

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 11, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 169 ~ 1 of 85

[1- Upcoming Events](#)

[2- 1440 News Headlines](#)

[4- JV/C Game Sponsors](#)

[5- Harry Implement Ad](#)

[6- Apartments for Rent](#)

[7- GDI Fitness Center Ad](#)

[8- Transit Holiday Bake Sale ad](#)

[9- Transit baked goods ad](#)

[10- Groton C&MA Christmas Program Ad](#)

[11- Dacotah Bank Ad](#)

[12- Groton PEO Chapter AC celebrates 100th Anniversary](#)

[14- Northern State University to Hold Winter Commencement Dec. 14](#)

[16- SD SearchLight: Summit panelists say federal funding for rural water projects is likely to tighten](#)

[18- SD SearchLight: Cattle tuberculosis confirmed in SD for first time since 2021](#)

[19- SD SearchLight: Noem threatens government transparency with cuts to public broadcasting](#)

[20- SD SearchLight: Republican U.S. Sen. Tom Cotton blocks press freedom bill Trump said GOP 'must kill'](#)

[23- SD SearchLight: Judge blocks DACA recipients from getting subsidized health insurance](#)

[24- SD SearchLight: Biden launches a national plan for Indigenous language protection and revitalization](#)

[26- SD SearchLight: Summit CO2 injection wells up for approval but court appeal already in the works](#)

[29- Weather Pages](#)

[33- Daily Devotional](#)

[34- Subscription Form](#)

[35- Lottery Numbers](#)

[36- Upcoming Groton Events](#)

[37- News from the Associated Press](#)

Wednesday, Dec. 11

Senior Menu: Ham and raisin sauce, baked sweet potato, cheesy green beans, Jell-O cake, dinner roll.

School Breakfast: Muffins.

School Lunch: Cheese quesadilla, refried beans.

St. John's Lutheran: Confirmation, 3:45 p.m.; DFC Youth supper, 6 p.m.; Advent Service, 7 p.m.

Emmanuel Lutheran: Caroling, 6 p.m.

Groton United Methodist: Community Coffee Hour, 9:30 a.m.

Groton Daily Independent

PO Box 34, Groton SD 57445

Paul's Cell/Text: 605-397-7460



Thursday, Dec. 12

Senior Menu: Pork cutlet, creamy noodles, California blend, fruit, whole wheat bread.

School Breakfast: Breakfast Pizza.

School Lunch: Chicken alfredo, cooked broccoli.

Groton Lions Club meeting, 6 p.m., 104 N Main

Friday, Dec. 13

Senior Menu: Potato soup, ham salad croissant, Monterey blend, fruit.

School Breakfast: Egg wraps.

School Lunch: Garlic cheese bread, cooked carrots.

Girls Varsity Wrestling at Rapid City

Basketball Double Header at Hamlin (Boys C at 4 p.m., Girls JV at 4 p.m.; Boys JV at 5 p.m., Girls Varsity and Boys Varsity to follow)

Saturday, Dec. 14

Girls Varsity Wrestling at Rapid City

Santa Day at Professional Management Services, 9 a.m. to 11 a.m.

Common Cents Community Thrift Store, 10 a.m. to 1 p.m., 209 N Main

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 11, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 169 ~ 2 of 85

1440

Why 1440? The printing press was invented around the year 1440, spreading knowledge to the masses and changing the course of history. More facts: In every day, there are 1,440 minutes. We're here to make each one count.

Netanyahu Stands Trial

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu took the stand yesterday in a corruption trial against him. It marked the first time a sitting Israeli prime minister testified as a criminal defendant.

The trial, which began in 2020, covers three separate cases involving alleged fraud and bribery. Netanyahu stands accused of receiving almost \$200K in gifts from a billionaire Hollywood producer and positive press from media moguls in exchange for regulatory favors. The Israeli leader was not granted exemption from standing trial; he will testify for six hours a day, three days per week in the coming weeks, passing notes to continue running the country. A verdict is expected in 2026.

Separately, Israel launched dozens of airstrikes into Syria yesterday, claiming to have destroyed its naval fleet and striking air bases and weapons arsenals. Netanyahu said the offensive—including entering the demilitarized zone between the two countries earlier this week—is designed to protect Israel following Syria's regime change.

GM Hits the Brakes on Cruise

General Motors announced it will stop funding its Cruise robotaxi project, citing competition, costs, and time required to scale the business. GM will instead focus on developing advanced driver assistance technologies and autonomous systems for personal vehicles, merging Cruise's technical team with its own. GM spent over \$10B on Cruise since acquiring it in 2016 and expects to save roughly \$1B annually from the restructuring.

The decision follows a series of challenges for Cruise, including an October 2023 incident where one of its vehicles struck and dragged a pedestrian, leading to federal regulatory scrutiny and operational setbacks. Amid the fallout, Cruise cofounder and CEO Kyle Vogt resigned, and Cruise laid off 900 employees, or about 24% of its workforce. Last month, Cruise paid a \$500K criminal fine for submitting a false report related to the October 2023 incident.

In other auto news, Amazon launched an online dealership with South Korea's Hyundai as its first partner. Consumers in 48 US cities can browse, order, finance, and pick up new Hyundai vehicles through Amazon.

Poet Nikki Giovanni Dies

Poet and activist Nikki Giovanni died Monday in Blacksburg, Virginia, from lung cancer complications at the age of 81. The longtime Virginia Tech professor was a renowned political poet and speaker whose work sought to uplift the Black experience in the US.

Born June 7, 1943, in Knoxville, Tennessee, and raised outside Cincinnati, Ohio, Giovanni became a fixture of the Black Arts Movement in the 1960s. She penned candid poems, including 1968's "Nikki-Rosa," in pursuit of Black civil rights. Giovanni would go on to write dozens of books and speak regularly, including in an iconic 1971 conversation (w/video) with acclaimed writer James Baldwin. After stints at Rutgers and Ohio State, she spent over three decades on the English faculty at Virginia Tech.

Giovanni was also the recipient of seven NAACP awards and 31 honorary doctorates. She made the National Book Award shortlist in 1973 and received a Grammy nomination for a spoken word album in 2004.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 11, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 169 ~ 3 of 85

Sports, Entertainment, & Culture

Time magazine taps WNBA Rookie of the Year Caitlin Clark as its 2024 Athlete of the Year. North Carolina tops Wake Forest 1-0 to win 2024 NCAA women's soccer national championship. Two more hotel workers charged in Argentina in a case related to the death of One Direction's Liam Payne. Former cycling world champion Rohan Dennis pleads guilty to charge related to the death of his wife, Olympic cyclist Melissa Hoskins. Mariah Carey's "All I Want for Christmas," which debuted in 1994, tops Billboard Hot 100; the song extends its record with six distinct runs atop the chart.

Science & Technology

Construction uncovers a 1,375-year-old pyramid along the site of a future highway in central Mexico; structure dates to the pre-Hispanic Metztitlan kingdom. James Webb Space Telescope measurements confirm gap in cosmological model, suggests additional factor needed to explain why the universe is expanding at a faster rate than its early stages. New cancer treatment eliminates bladder and lung tumors in mice without side effects by combining targeting drugs and engineered radioactive antibodies.

Business & Markets

US stock markets close lower (S&P 500 -0.3%, Dow -0.4%, Nasdaq -0.3%); investors await new inflation data from November, set to be released today. Federal judge temporarily halts supermarket chain Kroger's proposed \$25B acquisition of rival Albertsons pending Federal Trade Commission proceedings; Washington judge then permanently bars merger from the state, citing competition concerns. Walgreens shares close up nearly 18% on reports of potential sale to private equity firm Sycamore Partners, marking the highest one-day jump in shares in the pharmacy chain's history.

Politics & World Affairs

Franklin Fire near Pepperdine University in Malibu, California, burns over 2,800 acres as of this writing, places 12,500 people under evacuation orders. Suspect in fatal shooting of UnitedHealthcare CEO Brian Thompson appears in Pennsylvania court for extradition hearing to New York. Polygamous sect leader—who worked to start an offshoot of Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints—has been sentenced to 50 years in prison this week in Arizona for child sex abuse.



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\$1,199* Additional models available with 26", 28" clearing width



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Designed to provide steady traction in extreme weather conditions—try the 2X 26" TRAC with IntelliPOWER[®].

- TRAC drive designed for traction on slopes, inclines and gravel
- Heavy-duty 14-gauge steel side plates and auger housing
- 23" intake height
- Heated hand grips
- High-arc steel chute
- Cast aluminum auger gear box w/ 5-year limited warranty**

\$1,999*



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- Sealed ball bearings on auger and wheel shafts
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- Heavy-duty 14-gauge steel side plates and auger housing
- 23" intake height
- Heated hand grips
- High-arc steel chute
- Cast aluminum auger gear box w/ 5-year limited warranty**

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* Indicates step-up feature

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Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 11, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 169 ~ 7 of 85

You have to start some time! Why not **now!**

5 months to get your through the winter!

Student: \$175.75, Single: \$202.40, Couple: \$298.90,
Family: \$362.15

This will get you into the gym through the end of May!



Gift
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Daily Pass Available for \$5

Age 65 or older
Physical Therapy
\$20 per month

Annual Memberships:

Student: \$255.60

Single: \$319.50

Couple: \$575.10

Family: \$702.26



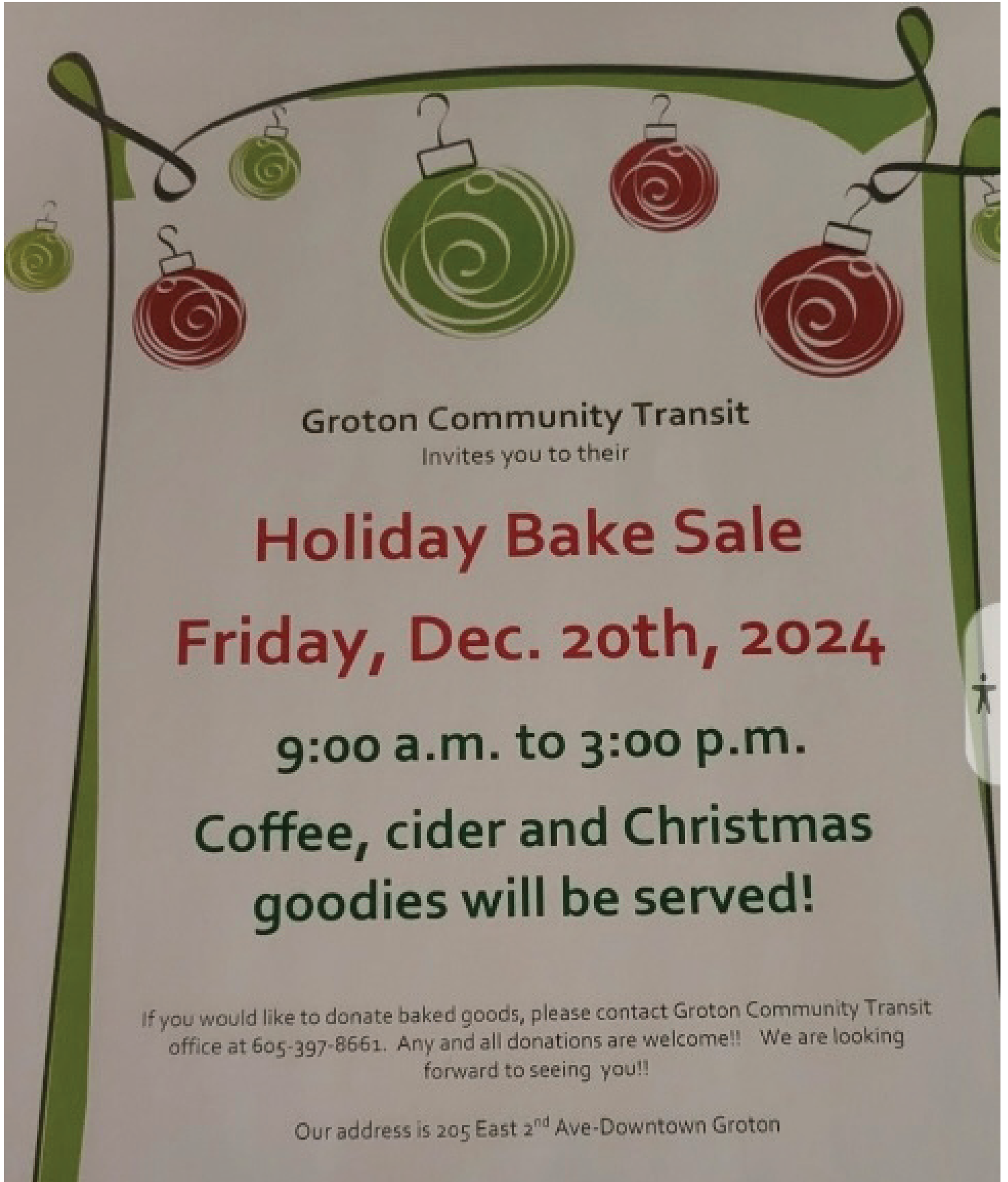
15 N Main St. - Ste. 101
Downtown Groton

Call/Text Paul: 605-397-7460

Call/Text Tina: 605-397-7285



Living Heart Fitness Center



Groton Community Transit
Invites you to their

Holiday Bake Sale

Friday, Dec. 20th, 2024

9:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m.

Coffee, cider and Christmas
goodies will be served!

If you would like to donate baked goods, please contact Groton Community Transit
office at 605-397-8661. Any and all donations are welcome!! We are looking
forward to seeing you!!

Our address is 205 East 2nd Ave-Downtown Groton

HOLIDAY BAKE SALE

12/20/2024-Friday

Happy Holidays! We hope this finds all of you staying well and healthy! Hoping you can enjoy what this wonderful season brings!

We are looking for donations of baked goods for our upcoming bake sale on Friday, December 20th 2024. If you would like to donate items please contact the dispatch office at 605-397-8661. Baked goods need to be delivered to the transit by 8:00 am the morning of the bake sale. Please feel free to package your items to your liking. We will price items as they are brought in. As always, we would like to thank you for supporting the GCT!! We look forward to hearing from you!

Please don't hesitate to call to arrange pickup of your donation...We would be happy to come and grab from you!!

Sincerely & Thank you Again!!

Groton Community Transit



**Groton Christian & Missionary
Alliance Church**

Presents "God's Gift of Love"

December 15th at 5pm

706 N Main

**A ham and turkey dinner with all the
trimmings will be served as a gift to
the community! The public is invited!**





DACOTAH BANK

HOLIDAY
OPEN HOUSE

Cookies & Calendars

DECEMBER 10 -13

9:00 - 4:00 PM

*Stop in for cookies,
coffee and a calendar!*

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MEMBER FDIC



Members of the Groton PEO Chapter AC Christmas Celebration December 9, 2024
(Photo by Dorene Nelson)

Groton PEO Chapter AC celebrates 100th Anniversary by Dorene Nelson

Chapter AC, the Groton chapter of P.E.O., celebrated its one hundredth birthday on December 1, 2024. P.E.O. is a Philanthropic Educational Organization which helps women through scholarships, awards, and continuing education programs.

It is amazing that any organization can still be active after one hundred years! There are a few reasons for this success. First of all, the members are from the Groton area so they know each other really well. They enjoy each other's company and look forward to their monthly meetings.

There also seems to be "generational" connection; a member asks HER daughter who will years later invite HER daughter!

The ladies share a common belief in the important value and necessity of a higher education keeps us working hard, attending the meetings, and knowing the success of our club and its work.

Chapter AC started with fourteen members and now has thirty-three active members. Grace Gage became interested in P.E.O. through a friend of hers and with the help of Fran Williams established the Groton chapter, the 29th chapter in South Dakota.

In the beginning there were two meetings a month with dues of \$3.00 a year! No refreshments were provided during these early meetings except for special occasions. The AC Chapter had members with widely varying talents such as musicians, poets, and writers.

The first project for Chapter AC was the Educational Loan Fund, with each member contributing ten cents to finance the project. During the 1930's and World War II, however, even the ten cent monthly dues became a financial struggle for many.

Things have changed over the years, but the membership continues to be composed of diversified members who provide entertainment, clever programs, and delicious refreshments!

The P.E.O. Sisterhood has brought together more than a half a million women in the United States and Canada who are passionate about helping women advance and improve their lives through education.

P.E.O. originally started as a friendship of seven women in Mount Pleasant, Iowa. It is one of the oldest women's organizations in North America with nearly 5,500 chapters.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 11, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 169 ~ 13 of 85

P.E.O. was founded on January 21, 1869, by seven students at Iowa Wesleyan University in Mount Pleasant, Iowa. This circle of like-minded individuals was bonded by its enthusiasm for women's opportunities and expanded to include women off campus as well.

One of the Sisterhood's main projects was the establishment of Cottey College, an important and successful center of learning and advancement for young women.

P.E.O. members take great pride in transforming the lives of women by providing grants, scholarships, awards, and loans for higher education. The International Chapter of the P.E.O. Sisterhood owns and supports Cottey College, a distinguished liberal arts college dedicated solely to the education and advancement of women.

The AC Chapter donates to various projects which are supplemented by member dues and various fundraising activities. This financial help has provided loans and grants to help with the education of young women from the Groton area. One of the local members even pursued her secondary education at Cottey College.

The past year has been particularly challenging for Groton's AC Chapter due to the loss of eight members due to age and illness. Included in this number were a sixty-year member and a few fifty plus year members. These ladies provided valuable guidance and leadership for the group.

Chapter AC has served as the hostess chapter for several state conventions and are excited to continue their involvement in the community and for all of P.E.O. The group continues to grow, remaining dedicated to the P.E.O. Sisterhood.

Chapter AC members love each other as sisters and continue with their work and support for each other and for P.E.O. International. These dedicated individuals hope to involve other young ladies who will carry on this valuable journey for another hundred years!

Chapter AC awards a STAR scholarship to deserving and outstanding Groton High School senior. The winners of the STAR Scholarships are as follows: 2012-Erin Sternhagen, 2014-Joellen Gonsoir, 2017-Keri Pappas, 2019-Anne Marie Smith and 2024-Ashlyn Sperry.

The STAR Scholarship was established in 2009 to provide scholarships for exceptional women in their final year of high school to attend a post secondary educational institution in the following year.

P.E.O. makes a difference in the lives of young women, and Groton's Chapter AC looks forward to continuing this amazing goal. P.E.O members believe that education unlocks doors and creates endless possibilities. Together they can help women reach for the stars.

The current officers are as follows: President-Ann Gibbs; Vice President-Chris Wheeting; Recording Secretary-Jeanne Wanous; Corresponding Secretary-Carna Atherton-Pray; Treasurers-Jennifer Thompson and Penny Stolle; Chaplain-Kelly Clark; and Guard-Carly Wheeting.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 11, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 169 ~ 14 of 85

Northern State University to Hold Winter Commencement Dec. 14

ABERDEEN, S.D. – Northern State University will celebrate the accomplishments of its graduates at Winter Commencement, set for 10 a.m. Saturday, Dec. 14, in the Johnson Fine Arts Center.

The ceremony is open to the public, and no tickets are required. Doors will open at least one hour before the event. The ceremony is expected to last about 90 minutes. Guests are encouraged to stay through the end to honor all graduates.

The event will also be available via livestream on the NSU Facebook page and the Graduation and Commencement webpage. Local viewers can watch the ceremony on cable Channel 12. Winter Commencement marks a significant milestone for students as they celebrate their achievements and take the next step in their journeys.

For more information, visit northern.edu/graduation-and-commencement.

South Dakota Graduates are listed below

Ethan Barnett, Aberdeen (B.A. International Business)#

Jaimen Farrell, Aberdeen (B.S. Human Performance)

Lincoln Flakus, Aberdeen (M.S. Accounting Analytics)

Cole Holmes, Aberdeen (BME Music Education: Vocal)***

Christopher Kappenman, Aberdeen (B.S. Management Information Systems)

Tarynn Kleffman, Aberdeen (B.S. Accounting)

Hannah Malsom, Aberdeen (B.S. Biology)

Hannah Menzia, Aberdeen (B.S. Accounting)

Kierra Navurskis, Aberdeen (B.S. Banking and Financial Services)*

Jeremy Pasara, Aberdeen (M.S. Accounting Analytics)

Ashlyn Reimer, Aberdeen (B.S. Psychology)

Ava Riggs, Aberdeen (B.S. Biology)

Aimee Roy, Aberdeen (M.S.Ed Sports Performance and Leadership)

Chloe Rush, Aberdeen (B.S.Ed Elementary Education)*

Baron Schock, Aberdeen (A.A. General Studies)

Bridget Shishnia, Aberdeen (B.A. Communication Studies)

Katelyn Thares, Aberdeen (B.S.Ed Elementary Education)*

Coralyn Wager, Aberdeen (B.S. Psychology)

Benjamin Wirth, Aberdeen (B.S. Accounting)*

Claire Zbylut, Aberdeen (B.S.Ed Elementary Education)

Amber Dallmann, Barnard (M.S.Ed Art Education)

Sage Bultje, Brandon (B.S. Biology)***

Connor Knecht, Brandon (M.S. Accounting Analytics)

Megan Pickering, Brandon (M.S. Accounting Analytics)

Jennifer Riegel, Brandon (M.S.Ed Instructional Design in E-Learning)

Chantel Duerre, Bristol (M.S.Ed Special Education)

Bryce Peterson, Bristol (B.S.Ed Elementary Education)*

Clifford Geyer, DeSmet (B.S. Sports Administration)#

Cody Brouwer, Dimock (M.S.Ed Special Education: Visually Impaired)

Levi Cooper, Eden (B.A. Communications Studies; B.S. Chemistry)

BriAnna Linn, Ethan (B.S. Accounting; Banking and Financial Services)*

Ally Cunningham, Faulkton (B.S.Ed Elementary Education)***

Kelsee Nash, Faulkton (A.S. Early Childhood Education)

Laura Drietz, Flandreau (M.S.Ed Art Education)

Emma Thill, Florence (B.S.Ed Elementary Education)

Carrie Cole, Groton (M.S.Ed Instructional Design in E-Learning)

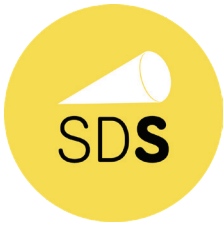
Alexis Hanten, Groton (B.S.Ed Elementary Education)***

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 11, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 169 ~ 15 of 85

Kasey Hinman, Groton (B.A. English; B.S.Ed English)
Nicholas Mohr, Harrisburg (M.S.Ed Teaching and Learning)
Morgan Rathjen, Hitchcock (BME Music Education: Vocal)**
Lynden Williams, Huron (B.S. Accounting)
Hailey Bierman, Ipswich (B.S. Banking and Financial Services)**
Samantha Bambas, Lake Andes (A.A. General Studies)
Carrell Haines, Miller (M.S.Ed Counseling: School)
Alexa Rossman, Mina (B.S.Ed Elementary Education)
Cameron Gauger, Mitchell (BME in Honoribus Music Education)*
Kathryn Konold, Mobridge (M.S.Ed Teaching and Learning)
Jayda Boxley, Pierre (B.S. Psychology)
Savannah Shrake, Pierre (B.A. Government; Criminal Justice)
Caitlin DeGroot, Platte (M.S.Ed Teaching and Learning)
James Muirhead, Presho (B.S. Business Administration)
Karley Colicheski, Rapid City (M.S.Ed Special Education)
Charles Larson, Rapid City (B.S. Finance)***
Kevin Munoz, Rapid City (B.S. Finance)
Aaron Shelley, Rapid City (M.S. Banking and Financial Services)
Arin Wagner, Rapid City (B.S. Biology)*
Austin Moen, Roslyn (B.S. Human Performance)
Chevar Carr, Sioux Falls (BGS General Studies)@
Suzi Fitterer, Sioux Falls (B.A. Theatre)
Alexis Wald, Sioux Falls (B.S. Honoribus in Accounting)*
Rachel Wittmeier, Sioux Falls (M.S. Accounting Analytics)
Hailee Like, Sturgis (B.S.Ed English)
Brooke Wilcox, Tea (B.S. Human Performance)
Manaja Hill, Wakpala (BGS General Studies)
Landon Leidholt, Warner (B.S. Business Administration)***
Kayla Zubke, Warner (B.S.Ed Elementary Education; Special Education)**
Abby Hartman, Watertown (B.S.Ed Elementary Education)***
Erin McNulty, Watertown (M.S. Banking and Financial Services)
Kade Russell, Watertown (B.S.Ed Elementary Education)
Samantha Stethem, Watertown (M.S.Ed Special Education)
Zachary Toben, Watertown (M.S.Ed Leadership and Administration)
Diana Fish, Webster (M.S.Ed Special Education)
Kennedy Johnson, Webster (B.S.Ed in Honoribus Elementary Education)*
Devin Pedersen, Webster (M.S.Ed Leadership and Administration)
Amanda Stulken, Webster (M.S.Ed Special Education)
Brooke Niederbaumer, Wecota (B.S.Ed Elementary Education; Special Education)*
Kayla Natoli, Winner (B.A. Criminal Justice; Global Language and Culture)**

***Summa Cum Laude
**Magna Cum Laude
*Cum Laude
^^^Highest Honor
^^High Honor
^Honor
Summer 2024
@ Spring 2025 Applicant



SOUTH DAKOTA SEARCHLIGHT

<https://southdakotasearchlight.com>

Summit panelists say federal funding for rural water projects is likely to tighten

Interest in budget cuts, efficiencies could put more financial burdens on state and local governments, speakers say

BY: JOHN HULT - DECEMBER 10, 2024 3:33 PM

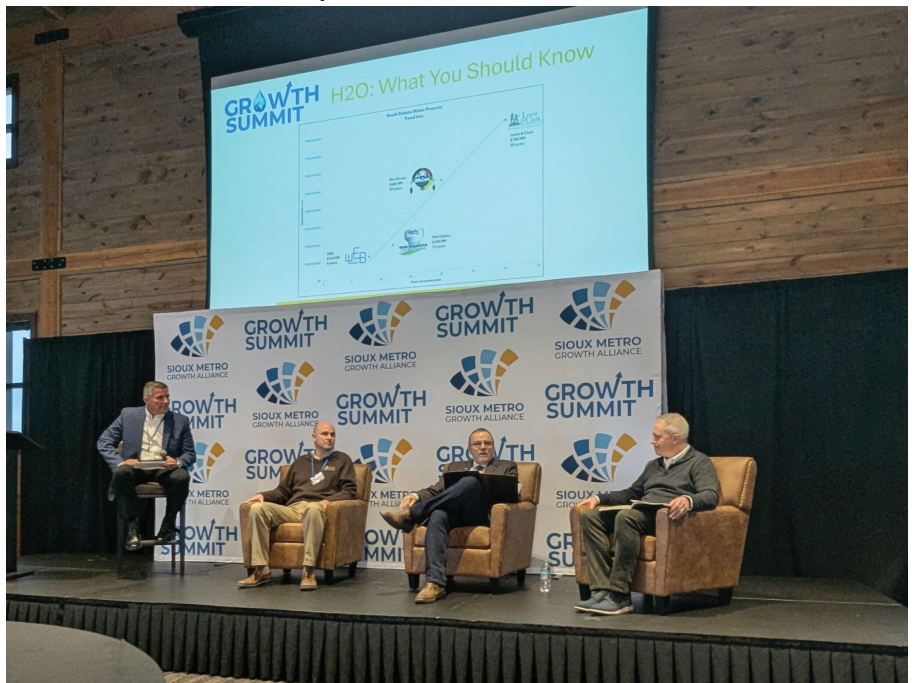
SIOUX FALLS — South Dakota and its communities may wind up paying more for rural water projects because of a thirst by a Republican-led Congress and the proposed Department of Government Efficiency to rein in spending.

Staffers with South Dakota's U.S. Senate delegation and a leader with the state Department of Agriculture and Natural Resources delivered that message Tuesday morning to a gathering of economic development leaders at the Sanford Event Barn in Sioux Falls.

Most of the money for water pipeline projects like the Lewis & Clark Regional Water System or Mni Wiconi Rural Water has come from the federal government. In the past, state and local governments have often been tasked with cobbling together 20% of the funding, with the feds picking up 80%.

But Benjamin Ready, southeast region director for Sen. John Thune, said GOP majorities in the U.S. House of Representatives and U.S. Senate, an incoming Republican president and the nation's ballooning debt could change that.

"There's probably going to be a push in D.C. about a higher local match than what is currently out there," Ready told the assembled audience at the Sioux Metro Growth Alliance's "H2O: What you Should Know" summit.



Former Governor's Office of Economic Development Commissioner Scott Stern moderates a discussion on rural water systems on Dec. 10, 2024, at the Sanford Event Barn in Sioux Falls. Panelists are, from left, Lewis and Clark Regional Water System Executive Director Troy Larson, Dakota Mainstem Director Kurt Pfeifle and Sioux Falls Public Works Director Mark Cotter. (John Hult/South Dakota Searchlight)

Higher state, local match expected

The possibility of more matching dollars is one signal of change in the federal government's approach to

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 11, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 169 ~ 17 of 85

spendy, long-term projects like the Lewis & Clark, which completed the first phase of its pipeline system three decades after its initial incorporation and is looking to expand again.

Keith Moore, who leads the southeast region team for Sen. Mike Rounds, told the crowd to “pay attention” to the actions of the proposed Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE). President-Elect Donald Trump announced shortly after his election win that he’d turn Tesla CEO Elon Musk and former GOP presidential candidate Vivek Ramaswamy loose to search for efficiencies in government operations.

There is no official blueprint at this point for the entity Musk dubbed “DOGE” as a nod to the billionaire’s preferred cryptocurrency, but Musk and Ramaswamy have vowed to cut \$2 trillion from the federal budget. DOGE would not be an actual government department, but rather an entity outside government.

For local and regional leaders who plan for rural water development projects, Moore said, “it’s going to be really important to pay attention to what gets cut and what’s changing.”

With \$35 trillion in debt, Moore said, it’s going to be more difficult to convince Washington to pony up funding for local water projects.

“We need more money, we need more water, and I think that’s going to continue to be a challenge going forward,” Moore said.

No water, no development

Moore, Ready and South Dakota Department of Agriculture and Natural Resources Financial and Technical Assistance Director Andy Bruels each told attendees that communities could improve their odds for federal support by having their projects buttoned up and ready when the time comes to ask for money.

Each spoke to the reality that Congress routinely fails to pass budgets on time and the political popularity of earmarks for local projects is often in flux. Being prepared and convincing community members of the need upfront will be critical, according to Bruels.

“We’re going to need that local buy-in from the project owners, from the community,” Bruels said.

Residents will need to rethink the way they think about their water bills, Bruels said. People don’t think twice about paying their cell phone bill, but Bruels said he’d rather go a day without his phone than without water.

Water is a resource, securing it and delivering it costs money, and Bruels said citizens should look at higher bills as a necessity.

“We have to get beyond the idea that water is free,” he said.

There are several projects in the works that aim to tap into South Dakota’s unused Missouri River water rights, said Lewis & Clark Executive Director Troy Larson.

Other states like Colorado and New Mexico are eyeing Missouri River water, Larson said, and South Dakota needs to stay ahead of them — or potentially partner with them to build water pipelines beneficial to both parties — in the interest of economic growth.

“When it comes to economic development, if you don’t have water, you don’t have anything,” said Larson.

New water systems proposed

The city of Sioux Falls has partnered with Lewis & Clark for years. Between that partnership and its Big Sioux River aquifer water access, Public Works Director Mark Cotter said, the city has about 40 years’ worth of water supply buttoned up.

Even so, the city recently signed on as a supporter of one of the proposed rural water expansion projects, called the Dakota Mainstem, which incorporated last year.

Cotter said a city staffer in her 30s recently offered an informative take on the 40-year supply.

“Her response was, ‘I can’t believe that’s all we have,’” Cotter said. “That’s a really important perspective for us to have. They’re looking to us to plan for what those next generations are going to need.”

Derick Wenck doesn’t have the luxury of 40 years’ worth of water. The Harrisburg mayor said the rapidly

growing city south of Sioux Falls has turned away businesses over worries about water availability since he took office in 2020.

The city gets all of its water from Lewis & Clark, but has access to a backup supply from Lincoln County Rural Water System if needed.

When asked during a break when his city will need more water, Wenck said "soon."

Like Sioux Falls, Harrisburg has signed on to support Dakota Mainstem.

"We need to be thinking about 40, 50 or 100 years out," Wenck said.

There is hope that the federal government will continue to offer at least some measure of support for rural water, Dakota Mainstem Director Kurt Pfeifle said during a panel discussion.

Less funding for water feels certain, but Pfeifle said he likes South Dakota's odds of being heard knowing that Sen. Thune will serve as Senate majority leader in the next Congress.

Trump's selection of North Dakota Gov. Doug Burgum as Interior secretary might also be helpful. Burgum's state has its own funding needs for rural water, but his state has had to consider many of the same issues South Dakota has.

"Would we have a sympathetic ear there? I don't know, but I know we would have a learned one," Pfeifle said.

John is the senior reporter for South Dakota Searchlight. He has more than 15 years experience covering criminal justice, the environment and public affairs in South Dakota, including more than a decade at the Sioux Falls Argus Leader.

Cattle tuberculosis confirmed in SD for first time since 2021

BY: SOUTH DAKOTA SEARCHLIGHT STAFF - DECEMBER 10, 2024 12:52 PM

Bovine tuberculosis has been confirmed in South Dakota cattle for the first time since 2021, State Veterinarian Beth Thompson said Tuesday.

The infected steer was identified in late October by meat inspectors during a routine inspection at a Wisconsin packing plant. Records linked the steer to a Hamlin County, South Dakota, feedlot that had marketed the animal. The infection was confirmed by the National Veterinary Surveillance Laboratory in Ames, Iowa, on Dec. 6.

The State Veterinarian's Office said it is working with the feedlot owner and other producers who may have sold animals purchased by the feedlot, as well as federal officials and area veterinarians, to locate the steer's source herd.

"Necessary precautions are being taken to protect the health of South Dakota's cattle industry," the State Veterinarian's Office said in a news release.

The cattle industry is a major part of South Dakota's economy, with U.S. Department of Agriculture data showing there are more than 3 million cattle in the state.

Bovine tuberculosis is not considered a threat to food safety, thanks to milk pasteurization and meat inspection programs, the State Veterinarian's Office said.

But the chronic, slowly progressive respiratory disease can be transmitted among cattle when they're



A cow on a pasture near Eureka in 2024. (Joshua Haiar/

South Dakota Searchlight)

in close proximity for prolonged periods. Cattle rarely exhibit visible signs of illness, and testing of cattle herds is necessary to determine if animals are infected.

COMMENTARY

Noem threatens government transparency with cuts to public broadcasting

Legislative livestreams provided by SDPB are vital to keep public informed about lawmaking

by Dana Hess

During my newspaper career I was tasked with writing five editorials a week. Consequently, I wasn't choosy about revisiting some subjects. If it was in the news, it was fair game for an editorial. Fortunately for me, the Public Broadcasting Service was in the news a few times a year, so I grew accustomed to commenting about it often. I was not a fan.

I wasn't like those conservatives who railed against what they perceived as Public Broadcasting's left-leaning news coverage. My opposition was economic.

In addition to government funding, PBS makes its money through donations from viewers, charitable organizations and businesses. However, the recognition of business donations supporting certain programs serves as a commercial message. Gone are the days when just a donor's company name would be mentioned. Now we sit through a slogan, a list of services, an accounting of business awards. In other words, it's a commercial on a government-funded, supposedly commercial-free network.

PBS fans may be able to accept that, but it didn't seem right to me that the newspaper I worked for, which was reliant on advertising, should be in competition for ads with an entity that was supported by the government. My own tax dollars were being used against my employer. It didn't seem fair.

My personal experience with PBS wasn't a good one, either. It seemed every time I settled in to watch a program on South Dakota Public Broadcasting it was during Pledge Week. Consequently, my attempt to watch *The Highwaymen* in concert was halted every couple of songs by hosts with an agenda. First, they would congratulate viewers for having the good taste to watch the program they had just interrupted. Then they would explain that this was just a sample of the good programming that needed my support.

Eventually there would be a pitch for money, usually tied to some sort of swag. During *Highwaymen Interruptus* they offered a CD for a smaller donation, a boxed set for a larger donation. I think the really big donors got all that and a concert-worn *Highwaymen* bandana with that authentic Willie Nelson dressing room aroma. Just when I thought it was time to get back to Waylon and Johnny, the hosts would go



Gov. Kristi Noem presents her annual budget address to lawmakers in the South Dakota State Capitol on Dec. 3, 2024. (Makenzie Huber/South Dakota Searchlight)

through the whole spiel again.

It left me hoping that there was an even more generous donation level. If I could afford to write a really, really big check, I'd be allowed to go to the home of one of the hosts and interrupt him while he tried to watch TV.

As you can see, I still have issues.

Given my problematic experience with SDPB, you'd probably think I would welcome the news that Gov. Kristi Noem wants to cut that entity's budget by \$3.6 million. With the state looking down the barrel of sluggish sales tax receipts and a commitment to an almost \$1 billion prison project, something had to go. If Noem has her way, she'll shut down "Sesame Street" and board up "Downton Abbey."

Public broadcasting in South Dakota is more than just TV and radio programming. One of the often overlooked offerings of SDPB is its wall-to-wall broadcasts of the happenings in the state Legislature. SDPB makes available, over the internet, every committee meeting as well as all the floor action in the House and Senate.

This isn't one guy with a microphone running around the Capitol, but rather a sophisticated system that allows the internet broadcast of more than 40 committee hearings per week as well as all eight weekly sessions of the House and Senate.

Because of its partnership with SDPB, the workings of Legislature are tremendously transparent. Using the Legislative Research Council website, it's possible to track legislation and know when it's coming up for discussion in committee. That committee hearing will be broadcast by SDPB. No matter where they are in the state, it's possible for citizens to track legislation they're interested in through committees in both chambers as well as floor action in the House and Senate.

I know that system works because I used it. I stayed away from the Capitol during the COVID-19 pandemic, but worked as a freelance reporter for the Rapid City Journal. From my desk in Brookings I was able to monitor the progress of bills of interest to West River readers. From the meetings I monitored over the internet I was able to write stories about a visitors' center at Custer State Park, funding for the Liberty Wellness Center at Box Elder and funding for a hangar area at Rapid City Regional Airport. I'm not particularly tech savvy. If I can track legislation using this system, any citizen can.

Lawmakers can't afford to build such a wonderful way for citizens to track their Legislature and then shut it down in the name of budget cuts. It's hard to put a price tag on the government accountability and transparency that the SDPB system brings to the legislative process.

If the Legislature goes through with the cuts proposed by Noem, I may find myself in an untenable position. After years of grouching about the unfairness of government-funded competition for newspapers, I may be in the seemingly hypocritical position of having to make a donation to SDPB. I hope they still have some of those bandanas.

Dana Hess spent more than 25 years in South Dakota journalism, editing newspapers in Redfield, Milbank and Pierre. He's retired and lives in Brookings, working occasionally as a freelance writer.

Republican U.S. Sen. Tom Cotton blocks press freedom bill Trump said GOP 'must kill'

BY: SHAUNEEN MIRANDA - DECEMBER 10, 2024 6:09 PM

WASHINGTON — An effort to pass a sweeping measure aimed at protecting press freedoms was struck down in the U.S. Senate on Tuesday night.

The journalism shield law — which would limit the federal government's ability to force disclosure of journalists' sources — drew strong objections from President-elect Donald Trump, who's had a rather rocky relationship with the press.

Arkansas GOP Sen. Tom Cotton blocked Oregon Democratic Sen. Ron Wyden's request for unanimous consent to pass the bill, calling the legislation "a threat to U.S. national security and an insult to basic

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 11, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 169 ~ 21 of 85

fairness in the principle of equality before the law.”

Though the U.S. House passed its version of the bill through voice vote earlier this year, Trump in November urged congressional Republicans “must kill this bill.”

Reaching unanimous consent — a process to fast-track the passage of bills in the Senate — appeared extremely unlikely given Trump’s sway in the Senate GOP conference.

Cotton, who’s the incoming Senate GOP conference chair, said the measure would “turn reporters into a protected class — free to hold, share and publish highly classified and dangerous information that no other American is allowed to possess.”

He also said the bill would turn the Senate “into the active accomplice of deep-state leakers, traitors and criminals, along with the America-hating and fame-hungry journalists who helped them out.”



President-elect Donald Trump, at the time the GOP nominee, participates in a Fox News Town Hall with Sean Hannity at the New Holland Arena on Sept. 4, 2024, in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. (Photo by Kevin Dietsch/

Getty Images)

Bipartisan backing

Wyden introduced companion legislation to the House bill in June 2023. GOP Sens. Mike Lee of Utah and Lindsey Graham of South Carolina, along with Illinois Democratic Sen. Dick Durbin, co-sponsored the bill.

Wyden dubbed the bill “so common sense” and said past administrations on both sides of the aisle have “exploited the lack of a federal shield law to curtail the freedom of the press and in some cases, even jailed journalists who refused to break their journalistic ethics and reveal their sources.”

Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer expressed strong support of the bill and his desire to get it to the president’s desk.

“No democracy can survive without a free and open and thriving press,” Schumer said on the Senate floor.

The legislation would establish “appropriate limits on the federally compelled disclosure of information obtained as part of engaging in journalism” and would limit federal law enforcement surveillance of journalists.

Dozens of news media organizations and press advocacy groups have pushed for the legislation’s passage, with press rights organizations voicing concerns about Trump’s incoming return to the Oval Office amid the threats he’s made against journalists.

Shauneen Miranda is a reporter for States Newsroom’s Washington bureau. An alumna of the University of Maryland, she previously covered breaking news for Axios.

Defense bill bans transgender medical coverage for children in military families

SD’s Rep. Johnson votes yes to advance bill toward final vote

BY: ASHLEY MURRAY - DECEMBER 10, 2024 5:47 PM

This story mentions suicide. If you or a loved one are suffering from thoughts of self-harm, dial 988 or visit 988lifeline.org to live chat with a mental health professional.

WASHINGTON — House Democrats will face a tough vote this week on the final compromise annual defense bill that includes pay raises for troops but also bans coverage for U.S. service members’ children who seek transgender care.

All Democrats present Tuesday opposed a procedural vote, 211-207, to advance the historically bipartisan

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 11, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 169 ~ 22 of 85

legislation, but will need to contend with a final vote as early as Wednesday. Congress has enacted the annual package for the last 63 years.

Rep. Adam Smith, the top Democrat on the House Committee on Armed Services, said in a statement he plans to vote against the massive defense policy bill.

The Washington state lawmaker said that “blanketly denying health care to people who need it — just because of a biased notion against transgender people — is wrong.”

“The inclusion of this harmful provision puts the lives of children at risk and may force thousands of service members to make the choice of continuing their military service or leaving to ensure their child can get the health care they need,” Smith said following the procedural vote.

President Joe Biden has not indicated whether he will sign the bill into law.

Pay raise, housing upgrades

The nearly \$900 billion National Defense Authorization Act for fiscal year 2025 is set to green-light an across-the-board 4.5% pay raise to troops, plus a 10% pay hike in April for the military’s most junior soldiers.

The bill would also pave the way for upgrades in military housing and new protocols for preventing and assessing traumatic brain injuries caused by blast exposure.

Also making it into the bill’s final version were a few far-right wishlist items, including a hiring freeze on diversity, equity and inclusion positions, and a prohibition on any federal dollars used for so-called “critical race theory” in military education — though the section carves out academic freedom protections for instructors.

Trans coverage prohibition

Gaining the most attention is a four-line provision in the 1,800-page package that would expressly prohibit coverage for minors under the military’s TRICARE health program for “medical interventions for the treatment of gender dysphoria that could result in sterilization.” The bill does not define which interventions would be prohibited.

Gender dysphoria is defined by the medical community as incongruence between a person’s expressed gender and their sex assigned at birth. The experience often leads to mental distress, including increased risk of self-harm, according to the medical literature.

The chair of the Congressional Equality Caucus, Rep. Mark Pocan of Wisconsin, urged Democrats to vote no on the final package.

“For a party whose members constantly decry ‘big government,’ nothing is more hypocritical than hijacking the NDAA to override servicemembers’ decisions, in consultation with medical professionals and their children, about what medical care is best for their transgender kids,” Pocan said in a statement Tuesday afternoon.

Rep. Teresa Leger Fernández, one of the bill’s managers, spoke on the House floor Tuesday, decrying the provision that “fails to acknowledge that the lack of care leads to death, leads to suicide.”

The New Mexico Democrat accused House Republicans of thinking they know “better than the parent and the doctor as to what care your child should get. That is insulting to our Marines, to those who serve in our Navy, to those who are deployed overseas and in our bases around our own country.”

Speaker praises TRICARE ban

U.S. House Speaker Mike Johnson, during his weekly press conference Tuesday, praised “landmark investments” and the pay increase included in the bill.

“It’s really important right now. We improved housing for our military families and other benefits, and it’s also why we stopped funds from going to CRT in our military academies. We banned TRICARE from prescribing treatments that would ultimately sterilize our kids, and we gutted the DEI bureaucracy,” said the Louisiana Republican.

A Democrat-led effort to strike the transgender coverage provision failed Monday in the House Com-

mittee on Rules.

Smith told the committee that the provision is "fundamentally wrong" because gender dysphoria is widely recognized by medical professionals.

"The treatments that are available for it, including puberty blockers and hormone therapy, and also psychiatric help, have proven to be incredibly effective at helping young people, minors, who are dealing with suicidal thoughts, dealing with causes of massive confusion that have led them to have anxiety and depression," said Smith.

Treatment options include mental health therapy, hormone therapy and surgery, though the World Professional Association for Transgender Health only recommends adolescent surgery under narrow circumstances that must meet numerous criteria. Some gender-affirming surgery causes sterilization, and the association recommends counseling for adolescents and their families about limited options to preserve fertility.

Smith told the committee Monday that anywhere from 6,000 to 7,000 children of U.S. service members are currently receiving treatment for gender dysphoria. The House Armed Services Committee did not respond to a request for further explanation of that number.

Gender-affirming care was not covered by military health insurance for service members' children until September 2016. A statistical analysis published in JAMA Pediatrics in March 2019 concluded that just over 2,500 military-affiliated youth received the treatment between October 2009 and April 2017 during roughly 6,700 separate office visits.

Ashley Murray covers the nation's capital as a senior reporter for States Newsroom. Her coverage areas include domestic policy and appropriations.

Judge blocks DACA recipients from getting subsidized health insurance

Immigrants in 19 states, including South Dakota, will be affected by the ruling

BY: MARY STEURER - DECEMBER 10, 2024 4:40 PM

A North Dakota federal judge's ruling will temporarily keep undocumented immigrants in 19 states, including South Dakota, from getting federally subsidized health insurance.

U.S. District Court Judge Dan Traynor on Monday granted a request from a coalition of Republican attorneys general to suspend a new federal rule from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services allowing immigrants protected under the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program to access health care through the Affordable Care Act.

The 19 states bringing the lawsuit, which includes North Dakota, ultimately want the rule struck down.

Traynor, in a Monday order, found that the plaintiffs are likely to prevail in the lawsuit because the federal agency acted contrary to federal law and the rule will result in additional expenses to state governments.

Under the order, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services is prohibited from enforcing the rule in the 19 plaintiff states until a final decision in the case is made.

Access to health insurance under the Affordable Care Act is only open to U.S. citizens, nationals or immigrants "lawfully present" in the country.

The lawsuit concerns who the federal government considers to be "lawfully present." Previously, participants in the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program were not explicitly defined as meeting this definition in administrative regulations implementing the law. The immigration program, commonly referred to as DACA, delays the deportation of people who immigrated to the U.S. without documentation as children.

But the Department of Health and Human Services' new rule clarified that DACA recipients do count as "lawfully present" and therefore may receive Affordable Care Act benefits. The rule also extends the definition to include undocumented immigrants with certain employment authorization documents. It went

into effect Nov. 1.

The plaintiff states filed suit against the federal agency in August, arguing that Congress never intended for DACA recipients to be included in the Affordable Care Act program, and that the new rule will force states to spend more money on undocumented immigrants and their families — and even incentivize immigrants who were otherwise planning to leave the U.S. to remain in the country

The federal agency has disputed this, arguing that Congress has shown support for DACA recipients receiving health benefits through the Affordable Care Act.

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services has also said that the new rule “aligns with the goals” of the Affordable Care Act since it will reduce the amount of uninsured people in the country.

According to data from the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Service, there were approximately 130 DACA recipients in North Dakota as of June 30, 2024.

The plaintiff states in the lawsuit are North Dakota, Kansas, Idaho, Nebraska, Ohio, South Carolina, Alabama, Virginia, Tennessee, Indiana, Missouri, Montana, South Dakota, Iowa, New Hampshire, Kentucky, Texas, Florida and Arkansas.

Three DACA recipients and CASA Inc., an immigration advocacy group, have filed to intervene in the case on the side of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

Mary Steurer is a reporter based in Bismarck for the North Dakota Monitor. A native of St. Louis, Steurer previously worked as the local government reporter for the Casper Star-Tribune newspaper in Wyoming.



From left, North Dakota Attorney General Drew Wrigley, Kansas Attorney General Kris Kobach and South Dakota Attorney General Marty Jackley meet in the lobby of the William L. Guy Federal Building in Bismarck, North Dakota, on Oct. 15, 2024. (Mary Steurer/North Dakota Monitor)

Biden launches a national plan for Indigenous language protection and revitalization

BY: SHONDIN SILVERSMITH, ARIZONA MIRROR - DECEMBER 10, 2024 4:26 PM

To support the revitalization, protection, preservation and reclamation of Indigenous languages across the United States, the Biden-Harris administration released a 10-year National Plan on Native Revitalization during the 2024 White House Tribal Nations Summit.

“Indigenous languages are central to our cultures, our lifeways, and who we are as people,” Secretary of Interior Deb Haaland said in a press release. “They connect us to our ancestors, to our homelands, and to our place in the world.”

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 11, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 169 ~ 25 of 85

The National Plan is a joint effort between government agencies that outlines strategies to help address the government's role in the loss of Indigenous languages among Native American, Alaska Native, Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander communities.

"This ambitious plan represents the Biden-Harris administration's commitment to address the wrongs of the past and restore what has been taken from us," Haaland said. The departments of the Interior, Education and Health and Human Services produced the plan.

The National Plan on Native Language Revitalization is the result of the Department of Interior's work to address the systematic and deliberate policies set in place by the United States to forcibly assimilate Indigenous peoples and eradicate Indigenous languages and cultures as part of the Federal Indian Boarding School system.

"Congressional authorization and funding of this Plan will reduce the number of vulnerable and endangered Native languages and increase the number of proficient Native language speakers, as defined by Native Americans," according to the report.

The Department of Interior launched the Federal Indian Boarding School Initiative in 2021. The initiative released two reports that highlighted the devastating impact the boarding school system had and continues to have on Indigenous communities. It also provided a complete list of all federally operated schools.

President Joe Biden became the first sitting president to formally acknowledge and apologize to Indigenous communities in October for the federal government's role in developing and enforcing the policies.

"The legacy of forced assimilation continues to threaten the existence of many Native languages, and the legacy of the boarding school era echoes in today's educational experience for Native students," according to the report.

The report states that congressional action is required to preserve Indigenous languages. If action is not taken, fewer than 20 Indigenous languages will still be in use in America by 2050. There are 167 Indigenous languages currently spoken.

"We use language to write history, share knowledge, map the future, and pass down traditions," Secretary of Health and Human Services Xavier Becerra said in a written statement. "Investing in language revitalization strengthens communities and contributes to their resiliency."

The plan prioritizes investing in and supporting Indigenous language efforts within academia. The plan calls for strategic investments in core content instruction in Indigenous languages to improve the educational outcomes for all Indigenous youth.

"I always say: multilingualism is a superpower—and that includes Native American languages," Secretary of Education Miguel Cardona said.

Cardona said he traveled through Indian Country as Secretary of Education and learned words in the Oneida, Dakota, and Nakota languages.



An app to teach students the Navajo language. (Photo by Cronkite News)

"One thing was crystal clear: when young people reclaim their Native languages, they reconnect deeply with who they are and where they come from," he said. "But Native peoples have suffered from shameful policies that aimed to eradicate these languages and cultures for too long."

Cardona added that he is hopeful that this national plan will be the start of the government's remediation for its participation in Federal Indian Boarding School policies that have impacted Indigenous communities for generations.

"I am hopeful we can all choose to keep fighting for a future where Native communities have the tools and support to keep their languages alive and their cultures thriving," he said.

According to the Department of Interior, the Bureau of Indian Education (BIE) funds 187 schools for Indigenous students and works to provide them with a culturally relevant, high-quality education. However, the BIE did not receive funding for language revitalization until 2017, and the appropriations have not exceeded \$7.5 million for any year.

As part of the summit, the Department of Interior also announced a cooperative agreement with the National Fund for Excellence in American Indian Education, which will provide \$7.5 million in existing grant funding to BIE schools supporting the launch or expansion of immersion programs.

"This funding will help build a network of BIE schools committed to integrating Native language immersion and cultural education into their curricula, offering students the tools to connect with their language and heritage," the department stated in a press release. "Together with the National Plan for Native Language Revitalization, these efforts create a comprehensive strategy to protect, preserve and reclaim Indigenous languages across the United States."

Shondiin Silversmith is an award-winning Native journalist for the Arizona Mirror based on the Navajo Nation. Silversmith has covered Indigenous communities for more than 10 years, and covers Arizona's 22 federally recognized sovereign tribal nations, as well as national and international Indigenous issues.

Summit CO2 injection wells up for approval but court appeal already in the works

North Dakota commission considering company's underground storage plan

BY: JEFF BEACH - DECEMBER 10, 2024 3:02 PM

North Dakota is poised to allow millions of tons of carbon dioxide to be permanently stored underground, but an attorney representing landowners argues the process has been unfair and he is already laying the groundwork for an appeal.

North Dakota's Industrial Commission is expected to vote at its Thursday meeting on plans for underground storage wells operated by Summit Carbon Solutions that will take in carbon dioxide from ethanol plants in five Midwest states, including South Dakota.

The Industrial Commission is composed of Gov. Doug Burgum, Attorney General Drew Wrigley and Agriculture Commissioner Doug Goehring.

Summit's plan is for three injection wells in Mercer and Oliver counties. Once the CO2 is injected, it will spread into the pore space — gaps and voids deep underground where the gas can be held permanently.

Attorney Derrick Braaten of Bismarck represents landowners in the sequestration area, which also includes part of Morton County. He said North Dakota's Department of Mineral Resources, which falls under the Industrial Commission, failed to provide landowners with a computer-generated model for how the CO2 would disperse underground.

Braaten said he eventually obtained the model from the Energy and Environmental Research Center in Grand Forks.

Braaten said his clients deserve the right to examine the dispersion model because that is what is used to determine how many landowners will be compensated for storing CO2 beneath their land and how much they will be paid.

"If you're going to do this, there's a fair way to do it," Braaten said.

With the help of a petroleum engineering company, he said he was able to replicate the results of the EERC model, but that it took 20 days for the computer to generate the report.

He said he believes the EERC model is flawed and it would take two to three months to generate and submit a model that he thinks would be more accurate.

He said the appeal would be based on a lack of due process when he and his clients were not provided Summit's model before a hearing in June.

Former North Dakota Director of Mineral Resources Lynn Helms called the June hearing "one of the most contentious" he's ever endured.

Helms has since retired and Braaten said he is encouraged his replacement, Nathan Anderson, has been more forthcoming with information.

But Braaten, in a November filing with the Industrial Commission, still requested more time to create a model for his clients.

A Summit letter filed in response to Braaten's request argued that further modeling was "an exercise in futility."

"The modeling information merely provides a 'best prediction' of plume migration based on the variables put into the model. No party will know or understand the actual migration until after injection operations have commenced," Summit's letter said.

Summit said it will notify the commission if monitoring activities indicate that the plume is reacting or migrating other than as predicted, including if the data suggests that the plume may travel outside of the horizontal boundaries of a storage facility.

Summit's filing said it is required to submit injection data on a monthly, quarterly and annual basis, and to submit Summit's seismic data by the end of the second, fourth and ninth years after injection begins.

Before it can begin injecting CO₂, Summit needs to build its pipeline to the injection sites. It recently obtained a pipeline permit from the North Dakota Public Service Commission and has a permit in Iowa.

Summit faces a permitting challenge in South Dakota, where it already has been denied a permit once.

The project also faces legal challenges in North Dakota, including from the Northwest Landowners Association, represented by Braaten.

The Northwest Landowners Association has asked the state Supreme Court to rule on a lawsuit challenging the state's laws that cover underground storage as being unconstitutional. State law allows for forcing landowners to allow pore space storage if 60% of the affected landowners have agreed to the storage plan.



Attorney Derrick Braaten asks a question June 11, 2024, in Bismarck during a hearing on the Summit Carbon Solutions project. Braaten also represents landowners in a lawsuit that challenges state laws related to carbon dioxide storage. (Kyle Martin/For the North Dakota

Monitor)

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 11, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 169 ~ 28 of 85

Summit has said it has about 90% participation in the storage area.

The provision, known as amalgamation, does not allow landowners the right to appeal the decision in the court system, unlike the use of eminent domain. Summit is among the energy companies that has intervened in the case.

Burgum, during a discussion of the lawsuit at the November Industrial Commission meeting, said one landowner should not be able to veto a carbon storage project. He noted that, unlike a pipeline route, where a company may be able to route around a dissenting landowner, there is no way to exclude a landowner who doesn't want their pore space used for storage.

Kurt Swenson lives south of Beulah and owns land in the sequestration area and is a member of the Northwest Landowners.

He said the Industrial Commission's approval of amalgamation and the storage wells "would be consistent with their trampling of property rights."

He said the landowners' primary argument is that the state has no right to take pore space.

He said he also has been frustrated by Summit's lack of willingness to negotiate, a complaint that also came up during hearings on the pipeline permit.

Summit estimates the Midwest Carbon Express pipeline project cost at \$8.9 billion to connect 57 ethanol plants to the storage wells.

If completed, Summit could sequester 18.5 million metric tons of CO2 annually. Summit would take advantage of federal tax credits of \$85 per ton of CO2 stored.

The ethanol plants, including Tharaldson Ethanol at Casselton, the only North Dakota plant signed on to the project, would benefit by having access to markets with a low-carbon fuel standard, such as California.

Burgum has been a vocal proponent of the Summit project.

Burgum shared a stage with Bruce Rastetter, one of the founders of Iowa-based Summit Carbon Solutions, and Harold Hamm, founder of oil company Continental Resources, when Summit announced that Continental Resources would be an investor in the project.

While the Summit project is for permanent underground storage, CO2 can also be injected into oil wells, helping extend the productivity of the well.

Burgum is President-elect Donald Trump's nominee to be Interior secretary and to chair a new National Energy Council that would oversee energy project permitting.

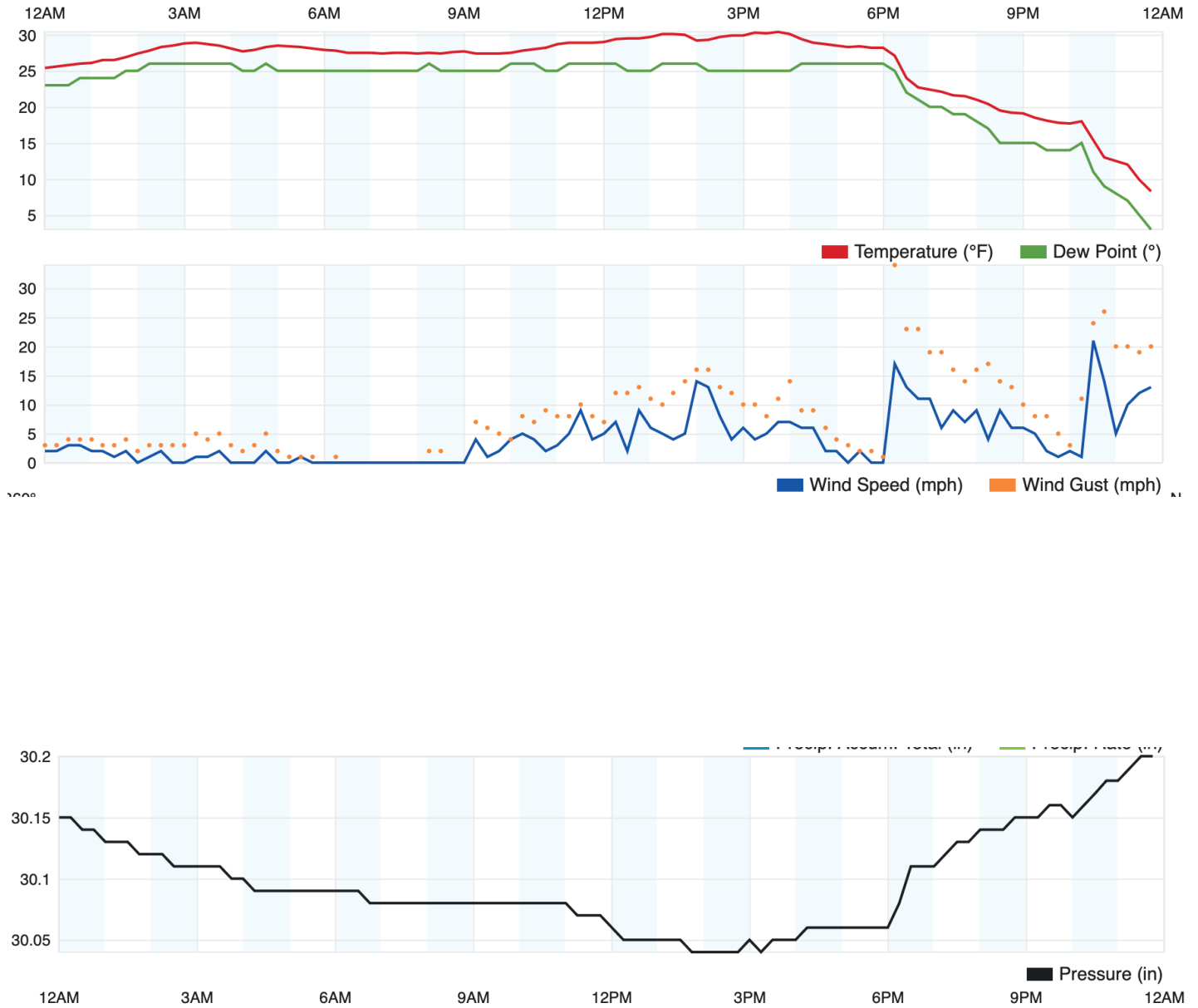
In most states, it is the Environmental Protection Agency that permits CO2 storage wells but North Dakota was the first state to be granted primacy in Class VI injection well permitting.

North Dakota Monitor Deputy Editor Jeff Beach is based in the Fargo area. His interests include agriculture, renewable energy and rural issues.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 11, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 169 ~ 29 of 85

Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 11, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 169 ~ 30 of 85

Today



High: 9 °F

Cold

Tonight



Low: -4 °F

Partly Cloudy

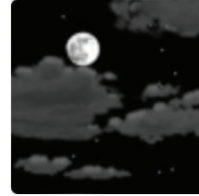
Thursday



High: 10 °F

Cold

Thursday
Night



Low: 1 °F

Partly Cloudy

Friday



High: 22 °F

Mostly Cloudy



Wind Chill Temperatures

Wednesday Morning, Dec 11 - Friday Evening, Dec 13

	Wed 12/11			Thu 12/12			Fri 12/13				
	6am	12pm	6pm	12am	6am	12pm	6pm	12am	6am	12pm	6pm
Aberdeen	-13	-11	-10	-11	-11	-4	-4	-9	-8	4	7
Miller	-10	-6	-2	-8	-10	-4	-2	-6	-7	2	8
Mobridge	-9	-4	-2	-6	-6	-1	-2	-3	-3	7	9
Murdo	-3	0	7	-1	-5	-2	0	-3	-2	5	11
Ortonville	-9	-14	-12	-11	-2	1	-4	-10	-12	-5	4
Pierre	-4	0	5	-2	-6	-1	0	-4	-3	6	10
Sisseton	-12	-16	-16	-14	-13	-6	-11	-13	-14	-5	0
Watertown	-15	-18	-14	-13	-11	-6	-7	-11	-11	-1	4

Apparent Temperature (°F)

Additional Details



How cold will it get?

- A blast of cold air will continue to impact South Dakota and western MN through Friday
- Overnight lows may be as low as -10 degrees.
- 10 mph winds will be enough to push wind chills down to around -20 degrees.



Potential Impacts

- Extended time outside may be dangerous and lead to hypothermia.
- Frostbite could set in within 30 minutes of being outside.

Valid: Wed 06 am CST - Fri 06 pm CST

Issued: Wed, Dec 11, 2024, 3 am CST



Cold air continues to impact South Dakota and western Minnesota through Friday. Winds chills may reach -20 degrees or lower in areas where the winds have picked up. These temperatures can be dangerous if exposed to for extended periods of time. Be sure to bundle up and limit outdoor time when temperatures are the coldest.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 11, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 169 ~ 31 of 85

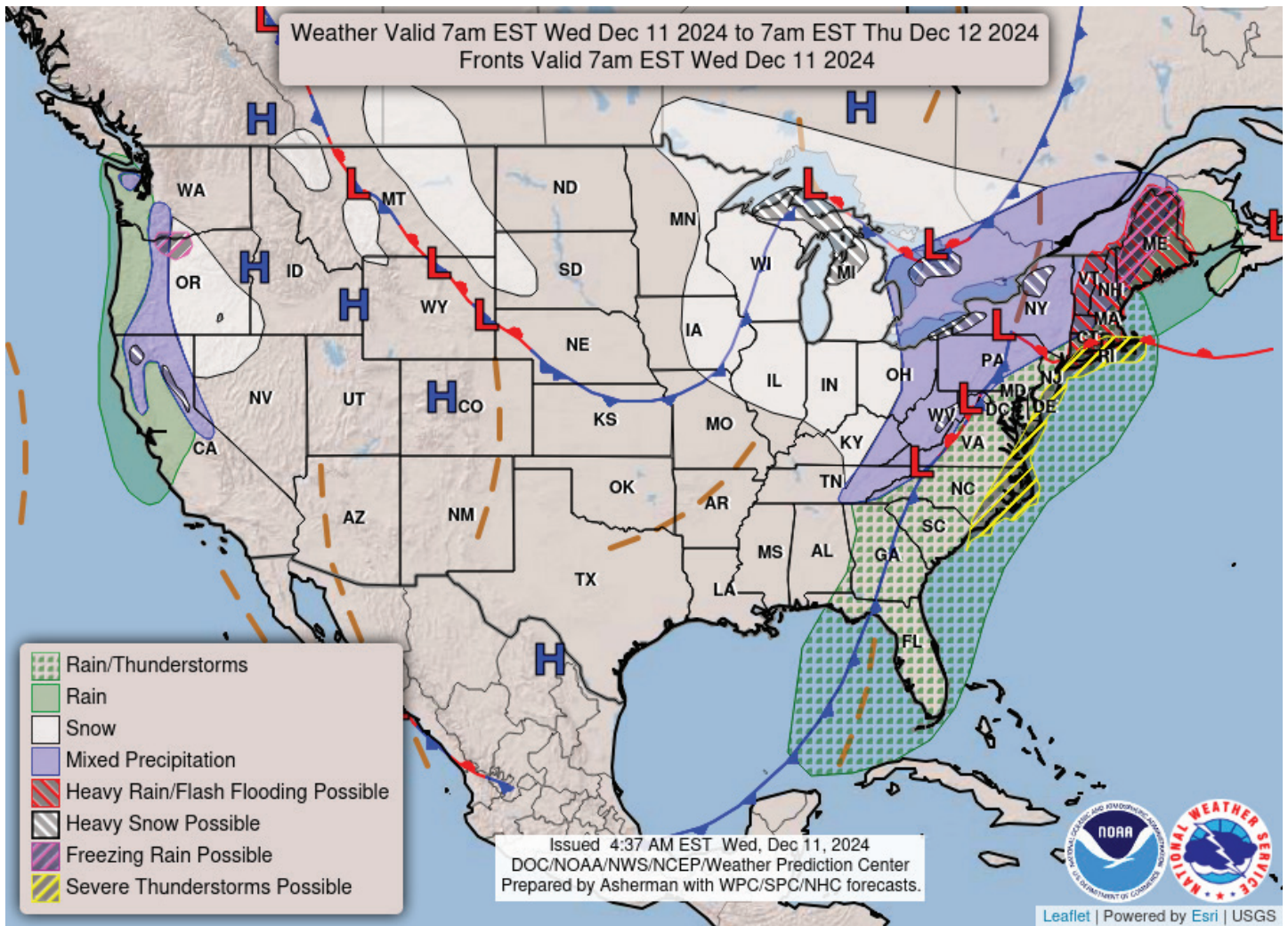
Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 30 °F at 3:08 PM
Low Temp: 10 °F at 11:30 PM
Wind: 34 mph at 6:15 PM
Precip: : 0.00

Day length: 8 hours, 49 minutes

Today's Info

Record High: 59 in 1939
Record Low: -22 in 1927
Average High: 30
Average Low: 9
Average Precip in Dec.: 0.22
Precip to date in Dec.: 0.00
Average Precip to date: 21.43
Precip Year to Date: 21.71
Sunset Tonight: 4:50:56 pm
Sunrise Tomorrow: 8:01:51 am



Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 11, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 169 ~ 32 of 85

Today in Weather History

December 11, 1965: Ice, up to 3 inches thick, with even more in some locations, accumulated from freezing rain on utility lines and trees in northern South Dakota, causing extensive damage. The damage was estimated at \$1 million each to telephone lines and power lines, with the highest losses in the northeast quarter of the state. The first accumulation of the glaze began as a thick rime due to dense fog and freezing temperatures before the 11th. Freezing rain, which started the afternoon of the 11th and continued into the 12th, formed a coating of ice over the heavy rime accumulation. The glaze remained for a week or more in most areas. In west central Minnesota, freezing drizzle and freezing rain at night on the 11th caused ice accumulations of 1/2 to 1 inch thick on roads, telephone, and electric wires, as well as tree limbs. Power and other services were disrupted over a broad area. Some services were out for up to four days.

December 11, 2004: High winds gusting to around 60 mph caused some spotty damage in northeast South Dakota. In Watertown, some trees were downed. One tree fell onto a house, causing some minor damage. In Milbank, two rail cars were blown down a railroad track and derailed.

December 11, 1905: The highest temperature ever recorded in South America was recorded at Rivadavia, Argentina with a temperature of 120 degrees.

1932 - Very cold weather prevailed along the West Coast. San Francisco received 0.8 inch of snow, and at the airport the temperature dipped to 20 degrees. At Sacramento CA, the mercury dipped to 17 degrees to establish an all-time record low for that location. Morning lows were below freezing from the 9th to the 15th at Sacramento, and the high on the 11th was just 34 degrees. The cold wave dealt severe damage to truck crops and orange groves in the Sacramento Valley. (David Ludlum) (The Weather Channel)

1988 - Arctic cold invaded the central and eastern U.S. Sault Ste Marie MI reported a record low of 14 degrees below zero, and International Falls MN was the cold spot in the nation with a low of 25 degrees below zero. Temperatures remained below zero all day over parts of eastern Upper Michigan and northern New England. (The National Weather Summary)

1989 - Strong Santa Ana winds developed across southern California and parts of central California. Winds in Kern County of central California gusted to 100 mph near Grapevine. The high winds reduced visibilities to near zero in the desert areas, closing major interstate highways east of Ontario CA. (Storm Data) (The National Weather Summary)

December 11, 1992: A complex storm system moved eastward from the Gulf Coast of Texas to eastern Georgia on December 9 and 10th. In the next 24 hours, the low-pressure system moved to the Chesapeake Bay and rapidly intensified. This system produced gale force winds with gusts exceeding hurricane force affected not only the Mid-Atlantic coastline but also as far southwest as the southern Appalachians where trees were downed and roofs damaged. This storm also produced 20 to 30-foot waves in Massachusetts on December 12 and 13th. Precipitation amounts varied considerably. Rainfall amounts of 8 inches occurred in southeastern Massachusetts, while several areas in New York, Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, and Maryland recorded more than 30 inches of snow. Precipitation ended during the evening hours on the 12th. Ten deaths resulted from the storm with insured losses totaling near \$850 million and non-insured losses near \$2 billion.

2008 - A rare snowstorm swept across parts of south Louisiana and Mississippi, blanketing the area with snow. Nearly 8 inches of snow fell over parts of Louisiana. These conditions caused schools and bridges to close and left thousands of residents without power (Associated Press). (NCDC)

2010 - The "Pineapple Express" - a meteorological event where southwest winds bring warm, moist air to the U.S. West Coast - produced record rainfall to the Pacific Northwest during December 11th-12th. Seattle experienced record daily rainfall two days in a row. The Seattle-Tacoma International Airport recorded 1.42 inches of rain on the 11th, breaking the old daily record of 1.32 inches set in 1955. The next day, 2.19 inches fell, breaking the daily record of 1.70 inches set in 1966. The Stillaguamish River in western Washington state reached 21.06 feet at Arlington, tying the record set in November 2006. Flood stage for the river is 14 feet. The storm system also brought record warmth to the area. On December 14th, the temperature at Seattle-Tacoma International Airport reached 57, breaking the old daily record of 55 set in 2004. (NCDC)



Whose Party?

Competent! Outstanding! Careful! Friendly! Supportive! Bright! Cheerful! Caring! Gracious! And the list of words to describe Beth, the secretary to the president of the company, could go on and on. She was loved by everyone who knew her.

When it came time for her birthday one year, her co-workers decided to honor her with a lavish party. They rented a beautiful ballroom, hired the best caterer, designed a special cake, had special napkins with her name printed on them, and collected money to buy a gift.

All went well. The tables were beautifully set, the caterer was on time, the guests arrived, and there was excitement in the room. Everyone kept looking at the entrance awaiting the arrival of Beth. After waiting for fifteen minutes, the co-worker who organized the event said to Beth's best friend, "Where is she?"

"I'm not sure," she replied. "I'll phone her."

She did – and discovered that she was at her favorite sandwich shop enjoying her lunch – alone. No one thought to invite Beth to her own celebration!

There will be many parties this Christmas. And as usual, the Guest, Whose birthday we celebrate, will not be invited. Tables will be set, lights will blink, guests will arrive, laughter will ring out, gifts will be exchanged, everyone will have fun – but Jesus will not be present. No one will think to invite Him – the One who should be the main attraction.

Prayer: Lord of the season, may we place Your Son, our Savior, at the center of everything we do this Christmas. May we never forget, "It's all about Him." In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: Matthew 2:11 And when they had come into the house, they saw the young Child with Mary His mother, and fell down and worshiped Him. And when they had opened their treasures, they presented gifts to Him: gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

We all need the encouragement, comfort, and peace that comes through God's grace. Our daily devotionals, known as Seeds of Hope, have been a means through which thousands of people have experienced this grace. Each devotional comes from God's Word and we pray this good "seed" finds good soil in your heart. Our aim is that the Seeds of Hope will be a great source of daily encouragement to you and that God will use them to draw you near to Him

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 11, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 169 ~ 34 of 85

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WINNING NUMBERS

MEGA MILLIONS

WINNING NUMBERS:

12.10.24

12 14 26 48 52 21

MegaPlier: 5x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$670,000,000

NEXT 2 Days 15 Hrs 56
DRAW: Mins 13 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LOTTO AMERICA

WINNING NUMBERS:

12.09.24

15 24 29 38 51 3

All Star Bonus: 3x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$16,520,000

NEXT 15 Hrs 11 Mins 13
DRAW: Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LUCKY FOR LIFE

WINNING NUMBERS:

12.10.24

6 12 30 39 46 10

TOP PRIZE:

\$7,000/week

NEXT 15 Hrs 26 Mins
DRAW: 13 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

DAKOTA CASH

WINNING NUMBERS:

12.07.24

7 10 20 26 35

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$143,000

NEXT 15 Hrs 26 Mins
DRAW: 13 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

DOUBLE PLAY

WINNING NUMBERS:

12.09.24

7 17 28 44 54 8

TOP PRIZE:

\$10,000,000

NEXT 15 Hrs 55 Mins
DRAW: 13 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

WINNING NUMBERS:

12.09.24

35 37 40 45 51 24

Power Play: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$30,000,000

NEXT 15 Hrs 55 Mins
DRAW: 13 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 11, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 169 ~ 36 of 85

Upcoming Groton Events

07/04/2024 Firecracker Couples Tourney at Olive Grove Golf Course
07/09/2024 FREE SNAP Application Assistance 1-6pm at the Community Center
07/14/2024 Lion's Club Summer Fest/Car Show at the City Park 9am-4pm
07/17/2024 Legion Auxiliary #39 Salad Buffet & Dessert Bar at the Groton Legion 11am-1pm
07/17/2024 Pro Am Tourney at Olive Grove Golf Course
07/25/2024 Dairy Queen Miracle Treat Day
07/25/2024 Summer Downtown Sip & Shop 5-8pm
07/25/2024 Treasures Amidst The Trials 6pm at Emmanuel Lutheran Church
07/26/2024 Ferney Open Tourney at Olive Grove Golf Course 9am Start
07/27/2024 1st Annual Celebration in the Park 1-9:30pm
08/05/2024 School Supply Drive 4-7pm at the Community Center
Cancelled: Wine on 9 at Olive Grove Golf Course 6pm
08/08/2024 Family Fun Fest 5:30-7:30pm
08/9-11/2024 Jr. Legion State Baseball Tournament
08/12/2024 Vitalant Blood Drive at the Community Center 1:15-7pm
09/07/2024 Lion's Club Fall Citywide Rummage Sale 8am-3pm
09/07-08/2024 Groton Airport Fly-In/Drive-In, Groton Municipal Airport
09/08/2024 Sunflower Couples Tourney at Olive Grove Golf Course 10am
10/05/2024 Pumpkin Fest at the City Park 10am-3pm
10/11/2024 Lake Region Marching Band Festival 10am
10/31/2024 Downtown Trick or Treat 4-6pm
10/31/2024 United Methodist Church Trunk or Treat 5:30-7pm
11/16/2024 Groton American Legion "Turkey Raffle" 6:30-11:30pm
11/28/2024 Community Thanksgiving at the Community Center 11:30am-1pm
12/01/2024 Groton Snow Queen Contest, 4:30 p.m.
12/07/2024 Olive Grove 8th Annual Holiday Party with Live & Silent Auctions 6pm-close
12/14/2024 Santa Day at Professional Management Services, downtown Groton
04/12/2025 Lion's Club Easter Egg Hunt at the City Park 10am Sharp
05/03/2025 Lion's Club Spring Citywide Rummage Sale 8am-3pm
05/26/2025 Memorial Day Services Groton Union Cemetery with lunch at Legion Post #39, 12pm
07/04/2025 Firecracker Couples Tourney at Olive Grove Golf Course
07/09/2025 Legion Auxiliary Salad Luncheon
07/13/2025 Lion's Club Summer Fest/Car Show at the City Park 9am-4pm
09/06/2025 Lion's Club Fall Citywide Rummage Sale 8am-3pm
09/20/2025 NSU Gypsy Day
10/31/2025 Downtown Trick or Treat 4-6pm
11/27/2025 Community Thanksgiving at the Community Center 11:30am-1pm

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 11, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 169 ~ 37 of 85

News from the **AP** Associated Press

Tuesday's Scores

The Associated Press

GIRLS PREP BASKETBALL=

Akron-Westfield, Iowa 30, Alcester-Hudson 22

Arlington 50, Howard 39

Avon 50, Gregory 46

Belle Fourche 56, Lead-Deadwood 22

Centerville 50, Gayville-Volin High School 36

Colman-Egan 72, Estelline-Hendricks 10

Dakota Valley 61, Lennox 59

Dell Rapids St Mary 71, Hills-Beaver Creek, Minn. 41

Faith 54, Bison 14

Florence-Henry 48, Deuel 25

Freeman 54, Platte-Geddes 12

Harding County 54, New England, N.D. 22

Huron 50, Yankton 38

Kadoka 65, Little Wound 15

McLaughlin 62, Standing Rock, N.D. 26

Mobridge-Pollock 69, Dupree 12

Scotland/Menno 44, Bridgewater-Emery 36

Sioux Falls Christian 66, Western Christian, Iowa 47

Sisseton 46, Great Plains Lutheran 26

Stanley County 36, Chamberlain 20

Tri-Valley 66, Garretson 13

Tripp-Delmont-Armour 48, Colome 16

Waubay/Summit 50, Webster 45, OT

West Central 55, Baltic 40

Some high school basketball scores provided by Scorestream.com, <https://scorestream.com/>

Chase Forte scores 25 to help South Dakota fend off Wyoming 82-81

By The Associated Press undefined

VERMILLION, S.D. (AP) — Chase Forte scored 25 points and South Dakota held off Wyoming 82-81 on Tuesday night.

Forte had five rebounds and five assists for the Coyotes (8-4). His jumper with 17:08 left in the second half gave South Dakota a lead it never relinquished. Kaleb Stewart scored 17 points while shooting 7 for 12, including 1 for 4 from beyond the arc. Quandre Bullock shot 3 of 9 from the field, including 2 for 5 from 3-point range, and went 6 for 8 from the line to finish with 14 points.

The Cowboys (5-4) were led by Obi Agbim, who posted 17 points, six rebounds and four assists. Wyoming also got 16 points from A.J. Wills. Dontaie Allen had 10 points.

Stewart scored 13 in the first half as South Dakota and the Cowboys played to a 37-all tie.

Man accused of killing UnitedHealthcare's CEO shouts on way into courthouse and fights extradition

By MICHAEL R. SISAK and MARK SCOLFORO Associated Press

ALTOONA, Pa. (AP) — The man charged with murder in the killing of the CEO of UnitedHealthcare made it clear he wasn't going to make things easy for authorities, shouting unintelligibly and writhing in the grip of sheriff's deputies as he was led into court and then objecting to being taken to New York to face trial.

The displays of resistance Tuesday weren't expected to significantly delay legal proceedings for Luigi Nicholas Mangione, who was charged in last week's Manhattan killing of Brian Thompson, the leader of the United States' largest medical insurance company. Little new information has come out about a possible motive, though writings found in Mangione's possession hinted at a vague hatred of corporate greed.

In his first public words since he was arrested at a McDonald's in Pennsylvania after a five-day search, the 26-year-old Ivy League graduate from a prominent Maryland real estate family emerged from a patrol car shouting about an "insult to the intelligence of the American people" while deputies pushed him into a courthouse.

A law enforcement bulletin obtained by The Associated Press said that at the time of his arrest, Mangione was carrying a handwritten document expressing anger with what he called "parasitic" health insurance companies and a disdain for corporate greed and power.

He wrote that the U.S. has the most expensive health care system in the world and that profits of major corporations continue to rise while "our life expectancy" does not, according to the bulletin.

Mangione remained jailed in Pennsylvania, where he was initially charged with possession of an unlicensed firearm, forgery and providing false identification to police.

Manhattan prosecutors were beginning to take steps to bring Mangione to New York, but at a brief hearing Tuesday, defense lawyer Thomas Dickey said his client will not waive extradition and instead wants a hearing on the issue. Mangione was denied bail after prosecutors said he was too dangerous to be released.

He mostly stared straight ahead at the hearing, occasionally looking at papers, rocking in his chair or looking back at the gallery.

"You can't rush to judgment in this case or any case," Dickey said afterward. "He's presumed innocent. Let's not forget that."

Mangione was arrested in Altoona, Pennsylvania, about 230 miles (about 370 kilometers) west of New York City, after a McDonald's customer recognized him and notified an employee, authorities said.

New York police officials have said Mangione was carrying a gun like the one used to kill Thompson and the same fake ID the suspected shooter had used to check into a New York hostel, along with a passport and other fraudulent IDs.

A law enforcement official who wasn't authorized to discuss the investigation publicly and spoke with The Associated Press on condition of anonymity said a three-page, handwritten document found with Mangione included a line in which he claimed to have acted alone.

"To the Feds, I'll keep this short, because I do respect what you do for our country. To save you a lengthy investigation, I state plainly that I wasn't working with anyone," the document said, according to the official.

Thompson, 50, was killed Dec. 4 as he walked alone to a Manhattan hotel for an investor conference. From surveillance video, New York investigators determined the shooter quickly fled the city, likely by bus.

Mangione was born into a life of country clubs and privilege. His grandfather was a self-made real estate developer and philanthropist.

"Our family is shocked and devastated by Luigi's arrest," Mangione's family said in a statement posted on social media late Monday by his cousin, Maryland Del. Nino Mangione. "We offer our prayers to the family of Brian Thompson and we ask people to pray for all involved."

From January to June 2022, Luigi Mangione lived at Surfbreak, a "co-living" space at the edge of touristy Waikiki in Honolulu. Josiah Ryan, a spokesperson for owner and founder R.J. Martin, said he was widely considered a "great guy," though he had long dealt with severe back pain that interfered with many aspects of his life.

Middle East latest: Israeli strike on home in northern Gaza kills 19 people, Palestinian medics say

By The Associated Press undefined

An Israeli strike on a home sheltering displaced people in the northern Gaza Strip killed at least 19, Palestinian medical officials said Wednesday.

Kamal Adwan Hospital said it received the bodies after the overnight strike in the town of Beit Lahiya. Hospital records show that a family of eight were among those killed, including four children, their parents and two grandparents.

There was no immediate comment from the Israeli military, which has waged a renewed offensive against Hamas militants in northern Gaza since early October.

Another strike in the Nuseirat refugee camp in central Gaza killed at least seven people, according to al-Awda Hospital. Records show the dead included two children, their parents and three relatives.

The war began when Hamas-led militants stormed into Israel on Oct. 7, 2023, killing some 1,200 people, mostly civilians, and abducting around 250 people, including children and older adults. Around 100 hostages are still inside Gaza, at least a third of whom are believed to be dead.

Israel's retaliatory offensive has killed over 44,000 Palestinians in Gaza, according to local health officials. They say women and children make up more than half the dead but do not distinguish between fighters and civilians in their count. Israel says it has killed over 17,000 militants, without providing evidence.

Here's the latest:

UN appeals for \$4 billion for humanitarian operations in Palestinian territories

JERUSALEM — The United Nations is asking donors for over \$4 billion to fund humanitarian operations in the Palestinian territories, most of it earmarked for war-ravaged Gaza.

The U.N. Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs also called for the "lifting all impediments to the entry of aid" in its appeal issued Wednesday.

U.N. agencies say aid operations in Gaza are hindered by Israeli restrictions and the breakdown of law and order. Israel says it allows enough aid to enter and blames the U.N. for not distributing it within the territory.

The appeal for 2025 includes \$3.6 billion for Gaza and about \$450 million for Palestinians in the Israeli-occupied West Bank.

Israel's offensive, launched after Hamas' Oct. 7, 2023, attack, has destroyed vast areas of the besieged territory and displaced around 90% of its population of 2.3 million. Many have been displaced multiple times and are now crammed into squalid tent camps with little in the way of food or other essentials. Most of the population relies on international aid.

Paraguay's president addresses the Knesset ahead of embassy reopening in Jerusalem

JERUSALEM — The president of Paraguay addressed the Israeli parliament Wednesday ahead of the reopening of the country's embassy in Jerusalem.

The decision to reopen the embassy in Jerusalem and recognize the city as the capital of Israel is a diplomatic win for Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, and puts Paraguay in a small group of countries that have taken the move.

Israel annexed east Jerusalem in 1967 but it wasn't recognized by the international community, and most countries run their embassies out of Tel Aviv.

"Without Jerusalem, the land of Israel is a body without a soul," President Santiago Peña said in a speech to the Knesset. "So I say here today that without an embassy in Jerusalem, diplomatic relations with Israel do not have a real heart." He said he hoped the move would inspire other countries to do the same.

The embassy is set to open Thursday.

Peña's move was welcomed by Netanyahu, Israeli President Isaac Herzog, along with other Israeli leaders.

"Tomorrow we will inaugurate together the embassy of Paraguay in our eternal capital, and that will happen not for the first time, but for the second time," Netanyahu said.

Paraguay had an embassy in Jerusalem in 2018, under Former President Horacio Cartes. That embassy was moved back to Tel Aviv by Cartes' successor, Mario Abdo Benitez, prompting Israel to close its embassy in Asuncion.

Israel reopened its embassy in September.

Russia says it's in touch with new authorities in Syria

MOSCOW — Russia said Wednesday it has maintained contacts with the new authorities in Syria.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said that "we are monitoring most closely what is happening in Syria."

"We, of course, maintain contacts with those who are currently controlling the situation in Syria," Peskov said in a conference call with reporters.

"This is necessary because our bases are located there, our diplomatic mission is located there and, of course, the issue related to ensuring the security of these facilities is extremely important and of primary significance."

Peskov wouldn't give details of those contacts, saying only that Russia has contacted "those who are controlling the situation on the ground."

He wouldn't give the number of Russian troops in Syria.

Asked to comment about Israel's seizure of a buffer zone on the border with Syria, Peskov called them destabilizing.

"The strikes and actions in the Golan Heights area, in the buffer zone area, are unlikely to help stabilize the situation in an already destabilized Syria," he said.

Russia has granted political asylum to ousted Syrian President Bashar Assad and his family after they fled rebels who seized Damascus over the weekend.

Iran's supreme leader says fall of Syrian government was part of joint plan by US and Israel

TEHRAN, Iran — Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei says the recent events in Syria, including the fall of its government, were part of a joint plan by the United States and Israel.

"There should be no doubt that what has happened in Syria is the result of a joint American and Zionist plan," Khamenei said in a speech in Tehran on Wednesday that was broadcast on state TV. "We have evidence, and this evidence leaves no room for doubt."

The Supreme leader added: "A neighboring state of Syria has played a clear role in this matter, and it continues to do so. Everyone can see this."

Khamenei also rejected speculation by analysts who have said that Iran will be weakened by the fall of Syrian President Bashar Assad's government.

"Those ignorant analysts are unaware of the meaning of resistance. They think that if resistance weakens, Islamic Iran will also weaken. But I say, with the help and power of God — by the will of Almighty Allah — Iran is powerful and it will become even more powerful," he said.

Atmospheric river and potential bomb cyclone bring chaotic winter weather to East Coast

By PATRICK WHITTLE Associated Press

PORTLAND, Maine (AP) — The U.S. East Coast was beginning a whiplash-inducing stretch of weather on Wednesday that was rainy, windy and potentially dangerous, due in part to an atmospheric river and developing bomb cyclone.

Places like western Maine could see freezing rain, downpours, unseasonably high temperatures and damaging winds — all in the span of a day, said Derek Schroeter, a forecaster with the National Weather Service.

The heavy rain and fierce winds will last until Wednesday night in many areas, and flooding is possible in some places, forecasters said. Utilities were also gearing up for potential power outages from damage caused by winds that could exceed 60 mph (97 kph) in areas.

One of the key factors driving the weather is an atmospheric river, which is a long band of water vapor that can transport moisture from the tropics to more northern areas, said Schroeter, who's based in Gray,

Maine.

The storm has the ability to hit New England hard because it could tap moisture from the Atlantic Ocean off the coast of the U.S. Southeast, and transport it to places like Maine. The state was preparing for a "multifaceted storm" that could bring two to three inches of rainfall in some areas, Schroeter said.

The region saw a combination of fog and light freezing rain on Tuesday night into early Wednesday. Schroeter said, "we are going to be watching for the potential for flash flooding and sharp rises on streams as temperatures rise into the 50s (10-15 Celsius)."

Forecasters also said the storm had the potential to include a process that meteorologists call bombogenesis, or a "bomb cyclone." That is the rapid intensification of a cyclone in a short period of time, and it has the ability to bring severe rainfall.

Parts of the Northeast were already preparing for bad weather.

In New Hampshire, the Mount Washington Avalanche Center issued a special bulletin Wednesday for the Presidential Range of mountains, which received significant snowfall over the last two weeks.

"Heavy rainfall could create dangerous and unpredictable avalanche conditions on steep snow-covered slopes," it said, making for unsafe conditions on stream crossings, skiing and hiking trails and bridges.

In Maine, some schools operated on a delay on Tuesday, which began with a few inches of snow. A flood watch for Vermont runs from Wednesday afternoon to Thursday morning.

The city of Montpelier, Vermont, was advising residents to prepare for mild flooding in the area and to elevate items in basements and low areas that are prone to flooding. The city said Tuesday that it has been in contact with the National Weather Service and Vermont Dam Safety and "will be actively monitoring the river levels as this storm passes through."

Ski resorts around the Northeast were preparing visitors for a potentially messy day on Wednesday. Stratton Mountain Resort, in southern Vermont, posted on its website that patrons "make sure to pack your Gore-Tex gear because it's going to be a wet one."

Alex Jones keeps Infowars for now after judge rejects The Onion's winning auction bid

By DAVE COLLINS Associated Press

A federal judge in Texas rejected the auction sale of Alex Jones' Infowars to The Onion satirical news outlet, criticizing the bidding for the conspiracy theory platform as flawed as well as how much money families of the 2012 Sandy Hook Elementary shooting stood to receive.

The decision late Tuesday night is a victory for Jones, whose Infowars site was put up for sale as part of his bankruptcy case in the wake of the nearly \$1.5 billion that courts have ordered him to pay over falsely calling one of the deadliest school shootings in U.S. history a hoax. Families of the Sandy Hook victims had backed The Onion's bid.

Following a two-day hearing in Houston, U.S. Bankruptcy Judge Christopher Lopez said he would not approve the sale, while citing concerns about transparency in the auction. That clears the way for Jones to keep — at least for now — Infowars, which is headquartered in Austin, Texas. The Onion had planned to kick Jones out and relaunch Infowars in January as a parody.

"We are deeply disappointed in today's decision, but The Onion will continue to seek a resolution that helps the Sandy Hook families receive a positive outcome for the horror they endured," Ben Collins, CEO of The Onion's parent company, Global Tetrahedron, posted on social media late Tuesday.

Lopez cited problems — but no wrongdoing — with the auction process. He said he did not think that those involved in the auction acted in bad faith and that everyone "put their best foot forward and tried to play within the rules."

Still, Lopez said he did not want another auction and left it up to the trustee who oversaw the auction to determine the next steps.

The Onion offered \$1.75 million in cash and other incentives for Infowars' assets in the auction. First

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 11, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 169 ~ 42 of 85

United American Companies, which runs a website in Jones' name that sells nutritional supplements, bid \$3.5 million.

The bids were a fraction of the money that Jones has been ordered to pay in defamation lawsuits in Connecticut and Texas filed by relatives of victims of the Sandy Hook shooting. Lopez said the auction outcome "left a lot of money on the table" for families.

"You got to scratch and claw and get everything you can for them," Lopez said.

Christopher Mattei, a lawyer for the Sandy Hook families who sued Jones in Connecticut, said they were disappointed in the judge's ruling.

"These families, who have already persevered through countless delays and roadblocks, remain resilient and determined as ever to hold Alex Jones and his corrupt businesses accountable for the harm he has caused," Mattei said in a statement. "This decision doesn't change the fact that, soon, Alex Jones will begin to pay his debt to these families and he will continue doing so for as long as it takes."

Jones, who did not attend the proceedings, went back on his program late Tuesday to celebrate the judge's ruling, calling the auction "ridiculous" and "fraudulent."

Although The Onion's cash offer was lower than that of First United American, it also included a pledge by many of the Sandy Hook families to forgo \$750,000 of the auction proceeds due to them and give it to other creditors, providing the other creditors more money than they would receive under First United American's bid.

Alex Jones' bankruptcy case

The sale of Infowars is part of Jones' personal bankruptcy case, which he filed in late 2022 after he was ordered to pay nearly \$1.5 billion in defamation lawsuits in Connecticut and Texas filed by relatives of victims of the Sandy Hook shooting.

Jones repeatedly called the shooting that killed 20 children and six educators a hoax staged by actors and aimed at increasing gun control. Parents and children of many of the victims testified in court that they were traumatized by Jones' conspiracies and threats from his followers.

Jones has since acknowledged that the Connecticut school shooting happened.

Most of the proceeds from the sale of Infowars, as well as many of Jones' personal assets, will go to the Sandy Hook families. Some proceeds will go to Jones' other creditors.

The auction overseer defends his decision

Trustee Christopher Murray had defended The Onion's bid in court this week, testifying that he did not favor either bidder over the other and was not biased.

He also revealed that First United American submitted a revised bid in recent days, but he said he could not accept it because the Sandy Hook families in the Connecticut lawsuit objected.

The Onion valued its bid, with the Sandy Hook families' offer, at \$7 million because that amount was equal to a purchase price that would provide the same amount of money to the other creditors.

In a court filing last month, Murray's lawyers called First United American's request to disqualify The Onion's bid a "disappointed bidder's improper attempt to influence an otherwise fair and open election process."

Jones' attorney, Ben Brooks, noted that the Sandy Hook lawsuit judgments could be overturned in pending appeals and got Murray to acknowledge that the Sandy Hook families' offer in The Onion bid could fall apart if that happens. That's because the percentage of the auction proceeds they would be entitled to could drop sharply and they wouldn't get the \$750,000 from the sale to give to other creditors.

Putting Infowars up for auction

Up for sale were all the equipment and other assets in the Infowars studio in Austin, as well as the rights to its social media accounts, websites, video archive and product trademarks. Jones uses the studio to broadcast his far-right, conspiracy theory-filled shows on the Infowars website, his account on the social platform X and radio stations. Many of Jones' personal assets also are being sold.

Jones has set up another studio, websites and social media accounts in case The Onion wins approval to buy Infowars and kicks him out. Jones has said he could continue using the Infowars platforms if the auction winner is friendly to him.

Jones is appealing the money has been ordered to pay in judgments citing free speech rights.

Ex-defense chief in South Korea tried to kill himself after being arrested over martial law

By KIM TONG-HYUNG and HYUNG-JIN KIM Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea (AP) — South Korea's previous defense minister was stopped from attempting suicide while in detention over last week's martial law declaration, officials said Wednesday, as President Yoon Suk Yeol's office resisted a police attempt to search the compound.

The main liberal opposition Democratic Party is pushing for a new motion to impeach Yoon for his Dec. 3 decree that imposed martial law in South Korea for the first time in more than four decades. Its first impeachment attempt against Yoon last Saturday failed after ruling party lawmakers boycotted the vote. The party said it plans to submit the new motion on Thursday to set up a vote on Saturday.

Yoon's ill-conceived power grab has paralyzed South Korean politics, frozen its foreign policy and rattled financial markets. On Wednesday, rival North Korea's state media for the first time reported about the turmoil across the border, but the country hasn't shown any suspicious activities.

Shin Yong Hae, commissioner general of the Korea Correctional Service, told lawmakers that former Defense Minister Kim Yong Hyun tried to kill himself the previous night at a detention center in Seoul. He said correctional officers stopped him and that he was in stable condition.

Kim was arrested by prosecutors early Wednesday on allegations of playing a key role in a rebellion and committing abuse of power. He became the first person formally arrested over the martial law decree.

Kim, one of Yoon's close associates, has been accused of recommending martial law to Yoon and sending troops to the National Assembly to block lawmakers from voting on it. Enough lawmakers eventually managed to enter a parliament chamber and they unanimously rejected Yoon's decree, forcing the Cabinet to lift it before daybreak on Dec. 4.

Kim said in a statement on Tuesday that he "deeply apologizes for causing significant anxiety" to the public. He said all responsibility for the martial law imposition rests with him and pleaded for leniency for soldiers deployed to enforce it.

Prosecutors have up to 20 days to determine whether to indict Kim.

Yoon's office blocks search of presidential compound

Later Wednesday, police detained National Police Agency Commissioner General Cho Ji Ho and Kim Bong-sik, head of Seoul's metropolitan police. They were accused of deploying police forces to parliament to block lawmakers from voting.

The main focus of the investigation is finding whether Yoon, Kim and others involved in imposing martial law committed rebellion. A conviction for rebellion carries a maximum penalty of death.

South Korean police said they sent officers to search Yoon's office on Wednesday to look for any evidence related to the martial law introduction. But investigators failed to enter the office as of Wednesday evening, about six hours after their arrival, senior police officer Lee Ho-young told the parliament.

Some observers earlier said that the presidential security service won't likely permit searches of Yoon's office, citing a law that prohibits searches of sites with state secrets without approval from those in charge of those areas.

Yoon on Saturday apologized over the martial law decree, saying that he won't avoid legal or political responsibility for it. He said he would leave it to his party to chart a course through the country's political turmoil, "including matters related to my term in office."

The leader of Yoon's ruling party later vowed to arrange the president's stable exit from office, saying the party will coordinate with Cabinet members over state affairs and that Yoon will be sidelined from duties.

The comments were criticized as unrealistic and unconstitutional, and caused widespread questions about who is in charge of South Korea and its military at a time of heightened tensions with North Korea. The Justice Ministry on Tuesday banned Yoon from leaving the country as he faces investigations.

Vice Defense Minister Kim Seon Ho reiterated Wednesday that Yoon remains in charge of the military. But Yoon hasn't been involved in any major official activities since lifting martial law, except for accepting resignation offers by officials involved in the martial law case and appointing the head for the country's

Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

A view from North Korea

A Wednesday article from the North's state news agency reported about the South Korean political chaos and protests triggered by Yoon's martial law decree. The report mostly attempted to explain the South Korean events, though it called Yoon "a traitor" and his military "gangsters."

Many experts say North Korea is sensitive to the domestic spread of news on major anti-government protests in foreign countries, because its own people have no official access to international news and could be affected by such events. The U.S. State Department said Monday that the U.S.-South Korean alliance remains "iron-clad" and that Washington is committed to the peace and security of the Korean Peninsula.

In his martial law announcement, the conservative Yoon stressed a need to rebuild the country by eliminating "shameless North Korea followers and anti-state forces," a reference to his liberal rivals who control parliament. Since taking office in 2022, Yoon has had near-constant friction with the Democratic Party, which introduced motions to impeach some of his top officials and launched a political offensive over scandals involving Yoon and his wife.

Opposition parties and many experts say the martial law decree was unconstitutional. They say a president is by law allowed to declare martial law only during wartime or similar emergency situations, but South Korea wasn't in such a predicament. They argue that deploying troops to seal the National Assembly to suspend its political activities amounted to rebellion because the constitution doesn't allow a president to use the military to suspend parliament in any situation.

If Yoon is impeached, his presidential powers would be suspended until the Constitutional Court decides whether to restore his powers or remove him from office. If he is dismissed from office, a new presidential election would be required.

Israeli strikes on Gaza kill at least 29, Palestinian medics say

By SAMY MAGDY and WAFAA SHURAFU Associated Press

DEIR AL-BALAH, Gaza Strip (AP) — Israeli strikes pounded the Gaza Strip overnight and into Wednesday, hitting a home where displaced people were sheltering in the isolated north and a built-up refugee camp. At least 29 people were killed, according to Palestinian health officials.

The Israel-Hamas war has raged on with no end in sight, even after Israel reached a ceasefire with Lebanon's Hezbollah and attention shifted to the overthrow of Syrian President Bashar Assad. Both the outgoing and incoming U.S. administrations have said they hope to end the war before the inauguration but months of ceasefire talks have repeatedly stalled.

The strike on the home killed 19 people in the northern town of Beit Lahiya near the border with Israel, according to the nearby Kamal Adwan Hospital, which received the bodies. Hospital records show that a family of eight was among those killed, including four children, their parents and two grandparents.

The hospital said another strike near its entrance on Wednesday killed a woman and her two children.

Dr. Hussam Abu Safiya, the hospital director, said Israeli drones struck nearby residential blocks overnight, causing explosions that sparked panic among the more than 120 sick and wounded patients inside the facility.

"We have received distress calls from neighbors and trapped people, but we're not able to leave the hospital because of the continued risk," he said. "We are witnessing a massive loss of life, with many martyrs in the targeted areas."

Another strike in the decades-old Nuseirat refugee camp in central Gaza killed at least seven people, according to the Awda Hospital. The dead included two children, their parents and three relatives, it said.

There was no immediate comment from the Israeli military. The military says it tries to avoid harming civilians and accuses militants of hiding among them, putting their lives in danger.

Evacuation orders after rocket fire

Militants in central Gaza meanwhile fired four projectiles into Israel on Wednesday, two of which were intercepted, the military said. The other two fell in open areas, and there were no reports of casualties.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 11, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 169 ~ 45 of 85

The military ordered the evacuation of a five-block area of the built-up Maghazi refugee camp in central Gaza, saying the rockets had been fired from there. The orders indicated that Israel would soon carry out strikes in the area.

The war began when Hamas-led militants stormed into Israel on Oct. 7, 2023, killing some 1,200 people, mostly civilians, and abducting around 250 people, including children and older adults. Around 100 hostages are still inside Gaza, at least a third of whom are believed to be dead.

Israel's retaliatory offensive has killed over 44,000 Palestinians in Gaza, according to local health officials. They say women and children make up more than half the dead but do not distinguish between fighters and civilians in their count. Israel says it has killed over 17,000 militants, without providing evidence.

Thousands more Palestinians have gone missing during the war, some after encounters with Israeli troops.

UN says civilians in Gaza face an 'utterly devastating situation'

Israel has been waging a renewed offensive against Hamas in Gaza's isolated and heavily destroyed north since early October. Troops have surrounded Beit Lahiya, Beit Hanoun and the urban Jabaliya refugee camp, allowing in almost no humanitarian aid and ordering tens of thousands to flee to nearby Gaza City.

Israeli officials have said the three communities are mostly deserted, but the United Nations humanitarian office said Tuesday that it believes around 65,000 to 75,000 people are still there, with little access to food, water, electricity or health care. Experts have warned that the north may be experiencing famine.

Sigrid Kaag, the senior U.N. humanitarian and reconstruction coordinator for Gaza, told reporters at the U.N. on Tuesday that civilians trying to survive all across Gaza face an "utterly devastating situation."

She pointed to the breakdown in law and order and looting that has left the U.N. and many aid organizations unable to deliver food and other humanitarian essentials to hundreds of thousands of Palestinians in need.

Kaag said she and other U.N. officials keep repeatedly asking Israel for access for convoys to northern Gaza and elsewhere, to allow in commercial goods, to reopen the Rafah crossing from Egypt in the south, and to approve dual-use items.

The Israeli military says it allows in enough humanitarian aid and blames U.N. agencies for not distributing it, saying large amounts of aid have accumulated just inside Gaza's borders. U.N. officials say Israeli restrictions, the breakdown of law and order and ongoing fighting make it difficult to access the aid and distribute it, and have repeatedly called for a ceasefire.

The United States, Egypt and Qatar have been mediating talks between Israel and Hamas for nearly a year, and diplomats say those efforts have recently gained momentum.

But Hamas has said it will not release the remaining hostages without an end to the war and a full withdrawal of Israeli troops. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has pledged to continue the war until Hamas is destroyed and all the hostages are returned and has said Israel will maintain a lasting military presence in some areas.

FIFA prepares to give Saudi Arabia its biggest sports win yet as host of the 2034 World Cup

By GRAHAM DUNBAR AP Sports Writer

ZURICH (AP) — Saudi Arabia will be confirmed by FIFA as host of the men's soccer 2034 World Cup on Wednesday, giving the oil-rich kingdom its biggest prize yet for massive spending on global sports driven by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman.

The decision completes a mostly opaque 15-month bid process which FIFA president Gianni Infantino helped steer toward Saudi Arabia without a rival candidate, without taking questions, and which human rights groups warn will put the lives of migrant workers at risk.

FIFA and Saudi officials say hosting the 2034 tournament can accelerate change, including more freedoms and rights for women.

A fast-track path to victory was cleared last year by FIFA accepting a three-continent hosting plan for

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 11, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 169 ~ 46 of 85

the 2030 World Cup led by Spain, Portugal and Morocco. That bid also will win Wednesday in a combined approval for the 2030 and 2034 tournament hosts by applause from more than 200 FIFA member federations in an online meeting hosted from Zurich by Infantino.

It will kick off a decade of scrutiny on Saudi labor laws and treatment of workers mostly from South Asia needed to help build and upgrade 15 stadiums, plus hotels and transport networks ahead of the 104-game tournament.

One of the stadiums is planned to be 350 meters (yards) above the ground in Neom — a futuristic city that does not yet exist — and another named for the crown prince is designed to be atop a 200-meter cliff near Riyadh.

During the bid campaign, FIFA has accepted limited scrutiny of Saudi Arabia's human rights record that was widely criticized this year at the United Nations.

Saudi and international rights groups and activists warned FIFA it has not learned the lessons of Qatar's much-criticized preparations to host the 2022 World Cup.

The kingdom plans to spend tens of billion of dollars on projects related to the World Cup as part of the crown prince's sweeping Vision 2030 project that aims to modernize Saudi society and economy. At its core is spending on sports by the \$900 billion sovereign wealth operation, the Public Investment Fund, which he oversees. Critics have called it "sportswashing" of the kingdom's reputation.

The prince, known as MBS, has built close working ties to Infantino since 2017 — aligning with the organizer of sport's most-watched event rather than directly confronting the established system as it did with the disruptive LIV Golf project.

The result for Saudi Arabia and FIFA has been smooth progress toward the win Wednesday with limited pushback from soccer officials, though some from women international players.

The steady flow of Saudi cash into international soccer is set to increase.

FIFA created a new and higher World Cup sponsor category for state oil firm Aramco, and Saudi funding is set to underwrite the 2025 Club World Cup in the United States that is a pet project for Infantino.

North American soccer body CONCACAF signed a multi-year deal with PIF, Saudi stadiums host Super Cup games for Italy and Spain, and nearly 50 FIFA member federations have signed working agreements with Saudi counterparts.

Lavish spending by PIF-owned Saudi clubs in the past two years buying and paying players — including Cristiano Ronaldo, Neymar, Karim Benzema and Sadio Mané — put hundreds of millions of dollars into European soccer.

That influence could be key in talks to agree which months to play the 2034 World Cup. The November-December slot taken by Qatar in 2022 to avoid extreme midsummer heat is complicated in 2034 by the holy month of Ramadan through mid-December and Riyadh hosting the multi-sport Asian Games.

Still, January 2034 could be an option — and likely better for European clubs and leagues — after the International Olympic Committee said it saw few issues in clashing with the Salt Lake Winter Games opening Feb. 10, 2034. The IOC also has a major commercial deal with Saudi Arabia, to host the new Esports Olympics.

Biden approves national security memo aimed at helping Trump on China, Iran, North Korea and Russia

By AAMER MADHANI Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden has approved a new national security memorandum that is meant to serve as a roadmap for the incoming Trump administration as it looks to counter growing cooperation among China, Iran, North Korea and Russia, the White House said Wednesday.

Biden administration officials began developing the guidance this summer. It was shaped to be a document that could help the next administration build its approach from day one on how it will go about dealing with the tightening relationships between the United States' most prominent adversaries and competitors, according to two senior administration officials.

The officials, who spoke on the condition of anonymity under ground rules set by the White House, said the classified memorandum would not be made public because of the sensitivity of some of its findings.

The document includes four broad recommendations: improving U.S. government interagency cooperation, speeding up the sharing of information with allies about the four adversaries, calibrating the U.S. government's use of sanctions and other economic tools for maximum effectiveness, and bolstering preparation to manage simultaneous crises involving the adversaries.

The U.S. for many years has been concerned about cooperation among the four countries. Coordination has accelerated between the countries in the aftermath of Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

The officials noted that as Russia has become more isolated by much of the world, Moscow has turned to Iran for drones and missiles. From North Korea, the Russians have received artillery, missiles and even thousands of troops that have traveled to help the Russians try to repel Ukrainian forces from the Kursk region. China, meanwhile, has supported Russia with dual use components that help keep its military industrial base afloat.

In return, Russia has sent fighter jets to Iran and assisted Tehran as it looks to bolster its missile defense and space technology.

North Korea has received from Russia much-needed fuel and funding to help build out its manufacturing and military capabilities. The officials added that Russia has "de facto accepted North Korea as a nuclear weapon state."

China, meanwhile, is benefiting from Russian know-how, with the two countries working together to deepen their military technical cooperation. The two nations are also conducting joint patrols in the Arctic region.

Biden and President-elect Donald Trump have sharply different worldviews, but officials in both the incoming and outgoing administrations said they have sought to coordinate on national security issues during the transition.

Humanitarian aid to northern Gaza mostly blocked for the last 2 months, UN says

UNITED NATIONS (AP) — Humanitarian aid to northern Gaza, where Israel launched a ground offensive on Oct. 6, has largely been blocked for the past 66 days, the United Nations said Tuesday. That has left between 65,000 and 75,000 Palestinians without access to food, water, electricity or health care, according to the world body.

In the north, Israel has continued its siege on Beit Lahiya, Beit Hanoun and Jabaliya with Palestinians living there largely denied aid, the U.N. Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, known as OCHA, said. Recently, it said, about 5,500 people were forcibly displaced from three schools in Beit Lahiya to Gaza City.

Adding to the food crisis, only four U.N.-supported bakeries are operating throughout the Gaza Strip, all of them in Gaza City, OCHA said.

Sigrid Kaag, the senior U.N. humanitarian and reconstruction coordinator for Gaza, told reporters after briefing the U.N. Security Council behind closed doors Tuesday afternoon that civilians trying to survive in Gaza face an "utterly devastating situation."

She pointed to the breakdown in law and order and looting that has exacerbated a very dire situation and left the U.N. and many aid organizations unable to deliver food and other humanitarian essentials to hundreds of thousands of Palestinians in need.

Kaag said she and other U.N. officials keep repeatedly asking Israel for access for convoys to north Gaza and elsewhere, to allow in commercial goods, to reopen the Rafah crossing from Egypt in the south, and to approve dual-use items.

Israel's U.N. Mission said it had no comment on Kaag's remarks.

The U.N. has established the logistics for an operation across Gaza, she said, but there is no substitute

for political will that humanitarians don't possess.

"Member states possess it," Kaag said. And this is what she urged Security Council members and keeps urging the broader international community to press for — the political will to address Gaza's worsening humanitarian crisis.

US Biathlon officials ignored sexual harassment and abuse of female racers for decades, athletes say

By MARTHA BELLISLE Associated Press

Sexual abuse and harassment by coaches and others who held positions of power over women on the U.S. Biathlon team have been dismissed, ignored or excused over decades by officials more concerned with winning medals than holding offenders accountable, according to a half-dozen former Olympians and other biathletes.

And while the men involved climbed the ranks of the sport, these women — who described a culture of abuse dating back to the 1990s — told The Associated Press they were forced to end their racing careers early.

One coach resigned after the young biathlete he was accused of sexually abusing attempted suicide, but he was later hired to coach the U.S. Paralympic team.

Max Cobb, who the women say was informed but failed to address the claims, went from U.S. domestic team manager to CEO of the U.S. Biathlon Association and is now secretary general of the International Biathlon Union, the worldwide governing body of the sport, which combines cross-country skiing on trails with target shooting.

Two male coaches and a former racer on the men's biathlon team confirmed the culture of misogyny described by the women, who all said they faced retaliation for speaking up.

"My safety on the team was clearly secondary to a top-down power structure focused on image, medals and marketing," said two-time Olympian Joan Wilder, 58, who said her coach got away with trying to sexually assault her in 1990 despite her complaints to Cobb.

Grace Boutot, a 2009 Youth World Championship silver medalist, said her reports to Cobb and other officials about abuse committed by two coaches, beginning when she was 15, also went unheeded, eventually leading to a suicide attempt.

"U.S. Biathlon leadership always seems to choose to support the predators instead of the person who was abused," the now 33-year-old Boutot said.

The women came forward after the AP reported that Olympian Joanne Reid was sexually abused and harassed for years, according to findings by the U.S. Center for SafeSport, a watchdog group created to investigate sex-abuse allegations in Olympic sports in the aftermath of the Larry Nassar U.S. Gymnastics scandal.

Reid told the AP her repeated complaints to top U.S. Biathlon officials, which were relayed to Cobb, were ignored for three years.

Cobb denied the women's allegations that he failed to act. "During my 33 years at U.S. Biathlon, athlete safety was always fundamental to me and I can't recall ever hearing from athletes or others that my efforts in this regard were not appropriate," he said in an email to the AP.

Cobb declined to be interviewed to respond to specific allegations raised by the women, saying it would be a violation of SafeSport's code.

However, an independent investigation ordered by U.S. Biathlon into team culture and safety following the AP report found biathletes faced "misogynistic" behavior while racing and feared retaliation if they came forward with their concerns.

The assessment by outside auditor Vestry Laight, released last week, said the athletes surveyed described a sport "dominated by men who have a very different outlook on how to treat women" and criticized the "lack of attention paid to create a respectful environment."

Biathlon officials said they were adopting an "action plan" in response to the auditor's report, including

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 11, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 169 ~ 49 of 85

workshops with staff and athletes to define core values and create a way to measure progress.

SafeSport interviews also confirmed the sexualized atmosphere. U.S. Biathlon team psychologist Sean McCann described "a European boys club culture" in the watchdog group's 2022 report on the Reid case, with some men sharing sexual comments and other explicit content on a private WhatsApp group.

Turning a blind eye in pursuit of elusive Olympic medals, athletes say

Biathlon is the only winter sport for which the U.S. has never won an Olympic medal. Desperate to excel in the European-dominated sport, U.S. officials hired European coaches and staff, and turned a blind eye when women raised claims of sexual harassment or abuse on the team, all those interviewed said.

In 1990, to prepare for the first-ever women's biathlon race at the Olympics, U.S. officials hired German biathlete Walter Pichler, a 1984 Olympic bronze medalist, to coach the U.S. women's team.

During a training camp in Montana that year, the team went out one night but then 20-year-old Wilder said she went to bed early. She suddenly woke to someone on her back. Pichler was holding her down and trying to force her to have sex, she said in a complaint filed with SafeSport.

Pichler denied trying to sexually assault Wilder. "This is unbelievable," he told AP. "I'm speechless. If this comes out, it does damage to me."

"I always had a super relationship with Joanie, or with all the athletes, all the female, the men athletes. All of them."

Wilder said she chased Pichler from her room and reported it to then-team manager Cobb. He showed concern, she said, "but didn't consider it discipline-worthy." Cobb justified Pichler's behavior by saying he didn't know U.S. laws or culture, she said.

"I recall pressing Max Cobb about sending Walter back to Germany. The conversation didn't last long," said Wilder, who competed under her maiden name Guetschow. Pichler's visa had taken two years to secure, he told her, "and we were so close to the Olympics. We needed their expertise to perform well."

"The message I felt, and it hurt, was not to harm the team, organization, Olympics over a very inconvenient 'incident,'" she said. "Basically, shut up for the team's sake."

Wilder said in her SafeSport complaint that she faced retaliation for pressing the issue of firing Pichler. "I was targeted as a 'problem' athlete," she said, in the complaint.

She said her rifle disappeared, her skis went to another athlete, and she was temporarily bumped from the 1994 Olympic team, then dropped from the national team before the 1998 Olympics without being told. That put her health insurance at risk. She had undergone heart surgery, so losing coverage with a pre-existing condition was catastrophic, she said.

She called Cobb in distress.

"Max ended the conversation with, 'Well, if you write a letter to the U.S. Olympic Committee and say that you're resigning from biathlon, I'll extend your medical insurance,'" she told the AP. She hung up, she said, deciding she didn't have any fight left.

"It was time for me to move on."

Two coaches prey on teenage Maine biathlete

Boutot grew up homeschooled and mostly isolated from others her age in Fort Kent, Maine, a town of 4,000 on the Canadian border. The Maine Winter Sports Center ran a world-class Nordic ski facility there used by U.S. Biathlon.

Boutot was 12 when she was recruited into the program in 2003. She started racing biathlon the next year and began training with newly hired coach Gary Colliander when she was 15.

Colliander gave her a lot of coaching attention, but also a lot of hugs, she said. Her parents had divorced and she rarely saw her father, so she appreciated his support.

"I didn't think he would do anything to hurt me," she told the AP of Colliander, who was 15 years her senior.

As she got older, she said, his attention increased. He invited her to his home, massaged her legs and rubbed her back and buttocks, she said. He was married, but his wife lived part time in Colorado.

The conduct escalated after she turned 18 to "kissing, sexual fondling and oral sex," according to a

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 11, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 169 ~ 50 of 85

treatment summary by therapist Jacqueline Pauli-Ritz, shared with the AP.

Boutot said she begged him to stop but Colliander ignored her. She said he warned her against telling anyone, saying his life would be ruined and her biathlon career would end.

She loved racing, and felt trapped; to compete internationally she needed her coach's recommendation: "I didn't know what to do," she said.

She became severely depressed and started cutting herself, according to the therapist's notes. In September 2010, Pauli-Ritz contacted Colliander and told him Boutot was suffering from major depression and post-traumatic stress disorder and he should stop coaching her, the treatment summary said.

"He did not do this until after the suicide attempt," Pauli-Ritz wrote, referring to Boutot's Oct. 7, 2010, overdose on antidepressants while at a training camp in Soldier Hollow, Utah. She was found by a teammate and hospitalized.

The next day, Colliander resigned. He took a coaching job in Colorado and was hired in December 2016 by the U.S. Paralympic team, where he is associate director of high performance for U.S. Paralympics Nordic Skiing.

Colliander did not respond to phone messages and emails seeking comment.

In October 2010, Boutot informed the CEO and the vice president of the Maine Winter Sports Center about the abuse by Colliander, according to a letter she sent to the sports center's board. But, she said, there was no investigation.

Boutot said she also faced abuse by then-U.S. Biathlon junior team coach Vladimir Cervenka of the Czech Republic, starting in 2007. He caressed her buttocks and legs, she said, and also grabbed other girls and gave "good luck pats."

When she won a silver medal at the 2009 Youth World Championships in Canada, Cervenka grabbed her, she said.

"He forcibly kissed me and groped my entire body, smothering me and crushing me until he was pulled off of me by our team masseuse," she said of Cervenka, who was 26 years older than her.

Cervenka denied Boutot's claims.

"I absolutely did not kiss her or grope her body," he told the AP in an email. "Regarding inappropriate touching Grace, I have no memory of any of that and I for sure did not have any intention of doing that. All these accusations are absurd and very upsetting."

Boutot reported the alleged abuse by Cervenka twice to U.S. Biathlon officials, including in a Jan. 6, 2011, email to Cobb and a U.S. Biathlon board member in which she also expressed concern about Cervenka's inappropriate contact with other young teammates and her worries about retaliation for speaking up. In the email exchange, she was told the issues were serious, but she had to make her complaint public so Cervenka could defend himself.

Boutot said she expected them to investigate.

"I wish I would have spoken up more at the time but it was terrifying," she told the AP. "I told them of the abuse and they never took me seriously. It felt like an insurmountable battle, me against them. I went to USBA hoping for help, and it felt like they continuously shut me down and wanted me to leave the sport."

Boutot tried to keep racing but faced retaliation by the Maine Winter Sports Center, she said in a 2011 complaint filed with the Maine Human Rights Commission. She accused the center of failing to prevent Colliander's sexual misconduct and retaliating against her when she reported it — denying her coaching and ending its financing of equipment, travel, athlete housing and other U.S. Biathlon competition-related expenses.

The center settled for \$75,000, and Boutot quit racing.

What comes next?

SafeSport has ordered a new investigation into whether Reid was retaliated against for exposing the abuse she endured to the watchdog group. SafeSport spokeswoman Hilary Nemchik said she could not comment on the ongoing case.

Olympian Deedra Irwin, Reid's teammate who is competing at the World Cup in Europe this winter, said

the misogynistic culture described by SafeSport grew under Cobb's leadership.

"Max Cobb just hired all his friends," Irwin told the AP. "The amount of people working in USBA right now who are all ex-athletes that are all really close with Max Cobb, it's like, OK, this is how this kept happening for so many years."

"You just keep hiring people who are comfortable with what's already happening."

SafeSport, which was created in 2017, decades after the abuse reported by Wilder and Boutot, investigates claims even when the legal statute of limitations has expired.

After receiving an anonymous tip, SafeSport contacted Boutot in 2021 about filing a complaint about the abuse allegations involving Colliander, she said.

She declined. A coach found guilty might only face a six-month suspension, she said, but "what I have endured has been a life sentence."

Wilder said she didn't know she had the option and filed a SafeSport complaint, naming Cobb and Pichler, after she found out. She said it is "an important next step."

"I love the sport of biathlon," Wilder said. "I sincerely hope that my shared story with other women biathletes results in this being bookends to a darker period — that it never happens again."

These Palestinians disappeared after encounters with Israeli troops in Gaza

By WAFAA SHURAF, SARAH EL DEEB and JULIA FRANKEL Associated Press

DEIR AL-BALAH, Gaza Strip (AP) — Reem Ajour says she last saw her husband and then 4-year-old daughter in March, when Israeli soldiers raided a family home in northern Gaza. She is haunted by those chaotic last moments, when the soldiers ordered her to go — to leave behind Talal and Masaa, both wounded.

Eight months later, the 23-year-old mother still has no answers about their fate. The military says it does not have them. Troops leveled the house where they were staying soon after the raid.

"I am living and dead at the same time," she said, breaking down in sobs.

Ajour is one of dozens of Palestinians that an Israeli legal group, Hamoked, is helping in their search for family members who went missing after being separated by Israeli soldiers during raids and arrests in the Gaza Strip.

Their cases — a fraction of the estimated thousands who have gone missing during the 14-month-long war — highlight a lack of accountability in how the Israeli military deals with Palestinians during ground operations in Gaza, Hamoked says.

Throughout the war, the military has conducted what amounts to a mass sifting of the Palestinian population as it raids homes and shelters and sends people through checkpoints. Troops round up and detain men, from dozens to several hundreds at a time, searching for any they suspect of Hamas ties, while forcing their families away, toward other parts of Gaza. The result is families split apart, often amid the chaos of fighting.

But the military has not made clear how it keeps track of everyone it separates, arrests or detains. Even if troops transfer Palestinians to military detention inside Israel, they can hold them incommunicado for more than two months — their whereabouts unknown to families or lawyers, according to rights groups.

When people vanish, it's nearly impossible to know what happened, Hamoked says.

"We've never had a situation of mass forced disappearance from Gaza, with no information provided for weeks and weeks to families," said Jessica Montell, the director of Hamoked. Israel's High Court of Justice has refused to intervene to get answers, despite Hamoked's petitions, she said.

Asked by The Associated Press about the cases of Ajour and two other families it interviewed, the Israeli military declined comment.

4-year-old Masaa Ajour was shot, then separated from her mother

The Ajours were sheltering at a home in Gaza City that belonged to Talal's family after being displaced from their own house earlier in the war. Israeli troops raided the home on March 24, opening fire as they burst in, Ajour said.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 11, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 169 ~ 52 of 85

Ajour, who was three months pregnant, was shot in the stomach. Talal was wounded in his leg, bleeding heavily. Masaa lay passed out, shot in the shoulder – though Ajour said she saw her still breathing.

As one soldier bandaged the little girl's wound, another pointed his gun in Ajour's face and told her to head out of Gaza City.

She said she pleaded that she couldn't leave Masaa and Talal, but the soldier screamed: "Go south!"

With no choice, Ajour collected her younger son and went down to the street. "It was all in a blink of an eye. It was all so fast," she said. Still bleeding, she walked for two and a half hours, clutching her son.

When they reached a hospital in central Gaza, doctors treated her stomach wound and found her fetus' pulse. Weeks later, doctors found the pulse had gone. She miscarried.

Ajour said that several weeks later, a Palestinian released from a prison in southern Israel told her family he had heard her husband's name called out over a loudspeaker among a list of detainees.

The rumor has kept her hope alive, but the military told Hamoked it had no record of Masaa or Talal being detained.

Another possibility is that they died on the scene, but no one has been able to search the rubble of the family's building to determine if any bodies are there.

The storming of their building came as Israeli forces were battling Hamas fighters in surrounding streets while raiding nearby Shifa Hospital, where it claimed the militants were based. Troops cleared families out of nearby homes and often then destroyed or set the buildings ablaze, according to witnesses at the time.

The military itself may not know what happened to Ajour's husband and daughter, said Montell of Hamoked.

"That illustrates a broader problem," she said.

Ajour and her son now shelter in a tent camp outside the central Gaza town of Zuweida.

Masaa, she said, "was my first joy" — with blond hair and olive-colored eyes, a face "white like the moon."

Masaa's fifth birthday was in July, Ajour said, sobbing. "She turned five while she is not with me."

Does the military document what troops do in Gaza?

Under a wartime revision to Israeli law, Palestinians from Gaza taken to military detention in Israel can be held for over two months without access to the outside world.

Israel says the law is necessary to handle the unprecedented number of detainees as it seeks to destroy Hamas following the Oct. 7 2023, attack on Israel that killed 1,200 and took around 250 people hostage inside Gaza. The military has transferred some 1,770 of its Gaza detainees to civilian prisons, according to rights groups, but it has not revealed the number still in its detention.

Milena Ansari, a researcher at Human Rights Watch, said Israel is obligated under international law to document what happens during every home raid and detention. But the military is not transparent about the information it collects on detainees or on how many it is holding, she said.

Hamoked has asked the military for the whereabouts of 900 missing Palestinians. The military confirmed around 500 of them were detained in Israel. It said it had no record of detaining the other 400.

The group petitioned Israel's High Court of Justice seeking answers in 52 cases, including that of Masaa and two other children, where witnesses testified that the missing were handled by troops before their disappearances.

"The judges just dismiss the cases, without even inquiring what measures might be necessary to prevent such cases in the future," said Montell.

A court spokesperson said it often asks the military to provide additional information but isn't authorized to investigate if the military says it is not detaining them.

In the cases of three missing adult Palestinians presented by Hamoked, the military first claimed it was not holding them, then found records of them being detained after being pressed by Hamoked to double-check.

In another case, military police discovered that two Palestinians they had initially denied holding -- a father and his adult son -- had died in Israeli custody. The U.N. Human Rights Office says at least 53 Palestinians are known to have died in Israeli detention during the war.

Ailing with cancer, Mahmoud Alghrabli disappeared after raid

The last time the Alghrabli family saw their 76-year-old patriarch, Mahmoud Alghrabli, was when Israeli troops stormed their district in Khan Younis on Feb. 4. The soldiers ordered residents out of the area. The Alghrablis had to carry Mahmoud, suffering from cancer, out of their building on a chair, his son Ahmed Alghrabli told the AP.

After detaining some men, the soldiers ordered the rest to leave. Mahmoud Alghrabli made it to a sand mound near the house. Ahmed Alghrabli said his brother went to help the father, but soldiers shouted at him to leave.

"He left our father by force, or he would have been shot," he said.

The family returned a month later. There was no trace of Mahmoud. Ahmed Alghrabli said he "walked meter by meter" searching for traces, finding bones but not knowing whose they were. He keeps them wrapped in a piece of cloth at home.

Hamoked was told by the military there was no indication of him in Israeli detention.

"By God, I don't sleep at night," said Mahmoud's wife, Sabah Abdul-Salam. Whether he was arrested or killed, she said, "let us know, we will rest."

Mahmoud Almoqayed vanished while searching for his family

The only traces left of another missing man, 77-year-old Mahmoud Almoqayed, are his torn shirt and pants with his ID in the pocket. They were found in the dirt near the school where he and his family were sheltering when it was raided by Israeli troops on May 23 in the northern town of Beit Lahiya.

The soldiers released Almoqayed and sent him and other men to another shelter, said his son, Rani Almoqayed, a doctor working in Saudi Arabia who pieced together the account from witnesses and family members.

Once at the second shelter, the elderly Almoqayed immediately turned back, determined to find his wife and grandchildren left behind at the school, witnesses told his son. It was dark, well after 1 a.m., and troops were all around the area. Almoqayed was never seen by his family again.

Weeks later, his family found his abandoned clothes. They also found skulls and body parts nearby, Rani Almoqayed said.

The military police told Hamoked it had no indication Almoqayed was detained.

Rani Almoqayed believes it's possible his father was killed and Israeli troops took the body. Since December 2023, the military has returned at least 318 bodies and a sack of body parts to Gaza after seizing them to search for hostages, a senior U.N. official in Gaza told the AP, speaking anonymously to discuss confidential matters.

The bodies, with no identification and often decomposed, are buried in anonymous mass graves.

The family had Mahmoud Almoqayed declared officially dead, his son said.

"But the doubt will not stop and one's heart won't ease unless they see the body."

Judge rejects sale of Alex Jones' Infowars to The Onion in dispute over bankruptcy auction

By DAVE COLLINS Associated Press

A federal judge on Tuesday night rejected the auction sale of Alex Jones' Infowars to The Onion satirical news outlet, criticizing the bidding process as flawed and the amount of money that families of the 2012 Sandy Hook Elementary shooting stood to receive.

The Onion had been named the winning bidder on Nov. 14 over a company affiliated with Jones, whose conspiracy theory platform was put up for sale as part of his bankruptcy case stemming from the nearly \$1.5 billion that courts have ordered him to pay over falsely calling one of the deadliest school shootings in U.S. history a hoax.

The decision by U.S. Bankruptcy Judge Christopher Lopez of Houston to not approve the sale means Jones can stay at his Infowars headquarters in Austin, Texas. The Onion had planned to kick Jones out and relaunch Infowars in January as a parody.

"We are deeply disappointed in today's decision, but The Onion will continue to seek a resolution that

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 11, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 169 ~ 54 of 85

helps the Sandy Hook families receive a positive outcome for the horror they endured," Ben Collins, CEO of The Onion's parent company, Global Tetrahedron, posted on social media late Tuesday.

Lopez cited problems — but no wrongdoing — with the auction process. He said he did not want another auction and left it up to the trustee who oversaw the auction to determine the next steps.

The Onion offered \$1.75 million in cash and other incentives for Infowars' assets in the auction. First United American Companies, which runs a website in Jones' name that sells nutritional supplements, bid \$3.5 million.

The bids were a fraction of the money that Jones has been ordered to pay in defamation lawsuits in Connecticut and Texas filed by relatives of victims of the Sandy Hook shooting. Lopez said the auction outcome "left a lot of money on the table" for families.

"You got to scratch and claw and get everything you can for them," Lopez said.

Christopher Mattei, a lawyer for the Sandy Hook families who sued Jones in Connecticut, said they were disappointed in the judge's ruling.

"These families, who have already persevered through countless delays and roadblocks, remain resilient and determined as ever to hold Alex Jones and his corrupt businesses accountable for the harm he has caused," Mattei said in a statement. "This decision doesn't change the fact that, soon, Alex Jones will begin to pay his debt to these families and he will continue doing so for as long as it takes."

Jones, who did not attend the proceedings, quickly went back on the air to applaud the judge's decision.

"We can celebrate the judge doing the right thing with the most ridiculous, fraudulent auction known in human history," he said.

Although The Onion's cash offer was lower than that of First United American, it also included a pledge by many of the Sandy Hook families to forgo \$750,000 of the auction proceeds due to them and give it to other creditors, providing the other creditors more money than they would receive under First United American's bid.

Alex Jones' bankruptcy case

The sale of Infowars is part of Jones' personal bankruptcy case, which he filed in late 2022 after he was ordered to pay nearly \$1.5 billion in defamation lawsuits in Connecticut and Texas filed by relatives of victims of the Sandy Hook shooting.

Jones repeatedly called the shooting that killed 20 children and six educators a hoax staged by actors and aimed at increasing gun control. Parents and children of many of the victims testified in court that they were traumatized by Jones' conspiracies and threats from his followers.

Jones has since acknowledged that the Connecticut school shooting happened.

Most of the proceeds from the sale of Infowars, as well as many of Jones' personal assets, will go to the Sandy Hook families. Some proceeds will go to Jones' other creditors.

The auction overseer defends his decision

Trustee Christopher Murray had defended The Onion's bid during a lengthy two-day hearing in Houston, testifying that he did not favor either bidder over the other and was not biased.

He also revealed that First United American submitted a revised bid in recent days, but he said he could not accept it because the Sandy Hook families in the Connecticut lawsuit objected.

The Onion valued its bid, with the Sandy Hook families' offer, at \$7 million because that amount was equal to a purchase price that would provide the same amount of money to the other creditors.

In a court filing last month, Murray's lawyers called First United American's request to disqualify The Onion's bid a "disappointed bidder's improper attempt to influence an otherwise fair and open election process."

Jones' attorney, Ben Brooks, noted that the Sandy Hook lawsuit judgments could be overturned in pending appeals and got Murray to acknowledge that the Sandy Hook families' offer in The Onion bid could fall apart if that happens. That's because the percentage of the auction proceeds they would be entitled to could drop sharply and they wouldn't get the \$750,000 from the sale to give to other creditors.

Auctioneer Jeff Tanenbaum on Monday defended both the value of the bid and its selection.

Putting Infowars up for auction

Up for sale were all the equipment and other assets in the Infowars studio in Austin, as well as the rights to its social media accounts, websites, video archive and product trademarks. Jones uses the studio to broadcast his far-right, conspiracy theory-filled shows on the Infowars website, his account on the social platform X and radio stations. Many of Jones' personal assets also are being sold.

Jones has set up another studio, websites and social media accounts in case The Onion wins approval to buy Infowars and kicks him out. Jones has said he could continue using the Infowars platforms if the auction winner is friendly to him.

Jones is appealing the money has been ordered to pay in judgments citing free speech rights.

A Malibu wildfire prompts evacuation orders and warnings for 20,000, including Dick Van Dyke, Cher

By JAE C. HONG, ERIC THAYER and STEFANIE DAZIO Associated Press

MALIBU, Calif. (AP) — Weather conditions were forecasted to improve this week in Southern California, aiding firefighters in their battle against a wind-driven wildfire that's forced up to 20,000 people — including performers Cher, Dick Van Dyke and his wife — from their homes.

Residents under evacuation orders and warnings on Tuesday waited anxiously to see whether their properties had been spared by the so-called Franklin Fire, which erupted late Monday and grew to more than 2,800 acres (1,133 hectares) in under 24 hours.

The National Weather Service late Tuesday said the strongest Santa Ana winds, with gusts that reached 40 mph (64 kph), have passed. The notorious Santa Ana winds are withering, dry gusts that sweep out of the interior toward the coast, pushing back moist ocean breezes.

Even as the weather was expected to improve, forecasters said gusty winds will continue through Wednesday morning, especially in the mountains, and critical fire conditions remain.

Much of the devastation occurred in Malibu, a community of about 10,000 people on the western edge of Los Angeles renowned for its stunning scenery of seaside bluffs and Zuma Beach featured in Hollywood films. Flames burned near celebrities' seaside mansions, horse farms and Pepperdine University, where some 3,000 students were forced to shelter in place on campus. Many evacuated their dorms to the library through smoke and ash as flames roared in the canyon nearby.

It was not immediately known how the blaze started. Los Angeles County Fire Department Chief Anthony C. Marrone said a preliminary aerial assessment estimates that seven structures were destroyed and eight structures damaged.

"This has been a traumatic 20 hours for the city of Malibu," said Malibu Mayor Doug Stewart. The Malibu City Hall was in the fire's path, so officials had to relocate to nearby Calabasas as a base for emergency operations, he continued.

Many major fires have burned in Malibu, and there's now a familiar cycle where once-lush vegetation is charred.

"It burns, it grows back, and we're resilient and strong," the mayor said.

Van Dyke, one of many celebrities with homes in Malibu, said he and his wife, Arlene Silver, had evacuated as the fire swept in. The actor turns 99 on Friday. "Arlene and I have safely evacuated with our animals except for Bobo escaped as we were leaving," said Van Dyke, referring to one of their cats. "We're praying he'll be OK and that our community in Serra Retreat will survive these terrible fires."

Cher evacuated from her Malibu home when ordered and is staying at a hotel, her publicist Liz Rosenberg said late Tuesday.

The fire erupted shortly before 11 p.m. Monday and swiftly moved south, jumping over the famous Pacific Coast Highway and extending all the way to the ocean, where large homes line the beach and rugged inland canyons are notoriously fire prone. At one point, flames threatened the historic Malibu Pier, but the structure was protected, officials said.

Power to about 40,000 customers had been shut off by Monday night, including 11,000 in LA County, as Southern California Edison worked to mitigate the impacts of the Santa Ana winds, whose strong gusts can

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 11, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 169 ~ 56 of 85

damage electrical equipment and spark wildfires. Gabriela Ornelas, an Edison spokesperson, said service power was shut off to most customers in Malibu around 6 or 7 p.m. on Monday.

The Woolsey Fire that roared through Malibu in 2018, killing three people and destroying 1,600 homes, was sparked by Edison equipment.

While Malibu is known for its celebrity and uber-wealthy residents, Kasey Earnest, executive director of the Boys and Girls Club of Malibu said Tuesday that she's especially concerned about the lower- and middle-class families, ranchers and farmers who make up the community, too.

"I refer to those residents as the heart of Malibu," she said. "They're just normal families — nobody's landing a helicopter on their property."

Celebrities and coastal residents flee from wind-driven wildfire in Malibu

By JAE C. HONG, ERIC THAYER and CHRISTOPHER WEBER Associated Press

MALIBU, Calif. (AP) — Evacuation orders and warnings have gone out to 20,000 Southern California residents Tuesday as firefighters battled a wind-driven wildfire in Malibu that burned near celebrities' seaside mansions, horse farms and Pepperdine University, the sheriff's department said.

The "stubborn fire" is 0% contained and has drawn some 1,500 firefighters, Los Angeles County Fire Department Chief Anthony C. Marrone said at a news conference Tuesday night. He said a preliminary aerial assessment estimates that seven structures were destroyed and eight structures damaged.

The blaze has grown to more than 2,800 acres (1,133 hectares) — 600 acres (243 hectares) alone on Tuesday, according to Marrone.

"This has been a traumatic 20 hours for the city of Malibu," said Malibu Mayor Doug Stewart. The Malibu City Hall was in the fire's path, so officials had to relocate to nearby Calabasas as a base for emergency operations, he continued.

Many major fires have burned in Malibu, and there's now a familiar cycle where once-lush vegetation is charred.

"It burns, it grows back, and we're resilient and strong," the mayor said.

The Santa Ana winds had gusts that reached 40 mph (64 kph) and made for erratic fire conditions.

Capt. Jennifer Seetoo of the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department said at a news conference Tuesday night that roughly 20,000 residents are under evacuation orders and warnings. Several shelters have been opened for displaced residents, she said.

Abigail Ballhagen and Bethany Kronlund, who are Pepperdine juniors and co-resident assistants, said evacuating other students from the dorms to the school's library late Monday amid the fire's smoke and encroaching flames was terrifying. Some 3,000 students sheltered in place on campus.

"Ash was everywhere, embers were everywhere," Kronlund said.

Ballhagen added: "It felt super apocalyptic."

The university later said the worst of the fire had pushed past the school. Michael Friel, a Pepperdine spokesperson, said parts of the campus had been "singled" but there was no major damage. The school canceled classes and final exams for Tuesday.

It was not immediately known how the blaze, named the Franklin Fire, started. It tore through part of Malibu, a community of about 10,000 people on the western edge of Los Angeles renowned for its stunning scenery of seaside bluffs and Zuma Beach featured in Hollywood films.

The fire burned amid dangerous fire conditions because of notorious Santa Ana winds expected to last into Wednesday. The withering, dry gusts sweep out of the interior toward the coast, pushing back moist ocean breezes.

Dick Van Dyke, one of many celebrities with homes in Malibu, said he and his wife, Arlene Silver, had evacuated as the fire swept in. The actor turns 99 on Friday. "Arlene and I have safely evacuated with our animals except for Bobo escaped as we were leaving," said Van Dyke, referring to one of their cats. "We're praying he'll be OK and that our community in Serra Retreat will survive these terrible fires."

Cher also evacuated from her Malibu home when ordered and is staying at a hotel, her publicist Liz

Rosenberg said late Tuesday.

By Tuesday afternoon, meteorologists said the strongest winds had passed but danger remained — especially in the mountains — through Wednesday.

The fire erupted shortly before 11 p.m. Monday and swiftly moved south, jumping over the famous Pacific Coast Highway and extending all the way to the ocean, where large homes line the beach and rugged inland canyons are notoriously fire prone. At one point, flames threatened the historic Malibu Pier, but the structure was protected, officials said.

Nick Smyth, 43, lives on a farm in the Serra Retreat community, a short distance inland from the pier. His wife packed getaway bags as a precaution before they went to sleep Monday and a few hours later they heard a neighbor running down the road shouting about a fire. With flames “lapping the tops of the mountains,” Smyth bundled their two kids and fled for a friend’s house outside of Malibu.

“My son’s got a little bit of shellshock, he’s definitely feeling a little anxious,” Smyth said Tuesday. “They woke up to an inferno outside their bedroom.”

Power to about 40,000 customers had been shut off by Monday night, including 11,000 in LA County, as Southern California Edison worked to mitigate the impacts of the Santa Ana winds, whose strong gusts can damage electrical equipment and spark wildfires. Gabriela Ornelas, an Edison spokesperson, said service power was shut off to most customers in Malibu around 6 or 7 p.m. on Monday.

The Woolsey Fire that roared through Malibu in 2018, killing three people and destroying 1,600 homes, was sparked by Edison equipment.

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“I refer to those residents as the heart of Malibu,” she said. “They’re just normal families — nobody’s landing a helicopter on their property.”

After acquittal in subway chokehold trial, Daniel Penny says he was vulnerable in the encounter

By JENNIFER PELTZ and SANYA MANSOOR Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — After being acquitted of homicide, the military veteran who choked a volatile, mentally ill man on a New York subway told an interviewer he put himself in a “very vulnerable position” but felt compelled to act.

“I’ll take a million court appearances and people calling me names and people hating me, just to keep one of those people from getting hurt or killed,” Daniel Penny told Fox News in a clip that aired Tuesday, a day after the verdict.

Meanwhile, scores of New Yorkers protested the trial outcome, holding signs and chanting Jordan Neely’s name in a Manhattan square Tuesday evening.

“Yes, he was acting erratically. But personally, I don’t believe being mentally unwell and being homeless is a crime worthy of death,” said one of the organizers, Sean Blackmon.

An anonymous Manhattan jury cleared Penny of a criminally negligent homicide charge in the death of Neely, 30. The jury had deadlocked last week on a more serious manslaughter charge, which was dismissed.

Penny, who served four years in the Marines, put Neely in a chokehold for about six minutes after Neely had an outburst that frightened riders on a subway car on May 1, 2023. Penny is white. Neely was Black.

According to passengers, Neely hadn’t touched anyone but had expressed willingness to die, go to jail — even to kill, some said. The former street performer was homeless, had schizophrenia, had synthetic marijuana in his system and had been convicted of assaulting people at subway stations.

In his first extensive comments since the trial began, Penny told Fox News host Jeanine Pirro that he’s “not a confrontational person.” But he said he wouldn’t have been able to live with “the guilt I would have felt if someone did get hurt, if he did do what he was threatening to do.”

Penny’s arm remained around Neely’s neck after another rider intervened to hold down the man’s arms,

and onlookers worried aloud that Neely might be dying, and he went still for nearly a minute, bystanders' video showed.

Penny told Pirro that he was in a "very vulnerable position" as he restrained Neely on the subway floor.

"If I just let him go, I'm on my back now, he could just turn around and start doing what he said to me ... killing, hurting," Penny said in the clips, aired ahead of the planned release of the full interview Wednesday on the Fox Nation streaming service.

Penny, 26, also criticized city officials as "self-serving," suggesting that they were refusing to scrutinize their own roles in the conditions that led to his encounter with Neely.

"These are their policies that clearly have not worked," Penny said. But, he added, "their egos are too big just to admit that they're wrong."

Manhattan District Attorney Alvin Bragg, a Democrat whose office brought the case, said after the verdict that prosecutors "followed the facts and the evidence from beginning to end." His office had no further comment Tuesday.

During the monthlong trial, prosecutors said Penny went too far in responding to Neely, who was unarmed. The veteran's lawyers argued that he put his own safety on the line to protect other passengers from a threatening man.

The case sparked national debate and divided New Yorkers over issues of homelessness and public safety in a city where millions ride the subway every day.

Penny chose not to testify at the trial, but the jury heard what he told police shortly after his encounter with Neely. Describing Neely as "a crackhead" who was "acting like a lunatic," Penny said he put the man in a chokehold and "just put him out" in order to prevent him from injuring anyone.

"I'm not trying to kill the guy," he told detectives in a recorded interview. "I'm just trying to de-escalate the situation."

A city medical examiner determined that the chokehold killed Neely, but Penny's defense challenged the finding.

Middle East latest: Israel bombs hundreds of sites across Syria as army pushes into border zone

By The Associated Press undefined

Israel said Tuesday it had bombed more than 350 military sites in Syria during the previous 48 hours, targeting "most of the strategic weapons stockpiles" in the country. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said the wave of airstrikes in neighboring Syria was necessary to keep the weapons from being used against Israel following the Syrian government's stunning collapse.

Israel also acknowledged its troops were pushing into a border buffer zone inside Syria, which was established after the 1973 Mideast war. However, Israel denied its forces were advancing Tuesday toward the Syrian capital of Damascus.

Life in the capital was slowly returning to normal after jihadi-led Syrian insurgents ousted President Bashar Assad over the weekend. People celebrated for a third day in a main square, and shops and banks reopened.

The United States said Tuesday it would recognize and support a new Syrian government that renounces terrorism, destroys chemical weapons stocks and protects the rights of minorities and women.

Syria's nearly 14-year civil war killed nearly half a million people and displaced half of the country's prewar population of 23 million, becoming a proxy battlefield for regional and international powers.

Here's the Latest:

Syria's insurgents say they now control the eastern city of Deir el-Zour after fighting with a Kurdish-led, US-backed force

BEIRUT — Insurgents who overthrew the Syrian government now say they have wrested control of the eastern city of Deir el-Zour after intense battles with a Kurdish-led, U.S.-backed force.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 11, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 169 ~ 59 of 85

Syria's rebel military command announced Tuesday evening that they had completely captured the city of Deir el-Zour.

A member of the jihadi group Hayat al-Tahrir, which leads the insurgent alliance, said in a recorded video that the group would soon conduct a thorough sweep of the city's neighborhoods to secure the area, adding that the strategic nearby town of Boukamal has also fallen to opposition forces.

"We will advance toward Raqqa and Hasakah and other areas in eastern Syria," the HTS fighters said.

The Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces had only held the city for a few days. The SDF said it deployed to Deir el-Zour and west of the Euphrates River on Friday, replacing Syrian government forces. At the time, the SDF said its fighters were not in control of the Boukamal border crossing with Iraq.

Earlier Tuesday, the top U.S. military commander for the Middle East was in eastern Syria for meetings with the SDF. It wasn't clear if he met with SDF leader Mazloum Abdi.

Syria's transitional government will draw from former rebel leaders

BEIRUT — Syria's transitional government will be made up of members from the rebel-led administration that ruled an insurgent stronghold in the country's northwest, the new prime minister said Tuesday, who called the task "a great challenge."

The caretaker Syrian government, which will oversee the country's affairs until March, held its first meeting Tuesday since overthrowing former President Bashar Assad. It was attended by the departing Prime Minister Mohammad Ghazi Jalali and other ministers along with new Prime Minister Mohammed al-Bashir. He had led the so-called "salvation government" in areas controlled by rebel groups — led by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, or HTS — that have taken control of much of the country.

"We were tasked by the general command with managing the affairs of the Syrian government during a transitional period," Bashir said in a statement following the meeting in Damascus. He added that he hopes ministers in the former Syrian government will assist the new government during this transitional period.

"The caretaker government was formed from a number of ministers of the revolutionary government, which is the Syrian Salvation Government, and this government is a temporary caretaker government that will last until March 2025, until the constitutional issues are resolved," Bashir said.

The insurgent alliance is led by a former senior al-Qaida militant, Abu Mohammed al-Golani, who cut ties with the extremist group years ago and has promised representative government and religious tolerance.

Thousands scour Syria's most horrific prison but find no sign of their loved ones

SAYDNAYA, Syria — Tens of thousands came to Saydnaya Prison from all over Syria after the fall of former President Bashar Assad to search for their loved ones. The place so notorious for its horrors was long known as "the slaughterhouse."

For the past two days, all have been looking for signs of loved ones who disappeared years or even decades ago into the secretive, sprawling prison just outside Damascus.

But hope gave way to despair Monday. People opened the heavy iron doors lining the hallways to find cells inside empty. With sledgehammers, shovels and drills, men pounded holes in floors and walls, looking for what they believed were secret dungeons, or chasing sounds they thought they heard from underground. They found nothing.

Insurgents freed dozens of people from the Saydnaya military prison on Sunday when Damascus fell. Since then, almost no one has been found.

"Where is everyone? Where are everyone's children? Where are they?" said Ghada Assad, breaking down in tears.

An estimated 150,000 people were detained or went missing in Syria since 2011 — and tens of thousands of them are believed to have gone through Saydnaya.

A top US general was in eastern Syria meeting with Kurdish-led group

WASHINGTON — The top U.S. military commander for the Middle East was on the ground in Syria on Tuesday, meeting with a Kurdish-led, U.S.-allied force at several bases in the country's east, U.S. Central Command said. Army Gen. Erik Kurilla visited with U.S. military commanders and troops as well as the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces.

It wasn't clear if he met with SDF leader Mazloum Abdi, and U.S. Central Command did not respond to

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 11, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 169 ~ 60 of 85

a request for details about his visit or with whom he met. U.S. officials said they did not know what his message to the SDF was.

The U.S. has about 900 troops in Syria, including forces working with Kurdish allies in the northeast to prevent any resurgence of the Islamic State group.

In a press release, Central Command said Kurilla received an "assessment of force protection measures, the rapidly evolving situation, and ongoing efforts to prevent ISIS from exploiting the current situation."

Kurilla then went on to Iraq where he met with leaders in Baghdad.

UN says humanitarian aid is still being looted in Syria

UNITED NATIONS – The United Nations says it still getting reports about the looting of warehouses with humanitarian aid in a number of areas in Syria, including around the capital Damascus.

U.N. spokesman Stephane Dujarric told reporters Tuesday that U.N. agencies and their partners are working to identify the extent of looting at the warehouses, including those of U.N. agencies and the Syrian Arab Red Crescent.

Dujarric said U.N. aid officials report that "the humanitarian situation remains volatile across Syria, with reports of people continuing to be displaced."

Humanitarian officials reported that 25 trucks carrying U.N. aid crossed from Turkey to northwest Syria, which the situation is now relatively calm, the U.N. spokesman said.

All 11 receptions opened in Idlib in the northwest to host newly displaced families were empty as of Monday, Dujarric said.

In the northeast, he said, authorities report that as of Tuesday 100,000 people have been displaced due to fighting in Tal Rifaat and other parts of Aleppo governorate.

Dujarric said the U.N.'s partners report that "reception centers in Tabqa and Raqqa have reached full capacity, and more than 200 sites – including municipal buildings, schools, mosques, and stadiums – are being used to accommodate newly displaced people."

Yemen's Houthi rebels fire drones and a missile at 3 commercial ships escorted by U.S. Navy

WASHINGTON — Yemen's Houthi rebels launched multiple drones and a missile at three commercial ships being escorted in the Gulf of Aden by U.S. Navy ships, a U.S. official said Tuesday.

There was no damage and no injuries. The official, who spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss military operations, said U.S. Navy destroyers, and Navy helicopter and a French Air Force aircraft shot down four of the drones and the missile. The three U.S. affiliated flagged ships were sailing east toward Djibouti.

A Houthi military spokesman, Brig. Gen. Yahya Saree, said Tuesday that the rebels targeted American supply ships and two U.S. destroyers.

The Iran-backed Houthis have targeted shipping through the key waterway for more than a year, attacks they say are meant to force an end to Israel's war against Hamas in Gaza.

Israel says it bombed hundreds of military sites across Syria in past 48 hours

JERUSALEM — Israel's military said it bombed more than 350 sites in Syria during the previous 48 hours, targeting "most of the strategic weapons stockpiles" in the country.

There is concern that, with the sudden collapse of the Syrian government, weapons stockpiles could be seized by jihadi militants.

Warplanes hit what Israel said were Syrian air defense systems, military airfields, missile depots, and dozens of weapons production sites in the cities of Damascus, Homs, Tartus, Latakia, and Palmyra, the Israeli army statement said.

In naval operations overnight Monday, Israeli missile ships struck two Syrian navy facilities simultaneously — Al-Bayda port and Latakia port — where the army said 15 Syrian naval vessels were docked.

Israeli did not specify how many Syrian naval vessels were hit. The private security firm Ambrey said it had seen evidence that at least six Soviet-era Syrian navy missile ships were hit.

Israeli officials said earlier that Israel also targeted alleged chemical weapons sites.

Netanyahu says Israel struck across Syria to knock out military assets

JERUSALEM — Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu confirmed Tuesday that his country's military

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 11, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 169 ~ 61 of 85

launched a wave of airstrikes across Syria to destroy the toppled government's leftover "military capabilities," and said Israel wants relations with the new government emerging Syria.

Hours after Israeli warplanes pounded Syria, Netanyahu said Israeli doesn't want to meddle in Syria's internal affairs, but would take necessary steps to protect Israel's security and prevent jihadi militants from seizing the Syrian army assets.

He warned that if the new Syrian government "allows Iran to re-establish itself in Syria or allows the transfer of Iranian weapons or any other weapons to Hezbollah, or attacks us -- we will respond forcefully and we will exact a heavy price from it."

He spoke in a video statement recorded at the Kirya military headquarters in Tel Aviv, after his first day of testimony in his corruption trial.

Crowds of Syrians are still celebrating Assad's fall in the main square of Damascus

DAMASCUS, Syria — In Umayyad Square in Damascus, Syrians celebrated the fall of President Bashar Assad for the third day on Tuesday despite Israeli airstrikes across the country. Insurgents who recently took control of the capital city tried to impose a new rule banning the celebratory gunfire. There were a few violators, and much less deafening gunfire.

Protesters climbed the square's central monument to wave the Syrian revolutionary flag. On the ground, crowds chanted: "Out with Bashar! Out with Bashar!" Assad fled to Russia over the weekend after a lightning rebel offensive toppled his brutal police state.

Demonstrators from different provinces marched in the square in groups, celebrating Assad's fall. Men on motorcycles and horses paraded into the square.

One woman from Idlib province shouted that the Israeli strikes ruined the joy of ousting Assad. "Why are you striking us? We just deposed a tyrant," she said.

"Give us peace. Leave us alone," said Ahmed Jreida, 22, a dentist student, when asked about the Israeli airstrikes.

Hamzeh Hamada, 22, said this was the first time he had gone out to a demonstration.

"We want the country to get better, to live in dignity and be like other countries that respect citizens' rights and where there are no bribes," he said. "We have suffered a lot from bribes. ... We had to bribe people for very minor things; things that should be our right."

Abdul-Jalil Diab was taking a stroll with his brothers in another square in western Damascus. He said he came back from Jordan the day Damascus fell. He was there studying German to prepare to move to Germany and said he is now reconsidering his plans. He was ecstatic, saying words can't describe how he feels.

"We are happy to get rid of the corrupt regime that was based on bribes. The whole country feels better. Everyone is happy and celebrating," Abdul-Jalil Diab said.

Residents of northeast Syria describe strikes on a convoy carrying weapons seized after Assad's fall

QAMISHLI, Syria — Residents of northeast Syria in the area around Qamishli airport said Tuesday they heard explosions overnight after an airstrike hit trucks loaded with rockets and ammunition that were heading to a military base in Tartab.

"We don't know the story. It was only in the morning when we realized they are trucks loaded with ammunition, leftovers of the former army, the regime," said Ibrahim al-Thalaj, who lives near the base. He said residents assumed that the strikes were Israeli.

Israel has carried out a heavy wave of airstrikes across Syria targeting military infrastructure after Syrian insurgents toppled the government of Bashar Assad. However, Turkish security officials said Tuesday that the strike in Qamishli was carried out by Turkey, targeting weapons and ammunition that were abandoned by the Syrian army and seized by Syrian Kurdish militants.

The explosions lasted for over 20 minutes after the strike, and many houses in the surrounding area were damaged as a result, residents of the area said.

"We just felt a strike hitting. It hit the first one (truck) and we saw the other trucks retreating back, and from there rockets and shells started flying over," said Hamid al-Asaad, an eyewitness from Qub al-Zeki

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 11, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 169 ~ 62 of 85

village in Qamishli.

"We were sitting when these explosions started to hit the house," said Mahmoud Hamza of Tartab. "It was hitting randomly and we didn't know where it was coming from. ... Once we got out of our house, a rocket hit the house."

There were no details released by the local Kurdish administration regarding the explosions, but members of the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces blocked the road to the base.

Turkey struck a Kurdish convoy in Syria allegedly carrying weapons seized after Assad's fall, officials say
ANKARA, Turkey — Turkey's intelligence agency, MIT, has attacked a convoy of trucks that was allegedly carrying missiles, heavy weapons and ammunition that were abandoned by the Syrian government and reportedly seized by Syrian Kurdish militias, Turkish security officials said Tuesday.

The officials said 12 trucks, two tanks and two ammunition depots were "destroyed" in aerial strikes in the city of Qamishli, near the border with Turkey in northeast Syria. The officials provided the information on condition of anonymity in line with Turkish regulations. They did not say when the attack occurred.

The officials said the intelligence agency detected that weapons left by the Syrian government forces were being moved to warehouses belonging to the Syrian Kurdish People's Defense Units, or YPG. Turkey views the group as a terrorist organization because of its links to the banned Kurdish militants that have led a decadeslong insurgency in Turkey.

According to the officials, the group was allegedly planning to use the equipment and supplies against Turkish security forces.

By Suzan Fraser

White House signals approval of Israeli seizure of buffer zone inside Syria

WASHINGTON — The White House is signaling its approval of Israel's strikes against Syrian military and alleged chemical weapons targets and the seizure of a buffer zone in the Syrian Golan Heights after the fall of the Assad government.

"These are exigent operations to eliminate what they believe are imminent threats to their national security," White House national security spokesman John Kirby said Tuesday, saying the U.S. would leave it up to the Israelis to discuss details of their operations.

"They have as always the right to defend themselves," Kirby said. He declined to detail and U.S. intelligence cooperation with the Israelis that went into the strikes. Kirby said the White House was reasserting its support of the 1974 Golan Heights disengagement agreement, but didn't criticize the Israeli seizure of the demilitarized zone.

Israel has a long history of seizing territory during wars with its neighbors and occupying it indefinitely, citing security concerns. Israel captured the Golan Heights from Syria in the 1967 Mideast war and annexed it in a move not recognized internationally, except by the United States.

US would recognize new Syrian government if it renounces terrorism, destroys chemical weapons and protects minorities

WASHINGTON — The Biden administration says it will recognize and support a new Syrian government that renounces terrorism, destroys chemical weapons stocks and protects the rights of minorities and women.

Secretary of State Antony Blinken said in a statement Tuesday that the U.S. would work with groups in Syria and regional partners to ensure that the transition from President Bashar Assad's deposed government runs smoothly. He was not specific about which groups the U.S. would work with.

Blinken says Syrians should decide their future and that other countries should "support an inclusive and transparent process" and not interfere.

"The United States will recognize and fully support a future Syria government that results from this process," he said. "We stand prepared to lend all appropriate support to all of Syria's diverse communities and constituencies."

Syrian civilians relish moments of freedom after Assad's fall

DAMASCUS, Syria — Jihad Mustafa Shibani was taking his new motorcycle for a spin with a friend around the house of the deposed Syrian president in western Damascus on Tuesday.

Shibani was released from prison a week before the capital Damascus fell, after he served two years on charges of buying his motorcycle using foreign currency on accusations he was dealing in dollars. He was tortured for 15 days and given a quick trial where he was sentenced for two years, he said. He was released the day Aleppo fell to the insurgents.

"Everything was banned in Syria. The (Assad loyalists) only could use it," Shibani said. He said he has never been to this neighborhood, because it was taken over by Assad, his family and supporters. "For 50 years, my family's house is near here, and we don't know anything about it. ... The Syrian people had been oppressed, you can't imagine."

Shibani said he has no fear of the rebel newcomers who have taken control of the country. "We are not afraid. There can be no one more unjust than Bashar. Impossible."

Trump says he'll name Andrew Ferguson head of FTC and Kimberly Guilfoyle as ambassador to Greece

By CHRISTOPHER RUGABER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President-elect Donald Trump made another flurry of job announcements on Tuesday, selecting Andrew Ferguson as the next chair of the Federal Trade Commission, Ron Johnson was nominated to be ambassador to Mexico, and Kimberly Guilfoyle to be ambassador to Greece.

Ferguson, who is already one of the FTC's five commissioners, will replace Lina Khan, who became a lightning rod for Wall Street and Silicon Valley by blocking billions of dollars worth of corporate acquisitions and suing Amazon and Meta while alleging anticompetitive behavior.

"Andrew has a proven record of standing up to Big Tech censorship, and protecting Freedom of Speech in our Great Country," Trump wrote on Truth Social, adding, "Andrew will be the most America First, and pro-innovation FTC Chair in our Country's History."

Tom Barrack was chosen as the nominee for ambassador to Turkey. Barrack, a wealthy financier, met Trump in the 1980s while helping negotiate Trump's purchase of the renowned Plaza Hotel. He was charged with using his personal access to the former president to secretly promote the interests of the United Arab Emirates, but was acquitted of all counts at a federal trial in 2022.

Trump called him a "well-respected and experienced voice of reason."

Johnson — not the Republican senator — served as ambassador to El Salvador during Trump's first administration. His nomination comes as the president-elect has been threatening tariffs on Mexican imports and the mass deportation of migrants who have arrived to the U.S.-Mexico border. Johnson is also a former U.S. Army veteran and was in the Central Intelligence Agency.

Guilfoyle is a former California prosecutor and television news personality who led the fundraising for Trump's 2020 campaign and became engaged to Don Jr. in 2020. Trump called her "a close friend and ally" and praised her "sharp intellect make her supremely qualified." Guilfoyle was on stage with the family on election night.

"I am so proud of Kimberly. She loves America and she always has wanted to serve the country as an Ambassador. She will be an amazing leader for America First," Don Jr. posted.

The ambassador positions must be approved by the U.S. Senate.

Guilfoyle said in a social media post that she was "honored to accept President Trump's nomination to serve as the next Ambassador to Greece and I look forward to earning the support of the U.S. Senate."

Trump also announced Tuesday that he had selected Jacob Helberg as the next undersecretary of state for economic growth, energy and the environment, and Dan Bishop as deputy director for budget at the Office of Budget and Management.

The replacement of Khan at the FTC likely means that the commission will operate with a lighter touch when it comes to antitrust enforcement. The new chair is expected to appoint new directors of the FTC's antitrust and consumer protection divisions.

"These changes likely will make the FTC more favorable to business than it has been in recent years, though the extent to which is to be determined," wrote Anthony DiResta, a consumer protection attorney

at Holland & Knight, in a recent analysis.

Deals that were blocked by the Biden administration could find new life with Trump in command.

For example, the new leadership could be more open to a proposed merger between the country's two biggest supermarket chains, Kroger and Albertsons, which forged a \$24.6 billion deal to combine in 2022. Two judges halted the merger Tuesday night.

The FTC had filed a lawsuit in federal court earlier this year to block the merger, claiming the deal would eliminate competition, leading to higher prices and lower wages for workers. The two companies say a merger would help them lower prices and compete against bigger rivals like Walmart.

One of the judges said the FTC had shown it was likely to prevail in the administrative hearing.

Yet given the widespread public concern over high grocery prices, the Trump administration may not fully abandon the FTC's efforts to block the deal, some experts have said.

And the FTC may continue to scrutinize Big Tech firms for any anticompetitive behavior. Many Republican politicians have accused firms such as Meta of censoring conservative views, and some officials in Trump's orbit, most notably Vice President-elect JD Vance, have previously expressed support for Khan's scrutiny of Big Tech firms.

Suspect in the killing of UnitedHealthcare's CEO struggles, shouts while entering courthouse

By MICHAEL R. SISAK and MARK SCOLFORO Associated Press

ALTOONA, Pa. (AP) — The man accused of killing UnitedHealthcare's CEO struggled with deputies and shouted while being led into court Tuesday as new details emerged about his possible motivation behind the ambush.

In his first public words since a five-day search ended with his arrest at a McDonald's in Pennsylvania, Luigi Nicholas Mangione emerged from a patrol car shouting about an "insult to the intelligence of the American people" while deputies pushed him inside a courthouse.

The 26-year-old Ivy League graduate from a prominent Maryland real estate family is fighting attempts to extradite him to New York so that he can face a murder charge in the Manhattan killing of Brian Thompson, who led the United States' largest medical insurance company.

A law enforcement bulletin obtained by The Associated Press said that at the time of his arrest, Mangione was carrying a handwritten document expressing anger with what he called "parasitic" health insurance companies and a disdain for corporate greed and power.

He wrote that the U.S. has the most expensive health care system in the world and that profits of major corporations continue to rise while "our life expectancy" does not, according to the bulletin.

In social media posts, Mangione called "Unabomber" Ted Kaczynski — who carried out a series of bombings while railing against modern society and technology — a "political revolutionary," according to the police bulletin.

Mangione remained jailed in Pennsylvania, where he was initially charged with possession of an unlicensed firearm, forgery and providing false identification to police.

Manhattan prosecutors were beginning to take steps to bring Mangione to New York, but at a brief hearing Tuesday, defense lawyer Thomas Dickey said his client will not waive extradition and instead wants a hearing on the issue. Mangione was denied bail after prosecutors said he was too dangerous to be released.

He mostly stared straight ahead at the hearing, occasionally looking at papers, rocking in his chair or looking back at the gallery. At one point, he began to speak to respond to the court discussion but was quieted by his lawyer.

"You can't rush to judgment in this case or any case," Dickey said afterward. "He's presumed innocent. Let's not forget that."

New York Gov. Kathy Hochul said Tuesday night on the social platform X that she will sign "a request for a governor's warrant to ensure the suspect in the murder of Brian Thompson is held accountable in New York."

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 11, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 169 ~ 65 of 85

Mangione was arrested in Altoona, Pennsylvania, about 230 miles (about 370 kilometers) west of New York City, after a McDonald's customer recognized him and notified an employee, authorities said.

Images of Mangione released Tuesday by Pennsylvania State Police showed him pulling down his mask in the corner of the McDonald's while holding what appeared to be hash browns and wearing a winter jacket and beanie. In another photo from a holding cell, he stood unsmiling with ruffled hair.

New York police officials have said Mangione was carrying a gun like the one used to kill Thompson and the same fake ID the shooter had used to check into a New York hostel, along with a passport and other fraudulent IDs.

A law enforcement official who wasn't authorized to discuss the investigation publicly and spoke with The Associated Press on condition of anonymity said a three-page, handwritten document found with Mangione included a line in which he claimed to have acted alone.

"To the Feds, I'll keep this short, because I do respect what you do for our country. To save you a lengthy investigation, I state plainly that I wasn't working with anyone," the document said, according to the official.

It also said, "I do apologize for any strife or traumas but it had to be done. Frankly, these parasites simply had it coming."

Thompson, 50, was killed last Wednesday as he walked alone to a Manhattan hotel for an investor conference. From surveillance video, New York investigators determined the shooter quickly fled the city, likely by bus.

Mangione was born into a life of country clubs and privilege. His grandfather was a self-made real estate developer and philanthropist.

Valedictorian at his elite Baltimore prep school, he went on to earn undergraduate and graduate degrees in computer science in 2020 from the University of Pennsylvania, a spokesperson said.

"Our family is shocked and devastated by Luigi's arrest," Mangione's family said in a statement posted on social media late Monday by his cousin, Maryland Del. Nino Mangione. "We offer our prayers to the family of Brian Thompson and we ask people to pray for all involved."

From January to June 2022, Luigi Mangione lived at Surfbreak, a "co-living" space at the edge of touristy Waikiki in Honolulu.

Like other residents of the shared penthouse catering to remote workers, Mangione underwent a background check, said Josiah Ryan, a spokesperson for owner and founder R.J. Martin.

"Luigi was just widely considered to be a great guy. There were no complaints," Ryan said. "There was no sign that might point to these alleged crimes they're saying he committed."

At Surfbreak, Martin learned Mangione had severe back pain from childhood that interfered with many aspects of his life, from surfing to romance, Ryan said.

Mangione left Surfbreak to get surgery on the mainland, Ryan said, then later returned to Honolulu and rented an apartment.

Martin stopped hearing from Mangione six months to a year ago.

Key details about the man accused of killing UnitedHealthcare's CEO

By SARAH BRUMFIELD and MARYCLAIRE DALE Associated Press

The 26-year-old man charged in last week's killing of UnitedHealthcare's CEO appeared in a Pennsylvania courtroom Tuesday, where he was denied bail and his lawyer said he'd fight extradition to New York City, where the attack happened.

Luigi Nicholas Mangione was arrested Monday in the Dec. 4 attack on Brian Thompson after police say a worker at a McDonald's in Altoona, Pennsylvania, alerted them to a customer who resembled the suspected gunman. When arrested, Mangione had on him a gun that investigators believe was used in the attack and writings expressing anger at corporate America, police said.

As Mangione was led into the Hollidaysburg courthouse Tuesday, he struggled with officers and shouted something that was partly unintelligible but referred to an "insult to the intelligence of the American people." He left hours later without saying anything and was driven away.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 11, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 169 ~ 66 of 85

Mangione is being held on Pennsylvania charges of possession of an unlicensed firearm, forgery and providing false identification to police. Manhattan prosecutors have charged him with five counts, including murder, criminal possession of a weapon and criminal possession of a forged instrument.

What's the latest?

Wearing an orange jumpsuit, Mangione mostly stared straight ahead during the hearing, occasionally consulting papers, rocking in his chair, or looking back at the gallery. At one point, he began to speak to respond to the court discussion but was quieted by his lawyer.

Judge David Consiglio denied bail to Mangione, whose attorney, Thomas Dickey, told the court that his client did not agree to extradition and wants a hearing on the matter.

Blair County (Pennsylvania) District Attorney Peter Weeks said that although Mangione will create "extra hoops" for law enforcement to jump through by fighting extradition, it won't be a substantial barrier to sending him to New York.

What evidence has been gathered?

In addition to a three-page, handwritten document that suggests he harbored "ill will toward corporate America," NYPD Chief of Detectives Joseph Kenny said Monday that Mangione also had a ghost gun, a type of weapon that can be assembled at home and is difficult to trace.

Officers questioned Mangione, who was acting suspiciously and carrying multiple fraudulent IDs, as well as a U.S. passport, New York Police Commissioner Jessica Tisch said. Officers also found a sound suppressor, or silencer, "consistent with the weapon used in the murder," she said.

He had clothing and a mask similar to those worn by the shooter and a fraudulent New Jersey ID matching one the suspect used to check into a New York City hostel before the shooting, the commissioner said.

What do we know about Mangione?

Mangione, who comes from a prominent Maryland family, was valedictorian of his elite Baltimore prep school and had degrees from one of the nation's top private universities. He earned undergraduate and graduate degrees in computer science in 2020 from the University of Pennsylvania.

Mangione's grandfather Nick Mangione, who died in 2008, was a successful real estate developer. One of his best-known projects was Turf Valley Resort, a sprawling luxury retreat and conference center outside Baltimore that he purchased in 1978. One of Luigi Mangione's cousins is Republican Maryland state legislator Nino Mangione, a spokesman for the lawmaker's office confirmed.

From January to June 2022, Mangione lived at Surfbreak, a "co-living" space at the edge of touristy Waikiki in Honolulu. Josiah Ryan, a spokesperson for owner and founder R.J. Martin, said that Martin had learned that Mangione had severe back pain from childhood that interfered with many aspects of his life.

Friends in Hawaii widely considered Mangione a "great guy," and pictures on his social media accounts show a fit and smiling young man on beaches and at parties.

Mangione likely was motivated by his anger at what he called "parasitic" health insurance companies and a disdain for corporate greed, according to a law enforcement bulletin obtained by The Associated Press. He wrote that the U.S. has the most expensive healthcare system in the world and that the profits of major corporations continue to rise while "our life expectancy" does not, according to the bulletin, based on a review of the suspect's handwritten notes and social media posts.

The shooting and a quick escape

Police said the person who killed Thompson left a hostel on Manhattan's Upper West Side at 5:41 a.m. last Wednesday.

Eleven minutes later, he was seen on surveillance video walking back and forth in front of the New York Hilton Midtown, wearing a distinctive backpack.

At 6:44 a.m., he shot Thompson at a side entrance to the hotel, fled on foot, then climbed aboard a bicycle and within four minutes had entered Central Park, according to police.

Another security camera recorded the gunman leaving the park near the American Museum of Natural History at 6:56 a.m. still on the bicycle but without the backpack, police said.

After getting in a taxi, he headed north to a bus terminal near the George Washington Bridge, arriving at around 7:30 a.m.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 11, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 169 ~ 67 of 85

From there, the trail of video evidence runs cold. Police have not located video of the suspect exiting the building, leading them to believe he likely took a bus out of town. Police said they are still investigating the path the suspect took to Pennsylvania.

"This just happened this morning," Kenny said. "We'll be working, backtracking his steps from New York to Altoona, Pennsylvania," Kenny said.

Donald Trump is returning to the world stage. So is his trolling

By MICHELLE L. PRICE and ROB GILLIES Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — President-elect Donald Trump's recent dinner with Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and his visit to Paris for the reopening of the Notre Dame Cathedral were not just exercises in policy and diplomacy.

They were also prime trolling opportunities for Trump.

Throughout his first term in the White House and during his campaign to return, Trump has spun out countless provocative, antagonizing and mocking statements. There were his belittling nicknames for political opponents, his impressions of other political figures and the plentiful memes he shared on social media.

Now that's he's preparing to return to the Oval Office, Trump is back at it, and his trolling is attracting more attention — and eyerolls.

On Sunday, Trump turned a photo of himself seated near a smiling first lady Jill Biden at the Notre Dame ceremony into a social media promo for his new perfume and cologne line, with the tag line, "A fragrance your enemies can't resist!"

The first lady's office declined to comment.

When Trudeau hastily flew to Florida to meet with Trump last month over the president-elect's threat to impose a 25% tax on all Canadian products entering the U.S., the Republican tossed out the idea that Canada become the 51st U.S. state.

The Canadians passed off the comment as a joke, but Trump has continued to play up the dig, including in a post Tuesday morning on his social media network referring to the prime minister as "Governor Justin Trudeau of the Great State of Canada."

After decades as an entertainer and tabloid fixture, Trump has a flair for the provocative that is aimed at attracting attention and, in his most recent incarnation as a politician, mobilizing fans. He has long relished poking at his opponents, both to demean and minimize them and to delight supporters who share his irreverent comments and posts widely online and cheer for them in person.

Trump, to the joy of his fans, first publicly needled Canada on his social media network a week ago when he posted an AI-generated image that showed him standing on a mountain with a Canadian flag next to him and the caption "Oh Canada!"

After his latest post, Canadian Immigration Minister Marc Miller said Tuesday: "It sounds like we're living in a episode of South Park."

Trudeau said earlier this week that when it comes to Trump, "his approach will often be to challenge people, to destabilize a negotiating partner, to offer uncertainty and even sometimes a bit of chaos into the well established hallways of democracies and institutions and one of the most important things for us to do is not to freak out, not to panic."

Even Thanksgiving dinner isn't a trolling-free zone for Trump's adversaries.

On Thanksgiving Day, Trump posted a movie clip from "National Lampoon's Christmas Vacation" with President Joe Biden and other Democrats' faces superimposed on the characters in a spoof of the turkey-carving scene.

The video shows Trump appearing to explode out of the turkey in a swirl of purple sparks, with the former president stiffly dancing to one of his favorite songs, Village People's "Y.M.C.A."

In his most recent presidential campaign, Trump mocked Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis, refusing to call his GOP primary opponent by his real name and instead dubbing him "Ron DeSanctimonious." He added, for good measure, in a post on his Truth Social network: "I will never call Ron DeSanctimonious 'Meatball'

Ron, as the Fake News is insisting I will.”

As he campaigned against Biden, Trump taunted him in online posts and with comments and impressions at his rallies, deriding the president over his intellect, his walk, his golf game and even his beach body.

After Vice President Kamala Harris took over Biden’s spot as the Democratic nominee, Trump repeatedly suggested she never worked at McDonalds while in college. Trump, true to form, turned his mocking into a spectacle by appearing at a Pennsylvania McDonalds in October, when he manned the fries station and held an impromptu news conference from the restaurant drive-thru.

Trump’s team thinks people should get a sense of humor.

“President Trump is a master at messaging and he’s always relatable to the average person, whereas many media members take themselves too seriously and have no concept of anything else other than suffering from Trump Derangement Syndrome,” said Steven Cheung, Trump’s communications director. “President Trump will Make America Great Again and we are getting back to a sense of optimism after a tumultuous four years.”

Though both the Biden and Harris campaigns created and shared memes and launched other stunts to respond to Trump’s taunts, so far America’s neighbors to the north are not taking the bait.

“I don’t think we should necessarily look on Truth Social for public policy,” Miller said.

Gerald Butts, a former top adviser to Trudeau and a close friend, said Trump brought up the 51st state line to Trudeau repeatedly during Trump’s first term in office.

“Oh God,” Butts said Tuesday, “At least a half dozen times.”

“This is who he is and what he does. He’s trying to destabilize everybody and make people anxious,” Butts said. “He’s trying to get people on the defensive and anxious and therefore willing to do things they wouldn’t otherwise entertain if they had their wits about them. I don’t know why anybody is surprised by it.”

More beans and less red meat:

Nutrition experts weigh in on US dietary guidelines

By JONEL ALECCIA AP Health Writer

Americans should eat more beans, peas and lentils and cut back on red and processed meats and starchy vegetables, all while continuing to limit added sugars, sodium and saturated fat.

That’s the advice released Tuesday by a panel of nutrition experts charged with counseling the U.S. government about the 2025 edition of the dietary guidelines that will form the cornerstone of federal food programs and policy.

But the 20-member panel didn’t weigh in on the growing role of ultraprocessed foods that have been linked to health problems, saying there’s not enough evidence to tell people to avoid them. And the group steered clear of updating controversial guidance on alcohol consumption, leaving that analysis to two outside reports expected to be released soon.

Overall, the recommendations for the 2025-2030 Dietary Guidelines for Americans sound familiar, said Marion Nestle, a food policy expert.

“This looks like every other set of dietary guidelines since 1980: eat your veggies and reduce consumption of foods high in salt, sugar and saturated fat,” Nestle said in an email. “This particular statement says nothing about balancing calories, when overconsumption of calories, especially from ultra-processed foods, is the biggest challenge to the health of Americans.”

What the scientific panel said about healthy diets

The nutrition panel concluded that a healthy diet for people aged 2 years and older is higher in vegetables, fruits, legumes, nuts, whole grains, fish and vegetable oils that are higher in unsaturated fat.

It is lower in red and processed meats, sugar-sweetened foods and beverages, refined grains and saturated fat. It may also include fat-free or low-fat dairy and foods lower in sodium and may include plant-based foods.

The panel, which met for nearly two years, was the first to focus on the dietary needs of Americans

through what they called a “health equity lens,” said Dr. Fatima Cody Stanford, a Massachusetts General Hospital obesity expert who was part of the group. That meant considering factors such as household income, race, ethnicity and culture when recommending healthy diets. It will help ensure that the guidance “reflects and includes various population groups,” she said in an email.

The panel didn’t come to conclusions on ultraprocessed foods or alcohol

Ultraprocessed foods include the snacks, sugary cereals and frozen meals that make up about 60% of the American diet.

The panel considered more than 40 studies, including several that showed links between ultraprocessed foods and becoming overweight or developing obesity. But the nutrition experts had concerns with the quality of the research, leaving them to conclude that the evidence was too limited to make recommendations.

That decision is likely to bump up against the views of Robert F. Kennedy, Jr., the nominee to lead the U.S. Health and Human Services Department, who has questioned potential conflicts of interest among members of the dietary guidelines panel and vowed to crack down on ultraprocessed foods that contribute to chronic disease.

The panel also didn’t revise recommendations that suggest limiting alcohol intake to two drinks or less a day for men and one drink or less a day for women.

In 2020, the last time the guidance was updated, the government rejected the advice of scientific advisers to recommend less alcohol consumption.

Two groups — the National Academies of Science, Engineering and Medicine and a committee of the government agency that oversees substance abuse — are expected to release reports in the coming months on the effects of moderate alcohol use to inform the guidelines.

Do Americans follow dietary guidelines?

The advisory panel acknowledged that the diets of most Americans don’t meet the current guidelines. More than half of all U.S. adults have one or more diet-related chronic health conditions and 18 million U.S. households have insecure sources of food, according to the report.

“Nutrition-related chronic health conditions and their precursors continue to threaten health through the lifespan,” the report concludes. “Which does not bode well for the future of health in the United States.”

What happens next?

The scientific report informs the dietary guidelines, which are updated every five years. Tuesday’s recommendations now go to HHS and the Agriculture Department, where officials will draft the final guidance set for release next year.

Starting Wednesday, the public will have 60 days to comment on the guidance. HHS and USDA officials will hold a public meeting Jan. 16 to discuss the recommendations.

The new guidance, which will be finalized by the incoming Trump administration, is consistent with decades of federal efforts to reduce diet-related disease in the U.S., said Dr. Peter Lurie, president of the advocacy group Center for Science in the Public Interest.

“Broadly, I think these are well-formulated recommendations that the incoming administration would do well to adopt,” Lurie said.

Report on attempts to kill Trump urges Secret Service to limit protection of foreign leaders

By REBECCA SANTANA Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — A congressional task force investigating the attempts to kill Donald Trump during his presidential campaign is recommending changes to the Secret Service, including protecting fewer foreign leaders during the height of election season and considering moving the agency out of the Homeland Security Department.

The 180-page report by the bipartisan task force released Tuesday is one of the most detailed looks so far into the July assassination attempt against Trump during a campaign rally in Pennsylvania and a

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 11, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 169 ~ 70 of 85

second attempt in Florida two months later.

Like the series of other investigations and reports, the task force railed at the agency tasked with protecting the top echelon of America's democratic leaders.

"The events of July 13, 2024, were tragic and preventable, and the litany of related security failures are unacceptable," the authors wrote. "The Secret Service's zero fail mission allows no margin for error, let alone for the many errors described in this report."

In the July shooting, a gunman opened fire from the roof of a nearby building, wounding Trump in the ear, killing one rallygoer and wounding two others. He was killed by a countersniper.

In another assassination attempt in September, a gunman waited for hours for Trump to appear at his golf course in Florida, but a Secret Service agent thwarted the attack by spotting the firearm poking through some bushes.

Here are the highlights of the new report and its recommendations:

Reducing the number of people protected — specifically foreign leaders

The report's authors noted that the number of people the agency is tasked with protecting has "greatly expanded." At the same time, the presidential campaign season is getting longer and more intense.

The agency is also tasked with protecting foreign dignitaries during the U.N. General Assembly, when heads of state and government flood into New York. That event happens every September, which comes at the "height of campaign season," the report noted, adding to the agency's staffing crunch.

"Congress, DHS, and the USSS should jointly consider the protective role the USSS plays for foreign leaders and consider whether such duties can be transferred or abrogated in order to focus on the USSS's primary duty: to protect the President and other critical U.S. leaders," the report said.

Drop some investigative work, especially during elections

The Secret Service is known for its high-profile work of protecting the president, the vice-president, presidential candidates, their families and others.

But agents also carry out a wide range of investigations not related to their protective mission — investigating fraud and financial crimes, for example. Stemming from when the agency was part of the Treasury Department, those investigations are an important part of training Secret Service officers for skills they'll need on protective details, agency leaders say.

But the task force recommended reviewing these investigative responsibilities — especially during campaign season — so the agency "can prioritize the protection of U.S. leaders and candidates running for office."

"These non-protective, investigative functions require systemic review because of the USSS's stunning failure to protect President-elect Trump on July 13," the report said. "The Secret Service's protective mission is at the core of the agency's purpose — anything that distracts or diverts resources from the agency's zero fail mission must be reconsidered."

Questioning whether the Secret Service should stay in the Homeland Security Department

After DHS was created in the aftermath of the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks, the Secret Service was moved there from the Treasury Department.

The task force suggested reevaluating that move. During the time Secret Service has been in the Homeland Security Department, "USSS has not benefited from stable leadership," the lawmakers said.

They said the structure "potentially weakens USSS, a small but critically important agency, in advocating for its budget and other priorities inside a much larger entity."

"A fresh look at whether USSS might benefit from the status of an independent agency, with more freedom to make budget requests and advocate for itself, would be a healthy discussion for former USSS leaders to have with Congress," the task force said.

Staffing problems

The task force said the gunman in Butler, Pennsylvania, Thomas Crooks, exploited gaps in protection because of a lack of assets and staff.

Specifically, the panel noted that the Secret Service, already dealing with the increased tempo of a presidential campaign, was protecting not one but two high-profile people that day in close vicinity to

each other, with first lady Jill Biden at a nearby event.

In one example highlighting the lack of resources at the Trump rally, the task force said there should have been a counter-surveillance unit in Butler, and if there had been one assigned that day, it might have spotted the shooter earlier.

Such a counter-surveillance team was in place for the Biden event, the report noted, although that event was indoors.

"From interviews with special agents on the ground, it appears that the main factor in the decision to not request (the counter-surveillance unit) was an assumption that the request would be denied due to the protectee's status as a former President at the time of the event," the report said.

Pointing to bad communications and faulty planning

Much of the criticism in the aftermath of the July assassination attempt has centered on how the shooter could have gotten access to a roof with a clear line of sight to Trump and why there was such poor communications between the Secret Service and local law enforcement.

The Secret Service often relies on local law enforcement to secure large events. The report detailed how local law enforcement had one idea of its responsibilities while the Secret Service had another.

But the task force emphasized that ultimately the Secret Service is responsible for ensuring that coordination runs smoothly.

"The Secret Service must own responsibility for the security of the site," the report said.

From wealth and success to murder suspect, the life of Luigi Mangione took a hard turn

By SEAN MURPHY Associated Press

Luigi Nicholas Mangione, the suspect in the fatal shooting of a healthcare executive in New York City, apparently was living a charmed life: the grandson of a wealthy real estate developer, valedictorian of his elite Baltimore prep school and with degrees from one of the nation's top private universities.

Friends at an exclusive co-living space at the edge of touristy Waikiki in Hawaii where the 26-year-old Mangione once lived widely considered him a "great guy," and pictures on his social media accounts show a fit, smiling, handsome young man on beaches and at parties.

Now, investigators in New York and Pennsylvania are working to piece together why Mangione may have diverged from this path to make the violent and radical decision to gun down UnitedHealthcare CEO Brian Thompson in a brazen attack on a Manhattan street.

The killing sparked widespread discussions about corporate greed, unfairness in the medical insurance industry and even inspired folk-hero sentiment toward his killer.

But Pennsylvania Gov. Josh Shapiro sharply refuted that perception after Mangione's arrest on Monday when a customer at a McDonald's restaurant in Pennsylvania spotted Mangione eating and noticed he resembled the shooting suspect in security-camera photos released by New York police.

"In some dark corners, this killer is being hailed as a hero. Hear me on this, he is no hero," Shapiro said. "The real hero in this story is the person who called 911 at McDonald's this morning."

Mangione's family and upbringing

Mangione comes from a prominent Maryland family. His grandfather, Nick Mangione, who died in 2008, was a successful real estate developer. One of his best-known projects was Turf Valley Resort, a sprawling luxury retreat and conference center outside Baltimore that he purchased in 1978.

The Mangione family also purchased Hayfields Country Club north of Baltimore in 1986. On Monday, Baltimore County police officers blocked off an entrance to the property, which public records link to Luigi Mangione's parents. Reporters and photographers gathered outside the entrance.

The father of 10 children, Nick Mangione prepared his five sons — including Luigi Mangione's father, Louis Mangione — to help manage the family business, according to a 2003 Washington Post report. Nick Mangione had 37 grandchildren, including Luigi, according to the grandfather's obituary.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 11, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 169 ~ 72 of 85

Luigi Mangione's grandparents donated to charities through the Mangione Family Foundation, according to a statement from Loyola University commemorating Nick Mangione's wife's death in 2023. They donated to various causes, including Catholic organizations, colleges and the arts.

One of Luigi Mangione's cousins is Republican Maryland state legislator Nino Mangione, a spokesman for the lawmaker's office confirmed.

"Our family is shocked and devastated by Luigi's arrest," Mangione's family said in a statement posted on social media by Nino Mangione. "We offer our prayers to the family of Brian Thompson and we ask people to pray for all involved."

Mangione's education and work history

Mangione, who was valedictorian of his elite Maryland prep school, earned undergraduate and graduate degrees in computer science in 2020 from the University of Pennsylvania, a university spokesman told The Associated Press.

He learned to code in high school and helped start a club at Penn for people interested in gaming and game design, according to a 2018 story in Penn Today, a campus publication.

His social media posts suggest he belonged to the fraternity Phi Kappa Psi. They also show him taking part in a 2019 program at Stanford University, and in photos with family and friends at the Jersey Shore and in Hawaii, San Diego, Puerto Rico, and other destinations.

The Gilman School, from which Mangione graduated in 2016, is one of Baltimore's elite prep schools. The children of some of the city's wealthiest and most prominent residents, including Orioles legend Cal Ripken Jr., have attended the school. Its alumni include sportswriter Frank Deford and former Arizona Gov. Fife Symington.

In his valedictory speech, Luigi Mangione described his classmates' "incredible courage to explore the unknown and try new things."

Mangione took a software programming internship after high school at Maryland-based video game studio Firaxis, where he fixed bugs on the hit strategy game Civilization 6, according to a LinkedIn profile. Firaxis' parent company, Take-Two Interactive, said it would not comment on former employees.

He more recently worked at the car-buying website TrueCar, but has not worked there since 2023, the head of the Santa Monica, California-based company confirmed to the AP.

Time in Hawaii and reports of back pain

From January to June 2022, Mangione lived at Surfbreak, a "co-living" space at the edge of touristy Waikiki in Honolulu.

Like other residents of the shared penthouse catering to remote workers, Mangione underwent a background check, said Josiah Ryan, a spokesperson for owner and founder R.J. Martin.

"Luigi was just widely considered to be a great guy. There were no complaints," Ryan said. "There was no sign that might point to these alleged crimes they're saying he committed."

At Surfbreak, Martin learned Mangione had severe back pain from childhood that interfered with many aspects of his life, including surfing, Ryan said.

"He went surfing with R.J. once but it didn't work out because of his back," Ryan said, but noted that Mangione and Martin often went together to a rock-climbing gym.

Mangione left Surfbreak to get surgery on the mainland, Ryan said, then later returned to Honolulu and rented an apartment. An image posted to a social media account linked to Mangione showed what appeared to be an X-ray of a metal rod and multiple screws inserted into someone's lower spine.

Martin stopped hearing from Mangione six months to a year ago.

An X account linked to Mangione includes recent posts about the negative impact of smartphones on children; healthy eating and exercise habits; psychological theories; and a quote from Indian philosopher Jiddu Krishnamurti about the dangers of becoming "well-adjusted to a profoundly sick society."

Police report a darker turn

Mangione likely was motivated by his anger at what he called "parasitic" health insurance companies and a disdain for corporate greed, according to a law enforcement bulletin obtained by AP.

He wrote that the U.S. has the most expensive healthcare system in the world and that the profits of

major corporations continue to rise while “our life expectancy” does not, according to the bulletin, based on a review of the suspect’s handwritten notes and social media posts.

He appeared to view the targeted killing of the UnitedHealthcare CEO as a symbolic takedown, asserting in his note that he is the “first to face it with such brutal honesty,” the bulletin said.

Mangione called “Unabomber” Ted Kaczynski a “political revolutionary” and may have found inspiration from the man who carried out a series of bombings while railing against modern society and technology, the document said.

Dillon Gabriel, Travis Hunter, Ashton Jeanty, Cam Ward are named Heisman finalists

By ERIC OLSON AP College Football Writer

Oregon’s Dillon Gabriel, Colorado’s Travis Hunter, Boise State’s Ashton Jeanty and Miami’s Cam Ward were announced as the Heisman Trophy finalists on Monday night.

The Heisman has been given to the nation’s most outstanding college football player since 1935. This year’s winner will be announced Saturday in New York. The top four vote-getters determined by more than 900 voters are selected as finalists. The voting panel includes members of the media and former Heisman winners.

A look, in alphabetical order, at each of the finalist’s road to Manhattan.

Dillon Gabriel, Oregon

Gabriel, who transferred from Oklahoma in the offseason, led unbeaten and top-ranked Oregon to the Big Ten championship in its first year in the league and the No. 1 seed in the College Football Playoff.

Gabriel averages 274 yards passing per game and has thrown for 28 touchdowns with six interceptions. His 73.2% completion rate is second in the nation. His 35 total touchdowns are tied for seventh nationally, and his career total of 187 is the highest in NCAA history.

He set the all-time Football Bowl Subdivision record for career quarterback starts with his 62nd in the Big Ten title game.

Travis Hunter, Colorado

Hunter, will go down as one of the great two-way players in history. His accomplishments harken those of Charles Woodson, the Michigan cornerback who in 1997 became the first Heisman winner who primarily played defense.

Woodson also spent time at receiver, but Hunter’s offensive production dwarfs his. Hunter was named All-Big 12 first-team receiver and earned honorable mention for offensive player of the year. He leads the Big 12 with 92 receptions and 14 receiving touchdowns and is second with 1,152 yards. His 21 receiving plays of 20-plus yards lead the nation.

He also is Big 12 defensive player of the year and a unanimous first-team defensive back after recording 31 tackles, tying for the Big 12 lead with 11 pass breakups and tying for second with four interceptions.

Ashton Jeanty, Boise State

The junior running back has had one of the most productive seasons in college football history. His 2,497 yards rushing are the fourth-highest single-season total in the FBS, and his 192.1 yards per game lead the nation and are 58 more than the next highest average. Jeanty has rushed for at least 125 yards in 13 straight games.

Jeanty has gone over 200 yards in his last two games and a total of six times this season. He averages 7.26 yards per carry, and his 344 attempts are the most in the FBS in two seasons. He and Army’s Bryson Daily share the national lead with 29 rushing touchdowns.

Cam Ward, Miami

The Miami quarterback was named Associated Press offensive player of the year and newcomer of the year in the Atlantic Coast Conference on Monday. He leads the nation with a school-record 36 passing touchdowns and his 4,123 passing yards, 4,319 total yards, 343.6 passing yards per game and 41 total touchdowns rank second.

Ward leads the nation's highest-scoring offense (44.2 ypg). He became the first Miami quarterback to post seven straight 300-yard games, and he has 10 games with 300-plus yards and three or more TD passes.

Republican-led states are rolling out plans that could aid Trump's mass deportation effort

By DAVID A. LIEB Associated Press

JEFFERSON CITY, Mo. (AP) — As President-elect Donald Trump assembles his administration, Republican governors and lawmakers in some states are already rolling out proposals that could help him carry out his pledge to deport millions of people living in the U.S. illegally.

Lawmakers in a growing number of states are proposing to give local law officers the power to arrest people who entered the country illegally, mirroring recent laws in Texas and elsewhere that have been placed on hold while courts weigh whether they unconstitutionally usurp federal authority.

Other legislation filed ahead of next year's legislative sessions would require local law enforcement agencies to notify U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement when they take someone into custody who is in the country illegally, even if the charges have nothing to do with their immigration status. Though not specifically requested by Trump, many of the state proposals would complement his immigration policies.

"We would be finding people who are in violation of this law, and we would be sort of hand-delivering them to the nearest port of deportation so that they could be removed in a safe and orderly fashion," said Missouri state Sen. Curtis Trent, who is sponsoring one of the proposals.

The U.S. Department of Homeland Security estimates that 11 million unauthorized immigrants were living in the U.S. as of 2022, the latest statistics available. While campaigning, Trump talked about creating "the largest mass deportation program in history" and called for using the National Guard and domestic police forces in the effort.

Some Democratic-led states already are raising resistance. The California Legislature has convened a special session to try to shield people from potential Trump policies, including by boosting legal aid for immigrants facing deportation.

Lawmakers in numerous states are likely to try to thwart or cooperate with Trump's immigration agenda, Tim Storey, CEO of the National Conference of State Legislatures, said Monday.

In Missouri, Trent's bill would empower local law officers to arrest people for a new state crime of "improper entry by an alien," punishable by a fine of up to \$100,000 and a court-ordered ride to the U.S. border.

A separate bill by Missouri state Sen.-elect David Gregory also would create a state crime and offer a \$1,000 reward to informants who tip off police about people in the country illegally. It would allow private bounty hunters to find and detain them.

While some jurisdictions refuse to cooperate with federal immigration officials, "we're stepping up and finding a way to help," Gregory said in a statement Tuesday.

Missouri's Republican Gov.-elect Mike Kehoe hasn't endorsed a specific legislative plan after campaigning against illegal immigration and the scourge of fentanyl smuggled across the U.S. border. But he told The Associated Press: "If they're here illegally, it definitely should trigger something more than it does now."

Immigrant advocacy groups already are raising alarm about some state proposals. Missouri's proposed bounty system would "create absolute chaos and division," said Ashley DeAzevedo, president of American Families United, which advocates for U.S. citizens married to foreign nationals.

Although many Americans support a path to citizenship for people living in the U.S. illegally, support for deportation also has grown. More than 4 in 10 voters said most immigrants who are in the U.S. illegally should be deported to the country they came from, according to AP VoteCast, a survey of more than 120,000 voters in this year's election. That's up from about 3 in 10 in 2020. More than half of voters said most immigrants in the U.S. illegally should be offered a chance to apply for legal status, down from about 7 in 10 who said this in 2020, according to AP VoteCast.

Many Republicans point to Texas as a model for immigration enforcement. Its \$11 billion Operation Lone Star program has erected razor wire and other barriers along the Mexican border, stationed state troopers

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 11, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 169 ~ 75 of 85

and Texas National Guard members in border towns and bused thousands of migrants to Democratic-led "sanctuary cities" such as New York, Chicago, Denver, Philadelphia and Washington. Texas law officers also have made tens of thousands of arrests, including many for trespassing on private property.

Tom Homan, Trump's "border czar," visited Texas last month and said its border security tactics can be a model for the Trump administration. Texas Gov. Greg Abbott's office confirmed that it's been in regular contact with Trump's team about strategies.

Following Texas' lead, Republican-led legislatures in Iowa, Louisiana and Oklahoma passed measures allowing law officers to arrest people who are in the U.S. illegally. Shortly after Trump's election, Oklahoma Gov. Kevin Stitt announced he was working on a plan to deport some of the more than 500 immigrants currently in Oklahoma prisons who are not legal citizens.

Arizona voters last month also approved a ballot measure letting local police arrest migrants suspected of illegally entering from Mexico, though it won't kick in until a similar law in Texas or another state has been in effect for 60 consecutive days.

Other Republican state measures seek to boost cooperation between local law officers and federal immigration officials.

Utah Gov. Spencer Cox recently announced an initiative to improve coordination with federal officials to identify undocumented immigrants in the state's criminal justice system and turn them over for deportation. Cox said there will be "zero tolerance" for "those who demonstrate a threat to public safety while in the country illegally."

A Georgia law enacted earlier this year requires jailers to check the immigration status of inmates and apply to help enforce federal immigration laws. The measure gained traction after the murder of University of Georgia student Laken Riley. A Venezuelan man who had entered the U.S. illegally was convicted of killing her and sentenced to life in prison.

North Carolina's Republican-controlled legislature last month overrode a veto by Democratic Gov. Roy Cooper to enact a law directing sheriffs to comply with federal immigration agents' requests to hold inmates. That came after several Democratic sheriffs from urban counties refused to cooperate with U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

Other Democratic governors dealing with Republican-led legislatures are pushing back against the potential for sweeping deportation plans. Democratic Kansas Gov. Laura Kelly said she supports deporting people who commit crimes while living in the U.S. illegally, but she won't send the National Guard to help enforce federal immigration laws.

Democratic Wisconsin Gov. Tony Evers, who also faces a Republican-led Legislature, said undocumented immigrants "are a really important part of our economy" in sectors such as agriculture and manufacturing.

"Trying to move them out of the country is irrational," Evers said. "So, we'll do whatever we can to avoid that."

South Korea's ex-defense minister is formally arrested over brief imposition of martial law

By HYUNG-JIN KIM and KIM TONG-HYUNG Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea (AP) — South Korea's previous defense minister was formally arrested Wednesday over his alleged collusion with President Yoon Suk Yeol and others in imposing martial law last week, as authorities investigate whether their acts amount to rebellion.

Martial law, the first in more than 40 years, lasted only about six hours but triggered a domestic firestorm and large street protests. Yoon and his associates face criminal investigations and impeachment attempts. The Justice Ministry has banned Yoon and eight others from leaving the country as authorities see them as key suspects. It's the first time a sitting president in South Korea has received a travel ban.

The Seoul Central District Court said it approved an arrest warrant for former Defense Minister Kim Yong Hyun on allegations of playing a key role in rebellion and committing abuse of power, making him the first person arrested over the Dec. 3 martial law decree. The court said it considered the significance of his

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 11, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 169 ~ 76 of 85

alleged crime and chances that he could destroy evidence.

Kim, one of Yoon's close associates, resigned Thursday and has been detained since Sunday. Prosecutors have up to 20 days to determine whether to indict him. A conviction on the charge of rebellion carries a maximum death sentence.

Kim has been accused of recommending martial law to Yoon and sending troops to the National Assembly to block lawmakers from voting on it. Enough lawmakers eventually managed to enter a parliament chamber and unanimously rejected Yoon's decree, forcing the Cabinet to lift it before daybreak on Dec. 4.

Kim said in a statement Tuesday that he "deeply apologizes for causing significant anxiety and inconvenience." He said all responsibility for the imposition of martial law rests solely with him and pleaded for leniency for soldiers deployed to enforce it, saying they were only following his order.

The opposition-controlled parliament passed a bill Tuesday to appoint an independent special counsel to investigate Yoon and other top military officials over the martial law introduction. The main opposition Democratic Party advocates for a special counsel investigation, arguing that public prosecutors cannot be trusted to conduct a thorough investigation of Yoon, a former prosecutor-general.

During a parliamentary hearing Tuesday, Kwak Jong-keun, commander of the Army Special Warfare Command whose troops were sent to parliament, testified that he received direct instructions from Kim Yong Hyun to obstruct lawmakers from entering the National Assembly's main chamber. Kwak said the purpose of Kim's instructions was to prevent the 300-member parliament from gathering the 150 votes necessary to overturn Yoon's martial law order.

Kwak said Yoon later called him directly and asked for the troops to "quickly destroy the door and drag out the lawmakers who are inside." Kwak said he discussed Yoon's order with the commander at the scene and that they concluded there was nothing that could be done, ruling out the possibility of threatening the lawmakers by shooting blanks or cutting off electricity.

At the same hearing, senior officer Kim Dae-woo of the military's counterintelligence agency said his commander, Yeo In-hyung, asked him if an army bunker in Seoul had space to detain politicians and other figures after martial law was imposed. Yeo is considered a close associate of Kim Yong Hyun. Last week, Hong Jang-won, a deputy director of the country's spy agency, said Yoon ordered him to help Yeo's command to detain some of his political rivals but he ignored the president's order.

Kwak and Yeo are among those who face opposition-raised rebellion charges along with Yoon and Kim, and the Defense Ministry suspended them last week.

Opposition parties and many experts say the martial law decree was unconstitutional. They say a president is by law allowed to declare martial law only during "wartime, war-like situations or other comparable national emergency states" and South Korea wasn't in such a situation. They argue that deploying troops to seal the National Assembly to suspend its political activities amounted to rebellion because the South Korean Constitution doesn't allow a president to use the military to suspend parliament in any situation.

In his martial law announcement, the conservative Yoon stressed a need to rebuild the country by eliminating "shameless North Korea followers and anti-state forces," a reference to his liberal rivals who control parliament. Since taking office in 2022, Yoon has had near-constant friction with the main liberal opposition Democratic Party, which introduced motions to impeach some of his top officials and launched a political offensive over scandals involving Yoon and his wife.

Yoon avoided impeachment on Saturday after most governing party lawmakers boycotted a floor vote in the National Assembly.

The Democratic Party said it would prepare for a new vote on Yoon's impeachment on Saturday. The party on Tuesday submitted motions to impeach Yoon's police chief and justice minister as well. It pushed to impeach Kim Yong Hyun and the safety minister, but they resigned before parliament took a vote.

If Yoon is impeached, his presidential powers would be suspended until the Constitutional Court decides whether to restore his powers or remove him from office. If he is dismissed from office, a new presidential election would be required.

US health panel adds self-testing option for cervical cancer screening

By CARLA K. JOHNSON AP Medical Writer

Women should have the option of taking their own test samples for cervical cancer screening, an influential health panel said Tuesday.

Draft recommendations from the U.S. Preventive Services Task Force are aimed at getting more people screened and spreading the word that women can take their own vaginal samples to check for cancer-causing HPV.

Women in their 20s should still get a Pap test every three years. But after that — from age 30 to 65 — women can get an HPV test every five years, the panel said.

And those HPV tests can be done with samples collected either by a doctor or by the patient herself in a mobile clinic or medical office. Women ages 30 to 65 can still opt for a Pap test done by a doctor every three years, or a Pap plus an HPV test every five years.

"I'm very hopeful that self-collection will help even more women get screened and help us reduce even further the burden of cervical cancer among women," said task force vice chair Dr. John Wong of Tufts University School of Medicine.

Earlier this year, U.S. regulators expanded the use of two HPV test kits to include self-collection. Studies show women and doctors take samples with similar accuracy.

For now, the tests are only for use in health care settings; home testing may be on the horizon.

HPV, or human papillomavirus, is very common and is spread through sex. Most HPV infections clear up on their own, but persistent infection can lead to cancer of the cervix. Most cervical cancers occur in women who are inadequately screened, diagnosed or treated.

To collect a sample, a swab or brush from the kit is inserted into the vagina and rotated. It is put in a tube and processed at a lab.

The HPV tests detect high-risk types of the virus. In contrast, a Pap test looks for abnormal cells in the cervix.

Australia, Denmark, the Netherlands and Sweden already use self-collection for cervical cancer screening.

Deaths from cervical cancers have declined in the U.S. in the past decade, and there is an HPV vaccine recommended for preteens that is preventing cancer in women and men. Still, nearly 14,000 new cases of cervical cancer were diagnosed in the U.S. this year and there were an estimated 4,360 deaths.

Black women, Native American women and Hispanic women still have higher death rates compared to white women. Women living in isolated areas also have higher than average death rates.

For many women, transgender men and nonbinary people, collecting their own sample could be more comfortable than the stirrups and speculum used by a doctor.

The draft advice remains largely the same as the group's previous recommendations from 2018. For example, women younger than 21 don't need to be screened for cervical cancer. Neither do women older than 65 who've had regular screenings with normal results. And women of any age who've had a total hysterectomy don't need to be screened.

The recommendations are open for comment through Jan. 13.

Chinese gold mining threatens a protected UN heritage site in Congo

By SAM MEDNICK Associated Press

OKAPI WILDLIFE RESERVE, Congo (AP) — Scattered along the banks of the Ituri River, buildings cram together, cranes transport dirt and debris scatters the soil. The patches of trees are a scant reminder that a forest once grew there.

Nestled in eastern Congo's Ituri province, the Chinese-run gold mine is rapidly encroaching on an area that many say it shouldn't be operating in at all - the Okapi Wildlife Reserve, an endangered World Heritage site.

The original boundaries of the reserve were established three decades ago, by Congo's government and encompassed the area where the Chinese company now mines. But over the years under opaque

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 11, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 169 ~ 78 of 85

circumstances, the boundaries shrunk, allowing the company to operate inside the lush forest.

The reserve was already on the endangered list, amid threats of conflict and wildlife trafficking. Now the rapid expansion of the Chinese mines threatens to further degrade the forest and the communities living within. Residents and wildlife experts say the mining's polluting the rivers and soil, decimating trees and swelling the population, increasing poaching, with little accountability.

"It is alarming that a semi-industrial mining operation is being given free rein in what's supposed to be a protected World Heritage Site, that was already on the danger list," said Joe Eisen, executive director, of Rainforest Foundation UK.

Spanning more than 13,000 square kilometers (5,000 square miles), the reserve became a protected site in 1996, due to its unique biodiversity and large number of threatened species, including its namesake, the okapi, a forest giraffe, of which it holds some 15% of the world's remaining 30,000. It's part of the the Congo Basin rainforest — the world's second-biggest — and a vital carbon sink that helps mitigate climate change. It also has vast mineral wealth such as gold and diamonds.

Mining is prohibited in protected areas, which includes the reserve, according to Congo's mining code.

Issa Aboubacar, a spokesperson for the Chinese company, Kimia Mining Investment, said the group is operating legally. It recently renewed its permits until 2048, according to government records.

Congo's mining registry said the map they're using came from files from the ICCN, the body responsible for managing Congo's protected areas, and it's currently working with the ICCN on updating the boundaries and protecting the park.

The ICCN told The Associated Press that in meetings this year with the mining registry the misunderstandings around the boundaries were clarified and the original ones should be used.

An internal government memo from August, seen by AP, said all companies in the Reserve will be closed down, including Kimia Mining. However, it was unclear when that would happen or how.

The document has not previously been reported and is the first acknowledging that the current boundaries are wrong, according to environmentalists working in Congo.

Rights groups in Congo have long said the permits were illegally awarded by the mining ministry based on inaccurate maps.

Shifting boundaries and rules

Eastern Congo's been beset by violence for decades and the Okapi Reserve's endured years of unrest by local militia.

In 2012, in Epulu town, a local rebel group slaughtered several residents including two rangers, as well as 14 okapis, the latter were part of a captive breeding program.

The reserve's also been threatened by artisanal — small scale — mining, by thousands of Indigenous peoples who live in and around the forest.

The Muchacha mine — the biggest in the reserve and one of the largest small and medium scale gold mines in the country — spans approximately 12 miles (19 kilometers) along the Ituri River and consists of several semi-industrial sites. Satellite images analyzed by AP show consistent development along the southwestern section of the Reserve, since it began operating in 2016, with a boom in recent years.

Joel Masselink, a geographer specializing in satellite imagery, who previously worked on conservation projects in the forest, said the mining cadastral — the agency responsible for allocating mineral licenses — is using a version of the reserve's maps in which the area's been shrunk by nearly a third. This has allowed it to award and renew exploration and extraction concessions, he said.

The mining cadastral told the U.N. that the boundaries were changed due to a letter from the Congolese Institute for the Conservation of Nature, the body in charge of protected areas in Congo, but didn't provide a copy, said a report from U.N. experts. The ICCN told the AP it's never seen the letter and the boundaries used should be the original ones.

Changing World Heritage Site boundaries needs to be approved by UNESCO experts and the World Heritage Committee, which analyze the impact of the modification, a spokesperson for the World Heritage Center told AP. The Center said no request to modify the Reserve's boundaries had been made and that cases of boundary modifications to facilitate development were rare.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 11, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 169 ~ 79 of 85

Civil society groups in Congo accuse some government officials of intentionally moving the boundaries for personal gain. "We all knew that Muchacha was within the reserve," said Alexis Muhima, executive director of the Congolese Civil Society Observatory for Peace Minerals. He said the discrepancy over the park's boundaries started when they realized the mine was producing large quantities of gold.

The U.N. report said mines are controlled by the military, and some members are under the protection of powerful business and political interests, with soldiers at times denying local officials access to the sites.

Residents, who once mined in the reserve, are infuriated by the double standard. "The community is worried, because the Chinese are mining in a protected area when it's forbidden for the community," said Jean Kamana, the chief of Epulu, a village inside the Reserve.

Despite being a protected forest, people still mined there until authorities cracked down, largely after the Chinese arrived. Kimia Mining grants limited access to locals to mine areas for leftovers, but for a fee that many can't afford, say locals.

Muvunga Kakule used to do artisanal mining in the reserve while also selling food from his farm to other miners. The 44-year-old said he's now unable to mine or sell produce as the Chinese don't buy locally. He's lost 95% of his earnings and can no longer send his children to private school.

Some residents told the AP there are no other options for work and have been forced to mine secretly and risk being jailed.

Losing land, animals and income

During a trip to the reserve earlier this year, Kimia Mining wouldn't let AP enter the site and the government wouldn't grant access to patrol the forest with its rangers.

But nearly two dozen residents, as well as former and current Kimia Mining employees from villages in and around the Reserve, told the AP the mining was decimating the forests and the wildlife and contaminating the water and land.

Five people who had worked inside Kimia's mines, none of whom wanted to be named for fear of reprisal, said when the Chinese finished in one area, they leave exposed, toxic water sources. Sometimes people would fall into uncovered pits and when it rains, water seeps into the soil.

Employees and mining experts say the Chinese use mercury in its operations, used to separate gold from ore. Mercury is considered one of the top ten chemicals of major public health concern by the U.N. and can have toxic effects on the nervous and immune systems.

One 27-year-old woman who worked as a cook for Kimia for six months and lives in Badengaido town, close to the mine, said the soil has become infertile. "(It's) poisoned by chemicals used by the Chinese," she said.

The AP could not independently verify her claim. However, a report from the University of Antwerp that researched the impact of conflict and mining on the Reserve said chemicals used to purify gold, such as mercury or cyanide, can enter the ecosystems and pollute the soil.

In the past, 15 kilograms (33 pounds) of peanut seeds would yield approximately 30 bags, but now it's hard to get three, she said. The loss of income has made it challenging to afford school and medical care for her siblings.

Assana, a fisher who also worked in the mines and only wanted to use his first name, said it now takes four days to catch the same amount of fish he used to get in a day. While doing odd jobs for the company last year, the 38-year-old saw the Chinese repeatedly chop swaths of forest, making the heat unbearable, he said.

Between last January and May, the reserve lost more than 480 hectares (1,186 acres) of forest cover — the size of nearly 900 American football fields — according to a joint statement from the Wildlife Conservation Society and government agencies, which said it was concerned at the findings.

Aboubacar, Kimia's spokesperson in Congo, said the company respects environmental standards and pays tax to the government for reforestation. Mining is a crucial revenue stream for Congo and it "can't place a higher value on the environment than on mining," he said.

Kimia is supporting the population and has employed more than 2,000 people, said Aboubacar. Conservation is an uphill battle

Conservation groups are trying to protect the reserve, but say it's hard to enforce when there's ambiguity on the legalities.

"On the one hand, Congo's law clearly states that mining is illegal in protected areas. On the other hand, if a mine is operating with an official permit, then that creates confusion, and that becomes hard to enforce on the ground," said Emma Stokes, Vice President of field conservation for The Wildlife Conservation Society.

The internal memo, seen by AP, outlines discussions by a joint task force between the ICCN and Congo's mining registry, which was created to try and resolve the boundary issue. The document said it will trigger the process of stopping all mining within the Reserve and integrate the agreed upon map from the joint commission into the mining registry's system.

UNESCO's requested a report from Congo by February, to provide clarity on what will be done to resolve the problem.

But this comes as little comfort to communities in the reserve.

Wendo Olengama, a Pygmy chief, said the influx of thousands of people into the Chinese-run mines has increased poaching, making it hard to earn money.

During the authorized hunting season, he could capture up to seven animals a day, eating some and selling others. Now it's hard to get two, he said.

Sitting in a small hut beside his wife, as she bounces their 3-year-old granddaughter on her lap, the couple says they want the Chinese company to provide business opportunities, such as cattle raising and teach people responsible hunting.

"If the situation persists, we'll live in misery," said his wife, Dura Anyainde. "We wont have food to eat."

Thousands scour Syria's most horrific prison but find no sign of their loved ones

By SARAH EL DEEB Associated Press

SAYDNAYA, Syria (AP) — They came from all over Syria, tens of thousands. The first place they rushed to after the fall of their longtime tormentor, former President Bashar Assad, was here: Saydnaya Prison, a place so notorious for its horrors it was long known as "the slaughterhouse."

For the past two days, all have been looking for signs of loved ones who disappeared years or even decades ago into the secretive, sprawling prison just outside Damascus.

But hope gave way to despair Monday. People opened the heavy iron doors lining the hallways to find cells inside empty. With sledgehammers, shovels and drills, men pounded holes in floors and walls, looking for what they believed were secret dungeons, or chasing sounds they thought they heard from underground. They found nothing.

Insurgents freed dozens of people from the Saydnaya military prison on Sunday when Damascus fell. Since then, almost no one has been found.

"Where is everyone? Where are everyone's children? Where are they?" said Ghada Assad, breaking down in tears.

She had rushed from her Damascus home to the prison on the capital's outskirts, hoping to find her brother. He was detained in 2011, the year that protests first erupted against the former president's rule — before they turned into a long, grueling civil war. She didn't know why he was arrested.

"My heart has been burned over my brother. For 13 years, I kept looking for him," she said. When insurgents last week seized Aleppo — her original hometown — at the start of their swiftly victorious offensive, "I prayed that they would reach Damascus just so they can open up this prison," she said.

Civil defense officials helping in the search were as confused as the families over why no further inmates were being found. It appeared fewer were held here in recent weeks, they said.

But few were giving up, a sign of how powerfully Saydnaya looms in the minds of Syrians as the heart of Assad's brutal police state. The sense of loss over the missing — and the sudden hope they might be found -- brought a kind of dark unity among Syrians from across the country.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 11, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 169 ~ 81 of 85

During Assad's rule and particularly after the 2011 protests began, any hint of dissent could land someone in Saydnaya. Few ever emerged.

In 2017, Amnesty International estimated that 10,000-20,000 people were being held there at the time "from every sector of society." It said they were effectively slated for "extermination."

Thousands were killed in frequent mass executions, Amnesty reported, citing testimony from freed prisoners and prison officials. Prisoners were subjected to constant torture, intense beatings and rape. Almost daily, guards did rounds of the cells to collect bodies of inmates who had died overnight from injuries, disease or starvation. Some inmates fell into psychosis and starved themselves, the human rights group said.

"There is not a home, there is not a woman in Syria who didn't lose a brother, a child or a husband," said Khairiya Ismail, 54. Two of her sons were detained in the early days of the protests against Assad – one of them when he came to visit her after she herself had been detained.

Ismail, accused of helping her son evade military service, spent eight months in Adra prison, northeast of Damascus. "They detained everyone."

An estimated 150,000 people were detained or went missing in Syria since 2011 — and tens of thousands of them are believed to have gone through Saydnaya.

"People expected many more to be here ... They are clinging to the slightest sliver of hope," said Ghayath Abu al-Dahab, a spokesman for the White Helmets, the search and rescue group that operated in rebel-held areas throughout the war.

Five White Helmet teams, with two canine teams, came to Saydnaya to help the search. They even brought in the prison electrician, who had the floor plan, and went through every shaft, vent and sewage opening. So far, there were no answers, Abu al-Dahab said.

He said the civil defense had documents showing more than 3,500 people were in Saydnaya until three months before the fall of Damascus. But the number may have been less by the time the prison was stormed, he said.

"There are other prisons," he said. "The regime had turned all of Syria into a big prison." Detainees were held in security agencies, military facilities, government offices and even universities, he added.

Around the Y-shaped main building of the prison, everyone kept trying, convinced they could find some hidden chamber with detainees, dead or alive.

Dozens of men tried to force a metal gate open until they realized it led only to more cells upstairs. Others asked the insurgents guarding the prison to use their rifle to lever open a closed door.

A handful of men were gathered, excavating what looked like a sewage opening in a basement. Others dug up electrical wiring, thinking it might lead to hidden underground chambers.

In a scene throughout the day, hundreds cheered as men with sledgehammers and shovels battered a huge column in the building's atrium, thinking they had found a secret cell. Hundreds ran to see. But there was nothing, and tears and loud sighs replaced the celebrations.

In the wards, lines of cells were empty. Some had blankets, a few plastic pots or a few names scribbled on walls. Documents, some with names of prisoners, were left strewn in the yard, the kitchen and elsewhere. Families scoured them for their loved ones' names.

A brief protest broke out in the prison yard, when a group of men began chanting: "Bring us the prison warden." Calls on social media urged anyone with information of the secret cells of the prison to come forth and help.

Firas al-Halabi, one of the prisoners freed when insurgents first broke into Saydnaya, was back on Monday visiting. Those searching flocked around him, whispering names of relatives to see if he met them.

Al-Halabi, who had been an army conscript when he was arrested, said he spent four years in a cell with 20 others.

His only food was a quarter loaf of bread and some burghul. He suffered from tuberculosis because of the cell conditions. He was tortured by electrocution, he said, and the beatings were constant.

"During our time in the yard, there was beating. When going to the bathroom, there was beating. If we sat on the floor, we got beaten. If you look at the light, you are beaten," he said. He was once thrown into

solitary for simply praying in his cell.

"Everything is considered a violation," he said. "Your life is one big violation to them."

He said that in his first year in the prison guards would call out hundreds of names over the course of days. One officer told him it was for executions.

When he was freed Sunday, he thought he was dreaming. "We never thought we would see this moment. We thought we would be executed, one by one."

Noha Qweidar and her cousin sat in the yard on Monday, taking a rest from searching. Their husbands were detained in 2013 and 2015. Qweidar said she had received word from other inmates that her husband was killed in a summary execution in prison.

But she couldn't know for sure. Prisoners reported dead in the past have turned up alive.

"I heard that (he was executed) but I still have hope he is alive."

Just before sundown on Monday, rescue teams brought in an excavator to dig deeper.

But late at night, the White Helmets announced the end of their search, saying in a statement they had found no hidden areas in the facility.

"We share the profound disappointment of the families of the thousands who remain missing and whose fates are unknown."

Michigan Democrats look toward a future that some hope includes Pete Buttigieg

By JOEY CAPPELLETTI Associated Press

MONROE, Mich. (AP) — In a packed union hall outside Detroit, a worker shifts the conversation from policy to the personal, quizzing Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg on his knowledge of Michigan, the state he only recently started calling home.

"Mayor Pete — Secretary Pete, I apologize," one auto worker yelled from the crowd. "Now that you're a Michigander, who do the Lions play Sunday?"

Caught off guard, the former mayor of South Bend, Indiana, couldn't provide an answer. Familiarity with the schedule of Detroit's long-suffering but recently soaring football team isn't an official prerequisite for holding statewide office. But the casual exchange illustrates the challenge Buttigieg may face in proving his connection to Michigan voters — a hurdle some Democrats nevertheless hope he'll take on by entering a crowded governor's race.

Though Buttigieg has publicly and privately stated that he won't make any decisions about his future until after the Biden administration ends on Jan. 20, he has already fielded calls from Michigan Democrats urging him to enter the 2026 race to replace Gov. Gretchen Whitmer, who is term limited.

Buttigieg, who moved to Traverse City, Michigan, soon after his unsuccessful presidential campaign in 2020, hasn't ruled out the possibility, according to a source speaking on condition of anonymity to discuss private conversations.

"I haven't made any decisions about, big decisions about my future. And I know that we've got six more weeks and we're going to sprint through the tape," Buttigieg told reporters at an event south of Detroit on Monday.

Bound by the nature of his official trip, Buttigieg avoided political questions during his visit, which included a stop at a union hall in Dearborn before heading south of Detroit to highlight nearly \$200 million in federal funding to replace a bridge. But pressure on him to enter the governor's race will likely only intensify after Detroit Mayor Mike Duggan, expected by many Democrats to be the leading contender to succeed Whitmer, announced last week plans to run as an independent.

"People are shocked and stunned and angry. Many view this as a serious situation where Mike Duggan could put the governor's mansion in the hands of Republicans and roll back years of progress," said Andrew Feldman, a Democratic strategist who has worked for the state party.

Michigan Democrats, who until recently had been posting big wins in a battleground state and advanced

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 11, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 169 ~ 83 of 85

a progressive agenda with remarkable party unity, suddenly find themselves in a new period of turmoil after significant losses in the 2024 election, including a backbreaking defeat in the presidential race.

President-elect Donald Trump won the state by a wider margin than in 2016, and Republicans reclaimed control of the state House, ending Democratic dominance in the Legislature. In their final month holding a slim majority in both chambers, the party has struggled to pass significant legislation, hampered by internal divisions.

While Whitmer — herself the subject of speculation about whether she'll seek higher office — still has two years remaining in her term, Duggan's surprise move has kick-started the race to replace her and has left Democrats worried the mayor of Michigan's largest city could drain support from their candidate and hand the office over to Republicans.

Buttigieg, who vaulted to prominence with his 2020 presidential run and deftly engaged with conservative audiences on behalf of President Joe Biden and Vice President Kamala Harris, could have the appeal to win that support back.

"I personally want to thank you for going up, facing the Fox News crowd, listening to people's questions and answering. And I think you're one of the few politicians that does that," an attendee told Buttigieg at the union hall on Monday, earning loud applause.

Buttigieg moved to Michigan to be closer to his husband's family, he said in an interview with The Associated Press on Monday. "I grew up a few miles from the state line, so even growing up I was getting the news from Michigan and from both sides of the state line. And I could point to any number of moments over the years, some wonderful and some really tough, like when our little guy was in the intensive care in Grand Rapids."

"But, yeah, bottom line, this is home," Buttigieg said.

Other potential candidates may not be ready to concede either race just yet. Michigan Democrats still boast one of the deepest political benches in the country, with several other high-profile candidates expected to join the race soon.

Secretary of State Jocelyn Benson confirmed last week that she is "certainly considering" a gubernatorial bid and is actively listening to voters' concerns as she weighs her decision. She also criticized Duggan for abandoning the party rather than grappling with its challenges.

"For me, it's important that in moments like this, we don't flee from the party, but we stay and fix it," Benson said during a televised interview with reporters.

Lt. Gov. Garlin Gilchrist II is also considering a gubernatorial bid and has assembled a team to explore the possibility, though a final decision won't be made until 2025, according to a source with direct knowledge. A 42-year-old Detroit native, Gilchrist, who is Black, could provide a strong contrast to the 66-year-old Duggan, who is white. If he runs, Gilchrist plans to engage with voters who feel the Democratic Party has failed to address their frustrations with the status quo, the source said.

There also are a number of dark horse candidates, including Genesee County Sheriff Chris Swanson. The Flint-area sheriff rose to prominence after he marched with a crowd of protesters in the wake of the death of George Floyd in 2020. Swanson, who spoke at the Democratic National Convention in August, recently told the AP that he has a "team doing due diligence" about a possible run.

"When it comes to the Democratic Party in Michigan, it is a prime time for them to restructure," Swanson said during a recent interview. "To not have a polarizing platform, but a more unifying one."

"The entire playbook has to be evaluated and restructured to go and listen to the people," he added.

Still rockin': As a singer turns 80, the Christmas song she sang as a teen is a holiday staple

By DAVID BAUDER AP Media Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Her memories of recording "Rockin' Around the Christmas Tree" are a little hazy. She remembers the producer placing decorations around the studio and blasting the air conditioner on

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 11, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 169 ~ 84 of 85

a warm Nashville day to create a holiday spirit. The musicians, she recalls, nailed it in a couple of takes. That's about it. After all, Brenda Lee was 13 years old at the time — and it was 66 years ago, in 1958. Somewhat implausibly, her celebration of a "Christmas party hop" is more popular today than ever before. It's an unusual trajectory, even accounting for the fact that music listeners during the holiday season tend to embrace songs they've known for years.

"Rockin'" eclipsed Mariah Carey's perennial favorite "All I Want for Christmas is You" last December to top the Billboard music chart and make Lee, at age 78, the oldest woman to achieve that feat. A week later, following a birthday, she beat her own mark. Kendrick Lamar likely stands in her way of doing it again this year.

Another record: Sixty-five years represented the longest interval between a record being released and making it to No. 1.

"It is a good song," Lee told The Associated Press. "It's a song that anybody can sing. You can join in, you can sing it, everyone is happy. I sure am glad that I have it. I never thought in my life that a Christmas song would be my legacy. But I'll take it."

'An ear worm on steroids'

It's a phenomenon that music journalist Holly Gleason noticed recently while stopping for coffee in Nashville, near the neighborhood where Lee lives. The song came over the loudspeaker and the room — parents, kids, hipsters — erupted in singing and laughter. "It's kind of an ear worm on steroids," said Gleason, whose 2017 book "Woman Walk the Line: How the Women in Country Music Changed Our Lives" featured Lee, among others.

The song manages the neat trick of sounding retro yet not dated. Sweet guitar licks snake around Lee's voice in the original recording. Boots Randolph's saxophone solo drives it home. The party flies by quickly, the song over in two minutes, six seconds.

Composer Johnny Marks already had some seasonal hits to his credit, including "Rudolph, the Red-Nosed Reindeer" and "A Holly Jolly Christmas." He specifically sought out Lee for his new song in 1958 and it's easy to see why: Who better to convey its innocence and spirit than a 13-year-old girl at the forefront of the Baby Boom? Rock 'n' roll was in its infancy then, too.

In the song, Lee sings about "mistletoe hung where you can see, every couple tries to stop."

In real life, she hadn't experienced her first kiss. "Lord, no," she said. "Not to say I didn't want to. I wasn't even allowed to date until I was 16."

What is the 'new old-fashioned way,' anyway?

The song hits plenty of holiday reference points — pumpkin pie, caroling, boughs of holly. You can overlook the part of the chorus that doesn't make much sense: what is the "new old-fashioned way," exactly?

The simplicity of "Rockin' Around the Christmas Tree" is a big part of its appeal, said Nathaniel Sloan, a musicologist at the University of Southern California and co-host of the "Switched on Pop" podcast. Like many successful holiday songs, it evokes nostalgia for a happier, more peaceful time — even if that's more imagination than reality, he said.

The style is more rockabilly than traditional rock or country, and Sloan believes that has much to do with why it continues to sound fresh.

"The thing that has always stunned me about the song is that you're listening to a 13-year-old's performance, and it doesn't sound that way to me," he said. "There's a depth to the vocal, even a weathered quality, that I can't believe she was so young. It's pitch-perfect."

For all of its success, the song was barely noticed upon its release in 1958. Not until two years later, when Lee's profile was higher through hits like "I'm Sorry," did it make the music charts. Its biggest boost came 40 years after that, when "Rockin' Around the Christmas Tree" was featured in the hit movie "Home Alone." The movie itself has become a holiday staple, giving more exposure to the song each year.

Her record company continues to push the song, recording a video in 2023 that included guest appearances by Tanya Tucker and Trisha Yearwood. This year it has released "Noche Buena Y Navidad," a Spanish-language version using artificial intelligence to create a vocal derived from Lee's voice.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 11, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 169 ~ 85 of 85

The record company is throwing Lee a birthday party

Universal Music is holding a party for her in Nashville to celebrate her 80th birthday on Wednesday. "She's just a force and a character," said Cindy Mabe, the company's chairwoman and CEO. "She's full of spunk in the same way that 13-year-old girl was."

"Rockin' Around the Christmas Tree" made the Grammy Hall of Fame in 2019. It has been streamed more than 2.5 billion times globally and certified seven times Platinum, meaning at least seven million copies sold. Kelly Clarkson, Miley Cyrus, Meghan Trainor, Kacey Musgraves and the duo of Darlene Love & Ronnie Spector are among the artists who've covered it.

Lee has sung it countless times over the years, most recently at a charity event last year. It made her concert setlist even in the heat of summer. How much money the song has earned is murky; the record company wouldn't talk about it. The bulk of its income would likely go to Marks' estate.

"It has never been a money thing for me," Lee said. "It's been a love thing. The money is great, yes, and I'm grateful. But I would be singing it on the corner for pennies because that's what I love to do."

Today in History: December 11 King Edward VIII abdicates British throne

By The Associated Press undefined

Today is Wednesday, Dec. 11, the 346th day of 2024. There are 20 days left in the year.

Today in history:

On Dec. 11, 1936, Britain's King Edward VIII abdicated the throne so he could marry American divorcee Wallis Warfield Simpson; his brother, Prince Albert, became King George VI.

Also on this date:

In 1946, the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) was established.

In 1978, nearly \$6 million in cash and jewelry were stolen from the Lufthansa cargo terminal at New York's John F. Kennedy Airport; the 'Lufthansa Heist,' the largest cash robbery in history at the time, was immortalized in the film 'Goodfellas.'

In 1980, President Jimmy Carter signed legislation creating a \$1.6 billion environmental "Superfund" to pay for cleaning up hazardous chemical spills and toxic waste dumps.

In 1997, more than 150 countries agreed at a global warming conference in Kyoto, Japan, to control the Earth's greenhouse gases.

In 1998, majority Republicans on the House Judiciary Committee pushed through three articles of impeachment against President Bill Clinton, over Democratic objections.

In 2008, former Nasdaq chairman Bernie Madoff was arrested, accused of running a multibillion-dollar Ponzi scheme that wiped out the life savings of thousands of people and wrecked charities. (Madoff died in April 2021 while serving a 150-year federal prison sentence.)

In 2020, the Supreme Court rejected a lawsuit backed by President Donald Trump to overturn Joe Biden's election victory, ending an attempt to get legal issues that were rejected by state and federal judges before the nation's highest court.

Today's Birthdays: Actor Rita Moreno is 93. Former U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry is 81. Singer Brenda Lee is 80. Singer Jermaine Jackson is 70. Rock musician Nikki Sixx (Mötley Crüe) is 66. Actor-comedian Mo'Nique is 57. Hockey Hall of Famer Daniel Alfredsson is 52. Rapper-actor Yasiin Bey (formerly Mos Def) is 51. Actor Rider Strong is 45. Actor Hailee Steinfeld is 28.