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Schedule Change for Thursday Jan 16 games at TZ

Girls JV is now at 5:00

Girls Varsity is now at 6:15

Boys Varsity is now at 7:30

There is no longer a JH BBB game at 5pm on Tuesday, February 11th with Leola/Frederick.

There is still a BB JV game at 6pm, with Varsity to follow.



Tuesday, Jan. 14

Senior Menu: Salisbury steak, mashed potatoes with gravy, carrots, mandarin orange salad, whole wheat bread.

School Breakfast: Scones.

School Breakfast: Chicken strips, fries.

JH Basketball hosts Roncalli (7th at 6 p.m., 8th at 7 p.m.)

Common Cents Thrift Store, 3 p.m. to 6 p.m., 209 N Main.

Pantry, 4 p.m. to 8 p.m., Groton Community Center
Emmanuel Lutheran: Council meeting, 6 p.m.

Wednesday, Jan. 15

Senior Menu: Vegetable soup, ham salad sandwich, peaches, cookie.

School Breakfast: Oatmeal.

School Lunch: Cheese quesadilla, corn.

Emmanuel Lutheran: Confirmation, 4 p.m.

Groton United Methodist: Community Coffee Hour, 9:30 a.m.; Groton Ad Council, 7 p.m.

Groton C&MA: Kid's Club, Youth Group, Adult Bible Study, 7 p.m.

St. John's Lutheran: Confirmation, 3:45 p.m.

Groton Daily Independent
PO Box 34, Groton SD 57445
Paul's Cell/Text: 605-397-7460

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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.

Trump Cabinet Hearings

Confirmation hearings for President-elect Donald Trump's Cabinet nominees begin today, with the Republican-controlled Senate evaluating more than a dozen key nominations this week. While more than 1,000 political appointee positions require a Senate confirmation vote, high-profile Cabinet nominees must first undergo confirmation hearings.

Today's hearings include former Rep. Doug Collins (R-GA) for Veterans Affairs secretary and Pete Hegseth for secretary of defense. Collins, an Air Force Reserve chaplain, will likely face questions about improving veterans' healthcare. Hegseth, an Army National Guard veteran and former Fox News host, may be questioned over sexual assault allegations. Meanwhile, former North Dakota Gov. Doug Burgum's (R) hearing for secretary of the interior—initially intended for today—was postponed to Thursday due to delayed paperwork.

If approved by the respective Senate committees, nominees will require 50 votes from the full Senate for confirmation. With Republicans holding a 53-47 majority, most nominees are likely to be confirmed.

Dementia Cases to Double

Roughly two in five US adults over the age of 55 will develop some form of dementia during their remaining life span, according to a new large-scale analysis published yesterday. The findings imply the number of newly diagnosed cases will double from around 500,000 to about 1 million annually by the year 2060.

Dementia is an umbrella term for a number of neurodegenerative conditions that cause loss of cognitive abilities, including Alzheimer's and Huntington's diseases. Researchers pointed to an aging US population as the primary driver—roughly a quarter of Americans are projected to be 65 or older by 2060—but also cited issues like poor diet and lack of exercise.

Women, who live on average five years longer than men, had a 48% chance of developing symptoms (compared to 35% for men), while Black Americans and people possessing a gene that helps carry lipids and cholesterol in the bloodstream ranged between 45% and 60%.

Alzheimer's accounts for about two-thirds of all dementia cases.

Trial Over Yoon's Fate Begins

South Korea's impeachment trial of suspended President Yoon Suk Yeol began and swiftly adjourned Tuesday afternoon local time after Yoon refused to appear in court. The Constitutional Court reconvenes Thursday and must determine whether to uphold parliament's impeachment vote from last month or reinstate Yoon's presidential powers.

The trial stems from Yoon's controversial, short-lived declaration of martial law in December, which led to hundreds of troops storming the National Assembly and sparked widespread protests. Yoon faces criminal charges of abuse of authority and has remained secluded in his heavily guarded residence in Seoul since Dec. 14. Yoon has also evaded an arrest warrant—the first time such action has been taken against a sitting president.

Yoon did not attend the trial's opening hearing because of security concerns. The court has scheduled five sessions between today and Feb. 4, which will proceed in Yoon's absence if necessary. The court must deliver a final ruling by June; at least six of the eight current justices must agree for the impeachment to be upheld.

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Sports, Entertainment, & Culture

The 2025 Grammy Awards to proceed as planned Feb. 2, with the telecast serving as a fundraiser for wildfire relief efforts.

Country music star Carrie Underwood tapped to perform at President-elect Donald Trump's inauguration. English author Neil Gaiman faces new allegations of sexual assault by four women.

Sean "Diddy" Combs accused in lawsuit of 2000 rape of a 16-year-old.

Academy Awards nominations announcement pushed to Jan. 23 as voting process delayed due to wildfires and Meghan, Duchess of Sussex, delays premiere of her Netflix lifestyle show.

Science & Technology

Biden administration proposes rules on exports for advanced AI computer chips; select group of nations will have full access while countries like China, Iran, and Russia will face heavy restrictions.

New NASA study suggests roughly one-third of supermassive black holes—those up to billions of times the mass of the sun—are hidden from view by gas and dust.

Bioengineered male mosquitoes deliver toxic venom proteins during mating, shortening the life span of disease-spreading female counterparts; only female mosquitoes bite and transmit pathogens.

Business & Markets

US stock markets close mixed (S&P 500 +0.2%, Dow +0.9%, Nasdaq -0.4%) as investors rotate out of tech stocks.

Moderna shares close down nearly 17% after company slashes 2025 sales forecast by \$1B, partly due to declining demand for its COVID-19 vaccine.

Robinhood to pay \$45M to settle charges with the US Securities and Exchange Commission over data breach, record-keeping, and other violations.

Johnson & Johnson to acquire psychiatric drug developer Intra-Cellular Therapies in roughly \$15B deal; if completed, deal would be largest biotech merger since 2023.

Politics & World Affairs

Judge allows partial release of special counsel Jack Smith's investigative report related to President-elect Donald Trump's 2020 election interference case; report could be released as soon as today.

National Weather Service issues "particularly dangerous situation" red flag warning for Los Angeles area, advising high winds could cause fires to intensify through tomorrow.

Palisades Fire has burned over 23,000 acres and is 14% contained as of this writing; see map of fires burning in Southern California.

Israel and Hamas reportedly nearing deal for ceasefire in Gaza and release of hostages following a breakthrough in Qatar-led negotiations; both sides reviewing details of the plan, which haven't been made public.

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GFP Commission Holds January Meeting

The South Dakota Game, Fish and Parks (GFP) held their January Commission at the Pierre Ramkota River Center on Jan 9-10.

The Commission had several proposals for upcoming seasons.

PARKS PROPOSALS

Bear Butte Public Use Restriction

The Commission proposed to reinstate the rule prohibiting the leaving of human remains at Bear Butte State Park. This rule was originally passed in August 2002 and inadvertently repealed in December 2019 during an administrative rule cleanup process.

Public Lands and Waters

The Commission proposed to align two rules with the United States Code of Federal Regulations, which was a recommendation made by the US Coast Guard. The first rule clarifies the usage of personal flotation devices be used in accordance with any requirements on the approval label or owner's manual. The second rule clarifies required fire extinguishers be in serviceable condition and not expired.

WILDLIFE PROPOSALS

PRAIRIE ELK

The Commission proposed the following season dates:

The Commission also proposed to expand the West River Prairie Elk unit (PRE-WRA) to include all counties west of the Missouri River not currently in a Prairie Elk or Black Hills Elk hunting unit.

A proposal to expand the season dates for prairie elk unit 27A to Sept.1 – Dec. 31 was approved, and to create a landowner-own-land, resident only antlerless elk license for this unit.

Specific license numbers will be proposed at the Commission's March meeting.

Bighorn Sheep/Mountain Goat Seasons

The proposed 2025 Bighorn Sheep Hunting Season would run Sept. 1 – Dec. 31.

The Commission proposed to expand the BHS – BH4 unit to include those portions of Lawrence and Meade Counties west of Interstate 90.

Specific license numbers will be proposed at the Commission's March meeting.

The Commission also proposed to keep the Mountain Goat Hunting Season closed for 2025.

Special Buck and Special Antelope

The Commission proposed the Special Buck and Special Antelope seasons for 2025 and 2026 with season dates of:

East River Special Deer

November 22 – December 7, 2025

November 21 – December 6, 2026

West River Special Deer

November 15 – 30, 2025

Except in Gregory County November 8 – 30

November 14 – 29, 2026

Except in Gregory County: November 7 – 29

Special Antelope

October 4 – 19, 2025

October 3 – 18, 2026

The proposal would include:

East River Deer

500 resident any deer licenses

West River Deer

500 resident any deer licenses

500 resident any whitetail licenses

500 nonresident any deer licenses

500 nonresident any whitetail licenses

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Special Antelope

50 resident buck antelope licenses
50 nonresident buck antelope licenses
Any special deer or special antelope licenses are only valid on private property not leased by GFP for public hunting.

Mountain Lion

The Commission proposed the 2025 and 2026 mountain lion hunting seasons with the dates of:
Black Hills Fire Protection District:
December 26, 2024 – April 30, 2025
December 26, 2025 – April 30, 2026
Outside Black Hills Fire Protection District:
December 26, 2024 - Dec. 25, 2025
December 26, 2025 – Dec.25, 2026
The Commission also proposed to allow the initiation of the pursuit of a mountain lion with dogs outside the Black Hills Fire Protection District to occur anywhere, where permitted by the landowner.

Duck Hunting Season

The Commission proposed the 2025 duck hunting season dates:
High Plains Zone
October 11, 2025 – January 15, 2026
Low Plains North & Low Plains Middle Zone
September 27, 2025 – December 9, 2026
Low Plains South Zone
October 25, 2025 – January 6, 2026
Included in this proposal would be to allow the take of 3 pintail ducks in the traditional bag limit and to decrease the "bonus teal season" from 16 to 9 days. Both of these proposals are in conjunction with the US Fish and Wildlife Services suggestions.

Goose Hunting Season

The Commission proposed the 2025 goose hunting season dates:
Canada Geese (and Brant)
Unit 1: October 1 – December 16, 2025
Unit 2 (including Bennett County): November 3, 2025 – February 15, 2026

Light Geese

Statewide: September 27, 2025 – January 9, 2026
White-fronted Geese
Statewide: September 27 - December 9, 2025
The Commission also proposed to repeal the Special Canada Goose season in Unit 3 and move Bennett County into Unit 2.

Sandhill Crane Hunting Season

The Commission proposed the 2025 sandhill crane hunting season dates: Sept: 27 – Nov. 23.

Youth Waterfowl Hunting Season

The Commission proposed the 2025 youth waterfowl hunting season dates: Sept. 13-14.
Public Comment Opportunity and Upcoming Meeting
To hear the discussion on any of the topics on the agenda, audio from the meeting is available through South Dakota Public Broadcasting and will soon be available on the GFP website as part of the meeting archive.

To see these documents in their entirety, visit gfp.sd.gov/commission/information.
To be included in the public record and to be considered by the Commission, public comments must include a full name and city of residence and be submitted by 11:59 p.m. CT, March 2.
The next Regular Commission Meeting will be held March 6-7 at the Ramkota River Center in Pierre.

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USD Announces Fall 2024 Dean's List and Academic Honors

VERMILLION, S.D. – More than 2,500 students at the University of South Dakota are being honored for their high achievement during the fall 2024 semester with the release of the Dean's List and Academic Honors.

Full-time, undergraduate students are named to the Dean's List if they received a 3.5 GPA for courses they took in the fall 2024 semester, and they had no incomplete or failing grades. For part-time students, those with fewer than 12 credit hours, the recognition is called Academic Honors.

Dean's List

Max Henry Duerre Bristol
Megan Kathryn Gustafson, Claremont
Elliana Marie Weismantel, Columbia
Jacob Kenneth Lewandowski, Groton
Shaylee Kristine Peterson, Groton

Academic Recognition - Fall 2024

Madison Jayden Peckham Bristol

Death Notice: Elroy "Sarge" Likness

Elroy "Sarge" Likness, 85, of Andover passed away Monday, January 13th at Avantara Groton. Services are pending with Paetznick-Garness Funeral Chapel, Groton.

Groton Prairie Mixed Bowling League Week #8 Results

Team Standings: Shihtzus 4, Chipmunks 3, Jackelopes 2, Cheetahs 2, Coyotes 1, Foxes 0
Men's High Games: Vern Meyers 237 & 211, Doug Jorgensen 218, Brad Waage 205 & 202
Women's High Games: Sam Bahr 188 & 186, Darci Spanier 170 & 168, Vicki Walter 166
Men's High Series: Vern Meyers 646, Brad Waage 554, Brad Larson 503
Women's High Series: Sam Bahr 525, Darci Spanier 490, Vicki Walter 458

Week 8 Fun Game – Most 9 Spares – Jackelopes with 21!

Name Released in Minnehaha County Fatal Crash

What: Vehicle and light pole fatal crash
Where: Interstate 229, mile marker 9, Sioux Falls City Limits
When: 1:05 p.m., Thursday, January 9, 2025

Driver 1: Frederick Lee VanHorn, 60-year-old male from Sioux Falls, SD, fatal injuries
Vehicle 1: 2017 Dodge Ram ProMaster
Seat belt Used: Yes

Minnehaha County, S.D.- A contractor was working on a large tower light pole along Interstate 229 near exit 9 when the pole began to lean and fell across the northbound lanes of I-229, striking a passing vehicle driven by Frederick Lee VanHorn. VanHorn sustained fatal injuries.

The South Dakota Highway Patrol is investigating the crash. All information released so far is only preliminary.

The Highway Patrol is an agency of the South Dakota Department of Public Safety.

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BROWN COUNTY
BROWN COUNTY COMMISSION AGENDA
REGULAR MEETING TUESDAY
January 14, 2025, 8:45 A.M.

COMMISSIONER'S CHAMBERS, COURTHOUSE ANNEX - 25 MARKET STREET, ABERDEEN SD

1. Call To Order - Pledge of Allegiance
2. Approval of the Agenda
3. Opportunity for Public Comment
4. Barr Engineering Presentation
5. Dirk Rogers, Highway Superintendent
 - a. Award Rural Access Infrastructure Funds (RAIF) Grants
 - b. Discuss future of RAIF Program
 - c. Adopt Resolution for Bridge Inspection
 - d. Department Update
6. Public Hearing for Fairgrounds Liquor License
7. Rachel Kippley, Fair/Fairgrounds/Parks Manager
 - a. Approval of Fair Contracts:
 - i. RSA Digital Advertising
 - ii. Pauer Sound
8. Judy Dosch, Building Superintendent
 - a. Approve & Authorize Chairman to sign Quote from Convergent
 - b. Discuss storage of Law Books
9. Summit PUC Intervener Discussion
10. Consent Calendar
 - a. Approval of Reorganization Meeting Minutes of January 7, 2025
 - b. Claims/Payroll
 - c. HR Report
 - d. Claim Assignments
 - e. Surplus Copier from P&Z
 - f. Surplus Property for Highway Department
 - g. Travel Requests
 - h. Set Hearing Date for Retail (On-Off Sale) Malt Beverage & SD Farm Wine Transfers & Authorize Advertising
11. Other Business
12. Executive Session (if requested per SDCL 1-25-2)
13. Adjourn

Brown County Commission Meeting

Please join my meeting from your computer, tablet, or smartphone.

<https://meet.goto.com/BrCoCommission>

You can also dial in using your phone. United States: +1 (872) 240-3311

Access Code: 601-168-909 #

Get the app now and be ready when your first meeting starts: <https://meet.goto.com/install>

Public comment provides an opportunity for the public to address the county commission.

Presentations may not exceed 3 minutes.

Public comment will be limited to 10 minutes (or at the discretion of the board) - Public comment will be accepted virtually when the virtual attendance option is available.

Official Recordings of Commission Meetings along with the Minutes can be found at <https://www.brown.sd.us/node/454>

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Weekly Vikings Roundup: Playoff edition

By Jordan Wright

After winning 14 games during the regular season, then losing to the Detroit Lions in week 18, the Vikings were forced to go on the road for the first round of the playoffs. This would be a rematch of the October 14th game which ended in a 20-30 loss for the Vikings. However, because of the wildfires in California, the game was moved to Arizona, so there wasn't a true home-field advantage for LA. It didn't matter though, as the Rams proceeded to demolish the Vikings 27-9.

The Vikings won the coin toss and deferred, so LA got the ball to begin the game. It only took them seven plays to travel 70 yards and find paydirt, taking a 7-0 lead. The Vikings ran three plays on their first drive, accumulated zero yards, and punted the ball right back. Eight plays and 62 yards later, the Rams kicked a field goal to extend the lead to 10-0.

The Vikings finally got something going on their second drive of the game, picking up 54 yards on nine plays before settling for a field goal to cut the Rams lead to seven. On the Rams' next possession, the Vikings' defense finally showed some signs of life and forced a three-and-out. Unfortunately, Sam Darnold threw an interception on the next series, giving the ball right back to LA, but they couldn't do anything with the ball, and they punted the ball right back. The Vikings offense, absent for most of the game up to this point, was putting a drive together... until Darnold was sacked and fumbled the ball, which a Rams player picked up and returned for a TD, extending their lead 17-3. On the Vikings' next drive, facing 4th&2, Darnold was sacked for the billionth time. The Rams capitalized on the turnover, finding the endzone again to extend the lead 24-3 going into halftime.

At this point, I'm jealous of anyone who was able to turn the game off and go about their lives.

LA started the scoring in the second half with a field goal. The Vikings managed to score a touchdown on the following possession, their first TD since week 17 against the Packers. The two-point conversion failed though, keeping the score 27-9. The Vikings' defense forced a punt by the Rams, and the Vikings had one last chance to make this a respectable game. A Darnold sack on 3rd&8 ended any and all hope for the purple and gold. You could almost see the players deflate. They threw the towel in – on the game, on the season, on any chance at self-respect.

Heading into the game, there were a ton of questions about the Vikings and Sam Darnold. Should the Vikings re-sign him? Should they franchise-tag him? Should they let him walk and let J.J. McCarthy take over? After Monday's game, it's clear that this team isn't ready to compete for a championship, and Darnold sure as heck isn't the QB to lead them to Valhalla.

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**SOUTH DAKOTA
NEWS WATCH**

Inform. Enlighten. Illuminate.

South Dakota Legislature: Property taxes, pipelines, prisons (and more) **BY STU WHITNEY**

South Dakota News Watch

The 100th session of the South Dakota Legislature in Pierre will be historic not just for its centennial landmark but because of transitions in power.

Gov. Kristi Noem is scheduled to give her State of the State address Jan. 14 and then head to Washington for hearings on her nomination to become secretary of the Department of Homeland Security in the administration of President-elect Donald Trump.

She can't be officially confirmed until about a week later, when Lt. Gov. Larry Rhoden is expected to be sworn as South Dakota's 34th governor, just in time for a legislative session rife with Republican power shifts and looming budget battles.

Even with these developments, the 2025 session in Pierre is more about issues than eras. Lawmakers are prepared to tackle the three Ps – property taxes, pipelines and prisons – as well as school vouchers, Medicaid funding and child care programs.

It's hard to keep up without a scorecard, so here's a primer on what to watch for as the South Dakota legislative session opens Tuesday.

Raising sales tax to cut property taxes

Property tax relief is a hot topic in Pierre, given that total payments have increased by nearly 60% for residential housing and nearly 50% for commercial property over the past decade in South Dakota.

The problem with cutting property taxes, which help fund local school districts and city and county governments, is that typically you need to backfill that lost revenue with general fund dollars to pay for education and reduce the local effort for school districts.

Rep. Tony Venhuizen (R- Sioux Falls) has floated a proposal to increase the sales tax rate from 4.2% to 5%, which would raise an estimated \$280 million in general fund revenue. That money would be used to reduce the levy for owner-occupied homes to fund education at the local level to zero.

"This is meant to start the conversation on property tax relief and to make the point that it costs a lot of money," said Venhuizen, whose plan is co-sponsored by Sen. Randy Deibert (R-Spearfish). "I'd say that property tax relief is easily the top issue that I hear about from other legislators."

Raising the sales tax rate, which legislators temporarily lowered from 4.5% to 4.2% in 2023, would require a two-thirds majority vote in both chambers. It could encounter turbulence from limited-government leadership in Pierre, even with the property tax offsets elsewhere.

The measure is also unlikely to win over Democrats, who are outnumbered by Republicans 31-4 in the Senate and 63-7 in the House of Representatives.

Rep. Kadyn Wittman (D-Sioux Falls) noted that property tax relief does little to help low-income residents and non-homeowners who would be impacted by higher sales tax rates on purchases.

"If you really want to impact every single South Dakotan in a tangible way, it would be better to look at removing the grocery tax," Wittman told News Watch. "I think that would be a better utilization of our legislative powers."

Voters rejected a grocery plan repeal on the 2024 ballot, but critics mainly derided the measure's overly broad language rather than the merits of eliminating the food tax.

Venhuizen's property tax relief plan harkens back to 1995, when Gov. Bill Janklow pushed through a 30% property tax reduction, offsetting the lost tax revenue to schools by increasing the state's education contribution. The program also updated the state's education aid formula and established property tax caps.

Rep. Will Mortenson of Fort Pierre, who served as Republican House majority leader the past two years,

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called the proposal "bold and clear-headed" amid all the property tax noise.

"A lot of people have been talking about property taxes as a campaign issue, but to this point, any changes have been kind of around the periphery," Mortenson told News Watch. "This proposal would deliver substantial, noticeable property tax relief to homeowners across the state. I wouldn't make a guess as to whether it's going to pass or not, but I applaud (Venhuizen and Deibert) for having the guts to do it."

Proposal sparks school voucher debate

Lively debate is also expected on Noem's push for "education savings accounts" that would provide state money to help students enroll in private schools or help parents pay for homeschooling outside the traditional public school system.

In her Dec. 3 budget address, the governor proposed spending \$4 million in ongoing state dollars to provide about \$3,000 per eligible student to offset the cost of private or alternative schools as a way to "prioritize education" in the state.

In her budget explanation, Noem said the funds would initially be eligible for "South Dakota kids who need it most" but added that the program could later expand to make all families in the state eligible for payments. She said the program will create new options for parents and increase competition in the educational landscape across the state.

The proposal was formally introduced on Jan. 8 as House Bill 1020 by House Majority Leader Scott Odenbach (R-Spearfish) and Senate Majority Leader Jim Mehlhaff (R-Pierre).

The so-called school choice bill would allow the money to be used for tuition at private schools and "micro-schools" for materials for homeschooling or for entrance exam or virtual learning fees not covered by a local school district.

Critics of the proposal — including several organizations focused on improving public education — said it is a veiled attempt to begin a school voucher program. Voucher programs in other states have resulted mostly from conservative-led efforts to enable more children to attend private, religious or charter schools or to expand home-schooling.

Noem said her program would not reduce funding to the state K-12 system, though her proposed budget includes only a 1.25% spending increase for public schools, well below the recent inflation rate.

Rob Monson, executive director of the School Administrators of South Dakota, said during a Jan. 8 conference call that conservatives in the Legislature have been trying for years to create a voucher program.

Monson said Noem's proposal, as well as other proposed measures such as House Bill 1009, will ultimately siphon funding from the public education system that serves all children regardless of income, race, ethnicity or disability status.

Monson said backers of voucher programs try to demonize public education and claim it is failing and "indoctrinates" students, which he said is false. He and other public education backers also pointed out that private schools, alternative schools and home-schooled children do not have to undergo the same levels of transparency and accountability that public schools must meet.

Monson said the new leadership in the Legislature appears to be more favorable to vouchers or Noem's proposed education savings accounts in the upcoming session, and he expects a big battle in Pierre.

"We're going to see an attack this year, we believe, on the public school institution bigger than we have ever seen (in South Dakota)" he said.

Anti-pipeline forces target eminent domain

Republican populists are still feeling the energy from the 2024 election defeat of Referred Law 21, a "Landowner Bill of Rights" package that critics decried as more favorable to ethanol producers and carbon pipeline companies.

Groups such as the Freedom Caucus and Dakota First PAC exploited the pipeline issue in GOP primaries by highlighting the votes of incumbent legislators, several of whom were defeated to set up the leadership shift.

Though the fate of Summit Carbon Solutions' \$5.5 billion, 2,500-mile pipeline plan will likely play out in the courts and Public Utilities Commission hearings, expect more fireworks in Pierre.

Jim Eschenbaum of the South Dakota Property Rights and Local Control Alliance told News Watch that

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the focus will be on tightening restrictions on eminent domain, which involves taking private property for public use while requiring fair compensation.

"I've heard people say that the interstate system couldn't have been built without eminent domain," said Eschenbaum, who is also running for chair of the South Dakota Republican Party. "But the interstate system was literally for the use of all, and it was for the greater good. This pipeline doesn't fit that description at all."

Whether Summit Carbon Solutions qualifies as a "common carrier" under state legal parameters for eminent domain is being litigated in court and will likely play a large role in legislative debates.

Property rights supporters will rally at the state Capitol rotunda on Jan. 13, the day before session opens. Republican legislators expected to attend include Speaker of the House Jon Hansen (Dell Rapids) and House Speaker Pro Tempore Karla Lems (Canton), both of whom are strident opponents of the pipeline project.

Amanda Radke, a Mitchell rancher and ag representative who has emerged as a leader on the issue, will address the gathering. Eschenbaum said he will be on hand to emphasize the need to "clarify the limits of eminent domain."

The movement will test the remaining influence of mainstream, pro-business Republicans, who have stressed the positive impact of eminent domain for large-scale development projects that create jobs and increase tax revenue for the state.

"The thing that concerns me most is this "not in my backyard" sentiment bleeding over into other areas of commerce or industry," Mortenson said. "South Dakota has been viewed as a place where you can come and build something without the government getting in the way. I really worry that because of anger over the pipeline, some of these folks will go too far and cut off our nose to spite our face by blocking construction and development of businesses that could keep our small towns vital and allow other towns to grow."

Legislators take aim at Medicaid expansion

South Dakota voters passed Medicaid expansion in 2022, extending health care coverage to more low-income residents under the Affordable Care Act, with the federal government covering 90 percent of the cost.

That arrangement will cost South Dakota about \$20 million each fiscal year if the matching rate remains the same.

Venhuizen and Sen. Casey Crabtree (R-Madison) have put forth a joint resolution proposing a constitutional amendment that ties Medicaid expansion in South Dakota to the level of federal assistance.

If the federal matching rate drops below 90%, as some have suggested it could as the Trump administration looks to reform spending strategies, the South Dakota Constitution would no longer require the state to continue Medicaid expansion.

"As things stand now, if they cut the match rate from 90% to 80% or 70%, we would have no choice," said Venhuizen. "We would have to come up with the money and pay it. So the point of this amendment is to say, if it drops below 90%, then it's up to the Legislature. We don't have to get out. If they drop it to 88% or 89%, we would probably stay in. If they drop it more than that, at what point does it become so expensive that the state can't afford it?"

Medicaid is a joint federal and state program that helps cover medical costs for qualified individuals with limited income and resources.

The Affordable Care Act in 2010 expanded Medicaid to include nearly all adults with incomes up to 138% of the federal poverty level, which translates to an annual gross salary of about \$21,000 for an individual or \$43,000 for a family of four.

South Dakota was one of the Republican-led states that resisted expansion, which meant childless adults without a disability were ineligible for Medicaid coverage regardless of income level. Many also didn't qualify for ACA subsidies to help obtain private coverage.

In 2022, South Dakota became one of 40 states to expand Medicaid when voters approved a constitutional amendment with 56% of the vote.

Two years later, Venhuizen sponsored a ballot amendment that allowed work requirements to be used in connection with able-bodied adults receiving Medicaid benefits in South Dakota, subject to federal ap-

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proval. That measure also passed with 56% approval.

Wittman criticized the latest effort, saying that measures that could eliminate Medicaid expansion in South Dakota altogether show a lack of regard for state residents that require assistance.

"I'm really tired of the South Dakota Legislature continuing to punish people who are vulnerable and marginalized and living in poverty," Wittman told News Watch. "I really do not understand Rep. Venhuizen's vitriol towards individuals that utilize this particular government support system. If this is truly about him wanting to make smart use of taxpayer dollars, I believe there are other places in our budget where he could focus his efforts and it would not further marginalize an already vulnerable population."

Budget battle for public broadcasting

Among the belt-tightening measures proposed by Noem in her budget address, cutting South Dakota Public Broadcasting's funding by 65% has received a lot of attention.

The governor put the \$3.6 million budget cut in national terms when presenting her proposal, which earmarked \$1.9 million for SDPB in fiscal year 2026. The network had requested \$5.6 million.

"Currently, South Dakota has the third-highest per capita funding of public broadcasting of any state in the nation," Noem said in her budget address. "We've been paying more than double the national average."

SDPB, which relies on state funding and private donations, provides livestreamed coverage of state legislative hearings as well as South Dakota High School Activities Association championship events, in addition to its news, weather and commentary programming, which includes National Public Radio.

"A cut of this size and scale will force significant reductions to all these important services," the network said in a statement. "This cut is likely to disproportionately affect rural service, where SDPB's programming is most valued."

During her 2022 re-election campaign, Noem refused to participate in a debate sponsored by the public broadcasting network, with her team saying in a statement that "SDPB's extreme leftward swing precludes the possibility of a fair debate."

While her likely exit from Pierre might shield her from political fallout from the budget cuts, some lawmakers view it differently. Pulling support from something that serves as a conduit to legislative proceedings as well as statewide sports and fine arts events has caused some angst among constituents.

"It's probably the cut that I've heard the most opposition to since the budget address," said Venhuizen. "I know a lot of legislators are hoping that we can avoid that cut, but the reality of the budget situation this year is that it's a zero-sum game. And so unless we have cause to increase our revenue estimate in a month, we're going to have to find a dollar elsewhere for every dollar we restore."

Noem seeks to close prison deal

South Dakota Department of Corrections officials have informed legislators that the guaranteed maximum price for a planned new men's state prison is \$825 million, higher than previous estimates.

That includes \$737 million in construction for the 1,500-inmate facility at the proposed site between Harrisburg and Canton in Lincoln County, making it the largest one-time capital investment in state history.

The fact that the prison involves "one time" dollars puts it on a different tier of budget discussion from ongoing expenditures such as health care and education funding, but the governor is looking to close the deal.

Noem's proposal includes putting \$182 million in a prison fund that, combined with interest already accrued, would fully fund the project, a clear priority when it comes to shaping her executive legacy.

The Legislature has already committed \$87 million to build a new women's prison in Rapid City, with a likely completion date of early 2026.

Some of the same lawmakers who opposed the carbon pipeline project have expressed concern about the men's prison site, which could lead to some interesting discussions in Pierre.

If the project goes through as planned, the outgoing governor will be justified in chalking it up as a win for her administration, said Mortenson.

"It's not a popular thing to build a prison," he told News Watch. "The public would rather spend this money on education or nursing homes or other things, but she saw a need. Our current facilities are falling

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short of their mission of rehabilitating people and being a Department of Corrections, not just a department of incarceration. She said, 'You know what, we've got the money, let's do something about it,' and I give her credit for that."

Bart Pfankuch contributed reporting to this story, which was produced by South Dakota News Watch, an independent, nonprofit organization. Read more stories and donate at sdnewswatch.org and sign up for an email every few days to get stories as soon as they're published. Contact Stu Whitney at stu.whitney@sdnewswatch.org

Secretary of State announces legislation for the 2025 legislative session

(Pierre, S.D.) – Secretary of State Monae L. Johnson announces that the Secretary of State’s Office has proposed a package of legislation for the 2025 Legislative Session that includes bills to define residency, streamline the election process, and provide funds for an upgraded business platform. “Our proposed package of legislation is designed to protect our elections and ensure that they are run smoothly and efficiently,” said Secretary Johnson. “We also look forward to acquiring more funds and using them to develop a new business platform that will allow South Dakota to maintain its ease of doing business.”

SB 20: An Act to require a voter to use a pen when marking a ballot. Black and blue pens are widely regarded as the most secure way for a voter to mark their ballot. Therefore, the Secretary of State’s Office is proposing a change to state law that would standardize the use of pens across South Dakota.

SB 21: An Act to prevent a member of a governing body from assisting in the canvass of the votes for an office for which the member is a candidate. One of the core principles of the American legal system is the idea that “no one should be a judge in their own cause.” As a result, the Secretary of State’s Office is proposing a change to state law that would apply this principle to South Dakota’s elections and ensure that they are being certified by individuals who will be able to remain unbiased because they have no vested interest in the outcome.

SB 22: An Act to modify provisions pertaining to the submission of a nominating petition. Existing laws regarding the deadlines for candidates to submit their nominating petitions will put the Secretary of State’s Office and county auditors in a tough position in 2026 by requiring petitions for dozens of contests, including several statewide contests, to be certified in less than a week. The Secretary of State’s Office is proposing legislation that would move the deadlines up a week and end the use of registered mail for nominating petitions in order to ensure that everything can be certified in time.

SB 23: An Act to require the Secretary of State to publish the numbers pertaining to the collection of signatures on a nominating petition. The Secretary of State’s Office is responsible for tracking the number signatures that a candidate needs to have on their nominating petition in order to have their name placed on the ballot. The Secretary of State’s Office is proposing legislation that would establish a timeline for the number of required signatures to be placed on the Secretary of State’s website and allow voters to challenge the numbers if they believe that there is an error.

SB 48: An Act to modify provisions pertaining to the registration of voters. The Secretary of State believes that only South Dakotans should vote in South Dakota’s elections. As a result, the Secretary of State’s Office is proposing legislation that would strengthen South Dakota’s residency requirements for voters, move the state’s voter registration deadline, and require proof of U.S. citizenship whenever a person registers to vote for the first time. This legislation also includes provisions that would protect the voting rights of individuals who find themselves in certain special circumstances.

HB 1024: An Act to amend certain fees collected by the Secretary of State. The Secretary of State is proud of South Dakota’s reputation as an easy place to do business and remains committed to protecting it. Therefore, the Secretary of State’s Office is proposing legislation that would slightly increase filing fees for businesses and allow it to retain a greater portion of those fees. The funds raised as a result of this legislation will be used by the Secretary of State’s Office to develop a new business platform that will greatly improve the ease of doing business in South Dakota.



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Carbon pipeline opponents rally in Pierre amid renewed push for eminent domain ban

BY: JOSHUA HAIAR - JANUARY 13, 2025 4:40 PM

PIERRE — Standing before a crowd of hundreds of carbon dioxide pipeline opponents Monday at the South Dakota Capitol, a lawmaker announced her bill to ban the use of eminent domain for carbon pipeline projects.

Rep. Karla Lems, R-Canton, introduced the bill to attendees as “a building block” toward protecting property rights.

“This bill will bring legislative certainty, and constitutional certainty, to the people of South Dakota,” Lems told the crowd.

The rally — held a day before Gov. Kristi Noem’s State of the State address will kick off the 2025 legislative session — brought together landowners, property rights advocates and other critics of carbon pipeline development.

Speakers voiced frustration over Iowa-based Summit Carbon Solutions’ potential use of eminent domain to acquire land for its proposed pipeline. The \$9 billion project would capture some of the carbon dioxide emitted by 57 ethanol plants in five states, including eastern South Dakota, and transport it to an underground storage area in North Dakota. The project would capitalize on federal tax credits intended to incentivize the prevention of heat-trapping carbon emissions into the atmosphere.

Some landowners on the Summit route have refused to sign agreements, known as easements, granting access to their land. The company may seek to use eminent domain, which is a legal process to force land access in exchange for fair compensation determined by a court. The power has typically been used for projects such as electrical power lines, oil pipelines and water pipelines.

Lems said her legislation will be introduced Tuesday and would specifically target carbon pipelines.

Incoming Sen. Mark Lapka, R-Leola, will carry the bill in the state Senate, while Lems will carry the bill in the House of Representatives. Both own land that would be crossed by the pipeline.

Some other legislators had already pre-filed their own bill to ban eminent domain for carbon pipelines prior to Monday. That bill was not discussed at the rally.

Rally speakers noted that in August, the South Dakota Supreme Court ruled that Summit had not yet proven its status as a “common carrier,” a designation necessary to exercise eminent domain. The court remanded the case to a lower court for further proceedings, leaving Summit’s eminent domain eligibility unsettled.

The bill comes after years of contentious debate over carbon pipeline development. Lawmakers previously considered similar bills, but they faced resistance and failed, with opponents claiming such restrictions could stifle economic development and hurt South Dakota’s ethanol industry and the corn farmers who depend on it.

Pipeline supporters have defended the use of eminent domain, asserting the project serves the public good by increasing ethanol demand and addressing climate change.

This year, legislation banning eminent domain may receive more support. Eleven Republican legislators lost their reelection campaigns last year after supporting pipeline legislation that did not include an eminent domain ban. Republican legislators have also replaced their leadership team with lawmakers like Lems — set to serve as House speaker pro tempore — who are critical of Summit’s project.

Summit is seeking a permit from South Dakota’s Public Utilities Commission. The commission will host a

series of public input meetings Wednesday through Friday in eastern South Dakota cities near the pipeline route.

The project already has a storage permit in North Dakota and route permits in North Dakota, Iowa and Minnesota, while Nebraska has no state permitting process for carbon pipelines. The project also faces litigation from opponents in multiple states.

Joshua Haiar is a reporter based in Sioux Falls. Born and raised in Mitchell, he joined the Navy as a public affairs specialist after high school and then earned a degree from the University of South Dakota. Prior to joining South Dakota Searchlight, Joshua worked for five years as a multimedia specialist and journalist with South Dakota Public Broadcasting.

Noem seeks nominations to replace Sioux Falls-area lawmaker

BY: MAKENZIE HUBER - JANUARY 13, 2025 4:08 PM

South Dakota Gov. Kristi Noem announced Monday she's seeking nominations for a new lawmaker to represent District 6 in southeastern South Dakota, after Republican Representative-elect Herman Otten, R-Tea, announced his resignation Friday, citing "personal and family reasons" in a social media post.

Noem is currently calling for public input on nominations for the position.

District 6 includes Tea, Harrisburg and other areas surrounding the southern edge of Sioux Falls. Otten served in the House and Senate for a combined total of 12 years. He also formerly served as mayor of Tea.

"I always sought to be a voice of reason when dealing with the issues at hand and serve to the best of my ability," Otten wrote on his campaign Facebook page.

Otten was slated to serve as vice chair of the House Transportation Committee.

Noem is expected to appoint a new lawmaker during the 2025 legislative session, which begins Tuesday. Noem herself could resign sometime after Jan. 20, if the U.S. Senate confirms her as President-elect Donald Trump's secretary of Homeland Security. Lt. Gov. Larry Rhoden would become governor upon Noem's resignation.

Noem also appointed legislators last year due to the resignations of Republican Rapid City lawmakers Sen. Jessica Castleberry and Rep. Jess Olson.

Makenzie Huber is a lifelong South Dakotan who regularly reports on the intersection of politics and policy with health, education, social services and Indigenous affairs. Her work with South Dakota Searchlight earned her the title of South Dakota's Outstanding Young Journalist in 2024, and she was a 2024 finalist for the national Livingston Awards.

As Noem's school choice bill divides educators, some districts cooperate with homeschool families

BY: MAKENZIE HUBER - JANUARY 13, 2025 2:23 PM

Nearly 15% of school-age children in the Meade School District — 504 students — are enrolled in alternative instruction instead of attending a state-accredited private or public school.

Because state funding is partially based on enrollment, those children would bring roughly \$3.5 million in funding to the district if they attended a public school.

That's money that could cover staff salaries and resources, maintenance and repair of school buildings or extracurriculars, said Heath Larson, executive director of Associated School Boards of South Dakota.

Larson and other public education advocates are concerned that as more families remove their kids from traditional schools to pursue alternative instruction, school districts will continue to lose funding.

"Our state must continue to adequately fund public education," Larson said, "to ensure that our schools are able to meet the needs of all students and provide school districts the resources and support they need."

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Alternative instruction nearly tripled in South Dakota over the last decade from 3,933 students in 2014 to 11,489 — now making up about 7% of school-age children in the state. That includes online, hybrid and microschoools that are unaccredited, or accredited by an entity other than the state.

The trend accelerated in 2021 when South Dakota lawmakers deregulated alternative instruction, making it easier for parents to remove their kids from public schools and harder for public school systems to monitor alternatively instructed students.

This winter, Republican Gov. Kristi Noem wants to create education savings accounts (ESAs). The \$4 million program — part of a nationwide push to make public funds available for private school and alternative instruction — would provide about \$3,000 per student in its first year to pay for a portion of private school tuition or curriculum for alternative instruction.

Ahead of the annual legislative session, which begins Tuesday, Noem's ESA proposal is pitting public school advocates against their counterparts from private education and alternative instruction.

"I will personally fight tooth and nail to make sure that public education stands forever, if I can have my way," said Rob Monson, executive director of the School Administrators of South Dakota. "We're going to see an attack this year, I believe, on the public school institution bigger than we've ever seen."

Public school advocates worry the program will balloon and siphon money away from public schools, while primarily benefiting students who are already enrolled in private school or alternative instruction without state support.

Monson told South Dakota Searchlight that families should work with their local school boards to make the changes they hope to see.

Some school districts and alternative-instruction families have been doing that: experimenting with ways to cooperate. They've created hybrid arrangements that allow students to participate in both alternative and public education, while school districts retain some of the state funding they would lose if the students had no involvement with a public school.

Students shift between public & alternative school, study says

The conversation surrounding homeschooling growth at the state Legislature has largely been framed as an exodus from public school systems. But that isn't entirely accurate from a national perspective, said Angela Watson, director of the Homeschool Research Lab at Johns Hopkins School of Education in Maryland.

The vast majority of nontraditional students nationwide are "switchers," Watson said: children who shift between public school, alternative instruction and back again. Between 36% and 43% of students surveyed for a 2024 working paper for the University of Arkansas were homeschooled for only one to two years.

Rebecca Lundgren started a hybrid school in Dell Rapids this school year. Lundgren removed her three children from the public school system in 2019 but allowed them to choose where they go to school.

Josie, Rebecca's 15-year-old youngest child, plans to continue alternative schooling through graduation but takes some classes at the hybrid and public school. While she likes the routine of public school and spending time with friends, homeschooling allows her to learn at her own pace. She is diagnosed with ADHD, dyslexia and auditory processing disorder.

"I struggle a bit sometimes with my learning. I like learning in a classroom setting, but sometimes the noise and people become too much," Josie said.

Rebecca added that it's important to her that her family is active in Dell Rapids and supports all educational paths, not just investing in her own children's education. That, she said, ensures the best education for everyone.

"I think homeschoolers need to support public school students and I think public school needs to support homeschool," she said.

Lundgren's oldest child graduated from homeschooling in 2022. Her middle child returned to public school full-time the same year.

That "switcher" perspective "completely changes the conversation," Watson said. It's an important distinction for lawmakers, homeschool advocates and school administrators to understand for funding and policy

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decisions, including virtual schooling or re-enrollment requirements: the students who leave might return. "If we understand those kids are going to probably end up in public schools, I think including them as much as possible is probably a good move for all concerned," Watson said.

Harrisburg finds success in nontraditional 'personalized learning'

Alternative instruction advocates say their growth can spur public schools to respond with changes that improve public education. The Harrisburg School District's "personalized learning" model is an example. The district adopted the approach from a charter school in Maine.

The district uses personalized learning for most elementary students. They learn math and reading — and some other subjects — at their own pace. Students complete activities, assignments and "mastery checks" individually before advancing. If they don't master the unit, they keep working.

Teachers closely follow data from placement tests, mastery checks, assignments and activities to understand how to work best with each child, said Harrisburg Superintendent Tim Graf.

The switch benefits teachers as well, said McClain Botsford, a third grade teacher. Botsford taught in a traditional classroom in Nebraska before moving to the Harrisburg district three years ago. She said she'd "never go back," because she feels less frustration and burnout working with students individually.

Teachers also become subject matter experts because they'll teach one topic, like fractions, through second and fifth grades, rather than learning the entirety of math standards at one grade level. Students move between four second-through-fifth grade teachers in a "cohort" as they focus on mastering a subject.

The children work on assignments and watch videos on their tablets when they aren't working with teachers in small groups. Because of that, there can be less behavior issues during math and reading since children are focused and challenged, Botsford said.

Because the district is the fastest growing in the state, it has the funds to invest in different educational techniques, Graf said. Not all school districts have that luxury.

Just over 300 students, or 4.64% of the school-aged population in the Harrisburg School District, are enrolled in alternative instruction this year.

'Public education is meant to serve all children'

Sheridan Keller's children are homeschooled, but her son is enrolled in a business class at Florence High School near their town of Wallace in eastern South Dakota. Both of her sons play sports and band, one daughter participates in middle school music classes, and her youngest daughter attended kindergarten once a week last school year.

Her children are involved in the school because her superintendent clearly communicates with her about her children's needs, she said. Florence Superintendent Mitchell Reed expressed a similar sentiment.

"Public education is meant to serve all children in a district," Reed said, "not just full-time students."

School districts are required to allow alternative instruction students to participate in sports and extra-curriculars, and to enroll in classes. Those reforms were included in an alternative instruction deregulation package that lawmakers passed in 2021.

When an alternative student participates in a public school class or sport, the school district claims that student's "credit hour" and receives state funding to support the child's participation.

But the relationship between public schools and homeschool families can depend on the district, Keller said. Her daughter joined the Florence kindergarten class once per week to make friends. She attended field trips and class parties, as well as normal days in the classroom. She was also included in the kindergarten graduation program.

"Our school is very good to us," Keller said. "It's just things like that that really make a difference."

Meade experiments with online learning

Online education is growing in the alternative instruction world, said Lisa Nehring, the owner and founder of True North Home School Academy. The online school teaches roughly 600 children grades second

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through 12th nationwide on subjects including math, literature, science, foreign language and soft skills, such as career exploration.

Students typically enroll in a few courses at a time, with three classes being the most popular “bundle,” said Nehring, who lives in Parker. Science, English and foreign language are the most popular courses because they’re harder to teach at home.

“And then they’ll do co-ops or dual enrollment or the parents will teach them themselves,” Nehring said.

Thousands of students across the state use virtual learning each year through the state’s South Dakota Center for Virtual Education, whether the classes replace an unfilled teaching position within a school district, are used for student credit recovery to graduate, or make courses available that are not offered at the local school district.

Alternative instruction students can take courses, as long as they register through their public school district. The student’s request for online access can be denied, depending on the school district’s policy.

Jen Beving, a homeschooling organizer and deputy state director for Americans for Prosperity-South Dakota, advocated for mandatory online education access for alternative instruction students at the state level two years ago. Virtual schools would bridge the gap between public and alternative instruction, allowing the public school to retain some oversight of the students, she said. For example, schools can monitor students’ laptops and engagement through the program.

The Meade School District is piloting a program similar to Beving’s idea this school year.

The school district launched its Meade County Homeschool Connections program, which allows alternative instruction families to enroll their children in kindergarten through eighth grade online classes on a part-time or full-time basis.]

A facilitator coordinates the program to connect with families who partially enroll their children for in-person classes. The district purchased an online teaching program, Acellus, to teach the courses. It mixes self-paced videos and interactive components.

“If a kid is struggling with a component, the program will recognize that and backfill with additional support and content,” said Whitewood Elementary Principal Brit Porterfield, who’s closely involved with the Connections program. “It identifies skills they’re struggling with and provides more material and targeted lessons as a way to improve mastery. It caters itself to students’ needs.”

The program — including the facilitator and technology — costs about \$106,000 a year, said Superintendent Wayne Wormstadt. It’s capped at the equivalent of 30 fully enrolled students, and will not accept children outside of the Meade School District. Increasing the school’s student enrollment by 30 allows for about \$200,000 in state funding, Wormstadt said.

As of the beginning of the school year, 20 students were enrolled. Most students are enrolled in reading and math classes.

The pilot program will run for two years before being reviewed.

“Whether the student is in public all school years or homeschooling, these children are going to be the future leaders in our community,” Wormstadt said, “so I feel this pilot is an important part of what we should be doing not just inside our school building walls but inside the school district as a whole.”

Makenzie Huber is a lifelong South Dakotan who regularly reports on the intersection of politics and policy with health, education, social services and Indigenous affairs. Her work with South Dakota Searchlight earned her the title of South Dakota’s Outstanding Young Journalist in 2024, and she was a 2024 finalist for the national Livingston Awards.

U.S. Senate postpones hearing on former ND Gov. Burgum's nomination

Noem's Homeland Security nomination up for review Wednesday

BY: JENNIFER SHUTT - JANUARY 13, 2025 1:40 PM

WASHINGTON — Utah Sen. Mike Lee announced Monday he had postponed the confirmation hearing for two days for President-elect Donald Trump's pick to lead the Interior Department.

Lee, chairman of the Energy and Natural Resources Committee, delayed former North Dakota Gov. Doug Burgum's hearing, which had been scheduled for Tuesday, until Thursday.

"Governor Doug Burgum has been fully cooperative throughout the confirmation process, promptly submitting his paperwork to the Office of Government Ethics," Lee wrote in a statement. "Despite his compliance and the Energy and Natural Resources Committee noticing the hearing in accordance with all rules, OGE has yet to complete its review. This bureaucratic delay is unacceptable."

Lee wrote the extra 48 hours was meant to give the Office of Government Ethics a bit more time to wrap up its work, but cautioned the agency should work quickly.

"To ensure transparency and uphold the integrity of this process, the committee will postpone Governor Burgum's hearing until Thursday," Lee wrote. "However, we expect OGE to act with urgency and complete its review without further unnecessary delays. The American people deserve a government that operates efficiently to advance their priorities, and we remain committed to ensuring these critical confirmations move forward as quickly as possible."

Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer, a New York Democrat, and Energy and Natural Resources Committee ranking member Martin Heinrich, D-N.M., both raised concerns last week about Burgum's hearing taking place before certain paperwork was filed with the committee.

"The Senate has a constitutional duty to advise and, if it determines, consent to the President's nominees. This requires careful consideration of each nominee," Heinrich wrote in a statement released last week. "To achieve this, for decades, nominees that have come before the ENR Committee have submitted responses to a standard questionnaire and a completed financial disclosure form, approval from the Department's ethics office, and completion of an FBI background check. Until these steps have been completed, I will not consent to notice of nomination hearings."

"Every nominee, every party, every administration should be subject to the same standards. I would urge Chairman Lee to reconsider his decision."

Heinrich and seven other Democrats on the committee and one independent released a letter Monday morning, urging Lee to delay the hearing until the panel received "the standard financial disclosure report, ethics agreement, or the opinions from the designated agency ethics officer and the Office of Government Ethics stating that the nominee is in compliance with the ethics laws."

"In view of the fact that the Committee still does not have these documents, which are essential for us to faithfully discharge our constitutional advice-and-consent responsibilities, we respectfully request that you postpone the scheduled hearing on Governor Burgum's nomination for at least a week to give Members sufficient time to receive and review these materials," the lawmakers wrote.

Those lawmakers included Maria Cantwell, D-Wash., Catherine Cortez Masto, D-Nev., Ruben Gallego, D-Ariz., John Hickenlooper, D-Colo., Mazie Hirono, D-Hawaii, Angus King, a Maine independent, Alex Padilla, D-Calif. and Ron Wyden, D-Ore.

The Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee, led by Kansas Republican Sen. Jerry Moran, later on Monday postponed its Tuesday hearing for Trump's pick to lead the VA, citing an uncompleted background check.

"Congressman Doug Collins has submitted all his paperwork in a timely manner and has been transparent and forthcoming with the committee," Moran wrote in a statement. "At this time, the FBI has not completed its customary background check of Congressman Collins. In accordance with long-standing practice, the committee should have an opportunity to review Congressman Collins' FBI file before the confirmation hearing. I expect the FBI to complete its review quickly so that the committee can move forward with its role of evaluating the President's nominee."

Trump announced in November that he had selected the former Georgia congressman to lead the VA. *Jennifer covers the nation's capital as a senior reporter for States Newsroom. Her coverage areas include congressional policy, politics and legal challenges with a focus on health care, unemployment, housing and aid to families.*

Noem's proposed Social Services, Human Services cuts worry some lawmakers, health advocates

BY: MAKENZIE HUBER - JANUARY 13, 2025 9:31 AM

Gov. Kristi Noem's proposed cuts to the state's Social Services and Human Services departments need scrutiny to make sure they don't endanger the budget and don't undermine Medicaid expansion or other programs for South Dakotans in need, some lawmakers and health advocates said.

Noem wants to adjust parts of the departments' budgets downward by a combined \$42 million for the current fiscal year, and also wants to reduce their combined budgets for the next fiscal year by \$38 million compared to the budget adopted last winter.

"We'll right-size funding for programs in the Department of Social Services and Department of Human Services to match utilization," Noem said in her Dec. 3 budget address. "These programs had been reverting money at the end of the fiscal year over the last several years."

Over the last two years, the Department of Social Services gave a combined \$77 million back to state coffers, primarily due to less-than-anticipated caseloads and utilization of departmental programs, according to the state Bureau of Finance and Management year-end summaries. The state Department of Human Services gave back a combined \$30.2 million, primarily within long-term services, which includes programs focused on home services, nursing homes and assisted living for older adults and adults with disabilities.

Economic volatility caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, federal protections during the pandemic that temporarily protected people from losing Medicaid coverage, and voter approval of Medicaid expansion made budget forecasts difficult and may have contributed to the large reversions during the last two years, said Rep. Tony Venhuizen, R-Sioux Falls, who serves on the Legislature's budget committee.

Lawmakers will begin considering Noem's budget proposals when they convene Tuesday for their annual legislative session at the Capitol in Pierre.

Medicaid expansion cuts scrutinized

Beyond the overall cuts, Noem is proposing additional, specific reductions in some of the two departments' programs, including a combined \$25 million reduction for current fiscal-year Medicaid enrollments. Medicaid is a joint federal-state health insurance program for low-income adults, children, pregnant women, elderly adults and people with disabilities.

South Dakota voters approved expanded income eligibility for Medicaid in 2022. The Department of Social Services planned and staffed for 57,000 expansion enrollees, but enrollment has been slower than projected. Noem's budget for the next fiscal year predicts expansion enrollment to reach 32,296. She's proposing the elimination of 27 state positions due to that slow pace.

That concerns Ben Hanson, North and South Dakota government relations director the American Cancer Society Cancer Action Network

"I think it'd be shortsighted to make those cuts right now," Hanson said. "I think they need to give it a little bit more time to continue."

Less-than-anticipated enrollment so far could be due to "lack of awareness," according to Hanson. He said the state has done little to no advertising about Medicaid expansion, instead relying on hospitals or advocacy organizations to connect patients. The state Department of Social Services has also received criticism from some lawmakers about a lack of outreach and advertising.

The Community HealthCare Association of the Dakotas works to guide potential enrollees through the process, in addition to its advocacy and policy work. Shelly Ten Napel, the association's CEO, said "it would

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be a great thing" for the state to invest in an enrollment marketing campaign — especially targeted at young adults. One of the most uninsured demographics in South Dakota and the nation are adults aged 19-26.

But Ten Napel is withholding judgment on Noem's proposed cuts. With today's technology, Medicaid departments may not need as many employees to enroll patients as they once did, Ten Napel said.

She'd like to see the Department of Social Services work toward proactive enrollment steps: simplifying the application, automatically enrolling eligible South Dakotans if they use other income-based programs, and using continuous eligibility for patients, which allows Medicaid recipients to stay enrolled for a set amount of time even if their income changes.

"We want a larger conversation about how to make this process more efficient for the state and easier for consumers," Ten Napel said.

The department has indicated it hopes to connect eligible patients when they seek other help from the department. Over two-thirds of South Dakotans eligible for expanded Medicaid are also eligible for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, known as SNAP. The department launched its online enrollment portal, meant to make it easier to apply for programs, last spring.

Legislators debate spending

Despite the slow expansion enrollment, the state's share of Medicaid expenses is growing. That's due to expiring federal bonus payments awarded for the eligibility expansion, and due to a federal formula that raises the state's share of costs in accordance with increases in the state's per capita income. Noem said her proposed budget includes about \$60 million in mandatory ongoing spending increases for the state's share of Medicaid.

Venhuizen wants to make sure Noem's proposed cuts don't underestimate Medicaid costs.

The state typically estimates the costs "very conservatively," leading to reversions and surpluses most years, he said. If Noem estimates too aggressively, it could land the departments in a deficit.

"You want to have a surplus. You want to have a reversion," Venhuizen said. "In a perfect world, we would end right on the money. But that's not possible, so the next best thing is to be conservative and end up in the black."

Venhuizen also plans to propose a state constitutional amendment this year alongside Sen. Casey Crabtree, R-Madison, that would allow the Legislature to eliminate Medicaid expansion if the federal government ever reneges on its promise to cover 90% of the expansion costs.

If the Legislature approves the amendment, it would go to voters in 2026. Voters already approved a Venhuizen-backed amendment last year that will allow legislators to consider imposing work requirements on Medicaid expansion enrollees.

Sioux Falls Democratic Rep. Linda Duba, whose service will end this month because she did not seek reelection, said it's "irresponsible" to cut funding for social and human services while proposing new spending in other areas.

Noem's new spending proposals include \$4 million to create education savings accounts that would provide public funds for private school tuition or other alternative instruction costs, and \$182 million to continue saving money for the replacement of the aging penitentiary in Sioux Falls with a new prison south of the city.

"You want to grow government over here but you want to cut it over here," Duba said.

Venhuizen said the cuts proposed by Noem essentially reallocate money back into Medicaid to cover the state's rising costs.

"Every dollar you spend, you have to find a dollar somewhere else," he said.

Other notable social and human services cuts proposed

In addition to utilization and Medicaid cuts, Noem proposed other notable cuts to the state Social Services and Human Services departments, including:

TANF: Noem proposed cutting the state's spending for Temporary Aid for Needy Families (TANF) by \$5.3

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million. The program in South Dakota is most commonly used to provide financial benefits to low-income families with the stipulation that they search or train for a job.

Lawmakers allocated \$12 million toward the program last fiscal year, which is more than the minimum federal match needed to continue the program. Duba suspects Noem plans to pull money from the state's carryover TANF balance, which currently holds \$23 million of unused TANF funds, while funding the program at the minimum of \$8.54 million to receive a federal match. If money is taken from unused TANF funding, Duba hopes it could go toward other programs "in dire need," such as assistance for victims of crime.

Indigent medication program: Noem proposed eliminating the indigent medication program, which financially supports South Dakotans to treat mental illness and substance use disorders who don't have any means to pay for it. The program cost increased from about \$500,000 in 2015 to \$1 million in 2024, despite serving roughly the same number of people — about 1,360 a year, according to a records request from the Department of Social Services.

Pam VanMeeteren, a nurse practitioner with the Lewis and Clark Behavioral Health Services in Yankton, said the program provides up to two months of medication for an individual during which the patient works to establish another payment source, such as Medicaid. The clinic doesn't use the program often, but its elimination could be a concern "in some cases," she added.

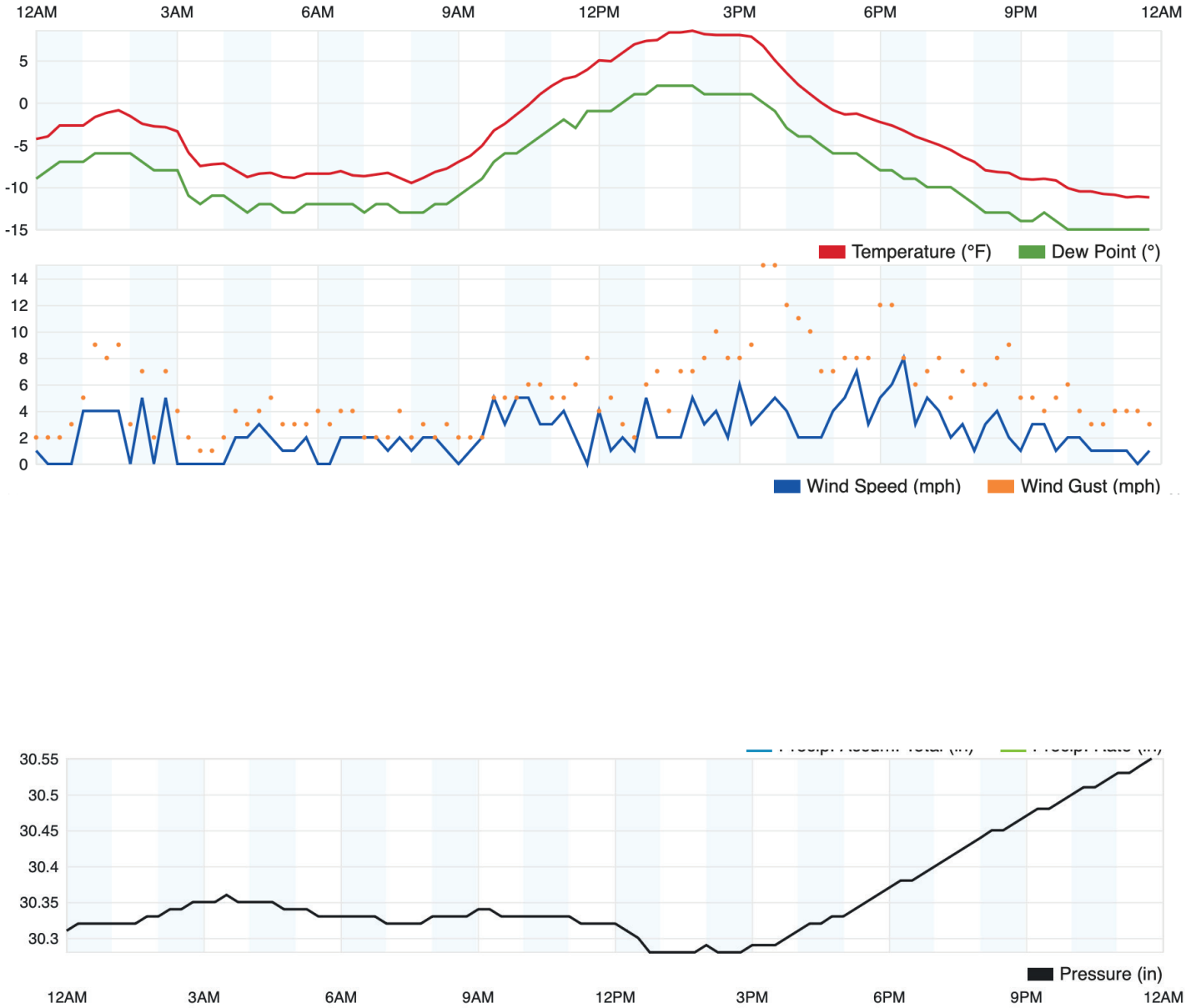
"I think there's always some immediacy to get someone back on their psychiatrist medication," VanMeeteren said. "To wait two to three weeks to get an application in for another program to cover the cost or get something transferred over, we may miss our window."

Makenzie Huber is a lifelong South Dakotan who regularly reports on the intersection of politics and policy with health, education, social services and Indigenous affairs. Her work with South Dakota Searchlight earned her the title of South Dakota's Outstanding Young Journalist in 2024, and she was a 2024 finalist for the national Livingston Awards.

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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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Today



High: 7 °F

Cold

Tonight



Low: -2 °F

Partly Cloudy

Wednesday



High: 35 °F

Partly Sunny

Wednesday
Night



Low: 20 °F

Mostly Clear

Thursday



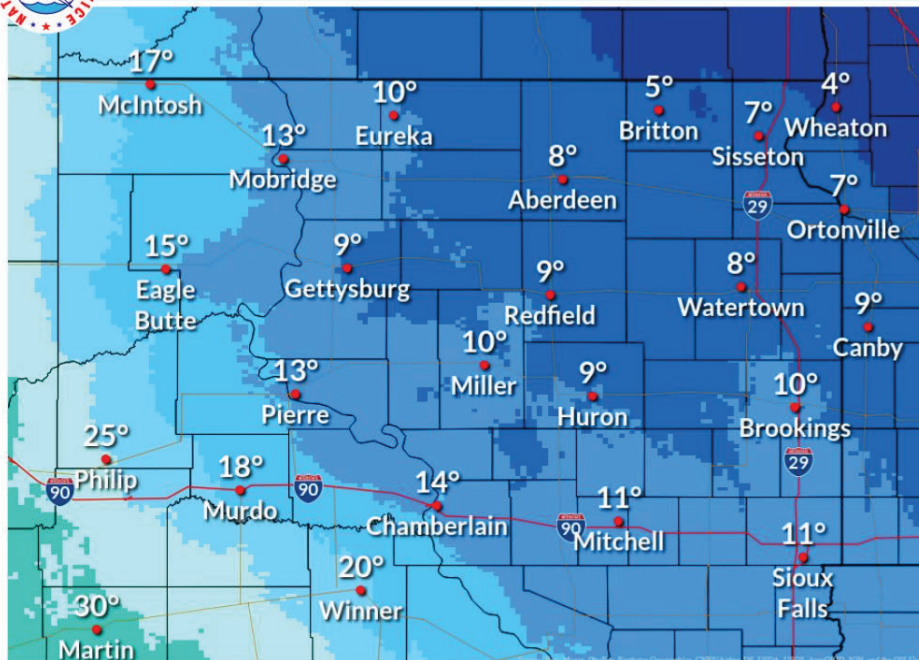
High: 36 °F

Mostly Sunny



High Temperatures Today

January 14, 2025
3:22 AM



Key Messages Regarding Forecast Temperature Trends

- Mostly dry for next several days
- Milder temperatures mid-week through Friday
 - 10 to 25 degrees above normal
- Arctic air returns late Friday & persist well into next week
 - 15 to 30 degrees below normal



National Weather Service
Aberdeen, SD

It will be a struggle to warm much today, but milder weather is due for Wednesday with highs above freezing. That mild air remains into Friday before a cold front blows through, with temperatures falling some 40 to 50 degrees over the weekend.

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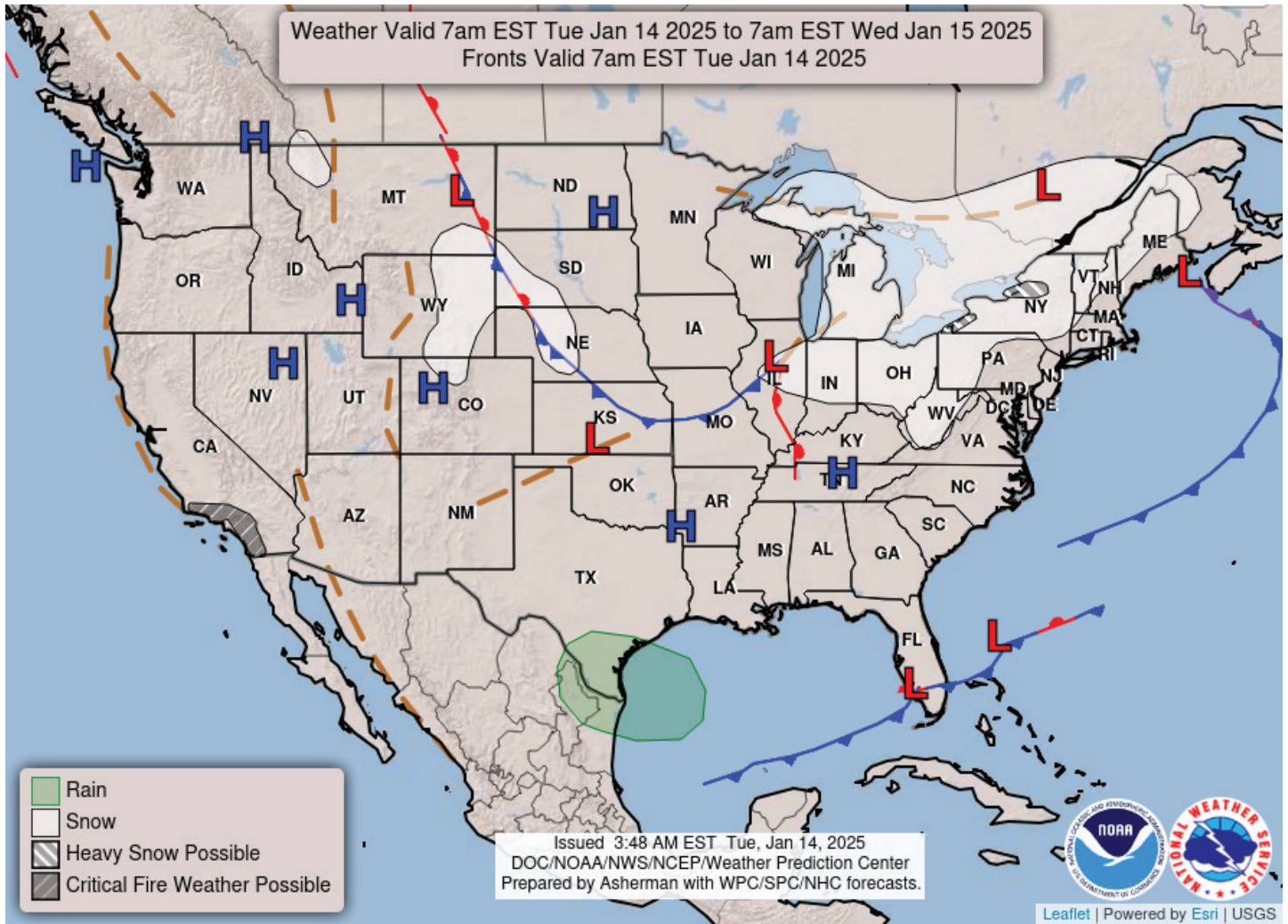
Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 9 °F at 1:50 PM
Low Temp: -11 °F at 11:08 PM
Wind: 15 mph at 3:26 PM
Precip: : 0.00

Day length: 9 hours, 9 minutes

Today's Info

Record High: 50 in 1901
Record Low: -36 in 1916
Average High: 23
Average Low: 2
Average Precip in Jan.: 0.28
Precip to date in Jan.: 0.00
Average Precip to date: 0.28
Precip Year to Date: 21.71
Sunset Tonight: 5:16:20 pm
Sunrise Tomorrow: 8:06:20 am



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Today in Weather History

January 14, 1916: Record cold continued on this date in weather history in 1916 across central and north-east South Dakota and west-central Minnesota. Aberdeen, Kennebec, Mobridge, Timber Lake, Watertown, and Wheaton all set record lows. The record lows were 24 degrees below zero at Kennebec, 28 degrees below zero at Wheaton, 31 degrees below zero at Timber Lake, 35 degrees below zero at Mobridge, 36 degrees below zero at Aberdeen, and 38 degrees below zero at Watertown.

1863 - The greatest snowstorm of record for Cincinnati OH commenced, and a day later twenty inches of snow covered the ground. That total has remained far above the modern day record for Cincinnati of eleven inches of snow in one storm. (David Ludlum)

1882: Snow fell in southern California, with the highest amount of 15 inches at San Bernardino. Three feet of snow fell in Campo over four days and produced 8-foot drifts in spots. Two to five inches fell in outlying San Diego, including four inches along Poway Grade, 3 inches at El Cajon, and one inch in Poway. Five inches fell in Riverside. Light snow fell in Del Mar. Snowflakes fell but did not stick at San Diego Lindbergh Field. Birds and livestock were killed, telegraph lines were knocked down, and citrus crops were damaged.

1972: In Loma, Montana, the temperature soared from 54 degrees below zero to 49 degrees above zero on January 14-15, 1972. The 103-degree change is the greatest ever recorded in the world for a 24 hour period.

1979 - Chicago, IL, was in the midst of their second heaviest snow of record as, in thirty hours, the city was buried under 20.7 inches of snow. The twenty-nine inch snow cover following the storm was an all-time record for Chicago. (David Ludlum)

1987 - Arctic cold invaded the north central U.S. By evening blustery northwest winds and temperatures near zero at Grand Forks ND were producing wind chill readings of 50 degrees below zero. (National Weather Summary)

1988 - A powerful Pacific storm produced rain and high winds in the western U.S. In Nevada, a wind gust to 90 mph at Reno was an all-time record for that location, and wind gusts reached 106 mph southwest of Reno. A wind gust to 94 mph was recorded at nearby Windy Hill. Rainfall totals in Oregon ranged up to six inches at Wilson River. (National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1989 - A winter storm spread snow and sleet and freezing rain from the Middle Mississippi Valley to the northeastern U.S. Freezing rain in West Virginia caused fifteen traffic accidents in just a few minutes west of Charleston. Tennessee was deluged with up to 7.5 inches of rain. Two inches of rain near Clarksville TN left water in the streets as high as car doors.

1990 - A winter storm in the southwestern U.S. blanketed the mountains of southwest Utah with 18 to 24 inches of snow, while sunshine and strong southerly winds helped temperatures warm into the 60s in the Central Plains Region. Five cities reported record high temperatures for the date, including North Platte NE with a reading of 63 degrees. (National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

2009: In Washington State, freezing fog and freezing drizzle enveloped much of the Inland Northwest during 13-23 January 2009. The area most affected by this was the high plateau region along Highway 2 between Wenatchee and Spo

2016: Hurricane Alex became the first January hurricane in the Atlantic since Hurricane Alice in 1955.



"IF ONLY" PEOPLE

A psychiatrist was deeply troubled by the sadness of one of his dear friends. Curiously he asked, "What's troubling you?"

After some time he responded, "I've been reviewing the 'If only's' of my life. I've made so many mistakes."

Wanting to help he said, "Let's go to my office. I have some recordings I want you to hear."

Sitting quietly he played a tape containing the stories of three very depressed patients. After a moment he asked, "Did you notice that each one kept repeating, 'if only?'" The "if only's" bring about a sense of hopelessness and helplessness, depression and discouragement. All of us must learn to say, "Next time I'll do things differently. I'll seek God's will and ask for His wisdom and guidance before I make a decision."

James said, "If you need wisdom – if you want to know what God wants you to do – ask Him and He will gladly tell you!" Wisdom in the Bible means "practical insight or guidance" that will lead the Christian to right living and eliminate the "if only's" of life.

Prayer: Father, may we look to You for guidance before we make decisions or plans or try to solve problems. May we seek Your guidance at all times. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: If you need wisdom, ask our generous God, and he will give it to you. He will not rebuke you for asking. James 1:5

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

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WINNING NUMBERS

MEGA MILLIONS

WINNING NUMBERS: 01.10.25

9 23 39 65 66 22

MegaPlier: 3x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$95,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 17 Hrs 20 Mins 58 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LOTTO AMERICA

WINNING NUMBERS: 01.13.25

5 11 37 49 50 4

All Star Bonus: 3x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$21,730,000

NEXT DRAW: 1 Days 16 Hrs 35 Mins 58 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LUCKY FOR LIFE

WINNING NUMBERS: 01.13.25

13 17 35 41 44 5

TOP PRIZE:

\$7,000/week

NEXT DRAW: 16 Hrs 50 Mins 57 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

DAKOTA CASH

WINNING NUMBERS: 01.11.25

4 6 7 16 23

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$20,000

NEXT DRAW: 1 Days 16 Hrs 50 Mins 57 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

DOUBLE PLAY

WINNING NUMBERS: 01.13.25

29 30 32 37 56 18

TOP PRIZE:

\$10,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 1 Days 17 Hrs 19 Mins 58 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

WINNING NUMBERS: 01.13.25

4 6 16 39 66 9

Power Play: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$303,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 1 Days 17 Hrs 19 Mins 58 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

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Upcoming Groton Events

- 01/05/2025 Pancake Sunday, Historical Society Fundraiser, 10am-1pm, Community Center
- 01/26/2025 Groton Robotics Pancake Feed at the Community Center 10am-1pm
- 01/26/2025 87th Carnival of Silver Skates 2pm & 6:30pm
- 02/02/2025 Pancake Sunday, Historical Society Fundraiser, 10am-1pm, Community Center
- 02/05/2025 FB Live Electronic Hwy 12 Sign Drawing City Hall 12pm
- 03/02/2025 Pancake Sunday, Historical Society Fundraiser, 10am-1pm, Community Center
- 03/22/2025 Spring Vendor Fair at the GHS Gym 10am-2pm
- 04/05/2025 Dueling Duo Baseball/Softball Fundraiser at the Legion Post #39, 6-11:30pm
- 04/06/2025 Pancake Sunday, Historical Society Fundraiser, 10am-1pm, Community Center
- 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
- 06/07/2025 Day of Play
- 07/04/2025 Firecracker Couples Tourney at Olive Grove Golf Course
- 07/13/2025 Lion's Club Summer Fest/Car Show at the City Park 9am-4pm
- 07/09/2025 Legion Auxiliary #39 Salad Buffet & Dessert Bar at the Groton Legion 11am-1pm
- 08/09/2025 2nd Annual Celebration in the Park/Rib Cook-Off 1-9:30pm
- 09/06/2025 Lion's Club Fall Citywide Rummage Sale 8am-3pm
- 10/31/2025 Downtown Trick or Treat 4-6pm
- 11/27/2025 Community Thanksgiving at the Community Center 11:30am-1:30pm

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News from the **AP** Associated Press

Monday's Scores

The Associated Press

GIRLS PREP BASKETBALL

De Smet 59, Iroquois-Lake Preston 31
Dell Rapids St Mary 70, Elkton-Lake Benton 20
Langford 60, Hankinson, N.D. 29
Marty 84, Wakpala 42
McLaughlin 70, Cheyenne-Eagle Butte 42
Timber Lake 52, Bison 17
Tri-Valley 70, Baltic 12
Wall 39, Chamberlain 18

BOYS PREP BASKETBALL

Colman-Egan 58, Bridgewater-Emery 54
Herreid-Selby 56, South Border, N.D. 37
Lemmon High School 42, Glen Ullin, N.D. 36
Marty 58, Wakpala 57
Wall 67, Chamberlain 35

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

The Freedom Caucus takes over the Wyoming House, marking its first chance to lead

By MEAD GRUVER and DAVID A. LIEB Associated Press

CHEYENNE, Wyo. (AP) — As President-elect Donald Trump plans bold moves for his first days in office, so too are conservative lawmakers in Wyoming, the first state where Trump-friendly Freedom Caucus members have won control of a statehouse chamber.

It will mark a big test for the Freedom Caucus movement, which has spread from Washington to a dozen state capitols during the past decade, including to Missouri and Oklahoma last year. The conservative network is adding a 13th chapter Tuesday in Democratic-led Maryland.

When Wyoming's legislative session starts Tuesday, the Freedom Caucus majority in the House will start the clock on an aggressive agenda to pass five priority bills in 10 days targeting immigrants who are in the U.S. illegally, dismantling diversity initiatives, prohibiting state investments that prioritize green energy over fossil fuels, and cutting property taxes.

"What we are here to do is get the job done. The people have clearly given us a mandate," incoming House Speaker Chip Neiman said.

So far, the Freedom Caucus has existed largely as an opposition faction to more moderate or mainstream Republicans in charge of legislative chambers. But now, its members will get a chance to lead.

"Wyoming is, I think, a Poli Sci 101 case study," said Andrew Roth, president of the State Freedom Caucus Network, who's hopeful that success in the Cowboy State can be replicated elsewhere. "If conservatives enact policies that they said they would on the campaign trail, it's infectious with voters, and the voters will continue to reward them."

Though not a majority, the Freedom Caucus significantly expanded its ranks last year in Louisiana and joined with new GOP Gov. Jeff Landry to enact a sweeping conservative agenda that included stronger gun rights, the display of the Ten Commandments in public classrooms, and the authority for police to

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arrest migrants who enter the U.S. illegally. Neither of the latter two laws are currently being carried out as legal challenges continue.

Wyoming, the nation's least-populated state, has long trended Republican. Growing GOP dominance in recent years has made Democrats downright hard to find in some places, so divisions instead have become significant within Wyoming's GOP. That fault line could start deepening as the Freedom Caucus in the House contends with Wyoming's more traditionally Republican state Senate and Gov. Mark Gordon, whom Trump criticized in 2023 as "a very liberal guy."

Gordon, who vetoed a Freedom Caucus-backed bill to cut property taxes last year, said he remains open to cooperation.

"There are a lot of issues we see eye to eye on," Gordon said. "It will be interesting to see the bills that they bring forward."

A Washington movement into the states

The Freedom Caucus has been active in the U.S. House since 2015, gaining widespread attention when some of its members helped topple former House Speaker Kevin McCarthy during the last session of Congress.

An outgrowth of the group, the State Freedom Caucus Network, launched in 2021 in Georgia and has been spreading to other states since then. It has about 175 members this year — up more than a quarter since the 2024 elections, Roth said.

The Freedom Caucus nearly doubled its ranks in South Dakota after last year's elections and now counts the House leaders — though not members — as allies who "see things in a very similar light as far as legislation goes," said Rep. Aaron Aylward, vice chairman of the state's Freedom Caucus chapter.

In Wyoming, the list of incumbents ousted by Freedom Caucus-endorsed candidates included House Speaker Albert Sommers, who was attempting to move up to the Senate, and House Speaker Pro Tem Clark Stith.

Though they suffered some losses, candidates aligned with Freedom Caucus also toppled prominent Republicans elsewhere, including South Carolina's assistant House majority leader.

Caucus members often portray themselves as the Republican Party's true conservatives, sometimes pressing colleagues into uncomfortable votes on amendments and blocking or slowing debate to make a point. As a result, they tend to clash with Republican legislative leaders.

Freedom Caucus members in Missouri and South Carolina recently made longshot bids to win House speaker elections. But both were soundly defeated.

Five and Dime Plan

In a bit of sloganeering rare for Wyoming, the state Freedom Caucus chapter is billing its five-issue, 10-day agenda as the "Five and Dime Plan." It's seeking to move at an unusually quick pace, even for a legislature that meets for just two months this year.

At the top of its list are two immigration-related measures. One would require voters to prove their Wyoming and U.S. citizenship; the other would invalidate driver's licenses issued by other states to Wyoming residents living in the country illegally.

Other prongs of the plan would target diversity requirements at colleges and universities, prohibit environmental and social factors from being taken into consideration in state investments and slash residential property taxes by 25%.

The Freedom Caucus says its polling shows strong support for its plan.

The agenda is "probably the most responsive we've seen government in decades in Wyoming," said Freedom Caucus member Rep. John Bear.

Gordon is skeptical the Freedom Caucus has as much support as it claims, pointing to low turnout in last year's Republican primary that chose many of the Legislature's new Freedom Caucus members.

"We didn't hear from a very large portion of the state," Gordon said. "But here they are, and I look forward to seeing what they can accomplish."

This is what the Homeland Security secretary has to say about his border record

By REBECCA SANTANA Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — In the waning days of the Biden administration, Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas defended his agency's work to tamp down border-crossing numbers and argued against breaking apart the sprawling department in a wide-ranging interview with The Associated Press.

President-elect Donald Trump, who promised an aggressive Day 1 effort to stop illegal immigration and remove people in the country illegally, has chosen South Dakota Gov. Kristi Noem to take over the agency responsible for border and airport security, disaster response, protections for high-level dignitaries and more. She faces a confirmation hearing Wednesday.

As he prepares to leave office, Mayorkas said he has spoken repeatedly to Noem, including about the Jan. 1 truck attack in New Orleans and the wildfires in California, calling the conversations "meaningful, very productive, very positive."

Here are some takeaways from AP's interview with Mayorkas:

How border numbers have changed

The number of people crossing the border illegally initially skyrocketed under President Joe Biden before falling sharply last year. December was the sixth straight month that arrests for illegal crossings were fewer than the monthly average in 2019.

Republican critics pointed to the rising numbers to argue that the Biden administration wasn't doing enough to control the border, and many voters agreed this November.

Mayorkas argued the increase actually started toward the end of the first Trump presidency but then the COVID-19 pandemic suppressed migration. The U.S. climbed out of the pandemic faster than other countries in the hemisphere, and the numbers increased, he said.

Mayorkas said people are on the move worldwide, not just heading toward the U.S.

"The level of displacement is now greater than it ever has been since World War II," he said. "And that is a phenomenon that is experienced internationally."

Mayorkas praised what the Biden administration has done to address the rising numbers, including creating safe mobility offices in other parts of the world and negotiating agreements with other countries to return their citizens.

"It's a multipronged, multifaceted approach," he said.

Facing criticism over border security and policies

Mayorkas became a lightning rod for criticism about border security and was impeached in early 2024 by Republicans who argued that he wasn't upholding immigration laws. At the time, Mayorkas called those charges politically motivated and baseless.

He said it's important to remember the context when the Biden administration came into office. Title 42 — the pandemic-era rule allowing officials to quickly eject migrants without letting them request asylum — was still in place. Biden eventually ended the policy, although, Mayorkas said, huge pressure existed to keep it over concern that immigration numbers would climb.

The secretary said the department had to build the capacity to do things like beef up the number of expedited removals and pointed to a lack of funding from Congress.

"We turned to Congress and requested supplemental funding. We didn't succeed," Mayorkas said. "We actually struck a bipartisan Senate deal that would have been an enduring solution to the border. ... It was politically torpedoed."

On the other end of the political spectrum, some immigration advocates have been disappointed by the Biden administration, pointing to asylum restrictions put in place when the southern border is overwhelmed and other policies.

Mayorkas pushed back, pointing to examples like the rebuilt refugee program, which Trump put on life support his first term.

"I couldn't disagree more vigorously. I just fundamentally disagree," Mayorkas said. "Do they understand

the reality of the number of encounters that we experienced at the border and how unacceptable that is from a border security perspective?"

On Trump's threats of 'mass deportations'

One of Trump's key campaign promises is to carry out mass deportations of migrants in the country illegally.

Mayorkas said he wouldn't "judge intended actions by headlines," although he noted that headlines can "instill fear."

But he said promises by the Trump administration to prioritize enforcing removals of migrants who are national security or public safety threats was what DHS was already doing.

"That is exactly what we have done and what we have focused upon," Mayorkas said.

The secretary noted Trump's support for the H-1B visa program, "the high skilled labor pathway with which I agree."

And he said Trump's comments about finding a solution for immigrants brought to the country as children by their parents "gives one hope that perhaps legislative reform providing status to them is potentially foreseeable."

Breaking up the Department of Homeland Security

DHS was born in the wake of the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks, with the aim of creating an agency responsible for defending the homeland and preventing acts of terrorism.

Twenty-two agencies were thrown together, and it's now the third-largest federal department with 260,000 staffers.

Critics question whether DHS has truly gelled. Project 2025, the policy blueprint by the Heritage Foundation that lays out a conservative vision for American government and society, calls for breaking up the department.

Mayorkas said that wouldn't be good for homeland security.

"The challenges that the homeland faces have also become more complex, more dynamic and involve multiple elements of our department," he said. "And I think this department is more fit for purpose now than it ever has been before. And I think that it is working more cohesively than it ever has been before."

Boosting morale

Mayorkas noted the work to help employees during his tenure, such as pay raises for frontline officers at the Transportation Security Administration and steps to improve mental health.

DHS has perennially been at the bottom of a job satisfaction survey carried out yearly of all federal agencies. But this year, Mayorkas noted, it received an award for climbing up the rankings.

"This year we climbed even higher, and that is the product of hard work," he said.

The threats facing America

Mayorkas listed a litany of threats facing America: domestic extremists; "adverse nation states," including China, Iran, North Korea and Russia; extreme weather events; cybercriminals; and more.

Asked which the next administration should be most concerned with, he said: "I think they need to focus on all of the above."

Top aide of impeached South Korean president pleads for investigators to halt detention efforts

By KIM TONG-HYUNG Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea (AP) — The top aide of impeached South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol pleaded with law enforcement agencies on Tuesday to abandon their efforts to detain him over his imposition of martial law last month, as authorities prepared a second attempt to take him into custody.

Presidential Chief of Staff Chung Jin-suk said Yoon could instead be questioned at a "third site" or at his residence and said the anti-corruption agency and police were trying to drag him out like he was a member of a "South American drug cartel."

However, Yoon Kab-keun, one of the president's lawyers, said Chung issued the message without consult-

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ing them and that the legal team has no immediate plan to make the president available for questioning by investigators.

Yoon Suk Yeol has not left his official residence in Seoul for weeks, and the presidential security service prevented dozens of investigators from detaining him after a nearly six-hour standoff on Jan. 3.

The Corruption Investigation Office for High-Ranking Officials and police pledged more forceful measures to detain Yoon while they jointly investigate whether his brief martial law declaration on Dec. 3 amounted to an attempted rebellion.

The National Police Agency has convened multiple meetings of field commanders in Seoul and nearby Gyeonggi province in recent days to plan their detainment efforts, and the size of those forces fueled speculation that more than a thousand officers could be deployed in a possible multiday operation. The agency and police have openly warned that presidential bodyguards obstructing the execution of the warrant could be arrested.

The anti-corruption agency and police haven't confirmed when they might return to the presidential residence, which has been fortified with barbed wire and rows of vehicles blocking entry paths. But Chung said he understood "D-day" to be Wednesday, without specifying the information he had.

Anti-corruption agency and police officials met with representatives of the presidential security service on Tuesday morning for unspecified discussions regarding efforts to execute the detention warrant for Yoon, the agency said. It wasn't immediately clear whether any kind of compromise was reached.

Yoon declared martial law and deployed troops around the National Assembly on Dec. 3. It lasted only hours before lawmakers managed to get through the blockade and voted to lift the measure.

His presidential powers were suspended when the opposition-dominated assembly voted to impeach him on Dec. 14, accusing him of rebellion. His fate now rests with the Constitutional Court, which has begun deliberating on whether to formally remove Yoon from office or reject the charges and reinstate him.

The Constitutional Court held its first formal hearing in the case on Tuesday. The session lasted less than five minutes because Yoon refused to attend, choosing to remain at his official residence while the detention warrant for him is active. The next hearing is set for Thursday, and the court will then proceed with the trial whether or not Yoon attends.

The country's acting leader, Deputy Prime Minister Choi Sang-mok, raised concerns on Monday about potential clashes between authorities and the presidential security service, which, despite a court warrant for Yoon's detention, has insisted it's obligated to protect the impeached president.

The anti-corruption agency and police have "completed preparations for a siege," Chung said.

"They are ready to tear down the walls at any moment and handcuff President Yoon Suk Yeol, who remains isolated in his residence in Hannam-dong, and forcibly remove him," he added, accusing investigators of trying to humiliate the president.

"Thousands of citizens are staying up through the night in front of the presidential residence, vowing to protect the president. If a conflict were to break out between the police and citizens, an unimaginable tragedy could occur."

Over the past two weeks, thousands of anti-Yoon and pro-Yoon protesters have gathered daily in competing rallies near Yoon's office in Seoul, anticipating another detention attempt. Yoon's lawyers have claimed that images of him being dragged out in handcuffs could trigger a huge backlash from his supporters and spark a "civil war" in a country deeply divided over ideological and generational lines.

In preventing Yoon's detention on Jan. 3, presidential bodyguards were assisted by troops assigned to guard the presidential residence under the command of the presidential security service. However, Defense Ministry spokesperson Lee Kyung-ho stated on Tuesday that the troops will no longer participate in efforts to block the execution of Yoon's detention warrant and will focus solely on guarding the compound's perimeter.

Ukraine holds first soccer tournament for war-wounded amputees — and plans to go international

By SAMYA KULLAB and ALEX BABENKO Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — The players were chosen from among the thousands of Ukrainians wounded in the war. With limbs lost to Russian attacks, they gathered at a stadium in Kyiv over the weekend, ready to embark on a new contest: a soccer tournament.

Organized by Ukraine's Association of Football, the "League of the Mighty" is Ukraine's first soccer championship for amputees. Over the past year, the association has invested in local communities to establish teams, recognizing the growing number of war-wounded citizens as a result of the nearly three-year war.

With six outfield players and one goalkeeper on each side, they engaged in intense matches. Outfield players, all lower-limb amputees, and goalkeepers with upper-limb amputations, played without prostheses, relying on wrist clutches for control.

Pokrova AMP won the tournament, with captain Valentyn Osovskiy describing the triumph as exhilarating. "We're really glad that we had to work our way through, it was interesting," he said, adding that the goal is to have their own championship and to create a strong team to represent Ukraine on the international level.

"This will be a priority for the next few years for us," said Andriy Shevchenko, president of the Ukrainian Association of Football, noting there are more than 100,000 amputees in the country, most of them "soldiers who defended our country."

For Olena Balbek, adviser to the president of the association, the sport is one way to provide mental and physical rehabilitation for amputees while also normalizing their growing presence in society.

"This is a societal effort," she said. "We're focusing on sports because it's our area of expertise, to make sure this is normalized."

Citing their own research, Balbek said the association boasts at least 60 professional amputee players in Ukraine — a significant number considering there are around 1,000 worldwide.

Though the reasons are unfortunate, Balbek said, "We have a huge potential in terms of engaging people in the sport."

Featuring five teams from across Ukraine, the weekend's championship served as a testament to the association's success in developing grassroots amputee football across the country since the full-scale invasion began. A dedicated department within the association assists local groups in creating teams.

The work is multifaceted, said Balbek, involving communication with veteran's groups, local initiatives and football clubs underscoring the importance of establishing amputee teams.

"Football is the best rehabilitation for me," said Mykola Gatala, captain of the Pokrova AMP-One team. "It has helped me both physically and mentally. I'm doing it with my brothers in arms who went through the same things I did. We understand each other."

Queen Elizabeth II wasn't told about Soviet spy in her palace, declassified MI5 files show

By JILL LAWLESS Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — Queen Elizabeth II wasn't told details of her long-time art adviser's double life as a Soviet spy because palace officials didn't want to add to her worries, newly declassified documents reveal.

The files about royal art historian Anthony Blunt are among a trove from the intelligence agency MI5 released Tuesday by Britain's National Archives. They shed new light on a spy ring linked to Cambridge University in the 1930s, whose members spilled secrets to the Soviet Union from the heart of the U.K. intelligence establishment.

Blunt, who worked at Buckingham Palace as Surveyor of the Queen's Pictures, was under suspicion for years before he finally confessed in 1964 that, as a senior MI5 officer during World War II, he had passed secret information to Soviet agents.

In one of the newly released files, an MI5 officer notes that Blunt said he felt "profound relief" at unbur-

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dening himself. In return for information he provided, Blunt was allowed to keep his job, his knighthood and his social standing – and the queen was apparently kept in the dark.

In 1972, her private secretary, Martin Charteris, told MI5 chief Michael Hanley that “the queen did not know and he saw no advantage in telling her about it now; it would only add to her worries and there was nothing that could be done about him.”

The government decided to tell the monarch in 1973, when Blunt was ill, fearing a media uproar once Blunt died and journalists were able to publish stories without fear of libel suits.

Charteris reported that “she took it all very calmly and without surprise,” and “remembered that he had been under suspicion way back” in the early 1950s. Historian Christopher Andrew says in the official history of MI5 that the queen had previously been told about Blunt in “general terms.”

Blunt was publicly unmasked as a spy by Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher in the House of Commons in November 1979. He was finally stripped of his knighthood, but never prosecuted, and died in 1983 at the age of 75.

Files held by Britain’s secretive intelligence services usually remain classified for several decades, but the agencies are inching toward more openness. Some of the newly released documents will feature in an exhibition, entitled “MI5: Official Secrets,” opening at the National Archives in London later this year.

Two of the Cambridge spies, Donald Maclean and Guy Burgess, fled to Russia in 1951. A third, Kim Philby, continued to work for foreign intelligence agency MI6 despite falling under suspicion. As evidence of his duplicity mounted, he was confronted in Beirut in January 1963 by his friend and fellow MI6 officer Nicholas Elliott.

The declassified files include Philby’s typed confession and a transcript of his discussion with Elliott.

In it, Philby admitted he had betrayed Konstantin Volkov, a KGB officer who tried to defect to the West in 1945, bringing with him details of moles inside British intelligence – including Philby himself. As a result of Philby’s intervention, Volkov was abducted in Istanbul, taken back to Moscow and executed.

Elliott reported that Philby said that if he had his life to lead again, he would probably have behaved in the same way.

“I really did feel a tremendous loyalty to MI6. I was treated very, very well in it and I made some really marvelous friends there,” Philby said, according to the transcript. “But the overruling inspiration was the other side.”

Philby told Elliott that the choice faced now that he was exposed was “between suicide and prosecution.” Instead, he fled to Moscow, where he died in 1988.

The Cambridge spies have inspired myriad books, plays, movies and TV shows, including the 2023 series “A Spy Among Friends,” starring Guy Pearce as Philby and Damian Lewis as Elliott. Blunt featured in a 2019 episode of “The Crown,” played by Samuel West.

Middle East latest: Israeli strikes kill 18 in Gaza, including women and children, medics say

By The Associated Press undefined

Israeli strikes in the Gaza Strip killed at least 18 people overnight, including women and children, health officials said Tuesday, as Israel and Hamas appeared to be narrowing in on a ceasefire deal to end the 15-month war and release dozens of hostages.

Officials have expressed mounting optimism that they can conclude an agreement in the coming days after more than a year of talks that have repeatedly stalled.

Two strikes in the central Gaza city of Deir al-Balah killed two women and their four children, who ranged in age from 1 month to 9 years old. One of the women was pregnant and the baby did not survive, according to Al-Aqsa Martyrs Hospital, which received the bodies.

Another 12 people were killed in two strikes on the southern city of Khan Younis, according to the European Hospital.

There was no immediate comment from the Israeli military. Israel says it only targets militants and ac-

cuses them of hiding among civilians in shelters and tent camps for the displaced.

Israel's war against Hamas in Gaza began on Oct. 7, 2023, when militants stormed into southern Israel and killed about 1,200 people and abducted around 250. A third of the 100 hostages still held in Gaza are believed to be dead.

The Israel Hamas-war has killed more than 46,000 Palestinians in Gaza, according to health authorities there. The Health Ministry does not distinguish between fighters and civilians, but says women and children make up more than half the fatalities.

Here's the latest:

Trump says a possible ceasefire deal for Gaza is 'very close'

President-elect Donald Trump has described a possible ceasefire as being "very close."

"I understand ... there's been a handshake and they are getting it finished -- and maybe by the end of the week," Trump told the American cable channel Newsmax Monday night.

He added that part of the deal would see "bodies" brought out of the Gaza Strip, without elaborating.

Israel and Hamas are under renewed pressure to halt the conflict in the lead-up to Trump's Jan. 20 inauguration. The phased deal would be based on a framework laid out by President Joe Biden in May and endorsed by the U.N. Security Council.

A missile fired by Houthi rebels targets central Israel

JERUSALEM — A missile fired by Yemen's Houthi rebels targeted central Israel early Tuesday, causing sirens to blare and people to flee into bomb shelters. Several Israeli strikes also hit the Gaza Strip overnight and early on Tuesday.

The Israeli military said it made several attempts to intercept a missile launched from Yemen and "the missile was likely intercepted." The Magen David Adom emergency service in Israel said there were no injuries from the missile or falling debris, but some people suffered injuries when running to shelters.

Israeli police said several homes outside Jerusalem were damaged by fallen debris and released a photo of what appeared to be a missile casing on the roof of a house.

Israel's military also said an earlier missile was intercepted before it entered Israeli territory.

Yemen's Iranian-backed Houthi rebels, who have held Yemen's capital, Sanaa, since 2014, have launched direct attacks on Israel and some 100 commercial ships as part of their campaign over Israel's war on Hamas in the Gaza Strip.

The Houthis acknowledged the attack early Tuesday.

Israeli strikes on Gaza kill 18 as hopes rise for a ceasefire and hostage release

By WAFAA SHURAFI and NATALIE MELZER Associated Press

DEIR AL-BALAH, Gaza Strip (AP) — Israeli strikes in the Gaza Strip killed at least 18 people overnight, including six women and four children, health officials said Tuesday, as Israel and Hamas appeared to be narrowing in on a ceasefire deal to end the 15-month war and release dozens of hostages.

Officials have expressed mounting optimism that they can conclude an agreement in the coming days after more than a year of talks that have repeatedly stalled.

Yemen's Iran-backed Houthi rebels meanwhile fired a missile at central Israel, setting off sirens and sending people fleeing to shelters without causing any casualties. Police said several homes were damaged outside Jerusalem and released a photo of a missile casing that had crashed into a roof.

Two strikes in the central Gaza city of Deir al-Balah killed two women and their four children, who ranged in age from 1 month to 9 years old. One of the women was pregnant and the baby did not survive, according to Al-Aqsa Martyrs Hospital, which received the bodies.

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cuses them of hiding among civilians in shelters and tent camps for the displaced.

Israel and Hamas have come under renewed pressure to halt the conflict in the lead-up to the Jan. 20 inauguration of President-elect Donald Trump, whose Middle East envoy, Steve Witkoff, recently joined U.S., Egyptian and Qatari mediators in the Gulf country's capital, Doha.

The phased deal would be based on a framework laid out by President Joe Biden in May and endorsed by the U.N. Security Council.

In the first phase, Hamas would release dozens of the most vulnerable hostages seized in the Oct. 7, 2023 attack that triggered the war in exchange for dozens of Palestinian prisoners as Israeli forces pull back from population centers. At least some Palestinians would be allowed to return to their homes and there would be a surge of humanitarian aid.

In the second phase, Hamas says it would release the remaining hostages in exchange for a large number of prisoners, a full Israeli withdrawal and a lasting ceasefire. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has vowed to keep fighting until Hamas' military and governing capabilities have been destroyed and it no longer poses a threat. The gap between the two sides would be negotiated during the first phase.

Hamas-led militants killed around 1,200 people in the Oct. 7 attack and abducted another 250. Some 100 hostages are still being held inside Gaza. The Israeli military believes that at least a third and up to half of them are dead.

Israel's retaliatory offensive has killed over 46,000 Palestinians, more than half of them women and children, according to Gaza's Health Ministry, which does not say how many of the dead were combatants. The Israeli military says it has killed over 17,000 fighters, without providing evidence.

The offensive has reduced large areas of the territory to rubble and displaced around 90% of Gaza's population of 2.3 million, with hundreds of thousands packed into tent camps along the coast where hunger is widespread.

The war has rippled across the region, igniting over a year of fighting between Israel and Lebanon's Hezbollah militants that ended with a tense ceasefire in November. Israel has also traded direct fire with Iran, which backs Hamas, Hezbollah and Yemen's Houthis.

The Israeli military said it made several attempts to intercept the missile launched from Yemen early Tuesday and that "the missile was likely intercepted." It said an earlier missile fired from Yemen was also intercepted.

The Houthis, who captured Yemen's capital, Sanaa, and much of the country's north in 2014, have launched a series of missile and drone attacks on Israel and have attacked international shipping in the Red Sea. The Houthis say they are fighting in solidarity with the Palestinians, but the vast majority of the targeted ships have no connection to the conflict.

Special counsel who investigated Trump says his team 'stood up for the rule of law'

By ALANNA DURKIN RICHER, ERIC TUCKER and COLLEEN LONG Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Special counsel Jack Smith said his team "stood up for the rule of law" as it investigated President-elect Donald Trump's efforts to overturn the results of the 2020 election, writing in a much-anticipated report released Tuesday that he stands fully behind his decision to bring criminal charges he believes would have resulted in a conviction had voters not returned Trump to the White House.

"The throughline of all of Mr. Trump's criminal efforts was deceit — knowingly false claims of election fraud — and the evidence shows that Mr. Trump used these lies as a weapon to defeat a federal government function foundational to the United States' democratic process," the report states.

The report, arriving just days before Trump is to return to office on Jan. 20, focuses fresh attention on his frantic but failed effort to cling to power in 2020. With the prosecution foreclosed thanks to Trump's election victory, the document is expected to be the final Justice Department chronicle of a dark chapter in American history that threatened to disrupt the peaceful transfer of power, a bedrock of democracy for

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centuries, and complements already released indictments and reports.

Trump responded early Tuesday with a post on his Truth Social platform, claiming he was “totally innocent” and calling Smith “a lamebrain prosecutor who was unable to get his case tried before the Election.” He added, “THE VOTERS HAVE SPOKEN!!!”

Trump had been indicted in August 2023 on charges of working to overturn the election, but the case was delayed by appeals and ultimately significantly narrowed by a conservative-majority Supreme Court that held for the first time that former presidents enjoy sweeping immunity from criminal prosecution for official acts.

Though Smith sought to salvage the indictment, the team dismissed it entirely in November because of longstanding Justice Department policy that says sitting presidents cannot face federal prosecution.

“The Department’s view that the Constitution prohibits the continued indictment and prosecution of a President is categorical and does not turn on the gravity of the crimes charged, the strength of the Government’s proof, or the merits of the prosecution, which the Office stands fully behind,” the report states. “Indeed, but for Mr. Trump’s election and imminent return to the Presidency, the Office assessed that the admissible evidence was sufficient to obtain and sustain a conviction at trial.”

The Justice Department transmitted the report to Congress early Tuesday after a judge refused a defense effort to block its release. A separate volume of the report focused on Trump’s hoarding of classified documents at Mar-a-Lago, actions that formed the basis of a separate indictment against Trump, will remain under wraps for now.

Though most of the details of Trump’s efforts to undo the election are already well established, the document includes for the first time a detailed assessment from Smith about his investigation, as well as a defense by Smith against criticism by Trump and his allies that the inquiry was politicized or that he worked in collaboration with the White House — an assessment he called “laughable.”

“While we were not able to bring the cases we charged to trial, I believe the fact that our team stood up for the rule of law matters,” Smith wrote in a letter to Attorney General Merrick Garland attached to the report. “I believe the example our team set for others to fight for justice without regard for the personal costs matters.”

The special counsel also laid out the challenges it faced in its investigation, including Trump’s assertion of executive privilege to try to block witnesses from providing evidence, which forced prosecutors into sealed court battles before the case was charged.

Another “significant challenge” was Trump’s “ability and willingness to use his influence and following on social media to target witnesses, courts, prosecutors,” which led prosecutors to seek a gag order to protect potential witnesses from harassment, Smith wrote.

“Mr. Trump’s resort to intimidation and harassment during the investigation was not new, as demonstrated by his actions during the charged conspiracies,” Smith wrote.

“A fundamental component of Mr. Trump’s conduct underlying the charges in the Election Case was his pattern of using social media — at the time, Twitter — to publicly attack and seek to influence state and federal officials, judges, and election workers who refused to support false claims that the election had been stolen or who otherwise resisted complicity in Mr. Trump’s scheme,” he added.

Smith also for the first time explained the thought process behind his team’s prosecution decisions, writing that his office decided not to charge Trump with incitement in part because of free speech concerns, or with insurrection because he was the sitting president at the time and there was doubt about proceeding to trial with the offense — of which there was no record of having been prosecuted before.

Strong winds forecast for Los Angeles threaten area’s fight against fires

By CHRISTOPHER WEBER, JULIE WATSON and JOHN SEEWER Associated Press
LOS ANGELES (AP) — Additional water tankers and scores of firefighters have arrived at the Los Angeles area ahead of fierce winds that were forecast to return and threaten the progress made so far on two

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massive infernos that have destroyed thousands of homes and killed at least 24 people.

On Monday, planes doused homes and hillsides with bright pink fire-retardant chemicals, while crews and fire engines were being placed near particularly vulnerable spots with dry brush. Dozens of water trucks rolled in to replenish supplies after hydrants ran dry last week when the two largest fires erupted.

Tabitha Trosen and her boyfriend said she feels like they are "teetering" on the edge with the constant fear that their neighborhood could be the next under threat.

"Our cats are ready to go, we have their carriers by the door prepped with their little stuffed animals and things like that," Trosen said, adding that she's packed things as she thinks about what she could lose. "It's like, how do I take care of myself, and what are the things that will ground me as a human and remind me of my background and my life and my family."

Los Angeles Mayor Karen Bass and other officials — who have faced criticism over their initial response to fires that began last week — expressed confidence Monday that the region was ready to face the new threat with additional firefighters brought in from around the U.S., as well as Canada and Mexico.

"We're absolutely better prepared," LA County Fire Chief Anthony Marrone said when asked what will be different from a week ago, when hurricane-force winds propelled multiple fires across the parched, brush-filled region that hasn't seen rain in more than eight months.

There have been more than a dozen wildfires in Southern California since Jan. 1, mostly in the greater Los Angeles area. The latest started late Monday in a dry riverbed in Oxnard, about 55 miles (about 89 kilometers) northwest of Los Angeles, and was burning in an agricultural area.

The winds are predicted to pick up starting early Tuesday and continue through midday Wednesday, according to the National Weather Service. They are not expected to reach hurricane-force like last week, but they could ground firefighting aircraft, Marrone said, warning if winds reach 70 mph (112 kph), "it's going to be very difficult to contain that fire."

Fire officials advised residents in high-risk areas to just leave home — and not wait for formal evacuation orders — if they sense danger.

That's exactly what Tim Kang of La Crescenta did last Wednesday. Feeling sick from the smoky air and fearful of nearby fires spreading, Kang and his brothers packed up and have stayed away from their neighborhood.

"Everything just felt like, 'Oh man, the world's ending,'" said Kang, who's staying with his girlfriend in Pasadena.

In less than a week, four fires around the nation's second-biggest city have scorched more than 62 square miles (160 square kilometers), roughly three times the size of Manhattan.

The National Weather Service warned the weather will be "particularly dangerous" on Tuesday, when wind gusts could reach 65 mph (105 kph). A large part of Southern California around Los Angeles is under this extreme fire danger warning through Wednesday, including densely populated Thousand Oaks, Northridge and Simi Valley.

The Eaton Fire near Pasadena is roughly one-third contained, while the largest blaze in Pacific Palisades on the coast is far less contained.

Search for victims continues

The death toll is likely to rise, Los Angeles County Sheriff Robert Luna said Monday. At least two dozen were missing, he said.

Luna said he understands that people are eager to return to their homes and neighborhoods to survey the damage, but he asked for their patience. "We have people literally looking for the remains of your neighbors," he said.

At a Monday evening community meeting about the Palisades Fire, a Los Angeles Police Department official said many people reported as missing had been found. It wasn't clear if there was overlap in the numbers shared by the sheriff.

Checking on their homes

The slower winds over the weekend allowed some people to return to previously evacuated areas. Many

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had no idea if their homes or neighborhoods were still standing.

Jim Orlandini, who lost his hardware store in Altadena, a hard-hit neighborhood next to Pasadena, said his home of 40 years survived.

"The whole time I was thinking, I don't know what I'm going to find when I get back here and after 40 years, you know, you got a lot of stuff you forget about that would disappear if the house burned down. So we're thankful that it didn't."

Warnings to stay out of disaster zones

LA city Fire Chief Kristin Crowley urged people to stay away from burned neighborhoods filled with broken gas lines and unstable buildings.

Just under 100,000 in Los Angeles County remained under evacuation orders, half the number from last week.

Fighting flames on multiple fronts

Firefighters over the weekend fought flames in Mandeville Canyon — home to Arnold Schwarzenegger and other celebrities — after the Palisades Fire spread, prompting new evacuation orders. Crews continued battling there Monday before potentially strong winds could push the flames toward the famous J. Paul Getty Museum and the University of California, Los Angeles.

Beyoncé, Disney and other celebrities and entertainment organizations have pledged millions to help those who have been displaced or lost their homes. Other stars — and ordinary people — have left large donations of clothing and other items along street corners in around the city.

Investigating looting, fundraising scams

Dozens of people have been arrested for looting after the wildfires. Officials are now starting to see price gouging and scams, including with hotels and short-term rentals and medical supplies, said Los Angeles County District Attorney Nathan Hochman.

Counting up and investigating the destruction

The fires that began Tuesday north of downtown LA have burned more than 12,000 homes, cars and other structures.

Authorities haven't determined an official cause for any of the fires. Southern California Edison has acknowledged agencies are investigating whether its equipment may have started a smaller blaze.

A lawsuit filed Monday claims the utility's equipment sparked the much bigger Eaton Fire. Edison did not respond to a request for comment and last week said it had not received any suggestions that its equipment ignited that blaze.

AccuWeather's early estimates suggest the fires could be the nation's costliest ever, topping \$250 billion including what's to come in the next days. The reconstruction cost for commercial and residential properties inside areas with active fires could be \$14.8 billion, according to real estate data tracker CoreLogic.

153 winners of Nobel and World Food prizes seek new ways to grow food to meet surging global need

By SCOTT McFETRIDGE Associated Press

DES MOINES, Iowa (AP) — More than 150 recipients of the Nobel and World Food prizes released an open letter Tuesday calling for a dramatic increase in research and a commitment to new food distribution efforts with a goal of producing more crops and avoiding a global hunger crisis in coming decades.

The letter notes that an estimated 700 million people now are "food insecure and desperately poor" but that without a "moonshot" effort to grow more and different kinds of food, far more people will be in dire need of food because of climate change and population growth.

"As difficult and as uncomfortable as it might be to imagine, humanity is headed towards an even more food insecure, unstable world by mid-century than exists today, worsened by a vicious cycle of conflict and food insecurity," states the letter, signed by 153 recipients of the two prizes. "Climate change is projected to decrease the productivity of most major staples when substantial increases are needed to feed a world which will add another 1.5 billion people to its population by 2050."

Corn production in Africa is expected to decline and much of the world could see more soil degradation and water shortages, the letter says.

"We are not on track to meet future food needs. Not even close," it adds.

The letter grew from a meeting of food accessibility experts last fall. Despite the potential gloom, it holds out hope for an optimistic vision of the future if people take needed actions. The letter says that a dramatic increase in research funding coupled with more effective ways to share information and distribute food could prevent a hunger crisis.

Brian Schmidt, who won the Nobel Prize in physics in 2011, said the need to dramatically increase food production in the coming decades is a huge challenge. He calls it a "destination with destiny," but one that can be achieved with proper funding to enhance existing knowledge as well as global leadership.

"It is an imminently solvable problem. It is a problem that will affect billions of people in 25 years. It is a problem that to solve it, there are no losers, only winners," Schmidt said in an interview. "All we have to do is do it."

Schmidt said he hopes governments in the U.S., Europe and elsewhere can commit to solving the problem, but he thinks private groups like the Gates Foundation may need to take the lead in funding initial steps that will draw attention and prompt action by politicians.

The letter calls for "transformational efforts" such as enhancing photosynthesis in essential crops such as wheat and rice, developing crops that are not as reliant on chemical fertilizers and lengthening the shelf life of fruits and vegetables.

Cynthia Rosenzweig, a climate research scientist at NASA who won the World Food Prize in 2022, said in an interview that researchers are already making progress toward breakthroughs, but their work needs to be turbocharged with more funding and emphasis from world leaders.

"It's not that we have to dream up new solutions," Rosenzweig said. "The solutions are very much being tested but in order to actually take them from the lab out into the agriculture regions of the world, we really do need the moonshot approach."

The term moonshot refers to an unprecedented effort, stemming from President John F. Kennedy's call in 1962 for Americans to rocket to the Moon. Rosenzweig, noting she works for NASA, said meeting the food needs of a growing population will take the kind of commitment the U.S. made in achieving Kennedy's goal of reaching the Moon.

"Look at how the scientists had to come together. The engineers had to be part of it. The funding had to come together as well as the general public," she said. "That base of support has to be there as well."

Pete Hegseth, Trump's nominee for defense secretary, faces crucial test at confirmation hearing

By LISA MASCARO and TARA COPP Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President-elect Donald Trump's choice for defense secretary, Pete Hegseth, is heading into a potentially explosive confirmation hearing Tuesday as senators question whether the former combat veteran and TV news show host is fit to lead the U.S. military.

Hegseth's former experience in the Army National Guard is widely viewed as an asset for the job, but he also brings a jarring record of past statements and actions, including allegations of sexual assault, excessive drinking and derisive views about women in military combat roles, minorities and "woke" generals. He has vowed to not drink alcohol if he is confirmed to lead the Pentagon.

He is among the most endangered of Trump's Cabinet choices, but GOP allies are determined to turn Hegseth into a cause célèbre for Trump's governing approach amid the nation's culture wars. Outside groups, including those aligned with the Heritage Foundation, are running costly campaigns to prop up Hegseth's bid.

"He will be ripped, he will be demeaned. He will be talked about," said Sen. Tommy Tuberville, R-Ala., at an event with former Navy SEALs, Army special forces and Marines supporting the nominee. "But we're

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going to get him across the finish line.”

The hearing at the Senate Armed Services Committee is the start of a weeklong marathon as senators begin scrutinizing Trump’s choices for more than a dozen top administrative positions. The Republican-led Senate is rushing to have some of Trump’s picks ready to be confirmed as soon as Inauguration Day, Jan. 20, despite potential opposition to some from both sides of the aisle.

“We’re going to grind them down,” Senate Majority Leader John Thune, R-S.D., said on Fox News.

Hegseth faces perhaps the most difficult path to confirmation. He will be forced to confront allegations of sexual assault, which he has denied, and his own comments that are far from the military mainstream, though he has the support of some veterans’ groups that say his past indiscretions are not as important as his focus on improving military readiness to fight.

And Hegseth will have to answer for his comments that women should “straight up” not be in combat roles in the military, a view he has softened following recent meetings with senators. Two former female combat veterans, Republican Joni Ernst of Iowa and Democrat Tammy Duckworth of Illinois, are among those grilling him from the dais.

“He can try to walk back his comments on women in combat all he wants, but we know what he thinks, right?” said Duckworth, an Iraq War veteran who lost her legs and partial use of her right arm when the Black Hawk helicopter she was piloting in the Army National Guard was shot down. “He’s the most unqualified person to ever be nominated for secretary of defense.”

Many senators have not yet met with Hegseth and most do not have access to his FBI background check, as only committee leaders are briefed on its findings. The background check on Hegseth did not appear to probe or produce new information beyond what’s already in the public realm about him, according to a person familiar with the situation and granted anonymity to discuss it.

In many ways, the Hegseth hearing is expected to follow the template set during Trump’s first term, when one of his choices for Supreme Court justice, Brett Kavanaugh, came under intense scrutiny over allegations of sexual assault from his teens but recouped to win confirmation to the high court.

Kavanaugh vigorously fought back during a volcanic 2018 hearing, portraying the sexual assault allegations against him as a smear job by liberal lawmakers and outside groups opposed to his judicial record, turning the tables in a way that many senators credit setting a new benchmark for partisanship.

Asked about advice for Hegseth, Sen. John Cornyn, R-Texas, referred to that earlier example.

“Go back and watch videos of the Kavanaugh hearings — give you a flavor,” he said.

Hegseth was largely unknown on Capitol Hill when Trump tapped him for the top Pentagon job.

A co-host of Fox News Channel’s “Fox & Friends Weekend,” he had been a contributor with the network since 2014, and apparently caught the eye of the president-elect, who is an avid consumer of television and the news channel, in particular.

Hegseth, 44, attended Princeton and served in the Army National Guard from 2002 to 2021, deploying to Iraq in 2005 and Afghanistan in 2011 and earning two Bronze Stars. But he lacks senior military and national security experience.

In 2017, a woman told police that Hegseth sexually assaulted her, according to a detailed investigative report recently made public. Hegseth has denied any wrongdoing and told police at the time that the encounter at a Republican women’s event in California was consensual. He later paid the woman a confidential settlement to head off a potential lawsuit.

Hegseth also came under scrutiny amid reports of excessive drinking when he worked at a veterans’ organization. But as he began meeting privately with GOP senators ahead of the hearing, he promised he would not drink if confirmed to the post.

If confirmed, Hegseth would take over a military juggling an array of crises on the global stage and domestic challenges in military recruitment, retention and ongoing funding.

In addition to being a key national security adviser to the president, the defense secretary oversees a massive organization, with nearly 2.1 million service members, about 780,000 civilians and a budget of roughly \$850 billion.

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He is responsible for tens of thousands of U.S. troops deployed overseas and at sea, including in combat zones where they face attacks, such as in Syria and Iraq and in the waters around Yemen. The secretary makes all final recommendations to the president on what units are deployed, where they go and how long they stay.

His main job is to make sure the U.S. military is ready, trained and equipped to meet any call to duty. But the secretary also must ensure that American troops are safe and secure at home, with proper housing, healthcare, pay and support for programs dealing with suicide, sexual assault and financial scams.

Pentagon chiefs also routinely travel across the world, meeting with international leaders on a vast range of security issues including U.S. military aid, counterterrorism support, troop presence and global coalition building. And they play a key role at NATO as a critical partner to allies across the region.

Multiracial boom in 2020 census was mostly an illusion, researchers say

By MIKE SCHNEIDER Associated Press

When the 2020 census results were released, they showed a boom in the number of people classified as multiracial in the United States since 2010. Two Princeton sociologists now say that jump was mostly an illusion.

The 276% increase largely happened because of a change in how people were classified by the U.S. Census Bureau rather than strong shifts in racial or ethnic identity or major growth, according to a paper published last month by Paul Starr and Christina Pao. The Census Bureau for the first time provided space on the census form for people to write-in their families' origins, which guided how the statistical agency categorized them.

People who were classified as being two or more races rose from 2.9% to 10.2% of the U.S. population from 2010 to 2020, and the increase was most noticeable among Hispanic people. The share of the white alone population dropped from 72.4% to 61.6%, provoking handwringing among some conservative commentators about what they called a loss of white power.

The Princeton researchers argued that anyone who marked themselves as Black or as white on the 2020 census form but then wrote that they were of Latin American origin was reclassified by a computerized algorithm as multiracial even though they had marked themselves as a single race. The same multiracial reclassification appeared to have been made for people who self-identified as white only but then wrote that their origins were from an African country, according to the researchers.

"So the 2020 census produced a sudden jump in the multiracial count and a precipitous decline in the count of the white population, contributing to an unwarranted panic among white conservatives about demographic change," Starr said in an email. "The procedure was misleading, and the public was misled about the extent of racial change."

When the figures were released in mid-2021, Census Bureau officials said the new method was an improvement that did a better job of capturing the complexities of how people identify their race and ethnicity in the 21st century. At the same time, they acknowledged that some of the dramatic growth likely came from their changes.

For the first time, empty spaces were left on the 2020 census form so that respondents could write in their "origins," such as "German" or "Jamaican," when answering the race question. The detailed answers guided the Census Bureau in classifying the respondents and members of their households into race and ethnicity categories.

"These improvements reveal that the U.S. population is much more multiracial and diverse than what we measured in the past," Census Bureau officials said at the time.

The official numbers on multiracial people are important because they are used for redrawing political districts, civil rights enforcement, labor data, health statistics and distributing federal funding. As the daughter of a Jamaican father and an Indian mother, Vice President Kamala Harris' run for the White House as the 2024 Democratic presidential nominee put multiracial identity in the spotlight.

The Princeton researchers said the Census Bureau mistakenly mixed up ancestry with identity and national origin with race, and they believe the agency should abandon using "origins" to categorize people.

The issue flew under the radar because of other distractions surrounding the 2020 census, such as the Trump administration's unsuccessful attempt to add a citizenship question, a controversial new data-privacy method and the COVID-19 pandemic, which threw the nation's head count off schedule. Black, Hispanic and American Indian residents on reservations were undercounted in the 2020 census.

Researchers have been asking the Census Bureau since 2021 to rerun the 2020 data using 2010 methods so that an "apples to apples" comparison of demographic changes can be made, but the agency hasn't done it yet, said historian Margo Anderson, who served on a National Academies panel that reviewed the quality of the census.

"It's 2025 and people have been asking since 2021, 'What the hell did you do?'" Anderson said. "There is a lot of frustration there because we can't know."

The Census Bureau has historically struggled to classify multiracial people, said Susan Graham, an advocate for multiracial representation in official statistics. Respondents weren't allowed to check more than one race until the 2000 census.

"Was the 2020 Census subjected to a fictitious multiracial boom? Possibly," Graham said. "As always, answers only get more confusing when the federal government goes back and tries, one more time, to get it right."

Race and ethnic categories used by the federal government are changing further to combine questions about race and ethnicity instead of asking about them separately. A Middle Eastern and North African category also is being added which will reduce the number of respondents identifying as white.

Not all demographers think the Census Bureau's methodological change was that profound.

"I don't think it's that big of a deal for most people using the data," said William Frey, a demographer at The Brookings Institution. "I think that the Census Bureau is trying hard to get this right."

Strong winds forecast to return and threaten Los Angeles area's fight against fires

By CHRISTOPHER WEBER, JULIE WATSON and JOHN SEEWER Associated Press

LOS ANGELES (AP) — Additional water tankers and scores of firefighters arrived at the Los Angeles area on Monday ahead of fierce winds that were forecast to return and threaten the progress made so far on two massive infernos that have destroyed thousands of homes and killed at least 24 people.

Planes doused homes and hillsides with bright pink fire-retardant chemicals, while crews and fire engines were being placed near particularly vulnerable spots with dry brush. Dozens of water trucks rolled in to replenish supplies after hydrants ran dry last week when the two largest fires erupted.

Tabitha Trosen and her boyfriend said she feels like they are "teetering" on the edge with the constant fear that their neighborhood could be the next under threat.

"Our cats are ready to go, we have their carriers by the door prepped with their little stuffed animals and things like that," Trosen said, adding that she's packed things as she thinks about what she could lose. "It's like, how do I take care of myself, and what are the things that will ground me as a human and remind me of my background and my life and my family."

Los Angeles Mayor Karen Bass and other officials — who have faced criticism over their initial response to fires that began last week — expressed confidence Monday that the region was ready to face the new threat with additional firefighters brought in from around the U.S., as well as Canada and Mexico.

"We're absolutely better prepared," LA County Fire Chief Anthony Marrone said when asked what will be different from a week ago, when hurricane-force winds propelled multiple fires across the parched, brush-filled region that hasn't seen rain in more than eight months.

The winds are predicted to pick up late Monday into early Tuesday, but they are not expected to reach hurricane-force like last week. However, they could ground firefighting aircraft, Marrone said, warning if winds reach 70 mph (112 kph), "it's going to be very difficult to contain that fire."

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Fire officials advised residents in high-risk areas to just leave home – and not wait for formal evacuation orders -- if they sense danger.

That's exactly what Tim Kang of La Crescenta did last Wednesday. Feeling sick from the smoky air and fearful of nearby fires spreading, Kang and his brothers packed up and have stayed away from their neighborhood.

"Everything just felt like, 'Oh man, the world's ending,'" said Kang, who's staying with his girlfriend in Pasadena.

In less than a week, four fires around the nation's second-biggest city have scorched more than 62 square miles (160 square kilometers), roughly three times the size of Manhattan.

The National Weather Service warned the weather will be "particularly dangerous" on Tuesday, when wind gusts could reach 65 mph (105 kph). A large part of Southern California around Los Angeles is under this extreme fire danger warning through Wednesday, including densely populated Thousand Oaks, Northridge and Simi Valley.

The Eaton Fire near Pasadena is roughly one-third contained, while the largest blaze in Pacific Palisades on the coast is far less contained.

Searching for victims continues

The death toll is likely to rise, Los Angeles County Sheriff Robert Luna said Monday. At least two dozen were missing, he said.

Luna said he understands that people are eager to return to their homes and neighborhoods to survey the damage, but he asked for their patience. "We have people literally looking for the remains of your neighbors," he said.

At a Monday evening community meeting about the Palisades Fire, a Los Angeles Police Department official said many people reported as missing had been found. It wasn't clear if there was overlap in the numbers shared by the sheriff.

Checking on their homes

The slower winds over the weekend allowed some people to return to previously evacuated areas. Many had no idea if their homes or neighborhoods were still standing.

Jim Orlandini, who lost his hardware store in Altadena, a hard-hit neighborhood next to Pasadena, said his home of 40 years survived.

"The whole time I was thinking, I don't know what I'm going to find when I get back here and after 40 years, you know, you got a lot of stuff you forget about that would disappear if the house burned down. So we're thankful that it didn't."

Warnings to stay out of disaster zones

LA city Fire Chief Kristin Crowley urged people to stay away from burned neighborhoods filled with broken gas lines and unstable buildings.

Just under 100,000 in Los Angeles County remained under evacuation orders, half the number from last week.

Fighting flames on multiple fronts

Firefighters over the weekend fought flames in Mandeville Canyon — home to Arnold Schwarzenegger and other celebrities — after the Palisades Fire spread, prompting new evacuation orders. Crews continued battling there Monday before potentially strong winds could push the flames toward the famous J. Paul Getty Museum and the University of California, Los Angeles.

Beyoncé, Disney and other celebrities and entertainment organizations have pledged millions to help those who have been displaced or lost their homes. Other stars — and ordinary people — have left large donations of clothing and other items along street corners in around the city.

Investigating looting, fundraising scams

Dozens of people have been arrested for looting after the wildfires. Officials are now starting to see price gouging and scams, including with hotels and short-term rentals and medical supplies, said Los Angeles County District Attorney Nathan Hochman.

Counting up and investigating the destruction

The fires that began Tuesday north of downtown LA have burned more than 12,000 homes, cars and other structures.

Authorities haven't determined an official cause for any of the fires. Southern California Edison has acknowledged agencies are investigating whether its equipment may have started a smaller blaze.

A lawsuit filed Monday claims the utility's equipment sparked the much bigger Eaton Fire. Edison did not respond to a request for comment and last week said it had not received any suggestions that its equipment ignited that blaze.

AccuWeather's early estimates suggest the fires could be the nation's costliest ever, topping \$250 billion including what's to come in the next days. The reconstruction cost for commercial and residential properties inside areas with active fires could be \$14.8 billion, according to real estate data tracker CoreLogic.

Mike McCarthy won't return as the Cowboys' coach. Deion Sanders could be a candidate to replace him

By ROB MAADDI and SCHUYLER DIXON AP Pro Football Writers

DALLAS (AP) — Mike McCarthy will not return as coach of the Dallas Cowboys, who are going on three decades since their last Super Bowl title, owner Jerry Jones said Monday.

Jones said the organization and McCarthy mutually agreed to part ways. A search for the team's next coach begins immediately, he said.

"I have great respect for Mike, and he has led the team through some very unique and challenging times during his tenure," Jones said in a statement.

McCarthy's contract expired on Jan. 8 following a 7-10 season. Dallas was 12-5 each of the three years before that under him, but still hasn't been past the divisional round of the NFC playoffs since its last Super Bowl at the end of the 1995 season.

University of Colorado coach Deion Sanders — who played on the last Super Bowl-winning Cowboys team — has a good relationship with Jones and could emerge as a coaching candidate. The two have discussed the job, according to a person with knowledge of the conversation. The person, speaking on condition of anonymity because a formal interview hasn't been arranged, said the team was still in the process of gathering candidates.

The Cowboys had an exclusive negotiating window with McCarthy through Tuesday, but the parties decided to split ahead of the deadline.

At least one NFL team asked during that time about talking to the 61-year-old coach, who won a Super Bowl with Green Bay.

Next season will be the 30th for the Cowboys since winning the last of their five Super Bowl titles.

Before taking the Dallas job after a full season out of coaching, McCarthy was with the Packers for 13 seasons and had a 125-77-2 record from 2006-18. He was 10-8 in the playoffs and led Green Bay to a Super Bowl title at AT&T Stadium, the home of the Cowboys, 14 years ago.

There were also three other NFC championship games for McCarthy in Green Bay, and that is what Jones envisioned — and more — when he hired the coach in 2020 after Jason Garrett never got that far in his 10 years.

McCarthy finished with a 50-38 record in Dallas, including a 1-3 mark in the playoffs. That included last season, when the Cowboys were NFC East champions and had won 16 consecutive home games before trailing by 32 points in the fourth quarter of a 48-32 wild-card loss to the seventh-seeded Packers.

Dallas played the final nine games this season without franchise quarterback Dak Prescott because of a torn hamstring. Top receiver CeeDee Lamb, seven-time Pro Bowl guard Zack Martin, cornerback Trevon Diggs and rushing defending DeMarcus Lawrence also finished the season on injured reserve.

Garrett had the franchise's second-longest coaching tenure. Hall of Fame coach Tom Landry was the coach for the Cowboys' first 29 seasons, the same number of seasons they have now gone since winning a Super Bowl. Jones fired two-time Super Bowl winner Landry when he bought the Cowboys before the

1989 season.

Only 12 NFL coaches have more career regular-season wins than McCarthy's 174, which is still far behind Don Shula's record 328. The only active coaches with more wins than McCarthy are Andy Reid (302 in 29 seasons) and Mike Tomlin (183 in 18 seasons).

Jones' next coach will be his ninth. He hired Jimmy Johnson from the University of Miami, and the Cowboys won back-to-back Super Bowls in the 1992-93 seasons before the college teammates at Arkansas had an acrimonious split.

Barry Switzer replaced Johnson, a Pro Football Hall of Fame coach, and won a Super Bowl in his second season but was fired two years later following a 6-10 season. Bill Parcells, another Hall of Famer, led the Cowboys to the playoffs twice in four seasons from 2003-06 but lost in the wild-card round both times.

Lawsuits claims utility's equipment sparked devastating Eaton Fire, but investigation still ongoing

By JASON DEAREN Associated Press
LOS ANGELES (AP) —

Lawsuits filed Monday claim utility equipment sparked one of the two deadly wildfires burning in the Los Angeles area while some Pacific Palisades residents believe the other blaze may have started when hurricane-force winds reignited the remnants of an extinguished New Year's Day fire.

Authorities haven't determined an official cause for the fires, which roared to life last Tuesday and have killed at least 24 people. A team from the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives took the lead on the investigations.

Multiple lawsuits against Southern California Edison claim the utility's equipment sparked the deadly Eaton Fire burning near Pasadena. Edison has acknowledged fire agencies are investigating whether its equipment may have started a far smaller LA-area fire that broke out the same day.

The Eaton Fire destroyed at least 7,000 homes and other structures and laid waste to entire neighborhoods. Attorneys representing homeowners who lost their homes said Monday that it is their belief that Edison's equipment caused it. Video taken during the fire's early minutes shows a large blaze directly beneath electrical towers.

"There is clear evidence from video footage, photographs, and witness accounts that the fire was caused by electrical equipment operated by Defendants Edison International and Southern California Edison," according to one complaint, filed on behalf of Altadena resident Evangeline Iglesias.

Gabriela Ornelas, an Edison spokesperson, said the utility is aware that a lawsuit has been filed, but has not yet reviewed it. "Our hearts remain with our communities during the devastating fires in Southern California, and we remain committed to supporting them through this difficult time," she said.

Last week, Edison filed a report with the California Public Utilities Commission related to the Eaton Fire that said it has not received any suggestions that its equipment was involved in the ignition of that fire. "Preliminary analysis by SCE of electrical circuit information for the energized transmission lines going through the area for 12 hours prior to the reported start time of the fire shows no interruptions or electrical or operational anomalies until more than one hour after the reported start time of the fire," the utility reported.

Edison also submitted a filing with the utilities commission about the Hurst fire in the Sylmar neighborhood of Los Angeles that started last Tuesday. The utility said "a downed conductor was discovered at a tower" near where the fire started.

But the utility added it "does not know whether the damage observed occurred before or after the start of the fire." That fire burned more than a square mile (2.6 square kilometers) and is now contained.

Meanwhile, a New Year's Day fire that broke out at the same place as the Jan. 7 fire that ripped through Pacific Palisades to become the most destructive in Los Angeles city history, is a particular source of interest for residents who saw both blazes.

Asked about speculation that remnants of the Jan. 1 fire reignited in Pacific Palisades, LAPD Assistant

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Chief Dominic Choi said Monday that no causes have been ruled out.

The Los Angeles Fire Department reported a brush fire shortly after midnight on Jan. 1 in the area of Pacific Palisades. The initial report was 3 to 4 acres (1.2 to 1.6 hectares) of heavy brush burning under 15 mph (24 kph) winds. Water dropping helicopters and firefighters on the ground battled the blaze, which grew to 8 acres (3 hectares), and it was reported as contained less than five hours later, according to reports posted on the department's website.

Residents say the wind-whipped blaze that ripped through that community started in the same location as a fire sparked by fireworks shot off just after midnight on New Year's Day. The hurricane-force winds that day could have helped ignite any embers that remained. Officials have not directly attributed the Jan. 1 fire to fireworks.

"I still think it's too coincidental that it would be in almost exactly the same spot. The fireworks went off that night. The firefighters were there," said Sue Pascoe, a resident who lost her home and who runs the neighborhood news website Circling the News, which has been writing about the connection to the New Year's Day fire since the Jan. 7 start.

The official investigations could take months, and with strong winds again in the forecast, the area is at risk for more fires that could further complicate efforts to determine cause.

Ginger Colbrun, a spokesperson for the ATF, said it is too early to determine the cause of the Palisades fire. Colbrun said investigators did an initial assessment of the area Friday and began processing the scene Monday.

Pacific Palisades resident Robert Trinkkeller said he saw the fire early on New Year's Day, and watched aircraft drop water on it.

When he saw the fire break out on Jan. 7, Trinkkeller said he immediately thought it was linked.

"In my opinion, it was a rekindling of the six-day old fire," he said. "It's the exact same place."

A new rival bid for US Steel is emerging as the US extends deadline on Nippon's bid blocked by Biden

By MARC LEVY Associated Press

HARRISBURG, Pa. (AP) — The bid by Japan's Nippon Steel to buy U.S. Steel may have a new lease on life, even as the potential for a new bid for the storied Pittsburgh steelmaker began to emerge Monday.

Lourenco Goncalves, the CEO of Ohio-based steelmaker Cleveland Cliffs, said in a news conference Monday that he wanted to make a new bid for U.S. Steel, which accepted the buyout offer from Nippon in 2023 after it rejected an offer by Cleveland-Cliffs.

Goncalves declined to give financial details about the bid, but said in a news conference at a Cleveland-Cliffs plant in western Pennsylvania that it is an "all-American solution" to save U.S. Steel. He said he would relocate Cleveland-Cliffs' headquarters to Pittsburgh, keep the U.S. Steel name and make Cleveland-Cliffs part of U.S. Steel.

Over the weekend, the Biden administration extended a deadline for the Japanese steelmaker to abandon plans to acquire U.S. Steel after President Joe Biden blocked the deal.

The new deadline, now in mid-June, was viewed by U.S. Steel — and investors, apparently — as an opportunity for the companies to complete the acquisition, even though President-elect Donald Trump, who takes office in a week, also opposes the deal.

Biden nixed the acquisition this month citing a potential threat to national security, though the U.S. Committee on Foreign Investment in the United States, known as CFIUS, failed to reach a consensus on the security issue.

"We are pleased that CFIUS has granted an extension to June 18, 2025 of the requirement in President Biden's Executive Order that the parties permanently abandon the transaction," U.S. Steel said in a statement Sunday. "We look forward to completing the transaction, which secures the best future for the American steel industry and all our stakeholders."

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Shares of U.S. Steel rose 6% in trading Monday.

The proposed deal kicked up an election year political maelstrom across America's industrial heartland and quickly drew vows by Biden and Trump from the campaign trail in a critical battleground state to block the deal.

Even after the election, Trump wrote on social media in December that he is "totally against" U.S. Steel being bought by a foreign company and said he would block the deal as president. He reiterated that stance this month after it was blocked by Biden.

However, a CFIUS composed of Trump appointees and Trump himself may be free to allow the deal to go through, or negotiate new terms.

Dennis Unkovic, a Pittsburgh lawyer who works on international business transactions, including deals in which CFIUS approval was required, said a new CFIUS and a new president are not legally bound by Biden's decision.

CFIUS giving the parties an extra six months to unwind the deal is unusual, Unkovic said. It wasn't immediately clear why CFIUS extended the deadline, but Unkovic pointed to reports that Biden's CFIUS was divided over whether it was a security threat.

"Extending this from the 30 days to the 180 days was a sign that there were people in the Biden administration that would like somebody to take a second look at this," Unkovic said.

CFIUS' job is to see if there are workarounds or modifications to a deal to allow it to go through, and rarely is a deal turned down, Unkovic said. After CFIUS takes another look at it, it could still be up to Trump to decide.

"Now how he comes down on it, who knows?" Unkovic said.

Nippon Steel and U.S. Steel have insisted that the deal presents no national security problem for the U.S., said Biden's decision to block it was a violation of legal due process and a political calculation.

The two steel companies sued in federal court three days after Biden announcement and accused the head of the Steelworkers union, Cleveland-Cliffs and Goncalves of working together to scuttle the buyout in a separate lawsuit.

The United Steelworkers have opposed the Nippon Steel deal, concerned over whether the company would honor existing labor agreements or slash jobs, and questioned Nippon Steel's status as an honest broker for U.S. national trade interests.

However, some union members have come out in favor of the deal. Nippon Steel — the world's fourth-largest steelmaker — says its ability to invest in U.S. Steel's aging blast furnace plants in Pennsylvania and Indiana will boost the ability of the U.S. to compete in an industry dominated by China.

U.S. Steel has warned that, without Nippon Steel's cash, it will shift production away from the blast furnaces to cheaper non-union electric arc furnaces and move its headquarters out of Pittsburgh.

Goncalves said U.S. Steel and Nippon Steel abandoning their blocked deal is critical to his company's ability to mount a new bid and, until that happens, he can't make a bid.

"If I present an offer today, they can't take it," Goncalves said. "So the very first thing that needs to happen, the merger agreement needs to be abandoned."

He also suggested that Trump's CFIUS could move the deadline to abandon the Nippon-U.S. Steel deal back to the original deadline set by Biden of Feb. 3.

Prosecutor who investigated Hunter Biden defends probes, denounces president's remarks in new report

By ERIC TUCKER and ALANNA DURKIN RICHER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The criminal charges against Hunter Biden "were the culmination of thorough, impartial investigations, not partisan politics," the prosecutor who led the probes said in a report released Monday that sharply criticized President Joe Biden for having maligned the Justice Department when he pardoned his son.

"Other presidents have pardoned family members, but in doing so, none have taken the occasion as an

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opportunity to malign the public servants at the Department of Justice based solely on false accusations," said the report from special counsel David Weiss, whose team filed gun and tax charges against the younger Biden that resulted in felony convictions that were subsequently wiped away by a presidential pardon.

The report is the culmination of years-long investigations that predated the arrival of Attorney General Merrick Garland but became among the most politically explosive inquiries of his entire tenure, capturing Republican fascination on Capitol Hill and ultimately producing a fissure between the Justice Department and the White House over the treatment of the president's son.

The document, as is customary for reports prepared by Justice Department special counsels, provides a recap of the investigative findings. But it is most notable for its steadfast defense of the team's work and for its open criticism of the president over a written statement he issued when pardoning his son last month.

Biden had repeatedly pledged that he would not pardon his son but reversed course on Dec. 1, saying that such an action was warranted because of what he called a "miscarriage of justice" and a selective prosecution. He said he believed that his son had been treated "differently" on account of his last name and that "raw politics" had infected the decision making of the Justice Department.

"No reasonable person who looks at the facts of Hunter's cases can reach any other conclusion than Hunter was singled out only because he is my son — and that is wrong," Biden said.

Weiss, who served as U.S. attorney for Delaware during the Trump administration and was kept in his position by Garland before being named to the role of special counsel in 2023, took exception to those comments and noted that judges had rejected that assessment as well.

"The president's characterizations are incorrect based on the facts in this case, and, on a more fundamental level, they are wrong," Weiss wrote. Such remarks undermine the public's confidence in the justice system, Weiss said.

Calling judges' rulings "into question and injecting partisanship into the independent administration of the law undermines the very foundation of what makes America's justice system fair and equitable," Weiss wrote. "It erodes public confidence in an institution that is essential to preserving the rule of law."

Hunter Biden's lawyer criticized the report, saying Weiss failed to explain why prosecutors "pursued wild — and debunked — conspiracies" about the president's son that prolonged the investigation.

"What is clear from this report is that the investigation into Hunter Biden is a cautionary tale of the abuse of prosecutorial power," defense attorney Abbe Lowell said in a statement.

The investigations, which Hunter Biden himself revealed in 2020 when he disclosed that prosecutors were examining his taxes, took a tortured path toward resolution across Justice Department leaders of both political parties.

Hunter Biden was supposed to plead guilty in 2023 to misdemeanor tax charges, but the deal fell apart in spectacular fashion among a last-minute disagreement between his lawyers and federal prosecutors. He went to trial in Delaware last year and was convicted of three federal felonies that accused him of having lied on a mandatory gun-purchase form by saying he was not illegally using or addicted to drugs.

Describing the younger Biden as a "Yale-educated lawyer and businessperson," Weiss said the president's son understood that he was lying when he filled out the federal form when he bought his gun in 2018 and marked that he wasn't a drug user.

"But he did it anyway, because he wanted to own a gun, even though he was actively using crack cocaine," Weiss wrote.

Hunter Biden subsequently entered a surprise guilty plea last September to federal tax charges, averting a trial that would have showcased potentially lurid evidence on top of the salacious and unflattering details about his personal life aired during his earlier trial in Delaware.

Weiss said Hunter "consciously and willfully chose" not to pay at least \$1.4 million in taxes over four years.

The president's claims that Hunter Biden was mistreated by the criminal justice system echoed in some ways arguments from the younger Biden's legal team, who had asserted that prosecutors bowed to political pressure to indict Hunter after the collapse of what Donald Trump and other Republicans called a "sweetheart" plea deal.

Not so, said Weiss.

"Far from selective, these prosecutions were the embodiment of the equal application of justice — no matter who you are, or what your last name is, you are subject to the same laws as everyone else in the United States," Weiss said.

Biden says he's leaving Trump with a 'strong hand to play' in world conflicts

By AAMER MADHANI, COLLEEN LONG and MATTHEW LEE Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden said Monday that his stewardship of American foreign policy has left the U.S. safer and economically more secure, arguing that President-elect Donald Trump will inherit a nation viewed as stronger and more reliable than it was four years ago.

Biden trumpeted his administration's work on expanding NATO, rallying allies to provide Ukraine with military aid to fight Russia and bolstering American chip manufacturing to better compete with China during a wide-ranging speech to reflect on his foreign policy legacy a week before ceding the White House to Trump.

Biden's case for his achievements will be shadowed and shaped, at least in the near term, by the messy counterfactual that American voters once again turned to Trump and his protectionist worldview. And he will leave office at a turbulent moment for the globe, with a series of conflicts raging.

"Thanks to our administration, the United States is winning the worldwide competition compared to four years ago," Biden said in his address at the State Department. "America is stronger. Our alliances are stronger. Our adversaries and competitors are weaker. We have not gone to war to make these things happen."

The one-term Democrat took office in the throes of the worst global pandemic in a century, and his plans to repair alliances strained by four years of Trump's "America First" worldview were quickly stress-tested by international crises: the chaotic U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, and Hamas' brutal 2023 attack on Israel that triggered the war in the Middle East.

Biden argued that he provided a steady hand when the world needed it most. He was tested by war, calamity and miscalculation.

"My administration is leaving the next administration with a very strong hand to play," Biden said. "America is once again leading."

Trump, hours after the remarks, said Biden had overseen "a terrible four years" in American foreign policy. "When you look at what happened, during this last four-year period, I think it was the lowest point in the history of our country," Trump said in a Newsmax interview. "It's been so bad."

Chaotic US exit from Afghanistan was an early setback for Biden

With the U.S. completing its 2021 withdrawal from Afghanistan, Biden fulfilled a campaign promise to wind down America's longest war.

But the 20-year conflict ended in disquieting fashion: The U.S.-backed Afghan government collapsed, a grisly bombing killed 13 U.S. troops and 170 others, and thousands of desperate Afghans descended on Kabul's airport in search of a way out before the final U.S. aircraft departed over the Hindu Kush.

The Afghanistan debacle was a major setback just eight months into Biden's presidency that he struggled to recover from.

"Ending the war was the right thing to do, and I believe history will reflect that," Biden said. "Critics said if we ended the war, it would damage our alliances and create threats to our homeland from foreign-directed terrorism out of a safe haven in Afghanistan — neither has occurred."

Biden's Republican detractors, including Trump, cast it as a signal moment in a failed presidency.

"I'll tell you what happened, he was so bad with Afghanistan, it was such a horrible embarrassment, most embarrassing moment in the history of our country," Trump said in his lone 2024 presidential debate with Biden, just weeks before the Democrat announced he was ending his reelection campaign.

Biden's legacy in Ukraine may hinge on Trump's approach going forward

With Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Biden rallied allies in Europe and beyond to provide Ukraine with billions

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in military and economic assistance — including more than \$100 billion from the U.S. alone. That allowed Kyiv to stay in the fight with Russian President Vladimir Putin's vastly bigger and better-equipped military.

Biden's team also coordinated with allies to hit Russia with a steady stream of sanctions aimed at isolating the Kremlin and making Moscow pay an economic price for prosecuting its war.

Biden on Monday marveled that at the start of the war Putin thought Russian forces would easily defeat Ukraine in a matter of days. It was an assessment U.S. and European intelligence officials shared.

Instead, Biden said his administration and its allies have "laid the foundation" for the Trump administration to help Ukraine eventually arrive at a moment where it can negotiate a just end to the nearly three-year old conflict.

"Today, Ukraine is still a free and independent country with the potential for a bright future," Biden said.

Trump has criticized the cost of the war to U.S. taxpayers and has vowed to bring the conflict to a quick end.

White House national security adviser Jake Sullivan made the case that Trump, a billionaire real estate developer, should consider the backing of Ukraine through the prism of a dealmaker.

"Donald Trump has built his identity around making deals, and the way you make a good deal is with leverage," Sullivan said in an interview. "Our case publicly and privately to the incoming team is build the leverage, show the staying power, back Ukraine, and it is down that path that lies a good deal."

Biden's Mideast diplomacy shadowed by devastation of Gaza

In the Middle East, Biden has stood by Israel as it has worked to root out Hamas from Gaza. That war spawned another in Lebanon, where Israel has mauled Iran's most powerful ally, Hezbollah, even as Israel has launched successful airstrikes openly inside of Iran for the first time.

The degradation of Hezbollah in turn played a role when Islamist-led rebels last month ousted longtime Syrian leader Bashar Assad, a brutal fixture of Iran's "Axis of Resistance."

"Iran is weaker than it's been in decades," Biden said.

Biden's relationship with Israel's conservative leader Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has been strained by the enormous Palestinian death toll in the fighting — now standing at more than 46,000 dead — and Israel's blockade of the territory, which has left much of Gaza a hellscape where access to food and basic health care is severely limited.

Pro-Palestinian activists have demanded an arms embargo against Israel, but U.S. policy has largely remained unchanged. The State Department in recent days informed Congress of a planned \$8 billion weapons sale to Israel.

Aaron David Miller, a former State Department Middle East negotiator, said the approach has put Iran on its heels, but Biden will pay a reputational cost for the devastation of Gaza.

"The administration was either unable or unwilling to create any sort of restraint that normal humans would regard as significant pressure," Miller said. "It was beyond Joe Biden's emotional and political bandwidth to impose the kinds of sustained or significant pressures that might have led to a change in Israeli tactics."

More than 15 months after the Hamas-led attack that prompted the war, around 98 hostages remain in Gaza. More than a third of those are presumed dead by Israeli authorities.

Biden's Middle East adviser Brett McGurk is in the Middle East, looking to complete an elusive hostage and ceasefire deal as time runs out in the presidency.

"We are on the brink of a proposal that I laid out in detail months ago finally coming to fruition," Biden said.

Trump, for his part, is warning that "all hell" will be unleashed on Hamas if the hostages aren't freed by Inauguration Day.

Sullivan declined to comment on Trump's threats to Hamas, but offered that the two sides are in agreement about the most important thing: getting a deal done.

"Having alignment of the outgoing and incoming administration that a hostage deal at the earliest possible opportunity is in the American national interest," he said. "Having unity of message on that is a good thing, and we have closely coordinated with the incoming team to this effect."

Small airborne embers play a big role in the spread of wildfires

By HOLLY RAMER Associated Press

While authorities still don't know what sparked the deadly fires in the Los Angeles area, they do know one clear way the flames have spread: embers.

At least 24 people have died in the fires that have destroyed more than 12,000 structures since starting last Tuesday. The flames have been fueled by strong winds, which not only aid combustion by increasing the oxygen supply but carry embers to unburned areas.

Contrary to popular belief, experts say most homes destroyed by wildfires aren't overcome by a racing wall of flames, but rather burn after being ignited by airborne embers.

Here's a look at what embers are and the role they play in wildfires.

What is an ember?

An ember is a piece of burning debris. Once it becomes airborne, the more technical term is firebrand, said James Urban, an assistant professor in the Department of Fire Protection Engineering at Worcester Polytechnic Institute.

"If it's a wildland fire, it's typically pieces of wood or other types of vegetation that are burning," he said. "But when you have a fire that's burning through an urban area, it can be vegetation, it can be pieces of the house, it can be almost anything that burns."

They can range in size from tiny specks to larger chunks.

What are they capable of?

While many people might have seen stray embers rise from a campfire and even had one land on them, the embers involved in wildfires are drastically different, said Anne Cope, chief engineer at the Insurance Institute for Business & Home Safety.

"Those embers can travel for miles, and it's often the neighborhoods that are closer to the wildlands that get inundated with just loads and loads — just showered with embers," she said.

Wind allows embers to burn harder and release more energy, becoming a more potent ignition source, Urban said. The firebrands then accumulate and sort of work together, gathering between the slats of wood fences or in shrubbery and igniting new fires.

In 2017, embers blew across a six-lane highway in Northern California, igniting businesses and then jumping from house to house in the Coffey Park neighborhood in Santa Rosa.

"A common thought before that was, 'We don't think embers are going to get all the way across that interstate, that's a far distance, they'll never get there,'" Cope said. Well, never is a dangerous word."

A single ember that lands on the ground might burn out within minutes but can also smolder, Urban said. "And then a sudden change of conditions like wind gusts ignite flames and cause a lot of destruction," he said.

How are researchers studying embers?

Together with San José State University, Worcester Polytech is part of a Wildfire Interdisciplinary Research Center. With funding from the U.S. Forest Service and National Science Foundation, researchers are examining how firebrands are produced and how that knowledge can be incorporated into models about how wildfires spread and defensive measures that can be applied to homes, Urban said. For example, his students have conducted experiments to see how vegetation management around buildings might affect how quickly a fire spreads between structures.

"I'm optimistic in a way that there's a lot of research coming out of this and we'll be better prepared in other fires," he said. "We're going to see more fires like this, and there's going to be need to be changes if we want to change the outcome."

Cope agreed.

"I would love to see us strategically incorporate preparedness for wildfire embers in far more areas than we currently do," she said.

Beyoncé donates \$2.5 million to fire relief and Meghan delays show launch due to the disaster

By The Associated Press undefined

LOS ANGELES (AP) — Weaker winds and intense firefighting efforts over the weekend boosted containment of fires burning in and around Los Angeles, but the effects of the blazes on the entertainment world continue.

The Oscar nominations have been delayed and the film academy announced Monday that it would cancel a gathering of nominees due to the fire. It's the latest shift to Hollywood's awards season and other projects are also being delayed. Meghan, the Duchess of Sussex, announced Sunday she would not launch a Netflix lifestyles program as planned this week and would wait until March.

Celebrities and entertainment organizations are pledging millions to help those who have been displaced or lost their homes, with Beyoncé directly millions to help families in the Eaton fire area.

While firefighters over the weekend were able to push the flames away from several populated areas, strong winds are expected to resume this week and last through Wednesday.

Thousands of homes have been destroyed, and 24 people have died as a result of the fires. More are reported missing and officials expect that number to increase.

Here's more on how the fires are affecting celebrities and the entertainment world.

Beyoncé, Netflix, Comcast donates millions to help wildfire victims

Beyoncé has contributed \$2.5 million to a newly launched LA Fire Relief Fund created by her charitable foundation, BeyGOOD.

The announcement arrived via the BeyGOOD foundation Instagram account on Sunday. "The fund is earmarked to aid families in the Altadena/Pasadena area who lost their homes, and to churches and community centers to address the immediate needs of those affected by the wildfires," the caption read.

Founded in 2013, the BeyGOOD foundation concentrates on economic equity, by "supporting marginalized and under-resourced programs," according to its mission statement.

Last week, Beyoncé's mother Tina Knowles shared that her Malibu bungalow was destroyed in the Los Angeles-area fires. "It was my favorite place, my sanctuary, my sacred happy place. now it is gone," she wrote on Instagram. "God Bless all the brave men and women in our fire department who risked their lives in dangerous conditions."

Netflix and Comcast NBCUniversal on Monday pledged \$10 million each to organizations offering aid to victims of the LA-area wildfires.

Netflix co-CEO Ted Sarandos said its donation will be split among five recipients including World Central Kitchen and the Los Angeles Fire Department Foundation. Comcast Corporation Chairman and CEO Brian L. Roberts allocated \$2.5 million of its \$10 million cash commitment to Habitat for Humanity of Greater Los Angeles' ReBUILD LA initiative. The remainder of the money would go to other charitable foundations helping victims.

The Screen Actors Guild announced over the weekend it would commit \$1 million to help members affected by the fires. While a lot of attention has been paid to stars who have lost homes, numerous less-famous industry workers have also lost homes or been displaced by the fires.

The nonprofit fundraising group Broadway Cares/Equity Fights AIDS has awarded \$500,000 in emergency grants to help Los Angeles-area residents and first responders with meals, shelter, medical care, clothing and emergency financial assistance.

"These wildfires have left deep scars, but they've also ignited a powerful wave of support from Broadway to the West Coast," said Robert E. Wankel, Broadway Cares/Equity Fights AIDS Board of Trustees president and chairman and CEO of The Shubert Organization.

Meghan delays launch of Netflix series

The Duchess of Sussex has pushed back the release of her new Netflix series due to the wildfires that have ravaged the LA-area.

"With Love, Meghan" was set to debut Wednesday, but the streaming service said Sunday that it sup-

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ports her request to push the premiere to focus on helping those affected by the fires.

The Duchess was born and raised in Los Angeles and now lives in Montecito, California, with Harry, the Duke of Sussex and their two children.

On Saturday, the royal couple visited Pasadena to hand out food and water to fire victims and thank first responders.

"With Love, Meghan" is a lifestyle program featuring the Duchess chatting with celebrity pals and demonstrating tasks like floral arrangements and baking. "I've always loved taking something pretty ordinary and elevating it," Meghan says in the trailer. The show will now drop March 4.

Composer Arnold Schoenberg's original work lost in fires

The publisher of Arnold Schoenberg's works says original manuscripts and scores from the composer were lost in the Los Angeles wild fires.

Belmont Music Publishers, located in the Pacific Palisades neighborhood, made the announcement Sunday.

"We have lost our full inventory of sales and rental materials," the company said in a statement. "We hope that in the near future we will be able to 'rise from the ashes' in a completely digital form. ... There are some scores and performing materials for which we have digital scans."

Born in Austria, Schoenberg moved to the U.S. when the Nazis took power and settled in Los Angeles, where he died in 1951.

Schoenberg gained attention for a 12-tone technique of composition and along with his students, including Alban Berg and Anton Webern, became known as the Second Viennese School. Among his most-known works are "Ewartung," "Gurre-Lieder," "Verklärte Nacht" and "Pierrot lunaire."

Sundance Film Festival will continue as planned

Many Hollywood events have been postponed and canceled due to the ongoing fires in the Los Angeles area, but the Sundance Film Festival is still planning to move forward with the 11-day event next week in Park City, Utah.

In a letter Monday to registrants from Southern California, the Institute's CEO Amanda Kelso and festival director Eugene Hernandez wrote that, "we may mourn, but we also know it is important to carry on." Those who received the letter were also invited to share more about how they've been affected by the fires.

Michelle Satter, a founding director of the Sundance Institute and its artists programs, wrote on social media last week that she lost her home in the Palisades fire. Satter is among those being honored at the festival's opening gala on Jan. 24.

Up to 4 in 10 people could develop dementia after 55.

What you can do to lower your risk

By LAURAN NEERGAARD AP Medical Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — About a million Americans a year are expected to develop dementia by 2060, roughly double today's toll, researchers reported Monday.

That estimate is based on a new study that found a higher lifetime risk than previously thought: After age 55, people have up to a 4 in 10 chance of eventually developing dementia -- if they live long enough.

It's a sobering number but there are steps people can take to reduce that risk, such as controlling high blood pressure and other bad-for-the-brain health problems. And it's not too late to try even in middle age.

"All of our research suggests what you do in midlife really matters," said Dr. Josef Coresh of NYU Langone Health, who coauthored the study in the journal Nature Medicine.

Dementia isn't only Alzheimer's

Taking longer to recall a name or where you put your keys is typical with older age. But dementia isn't a normal part of aging -- it's a progressive loss of memory, language and other cognitive functions. Simply getting older is the biggest risk and the population is rapidly aging.

Alzheimer's is the most common form, and silent brain changes that eventually lead to it can begin two decades before symptoms appear. Other types include vascular dementia, when heart disease or small strokes impair blood flow to the brain. Many people have mixed causes, meaning vascular problems could

exacerbate brewing Alzheimer's symptoms.

Measuring the risk from a certain age over the potential remaining life span can guide public health recommendations and medical research.

"It's not a guarantee that someone will develop dementia," cautioned Dr. James Galvin, a University of Miami Alzheimer's specialist. He wasn't involved with the new study but said the findings fit with other research.

Dementia risk is different by age

Prior studies estimated about 14% of men and 23% of women would develop some form of dementia during their lifetime. Coresh's team analyzed more recent data from a U.S. study that has tracked the heart health and cognitive function of about 15,000 older adults for several decades.

Importantly, they found the risk changes with the decades.

Only 4% of people developed dementia between the ages of 55 and 75, what Coresh calls a key 20-year window for protecting brain health.

For people who survive common health threats until 75, the dementia risk then jumped — to 20% by age 85 and 42% between ages 85 and 95.

Overall, the lifetime dementia risk after age 55 was 35% for men and 48% for women, the researchers concluded. Women generally live longer than men, a main reason for that difference, Coresh noted. Black Americans had a slightly higher risk, 44%, than white people at 41%.

Yes, there are ways to help lower dementia risk

There are some risk factors people can't control, including age and whether you inherited a gene variant called APOE4 that raises the chances of late-in-life Alzheimer's.

But people can try to avert or at least delay health problems that contribute to later dementia. Coresh, for example, wears a helmet when biking because repeated or severe brain injuries from crashes or falls increase the risk of later-in-life dementia.

Especially important: "What's good for your heart is good for your brain," added Miami's Galvin. He urges people to exercise, avoid obesity, and control blood pressure, diabetes and cholesterol.

For example, high blood pressure can impair blood flow to the brain, a risk not just for vascular dementia but also linked to some hallmarks of Alzheimer's. Similarly, the high blood sugar of poorly controlled diabetes is linked to cognitive decline and damaging inflammation in the brain.

Stay socially and cognitively active, too, Galvin said. He urges people to try hearing aids if age brings hearing loss, which can spur social isolation.

"There are things that we have control over, and those things I think would be really, really important to build a better brain as we age," he said.

A tough-on-crime approach is back in US state capitols

By DAVID A. LIEB Associated Press

JEFFERSON CITY, Mo. (AP) — Within minutes of his inauguration Monday, new Missouri Gov. Mike Kehoe unleashed a volley of orders targeting crime. The tone-setting move reflects a national trend.

After a period of relaxed sentencing laws, a tough-on-crime approach is back in political favor in the U.S.

Republicans and Democrats alike are promoting anti-crime initiatives as a new year of lawmaking gets underway in state capitols. That comes after voters in several states approved ballot measures in the fall imposing stricter penalties for crimes ranging from shoplifting to deadly drug dealing.

Kehoe, a Republican who cruised to election, took the oath of office at noon. Soon afterward, Kehoe said he issued orders aimed at capturing dangerous fugitives, boosting pay for veteran state law enforcement officers and training them to assist federal immigration authorities. He also said he ordered immigration-status data to be collected on people facing criminal charges.

"Too many Missourians don't feel safe, and too many Missourians aren't safe," Kehoe said. "When people are afraid for their lives and their family, they cannot be productive, and they will not prosper."

In some states like Missouri, the anti-crime measures are intertwined with efforts to crack down on

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those living in the U.S. illegally, mirroring an emphasis of President-elect Donald Trump. Many also propose tougher penalties for trafficking fentanyl, a synthetic opioid blamed for tens of thousands of overdose deaths annually in the U.S.

Other measures go beyond that. Some seek stricter sentences for sexual offenses involving children, violent crimes or retail theft rings, which have gained attention from social media videos showing shoplifting crews rampaging through stores.

In Maryland, Democratic state Sen. Ron Watson is sponsoring legislation he said would let prosecutors file felony charges against everyone involved in a group theft if the total value exceeds \$1,500, even if each person stole less than that.

Criminals "have become emboldened because they can get away with things and pretty much get a slap on the wrist," Watson said. "Violent or nonviolent, a crime is a crime. And that crime needs to be punished."

Drug crimes in the spotlight

Utah state Rep. Matthew Gwynn, a Republican, is among many lawmakers targeting fentanyl traffickers. Gwynn said his bill would impose heftier penalties for selling large quantities of illicit fentanyl than for other drugs like heroin and methamphetamine.

The federal government and many states have backed away from 1980s policies that imposed harsher sentences on crack cocaine than powder cocaine, as civil rights activists noted a disproportionate impact on minorities. But Gwynn, who is police chief of the Salt Lake City suburb of Roy, said sentencing enhancements for fentanyl are justified.

"I believe fentanyl to be almost terroristic in nature because of the amount of people it can kill," Gwynn said.

Many types of crimes rose during the coronavirus pandemic. More recently, the rates of violent crimes and many property crimes have trended back down, though shoplifting remains above pre-pandemic levels, according to the Council on Criminal Justice, a nonpartisan think tank.

But people's sense of security isn't necessarily tied to statistics. High-profile crimes such as the New Year's Day attack in New Orleans, the burning of a woman on the New York subway or the fatal shooting of a health insurance executive outside a New York City hotel can impact perceptions of public safety.

"When you see randomness, brazenness, that makes people feel vulnerable and suggests there is a sense of lawlessness, a breakdown of behavioral norms," said Adam Gelb, president and CEO of the Council on Criminal Justice.

"Many people seem to think that the reforms over the past two decades overshot the mark and there needs to be a rebalancing," Gelb added.

Crime is on voters' minds

Nearly 8 in 10 voters in the U.S. said they were "very" or "somewhat" concerned about crime in their own communities, according to AP VoteCast, a survey of more than 120,000 voters conducted during the fall election. The percentage saying they were very concerned was higher than the national rate in several states including Louisiana, Mississippi, New Mexico, Alabama and California.

California voters gave overwhelming approval in November to a ballot initiative making shoplifting a felony for repeat offenders and increasing penalties for some drug charges, including those involving fentanyl. The measure rolled back parts of progressive law passed by voters in 2014 that downgraded several nonviolent crimes to misdemeanors, including theft valued under \$950 and some drug offenses.

In Colorado, voters approved a ballot initiative lengthening the time people must serve in prison before they can be paroled for certain categories of murder, assault, sexual assault, kidnapping, arson, burglary and robbery.

Arizona voters approved measures boosting penalties for deadly fentanyl sales and mandating life imprisonment for certain child sex trafficking crimes.

Rethinking loose sentencing laws

Other states have backtracked just years after relaxing sentencing laws. Democratic Oregon Gov. Tina Kotek signed a measure rolling back a 2020 voter-approved law that had made possession of small

amounts of hard drugs such as heroin, cocaine and methamphetamine only punishable by a ticket and a maximum fine of \$100. A new law that took effect last year makes that a misdemeanor punishable by up to six months in jail and imposes harsher penalties for selling drugs near parks and other places.

Republican Louisiana Gov. Jeff Landry signed numerous anti-crime laws last year, including longer sentences for carjacking and fentanyl crimes, the elimination of parole for most offenders and the reversal of a 2016 law that had treated 17-year-olds charged with crimes as juveniles instead of adults.

In Missouri, lawmakers in 2014 approved an overhaul of the state's criminal laws that reduced possible prison sentences for some nonviolent drug crimes. In 2019, they added a law exempting some nonviolent offenders from requirements to serve between 40% and 80% of their prison terms, making hundreds of people eligible for release sooner.

This year, Missouri lawmakers are backing numerous anti-crime measures, including bills targeting fentanyl, stunt driving, rioting, retail theft and resisting arrest. Other measures encourage recruiting more police.

"Too many Missouri families are being torn apart by violence and crime," House Speaker Jon Patterson said on the Legislature's opening day. "Nothing is more harmful to the growth of our state than criminals who roam our streets with little fear of punishment."

Significant progress made in talks over Israel-Hamas ceasefire and hostage release, officials say

By VICTORIA EASTWOOD, SAMY MAGDY and JOSEF FEDERMAN Associated Press

CAIRO (AP) — U.S. and Arab mediators made significant progress overnight toward brokering a ceasefire in the Israel-Hamas war and the release of scores of hostages held in the Gaza Strip, but a deal hasn't been reached yet, officials said Monday.

Four officials acknowledged that progress has been made and said the coming days would be critical for ending more than 15 months of fighting that has destabilized the Middle East. They spoke on condition of anonymity because they weren't authorized to discuss the talks.

A U.S. official briefed on the negotiations said all sides are "closer than we've ever been, but it could still fall apart." The official declined to predict the timing of a potential agreement because he said it is too uncertain, with multiple moving parts still in play.

Two other officials, including one associated with Hamas, said there were still a number of hurdles. On several occasions over the past year, U.S. leaders have said they were on the verge of reaching a deal, only to have talks stall.

Another person familiar with the talks said there had been a breakthrough overnight and there was a proposed deal on the table. Israeli and Hamas negotiators will take it to their leaders for final approval, the person said.

The person said mediators from Qatar had put renewed pressure on Hamas to accept the agreement, while U.S. President-elect Donald Trump's envoy, Steve Witkoff, was pressing the Israelis. Witkoff recently joined the negotiations and has been in the region in recent days.

The person said the mediators had handed the draft deal to each side and the next 24 hours would be pivotal.

An Egyptian official said there had been good progress overnight, but it would likely take a few more days, and the sides were aiming for a deal before Trump's inauguration on Jan. 20.

A Hamas official who spoke anonymously because he wasn't authorized to brief the media said a number of contentious issues still need to be resolved, including an Israeli commitment to ending the war and details about the withdrawal of Israeli troops and the exchange of hostages for Palestinian prisoners.

The Qatari palace said the emir of Qatar, Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani, met with Hamas' delegation in Doha as well as with Witkoff and Brett McGurk, President Joe Biden's top Middle East adviser. Al Thani also spoke by phone with Biden, who stressed the urgent need for a deal.

Months of negotiations have repeatedly stalled

The Biden administration, along with Egypt and Qatar, has spent more than a year trying to broker an

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agreement to end the deadliest war ever fought between Israelis and Palestinians and secure the release of scores of hostages captured in Hamas' attack on southern Israel on Oct. 7, 2023, which triggered the conflict.

But the sides have been divided over the details of the planned exchange of hostages for Palestinian prisoners held by Israel, as well as the nature of the ceasefire itself. Hamas has said it won't release the remaining captives without an end to the war, while Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has vowed to continue the campaign until "total victory" over the militant group.

Under discussion now is a phased ceasefire. Netanyahu has repeatedly signaled he is committed only to the first phase, a partial hostage release in exchange for a weeklong halt in fighting. The possibility of a lasting ceasefire and other issues would be negotiated after the first phase begins. Hamas has demanded a full withdrawal and complete end to the war, and is hoping this first phase will lead to that outcome.

A deal could weaken Netanyahu's coalition, which includes two far-right factions that have threatened to leave the government if Israel makes too many concessions. Members of the opposition have promised to give Netanyahu the support he needs to approve a hostage release, but the hardliners' anger could be a source of instability down the road.

Ten hardline members of Israel's parliament sent a letter to Netanyahu expressing their opposition to a deal that does not allow Israeli soldiers to maintain a presence in strategic parts of the Gaza Strip, which previously has been a non-starter for Hamas.

Netanyahu is hoping the prospect of a Trump administration — which includes allies of the West Bank settler movement — will persuade his partners to remain in the government.

Biden, who hopes to wrap up a deal before leaving office next week, spoke with Netanyahu about the talks on Sunday.

The head of Israel's Mossad foreign intelligence agency, David Barnea, and McGurk were both in Doha. Barnea's presence meant high-level Israeli officials who would need to sign off on any agreement are once again involved in the talks.

Palestinians and families of hostages hope for a deal

Just one brief ceasefire has been achieved during the war, and that was in the earliest weeks of fighting.

Families of the roughly 100 hostages still held in Gaza have been pressing Netanyahu to reach a deal to bring their loved ones home.

In Gaza, Palestinians hope for a stop to Israel's military campaign, which has devastated much of the territory and driven around 90% of its 2.3 million people from their homes. At least 14 Palestinians, including a family of five, were killed in three separate Israeli airstrikes Monday in northern Gaza, according to Gaza's Health Ministry.

Five Israeli soldiers were killed in Beit Hanoun in northern Gaza on Monday, raising the number of Israeli soldiers killed in combat in the north over the past week to 15. The large number of fatalities could lead to more support for a ceasefire among the Israeli public.

Israel's campaign in Gaza has killed more than 46,000 Palestinians, the majority women and children, according to the territory's Health Ministry, whose count doesn't give a breakdown between fighters and civilians. Hamas-led militants killed about 1,200 people and abducted around 250 others in the attack that ignited the war.

In Jerusalem, around 1,000 people blocked the main entrance to the city and demonstrated against a deal, marching with a sign that read "You have no mandate to surrender to Hamas."

In Tel Aviv, dozens of supporters of the hostages spelled out "HOME!" at the entrance to the city's main military base.

"We're not getting any guidance yet from the government of Israel, understanding if it is a deal for all the hostages or is it just a partial deal," said Ruby Chen, whose son, Israeli-American Itay Chen, was taken hostage from his military base. Israel determined that Chen was likely killed on Oct. 7, 2023, and his body is still in Gaza.

Ruby Chen said when it seemed that talks were starting to gain momentum 10 days ago, he flew to Qatar with other families to press for a deal to include all of the hostages, including the bodies of those

who have died.

Inside Gaza, "we hear that there are negotiations every day, but we see nothing," said Mazen Hammad, a resident of the southern city of Khan Younis. "When we see it on the ground, then we believe that there is a truce."

'PDS' warnings were made to grab attention in tornadoes, hurricanes, and now wildfires

By JEFF MARTIN Associated Press

The National Weather Service's Los Angeles page screams "Particularly Dangerous Situation (PDS)" in hot pink letters against a gray background.

It's a rare warning aimed at seizing attention ahead of extreme wildfire risk that's predicted to start in Southern California at 4 a.m. (1200GMT) Tuesday.

PDS warnings were first used to warn of tornado outbreaks in the Midwest. More than a decade ago, three meteorologists proposed expanding their use to disasters such as ice storms, floods, hurricanes, and now wildfires.

Grabbing attention

"It catches the attention, it really heightens that awareness and the need to really act at that point," said one of those scientists, Jonathan Howell.

The hope was that the phrase would "become synonymous with extreme weather events" and also could be used for emergencies such as hurricanes and snowstorms, Howell and two colleagues wrote for a presentation at a 2011 conference of the American Meteorological Society.

"I definitely think this has made an impact and has saved lives over the years," said Howell, who is the science and operations officer at the weather service's Mobile, Alabama office.

Past warnings

The weather service's Storm Prediction Center — whose mission is to provide "forecasts and watches for severe thunderstorms and tornadoes" — says that the term was first used on April 2, 1982 by forecaster Robert H. Johns, in conjunction with a tornado watch.

That came after a "failed attempt in the late 1970s," Johns said in an interview in the Electronic Journal of Severe Storms Meteorology. Meteorologists had alerted the public to a "big next day," only to see no severe weather, he said.

Today, meteorologists have better tools to predict catastrophic weather outbreaks than they had in the 1970s and 1980s and forecasters can more reliably issue severe warnings, Howell said.

The PDS term appeared in newspaper articles such as an April, 1, 1983 Associated Press story about a widespread storm system that caused a blinding dust storm in West Texas.

PDS warnings for wildfires

During the first week of November last year, as Santa Ana winds fueled the Mountain Fire northwest of Los Angeles, the National Weather Service issued a PDS warning. Forecasters called the threat "extreme and life-threatening."

Then, on Dec. 9, residents of Los Angeles and Ventura counties were again warned of a "particularly dangerous situation" as Santa Ana winds roared through the mountains.

Trump team is questioning civil servants at National Security Council about commitment to his agenda

By AAMER MADHANI and ZEKE MILLER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Incoming senior Trump administration officials have begun questioning career civil servants who work on the White House National Security Council about who they voted for in the 2024 election, their political contributions and whether they have made social media posts that could be

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considered incriminating by President-elect Donald Trump's team, according to a U.S. official familiar with the matter.

At least some of these nonpolitical employees have begun packing up their belongings since being asked about their loyalty to Trump — after they had earlier been given indications that they would be asked to stay on at the NSC in the new administration, the official said, speaking on the condition of anonymity to discuss sensitive personnel matters.

Trump's pick for national security adviser, Florida Rep. Mike Waltz, in recent days publicly signaled his intention to get rid of all nonpolitical appointees and career intelligence officials serving on the NSC by Inauguration Day to ensure the council is staffed with those who support Trump's agenda.

A wholesale removal of foreign policy and national security experts from the NSC on Day 1 of the new administration could deprive Trump's team of considerable expertise and institutional knowledge at a time when the U.S. is grappling with difficult policy challenges in Ukraine, the Mideast and beyond. Such questioning could also make new policy experts brought in to the NSC less likely to speak up about policy differences and concerns.

White House national security adviser Jake Sullivan said Monday that he has not been told by Waltz or Trump transition team officials that the incoming team has conducted or planned on conducting such vetting.

But Sullivan in recent days has made a robust case for the incoming Trump administration to hold over career government employees assigned to the NSC at least through the early going of the new administration. He called the career appointees "patriots" who have served "without fear or favor for both Democratic and Republican administrations."

"And many of them have raised their hands to say, 'I'm ready to stay and keep serving,'" Sullivan told reporters.

The NSC staff members being questioned about their loyalty are largely subject matter experts who have been loaned to the White House by federal agencies — the State Department, FBI and CIA, for example — for temporary duty that typically lasts one to two years. If removed from the NSC, they would be returned to their home agencies.

Vetting of the civil servants began in the last week, the official said. Some of them have been questioned about their politics by Trump appointees who will serve as directors on the NSC and who had weeks earlier asked them to stick around. There are dozens of civil servants at the directorate level at the NSC who had anticipated remaining at the White House in the new administration.

A second U.S. official told the AP that he was informed weeks ago by incoming Trump administration officials that they planned on raising questions with career appointees that work at the White House, including those at the NSC, about their political leanings. The official, who was not authorized to comment publicly, however, had not yet been formally vetted.

Waltz told Breitbart News last week that "everybody is going to resign at 12:01 on January 20." He added that he wanted the NSC to be staffed by personnel who are "100 percent aligned with the president's agenda."

"We're working through our process to get everybody their clearances and through the transition process now," Waltz said. "Our folks know who we want out in the agencies, we're putting those requests in, and in terms of the detailees they're all going to go back."

A Trump transition official, speaking on condition of anonymity to discuss personnel matters, said the incoming administration felt it was "entirely appropriate" to seek officials who share the incoming president's vision and would be focused on common goals.

The NSC was launched as an arm of the White House during the Truman administration, tasked with advising and assisting the president on national security and foreign policy and coordinating among various government agencies. It is common for experts detailed to the NSC to carry over from one administration to the next, even when the White House changes parties.

Sullivan has also said it was "up to the next national security adviser to decide how they want to play things. All I can say is how we did it and what I thought worked."

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"When they are selected to come over, they're not selected based on their political affiliation or their policy opinions, they're selected based on their experience and capacity and so we have a real diversity of people in terms of their views, their politics, their backgrounds," Sullivan said of those assigned to the NSC, during a reporters roundtable hosted by the White House on Friday. "The common element of all of it is we get the best of the best here" from agencies including the State Department, the intelligence community, the Pentagon and the Homeland Security and Treasury departments.

Sullivan noted when Biden took office in 2021, he inherited most of his NSC staff from the outgoing Trump administration.

"Those folks were awesome," Sullivan said. "They were really good."

Virginia Rep. Gerry Connolly, the top Democrat on the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee, said such vetting "threatens our national security and our ability to respond quickly and effectively to the ongoing and very real global threats in a dangerous world."

Trump, during his first term, was scarred when two career military officers detailed to the NSC became whistleblowers, raising their concerns about Trump's 2019 call to Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy in which the president sought an investigation of Biden and his son Hunter. That episode led to Trump's first impeachment.

Alexander Vindman was listening to the call in his role as an NSC official when he became alarmed at what he heard. He approached his twin brother, Eugene, who at the time was serving as an ethics lawyer at the NSC. Both Vindmans reported their concerns to superiors.

Alexander Vindman said in a statement Friday that the Trump team's approach to staffing the NSC "will have a chilling effect on senior policy staff across the government."

He added, "Talented professionals, wary of being dismissed for principled stances or offering objective advice, will either self-censor or forgo service altogether."

The two men were heralded by Democrats as patriots for speaking out and derided by Trump as insubordinate. Eugene Vindman in November was elected as a Democrat to represent Virginia's 7th Congressional District.

Auburn rises to No. 1 in AP Top 25 after Tennessee loses, Georgia is ranked for 1st time since 2011

By AARON BEARD AP Basketball Writer

Auburn has climbed to No. 1 in The Associated Press men's basketball poll for its second stint at the top in program history, while fellow Southeastern Conference program Georgia is in the rankings for the first time in 14 years.

Bruce Pearl's Tigers (15-1) claimed 60 of 62 first-place votes to rise one spot Monday after previous No. 1 Tennessee suffered its first loss of the season, falling at Florida, to end a five-week reign at the top. Auburn has been No. 1 only once before in the AP Top 25, during a three-week stint in January and February of 2022, and is the third team to sit atop the poll this season.

Auburn's only loss came at Duke in early December and the Tigers have won eight straight games, though there is no word on when star forward Johni Broome might be ready to play after suffering an ankle injury in Saturday's win over South Carolina.

The Tigers' rise made them the headliner in another SEC-heavy poll, with the league having nine teams in the AP Top 25 — including three of the top five and five of the top 10.

Iowa State rose one spot to No. 2, reaching its highest ranking in program history, followed by Duke, Alabama and Florida. The Blue Devils and Gators each claimed a first-place vote.

The top tier

The Volunteers (15-1) had been No. 1 since Dec. 9 and stood as Division I's last unbeaten team before a 30-point loss to Florida. They recovered by beating Texas but still tumbled five spots to No. 6.

Marquette was next at No. 7 as the only team to stay at the same spot from last week, followed by Kentucky, preseason No. 1 Kansas and Houston to round out the top 10.

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Rising

No. 12 Michigan State and No. 20 Michigan had the week's biggest jumps, each rising four spots. Florida and No. 17 Purdue were next by climbing three positions.

In all, 15 teams that were ranked last week moved up in the latest poll.

Falling

While Tennessee's tumble was notable, No. 19 Illinois had the week's biggest slide by falling six spots after a weekend home loss to Southern California.

Two-time reigning national champion UConn matched the Volunteers' five-spot decline, checking in at No. 14 after last week's loss at Villanova.

Six teams that were ranked last week moved down in Monday's poll.

Welcome

No. 23 Georgia, No. 24 Wisconsin and No. 25 Baylor were the week's new additions. And for Georgia, it's been a while.

Mike White's Bulldogs (14-2) have their first AP Top 25 ranking since spending a week at No. 24 in January 2011. That lone appearance had stood as the program's only time being ranked since the 2002-03 season, but the Bulldogs are coming off a week that featured wins against then-No. 6 Kentucky and then-No. 17 Oklahoma for the program's first back-to-back victories against ranked opponents since the 2006-07 season.

Both the Badgers and Bears have spent multiple weeks in the poll this season.

Farewell (for now)

West Virginia (No. 21) and UCLA (No. 22) joined the Sooners in falling out of this week's poll.

Conference watch

The SEC — which had 10 ranked teams on Dec. 23 and Dec. 30 — had nine ranked teams for the fifth time this season, including No. 11 Texas A&M, No. 15 Mississippi State and No. 21 Mississippi.

The Big Ten was next with six, followed by the Big 12 with four. The Big East had two, followed by the Atlantic Coast, West Coast, American Athletic and Mountain West conferences with one each.

Minnesota earns 1st women's AP Top 25 ranking since 2019. UCLA, South Carolina, Notre Dame still 1-3

By DOUG FEINBERG AP Basketball Writer

Minnesota is off to its best start in 17 games and earned its first ranking since 2019 on Monday, entering The Associated Press women's basketball poll at No. 24.

The Golden Gophers have won 16 of their first 17 contests, with the loss coming against Nebraska last month. They are ranked for the first time since Dec. 30, 2019. Next up is a matchup at No. 8 Maryland on Tuesday.

UCLA, South Carolina, Notre Dame and Southern California kept rolling, holding the top four spots again in the AP Top 25. The Bruins received 29 of the 31 first-place votes from a national media panel. The Fighting Irish, who were missing All-America guard Hannah Hidalgo in their last game because of a foot injury, got the other two top votes.

Undefeated LSU moved up one spot to fifth. The Tigers, along with the Bruins and No. 9 Ohio State, are the only three unbeaten teams left in Division I women's basketball.

UConn was sixth, with Texas falling two places to seventh after a 67-50 loss at South Carolina on Sunday.

TCU moved up one spot to 10th.

Dropping out

Iowa and Michigan fell out of the poll this week. The two Big Ten schools suffered losses last week. The Wolverines had a difficult stretch over the past few weeks, with games against No. 1 UCLA, No. 4 USC and No. 9 Ohio State that were all losses. Michigan did beat Purdue on Saturday. Iowa lost to Illinois and Indiana last week.

Ranked Cowgirls

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No. 24 Oklahoma State entered the poll for the first time since 2018 after knocking off then-No. 17 West Virginia on Saturday. The Cowgirls have gone 14-2 this season and are on the road at Houston and UCF this week before hosting No. 10 TCU on Jan. 22.

Rising Bears

California moved up six spots to No. 18 after beating No. 21 North Carolina State and Florida State last week. The Bears have their highest ranking since they were 18th on Dec. 31, 2018.

Conference breakdown

The Southeastern Conference has seven teams ranked this week, with the Big Ten and ACC right behind with six each. The Big 12 has five and the Big East one.

Games of the week

No. 23 Utah at No. 10 TCU, Friday. The Utes stumbled in their first game this season as a ranked team, getting routed by then-No. 12 Kansas State. Now Utah will face another tall task, this one against Sedona Prince and the Horned Frogs.

No. 13 Oklahoma at No. 2 South Carolina, Sunday. The Gamecocks continue their stretch of facing five ranked opponents in a row with a game at No. 19 Alabama on Thursday before hosting the Sooners this weekend.

Millions have had student loans canceled under Biden — despite the collapse of his forgiveness plan

By COLLIN BINKLEY AP Education Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — Despite failing to deliver his promise for broad student loan forgiveness, President Joe Biden has now overseen the cancellation of student loans for more than 5 million Americans — more than any other president in U.S. history.

In a last-minute action on Monday, the Education Department canceled loans for 150,000 borrowers through programs that existed before Biden took office. His administration expanded those programs and used them to their fullest extent, pressing on with cancellation even after the Supreme Court rejected Biden's plan for a new forgiveness policy.

"My Administration has taken historic action to reduce the burden of student debt, hold bad actors accountable, and fight on behalf of students across the country," Biden said in a written statement.

In total, the administration says it has waived \$183.6 billion in student loans.

The wave of cancellation could dry up when President-elect Donald Trump takes office. Trump hasn't detailed his student loan policies but previously called cancellation "vile" and illegal. Republicans have fought relentlessly against Biden's plans, saying cancellation is ultimately shouldered by taxpayers who never attended college or already repaid their loans.

Biden loosened rules for debt forgiveness

The latest round of relief mostly comes through a program known as borrower defense, which allows students to get their loans canceled if they're cheated or misled by their colleges. It was created in 1994 but rarely used until a wave of high-profile for-profit college scandals during the Obama administration.

A smaller share of the relief came through a program for borrowers with disabilities and through Public Service Loan Forgiveness, which was created in 2007 and offers to erase all remaining debt for borrowers in a government or nonprofit job who make 10 years of monthly payments.

Most of Monday's borrower defense cancellations were for students who attended several defunct colleges owned by Center for Excellence in Higher Education, including CollegeAmerica, Stevens-Henager College, and Independence University. They are based on past findings that the schools lied to prospective students about their employment prospects and the terms of private loans.

Before Biden took office, those programs were criticized by advocates who said complex rules made it difficult for borrowers to get relief. The Biden administration loosened some of the rules using its regulatory power, a maneuver that expanded eligibility without going through Congress.

As an example, just 7,000 borrowers had gotten their loans canceled through Public Service Loan For-

givenness before the Biden administration took office. Widespread confusion about eligibility, along with errors by loan servicers, resulted in a 99% rejection rate for applicants.

Huge numbers of borrowers made years of payments only to find out they were in an ineligible repayment plan. Some were improperly put into forbearance — a pause on payments — by their loan servicers. Those periods didn't end up counting toward the 10 years of payments needed for cancellation.

The Biden administration temporarily relaxed the eligibility rules during the pandemic and then made it more permanent in 2023. As a result, more than 1 million public servants have now had their balances zeroed out through the program.

All those rule changes were meant to be a companion to Biden's marquee policy for student debt, which proposed up to \$20,000 in relief for more than 40 million Americans. But after the Supreme Court blocked the move, the Biden administration shifted its focus to maximizing relief through existing mechanisms.

Republicans have called for a different approach

Announcements of new cancellation became routine, even as conservatives in Congress accused Biden of overstepping his power. Republican states fought off Biden's later attempts at mass forgiveness, but the smaller batches of relief continued without any major legal challenge.

As Republicans take hold of both chambers of Congress and the White House, Biden's changes could be targeted for a rollback. But it's unclear how far the next administration will go to tighten the cancellation spigot.

Trump proposed eliminating PSLF during his first term in office, but Congress rejected the idea. Project 2025, a blueprint created by the Heritage Foundation for a second Trump term, proposes ending PSLF, and narrowing borrower defense and making repayment plans less generous than existing ones.

Republicans have suggested that reversing Biden's changes will be a priority. Earlier this month, Rep. Virginia Foxx, R-N.C., issued a report blasting Biden's expansion of borrower defense, saying he "tried to stretch every possible law" to fulfill his campaign promises.

When Trump takes office, Foxx wrote, "the jig will finally be up."

Russian forces bypass a key stronghold in a bid to cut off its supplies, a Ukrainian officer says

By SAMYA KULLAB and YEHOR KONOVALOV Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — Russian forces are bypassing a key stronghold in eastern Ukraine that they have fought for months to capture and are focusing instead on cutting supply lines to it, a Ukrainian official said Monday.

Russian troops are going around the vital logistics hub of Pokrovsk, where a steadfast Ukrainian defense has kept them at bay, and are taking aim at a highway that leads from there to the central Ukraine city of Dnipro, Maj. Viktor Trehubov, a local Ukrainian army spokesperson, told The Associated Press.

That route is crucial for supplies feeding Ukrainian forces in the entire region. Cutting the highway traffic would also severely weaken Pokrovsk.

"So far, they have not achieved their goal and (Ukrainian forces) are working to ensure that they do not achieve it in the future — just as they have not been successful in other attempts to bypass the city," Trehubov said in a WhatsApp message.

Ukraine's army is under severe strain along parts of the approximately 1,000-kilometer (600-mile) front line, especially in the eastern Donetsk region where Pokrovsk is located.

After almost three years of war, Ukrainian units are depleted and are outnumbered by Russian forces. Though its battlefield progress has been slow and costly, momentum in the war is in Russia's favor and its onslaught has gradually swallowed up towns and villages, especially in Donetsk. The Russian Defense Ministry claimed Monday its forces had seized the village of Pishchane.

In his daily video address to the nation late Sunday, Ukraine President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said fighting around Pokrovsk was "the most intense" in recent days.

In separate comments to local media, Trehubov, the army spokesperson, speculated that Russia's heavy

losses of troops and armor in the Donetsk operation had prompted it to alter its strategy.

"Now they are acting more cautiously," he said.

Russian President Vladimir Putin is pressing his advantage ahead of U.S. President-elect Donald Trump's arrival in the White House next week. Trump says he wants to bring a swift end to the war, though he hasn't publicized details of his plans.

In 2022, Moscow illegally annexed the Donetsk and neighboring Luhansk regions, which make up the economically important Donbas industrial area, together with the southeastern provinces of Kherson and Zaporizhzhia. But Russian forces don't fully control any of them.

Australian Open: Novak Djokovic and new coach Andy Murray get a win against US teen in debut

By HOWARD FENDRICH AP Tennis Writer

MELBOURNE, Australia (AP) — Novak Djokovic's first match with former rival Andy Murray as his coach did not start all that well, even against a 19-year-old making his Grand Slam debut.

Still, after dropping his opening set at the 2025 Australian Open on Monday night to Nishesh Basavareddy, an American who left Stanford University and turned pro last month, Djokovic eventually asserted himself for a 4-6, 6-3, 6-4, 6-2 victory to begin his bid for an 11th championship at Melbourne Park and a record 25th major title overall.

"I'm obviously thrilled to have him in my corner," Djokovic said about Murray. "I must say, it was a little bit of a strange experience to have him at courtside in my box. We played for over 20 years against each other at the highest level. Great to have him on the same side of the net. He gave me some great advice mid-match."

Before heading out into Rod Laver Arena, Djokovic and Murray chatted in the gym. They wrapped up the conversation with a fist bump, before Djokovic hopped on the treadmill to warm up.

During the match, apart from an extended conversation before the fourth set, there was only the occasional interaction between player and coach — a pairing between 37-year-olds born a week apart, and opponents from the age of 12, including in a series of Slam finals as pros. Murray retired at the Paris Olympics in August; Djokovic proposed teaming up in November.

As a player, Murray was known for mid-match dramatics, plenty of gesticulating and muttering, often directed at his entourage. Djokovic does similar.

Djokovic showed some of his usual fire when that vital break came at the 1 1/2-hour mark. He watched the 107th-ranked Basavareddy's forehand land wide and let out a yell, clenched a fist, pointed a finger at his ear. That was the beginning of the end for Basavareddy, who started stepping gingerly between points and grabbing at his legs, and took a medical timeout before the third set.

On a busy and warm Day 2, which included nine Grand Slam champions with a combined 43 major trophies in action plus another half-dozen players with runner-up showings, the winners included No. 2 Iga Swiatek, No. 3 Coco Gauff, No. 7 Jessica Pegula and Naomi Osaka among the women, and No. 1 Jannik Sinner and No. 3 Carlos Alcaraz among the men.

Osaka, who won two of her four major titles in Australia, defeated Caroline Garcia 6-3, 3-6, 6-3 in Monday's last match at Rod Laver Arena.

Noteworthy exits came from two-time Australian Open champion Victoria Azarenka, 2017 French Open champion Jelena Ostapenko, and two-time major finalist Stefanos Tsitsipas. Ostapenko's 6-3, 7-6 (6) loss came against Tokyo Olympics gold medalist Belinda Bencic, who is ranked outside the top 400 after returning in October from maternity leave.

Also one-and-done, but not that surprisingly: Nick Kyrgios, who lost to Djokovic in the 2022 Wimbledon final and played one match the past two seasons because of injuries. Kyrgios dealt with a strained abdominal muscle in the lead-up to this week and was defeated by Jacob Fearnley 7-6 (3), 6-3, 7-6 (2).

"Sorry for Nick," said Fearnley, a 23-year-old from Scotland who played college tennis at TCU in Fort Worth, Texas. "I could tell he was dealing with some stuff."

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The intensity and physicality of the points against Djokovic wore on Basavareddy. Another key: Djokovic's backhand grew faster in the second set, while Basavareddy's shots off that wing slowed. And one more: Djokovic hit 23 aces.

At 3-all, a half-hour in, Basavareddy moved out front by breaking Djokovic with a backhand return winner. Soon enough, that set belonged to the youngster, who is not shy about saying the Serb is his favorite player. Basavareddy showed off some great touch with drop shots and lob winners, while hanging in there at the baseline with the consummate baseliner.

"Very complete player," Djokovic said. "He did very pleasantly surprise me with all of his shots and his fighting spirit toward the end."

They are currently separated by exactly 100 spots in the ATP rankings. The gulf is far wider, of course, when it comes to experience and accomplishments.

This outcome left Basavareddy's career record at Grand Slam tournaments at 0-1; his tour-level debut only came in December. Djokovic, meanwhile, picked up his record-extending 378th victory at a major on Monday; he hasn't lost in the first round of one since bowing out at that stage of his first two Australian Opens in 2005 and 2006.

"He didn't get carried away by the significance of the moment," Djokovic said about Basavareddy. "I'm sure we'll see a lot of him in the future."

Hegseth could lead troops who'd face getting fired for actions he's done in the past

By TARA COPP and LOLITA C. BALDOR Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — If Pete Hegseth were still in uniform, his extramarital affairs and a decision to flatly ignore a combat commander's directive would not just be drawing the attention of senators — they could have run afoul of military law.

That is raising questions among current and former defense leaders and veterans about whether Hegseth would be able to enforce discipline in the ranks if confirmed as President-elect Donald Trump's defense secretary. Hegseth would oversee more than 2 million troops who could be disciplined or kicked out of the service for the same behavior he has acknowledged or been accused of in the past.

Hegseth, a 44-year-old Army National Guard veteran and former Fox News Channel weekend host, has acknowledged having multiple extramarital affairs — which occurred while he was in the military, according to divorce records — and has said he told his troops to ignore commands about when to fire on potential enemies. Both violate the Uniform Code of Military Justice and can get troops court-martialed and dishonorably discharged.

He's also facing questions over his past drinking — which, had it occurred in uniform, also could have led to disciplinary action.

Hegseth, however, has the support of some veterans' groups that say his past indiscretions are not as important as getting in the job someone who will focus on improving military readiness to fight.

Four defense officials pointed to Hegseth's acknowledged problems and said senior officers have expressed unease about having him at the helm because the defense secretary often sits in judgment of generals and admirals accused of bad behavior — including infidelity and refusal to obey orders.

Service members expect those holding them accountable to set an example and meet equally high standards, said the officials, who spoke on the condition of anonymity to relay private discussions.

"Character is everything in an institution," said former Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel, who served in the Obama administration and was a longtime Republican senator. "You can't minimize how important character is in leadership."

While it's very rare for service members to be disciplined solely for consensual affairs, it's more likely to be done as part of a broader incident that affects the good order and discipline of a unit or their ability to lead. Those instances would include fraternization within a unit, anything involving an assault or a relationship between a service member and a subordinate's civilian spouse.

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A test before the Senate

The issues are expected to come up Tuesday at Hegseth's Senate confirmation hearing, which will be an early test of Trump's ability to ensure loyalty among a slim Republican majority.

In a letter to Hegseth last week, Sen. Elizabeth Warren, who is on the Senate Armed Services Committee holding the hearing, asked that he answer a number of questions about his previous conduct. The Massachusetts Democrat said she was "deeply concerned by the many ways in which your past behavior and rhetoric indicates that you are unfit to lead the Department of Defense."

Asked about his ability to discipline others under the Uniform Code of Military Justice considering his own behavior, Hegseth said on the "Megyn Kelly Show" last month that "my job is to follow the law, the UCMJ, and I will do that."

Hegseth also has promised not to drink on the job and has denied a 2017 sex assault allegation but acknowledged paying the woman a settlement. He was going through a divorce at the time after having a child with a Fox News producer who became his current wife, according to court records and his social media posts.

Trump and his supporters have rallied around Hegseth, saying he will strengthen what they see as a "woke" military.

He "is an incredibly tough and smart candidate that will fight to put America First," Steven Cheung, Trump's communications director, said in a statement. "With Pete as our Secretary of Defense, America's enemies are on notice and our military will be great again."

Only one other Cabinet nominee in the last 60 years has gone through the confirmation process only to be rejected by the Senate. Texas Republican Sen. John Tower, President-elect George H.W. Bush's choice for defense secretary, was voted down in 1989 after contentious confirmation hearings looking into allegations of Tower's drinking and womanizing.

In meetings with senators on Capitol Hill, Hegseth has worked to assuage concerns. Trump's base also has piled pressure on those seen as not fully on board.

Sen. Susan Collins, a moderate Maine Republican, said after meeting Hegseth last month that she pressed him about the drinking allegations and settlement payment and would wait to decide on his nomination until the confirmation hearing and a background check.

The military's strict code of conduct

Hegseth's indiscretions could impede his ability to lead by example, said the chief executive officer of the nation's largest group of Iraq and Afghanistan veterans.

"The average American might scratch their head that you can literally be kicked out of the military for cheating on your spouse. But it is fact. And that's just because the military holds itself to a higher standard when it comes to character," said Allison Jaslow, who served as an Army officer in Iraq and now heads the Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America, a group of about 425,000.

In a November podcast, Hegseth said he told his platoon in Iraq in 2005 to ignore a commander's directive not to fire on someone unless they raised their weapon to shoot at U.S. troops.

"Clear as day, I remember walking out of that briefing and pulling my platoon together and being like, 'Guys, we're not doing that,'" Hegseth said. "If you see an enemy, engage before he's able to point his weapon at you and shoot."

Asked whether that had given Trump's team pause, transition spokesman Brian Hughes said "all nominees and appointees will comply with the ethical obligations of their respective agencies."

Hegseth was awarded a Bronze Star for his service in Iraq from 2005 to 2006 and earned a second for his tour in Afghanistan in 2012.

Hegseth gains support from some veterans

He has gotten a boost from 32 House Republicans who served in the military, who asked the Senate to evaluate him on his service and vision. They don't vote on his nomination, however.

A group of Navy SEALs is hosting a rally for him this week in Washington, and one of those involved said Hegseth's indiscretions are not as important as refocusing the military on readiness.

"I think the core of my support ... kind of goes back to the fact that I was a SEAL on 9/11 and that

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changed my life forever," Bill Brown said.

He said Hegseth understands their anger and sense of betrayal over failures in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Regarding potential military code violations, "the No. 1 rule of engagement is you come home," Brown said. "The military is not a social justice project."

Today in History: January 14, Lance Armstrong admits to using performance-enhancing drugs

By The Associated Press undefined

Today is Tuesday, Jan. 14, the 14th day of 2025. There are 351 days left in the year.

Today in history:

On Jan. 14, 2013, cyclist Lance Armstrong ended a decade of denial by confessing to Oprah Winfrey during a videotaped interview that he'd used performance-enhancing drugs to win the Tour de France seven consecutive times.

Also on this date:

In 1784, the United States ratified the Treaty of Paris ending the Revolutionary War; Britain followed suit in April.

In 1943, U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill and French Gen. Charles de Gaulle opened a wartime conference in Casablanca, Morocco.

In 1952, NBC's "Today" show premiered, with Dave Garroway as host.

In 1963, George C. Wallace was sworn in as governor of Alabama with the pledge, "segregation now, segregation tomorrow, and segregation forever!" — a view he later repudiated.

In 1967, the "Summer of Love" unofficially began with a "Human Be-In" involving tens of thousands of young people at Golden Gate Park in San Francisco.

In 1970, Diana Ross and the Supremes performed their last concert together, at the Frontier Hotel in Las Vegas.

In 1994, U.S. President Bill Clinton, Russian President Boris Yeltsin and Ukrainian President Leonid Kravchuk signed the Trilateral Statement, an accord to dismantle the nuclear arsenal of Ukraine.

In 2006, Eminem re-married Kim Mathers in Detroit. He filed for divorce 82 days later.

Today's birthdays: Drag racer Don "Big Daddy" Garlits is 93. Actor Faye Dunaway is 84. Actor Holland Taylor is 82. Guitarist-producer T-Bone Burnett is 77. Filmmaker Lawrence Kasdan is 76. Filmmaker Steven Soderbergh is 62. Actor Emily Watson is 58. Rapper-actor LL Cool J is 57. Actor Jason Bateman is 56. Rock musician Dave Grohl is 56. Rock singer-musician Caleb Followill (Kings of Leon) is 43. Actor Grant Gustin is 35.