

# Groton Daily Independent

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**Groton Daily Independent**  
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## 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.

## Thursday, Jan. 16

- Senior Menu: Lasagna rotini bake, salad with dressing, baked apples, whole wheat bread.
- School Breakfast: Biscuits.
- School Lunch: BBQ Chicken sandwich, puzzle tots.
- Basketball Double Header at Tiospa Zina (Girls JV 5 p.m., Girls Varsity and Boys Varsity to follow)
- Triangular Wrestling at Groton Area with Redfield and Webster, 6 p.m.

## Friday, Jan. 17

- Senior Menu: Oven baked chicken, sweet potato, carpi blend, pineapple, whole wheat bread.
- School Breakfast: Breakfast cookie.
- School Lunch: Garlic cheese bread, cooked carrots.
- Girls Varsity Wrestling at Harrisburg, 2 p.m.
- Boys JH Basketball hosts Milbank, 7th at 5 p.m., 8th at 6 p.m.

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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.**

## Israel-Hamas Deal Nears

Hamas and Israel have agreed in principle to a Qatar-mediated ceasefire and hostage-release plan. If finalized—expected this week—the agreement will mark a step toward ending the 15-month-long war that began after Hamas attacked southwestern Israeli communities, killing roughly 1,200 people and abducting around 250.

The current proposal includes a 42-day ceasefire in Gaza and a three-part plan to release Israeli hostages in exchange for Palestinian prisoners. Under the first phase, Hamas would free 33 hostages, including women, children, and those over 50 years old. Israel would free 30 Palestinian prisoners for each civilian hostage and 50 prisoners for each female soldier. Israel would also increase humanitarian aid and withdraw from populated areas. Negotiations for subsequent phases would continue; it is unclear what will happen after the first 42-day phase.

Nearly 100 hostages remain inside Gaza, with at least a third believed to be dead. The death toll in Gaza is around 46,000, according to the Hamas-run Health Ministry, which does not distinguish between civilians and militants. The death toll in Israel is around 1,900.

## Gaia Mission Ends

Europe's Gaia space observatory will cease science operations today as its cold gas propellant runs out after over a decade of observations. First launched in 2013, the astrometry telescope precisely cataloged nearly 2 billion objects within our Milky Way galaxy as part of an effort to create a novel three-dimensional galactic map.

The observatory orbits at Lagrange Point 2 (with its neighbor the James Webb telescope) roughly 1 million miles from Earth. Its two telescopes continuously scan the galaxy, while an array of 106 credit card-sized detectors—making the largest focal plane used in space—collects data on the luminosity and motion of stars, quasars, exoplanets, asteroids, and more. Gaia has scanned more than a billion objects over 70 times at a resolution 400,000 times fainter than what the naked eye can detect.

Data from Gaia's observations—released in batches, with the fourth expected in 2026—have led to major discoveries, including starquakes and half a million new stars, as well as revealing the Milky Way merged with another galaxy early in its formation.

## Cambridge Five Confessions

Britain's intelligence agency MI5 released a trove of declassified documents yesterday, revealing new insights into the notorious Cambridge Five Soviet spy ring. The files show Queen Elizabeth II was not informed for nearly a decade that Anthony Blunt, her long-serving royal art adviser, had confessed to being a Russian spy in 1964, in an effort to avoid adding to her worries.

More than 100 documents were released, including partial confessions from other members of the spy ring, such as Kim Philby, one of the most successful double agents in British intelligence history, and John Cairncross, the "fifth man" who played a crucial role in passing sensitive information to the Soviets during World War II.

Additionally, the documents contained surveillance advice for new MI5 recruits—such as avoiding the use of fake hair, carrying spare change for public transportation, and being prepared with a convincing cover story.

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## Sports, Entertainment, & Culture

Catherine, Princess of Wales, announces her cancer is in remission; Catherine underwent chemotherapy treatment after announcing her diagnosis in March 2024.

Warner Music Group and Sony Music join Universal Music in canceling all Grammy Awards week events due to Los Angeles wildfires.

Palisades Fire is 17% contained and Eaton Fire is 35% contained as of this writing; see map.

Rashida Jones steps down as president of MSNBC after leading the cable news network for four years.

Saudi Arabia's sovereign wealth fund nearing deal to invest \$1B in sports streaming service DAZN.

## Science & Technology

President Joe Biden signs executive order allowing the Defense and Energy Departments to lease federal lands to companies building AI data centers and clean power facilities.

Gut bacteria in Antarctic worms produce proteins that help the animals cope with freezing temperatures; study sheds light on the interaction between the microbiome and environmental adaptations.

Laser imaging technique reveals intricate tattoos on medieval-era mummies from Peru's Chancay culture; discovery may offer insight into the culture's social hierarchy.

## Business & Markets

US stock markets close mixed (S&P 500 +0.1%, Dow +0.5%, Nasdaq -0.2%) as investors weigh first of two inflation reports this week.

SEC sues Elon Musk for allegedly failing to timely disclose Twitter ownership stake in March 2022 before eventually buying the company.

Federal regulators sue Capitol One over allegedly misleading customers about their savings accounts and cheating them out of more than \$2B in interest.

JPMorgan Chase exec Daniel Pinto, longtime No. 2 to CEO Jamie Dimon, will step down in June from roles as chief operating officer and president.

Eli Lilly shares close down over 6% after revenue guidance trimmed on lower-than-expected demand for obesity and diabetes drugs.

The FTC finds major pharmacy benefit managers inflated drug prices for more than \$7B gain.

## Politics & World Affairs

South Korean investigators detain impeached President Yoon Suk Yeol for questioning after entering his compound early Wednesday; Yoon faces insurrection charges, is first sitting president in the country to ever be arrested.

Trump Cabinet hearings kick off, starting with defense secretary nominee Pete Hegseth; topics covered included past comments on women in the military and allegations of sexual misconduct.

Justice Department releases report related to President-elect Donald Trump's 2020 election interference case.

Biden administration to remove Cuba from state sponsor of terrorism list as part of deal to free political prisoners on the island; Trump had added the designation in 2021 shortly before he left office.

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## Girls NEC Standings

Roncalli	3-0	7-1
Hamlin	2-0	6-2
Groton Area	3-1	6-2
Clark/Willow Lake	2-1	6-2
Deuel	1-1	2-5
Milbank	2-1	3-3
Webster Area	3-2	4-4
Britton-Hecla	2-2	2-8
Redfield	1-4	1-6
Sisseton	0-2	3-4
Tiospa Zina	0-4	3-4

Hamlin 44, Groton Area 41  
Groton Area 48, Sisseton 45  
Groton Area 51, Redfield 9  
Roncalli 64, Redfield 10  
Roncalli 61, Webster Area 22  
Britton-Hecla 43, Tiospa Zina 29  
Webster Area 50, Britton-Hecla 29  
Deuel 53, Britton-Hecla 45  
Clark/Willow Lake 72, Milbank 39  
Redfield at Deuel Postponed to Feb. 17  
Milbank 61, Britton-Hecla 23  
Webster 51, Tiospa Zina 43  
Groton Area 32, Clark/Willow Lake 30  
Britton-Hecla 36, Redfield 26  
Webster 47, Deuel 29  
Hamlin 62, Tiospa Zina 25  
Roncalli 54, Sisseton 42  
Milbank 70, Tiospa Zina 21  
Clark/Willow Lake 53, Webster Area 27

Jan. 16  
Groton Area at Tiospa Zina  
Milbank at Redfield  
Hamlin at Webster Area

Jan. 17  
Clark/Willow Lake vs. Deuel at Willow Lake

Jan. 21  
Tiospa Zina at Roncalli

Jan. 23  
Groton Area at Milbank  
Roncalli vs Clark/Willow Lake at Clark  
Redfield at Hamlin  
Webster Area at Sisseton  
Tiospa Zina at Deuel

## Boys NEC Standings

Deuel	2-0	6-1
Hamlin	2-0	5-2
Roncalli	2-0	3-5
Groton Area	4-1	5-3
Clark/Willow Lake	2-1	6-1
Milbank	1-1	1-5
Britton-Hecla	3-2	6-2
Webster Area	1-5	2-7
Sisseton	0-1	1-3
Redfield	0-2	0-5
Tiospa Zina	0-3	0-8

Hamlin 69, Groton Area 41  
Groton Area 73, Sisseton 41  
Groton Area 76, Webster Area 46  
Groton Area 86, Redfield 11  
Roncalli 61, Redfield 34  
Roncalli 72, Webster Area 32  
Britton-Hecla 67, Tiospa Zina 38  
Britton-Hecla 56, Webster Area 46  
Deuel 73, Britton-Hecla 53  
Clark/Willow Lake 52, Milbank 35  
Redfield at Deuel postponed to Feb. 17  
Milbank 56, Britton-Hecla 43  
Webster 78, Tiospa Zina 38  
Groton Area 49, Clark/Willow Lake 48  
Britton-Hecla 74, Redfield 49  
Deuel 64, Webster 48  
Hamlin 84, Tiospa Zina 26  
Clark/Willow Lake 70, Webster Area 34

Jan. 16  
Groton Area at Tiospa Zina  
Sisseton at Roncalli  
Milbank at Redfield  
Hamlin at Webster Area

Jan. 17  
Deuel vs. Clark/Willow Lake at Willow Lake

Jan. 21  
Tiospa Zina at Roncalli

Jan. 23  
Groton Area at Milbank  
Roncalli vs. Clark/Willow Lake at Clark  
Redfield at Hamlin  
Webster Area at Sisseton  
Tiospa Zina at Deuel



## Gonsoir receives Presidential Award for Excellence Award; legislative discussion highlights school board meeting

by Elizabeth Varin

The Groton Area School Board celebrated excellence and tackled other agenda items during its meeting Monday night.

High school science teacher Kristen Gonsoir was recognized Monday for receiving the prestigious Presidential Award for Excellence in Mathematics and Science Teaching, the nation's highest honor for educators in these fields. Gonsoir has taught at the high school for 32 years. (See the White House Press Release on next page)

Teachers are selected based on their distinction in the classroom and dedication to improving STEM education, according to the press release from the White House. Gonsoir was among the more than 300 teachers and mentors from around the nation to be honored for their vital role that America's teachers and mentors play in shaping the next generation of technical leaders, including scientists, engineers, explorers and innovators.

"I have been blessed to spend the past 32 years doing what I love: sharing my love of learning and science with others," Gonsoir said in a statement. "The greatest moments of my day are seeing students have 'Aha' moments and then sharing that excitement. Being a Presidential Award for Excellence in Mathematics and Science Teaching winner is my 'Aha' moment of unbridled excitement! I learned so much about my teaching and its impact during the application process; being selected is the icing on an already delicious cake."

The school board congratulated Gonsoir after Superintendent Joe Schwan told them about the award, which was announced earlier in the day.

"It's a very incredible accomplishment for her," Schwan said. "We're proud of her and we're happy she's one of ours."

In addition to celebrating this achievement, the board turned its attention to legislative matters as the state legislature prepares to convene Tuesday. Schwan updated the board on bills that could impact education in the state, including House Bills 1009, 1017, 1019, 1020, 1035, 1039, 1040 and 1048. Also included on the list were Senate Bills 21, 51 and 55.

The bills cover a variety of issues, including educational vouchers, school security enhancements, reducing the state's contribution to a subsidized high school dual credit program, displaying the Ten Commandments in school and property tax levies.

- The board adopted the 2025-2026 school calendar, which includes August 19 as the first day of school, various in-service dates and the last day of school scheduled for May 14, 2026.

- A date has been set for school board elections. There will be voting precincts in Andover, Bristol, Columbia and Groton for the April 8 election. Voting will be for three seats that are currently held by Tigh Flihs, Travis Harder and Deb Gengerke. Those wishing to run for a position can start circulating petitions to be on the ballot on January 31, said Business Manager Becky Hubsch. Those with questions can reach out to her at [Becky.Hubsch@k12.sd.us](mailto:Becky.Hubsch@k12.sd.us).

- The board approved hiring Kelly Oswald as a special education paraprofessional. Oswald is new to the area and has been a substitute at the district, Schwan said. She's been doing a fantastic job so far, he added.

- The board approved a service contract with OTIS Elevator to complete routine maintenance and inspection.

- The board approved a proposal from ARS Roofing for roof inspections at both the middle/high school and elementary school.



**Kristen Gonsoir**

## **President Biden Honors More Than 300 Americans with Nation's Highest Award for Science and Mathematics Teachers and Mentors**

Today, President Biden announced 336 teachers and mentors from around the nation as recipients of the Presidential Awards for Excellence in Mathematics and Science Teaching (PAEMST) and the Presidential Awards for Excellence in Science, Mathematics, and Engineering Mentoring (PAESMEM). These awards honor the vital role that America's teachers and mentors play in shaping the next generation of technical leaders, including scientists, engineers, explorers, and innovators.

### **Presidential Awards for Excellence in Mathematics and Science Teaching (PAEMST)**

Established in 1983, PAEMST is the highest award K-12 math and science teachers can receive from the U.S. government. Award recipients over the years represent schools and organizations from all 50 states, Washington D.C., Puerto Rico, Department of Defense Education Activity (DODEA) schools, and the U.S. territories (American Samoa, Guam, Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, and U.S. Virgin Islands).

Nominees complete a rigorous application process to demonstrate deep content knowledge and an ability to adapt to a broad range of learners and teaching environments.

A panel of distinguished mathematicians, scientists, and educators at the state and national levels assess nominations before recommending awardees to the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy (OSTP). Teachers are selected based on their distinction in the classroom and dedication to improving STEM education.

### **Presidential Awards for Excellence in Science, Mathematics and Engineering Mentoring (PAESMEM)**

Established by Congress in 1995, this award has honored the hard work and dedication mentors exhibit in broadening participation in STEM pathways. This award honors individuals and organizations that have demonstrated excellence in mentoring individuals from groups that are underrepresented in STEM education and the workforce. Colleagues, administrators, and students nominate individuals and organizations for exemplary mentoring sustained over a minimum of five years.

A national selection committee assesses the nominations before recommending awardees to the National Science Foundation and OSTP.

The National Science Foundation, which manages PAEMST and PAESMEM on behalf of OSTP, provides each recipient \$10,000.

## **December Pantry Stats**

The Pantry - Groton, SD had 56 visits in December. Household members were 51 children, 56 adults, and 25 seniors. 1,060lbs were donated and 1,590lbs dispersed. There are 14 signed up for senior food boxes.

We continue to serve the needs of our Groton SD Community through the food pantry and our many other acts of giving and enrichment and are so grateful for the support we receive!

If information is needed about any of our programs, please contact April at City Hall 605-397-8422, Nancy at 605-397-7097, or Diane at 605-216-2350.

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## Superintendent's Report to the Groton Area School District 06-6 Board of Education

January 13, 2025

**Kristen Gonsoir – PAEMST Award Winner.** Mrs. Gonsoir learned today that she was selected by the White House for a Presidential Award for Excellence in Mathematics and Science Teaching. The full White House press release can be found at [whitehouse.gov/ostp/news-updates/press-releases](https://www.whitehouse.gov/ostp/news-updates/press-releases).

**Perkins IMPROVE Meeting.** On January 30, Ms. Edwards and I will be attending the “CTE 2025 Improve Meetings” in Aberdeen to learn about the new, modernized Career Cluster Framework. The Career Clusters that we’ve been accustomed to are getting some updates and changes, and we want to learn as much as we can about the updates and aligning our programs accordingly.

**NSU Teacher Job Fair.** We are signed up as participants in the annual NSU Teacher Job Fair. This year, the Teacher Job Fair is on Friday, January 31 and will include round table discussions with the teacher candidates, a job fair, and an opportunity to conduct private interviews for potentially open positions.

**Legislative Session.** The 2025 Legislative Session opens at 12:00 PM on Tuesday, January 14. Many bills have already been filed in advance of the beginning of the session, including several of interest to school districts. On Wednesday, February 5, I am planning to attend the Superintendent’s Legislative Day in Pierre.

HB1009 An Act to provide for the creation and use of South Dakota educational empowerment accounts. [Carl Perry, Logan Manhart]

HB1017 An Act to require the acceptance of a cash payment for admission to a school-affiliated event.

HB1019 An Act to eliminate certain property taxes levied on owner-occupied single-family dwellings, and to increase certain gross receipts tax rates and use tax rates.

HB1020 An Act to establish education savings accounts. [Manhart]

HB1035 An Act to make an appropriation for school security enhancement grants.

HB1039 An Act to repeal the programs reimbursing a teacher or school counselor for earning national board certification.

HB1040. An Act to reduce the state’s contribution to a subsidized high school dual credit program.

HB1048. An Act to require that cash be accepted for certain transactions.

SB21. 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.

SB51. An Act to require the display and curricular inclusion of the Ten Commandments and other documents.

SB55. An Act to revise property tax levies for school districts and to revise the state aid to general and special education formulas.

## School Board Meeting Principal Report

MS/HS- Shelby Edwards

01/13/2025

### Class Counts-

6th- 54 (+/- 1 at semester)

7th- 38

8th- 42 (+1)

9th- 45 (-1)

10th- 37 (-1)

11th- 44

12th- 44

**New Total- 303 Students**

- Teachers are wrapping up Winter MAPS testing
- HOSA is hosting a Winter Formal for Middle School and High School students January 24th and 25th in the "Old Gym"
- We are introducing our Hall Pass system to the whole staff on Wednesday. We have had a few teachers piloting this the first semester.
- 2025/2026 Curriculum Guidebook is ready
- Class pre registration starts on Wednesday January 15th



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Board Report

Elementary Principal

January 13, 2025

1. Enrollment

- a. PS – 12 (+3)
- b. JK – 13 (+1)
- c. KG – 31
- d. 1<sup>st</sup> – 52
- e. 2<sup>nd</sup> – 39
- f. 3<sup>rd</sup> – 46
- g. 4<sup>th</sup> – 42 (-1)
- h. 5<sup>th</sup> – 50 (+1)

2. OST will be open on the following days (school not in session)

- a. Monday February 17th
- b. Thursday March 20
- c. Friday March 21st
- d. Friday April 18th
- e. Monday April 21<sup>st</sup>

3. Social media – I have received a lot of positive feedback regarding the amount of posts and livefeed news that has been posted from the elementary school.

4. Evaluations: I will begin my second semester formal and informal observations this week. I have 20 informal and 13 formal observations to complete. My goal is to have all of these completed by early April.

5. American Heart Association Kids Heart Challenge: We have teamed up with the AHA for the Kids Heart Challenge fundraiser. This replaced what was known as Jump rope for Heart. We have currently raised over \$5,300.

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## JANUARY, 13, 2025 BOARD REPORT

### BUSINESS MANAGER

BECKY HUBSCH

- \* School Board Terms: this year are Deb G., Tigh F., and TJ Harder. We will set the election date today (April 8, 2025). Petitions can be picked up at the school if there are interested candidates. Petitions cannot be circulated until January 31, 2025, and will be due February 28, 2025, to the school by 5:00 pm.
- \* W-2's have been sent out to all employees, and 1099's to vendors. 1095 health coverage forms will be sent out within the month.
- \* The ASBPT Health Insurance meeting is scheduled for March 26, and we will know our insurance rates for FY 2026.
- \* Senate Bill 55 Introduced:
  - \* The tax levy changes are Ag: 1.197 to **1.125**; Owner Occupied: 2.679 to **2.518**; and OTH: 5.544 to **5.211**.
  - \* Target Teacher Salary changes are \$62,045.62 to **\$62,821.19**

FY 24 GASD Average Compensation: \$71,128

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## 2025-2026 Groton Area School District

Proposed January 13, 2025

**August 2025**

Su	M	Tu	W	Th	F	Sa
					1	2
3	4	5	6	7	8	9
10	11	12	13	14	15	16
17	18	19	20	21	22	23
24	25	26	27	28	29	30
31						

**August**

- 13 - Staff Development @ NSU/New Teachers
- 18 - Staff Development
- 18 - Open House Events
- 19 - First Day of School
- 29 - No School - Staff Development

**Student Contact: 8; Inservice: 2.5**

**January 2026**

Su	M	Tu	W	Th	F	Sa
				1	2	3
4	5	6	7	8	9	10
11	12	13	14	15	16	17
18	19	20	21	22	23	24
25	26	27	28	29	30	31

**January**

- 5 - No School - Staff Development
- 6 - School Resumes

**Student Contact: 19; Inservice: 1**

**September 2025**

Su	M	Tu	W	Th	F	Sa
	1	2	3	4	5	6
7	8	9	10	11	12	13
14	15	16	17	18	19	20
21	22	23	24	25	26	27
28	29	30				

**September**

- 1 - No School - LABOR DAY

**Student Contact: 21; Inservice: 0**

**February 2026**

Su	M	Tu	W	Th	F	Sa
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
8	9	10	11	12	13	14
15	16	17	18	19	20	21
22	23	24	25	26	27	28

**February**

- 12 - Parent/Teacher Conferences (1:30-8:00)
- 13 - No School - Staff Development
- 16 - No School - PRESIDENT'S DAY

**Student Contact: 18; Inservice: 2**

**October 2025**

Su	M	Tu	W	Th	F	Sa
			1	2	3	4
5	6	7	8	9	10	11
12	13	14	15	16	17	18
19	20	21	22	23	24	25
26	27	28	29	30	31	

**October**

- 9 - Parent/Teacher Conferences (1:30-8:00)
- 10 - No School - Staff Development
- 10 - Lake Region Marching Festival
- 13 - No School - NATIVE AMERICAN DAY
- 17 - End of 1st Quarter (40)

**Student Contact: 21; Inservice: 2**

**March 2026**

Su	M	Tu	W	Th	F	Sa
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
8	9	10	11	12	13	14
15	16	17	18	19	20	21
22	23	24	25	26	27	28
29	30	31				

**March**

- 10 - End of 3rd Quarter (44)
- 19-20 - No School - SPRING BREAK

**Student Contact: 20; Inservice: 0**

**November 2025**

Su	M	Tu	W	Th	F	Sa
					1	
2	3	4	5	6	7	8
9	10	11	12	13	14	15
16	17	18	19	20	21	22
23	24	25	26	27	28	29

**November**

- 11 - Veterans Day Program
- 26-28 - No School - THANKSGIVING BREAK

**Student Contact: 17; Inservice: 0**

**April 2026**

Su	M	Tu	W	Th	F	Sa
			1	2	3	4
5	6	7	8	9	10	11
12	13	14	15	16	17	18
19	20	21	22	23	24	25
26	27	28	29	30		

**April**

- 3 & 6 - No School - EASTER BREAK
- 12 - Pops Concert (2:00 & 5:00)
- 18 - PROM
- 23 - Middle School Spring Concert (7:00)
- 28 - Elementary Spring Concert (7:00)
- 30 - High School Concert/Awards/Art Show (7:00)

**Student Contact: 20; Inservice: 0**

**December 2025**

Su	M	Tu	W	Th	F	Sa
	1	2	3	4	5	6
7	8	9	10	11	12	13
14	15	16	17	18	19	20
21	22	23	24	25	26	27
28	29	30	31			

**December**

- 11 - MS/HS Christmas Concert (7:00 PM)
- 19 - Elementary Christmas Concert (1:00 PM)
- 19 - Early Dismissal (2:00 PM)
- 19 - End of 2nd Quarter (42/82)

**Student Contact: 15; Inservice: 0**

**May 2026**

Su	M	Tu	W	Th	F	Sa
					1	2
3	4	5	6	7	8	9
10	11	12	13	14	15	16
17	18	19	20	21	22	23
24	25	26	27	28	29	30
31						

**May**

- 14 - End of 2nd Semester (43/87)
- 15 - Staff Development
- 16 - Graduation

**Student Contact: 10; Inservice: 0.5**

82

87

- Faculty Inservice
- No School
- Important Dates

- End of Quarter/Semester
- Early Dismissal

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## 2025 State of the State Address

By: Gov. Kristi Noem  
January 14, 2024

### Introduction

Lieutenant Governor Rhoden, Mr. Speaker, Supreme Court justices, Constitutional officers, members of the House and Senate, and my fellow South Dakotans:

We stand here at the start of the 100th session of the South Dakota State Legislature. Over those 100 sessions, we have made history here in South Dakota. The things that took place in this building have changed our state forever. Today, I want to share a story that inspires me – a story about a South Dakota trailblazer, Gladys Pyle.

Gladys was born in Huron in 1890. Her mother, Mamie, secured the right to vote for South Dakota women. Her father, John, was the fourth Attorney General of South Dakota. But Gladys would outshine them both. She became the first female Secretary of State in South Dakota in 1927 – then the first Republican woman elected to the U.S. Senate in 1938. But did you know that Gladys Pyle was almost the first female governor of South Dakota? In fact, she won the primary with 28% of the vote. But she didn't clear the 35% threshold, so the vote went to the GOP convention, where a different candidate was selected after 12 ballots. 88 years later, I became the first woman to hold this office. Gladys' story reminds me that sometimes, the obstacles that we face prepare us for greatness.

America has been through a difficult time. Now, we stand on the cusp of a great American comeback. In just 6 days, a leader will take office in Washington who will truly make our nation great again. South Dakota has had its own share of difficulty in these past years. But those challenges have been opportunities that have put us in position to succeed – and to thrive. Today, South Dakotans have prosperity and hope! Our people enjoy a greater level of Freedom than anywhere else. We have made our state safer, stronger, and freer for our kids and our grandkids. We have built a stronger South Dakota than ever before.

And we are just getting started. When I was elected Governor, I knew that our best days were still ahead of us, and I still believe it today. Because we focused on Freedom and not government control, we have unleashed something in our people. We have fostered that American sense of hard work, grit, and determination – a spirit that is disappearing in far too many other places.

South Dakota has created our very best days. More importantly, we've created the opportunity for even better days ahead. And that is what I would like to talk to all of you about today. You might have learned by now that I love "Top 10" lists – and you might even be tired of hearing them! But I think they're more interesting. So today, I'm going to share with you the top-10 reasons why South Dakota will continue to be an example to the nation.

**The number 10** reason why South Dakota will continue to be an example to the nation: Education. One of the very best ways that we can set our kids up for success is by giving them the best education possible. We raised the bar for the education that our kids will get in the classroom. We supported their teachers to attract and retain the very best. We provided additional opportunities for parents to help their kids succeed.

We know that reading is the foundation of educational success. We implemented the Science of Reading across South Dakota so that our kids can get excellent phonics-based reading education. We revamped our social studies standards so that our kids will get the very best civics and history education in America. We launched the South Dakota Sturdy initiative to teach our students grit and mental resilience – I believe this will become yet another example for the nation. And we eliminated hateful teachings like Critical Race Theory that only seek to divide our kids.

We recognized that, after parents, teachers are the most impactful people on our children's education. So we made sure that they will be paid what they deserve. And we launched a fantastic teacher apprenticeship program. Now, teacher aides can become fully certified teachers while still earning a paycheck to



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put food on the table for their families.

But education isn't one-size-fits-all. That's why we're expanding options for parents. We improved alternative education in South Dakota to give flexibility to parents who choose that path for their kids. We expanded the Partners in Education Tax Credit Scholarship. And this year, we will be working with Majority Leaders Odenbach and Mehlhaff to institute Education Savings Accounts for South Dakota kids.

These Education Savings Accounts will support all South Dakota students. We will provide families greater opportunities to choose the best fit for their child's education. And we won't impact the funding that goes to our great public schools. These ESAs will be a testament to our ability to meet the unique needs of every South Dakota family that participates.

**The number 9** reason why South Dakota will continue to be an example to the nation: Healthcare. Our state has been a leader in healthcare policy. We took a unique approach to the COVID pandemic. We cared for our people while still respecting their Freedoms. We created a first-in-the-nation initiative where telehealth services are available in the back of ambulances across South Dakota. We guaranteed that South Dakotans will have price transparency from health insurance companies. And we created regional mental health facilities across the state to get South Dakotans care closer to home.

We are reforming healthcare to give South Dakotans more opportunities to work. The Freedom Works Here campaign recruited nurses to South Dakota because this was our number one workforce need. Ladies and gentlemen, the results have been incredible. Over the last two years, the number of nurses working in South Dakota has increased by at least 1,100 across all nursing classifications. These professionals are filling critical roles in hospitals and clinics across the state, ensuring that every community has access to care.

And we are advancing career opportunities for South Dakotans who use our state's Medicaid program. South Dakota already has work requirements in place for many of our social welfare programs, such as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families and Food Stamps. For folks in these programs, the Department of Social Services provides SD Career Link to help them find a career that they'll love. We assist with education and training, interview skills, and finding career opportunities.

This past November, South Dakota voters passed Amendment F, which allows for future work requirements under Medicaid Expansion. SD Career Link will be available for these folks, as well. We will connect them with the training, guidance, and support they need to find a stable and meaningful career. This will make South Dakota even stronger and more prosperous for the next generation.

**The number 8** reason why South Dakota will continue to be an example to the nation: Agriculture. Ag is more than just our largest industry – it's our way of life. When Ag has a good year, our communities grow and thrive. When the opposite is true, our entire state faces challenges. I am proud that we've preserved our ag operations, opened up new markets for our commodities, and strengthened biofuels production. And we protected South Dakota ag from interference by evil foreign governments like Communist China. We've put South Dakota ag in position to be stronger than ever before.

We need a robust, diverse food supply, and our family farms are one of the most crucial parts of that. Family farms and ranches have a special connection to the land that has been in their family for generations. Today, I am announcing a partnership to keep farmers farming in South Dakota. We have reached an agreement between the State of South Dakota, the South Dakota Ag Foundation, and First Dakota National Bank to transfer the Keep Farmers Farming program from First Dakota to the South Dakota Ag Foundation. The partnership works with farm and ranch families on estate and transition planning. It helps our producers pass along their land and legacy to their kids and grandkids. It's about transferring not just assets – but experience, work ethic, morals, and history to the next generation. My Governor's Office of Economic Development will provide the South Dakota Ag Foundation with a one-year \$200,000 grant to administer, market, and grow the program. And there will be no loss of service for existing program participants.

We have representatives here today from the South Dakota Ag Foundation – would you please give them a round of applause for the work they will do to Keep Farmers Farming in South Dakota?

**The number 7** reason why South Dakota will continue to be an example to the nation is our Outdoor Opportunities. South Dakota has some of the most beautiful landscapes in the world. From the rolling

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prairies to the rugged Black Hills, our landscapes are a testament to God's creation. We've worked to conserve and enhance these treasures.

We're breaking records for outdoor opportunities – including our pheasant hunting. Our Nest Predator Bounty Program has been incredibly successful. We've gotten our kids outdoors, passed on our outdoor heritage, and increased our bird population. And our Second Century Habitat Initiative took marginal acres and created more havens for wildlife. It had the added benefit of opening up more acres for public hunting. In 2024, South Dakota had a record 1.6 million acres of private land open for public hunting. We've had the most pheasant hunters in over 10 years. Hundreds of thousands of residents and nonresidents enjoyed our pheasant season. We had nearly 8 million visitors to our state parks. We're expanding the Sioux Falls Outdoor Campus. We completed the fantastic expansion of Palisades State Park. And we broke the record for highest attendance at my favorite event of the year, the Governor's Buffalo Roundup at Custer State Park.

The new Shooting Sports Complex near Rapid City will open later this year. It will be one of the very best firearms range complexes in the nation. It will offer a wide variety of options for firearms enthusiasts of all levels, from hunters and recreational shooters to law enforcement training.

We are conserving South Dakota's natural beauty and creating more opportunities to share it in the future. I am so glad that my grandbabies will be able to enjoy the same beautiful great outdoors that I enjoyed growing up.

Speaking of babies, that brings me to the **number 6 reason** why South Dakota will continue to be an example to the nation: Babies. South Dakota still has the highest birth rate of any state in America. Our people are happy and have hope for our future. Every baby brings boundless potential.

We are caring for South Dakota moms and babies both before birth and after. Last year, we talked about the first thousand days of a child's life – from conception to their 2nd birthday. These days are the most crucial to a child's development. In the last year, our Bright Start program supported more than 600 mothers and more than 500 infants and toddlers. One mom started Bright Start as a teen – now she's a registered nurse in an emergency room. She wrote to the Department of Health, "I talk about you and the Bright Start program all the time to new moms. I tell them the big impact you made on my life. I am forever grateful."

This past November, the people of South Dakota endorsed the way that we are taking care of moms and babies. They voted to support life. And the Department of Health will continue emphasizing care for our next generation. If you have any questions about pregnancy, parenting, financial assistance, or adoption – [Life.SD.gov](http://Life.SD.gov) is a one-stop shop that will get you the help that you need. Our commitment to moms, babies, and families ensures that our state's future is as bright as the hope in a newborn's eyes.

And we also need to keep our families safe. So, the **number 5 reason** why South Dakota will continue to be an example to the nation is Safety. I am incredibly proud of the work that we have done over the past six years to make South Dakota safer. We supported and respected law enforcement officers when much of the rest of the nation was attacking them. We led the way in cybersecurity by banning TikTok for state government and enhancing the mission of Dakota State University. And we led the nation by prioritizing our border security when the Biden Administration failed to keep America safe.

We made South Dakota the first state in America to offer a state-led tribal-specific law enforcement training. For the first time, future tribal law enforcement officers were trained right here in Pierre. They didn't have to leave their families for three months to go to New Mexico. This year, we will make this training a part of our ongoing budget so that we can train tribal law enforcement officers into the future.

Today, we have here with us Corson County Sheriff Alan Dale and Ziebach County Sheriff Gary Cudmore. Would you two gentlemen please stand? These two sheriffs represent counties that are on South Dakota tribal lands. They helped me come up with the idea that became the tribal law enforcement training academy. Would you please join me in thanking them for their work to keep South Dakota safe?

We have also kept South Dakota safe through unprecedented natural disasters. My first year in office, South Dakota saw a historic bomb cyclone and other flooding events that made 63 of our 66 counties federal disaster areas. We've had tornados hit small towns and even our largest city. We've had wildfires

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threaten the Black Hills. We've seen a derecho, blizzards, and even an unprecedented 1,000-year flood. Every time, South Dakotans worked together to get through the very worst situations.

As an example, over the past several years, we have improved our infrastructure. We built levees stronger and higher. We invested in reinforcing and rebuilding dams to hold back these powerful rivers to the greatest extent possible. And we didn't see any major dam breaks unlike in a neighboring state. But we know that planning can only go so far in preparing for a 1,000-year flood.

During the 1,000-year flood, several agencies stepped up to respond: at my direction, the South Dakota Department of Public Safety sent Highway Patrol and an Incident Management Assistance Team; the Department of Game, Fish & Parks deployed conservation officers to conduct boat rescues; the Department of Transportation handled traffic control, detours, and helped construct a levee across the Interstate in just hours in accordance with the city's flood plan; and the State Geologist with the Department of Agriculture and Natural Resources worked with local first responders to adjust to the river projections and water flows. After the flooding, the Department of Social Services helped arrange counseling; the Department of Health provided free tetanus shots; even the Bureau of Information and Telecommunications set up a network in the Emergency Operations Center to support response efforts. I want to thank all of the emergency responders, volunteers, local governments, and state employees whose quick and professional actions prevented further damage. And I want to honor a few individuals whose actions went above and beyond the call of duty.

Tim Cowman, our South Dakota State Geologist with the Department of Agriculture and Natural Resources, saved lives with his water flow projections. Without Tim, we would not have had as accurate of projections on the rising rivers. The data that we were getting from the Federal River Forecast Center was too unreliable.

Boat rescue crews with Sioux Falls Swift Water Rescue and conservation officers with the Department of Game, Fish and Parks acted heroically to save lives. I want to highlight one story in particular. In rural Union County, one individual was trapped on a highway overpass. They were stuck without food, water, or a way out in extreme heat. Our emergency management officials were trying to coordinate a helicopter rescue – but that would have been dangerous because of fast water flows, debris, and other hazards. Suddenly, a local official walked into the Emergency Operations Center and exclaimed, "Well scratch that plan, some crazy Game, Fish & Parks guys launched their boat in a highway ditch and were able to figure out a way to get to him."

They risked their own safety and eliminated the need for a more dangerous aerial rescue. They used a drone to scout the possible route, boated across cornfields with unknown hazards, walked across a narrow berm to the overpass, and rescued that South Dakotan. I appreciate their example, leadership, and heroism.

The Sioux Falls Swift Water Rescue came at our request because of their special skillset. When the first member of their team arrived on site, he single-handedly assisted several people before the rest of the team arrived. In fact, when the rest of the team got there, he was taken for medical attention due to heat exhaustion. The other team members worked with Game, Fish & Parks through the night to make sure everyone was rescued. After everyone was out, they slept a few hours in the grass until morning.

These individuals all went above and beyond throughout this crisis. They truly saved lives, and we cannot thank them enough for what they accomplished. But here's what I can do: I would like to give the Governor's Award for Heroism to Tim Cowman; those "crazy Game, Fish & Parks guys:" Sam Schelhass, Jeremy Roe, Christopher Schiera, and Taylor Etherington; and the six members of the Sioux Falls Swift Water Rescue Team: Mike Murphy, Mike Olson, Adam Frick, Chris Lohan, Jack Claussen, and Rob Flannery. Please give them a round of applause.

Thank you.

**The number 4** reason why South Dakota will continue to be an example to the nation: our Economy. We've built the strongest economy of any state in America. Our 1.9% unemployment rate is the lowest in the nation today, and it has averaged the lowest since I took office. We even broke the record for lowest unemployment rate of any state in American history. Our incomes have consistently grown faster than any other state, and we have led the nation in new housing development. Our labor force participation is far



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above the national average. We broke ground on a nearly one billion dollar food processing facility with CJ Schwan's. Last year, we won the Governor's Cup as the top state in America for economic development projects -- and we're poised to do well in this metric again this year. And our GDP growth has consistently been among the fastest in the nation.

Rising incomes mean that – during a historic inflation crisis – South Dakota families have been better able to keep food on the table. New jobs mean our kids don't need to leave the state to pursue the career of their dreams. New homes mean that we are able to welcome more Freedom-loving Americans to join us.

Our biggest challenge has been workforce. When I started the Freedom Works Here campaign in June 2023, we had more than 25,000 open jobs in South Dakota. Today, that number is down by more than 7,000. And we're filling some of the most important job needs like nurses, electricians, plumbers, and accountants.

Our apprenticeship programs have completely changed how South Dakotans get educated for the future. Our teacher apprenticeship pathway is on track to turn out about 150 new certified teachers within just three years. We have more than 1,500 apprentices in professions like electricians, plumbers, K-12 teachers, linemen, carpenters, sheet metal workers, fire medics, HVAC installers, ag mechanics, welders, and more. Businesses across the state have welcomed apprenticeship opportunities with open arms.

Speaking of arms, South Dakota's firearms manufacturing industry is thriving. We recently welcomed Paradigm Carbon to Yankton – they manufacture carbon wrapped gun stocks and barrels. Silencer Central in Sioux Falls is one of the fastest growing companies in America. Cole TAC in Rapid City joined us from out of state. Our firearms industry supports 1,600 jobs in South Dakota and generates more than \$400 million in annual economic activity. And we are aggressively recruiting other arms and ammo manufacturers to bring their businesses to the most 2nd Amendment-friendly state in America.

And to show the diversity of our state's economy, I want to focus on another growing business. I want to welcome leaders from a business that is revolutionizing our largest industry: agriculture. Our economy cannot thrive unless ag thrives. Bel Brands is doubling their production capacity. They will create additional markets for our ag producers and help ensure that South Dakota's best economic days are still ahead of us. Will you all please join me in welcoming the leadership of Bel Brands?

**The number 3** reason why South Dakota will continue to be an example to the nation: our Values. South Dakota embodies the values that make America so special. People visit here and think, "This is the way America is supposed to be."

I recently had the opportunity to meet with Rabbi Mendel Alperowitz, South Dakota's only rabbi. He talked to me about how traditional morals are eroding across the country. Antisemitic hatred continues to rise in far too many places. South Dakota addressed that last year. We defined antisemitic discrimination so that we can identify when it occurs and stop it. The Rabbi and I discussed how the nation needs to turn to South Dakota's example to face this moral decline. We embody the values and morals that built this nation.

Make no mistake – America was built on Judeo-Christian values. This might be a controversial statement for some, but it wasn't for our Founders. Take it from the father of our nation: George Washington.

It might surprise you to know that George Washington did not sign the Declaration of Independence. He was with his troops in the field while the Continental Congress met. John Hancock mailed him a copy. On July 9th, five days after it was signed, General Washington wrote General Orders to his men to gather and listen as the Declaration was read aloud. These were Washington's words:

"The blessing and protection of Heaven are at all times necessary, but especially so in times of public distress and danger. The General hopes and trusts that every officer and man will endeavor to live and act as becomes a Christian soldier, defending the dearest rights and liberties of his country."

Even in that historic moment, General Washington encouraged his troops to first act as becomes a Christian – then defend our rights and liberties.

Four-and-a-half years ago, we had the tremendous honor of celebrating America's birthday right here in South Dakota. We had this celebration with fireworks at Mount Rushmore, which honors President Washington and three other monumental American leaders. We welcomed President Trump to South Dakota



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to celebrate with us. We are the first nation built on the principle that our rights come from God, not government – that our people have the unalienable rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. In the coming days, we will once again move forward with planning to return fireworks to Mount Rushmore for America's birthday. Get ready America – our nation's 250th birthday is coming up in 2026. And South Dakota is going to throw the biggest birthday party ever at Mount Rushmore.

**The number 2** reason why South Dakota will continue to be an example to the nation: our Freedoms. South Dakota has been a shining "City Upon a Hill" over the past few years. We have proven that Freedom Works Here. Here's what I love most about that fact: we don't have to just talk about Freedom. We can look from state to state and compare results.

When COVID came in 2020, South Dakota was the ONLY state that never forced a business or church to close. I never mandated anything. I trusted our people to use personal responsibility to make the best decisions for themselves and their loved-ones. We defended the First Amendment, including Freedom of Assembly, in ways that no other state did.

Later that year, when other states attacked and defunded law enforcement, South Dakota invited officers to move to a state that would respect them. And several times over the past few years, when other states accepted piles of federal money with strings attached to leftist policies, South Dakota said "no thanks."

We've defended our Second Amendment more than any other state. The first bill that I signed as governor was Constitutional Carry. We blocked local governments from using emergencies to seize people's firearms. We strengthened Stand Your Ground laws. I signed an Executive Order to protect our God-given right to keep and bear arms from being infringed upon by financial institutions. And we made South Dakota the first state in America where it will not cost you a penny to exercise your Second Amendment rights.

Thomas Jefferson once wrote a letter to James Madison where he said, "I prefer dangerous Freedom over peaceful slavery." The media thought that the decisions we were making in South Dakota were "dangerous," but those decisions were right. In the future, when tough decisions are in front of our state, we will have an easier time making the right choice. We have the courage of our convictions.

But Freedom is only as good as the people exercising those Freedoms – which brings me to the **number 1 reason** why South Dakota will continue to be an example to the nation: our People.

You've heard me recite our state motto many times: "Under God, the People Rule." I hope that you will remind each other of that motto every day. Everything that we do is for the PEOPLE. The everyday South Dakotan does not have a lobbyist in this Capitol. It is the charge of each of the 105 legislators in this chamber to be that voice. Listen to your constituents, do the work to learn the facts, and then make the best decisions you can as their elected leaders.

I do want to thank one particular group of fantastic South Dakotans: my family. Several of them are in the back of the room here today, and I'd like to say a few words honoring them.

My mom Corinne is here. Mom, you spoke life into me and made me realize how special I am to God. You taught me that I could do anything, and your love showed me that I was already enough.

My son Booker couldn't be here today – he's across the world telling people about Jesus. Booker, I am so proud of your example of Christ's love. God has you right where he wants you, and we sure enjoy when we can spend time with you. I'm so proud of you.

My daughter Kennedy and her husband Tanner couldn't be here because they will be having my next grandbaby any day now! Kenners and Tanner, I am amazed at what you have already accomplished at such a young age. I will be praying for you as you start parenthood. I know that you will do a great job, just like you always do!

My oldest, Cassidy, is here with her husband Kyle, and they brought their oldest, Miss Addie. I am her best friend! They have two other beautiful babies too: Branch and Lenni Lou. For a minute there, they had three kids under three! And they still are achieving fantastic things in their careers. Kass and Kyle, you have such a bright light and are such an example to others. You are raising amazing kiddos. It's a wonderful reflection of your love. Thanks for letting me babysit so often – there's nothing I love more!

Last but certainly not least, I want to thank my husband Bryon for being the best partner through this crazy journey together. When he married me, he thought he was marrying a farmer! Bryon, you have

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always been there with advice and support. Thank you for all the adventures, the love, and the years that we are enjoying together.

I love each and every one of you. Would everyone please join me in honoring my family?

## Conclusion

So that's it: my Top 10 Reasons why South Dakota will continue to be an example to the nation. But before I go, I do have something else to talk to you about.

You probably know that President-elect Trump has called on me to serve, if confirmed, as the next Secretary of the Department of Homeland Security. It's a tremendous honor and a great responsibility. The mission is to keep the American people safe from threats to the Homeland.

The situation at our Southern Border is nothing short of an invasion. Over the last four years, America's border security has been purposely weakened and ignored. Our laws have not been enforced. And this has led to millions and millions of law enforcement encounters with illegal aliens. That doesn't include millions of "gotaways" that we're aware of. It doesn't include the ridiculous number who got in through the "CBP One" phone app. And it doesn't include the many thousands who caught a free plane ride over our borders courtesy of the federal government. Too many of these individuals disappear while they wait for an asylum hearing or don't ever show up for that hearing.

As you know, I've taken a stand against this invasion. I have deployed South Dakota National Guard to our southern border eight times. That includes five state deployments to support Texas' work to stop the flow of illegal aliens. I went to the border myself several times. I witnessed illegal immigrants infiltrate our nation. And I saw our National Guard troops enforcing our laws and building the wall.

Ladies and gentlemen, leadership has consequences. We see the consequences of Washington's inaction here in South Dakota. The cartels and their affiliates have invaded our poorest communities. Other states around the country see it too. Increased crime. Increased drugs. Increased overdose deaths, violence, rape, human trafficking, and murder. Even known terrorists have crossed the border amongst the illegals – and they could be anywhere. This invasion is an existential threat to America. It threatens our national security and our economy.

The basic question is this: What kind of country do we want to leave to our families? I want to leave them a state and a nation that is even safer, stronger, and freer than the one that I grew up in.

That leaves me in a position where I may say "farewell" to all of you in the very near future. But before I do, I want to say a few words about the man sitting beside me. I started this speech – and every speech that I have given to this joint legislative session – with the words, "Lieutenant Governor Rhoden." Almost seven years ago, people recommended I pick a Sioux Falls businessman to be my running mate. But I didn't. I asked a West River rancher to join me on the ride of a lifetime. Larry Rhoden stepped up to the plate. He has been more than just a partner in this role – he has been an adviser, a source of wisdom, and (this is sometimes more important) a source of laughter.

I chose Larry to run with me because I knew that a day like today might come. I knew that it was always possible that I might not be your governor anymore – whether that circumstance be the result of tragedy or opportunity. So I wanted a partner who would lead this state just as I would. I wanted someone who realized that our rights come from God, not from government – that it is our duty to protect the rights and Freedoms of our people. I wanted a friend – and Larry has been a friend since I was first elected to the state legislature almost 20 years ago.

Larry, you're next at bat, so here's a baseball bat that will help you do the job. Maybe it'll hold up better than those gavels that you love to shatter at this podium. Senators and leaders, you will find smaller replicas of this bat at your desks. And house members, you'll find baseballs. These are a reminder that all of you are at bat now.

Ladies and gentlemen, I trust you to knock it out of the park – because the people have bestowed that trust in you. "Under God, the People Rule." Our people are worth serving. They are the very best in America. They have been such a blessing and a source of joy to me and my family. So although I am saying "farewell," please know that I'm not going far. South Dakota has always been my home – and it is

still my home. I will continue to focus on making our people safer, stronger, and freer.

To the people of South Dakota: thank you for the incredible honor of serving you as state representative, as congresswoman, and now as governor. Thank you for trusting me and for working with me to accomplish incredible things.

But that's enough of that. We must keep looking ahead. Our state and our nation have even better days in front of us, God willing. The state of our state is strong. With your leadership, it will continue to grow stronger.

Thank you all. God bless you. And may God continue to bless the great state of South Dakota.

## **Democratic Legislative Leadership Reaction to State of the State**

Pierre, SD -- State Democratic Legislative Leadership released the following statements after Governor Kristi Noem delivered her State of the State speech.

### **Sen. Liz Larson**

#### **Senate Minority Leader**

#### **District 10 - Sioux Falls**

Governor Noem's "Top 10 List" highlighted several meaningful achievements that we, as South Dakota Democrats, acknowledge and support. We share the Governor's commitment to enhancing opportunities for our farmers, ranchers, and business owners, and we appreciate her focus on the importance of family and work, as well as her recognition of first responders in some of this year's worst natural disasters.

However, there are critical areas where we believe the Governor's approach falls short. First, many educators are going to disagree with the idea that the state has worked to attract and retain the best teachers – given our continued under performance on teacher pay, and tightening of school budgets. I worry about the future erosion of our public schools in the face of this year's proposal to create an education savings account program. Taxpayer money should not be going to private schools that lack accountability and deny admission to students.

Second, while it is admirable to celebrate the achievements of a bustling economy, it is also counter intuitive to not support affordable healthcare for everyone. Medicaid is a lifeline for people who otherwise would either not receive care or go into debt, the cost of which is ultimately borne by the private sector. Instituting work requirements in a state with 1.9% unemployment does nothing to make communities healthier, or foster economic development. I fear it is a double-whammy for families who are struck down by an illness while trying to make ends meet in an increasingly difficult environment.

Third, I personally struggle with the way religion and firearms are framed in the public policy dialog in our state. As someone who has been deeply shaped by my Lutheran upbringing, I was taught to live my faith humbly and authentically, rather than making it a public display. I also value the principle of separating church and state, a cornerstone of our nation's founding. I believe it's important to thoughtfully consider the context of our founding fathers' words and avoid applying modern interpretations to their intentions. As a responsible gun owner, I deeply respect the Second Amendment, but I also recognize the equal importance of all amendments and the many principles enshrined in our Constitution.

### **Rep. Erin Healy**

#### **House Minority Leader**

#### **District 10 - Sioux Falls**

Governor Noem's claim that South Dakota offers the best education in the nation rings hollow when we face ongoing challenges in our schools. We rank 49th for teacher pay. This has real consequences for attracting and retaining qualified educators, directly impacting the quality of education our children receive.

In addition, behavioral health issues among students are growing, yet resources remain limited. Schools

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are often the first line of defense for children struggling with mental health challenges. But without adequate support, we're failing both students and educators. Addressing these gaps should be a priority if we truly care about the future of our state.

The proposed education savings account is a school voucher program by another name. This threatens to divert critical funding from public schools, undermining the very foundation of our education system. Public dollars should remain in public schools, ensuring every child has the opportunity to succeed regardless of their family income.

The Governor also touched on Medicaid work requirements, but these policies place unnecessary burdens on the very people who need healthcare the most. Access to healthcare shouldn't be conditional; it's a foundation for building strong, thriving communities. Work requirements disproportionately affect individuals who are already struggling with chronic illnesses, caregiving responsibilities, or unpredictable employment. If we want to make South Dakota stronger, our policies must prioritize health and wellness, not bureaucratic obstacles. Healthy individuals are better equipped to seek and maintain employment, support their families, and actively participate in their communities. Medicaid expansion was a step in the right direction, but attaching work requirements undermines its potential to truly transform lives for the better.

Governor Noem rightly emphasized the importance of agriculture and maintaining a robust food supply. South Dakota's farmers and ranchers are the backbone of our economy and play a critical role in feeding the nation. However, her remarks failed to address a key reality: sustaining this vital industry requires a reliable workforce—a reality that clashes with Donald Trump's deportation plans. For over a century, migrant workers have been integral to agriculture in South Dakota and across the country. They take on some of the most challenging and undesirable jobs, particularly in turkey and pork processing plants, roles critical to maintaining our food supply and ensuring food security.

Deportation policies and the lack of meaningful immigration reform threaten to upend this system, leaving our farmers and food processing industries without the labor they need to operate. If we are serious about ensuring food security and keeping farmers farming, we must expand and improve migrant worker programs and provide pathways to legal status. Recognizing and supporting the essential contributions of undocumented workers is not just practical; it is vital for the future of our agricultural sector.

Governor Noem highlighted South Dakota's low unemployment rate, which is certainly an accomplishment worth noting. However, for many families, the challenge isn't finding work—it's finding affordable childcare. Too many parents are being forced to choose between earning a paycheck and ensuring their children have safe, reliable care.

Investing in affordable and accessible childcare solutions is one of the best ways to support working families and grow our economy. It enables parents—especially mothers—to remain in the workforce, contribute to our communities, and support their families. By addressing this critical need, we can ensure that our low unemployment rate translates into real economic stability and opportunity for all South Dakotans.

## Conde National League

**Jan. 13 Team Standings:** Braves 19, Giants 15, Mets 13, Cubs 12, Pirates 8, Stooges 5

**Men's High Games:** Chad Furney 211, Aaron Severson 195, Butch Farmen 186

**Men's High Series:** Chad Furney 513, Butch Farmen 509, Aaron Severson 500

**Women's High Games:** Suzi Easthouse 169, Vickie Kramp 156, Nancy Radke 155

**Women's High Series:** Suzi Easthouse 433, Vickie Kramp 422, Nancy Radke 419



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## Fellowship of Christian Students have been busy

Fellowship of Christian Students (FCS) partake in a community service project each month. Students gather together typically for a couple hours on a Saturday or Sunday giving back to those in need, those that might need encouragement or a project that needs a few more volunteers. While our youth see the value and impact of these projects, they also find it a way to hang out with their friends outside of school hours. Recent projects have included: November - replacing laces for ice skates at the Groton community ice rink; December - Caroling for a Cause, where students visited members around town, singing and sharing holiday joy to those that could use the encouragement during the season; December - ringing the bells for Salvation Army; January - filling BAGS for a program in which sends food home with kids in our school that need a meal over the weekends.



**New laces on ice skates**



**Ringing bells for Salvation Army**



**Caroling Group**



**Students line up to fill bags for the BAGS Program**



**Bags filled**





## SOUTH DAKOTA SEARCHLIGHT

<https://southdakotasearchlight.com>

### Noem bids farewell and thank you to SD in State of the State address

#### Governor delivers speech ahead of hearing on her nomination to lead U.S. Homeland Security

BY: MAKENZIE HUBER - JANUARY 14, 2025 4:43 PM



**South Dakota Gov. Kristi Noem delivers her 2025 State of the State address to lawmakers at the Capitol in Pierre on Jan. 14, 2025.** (Joshua Haiar/South Dakota Searchlight)

South Dakota Gov. Kristi Noem used her State of the State address on Tuesday to say goodbye.

Noem is expected to resign sometime after President-elect Donald Trump's inauguration on Jan. 20, if the U.S. Senate confirms her as Trump's secretary of Homeland Security. She had been scheduled for a confirmation hearing on Wednesday in Washington, D.C., but it's since been postponed to 9 a.m. Eastern time on Friday.

She focused her speech at the Capitol in Pierre on what she wants to achieve at the federal level, while also touting achievements from her six years as the state's first female governor.

"What kind of country do we want to leave to our families?" Noem said. "I want to leave

them a state and nation that is even safer, stronger and freer than the one that I grew up in."

Noem said there is an "invasion" of undocumented immigrants at the U.S.-Mexico border causing a flow of illicit drugs into the country and South Dakota, adding that she's deployed the South Dakota National Guard multiple times to the border.

While her imminent resignation will mean a change in leadership in the state, she expects Lt. Gov. Larry Rhoden to "lead this state just as I would," she said.

Noem has served as a conservative Republican, focusing on business-friendly investments, Second Amendment rights and anti-abortion efforts — all of which she touted in the "top 10 list" that she used as the structure for her speech. She also focused on South Dakotans' personal freedoms, business expansions, infrastructure projects in the state and initiatives to invest in prenatal and maternal health care.

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While touting her administration's responses to natural disasters, Noem announced the awarding of her Governor's Award for Heroism to a group of state and local authorities for risking their lives and going "above and beyond" during the June Big Sioux River flooding in southeastern South Dakota.

The speech was light on policy goals for the 100th legislative session, Brookings Republican Sen. Tim Reed said after the speech. Tuesday was the kickoff for the session, which continues through March 13.

Reed said the state is "out of focus on how we make sure that we're open for business." There has been a push against some infrastructure investments in the state, including against carbon pipelines (a prefiled bill would ban their use of eminent domain) and against data centers with huge electricity demands to handle computing in the artificial intelligence age.

Legislators should ask, "How do we grow our economy to make sure we start to have more revenue?" Reed said, adding that investments in education are a key piece of economic growth.

## Fireworks will return to Rushmore, Noem says

Noem did make a few announcements, including her pledge that "we will once again move forward with planning to return fireworks to Mount Rushmore" for a celebration of the nation's 250th birthday in 2026.

Noem worked with then-President Donald Trump to bring fireworks back to Mount Rushmore in 2020, at a show Trump attended. The National Park Service had stopped fireworks displays at the national memorial in 2010 due to wildfire concerns, litter from the fireworks and drinking water contamination from fireworks chemicals, and has stopped them again during the presidency of Joe Biden.

Noem also announced a \$200,000 one-time grant to help transfer the Keep Farmers Farming program, which helps with estate and transition planning for farmers, from First Dakota National Bank to the South Dakota Ag Foundation. Noem said the money from the Governor's Office of Economic Development will also help to market and grow the program.

Noem's proposal to create education savings accounts, which she mentioned in the speech after unveiling it last month during her budget address, has divided educators and lawmakers in the state.

Senate Majority Leader Jim Mehlhaff, R-Pierre, told South Dakota Public Broadcasting after the speech that the program will strengthen South Dakota's education system because it'll increase competition among private and public schools.

House Minority Leader Erin Healy, D-Sioux Falls, said the \$4 million program would take away funding that could go toward public education.

Noem said her administration has made efforts to pay public school teachers "what they deserve," yet South Dakota remains 49th in the nation for teacher pay, and she only proposed a 1.25% increase for public school funding in her budget address.

"Our teachers deserve to be paid fairly," Healy told South Dakota Searchlight. "We can't recruit the best until we start paying them more."

## Governor gives bat to Rhoden

In Noem's goodbye, she passed the baton — or rather the bat — to Lt. Gov. Larry Rhoden, gifting him a literal baseball bat. She said it should hold up better than "those gavels you love to shatter at this podium." Rhoden has broken two gavels in recent years while presiding over official legislative functions.

She also gifted lawmakers smaller replicas of the bat, meant to remind them that they're all "at bat now."

"To the people of South Dakota," Noem said, "thank you for the incredible honor of serving you as state representative, as congresswoman, and now as governor. Thank you for trusting me and for working with me to accomplish incredible things."

*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.*

## Noem's U.S. Senate confirmation hearing postponed

BY: SOUTH DAKOTA SEARCHLIGHT STAFF - JANUARY 14, 2025 5:29 PM

A U.S. Senate committee's hearing on South Dakota Republican Gov. Kristi Noem's nomination to lead the Department of Homeland Security has been postponed.

The hearing was scheduled for Wednesday. It's now postponed to 9 a.m. Eastern time on Friday. The hearing will be conducted by the U.S. Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs.

Politico cited a "person familiar with the process" who told the online political news website that Noem has completed her FBI background paperwork, but the FBI had not yet completed its portion of the paperwork.

A similar delay has occurred for former North Dakota Gov. Doug Burgum, whose hearing on his nomination to serve as secretary of the Interior Department was postponed this week from Tuesday to Thursday. Utah Sen. Mike Lee, chairman of the Energy and Natural Resources Committee, blamed the Office of Government Ethics for a "bureaucratic delay" in its review of Burgum's paperwork.



**South Dakota Gov. Kristi Noem delivers her 2025 State of the State address to lawmakers at the Capitol in Pierre on Jan. 14, 2025.**

(Joshua Haiar/South Dakota Searchlight)

## U.S. House passes bill banning trans athletes from competing in women's school sports

**South Dakota's lone representative votes yes**

BY: SHAUNEEN MIRANDA - JANUARY 14, 2025 5:46 PM

WASHINGTON — A measure that would bar transgender students from participating on women's school sports teams consistent with their gender identity passed the U.S. House on Tuesday.

The legislation — which advanced 218-206 — came as an increasing number of states have passed laws banning trans athletes from participating in sports in K-12 schools and colleges that align with their gender identity and amid a wider GOP-led push to enact anti-trans legislation.

President-elect Donald Trump, set to be sworn in Jan. 20, repeatedly pledged on the campaign trail that he would ban transgender youth from participating in school sports that align with their gender identity.

Almost all U.S. House Democrats opposed the measure, but two Texans — U.S. Reps. Henry Cuellar and Vicente Gonzalez — voted for it. North Carolina Democratic Rep. Don Davis voted "present."

Florida GOP Rep. Greg Steube introduced the legislation, a version of which passed the House in the previous session of Congress but had no chance of success back when Democrats controlled the Senate.

U.S. House Speaker Mike Johnson said "this is a great day for women in America" during a press conference following the vote.

The Louisiana Republican said the "House voted to uphold common sense again."

Riley Gaines, a former NCAA swimmer at the University of Kentucky who was at the press conference, said that with the House's passage, "we are one step closer as a nation to making sure that not one more male athlete is able to take a trophy, a roster spot, playing time, resources or an opportunity to compete,



from a woman.”

Gaines is a leading voice in opposing transgender athletes’ participation in sports that align with their gender identity.

The Human Rights Campaign, an LGBTQ+ advocacy group, noted that there has been “considerable disinformation and misinformation about what the inclusion of transgender youth in sports entails” and that trans students’ sports participation “has been a non-issue.”

### What the bill would do

The measure would amend Title IX so that “sex shall be recognized based solely on a person’s reproductive biology and genetics at birth.”

The bill does not specify how exactly the ban would be enforced — a point House Democrats in opposition to the measure were quick to point out.

Title IX is a landmark federal civil rights law that bars schools that receive federal funding from practicing sex-based discrimination.

In April 2024, the Biden administration released updated regulations to Title IX, part of which sought to bolster federal protections for LGBTQ+ students.

But last week, a federal judge in Kentucky scrapped the administration’s final rule nationwide — ending enforcement of the updated regulations that had drawn strong GOP opposition and a slew of legal challenges and created a policy patchwork across the country.

With Republicans now leading both chambers of Congress and Trump’s imminent return to the White House, the GOP stands in a more robust position to enact such a ban.

Alabama GOP Sen. Tommy Tuberville reintroduced a similar measure in the U.S. Senate last week. That effort, which already has the support of 35 Senate Republicans, would likely need the backing of at least 60 senators to advance past the filibuster.

There are 45 Democratic senators in Congress, though independent Sens. Angus King of Maine and Bernie Sanders of Vermont caucus with the Democrats.

The U.S. Department of Education did not immediately respond to States Newsroom’s request for comment Tuesday on the House bill.



**U.S. House Speaker Mike Johnson of Louisiana speaks at a press conference Tuesday, Jan. 14, 2025, after the U.S. House passed a bill that would prohibit transgender students from competing on women’s school sports teams consistent with their gender identity.** (Photo by Shauneen Miranda/States Newsroom)

### Democrats, civil rights groups object

The measure drew strong opposition from House Democrats, who spoke during the floor debate in front of a backdrop that read: “The GOP Child Predator Empowerment Act.”

The bill is titled by Republicans as the “Protection of Women and Girls in Sports Act of 2025.”

U.S. Rep Suzanne Bonamici, part of the U.S. House Committee on Education and Workforce, fiercely

opposed the measure, which she said would “empower child predators — putting students across the country at increased risk.”

Bonamici voiced concerns over privacy violations and harassment regarding how the bill would be enforced.

“This is a ‘one size fits all’ bill that would apply equally to every sport, from K-12 schools to colleges,” the Oregon Democrat said during floor debate.

Meanwhile, the Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights, along with more than 400 civil rights groups, called on members of Congress to reject the measure Monday, writing in a letter that “this discriminatory proposal seeks to exclude transgender, nonbinary, and intersex people from athletics programs in schools.”

“Instead of providing for equal facilities, equipment, and travel, or any other strategy that women athletes have been pushing for for decades, the bill cynically veils an attack on transgender people as a question of athletics policy,” the groups wrote.

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

## Trump pick for Pentagon chief, Pete Hegseth, grilled at lengthy confirmation hearing

BY: ASHLEY MURRAY - JANUARY 14, 2025 4:21 PM

WASHINGTON — Senators jockeyed to magnify contrasting aspects of Pete Hegseth’s life at his confirmation hearing Tuesday on whether the veteran, Fox News personality and accused perpetrator of sexual misconduct is qualified to lead the nation’s military and its nearly \$900 billion budget.

Lawmakers on the Senate Committee on Armed Services questioned the nominee for secretary of defense for just over four hours, the first of many hearings to come for President-elect Donald Trump’s Cabinet picks. Trump takes office in six days.

Senators on the Republican-led committee praised Hegseth for his “warrior ethos.” The veteran-turned-cable-news-host authored several books that have, among other talking points, compared modern patriotism to the crusades and critiqued Pentagon leadership, including his 2024 book “War on the Warriors: Behind the Betrayal of Men Who Keep Us Free.”

Committee Chair Roger Wicker described Hegseth as an “unconventional” choice and someone who will “bring a swift end to corrosive distractions such as DEI,” shorthand for diversity, equity and inclusion.

“Mr. Hegseth will bring energy and fresh ideas to shake up the bureaucracy. He will focus relentlessly



**President-elect Donald Trump’s nominee for secretary of defense, Pete Hegseth, speaks during a Senate Armed Services confirmation hearing on Capitol Hill on Jan. 14, 2025, in Washington, D.C.** (Photo by Andrew Harnik/Getty Images)

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on the war fighter and the military's core missions, deterring wars and winning the ones we must fight," the Mississippi Republican said.

But the committee's ranking member, Jack Reed, slammed Hegseth's nomination, telling him "the totality of your own writings and alleged conduct would disqualify any service member from holding any leadership position in the military, much less being confirmed as the secretary of defense."

"Mr. Hegseth, I hope you will explain why you believe such diversity is making the military weak, and how you propose to undo that without undermining military leadership and harming readiness, recruitment and retention," said the Rhode Island Democrat, who also questioned Hegseth's recent assertion in his book against the Geneva Conventions.

## Dust on his boots

Seated before the committee in a blue jacket, red striped tie and American flag pocket square, Hegseth pledged to be a "change agent" and agreed with Trump that "it's time to give someone with dust on his boots the helm."

"Like many of my generation, I've been there. I've led troops in combat. I've been on patrol for days. I've pulled the trigger down range, heard bullets whiz by, flex-cuffed insurgents, called in close air support, led medevacs, dodged IEDs, pulled out dead bodies and knelt before a battlefield cross," Hegseth said.

Hegseth was interrupted by shouting audience members three times in the first several minutes of his opening remarks.

In the weeks since Trump nominated Hegseth, accusations of sexual assault, harassment, alcohol abuse and financial mismanagement at veterans' nonprofits have surfaced against the 44-year-old who served in the Iraq and Afghanistan wars.

Hegseth told Wicker he chalked up the allegations to a "coordinated smear campaign" from "anonymous sources."

"I'm not a perfect person, as has been acknowledged, saved by the grace of God, by Jesus and Jenny," he said, referring to his third wife, television producer Jennifer Hegseth, who was seated behind him.

At numerous points in the hearing Wicker entered into the record letters attesting to Hegseth's character, including from former colleagues at Vets for Freedom and Concerned Veterans for America, two veterans service organizations he led following his time as an Army infantry officer.

## Women in combat roles?

Throughout the course of the hearing several female committee members, among them veterans who served in noncombat, combat and intelligence roles, pressed Hegseth on his years-long record of disparaging women in the military.

As recently as Nov. 7, he told podcast host Shawn Ryan that "I'm straight up just saying we should not have women in combat roles."

Sen. Joni Ernst, an Iowa Republican who served in the Army National Guard for over two decades, point-blank asked Hegseth to declare on the record that women should remain in combat roles, given that they meet "very, very high standards."

"My answer is yes, exactly the way that you caveated it," Hegseth said.

In an impassioned critique, Democratic Sen. Tammy Duckworth, a combat veteran from Illinois, said, "How can we ask these warriors to train and perform the absolute highest standards when you are asking us to lower the standards to make you the secretary of defense simply because you are buddies with our president-elect?"

Duckworth lost both her legs and partial use of her right arm when a rocket-propelled grenade downed her Black Hawk helicopter north of Baghdad.

Sen. Angus King, an independent from Maine, said Hegseth seems to have "converted over the last several weeks."

"You wrote in your book just last year, this is the book 'War on Warriors,' 'But if we're going to send our



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boys to fight, and it should be boys, we need to unleash them to win.' ... Which is it? Is it? Is it only boys can fight? I mean, you've, you've testified here today that you believe in women in combat."

## Managing an organization

Democratic senators also questioned Hegseth's ability to manage an organization's finances.

Sen. Richard Blumenthal, of Connecticut, held up tax records from Hegseth's tenure at the Concerned Veterans of America that he said showed budget shortfalls and up to \$75,000 in debt from credit card transactions.

"That isn't the kind of fiscal management we want at the Department of Defense," Blumenthal said.

"I don't believe that you can tell this committee or the people of America that you are qualified to lead them, I would support you as the spokesperson for the Pentagon, I don't dispute your communication skills," Blumenthal said.

Hegseth told the committee that one of his top priorities would be to obtain a clean audit of Pentagon spending.

## Money from television and book sales

Hegseth's own financial disclosure shows that he's made just north of \$4.6 million as a Fox News host since 2022.

Hegseth, who lives in Tennessee, reported a \$348,000 advance for his "War on Warriors" book and a range of anywhere from \$100,001 to \$1 million in royalties. The disclosure form only requires ranges, not specific dollar amounts.

He also reported just under \$1 million in income for speeches he's given over the last two years.

Additionally, Hegseth reported royalties in the range of \$100,001 to \$1 million for his 2022 book "Battle for the American Mind: Uprooting a Century of Miseducation." The book, co-written with David Goodwin, champions a "classical" Christian education system and claims to reveal the "untold story of the Progressive plan to neutralize the basis of our Republic," according to a synopsis featured on the book's official website.

In June 2022, while hosting "Fox and Friends Weekend," Hegseth scrawled "Return to Sender" on his Harvard graduate degree diploma – striking the word "Harvard" and replacing it with "Critical Theory" – and told viewers he didn't want it anymore.

In 2020, Hegseth delivered remarks at the Conservative Political Action Conference, rallying for a "battle for the soul of America" and promoting his book titled "American Crusade."

He drew a through line from the 11th-century military campaigns when, he said, "Europe was effectively under threat from Islamic hordes," to the American Revolution, and all the way to 2016 when "a country rose up and said 'We're going to make America great again.'"

"We live in a similar moment," Hegseth told the CPAC crowd.

In 2016, while promoting his book "In the Arena" to an audience at the conservative Heritage Foundation, Hegseth railed against many cultural topics while juxtaposing them with the famed Teddy Roosevelt arena speech in Paris on which his book centered.

"We teach our kids to be wimps. We turn our men into women and women into men," he said.

On the topic of immigration in Europe, Hegseth said, "When you forget who you are and you don't demand, at some level, allegiance and assimilation from populations that separate themselves and then have 10 kids while you're having one, that's how the most popular name in London becomes Mohammed for newborn boys."

Hegseth began as a Fox News contributor in 2014.

In July 2010, Hegseth testified against the Supreme Court nomination of Elena Kagan over her "unbecoming" treatment of military recruiters at Harvard in 2004.

Hegseth joined the Army ROTC during his undergraduate education at Princeton University in the early 2000s.

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



## Trump would have been convicted on election interference charges, says special counsel

BY: ASHLEY MURRAY - JANUARY 14, 2025 9:06 AM

WASHINGTON — A final report from former Department of Justice prosecutor Jack Smith contends that had President-elect Donald Trump not won in November, he would have been convicted on charges that he conspired to overturn the 2020 presidential election results.

The report was released just after midnight Tuesday, following a court battle to keep the document hidden from the public.

The roughly 140-page report is Smith's final record of the investigation that never made it to trial, as Trump repeatedly delayed the case, ultimately escalating his assertion of presidential criminal immunity to the Supreme Court.

Smith, who resigned Friday, detailed the investigation's findings that Trump attempted to undermine Joe Biden's 2020 victory by pressuring state officials and then-Vice President Mike Pence to lie about results, and knowingly spreading false claims that rallied his supporters to violently attack the U.S. Capitol on Jan. 6, 2021.

"As set forth in the original and superseding indictments, when it became clear that Mr. Trump had lost the election and that lawful means of challenging the election results had failed, he resorted to a series of criminal efforts to retain power," Smith wrote.

Smith closed his federal cases against Trump following the president-elect's victory on Nov. 5.

"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," Smith wrote.

"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."

A second volume of Smith's report focusing on his investigation of Trump's alleged illegal hoarding of classified documents at his Florida estate following his presidency has not been made public. Trump's two co-defendants in the case have legally challenged the document's release.

A federal hearing on that second volume's release is scheduled for later this week in Florida.



**Jack Smith, at the time the special counsel, delivers remarks on a recently unsealed indictment including four felony counts against Donald Trump at the Justice Department on Aug. 1, 2023 in Washington, D.C.** (Photo by Alex Wong/Getty Images)

### Trump slams report, Smith

Trump, who is set to again occupy the Oval Office in six days, dismissed the report in a post overnight on his platform Truth Social.

In it, he name-called the prosecutor and conflated Congress' non-criminal investigation into the Jan. 6 Capitol attack with Smith's wider probe of Trump's weeks-long conspiracy with others to subvert the 2020

election.

"Deranged Jack Smith was unable to successfully prosecute the Political Opponent of his 'boss,' Crooked Joe Biden, so he ends up writing yet another 'Report' based on information that the Unselect Committee of Political Hacks and Thugs ILLEGALLY DESTROYED AND DELETED, because it showed how totally innocent I was, and how completely guilty Nancy Pelosi, and others, were. Jack is a lamebrain prosecutor who was unable to get his case tried before the Election, which I won in a landslide. THE VOTERS HAVE SPOKEN!!!" Trump wrote.

## The long, winding litigation

A federal grand jury handed up its initial indictment of Trump on Aug. 1, 2023, charging him with four counts of conspiracy to defraud the United States; conspiracy to obstruct an official proceeding; obstruction of, and attempt to obstruct, an official proceeding; and conspiracy against rights.

U.S. District Judge Tanya Chutkan denied Trump's attempts to dismiss the case based on his argument that former presidents are protected from criminal prosecution.

After a federal appeals court also denied the criminal immunity argument, Trump brought the case to the Supreme Court.

The justices ruled last summer that presidents enjoy criminal immunity for their core official duties and presumptive immunity for actions taken on the outer perimeter of the office. However, the justices ruled that former presidents do not receive a shield from criminal prosecution for personal acts.

Smith adjusted his investigation accordingly, removing allegations of Trump's pressure on Justice Department officials, and a grand jury handed up a superseding indictment, still charging the same four counts, in late August.

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

## Apartment construction cools rents in some regions, including South Dakota

**State among those with highest building rates and biggest recent price declines**

**BY: TIM HENDERSON, STATELINE - JANUARY 14, 2025 9:41 AM**

A historic rate of apartment building is starting to make a difference in Sun Belt rents, but most tenants are still paying way more than they did earlier in the decade and rents are still rising in many Northeast and Midwest states.

The fact that rents are starting to drop as more apartment supply comes online, yet still remain perilously high for most low- and moderate-income renters, is new fodder for the debate over how to help more people afford the escalating costs of housing.

Increasingly, states see new apartments and other housing construction as the answer, though experts disagree on how much more is needed — and where — as supply begins to outstrip demand in some areas. New construction is also expensive, given today's inflated material and labor costs, and doesn't tend to produce much housing that is affordable to people with lower incomes, though it can prevent gentrification of existing affordable areas.

"When you don't allow enough homes to get built in high-income neighborhoods, higher-income people tend to move into lower-income areas," said Alex Horowitz, who directs the Housing Policy Initiative at the nonprofit Pew Charitable Trusts. "Then lower-income people have nowhere to go."

Nationally, December rents dropped slightly in 2024 for the second straight year, according to an Apartment List analysis of lease transactions. December rent peaked at a median \$1,394 in 2022 and is now down slightly, about 2%, to \$1,373 as of last year.

The biggest two-year decreases were in Sun Belt states that experienced apartment building booms:

Rents in Arizona, Georgia and Utah dropped 6%, and those in Texas and North Carolina fell 5%, according to a Stateline analysis of data from Apartment List, a company that posts rental listings online. Alabama, Colorado, Florida and South Dakota saw decreases of about 4%.

The new housing in mostly Sun Belt states has led to a drop in the national median rent, but rents in 32 states plus the District of Columbia have been on an upward trajectory since 2022. Those states include North Dakota (up 14%), Alaska (up 13%), Connecticut and Wyoming (each up 9%) and Kansas (up 8%). Vermont and West Virginia are not included in the analysis because Apartment List did not have enough information on leases from those states, though both states have large shares of renters paying excessive rent compared to income.



**An apartment building under construction on June 13, 2023, in eastern Rapid City.** (Seth Tupper/South Dakota Searchlight)

## Austin housing boom

Austin, Texas, with the highest rate of new construction in recent years, appears to be a prime example of the effect of more construction: Recent social media posts show young renters celebrating their lower payments.

In a January TikTok video she titled “jaw on the floor,” 27-year-old Becca Flores said, “I just got my lease renewal offer on my apartment in Austin in Texas and it was down almost \$200. That has, like, never happened to me in my life,” she said in the video. Many of the hundreds of comments relayed similar stories of unexpected rent drops.

Renters in the Northeast and Midwest have not been so lucky.

In New Jersey, which has seen an influx of new residents that began with people fleeing New York City during pandemic lockdowns, median rent has increased 3% to \$1,885 since 2022. State efforts to force more city-by-city apartment construction have run into local opposition.

Palisades Park, a majority Korean American borough of about 21,000 people in New Jersey a few miles from Manhattan, has been overwhelmed by developer proposals to build more apartments, said Democratic Mayor Chong “Paul” Kim. The borough settled recent lawsuits by developers partly by agreeing to allow accessory dwelling units, known as ADUs, which can help some cost-stressed homeowners by letting them earn rent from ADUs on their property.

“We wanted to do something that would benefit current residents,” Kim said. “Residents are saying it’s a good move to reduce the [apartment] developments. The judge said we can’t slide, we have to comply with the state law. We’re trying to head off a concentrated influx of developments coming all at once — we don’t have the public services to support it.”



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Another New Jersey mayor, Republican Mike Ghassali of Montvale, calls the state law "forced urbanization." Ghassali led 26 municipalities in a court challenge last fall.

Rents escalated dramatically in 2021 and 2022 and haven't come back down to what they were before that period in any state: Rents are up from 12% in Minnesota to 42% in Wyoming since December 2020, when they declined early in the pandemic.

But a few fast-building metros have seen drastic drops: The median rent in the Austin area has dropped by 13%, or \$199, to \$1,362, since 2022. In Atlanta; Jacksonville, Florida; Phoenix; and Raleigh, North Carolina, the median rent has declined by 7%.

Austin was cited in a separate Apartment List analysis in June, showing that rents had begun to drop amid the largest rate of apartment construction in the nation. Building permits for about 10 units per 1,000 residents were issued in the Austin metro area between 2021 and 2023.

By comparison, Northeast and Midwest metros with little construction in that time saw rents rise instead of drop. Cleveland, Milwaukee and Providence, Rhode Island, had some of the largest increases and lowest construction rates: less than one unit permitted per 1,000 residents.

Vermont and West Virginia are not included in the Apartment List data, but in both states nearly half of renters pay more than 30% or more of their pre-tax incomes for rent and utilities, an amount deemed excessive under federal standards.

## How big is the gap?

Apartment building reached a historic peak last year, with 67,000 units finished in August, the highest number on record for a single month since October 1974, with total housing units nearing an annual construction rate of 1.7 million a year.

Estimates of the national housing shortage vary widely, from 1.5 million houses and apartments to 20.1 million. Most experts estimate a shortage of 1.5 million to 5.5 million, according to Daniel McCue, a senior research associate at the Joint Center For Housing Studies of Harvard University.

Freddie Mac, a federal agency that buys home loans to support the housing market, estimated the shortage at 3.8 million in 2020, and said in November that the gap was 3.7 million as of the third quarter of 2024, despite all the recent construction.

"While the U.S. added 5.8 million housing units since our previous estimate, we also added 6.3 million households," Freddie Mac's deputy chief economist, Leonard Kiefer, said in a statement, adding that there are another million families that would rent or buy if they could, but have been priced out of today's market.

But not everybody believes there is a shortage.

Kirk McClure, professor emeritus of urban planning in the School of Public Affairs and Administration at the University of Kansas, published a paper last year arguing that the nation built too many homes and apartments in the bubble years of the late 2000s, and that between 2000 and 2020, home construction exceeded the number of new families by 3.3 million.

"We're still, to this day, trying to absorb that excess supply," McClure said. Prices would drop if we built millions of new homes, he added, "but we don't want to go back to 2008," when housing prices collapsed in the Great Recession.

Instead, McClure said, the answer is to put more money into the pockets of lower-income people.

"What we need to do is raise people's incomes," McClure said. "I've often said the best housing program out there is the minimum wage. When income reaches \$20 an hour, the affordability problems start to fade."

The problem, McClure said, is that people want to live in specific places and bid up the prices in those areas, not there is a national housing shortage.

"My colleague lives on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, which is just a wonderful part of New York City, but I think we all agree that it's expensive and New York doesn't want to build hundreds of thousands of apartments there," McClure said. "The truth of it is, even in the New York area, which deems itself to have a housing shortage, there are units waiting for you in New Jersey if you're willing to commute."

But Rob Warnock, an Apartment List senior research associate, said that suburban and exurban building



will never make up for lack of housing in popular cities.

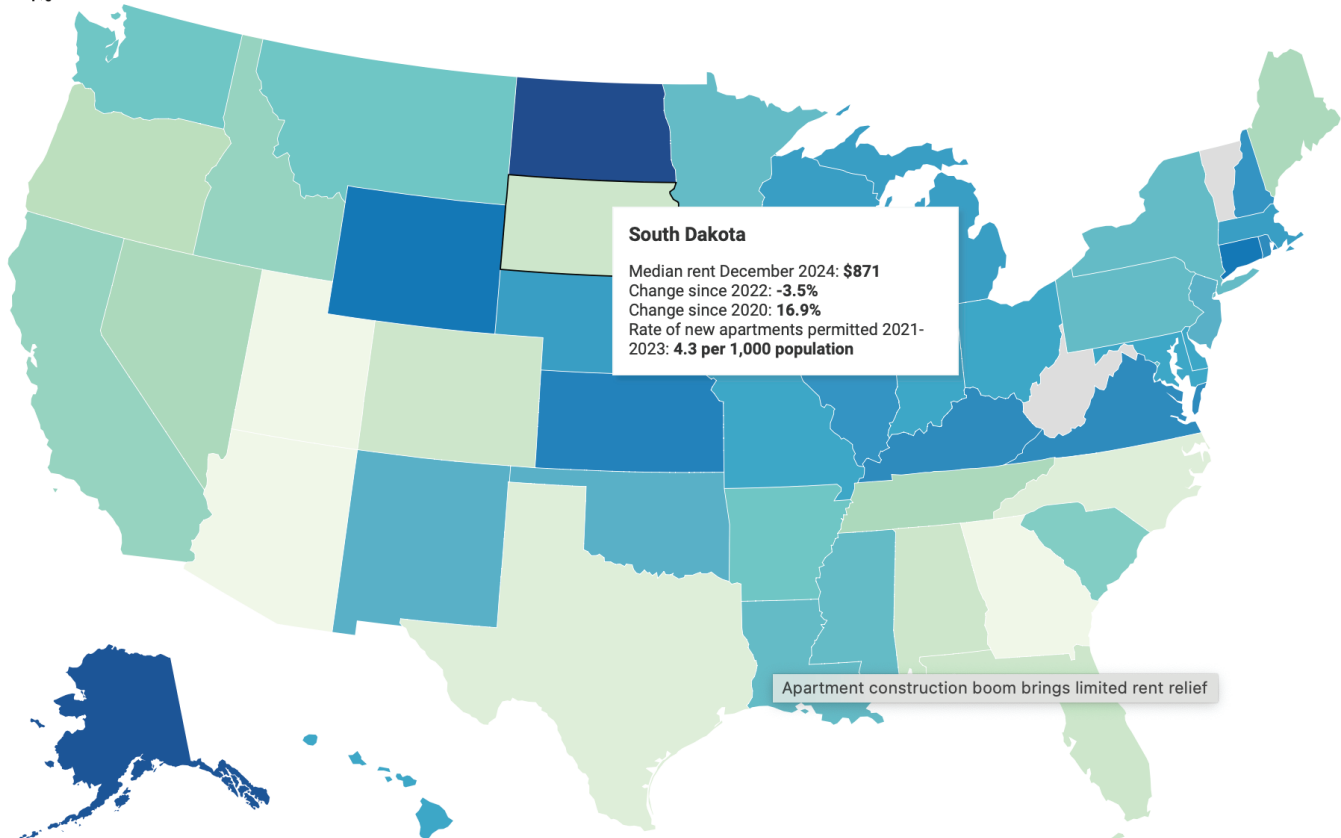
“For affordability to improve, housing has to be built in the places people want to live,” Warnock wrote in an email.

*Tim Henderson covers demographics for Stateline. He has been a reporter at the Miami Herald, the Cincinnati Enquirer and The Journal News in suburban New York. Henderson became fascinated with census data in the early 1990s, when AOL offered the first computerized reports. Since then he has broken stories about population trends in South Florida, including a housing affordability analysis included in the 2007 Pulitzer-winning series “House of Lies” for the Miami Herald, and a prize-winning analysis of public pension irregularities for The Journal News. He has been a member and trainer for the National Institute for Computer-Assisted Reporting since its inception 20 years ago, specializing in online data access and visualization along with demographics.*

## Apartment construction boom brings limited rent relief

An apartment construction boom is starting to make a small difference in rents nationally and in some states after rents spiked in 2021 and 2022, according to a Stateline analysis of Apartment List data. Rents in every state are still sharply higher than in 2020, however.

Change in December rent 2022 to 2024



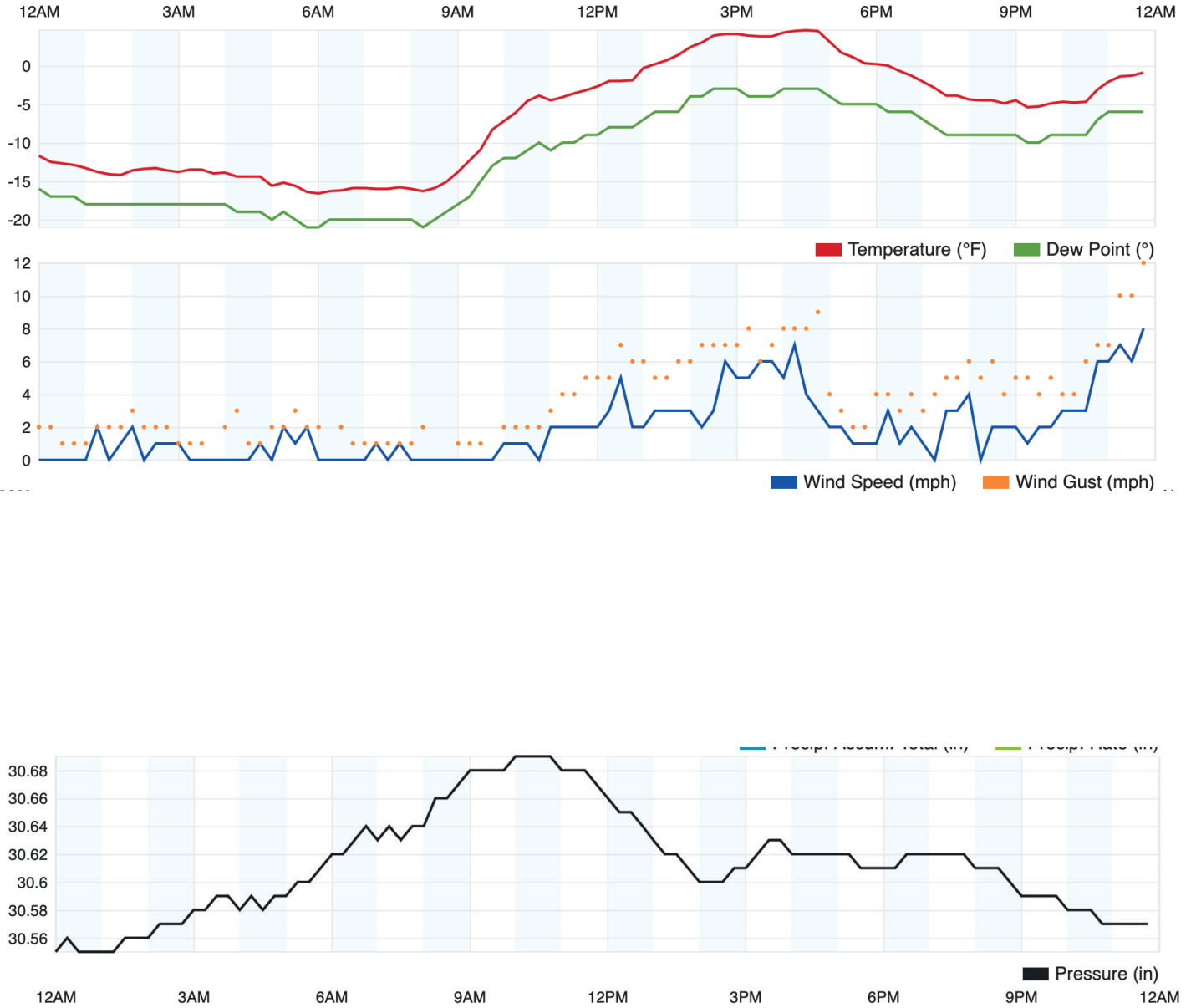
Rent information for Vermont and West Virginia are not included because Apartment List did not have enough information from those states.

Map: Tim Henderson/Stateline • Source: [Apartment List](#) • [Get the data](#) • [Embed](#) • Created with [Datawrapper](#)

# Groton Daily Independent

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## Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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Today



High: 36 °F

Decreasing  
Clouds

Tonight



Low: 18 °F

Mostly Clear

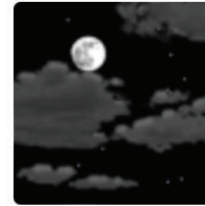
Thursday



High: 32 °F

Mostly Sunny

Thursday  
Night



Low: 25 °F

Partly Cloudy

Friday



High: 35 °F

Breezy.  
Partly Sunny  
then Slight  
Chance Snow  
Showers



## A Mild Break Before Next Arctic Blast

January 15, 2025  
2:57 AM

### Key Messages

- Mild Temperatures Through Thursday Night
- Arctic Blast Friday
  - Falling Temperatures
  - 20% Chance For Light Snow Showers
- Cold Persists Well Into Next Week
  - Wind Chills of 20 below to 35 below Sun Mon & Tues Mornings

Today



Highs  
30 to 40

Thurs



Lows  
19 to 22  
Highs  
31 to 40

Fri



Lows  
24 to 27  
Highs  
32 to 36

Sat



Lows  
-1 to 6  
Highs  
4 to 13

Warmest temps over central SD  
Coldest temps in the northeast



National Weather Service  
Aberdeen, SD

We'll experience a few days of mild weather thanks to one arctic high pressure system moving off, but another is waiting in the wings. The next surge in Arctic air comes through Friday and will persist well into next week, with some dangerously cold temperatures and wind chills

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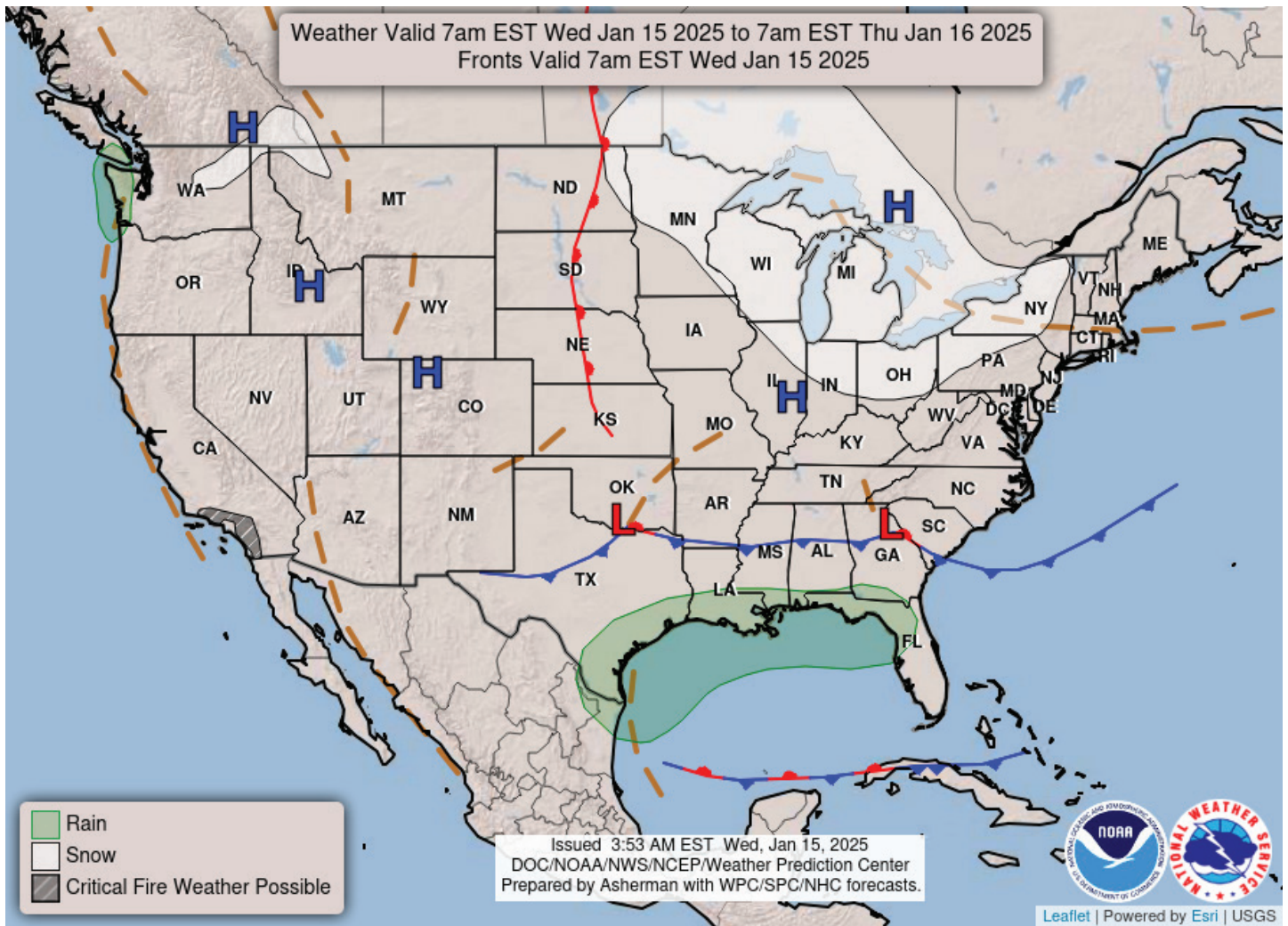
## Yesterday's Groton Weather

**High Temp: 5 °F at 4:38 PM**  
**Low Temp: -17 °F at 5:58 A**  
**Wind: 10 mph at 11:07 PM**  
**Precip: : 0.00**

Day length: 9 hours, 11 minutes

## Today's Info

Record High: 48 in 1942  
Record Low: --42 in 2009  
Average High: 23  
Average Low: 2  
Average Precip in Jan.: 0.30  
Precip to date in Jan.: 0.00  
Average Precip to date: 0.30  
Precip Year to Date: 21.71  
Sunset Tonight: 5:17:37 pm  
Sunrise Tomorrow: 8:05:44 am





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## Today in Weather History

January 15, 1982: Snowfall amounts of one to four inches and powerful northwest winds of 35 to 45 mph with gusts to 60 mph caused blizzard conditions with widespread drifting across much of South Dakota and Minnesota from the early morning of the 15th to mid-afternoon on the 16th. Wind chills were lowered to 50 to 80 degrees below zero, and visibilities were near zero across most areas. One death was attributed to exposure. There were numerous weather-related accidents. Some of the major accidents included; a truck blown off Interstate 90 near Murdo, injuring the driver, a truck blown off Highway 281, turned upside down in a ditch, and a truck slamming into a bridge on Interstate 90 near Murdo. The extreme cold killed numerous fruit trees at a nursery in Watertown.

January 15, 1985: Heavy snow fell in central and south-central South Dakota from the early evening of the 15th to around noon on the 16th, with areas around Pierre receiving up to 18 inches. Generally, 5 to 10 inches fell with numerous minor traffic accidents reported. Interstate 90 had a no travel advisory in a 95-mile stretch from Kimball to Murdo until the afternoon of the 16th due to low visibility and heavy drifting. Also, many schools and businesses were closed. Some snowfall amounts included 4 inches at Kennebec, 6 inches at Murdo, and 10 inches at Pierre.

January 15, 2009: An Arctic high pressure settled in on the morning of the 15th, bringing the region's coldest temperatures in many years. The combination of a fresh and deep snowpack, clear skies, and light winds allowed temperatures to fall to record levels at many locations on the 15th. Daytime highs remained well below zero across the area. This was one of the coldest days that most areas experienced since the early 1970s. The records were broken by 1 to as much as 7 degrees. [Click HERE](#) for a list of records.

1852: In 1852, the long, cold winter froze the Susquehanna River in Maryland to a depth of 2 to 3 feet, preventing all ferry service. Railroad officials overcame this perplexing situation by laying tracks across the ice, with trestles for either bank's inclines. During the several weeks from January 15 to February 29, approximately 1,300 cars with a total weight of 10,000 tons were hauled across the river from Havre de Grace, Maryland, to Perryville, Maryland.

1932 - Up to two inches of snow whitened the Los Angeles basin of California. The Los Angeles Civic Center reported an inch of snow, and even the beaches of Santa Monica were whitened with snow, in what proved to be a record snowstorm for Los Angeles. (David Ludlum) (The Weather Channel)

1952 - A six day snowstorm was in progress in the western U.S. The storm produced 44 inches of snow at Marlette Lake NV, 52 inches at Sun Valley ID, and 149 inches at Tahoe CA, establishing single storm records for each of those three states. In addition, 24 hour snowfall totals of 22 inches at the University of Nevada, and 26 inches at Arco ID, established records for those two states. The streamliner, 'City of San Francisco' was snowbound in the Sierra Nevada Range, near Donner Summit. (David Ludlum)

1967: The Green Bay Packers beat the Kansas City Chiefs, 35-10, in Super Bowl I at the Memorial Coliseum in Los Angeles. From the weather station at the USC campus in downtown LA, the high temperature was 79 degrees, and the low was 51. There was a light west wind.

1972: In Flint, Michigan, the daytime temperature rose to only -3 degrees. This is the second coldest maximum temperature recorded in the city of Flint since 1921. Detroit's high temperature was zero.

1987 - A powerful storm over the Southern Plateau and the Southern Rockies produced 24 inches of snow at Colorado Springs CO, including 22 inches in 24 hours, a January record. High winds in the southwestern U.S. gusted to 65 mph in the Yosemite Valley of California. (National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1988 - A small storm over the Atlantic Ocean produced heavy snow along the coast of North Carolina. The five inch total at Wilmington NC was their third highest for any storm in January in 117 years of records. (National Weather Summary)

1989 - A storm in the northwestern U.S. produced up to 14 inches of snow in the Cascade Mountain Range. Light snow in the north central U.S. was just enough to push the snowfall total for January at Fargo ND past their previous all-time monthly record of 30.7 inches.

1990 - While one Pacific storm crossed the Central Rockies, another approached the west coast. The northern mountains of Utah were buried under 17 to 35 inches of snow while the mountains of southern Utah received another 12 to 16 inches. Eighteen cities in the central U.S. reported record high temperatures for the date as readings warmed into the 50s and 60s. Wichita KS reported a record high of 68 degrees. (National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)



## HOW TO SELF-DESTRUCT

It was the second class of the new semester. The professor entered the classroom walking rapidly. Before getting behind his desk he shouted, "Hold up your assignment with your right hand!" One student, however, held up his assignment with his left hand.

Angrily the professor looked at the student and shouted, "Your right hand you stupid idiot!"

Calmly, the student responded, "Sir, this is the only hand I have. I lost my right hand in combat."

The Greeks defined anger as a "brief madness." In Scripture it has several meanings, including "strong feelings of displeasure, fury or wrath." Whichever meaning we choose leads to the same outcome: the expression of destructive behavior. When we become angry, we are not in control of ourselves, and we do things that are displeasing to God and harmful to others.

The Psalmist always gives good advice. When speaking of anger and self-control one of them said, "Stop your anger! Turn from your wrath."

When we become angry, we usually become frustrated, lose control of our emotions and then take it out on others. We think that we know what they should do and assume a role that is reserved for God.

Better for the Christian to turn anger into affection and frustration into forgiveness and prayer.

Prayer: Help us, Savior, to fill our hearts with Your love. May we honor others as You do, Lord, and seek to build them up rather than to tear them down in anger. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today : Stop being angry! Turn from your rage! Do not lose your temper – it only leads to harm. Psalm 37:8

*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: 01.14.25

4 14 35 49 62 6

MegaPlier: 3x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

**\$113,000,000**

NEXT DRAW: 2 Days 17 Hrs 8 Mins 56 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: 16 Hrs 23 Mins 56 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### LUCKY FOR LIFE

WINNING NUMBERS: 01.14.25

3 6 17 26 39 4

TOP PRIZE:

**\$7,000/week**

NEXT DRAW: 16 Hrs 38 Mins 56 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### DAKOTA CASH

WINNING NUMBERS: 01.11.25

4 6 7 16 23

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

**\$20,000**

NEXT DRAW: 16 Hrs 38 Mins 56 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### POWERBALL

DOUBLE PLAY

WINNING NUMBERS: 01.13.25

29 30 32 37 56 18

TOP PRIZE:

**\$10,000,000**

NEXT DRAW: 17 Hrs 7 Mins 56 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: 17 Hrs 7 Mins 56 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

### Tuesday's Scores

The Associated Press

#### **GIRLS PREP BASKETBALL**

Aberdeen Central 51, Watertown 36  
Aberdeen Roncalli 52, Faulkton 23  
Arlington 56, Deuel 39  
Avon 45, Freeman Academy-Marion 25  
Brandon Valley 62, Crofton, Neb. 54  
Burke 56, Irene-Wakonda 52  
Centerville 57, Scotland/Menno 17  
Clark-Willow Lake 50, Castlewood 39  
Colman-Egan 54, Chester 37  
Dakota Valley 68, West Central 44  
DeSmet 54, Howard 35  
Elk Point-Jefferson 60, Wagner 39  
Ethan 62, Bridgewater-Emery 27  
Faith 46, New Underwood 25  
Flandreau 41, Garretson 21  
Freeman 59, Parker 23  
Great Plains Lutheran 31, Estelline-Hendricks 26  
Hamlin 62, Sioux Valley 59, OT  
Herreid-Selby 62, McIntosh High School 36  
Hot Springs 56, Oelrichs 28  
Lemmon High School 77, Wakpala 43  
Lennox 54, Western Christian, Iowa 21  
Lower Brule 45, Sunshine Bible Academy 37  
Lyman 54, Kadoka 49  
Mahpiya Luta Red Cloud 77, Lakota Tech 51  
Marty 59, Colome 26  
McCook Central-Montrose 77, Hanson 31  
Milbank 70, Tiospa Zina 21  
Miller 44, Redfield 19  
Mitchell 51, Huron 39  
Mt. Vernon/Plankinton 53, Wessington Springs 43  
Newell 62, Moorcroft, Wyo. 51  
North Central 34, Leola-Frederick High School 22  
Oldham-Ramona-Rutland 52, James Valley Christian School 38  
Parkston 59, Canistota 22  
Potter County 32, Stanley County 22  
Sanborn Central-Woonsocket 60, Kimball-White Lake 22  
Sioux Falls Christian 76, Dell Rapids 48  
Sioux Falls O'Gorman 70, Sioux Falls Washington 53  
St Thomas More 38, Rapid City Christian 27  
Tea 51, Sioux Falls Roosevelt 42  
Upton, Wyo. 38, Edgemont 26  
Vermillion 49, Madison 23



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Viborg-Hurley 47, Alcester-Hudson 36  
Warner 50, Hitchcock-Tulare 42  
Waverly-South Shore 50, Flandreau Indian 21  
Wilmot 61, Britton-Hecla 34  
Winner 46, Bon Homme 30  
Wolsey-Wessington 51, Aberdeen Christian 16

## BOYS PREP BASKETBALL

Aberdeen Central 67, Watertown 63  
Aberdeen Christian 62, Wolsey-Wessington 45  
Bridgewater-Emery 59, Ethan 58  
Britton-Hecla 50, Wilmot 44  
Castlewood 50, Clark-Willow Lake 38  
Centerville 64, Scotland/Menno 37  
Cheyenne-Eagle Butte 77, Crow Creek Tribal School 54  
Corsica/Stickney 64, Mitchell Christian 25  
DeSmet 62, Howard 51  
Dell Rapids St Mary 61, Elkton-Lake Benton 41  
Deuel 70, Arlington 32  
Dupree 63, Harding County 52  
Estelline-Hendricks 63, Great Plains Lutheran 41  
Florence-Henry 76, Northwestern 69  
Freeman 82, Parker 63  
Freeman Academy-Marion 70, Avon 53  
Gayville-Volin High School 68, Sioux Falls Lutheran 34  
Hamlin 59, Sioux Valley 39  
Highmore-Harrold 46, Faulkton 45  
Hitchcock-Tulare 51, Warner 48  
Huron 47, Mitchell 38  
Irene-Wakonda 65, Burke 28  
James Valley Christian School 68, Oldham-Ramona-Rutland 39  
Lead-Deadwood 68, Belle Fourche 67  
Lemmon High School 70, Wakpala 43  
Leola-Frederick High School 66, North Central 21  
Mahpiya Luta Red Cloud 85, Lakota Tech 63  
Miller 74, Redfield 45  
Parkston 65, Canistota 34  
Rapid City Christian 38, St Thomas More 27  
Sanborn Central-Woonsocket 49, Kimball-White Lake 34  
Sioux Falls Christian 76, Dell Rapids 47  
Sioux Falls Lincoln 53, Sioux Falls Jefferson 38  
Sioux Falls O'Gorman 68, Sioux Falls Washington 67, 20T  
Tea 70, T F Riggs High School 52  
Tripp-Delmont-Armour 49, Andes Central/Dakota Christian 46  
Vermillion 72, Madison 46  
Viborg-Hurley 60, Alcester-Hudson 19  
Wagner 41, Elk Point-Jefferson 40  
Waubay/Summit 62, Sisseton 40  
Wessington Springs 59, Mt. Vernon/Plankinton 40  
West Central 69, Dakota Valley 49

Western Christian, Iowa 63, Lennox 47  
Winner 64, Bon Homme 31

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

## **DYXnet Hosts its First Cross-Region Simulated Attack and Defense Exercise to Strengthen Cybersecurity Capabilities**

HONG KONG SAR - Media OutReach Newswire - 15 January 2025 - As technology rapidly evolves, the number and complexity of cyberattacks have increased significantly. To enhance the response capabilities of its cybersecurity team in addressing various threats, DYXnet, a leading enterprise network service provider in Greater China, organized the "DYXnet Cyber Defense Exercise Competition 2025" yesterday (January 14), marking the company's first cross-regional simulated attack and defense exercise. This event brought together cybersecurity elites from offices in mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan, forming multiple "blue teams" tasked with defending against attacks from a "red team" led by DYXnet Hong Kong's cybersecurity experts. The exercise provided DYXnet's security team with invaluable experience, strengthening the overall incident response capabilities of its Security Operations Center (SOC) and enhancing the protection of clients' networks and digital assets.

"DYXnet Cyber Defense Exercise Competition 2025" brought together cybersecurity elites from DYXnet's teams in mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan.

### **Training Cybersecurity Talent with Simulated Real-World Cyber Attacks**

The simulated attack and defense exercise, also known as the purple team exercise, was organized by cybersecurity experts from DYXnet's product and pre-sales departments. They created a simulated enterprise network within One Cloud Director's controlled environment, acted as the red team attackers, and exploited the latest vulnerabilities and weaknesses. Meanwhile, eight defending blue teams, consisting of members from DYXnet's SOC, Network Operations Center (NOC), and Quality and Service Management (QSM) departments, participated online. These teams developed defense strategies and employed techniques to detect incidents and respond promptly.

The simulated attacks included data breaches, suspicious internal communications, OWASP, enterprise application vulnerabilities, DDoS, and phishing emails. These scenarios tested the teams' abilities in alert investigation, incident assessment, and response. The blue teams raced against time to solve the attack scenarios, requiring professional knowledge and familiarity with defensive measures, tools, and configurations to adapt to dynamic attack patterns. After three hours of intense competition, the team that responded most accurately and quickly was awarded the championship.

Joe Sze, the Director of Product and Services Management at DYXnet, stated, "Due to the increasing severity of cybersecurity threats, Hong Kong is considering new legislation for the 'Protection of Critical Infrastructures (Computer Systems) Bill.' This law will require critical infrastructure operators to implement measures safeguarding their computer information systems and enhancing overall security in Hong Kong. As a key player in the industry and a provider of cybersecurity services, DYXnet is dedicated to maintaining exceptional defense capabilities. We prioritize the training of cybersecurity professionals and consider purple team exercises essential training practices. These exercises allow our teams to engage in real-world scenarios, understand the latest attack trends and advanced persistent threats, and improve their response capabilities and teamwork. Ultimately, this enhances our overall cybersecurity posture."

DYXnet's cybersecurity team in Hong Kong won second place in the Fortinet's "Cyber Attack and Defense Competition 2024"

### **Gaining Recognition for Professional Expertise in Industry Competitions**

In the face of ever-evolving cyber threats, DYXnet is committed to staying ahead and providing clients with the most professional and reliable services. The cybersecurity team keeps up with the latest attack trends, conducts regular exercises, and actively participates in industry competitions, earning notable accolades.

At "The Cyber Attack and Defense Competition 2024" hosted by the global cybersecurity leader Fortinet last year, DYXnet distinguished itself among twelve competing teams from service providers in Hong Kong, achieving second place. The DYXnet team comprised four members: a cybersecurity consultant, a product manager, and two engineers. Each member focused on identifying vulnerabilities, formulating security strategies, assessing incidents, and executing technical solutions. Their extensive experience in daily operations enabled them to respond swiftly to various types of attacks during the competition. This achievement serves as a testament to the team's capabilities and expertise.

Joe Sze noted, "The purple team exercises emphasize teamwork and time management, as real security incidents often require racing against the clock. DYXnet's Managed Detection and Response (MDR) service provides enterprises with professional support, ensuring that our SOC team 24x7 monitors and responds promptly, maintaining clients' business operations and minimizing impacts during security incidents."

As DYXnet continues to enhance its cybersecurity offerings, the company remains dedicated to providing comprehensive cybersecurity solutions and managed services, including Secured SD-WAN, MDR, SASE, CloudShield, dark web monitoring, penetration testing, and vulnerability scanning, to meet the evolving needs of businesses.

Hashtag: #DYXnet #Cybersecurity

<https://www.dyxnet.com>

<https://www.linkedin.com/company/dyxnet>

The issuer is solely responsible for the content of this announcement.

DYXnet

DYXnet, established in 1999 in Hong Kong, became a wholly-owned subsidiary of VNET Group (NASDAQ: VNET) in 2014. It is a leading ICT service provider in Hong Kong and the Asia Pacific region, delivering innovative technologies and solutions to enterprises of all sizes and helping them fully embrace digital transformation. DYXnet offers a comprehensive portfolio of services, including enterprise networks (MPLS and SD-WAN), cloud solutions, data center services, cybersecurity, and AI solutions, empowering businesses to realize their full potential.

As a pioneer in the ICT field, DYXnet operates over 200 PoPs worldwide, covering more than 700 cities and serving over 30,000 client sites. DYXnet was among the first ICT service providers in the region to obtain prestigious ISO certifications, including ISO/IEC 27001, ISO/IEC 20000-1, and ISO 9001. Additionally, DYXnet is one of the inaugural official members of the China Cross-border Data Telecommunications Industry Alliance and has played a crucial role as one of the initial drafting units for SD-WAN service standards.

## **The Freedom Caucus takes control of 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 marks 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.

With the start of Wyoming's legislative session Tuesday, the Freedom Caucus majority in the House starts 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.

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"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 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.”

## South Dakota’s Grace Larkins is AP women’s basketball player of the week

By The Associated Press undefined

The Associated Press national player of the week in women’s basketball for Week 10 of the season:

Grace Larkins, South Dakota

The senior guard set the school’s single-game scoring record with 45 points and 13 rebounds in a win over Omaha. Her 45 points are the second most in a game of any NCAA Division I player this season and the third most by a Summit League player in league history. She averaged 39.5 points, 12.5 rebounds and seven assists in a pair of victories.

Runner-Up

Sedona Prince, TCU. The senior forward averaged 25 points, 12 rebounds and four blocks in road wins over Kansas and Teas Tech. She has helped the Horned Frogs to a 17-1 start, including a 5-0 mark in the Big 12 for the team’s best start to conference play in its 13 seasons in it. She’s one of three players in the country with at least 30 points and 12 rebounds in multiple games this season.

Honorable Mention

Morgan Maly, Creighton; Rose Micheaux, Virginia Tech; JuJu Watkins, USC.

Keep an eye on

Richmond forward Maggie Doogan led the Spiders to wins over George Mason and Davidson. She scored a career-high 37 points against George Mason, including the game-winner with three seconds left, also matching a career-high eight assists. She followed that up with 26 points in a win at Davidson.

## South Korea’s impeached President Yoon detained in massive law-enforcement effort

By KIM TONG-HYUNG Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea (AP) — South Korea’s impeached President Yoon Suk Yeol was detained in a massive law enforcement operation at the presidential compound Wednesday, defiantly insisting the anti-corruption agency didn’t have the authority to investigate his actions but saying he complied to prevent violence.

In a video message recorded before he was escorted to the headquarters of the anti-corruption agency, Yoon lamented the “rule of law has completely collapsed in this country.”

Yoon, the country’s first sitting president to be apprehended, had been holed up in the Hannam-dong residence in the capital, Seoul, for weeks while vowing to “fight to the end” the efforts to oust him. He has justified his declaration of martial law Dec. 3 as a legitimate act of governance against an “anti-state” opposition employing its legislative majority to thwart his agenda.

The Corruption Investigation Office for High-Ranking Officials said Yoon was brought into custody about five hours after investigators arrived at the presidential compound and about three hours after they successfully entered the residence, in their second attempt to detain him over his imposition of martial law.

A series of black SUVs, some equipped with sirens, were seen leaving the presidential compound with police escorts. Yoon was later seen stepping out of a vehicle after arriving at the agency’s office in the nearby city of Gwacheon. Following the questioning, Yoon was expected to be sent to a detention center in Uiwang, near Seoul.

What’s next?

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Yoon could be held in custody for weeks.

The anti-corruption agency, which is leading a joint investigation with the police and the military over whether Yoon's martial law declaration amounted to an attempted rebellion, has 48 hours to request a court order for a formal arrest on a charge of attempting a rebellion, and if it fails to do so, Yoon will be released. If Yoon is formally arrested, investigators can extend his detention to 20 days before transferring the case to public prosecutors for indictment.

The anti-corruption agency told reporters that Yoon, during his first two hours of questioning, exercised his right to remain silent.

The detainment warrant for Yoon, issued by the Seoul Western District Court, said there were substantial reasons to suspect that he committed crimes as a "ringleader of a rebellion."

Yoon's presidential powers were suspended when parliament impeached him on Dec. 14. The impeachment case now rests with the Constitutional Court, which could formally remove Yoon from office or reject the case and reinstate him.

In a separate message posted on his Facebook account after his detainment, Yoon claimed that "martial law is not a crime," saying his declaration was necessary to raise awareness about an opposition that was exercising "legislative dictatorship by blocking laws and budgets" and "paralyzing" state affairs. He denied the rebellion accusations, describing his impeachment as "fraud."

#### The scene at the compound

As they began the detention operation in the early morning, the anti-corruption investigators and police officers engaged in an hourslong standoff at the compound's gate with presidential security forces but otherwise encountered no meaningful resistance.

Police officers were seen using wire cutters to remove the barbed wire placed by the presidential security service on the perimeter of the compound to block their entry. Some police officers used ladders to climb over rows of buses placed by the presidential security service near the compound's entrance, and then the investigators began moving up the hilly compound. The investigators and police later arrived in front of a metal gate with a gold presidential mark that's near Yoon's residential building. Some officers were seen entering a security door on the side of the metal gate, joined by one of Yoon's lawyers and his chief of staff. The presidential security service later removed a bus and other vehicles that had been parked tightly inside the gate as a barricade.

Despite a court warrant for Yoon's detention, the presidential security service had insisted it's obligated to protect the impeached president and fortified the compound with barbed wire and rows of buses blocking paths.

#### The preparations and the concerns

South Korea's acting leader, Deputy Prime Minister Choi Sang-mok, issued a statement early Wednesday urging law enforcement and the presidential security service to ensure there are no "physical clashes."

Following Yoon's detainment, Choi met with diplomats from the Group of Seven nations, including the United States, Japan, Britain and Germany, as well as the representative of the European Union, to reassure them that the government was functioning stably.

Park Chan-dae, floor leader of the liberal opposition Democratic Party, which drove the legislative campaign that led to Yoon's impeachment on Dec. 14, said Yoon's detention is the "first step toward restoring constitutional order, democracy, and realizing the rule of law."

As investigators moved up the hillside compound, lawmakers from Yoon's People Power Party held a rally in nearby streets, decrying the efforts to detain him as unlawful.

The National Police Agency met with 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. The agency and police had openly warned that presidential bodyguards obstructing the execution of the warrant could be arrested.

Yoon's lawyers have claimed that the detainment warrant issued by the Seoul Western District Court was invalid. They cited a law that protects locations potentially linked to military secrets from search without

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the consent of the person in charge — which would be Yoon. They also claimed that the anti-corruption agency had no legal authority to investigate rebellion allegations.

"I am truly appalled to see illegalities upon illegalities upon illegalities being carried out and procedures being forcefully conducted under an invalid warrant," Yoon said in the video released before his detention. "I do not acknowledge the investigation by the Corruption Investigation Office for High-Ranking Officials. As the president, who is responsible for upholding the constitution and legal system of the Republic of Korea, my decision to comply with such illegal and invalid procedures is not an acknowledgment of them, but rather a willingness to prevent unfortunate and bloody incidents."

Yoon's supporters and critics have held competing protests near the residence — one side vowing to protect him, the other calling for his imprisonment — while thousands of police officers in yellow jackets closely monitored the tense situation.

What led to this

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 vote to lift the measure. The opposition-led assembly voted to impeach him on rebellion charges Dec. 14.

The Constitutional Court held its first formal hearing in the impeachment case on Tuesday, but the session lasted less than five minutes because Yoon refused to attend. The next hearing is set for Thursday, and the court will then proceed with the trial whether or not Yoon is there.

The White House National Security Council issued a statement saying that the United States stands by its support for the Korean people and "our shared commitment to the rule of law." It said Washington remains committed to working with the government led by Seoul's acting leader, Choi, and reaffirms the strength of the countries' alliance.

## A 'Particularly Dangerous Situation' is forecast for fire-scarred Los Angeles area

By JAIMIE DING, JULIE WATSON and JOHN SEEWER Associated Press

LOS ANGELES (AP) — Millions of Southern Californians were on edge as a final round of dangerous fire weather was forecast for the region on Wednesday, along with a rare warning of a "Particularly Dangerous Situation" for an area near where two massive blazes have killed at least 25 and destroyed thousands of homes.

Firefighters got a reprieve Tuesday when winds were unexpectedly light and they were able to make progress battling the two huge Los Angeles area fires and quickly snuff out several new fires.

The Eaton Fire burning just north of Los Angeles and the Palisades Fire that destroyed much of the seaside LA neighborhood of Pacific Palisades broke out Jan. 7 in conditions similar to what's expected Wednesday. High winds last week pushed flames at remarkable speed and carried fire-sparking embers sometimes miles away.

The National Weather Service issued red flag warnings — done when temperatures are warm, humidity is low and strong winds are expected — from 3 a.m. to 3 p.m. from the Central Coast 275 miles (443 kilometers) south to the border with Mexico. The "Particularly Dangerous Situation" was in effect for an area that includes parts of Los Angeles and Ventura counties.

"Key message: We are not out of the woods yet," the weather service said in a post late Tuesday. "The winds underperformed today, but one more enhancement could happen tonight-tomorrow."

More than 77,000 households were without electricity as utilities shut off power to prevent their lines from sparking new blazes.

A state of alert

Weary and anxious residents were told to be ready to flee at a moment's notice. They remained vigilant, keeping an eye on the skies and on each other: Police announced roughly 50 arrests, for looting, flying drones in fire zones, violating curfew and other crimes.

Of those, three people were arrested on suspicion of arson after being seen setting small fires that were

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immediately extinguished, LA Police Chief Jim McDonnell said. One was using a barbecue lighter, another ignited brush and a third tried to light a trash can, he said. All were far outside the disaster zones. Authorities have not determined a cause for any of the major fires.

Among nine people charged with looting was a group that stole an Emmy award from an evacuated house, Los Angeles County District Attorney Nathan Hochman said.

The biggest worry remained the threat from intense winds. Now backed by firefighters from other states, Canada and Mexico, crews were deployed to attack flareups or new blazes. The firefighting force was much bigger than a week ago, when the first wave of fires began destroying thousands of homes in what could become the nation's costliest fire disaster.

Kaylin Johnson and her family planned to spend the night at their home, one of the few left standing in Altadena, near Pasadena. They intended to keep watch to ward off looting and to hose down the house and her neighbors' properties to prevent flareups.

"Our lives have been put on hold indefinitely," Johnson said via text message, adding that they cannot freely come and go because of restrictions on entering the burn areas. "But I would rather be here and not leave than to not be allowed back at all."

Packed and ready to go

Residents said they were ready to make a hasty escape.

Javier Vega, who said he feels like he has been "sleeping with one eye open," and his girlfriend have planned out how they can quickly pack up their two cats, eight fish and leopard gecko if they get orders to evacuate.

"Typically on any other night, hearing helicopters flying overhead from midnight to 4:00 in the morning, that would drive anyone crazy," Vega said. But figuring they were helping firefighters to keep the flames from threatening their neighborhood, he explained, "it was actually soothing for me to go to sleep."

Preparing for another outbreak

Planes doused homes and hillsides with bright pink fire-retardant chemicals, while crews and fire engines deployed to particularly vulnerable spots with dry brush.

Los Angeles Mayor Karen Bass and other officials who were criticized over their initial response expressed confidence that the region is ready to face the new threat. The mayor said she was able to fly over the disaster areas, which she described as resembling the aftermath of a "dry hurricane."

Winds this time were not expected to reach the same fierce speeds seen last week but they could ground firefighting aircraft, LA County Fire Chief Anthony Marrone said.

He urged homeless people to avoid starting fires for warmth and to seek shelter.

Wildfires on the rise across LA

With almost no rain in more than eight months, the brush-filled region has had more than a dozen wildfires this year, mostly in the greater Los Angeles area.

Firefighters have jumped on small blazes that popped up, quickly smothering several in Los Angeles county, including a blaze Tuesday evening in the Angeles National Forest.

The four largest fires around the nation's second-biggest city have scorched more than 63 square miles (163 square kilometers), roughly three times the size of Manhattan. Of these, the Eaton Fire near Pasadena was roughly one-third contained, while the largest blaze, in Pacific Palisades on the coast, was far less contained.

Searching for victims

The death toll is likely to rise, according to Los Angeles County Sheriff Robert Luna. Nearly 30 people were still missing, he said Tuesday. Some people reported as missing earlier have been found.

Just under 90,000 people in the county remained under evacuation orders, half the number from last week.

Hollywood on hold

Hollywood's awards season has been put on hiatus because of the crisis. The Oscar nominations have been delayed twice, and some organizations postponed their awards shows and announcements without



rescheduling.

## Relief, 21st-century style: As wildfires burn, GoFundMe becomes a repository of harrowing stories

By MATT SEDENSKY AP National Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — They seem endless, these sapping stories of loss. A grandfather starts over in his 90s. A family loses their dream home. People who were already struggling are dealt new, brutal blows.

As California's massive wildfires burn, a barrage of GoFundMe campaigns for victims have become an outlet for onlookers transfixed by the blazes and eager to do something to help. Those appeals for help — plastered with photos of saffron flames or the charcoal aftermath or, most of all, the faces of the people at the center of the plea — are personalizing a tragedy too big to comprehend.

"I feel connected in a strange way to all these people that I don't know," says Rachel Davies, a 27-year-old writer in New York, who went through hundreds of GoFundMe's wildfire campaigns and felt drawn in to stories of strangers, donating to fundraisers for landscapers, housekeepers and a cook.

Davies was moved by the little details of victims' stories — like the fact that someone lost their home just as they were bringing a baby home from the hospital — and compiled and circulated a list of GoFundMe sites, thinking others would feel the same and be spurred to donate.

"Those stories," Davies says, "will stick with me."

They're offering glimpses into lives you might never see

The pages feel intimate. They serve up glimpses into the lives of a compassionate nurse or a goofy driver, and into the things they lost — be it a prized sneaker collection or the tools they counted on for work. Here, each is not some faraway, faceless victim. They're Todd or Ulli or Susan.

"People can look for someone they see as the ideal victim for them," says Amy Pason, a professor at the University of Nevada, Reno, who has studied social movements and teaches a class on persuasion.

In an era of constant connection, on-demand expectations, pinpointed preferences and endless customization, browsability and tailoring are second nature. Why not for disaster relief, too?

Plus, Pason says, it feels to many like a "more authentic" way to give.

In a statement, GoFundMe says thousands of fundraisers have been launched in connection with the fires, including its own Wildfire Relief Fund, which has already garnered about 30,000 donations. All told, the campaigns have already raised more than \$100 million for wildfire victims.

Ella Marx, a 26-year-old social worker in Ypsilanti, Michigan, is among those who chipped in. She came across an appeal from a woman who said the houses of her grandmother and three aunts were all destroyed by the Eaton Fire. She quickly donated \$20.

Marx finds herself donating to GoFundMe campaigns every month or so. She likes them because she doesn't have faith in the government to help victims and doesn't like the constraints that nonprofits might put on recipients of aid. Plus, she likes the feeling of knowing who she's donating to.

"I think it does personalize it a little more," she says.

Stories that can touch many

Scrolling through GoFundMe's pages, there is something to pull at nearly anyone's heartstrings. It is a veritable catalog of grief.

Runners might be drawn to a campaign organized by the Pasadena Pacers, which posted photos of members who lost homes on happier days, on a favorite trail or sporting a race-day medal. Rabbit lovers can flock to an appeal for The Bunny Museum, which paid tribute to the fluffy-tailed animal through its collection of tens of thousands of items, now all gone. A bar, a coffee shop, a mosque, a school — all are among the places left in ashes by the fire and now the subject of campaigns to bring them back.

Matthew Wade, a sociologist at La Trobe University in Melbourne, Australia, who has researched GoFundMe, says donors are drawn to the immediate gratification of their gift and the ability to follow along as their beneficiaries recover from tragedy.

"A concrete action," he says, "in these otherwise helpless moments."

But while some crowdfunded fundraisers result in a massive response, Wade says many raise little or nothing. Only the most uniquely compelling stories manage to garner a fickle public's attention, he says, reinforcing existing inequalities.

"Social crowdfunding platforms are effectively markets for sympathy, where the crowd weighs claims to moral worthiness," Wade said in an email interview.

But John Dent, who created a GoFundMe page for his cousin's family, who lost their home in Altadena, remains in awe of the generosity his campaign elicited. His relatives had initially rebuffed the idea of the fundraiser but were left in tears by the response of more than \$22,000 so far.

"It's just been so powerful," says Dent, a 52-year-old teacher from Goleta, California. "These are often people that have no clue who they are."

## **Biden promised to turn the page on Trump. Now he's being replaced by him**

By CHRIS MEGERIAN and ZEKE MILLER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Joe Biden promised nothing short of a national exorcism when he took office. He wanted to "restore the soul" of the country and prove that Donald Trump was only a footnote in the American story, not its next chapter.

The pitch was "let's try to get things back to normal as best we can," said Sean Wilentz, a historian who met twice with Biden in the White House.

It didn't work out that way. Despite exceeding expectations when it came to cutting bipartisan deals and rallying foreign allies, Biden was unable to turn the page on Trump. Four years after voters chose Biden over Trump, they picked Trump to replace Biden. It's an immutable and crushing outcome for an aging politician in the last act of his long career, one that will likely become the prism for how Biden is viewed through history.

"The fact is, the abnormality did not end," said Wilentz, a professor at Princeton University. "He may not have appreciated what he was up against."

Biden will offer his own perspective on how he wishes to be remembered in the Oval Office on Wednesday evening, when he'll deliver a farewell address. But Trump's impending return underscores the limits of Biden's ability to reshape the country's trajectory as his celebrated predecessors were able to do. With the end of his single term only days away, it's unclear how Biden will reconcile his hopes for his presidency with the results.

The country isn't waiting for his assessment. Only a quarter of Americans said Biden was a good or great president, according to the latest poll from The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research. That's lower than the views of the twice-impeached Trump when he left office soon after the Jan. 6 attack on the U.S. Capitol and during the deadly depths of the coronavirus pandemic.

Biden's friends and supporters insist that views will shift over time.

"We lost a close election under closely contested, hard fought issues, but that doesn't mean that what we did and how we did it hasn't helped change the country for the better," said Steve Ricchetti, a longtime adviser to Biden who served as White House counselor.

Ricchetti argued that Biden provided a model for repairing damage caused by Trump, one that will help another president down the line.

"There is no question that this is a strategy that will enable a successful presidency into the future," he insisted.

Trump will enter office Monday promising an even more aggressive effort to reshape the country than his turbulent first term. His comeback is calling into question — even among Biden loyalists — whether the outgoing president was only a fleeting reminder of a fading political era.

"Which one is the aberration, Biden or Trump?" said Sen. Chris Coons, a Democrat from Biden's home state of Delaware. "Has the United States permanently moved in a populist and right-wing direction, and

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Biden was just a temporary interruption?"

Coons isn't sure yet.

"I think it is an open question," he said.

Biden went from young upstart to aging leader

For better and worse, the arc of Biden's political career is intertwined with his age. He became the youngest senator in U.S. history when he took office in 1973 at 30 years old, the bare constitutional minimum.

He ran for president twice, falling short both times, before becoming Barack Obama's running mate in 2008.

By this point, Biden was a Washington veteran. David Axelrod, a longtime adviser to Obama, said one of the benefits of choosing Biden was how old he was. Biden would be 74 when Obama left office — too old to seek the presidency a third time, they presumed.

"You want your vice president to be concentrating on the task at hand, and not planning eight years ahead for their own candidacies," Axelrod said.

What happened next is a central part of Biden's political mythos. Mourning the death of his elder son to cancer, Biden thought he was done with politics — until Trump's comments in 2017 about "very fine people, on both sides" of racial violence in Charlottesville, Virginia, prompted him to run again.

Biden overcame doubters who believed he was past his prime, seizing the Democratic nomination as the political moment aligned with his message. He showed empathy while Trump appeared callous about the COVID-19 pandemic, and he promised competence instead of chaos.

When Biden took office, he hung a portrait of Franklin Delano Roosevelt above the fireplace in the Oval Office. It was an unmistakable signal that he wanted to be a transformational figure, not a transitional one.

Biden signed legislation to provide massive investments in infrastructure, clean energy and computer chip manufacturing, as well as a massive economic stimulus to power the country's recovery from the pandemic. He also limited the cost of prescription drugs and enacted tighter rules on gun purchases.

"There were these powerful entities that the Democratic Party had been unsuccessful in confronting," said Sen. Chris Murphy, a Democrat from Connecticut. "And Biden beat them all."

But he fell short of his ambitions to expand social services, including lowering the cost of child care and sustaining programs to cut child poverty, while a generational surge in inflation sparked a political backlash and questions about the wisdom of some of his spending.

More challenges came overseas. After fumbling the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, Biden rallied Western support for Ukraine to prevent Russian domination. He also remained resolutely behind Israel after the Oct. 7, 2023, attack by Hamas, disappointing some Democrats who wanted to see greater effort to protect Palestinian civilians.

Biden's effort to hold on to the presidency unraveled, clearing a path for Trump

Despite Biden's accomplishments, voters were concerned about other matters. They were frustrated by rising costs that chipped away at their paychecks. And they worried about illegal migration at the southern border.

As the problems festered, Trump gained momentum and Biden struggled.

"Biden was very interested in becoming a historic president," Axelrod said. "That was sort of an obsession. So he had a hard time acknowledging mistakes or failure."

After a lifetime of seeking the presidency, Biden had no interest in relinquishing it. He announced his reelection campaign even though he would be 86 at the end of his second term. The decision created another parallel to Roosevelt, although not one that Biden would have wanted.

Roosevelt pursued a fourth term in 1944 despite his failing health, believing himself to be indispensable while World War II was still underway. He died months after winning his last election.

Biden ran for reelection while brushing aside Americans' fears that he was too old for the job. He had beaten Trump before, and Biden insisted he was singularly capable of doing so again.

But he was forced to drop out of the race over the summer after stumbling through a debate against Trump. His performance sparked a crisis of confidence in a party unified by its shared desire to block Trump's return. The damage lingered even after Biden endorsed Vice President Kamala Harris as his suc-

cessor. She lost.

Two days after the election, Biden addressed the nation from the Rose Garden, where he talked up his "historic presidency" and shared an optimistic message about the future.

"The American experiment endures, and we're going to be OK, but we need to stay engaged," he said. "We need to keep going. And, above all, we need to keep the faith."

Ben LaBolt, the White House communications director, compared Biden to former Presidents Harry Truman and Lyndon Johnson, who were also unpopular when they left office.

"They governed during a very challenging time for the country and the world, but they did big things to set the country up on the path for the future and to tackle some significant challenges," he said.

On Friday, a reporter asked Biden if he regretted running for reelection and whether his decision paved the way for Trump's resurgence.

"I don't think so," he said.

In fact, Biden maintained, he could have won if he stayed in the race.

## Rubio vows to place US interests 'above all else' as Trump's top diplomat

By FARNOUSH AMIRI and MATTHEW LEE Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Florida Sen. Marco Rubio is promising to implement President-elect Donald Trump's "America First" vision as secretary of state, vowing in his confirmation hearing Wednesday that the incoming administration will forge a new path by placing American interests "above all else."

"Placing our core national interests above all else is not isolationism," Rubio will tell the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, according to an opening statement obtained by The Associated Press. "It is the commonsense realization that a foreign policy centered on our national interest is not some outdated relic."

"The postwar global order is not just obsolete; it is now a weapon being used against us," Rubio says.

It's a remarkable opening salvo from Rubio, who was born in Miami to Cuban immigrants, and who, if confirmed, would become the first Latino ever to serve as the nation's top diplomat.

The confirmation hearing begins a new chapter in the political career of the 53-year-old Florida Republican, whose relationship with Trump has evolved over the last decade. Once rivals trading schoolyard insults as they campaigned for president in 2016, the two men became close allies as Trump campaigned for another White House term last year.

Rubio first came to Washington as part of the "tea party" wave in 2010 and once advocated for allowing a path to citizenship for immigrants in the country illegally. But like other Republicans, Rubio's views on immigration have shifted toward the hardline stance of Trump, who has pledged to aggressively pursue deportations once he takes office on Monday.

Unlike many of Trump's Cabinet selections, Rubio is expected to easily win confirmation, notching support not only from Republicans but also Democrats who endorse him as a "responsible" pick to represent the U.S. abroad. Many expect he will be among the first of Trump's Cabinet picks approved.

Democratic Sen. Brian Schatz, who served alongside Rubio on the Foreign Relations Committee, said he has high hopes that the Florida Republican will reject the isolationist approach of other Trump allies.

"I think Marco is a hawk, but he's also an internationalist, and I think the challenge for him will be to maintain the long bipartisan tradition of America being indispensable in world affairs," the Hawaii lawmaker told AP. "And there are people in the Trump world who want us to run away from being the leaders of the free world. And I'm hoping that Marco's instincts towards American strength will win the day."

Rubio's approach to foreign affairs is grounded in his years of service on the Foreign Relations committee and the Senate Intelligence panel. In his speeches and writings, he's delivered increasingly stern warnings about growing military and economic threats to the United States, particularly from China, which he says has benefited from a "global world order" that he characterizes as obsolete.

China, Rubio will tell the committee, has "lied, cheated, hacked, and stolen their way to global super-



power status, at our expense.”

If confirmed, Rubio will become the leader of U.S. foreign policy — though his role will surely remain secondary to Trump, who relishes the global stage and frequently uses the bully pulpit against America’s allies.

Even before taking office, Trump has stirred angst in foreign capitals by threatening to seize the Panama Canal and Greenland and suggesting he will pressure Canada to become the nation’s 51st state.

By winning another term, Trump has won an “unmistakable mandate from the voters,” Rubio will say. “They want a strong America. Engaged in the world. But guided by a clear objective, to promote peace abroad, and security and prosperity here at home.”

A Biden administration decision to rescind Cuba’s designation as a state sponsor of terrorism with just days left in office is likely to irk Rubio, who has long supported tough sanctions on the communist-run island.

Rubio’s office did not respond to multiple queries Tuesday about the senator’s reaction to the move, which many believe will almost certainly be reversed by the Trump administration.

Secretaries of state have played a key role in formulating the foreign policy of the country since its founding, starting with the first one, Thomas Jefferson, who served in the top Cabinet position under President George Washington.

Since then, Jefferson, as well as his 19th century successors James Madison, James Monroe, John Quincy Adams, Martin Van Buren and James Buchanan, have all gone on to be elected president.

More recent secretaries of state have been less successful in their political ambitions, including John Kerry, who lost the 2004 presidential election to President George W. Bush before becoming the top diplomat, and Hillary Clinton, who lost the 2016 election to Trump.

The most successful secretaries of state have been known for their closeness to the presidents whom they serve, notably James Baker under George H.W. Bush, Condoleezza Rice under George W. Bush and, to some extent, Clinton under Barack Obama.

Like Clinton, Rubio was once a political rival to the president-elect who nominated them. However, the Clinton-Obama relationship during the 2008 Democratic primaries was not nearly as hostile as that between Trump and Rubio in the 2016 GOP primaries, which was marked by name-calling and personal insults.

Trump had an acrimonious relationship with his first secretary of state, Rex Tillerson. Trump fired him from the position via a social media post less than two years into his term.

## **As Los Angeles burns, Hollywood’s Oscar season turns into a pledge drive**

By JAKE COYLE and LINDSEY BAHR AP Film Writers

When the Palisades Fire broke out in Los Angeles last Tuesday, Hollywood’s awards season was in full swing. The Golden Globes had transpired less than 48 hours earlier and a series of splashy awards banquets followed in the days after.

But the enormity of the destruction in Southern California has quickly snuffed out all festiveness in the movie industry’s high season of celebration. At one point, the flames even encroached on the hillside above the Dolby Theatre, the home of the Academy Awards.

The fires have struck at the very heart of a movie industry still trying to stabilize itself after years of pandemic, labor turmoil and technological upheaval. Not for the first time this decade, the Oscars are facing the question of: Should the show go on? And if it does, what do they mean now?

“With ALL due respect during Hollywood’s season of celebration, I hope any of the networks televising the upcoming awards will seriously consider NOT televising them and donating the revenue they would have gathered to victims of the fires and the firefighters,” “Hacks” star Jean Smart, a recent Globe winner, wrote on Instagram.

The Oscars remain as scheduled, but it’s certain that they will be transformed due to the wildfires, and that most of the red-carpet pomp that typically stretches between now and then will be curtailed if not

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altogether canceled. With so many left without a home by the fires, there's scant appetite for the usual self-congratulatory parades of the season.

Focus has turned, instead, to what the Oscars might symbolize for a traumatized Los Angeles. The Oscars have never meant less, but, at the same time, they might be more important than ever as a beacon of perseverance for the reeling movie capital.

The film academy on Monday for the second time delayed its nominations announcement. Nominations will now be announced virtually on Feb. 23. The academy also canceled its annual nominees luncheon and said it's planning to honor frontline workers and to support relief efforts.

"We will get through this together and bring a sense of healing to our global film community," vowed Bill Kramer, academy chief executive, and Janet Yang, academy president.

The fires, one of the costliest natural disasters in U.S. history, continue. The ongoing nature of the crisis, which has killed at least 25 people, has made remaking well-laid plans a moving target. The Critics Choice Awards have been postponed. Nominations to the Producers Guild Awards have been delayed twice with no new date set. On Tuesday, the guild established a fund to support producers affected by the fires.

The 67th Grammy Awards, scheduled to be held Feb. 2 in downtown Los Angeles, are going forward, albeit with significant changes. Harvey Mason jr., Recording Academy chief executive and Board of Trustees chair Tammy Hurt said this year's Grammys "will carry a renewed sense of purpose: raising additional funds to support wildfire relief efforts and honoring the bravery and dedication of first responders who risk their lives to protect ours."

Some telethon-like element also seems sure to accompany the Oscars. In recent days, many throughout the industry have voiced suggestions for how the broadcast could be reconsidered. A not dissimilar process happened during the 2021 Oscars, which were postponed to late April because of the COVID-19 pandemic. The Oscars have been moved a few times throughout history, including in 1938, when the show was delayed a week due to historic flooding in Los Angeles.

For the Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences, the wildfires have been acutely personal. Four of the academy's 55-person board of governors lost their homes, according to The Hollywood Reporter, including producer Lynette Howell Taylor, visual effects governor Brooke Breton, sound branch governor Mark P. Stoeckinger and animation branch governor Jinko Gotoh. The Pacific Palisades, which was largely destroyed by the fires, was home to many stars and executives.

For potential nominees, this would normally be when they'd be at their most active, campaigning in Q&As and other events tied to the all-important nominations voting period. All of that has ground to a halt. Isabella Rossellini, who's favored to be nominated for best supporting actress for her performance in "Conclave," on Instagram posted a photograph of an Oscar lying in ashes. The photo turned out to be fake, but it accurately captured Hollywood's current mood.

Several high-profile TV series were forced to pause production because of the fires but notably few movie shoots were affected. That, in itself, is a reflection of a Hollywood that has seen the majority of film production seek tax incentives in other states.

Work throughout the film and TV industry hasn't rebounded following the 2023 strikes, leaving large numbers of crew members unemployed. So quiet are studio lots that actress Natalie Morales ("Grey's Anatomy") has advocated for studios, in the wake of the fires, to turn empty soundstages into temporary classrooms, erected by out-of-work craftspeople, for children whose schools burned down.

It's a reminder that many in the film business need all the work they can find, including all the jobs that accompany the Oscars. Not only are the Academy Awards a vital spotlight on a wide swath of movies that otherwise might struggle to find audiences, the awards provide a lot of jobs to an awards season industrial complex of workers, stylists and vendors.

With so many out of work before the fires hit, Silvina Knight, an Emmy-winning makeup artist, calls this latest crisis "another setback – a big one." She is currently working on "Suits LA," one of the series that stopped filming due to the fires.

"I'm not sure how people are going to feel about getting dressed up and when they just lost everything," said Knight of the Oscars. "But I don't know, it might be a show of force when we come back. Yeah, this

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is tragic, but we are all coming together. Even driving home the other night, motorists were being very considerate of each other, which is unusual for Los Angeles.”

## Dire fire warning for LA area pushed back as winds ease

By JAIMIE DING and JULIE WATSON and JOHN SEEWER Associated Press

LOS ANGELES (AP) — Easing winds delivered a brief but much-needed reprieve to firefighters Tuesday as they battled two massive blazes burning in the Los Angeles area, and the National Weather Service pushed back its unusually dire warning of critical fire weather until early the following day.

Forecasters said the winds were below danger levels in the evening, but they were expected to strengthen overnight with potentially fire-fueling gusts. Red flag warnings remained in effect from Central California to the Mexican border until late afternoon Wednesday.

Winds increased Tuesday but not to the near-hurricane-force levels that were predicted to happen earlier in the day. Still the danger was not over, officials said.

“Key message: We are not out of the woods yet,” the National Weather Service in Los Angeles said in a post on social media. “The winds underperformed today, but one more enhancement could happen tonight-tomorrow.”

This round of Santa Ana winds was not expected to be as mighty as last week, but they could carry fire-sparking embers for miles and stoke new outbreaks in a region where at least 25 people have already been killed.

Firefighters made more progress on the Palisades Fire, the largest and most stubborn blaze. CalFire Operations Section Chief Christian Litz said he took a helicopter ride around the perimeter and saw no active flames, though it was far from over.

Nearly 90,000 households lost electricity as utilities shut off power to prevent their lines from sparking new blazes.

A state of alert

Weary and anxious residents were told to be ready to flee at a moment’s notice. They remained vigilant, keeping an eye on the skies and on each other: Police announced roughly 50 arrests, for looting, flying drones in fire zones, violating curfew and other crimes.

Of those, three people were arrested on suspicion of arson after being seen setting small fires that were immediately extinguished, LA Police Chief Jim McDonnell said. One was using a barbecue lighter, another ignited brush and a third tried to light up a trash can, he said. All were far outside the disaster zones. Authorities have not determined a cause for any of the major fires.

Among nine people charged with looting was a group that stole an Emmy from an evacuated house, Los Angeles County District Attorney Nathan Hochman said.

The biggest worry remained the threat from intense winds. Now backed by firefighters from other states, Canada and Mexico, crews were deployed to attack flareups or new blazes. The firefighting force was much bigger than a week ago, when the first wave of fires began destroying thousands of homes in what could become the nation’s costliest fire disaster.

Kaylin Johnson and her family planned to spend the night at their home, one of the few left standing in her neighborhood in Altadena, near Pasadena. They intended to keep watch to ward off looting and to hose down the house and her neighbors’ properties to prevent flareups.

“Our lives have been put on hold indefinitely,” Johnson said via text message, adding that they cannot freely come and go because of restrictions on entering the burn areas. “But I would rather be here and not leave than to not be allowed back at all.”

An unusual and ominous warning

Tuesday’s forecast included a rare warning: The winds, combined with severely dry conditions, have created a “Particularly Dangerous Situation,” the National Weather service said, meaning that any new fire could explode in size.

The forecast was later adjusted to say gusts were expected to pick up strength early Wednesday.

Packed and ready to go

Residents said they were ready to make a hasty escape.

Javier Vega, who said he feels like he has been "sleeping with one eye open," and his girlfriend have planned out how they can quickly pack up their two cats, eight fish and leopard gecko if they get orders to evacuate.

"Typically on any other night, hearing helicopters flying overhead from midnight to 4:00 in the morning, that would drive anyone crazy," Vega said. But figuring they were helping firefighters to keep the flames from threatening their neighborhood, he explained, "it was actually soothing for me to go to sleep."

Preparing for another outbreak

Planes doused homes and hillsides with bright pink fire-retardant chemicals, while crews and fire engines deployed to particularly vulnerable spots with dry brush.

Los Angeles Mayor Karen Bass and other officials who were criticized over their initial response expressed confidence that the region is ready to face the new threat. The mayor said she was able to fly over the disaster areas, which she described as resembling the aftermath of a "dry hurricane."

Winds this time were not expected to reach the same fierce speeds seen last week but could ground firefighting aircraft, LA County Fire Chief Anthony Marrone said.

He urged homeless people to avoid starting fires for warmth and to seek shelter.

Wildfires on the rise across LA

With almost no rain in more than eight months, the brush-filled region has had more than a dozen wildfires this year, mostly in the greater Los Angeles area.

Firefighters have been jumping on small blazes that pop up. One, in a dry riverbed near Oxnard Monday night, was quickly smothered. "We've got helicopters ready to go, to drop water on any new fires," said Andrew Dowd, a spokesperson for the Ventura County Fire Department.

The four largest fires around the nation's second-biggest city have scorched more than 63 square miles (163 square kilometers), roughly three times the size of Manhattan. Of these, the Eaton Fire near Pasadena was roughly one-third contained, while the largest blaze, in Pacific Palisades on the coast, was far less contained.

Searching for victims

The death toll is likely to rise, according to Los Angeles County Sheriff Robert Luna. Nearly 30 people were still missing, he said Tuesday. Some people reported as missing earlier have been found.

Just under 90,000 people in the county remained under evacuation orders, half the number from last week.

Hollywood on hold

Hollywood's awards season has been put on hiatus because of the crisis. The Oscar nominations have been delayed twice, and some organizations postponed their awards shows and announcements without rescheduling.

## Workers at a California senior home race to evacuate residents in wildfire

By ALLEN G. BREED and HEATHER HOLLINGSWORTH Associated Press

Dinner service at the Terraces at Park Marino in Pasadena, California, was about half over, and residents were gathering in the lobby for the night's movie feature: "Scent of a Woman."

Sharon Tanner and Carlene Sutherland, both members of the resident council at the senior living community, were discussing what to do about people who leave their laundry in the washer or dryer when something caught their attention.

"I smell smoke," Tanner said.

"So do I," remarked Sutherland.

High above in the surrounding hills, a fire was burning. Within an hour, the Terraces' staff and residents would be in a race for their lives, walking, rolling and stumbling out into a hellscape of swirling coals.



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The wildfires that have ravaged the Los Angeles area since Jan. 7 have claimed at least two dozen lives and destroyed thousands of structures. AccuWeather, a company that provides data on weather and its impact, puts the damage and economic losses at \$250 billion to \$275 billion.

Fewer than 100,000 people in Los Angeles County remain under evacuation orders.

Around 850 patients and residents of nursing homes, assisted living facilities and group homes were evacuated after the blazes last week, according to the California Department of Public Health.

Among them are the people who called the Terraces home. The three-story wood and stucco building is partially covered with ivy, and nestled in the foothills of the San Gabriel Mountains. The 95 residents — ranging in age from 60 to 102 — were divided between assisted living and memory care.

Jan. 7 started out just like any other Tuesday. Breakfast was served from 7-9 a.m. Then at 9:45, it was time for "Stay Fit" — what they call their chair exercises.

The afternoon was full of other activities, and at 5:30, it was time for Movie Night.

Not long into the film, a visiting nurse came by and told staff there was a fire in the hills above. Neither local nor state officials had suggested that the Terraces evacuate, says Adam Khalifa, President and CEO, Diversified Healthcare Services, which owns and operates the facility.

Just the same, staff decided to begin bringing the residents down to the lobby. They started methodically draping lanyards around each neck with badges containing the resident's photo, name and apartment number; on the back were medical details: any conditions, cognitive deficits and "do not resuscitate" orders.

Off-duty staffers began showing up to volunteer, calling families to let them know what was happening, and some families came and picked up their loved ones.

Yesenia Cervantes, director of the memory care unit, was on the phone with hospice to get some help evacuating those residents when the power went out at around 6:40 p.m. When the yard outside the dining room caught fire, she and another employee grabbed a fire extinguisher and ran outside and put out the blaze.

Smoke began filling the lobby. Residents donned protective masks.

By 7:45 p.m., the backyard had reignited. Cervantes decided it was time to clear Safe Haven, the memory care wing; around the same time they got an evacuation order.

Some residents were still in bed. One woman who'd had a seizure earlier that day was too weak to rise; Cervantes lifted her up and put her in a wheelchair. Other staff made multiple forays to the upper floors, carrying residents downstairs.

When they got outside, it was bedlam. Workers from a skilled-nursing facility next door were wheeling their residents across the road in chairs and on beds. First responders were shouting and gesturing, telling people to move down the street and convene at the 7-Eleven.

Tanner, 72, was struggling when a man with dark hair appeared out of the smoke and told her sit on the bench of her walker.

"Hold your feet up," the stranger said as she faced back toward to the Terraces. "Be careful."

He towed her across the road "like a bat out of hell," made sure she was OK, then disappeared into the haze in search of someone else to help.

When residents and staff reached the convenience store parking lot, transport vehicles were already waiting. Tanner and two other residents were loaded into an ambulance and whisked away. Other residents were packed into buses and taken to the Pasadena Convention Center 5 miles away.

After residents were situated with cots, water and food, the Terraces staff went to work finding each of them a place to stay — be it a home, a hospital or another senior living facility.

When the smoke cleared, all that remained of their former home was a charred, water-stained shell, several of the black metal letters that once spelled out "the Terraces at Park Marino" over the front door missing.

For now, Tanner says she's staying with her sister and brother-in-law in San Jose. But she can't wait to see all of her friends again, when, and if, the center is rebuilt.

"Wherever I go is going to be just temporary," she says. "Because as soon as it's built, I'm back to the Terraces. That was my home, and that's where I want to live."

## 'Nobody's dying': A look inside how a senior home evacuated before burning down in LA wildfire

By ALLEN G. BREED and HEATHER HOLLINGSWORTH Associated Press

Flush with her \$1.25 winnings at the bingo tables, Sharon Tanner retired to a room off the dining hall to discuss the top worry for the residents council at her senior living community: what to do about people leaving their laundry in the washing machines and dryers.

Dinner service at the Terraces at Park Marino in Pasadena, California, was about half over, and residents were gathering in the lobby for the night's movie feature: "Scent of a Woman." Tanner and Carlene Sutherland, the council vice president and secretary, were discussing the laundry scofflaws when something caught their attention.

"I smell smoke," Tanner said.

"So do I," remarked Sutherland.

High above in the surrounding hills, a fire was burning. But staff had decided they were in no immediate danger, and the women figured they were smelling a distant fire.

Then they heard a commotion in the lobby.

The space was filling up with people, many of them agitated. Outside, the wind was howling. Then the power went out.

Tanner was looking out a picture window toward the backyard, where she sometimes takes meals, when embers began falling from the sky "like hail." She sat amazed as first the bushes, then a wooden fence burst into flames.

Within an hour, the Terraces' staff and residents would be in a race for their lives, walking, rolling and stumbling out into a hellscape of swirling coals in what one person called a "hurricane with flames."

Four of 15 residents in the Safe Haven wing were in hospice care. As Yesenia Cervantes, director of the memory care unit, scrambled to get people prepared to evacuate, a dark thought began gnawing at her.

Oh, my God, she thought. Will we have to decide which people we can save, and which to leave behind?

Deadly fires

The wildfires that have ravaged the Los Angeles area since Jan. 7 have claimed at least two dozen lives and destroyed thousands of structures. AccuWeather, a company that provides data on weather and its impact, puts the damage and economic losses at \$250 billion to \$275 billion.

Fewer than 100,000 people in Los Angeles County remain under evacuation orders.

Around 850 patients and residents of nursing homes, assisted living facilities and group homes were evacuated after the blazes last week, according to the California Department of Public Health.

Among them are the people who called the Terraces home.

A place for people's next stage

A three-story wood and stucco building partially covered with ivy, the Terraces nestled in the foothills of the San Gabriel Mountains. The 95 residents — ranging in age from 60 to 102 — were divided between assisted living and memory care.

Jan. 7 started out just like any other Tuesday. Breakfast was served from 7-9 a.m. Then at 9:45, it was time for "Stay Fit" — what they call their chair exercises.

Walking Club is usually at 10:15, but the staff decided it was too windy for the residents — many of whom, like Tanner, use a walker. After lunch, it was "Tech Hour," where staffers helped residents with their devices, and dinner started at 4. Residents had a choice between orange chicken with rice and broccoli, or a cold shrimp salad.

At 5:30, it was time for Movie Night, a tradition for which the residents could thank Louise Miller.

The 83-year-old widow and her neighbor, a 70-year-old man named Eddie, were inseparable, and also "kind of night owls" and wanted something to do after dinner, said Sam Baum, the community relations director. Soon, other residents began joining them, and "Movie Night" was born.

Not long into the film, a visiting nurse came by and told staff there was a fire in the hills above. Baum

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decided to jump in his car and head up for a closer look.

It was part of the Eaton fire, which began earlier that day and, fanned by vicious Santa Ana Winds, would eventually grow and all but obliterate the nearby community of Altadena. But when Baum stopped his car and took a look around, he didn't see cause for alarm. There were lots of firefighters on the scene, and the blaze would have to jump a major thoroughfare and a canyon stream to get to the Terraces.

So, when he got back, he told his colleagues, "I think we're OK."

Neither local nor state officials had suggested that the Terraces evacuate, says Adam Khalifa, President and CEO, Diversified Healthcare Services, which owns and operates the facility.

Just the same, staff decided to begin bringing the 93 residents (two others were already in other facilities when the fire broke out) down to the lobby.

They started methodically draping lanyards around each neck with badges containing the resident's photo, name and apartment number; on the back were medical details: any conditions, cognitive deficits and "do not resuscitate" orders.

Off-duty staffers began showing up to volunteer. They started calling families to let them know what was happening, and some came and picked up their loved ones.

Suddenly, the lights went out. It was around 6:40 p.m.

A rush to escape the flames

Cervantes, the memory care director, was on the phone with hospice to get some help evacuating those residents when the power went out. That's when she saw the backyard catch fire. She and another employee grabbed a fire extinguisher and ran outside, trailed closely by Cervantes' Pomeranian-Yorkie mix WALL-E, and put out the blaze.

Smoke began filling the lobby. Residents donned protective masks.

By 7:45 p.m., the backyard had reignited. Cervantes decided it was time to clear Safe Haven, the memory care unit. Around the same time they got an evacuation order.

Some residents were still in bed. One woman who'd had a seizure earlier that day was too weak to rise; Cervantes lifted her up and put her in a wheelchair.

Other staff made multiple forays to the upper floors, carrying residents down strapped in emergency stair chairs, in wheelchairs, even on their backs. The dining room had caught fire, and Cervantes finally rushed out.

When they got outside, it was bedlam. Workers from the Pasadena Park Healthcare & Wellness Center, a skilled-nursing facility next door, were wheeling their residents across the road in chairs and on beds. First responders were shouting and gesturing.

"Go straight," they yelled, pointing down the street into the murk. "Go to 7-Eleven." Cervantes made multiple trips back and forth to the 7-Eleven, WALL-E following her every move.

Tanner, 72, was struggling when a man with dark hair appeared out of the smoke and told her sit on the bench of her walker.

"Hold your feet up," the stranger said as she faced toward the Terraces. "Be careful."

He towed her across the road "like a bat out of hell," made sure she was OK, then disappeared into the haze in search of someone else to help.

Terraces executive director Maria Quizon was pushing a woman in a wheelchair when she noticed a man sitting on a sidewalk bench. He was confused, probably in shock, and she begged him to follow her. The winds were so fierce that Quizon was forced to zig and zag, like a sailboat tacking in a gale, the man close in her wake.

The Terraces is set about 200 feet back from the street. Then it was another 800 feet to the 7-Eleven.

It was "the longest, scariest" walk of Quizon's life.

When the nursing home next door had finished evacuating its 93 residents, staff pitched in with the Terraces folks.

"It didn't matter who it was," Pasadena Park vice president of operations Rhea Bartolome said to herself. "Nobody's dying."

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When residents and staff reached the convenience store parking lot, transport vehicles were already waiting. Tanner and two other residents were loaded into an ambulance and whisked away. Other residents were packed into buses and whisked away to the Pasadena Convention Center 5 miles away.

When he was sure everyone had gotten away, Baum drove to his condominium about eight minutes away from the Terraces to retrieve the ashes of his late wife Patrice, medications, some shoeboxes full of photos and his two cats.

Then he headed to the convention center to rejoin his staff and charges.

A temporary shelter

At 10:25 p.m. that night, Miller called her son, who was also under an evacuation order, to make sure he didn't worry about her. The call went to voicemail.

"We are in some giant facility in Pasadena," his mother said in a sweet, even tone. "She had no idea where that was — "It's like a football field with a linoleum floor and lots and lots of people."

After Miller and the other refugees were situated with cots, water and food, the Terraces staff went to work finding each of their residents a place to stay — be it a home, a hospital or another senior living facility. They found two facilities that would take 20 residents each.

They made sure Miller and Eddie were kept together.

When the smoke cleared, all that remained of their former home was a charred, water-stained shell, some of the black metal letters spelling out "the Terraces at Park Marino" still intact over the front door.

Miller lost all her treasures, including the precious papier-mâché sculptures her mother made — everything but her wallet, cellphone and the clothes on her back.

Her son, James Dyer, had nothing but praise and admiration for the Terraces staff.

"It was like a hurricane with flames," he says of the disaster. "And they did amazing work for the very short notice that they had."

The Terraces staff set up a makeshift "command center" in the lobby of a hotel just a few miles away to continue advocating for their residents and employees. Baum has vowed that his "second home" will be rebuilt, and that they will all be together again.

Tanner — a former waitress who'd worked at Denny's, Frisch's Big Boy and too many other restaurants to count — had only been at the Terraces for 10 months. She loved the place so much that she was already a "resident ambassador."

For now, she's staying with her sister and brother-in-law in San Jose. But she can't wait to see all of her friends again.

"Wherever I go is going to be just temporary," she says. "Because as soon as it's built, I'm back to the Terraces. That was my home, and that's where I want to live."

## Hamas OKs draft agreement of a Gaza ceasefire and the release of some hostages, officials say

By SAMY MAGDY and WAFAA SHURFAFA Associated Press

CAIRO (AP) — Hamas has accepted a draft agreement for a ceasefire in the Gaza Strip and the release of dozens of hostages, two officials involved in the talks said Tuesday. Mediators from the United States and Qatar said Israel and the Palestinian militant group were at the closest point yet to sealing a deal to bring them a step closer to ending 15 months of war.

The Associated Press obtained a copy of the proposed agreement, and an Egyptian official and a Hamas official confirmed its authenticity. An Israeli official said progress has been made, but the details are being finalized. All three officials spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss the talks.

"I believe we will get a ceasefire," U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken said during a speech Tuesday, asserting it was up to Hamas. "It's right on the brink. It's closer than it's ever been before," and word could come within hours, or days.

The United States, Egypt and Qatar have spent the past year trying to mediate an end to the war and secure the release of dozens of hostages captured in Hamas' Oct. 7, 2023, attack that triggered it. Nearly



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100 people are still captive inside Gaza, and the military believes at least a third are dead.

Any deal is expected to pause the fighting and bring hopes for winding down the most deadly and destructive war Israel and Hamas have ever fought, a conflict that has destabilized the Middle East and sparked worldwide protests.

It would bring relief to the hard-hit Gaza Strip, where Israel's offensive has reduced large areas to rubble and displaced around 90% of the population of 2.3 million, many at risk of famine.

If a deal is reached, it would not go into effect immediately. The plan would need approval from Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's Security Cabinet and then his full Cabinet. Both are dominated by Netanyahu allies and are likely to approve any proposal he presents.

Officials have expressed optimism before, only for negotiations to stall while the warring sides blamed each other. But they now suggest they can conclude an agreement ahead of the Jan. 20 inauguration of U.S. President-elect Donald Trump, whose Mideast envoy has joined the negotiations.

Hamas said in a statement that negotiations had reached their "final stage."

In the Oct. 7 attack, Hamas-led militants killed around 1,200 people, mostly civilians, and abducted another 250. Around half those hostages were freed during a brief ceasefire in November 2023. Of those remaining, families say, two are children, 13 are women and 83 are men.

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.

Israeli airstrikes on two homes in central Gaza killed at least 17 Palestinians late Tuesday and wounded seven more, hospital officials said, adding that some of the corpses had been dismembered. Earlier strikes killed at least 18 people, including two women and four children, according to local health officials, who said one woman was pregnant and the baby died as well.

There was no immediate comment from the Israeli military. Israel says it only targets militants and accuses them of hiding among civilians.

### A three-phase agreement

The three-phase agreement — based on a framework laid out by U.S. President Joe Biden and endorsed by the U.N. Security Council — would begin with the release of 33 hostages over a six-week period, including women, children, older adults and wounded civilians in exchange for hundreds of Palestinian women and children imprisoned by Israel.

Among the 33 would be five female Israeli soldiers, each to be released in exchange for 50 Palestinian prisoners, including 30 militants who are serving life sentences.

The Israeli official said Israel assumes most of the 33 are alive.

During this 42-day phase, Israeli forces would withdraw from population centers, Palestinians could start returning to what remains of their homes in northern Gaza and there would be a surge of humanitarian aid, with some 600 trucks entering each day.

Details of the second phase still must be negotiated during the first. Those details remain difficult to resolve — and the deal does not include written guarantees that the ceasefire will continue until a deal is reached. That means Israel could resume its military campaign after the first phase ends.

The Israeli official said "detailed negotiations" on the second phase will begin during the first. He said Israel will retain some "assets" throughout negotiations, referring to a military presence, and would not leave the Gaza Strip until all hostages are home.

The three mediators have given Hamas verbal guarantees that negotiations will continue as planned and that they will press for a deal to implement the second and third phases before the end of the first, the Egyptian official said.

The deal would allow Israel throughout the first phase to remain in control of the Philadelphi corridor, the band of territory along Gaza's border with Egypt, which Hamas had initially demanded Israel withdraw from. Israel would withdraw from the Netzarim corridor, a belt across central Gaza where it had sought a mechanism for searching Palestinians for arms when they return to the territory's north.

In the second phase, Hamas would release the remaining living captives, mainly male soldiers, in ex-

change for more prisoners and the "complete withdrawal" of Israeli forces from Gaza, according to the draft agreement.

Hamas has said it will not free the remaining hostages without an end to the war and a complete Israeli withdrawal, while Netanyahu has vowed in the past to resume fighting until Hamas' military and governing capabilities are eliminated.

Unless an alternative government for Gaza is worked out in those talks, it could leave Hamas in charge of the territory.

In a third phase, the bodies of remaining hostages would be returned in exchange for a three- to five-year reconstruction plan for Gaza under international supervision.

Blinken on Tuesday was making a last-minute case for a proposal for Gaza's postwar reconstruction and governance that outlines how it could be run without Hamas in charge.

Growing pressure ahead of Trump's inauguration

Israel and Hamas have come under renewed pressure to halt the war before Trump's inauguration. Trump said late Monday a ceasefire was "very close."

Thousands of Israelis rallied in Tel Aviv on Tuesday night in support of a deal they have long encouraged. "This is not about politics or strategy. It's about humanity and the shared belief that no one should be left behind in darkness," said a hostage released earlier from Gaza, Moran Stella Yanai.

But in Jerusalem, hundreds of hard-liners marched against a deal, some chanting, "You don't make a deal with the devil," a reference to Hamas.

In the Israeli-occupied West Bank, families of Palestinian prisoners gathered as well. "I tell the mothers of the prisoners to put their trust in the almighty and that relief is near, God willing," said the mother of one prisoner, Intisar Bayoud.

And inside Gaza, an exhausted Oday al-Halimy expressed hope from a tent camp for the displaced. "Certainly, Hamas will comply with the ceasefire, and Israel is not interested in opposing Trump or angering him," he said.

A child born in Gaza on the first day of the war, Massa Zaqout, sat in pink pajamas in another tent camp, playing with toys. "We're eagerly waiting for a truce to happen so we can live in safety and stability," her mother, Rola Saqer, said.

## Hegseth confronts allegations of misconduct as senators grill Trump's choice for Pentagon chief

By LISA MASCARO, TARA COPP and MATT BROWN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President-elect Donald Trump's choice for defense secretary, Pete Hegseth, vowed Tuesday to foster a "warrior culture" at the Pentagon and confronted allegations of sexual assault and excessive drinking and questions about his derisive views of women in combat during a heated Senate confirmation hearing.

Hegseth repeatedly deflected the various misconduct allegations and instead focused on his own military experience in the Army National Guard as senators determine whether the combat veteran and former TV news show host is fit to lead the U.S. military.

"It's time to give someone with dust on his boots the helm. A change agent," Hegseth said in his opening remarks.

Asked directly about the sexual assault allegation, Hegseth dismissed it as a "smear campaign," as he did in response to a rapid-fire series of questions about his personal behavior and complaints of drinking on the job. He has vowed not to drink alcohol if he is confirmed to lead the Pentagon. But pressed about his marital infidelity, Hegseth acknowledged, "I am not a perfect person."

Senators spent hours probing the concerns surrounding Hegseth, with the Republican chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee acknowledging the "unconventional" choice. But Sen. Roger Wicker, R-Miss., compared Hegseth to Trump himself, and said he will "bring energy and fresh ideas to shake up the bureaucracy."

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The top Democrat, Sen. Jack Reed of Rhode Island, however, called the allegations "extremely alarming" and said flatly: "I do not believe that you are qualified to meet the overwhelming demands of this job."

Hegseth, 44, comes from a new generation of veterans from the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, and his military experience is widely viewed as an asset. But he also brings a jarring record of past actions and statements, including about women, minorities and "woke" generals.

Hegseth also does not have the credentials typical of a defense secretary, raising questions about his ability to manage an organization with nearly 2.1 million service members, about 780,000 civilians and a budget of roughly \$850 billion.

The more than four-hour hearing launched a weeklong marathon as the Republican-led Senate is rushing to have some of Trump's nominees ready to be confirmed as soon as Inauguration Day, Jan. 20. With a narrow GOP majority, almost all Republicans must support Trump's pick if Democrats oppose.

Hegseth faces perhaps the most difficult path to confirmation, but GOP allies are determined to turn him 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.

In the audience were cadres of men wearing clothing expressing support for veterans or service in the military, but also protesters who momentarily disrupted proceedings but were removed from the room.

Hegseth was combative at times, as he was forced to confront the allegations of misconduct and his own comments that are far from the military mainstream.

Pressed on his opposition to diversity initiatives, Hegseth agreed that the military "was a forerunner in courageous racial integration." But he argued that modern diversity and inclusion policies "divide" current troops and don't prioritize "meritocracy."

In a striking scene, several female Democratic senators grilled Hegseth over his comments that women should "straight up" not be in combat roles, a view he has softened since his nomination.

Sen. Jeanne Shaheen, D-N.H., noted the switch. "Which is it?"

In one fiery exchange, Sen. Kristen Gillibrand, D-N.Y., told Hegseth: "You will have to change how you see women to do this job."

And Sen. Tammy Duckworth, D-Ill., who lost both legs when the Blackhawk helicopter she was piloting was shot down, displayed the Soldier's Creed she said hung at her hospital bed and by which all Army service members are expected to live. She told the nominee the troops "cannot be led by someone who is not competent."

Many senators have not yet met with Hegseth and most do not have access to his FBI background check, as only committee leaders were briefed on its findings. Reed called the background check "insufficient."

Sen. Richard Blumenthal, D-Conn., asked Hegseth if he would agree to a fuller FBI review, but he demurred, saying it was not up to him. The Trump transition would need to request it.

Republican senators took turns shoring up the nominee, with Sen. Markwayne Mullin, R-Okla., saying "we've all made mistakes," and coaxing Hegseth to say something nice about his wife and children.

Sen. Eric Schmitt, R-Mo., called Hegseth a "breath of fresh air," after he spoke about the need to tear diversity and critical race initiatives "root and branch from institutions."

And when GOP Sen. Joni Ernst of Iowa, a military veteran and sexual assault survivor, questioned Hegseth, he told her it would be the "privilege of a lifetime" to be the defense secretary for men, and women, in uniform.

Ernst released a statement Tuesday night saying she would support Hegseth and would "hold him to his commitments of auditing the Pentagon, ensuring opportunity for women in combat while maintaining high standards, and selecting a senior official to address and prevent sexual assault in the ranks."

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

A former 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 attended Princeton University and served in the Army National Guard from 2002 to 2021, de-

ploying 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.

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.

The secretary is responsible for tens of thousands of U.S. troops deployed overseas and at sea, including in combat zones. The secretary makes all final recommendations to the president on what units are deployed, where they go and how long they stay.

Pentagon chiefs also routinely travel across the world, meeting with international leaders on a vast range of security issues, and play a key role at NATO as a critical partner to allies across the region.

## **Biden moves to lift state sponsor of terrorism designation for Cuba, part of deal to free prisoners**

By AAMER MADHANI, COLLEEN LONG, MATTHEW LEE and ZEKE MILLER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden notified Congress of his intent to lift the U.S. designation of Cuba as a state sponsor of terrorism, the White House announced, as part of a deal facilitated by the Catholic Church to free political prisoners on the island.

Senior U.S. administration officials, who previewed the announcement on the condition of anonymity, said "many dozens" of political prisoners and others considered by the U.S. to be unjustly detained would be released by the end of the Biden administration at noon on Jan. 20.

The U.S. would also ease some economic pressure on Cuba, as well as a 2017 memorandum issued by then-President Donald Trump toughening U.S. posture toward Cuba.

"In taking these steps to bolster the ongoing dialogue between the government of Cuba and the Catholic Church, President Biden is also honoring the wisdom and counsel that has been provided to him by many world leaders, especially in Latin America, who have encouraged him to take these actions, on how best to advance the human rights of the Cuban people," White House press secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said in a statement.

The Cuban foreign ministry on Tuesday said that the government informed Pope Francis it will release 553 people who had been convicted of different crimes. It said that they will be gradually released, as the authorities analyze the legal and humanitarian ways to make it happen.

The foreign ministry didn't link the release of the prisoners to the US decision of lifting the designation as a state sponsor of terrorism, but "in the spirit of the Ordinary Jubilee of the year 2025 declared by His Holiness." In a statement, the foreign minister condemned the ongoing U.S. sanctions on the country as "economic warfare" and acknowledged that the Biden decision could well be reversed by Trump.

The Cuban authorities didn't say who is among the 553 people who will be released.

The determination by the outgoing one-term Democrat is likely to be reversed as early as next week after Trump, the Republican who is now president-elect, takes office and Secretary of State-designate Marco Rubio assumes the position of America's top diplomat.

Rubio, whose family left Cuba in the 1950s before the communist revolution that brought Fidel Castro to power, has long been a proponent of sanctions on the communist island. Rubio will appear before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on Wednesday for his confirmation hearing and is expected to address his Cuban roots in his testimony.

Trump has also appointed Mauricio Claver-Carone, a former White House National Security Council aide and strong supporter of sanctions against Cuba, to be his special envoy to Latin America.

The U.S. officials said the Trump transition team had been informed of the action before it was announced by the Biden White House.



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Rep. Mike Waltz, Trump's pick to serve as national security adviser, previewed a snap back to the previous U.S. policy, but signaled approval for the arrangement.

"Look, anything that they're doing right now we can do back, and no one should be under any illusion in terms of a change in Cuba policy," Waltz told Fox News on Tuesday. "We don't like it, but again, if people are going free, then that's what it is for now."

In the final days of Trump's first administration, on Jan. 11, 2021, the White House reinstated the designation, which had been reversed during the period of rapprochement between Cuba and the United States during President Barack Obama's second term in office. In doing so, the Trump administration cited Cuba's support for Venezuela's leader, Nicolas Maduro, and its refusal to extradite Colombian rebels to Colombia, among other issues, including its continued harboring of wanted Americans.

The move to designate Cuba by Trump was one of several foreign policy moves he made in the final days of his first term.

About six months after Trump designated Cuba as a terror sponsor, the Biden administration levied new sanctions on island officials and the national revolutionary police after hundreds of Cubans were arrested during demonstrations in Havana and other cities to protest shortages, power outages and government policies. They were the first such protests since the 1990s.

Human rights groups and activists, including the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, have been pressing the Biden administration to lift the designation to ease the suffering of Cuban people who feel the impact of Cuba's economic isolation.

Cuba's government recognized the announcement and expressed its gratitude, although it deemed it as "limited."

"Despite its limited scope, this is a decision that points to the right direction and is in line with the sustained and firm demand by the government and the people of Cuba," the country's foreign ministry said in a press release.

"The decision announced today by the United States, rectifies, in a very limited way, some aspects of a cruel and unjust policy," it added.

Congress and the incoming Trump administration will have the opportunity to review and potentially reverse Biden's actions, though the senior U.S. administration officials said the Biden administration had determined there was "no credible evidence" that Cuba was currently engaged in supporting international terrorism.

The Cuban foreign ministry said that the government is conscious that the incoming government in the U.S. could reverse the decision, but that it will remain "ready to develop a respectful relation with that country, based on dialogue and non-interference in the internal affairs of both countries, despite the differences."

There was no immediate comment from Rubio or his office, but one of his Republican colleagues on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Texas Sen. Ted Cruz, quickly denounced the Biden administration move.

"Today's decision is unacceptable on its merits," Cruz said in a statement. "The terrorism advanced by the Cuban regime has not ceased. I will work with President Trump and my colleagues to immediately reverse and limit the damage from the decision."

Rep. Carlos Gimenez, a Florida Republican, criticized the move and predicted that Trump would quickly reverse Biden's decision.

"President Biden is a pathetic coward," Gimenez posted on X. "Come January 20th, there will be a NEW SHERIFF in town & President Trump alongside Secretary of State @SenMarcoRubio will not only put #Cuba BACK on the list but PULVERIZE the regime once & for all!"

Biden in a national security memorandum issued Tuesday certified that Cuba hasn't provided any support for international terrorism during the last six months and had provided the administration with assurances that it wouldn't support acts of terrorism in the future.

The move comes after the administration in May removed Cuba from the State Department's short list of countries that it deems less than fully cooperative against violent groups.

## **USDA documented insects and slime at Boar's Head plants, records show**

By JONEL ALECCIA AP Health Writer

Government inspectors documented unsanitary conditions at several Boar's Head deli meat plants, not just the factory that was shut down last year after a deadly outbreak of listeria poisoning, federal records show.

Newly released reports from Boar's Head plants in New Castle, Indiana; Forrest City, Arkansas; and Petersburg, Virginia, described multiple instances of meat and fat residue left on equipment and walls, dripping condensation falling on food, mold, insects and other problems dating back roughly six years. Last May, one inspector documented "general filth" in a room at the Indiana plant.

The U.S. Agriculture Department released the inspection records in response to Freedom of Information Act requests from The Associated Press and other news organizations.

The problems documented at the three factories echo some of the violations found at the Jarratt, Virginia, plant linked to the food poisoning outbreak. The newly released reports describe:

- Equipment "covered in meat scraps" in 2019.
- "Dry crusted meat from the previous day's production" and "dark, stinky residue" left behind in 2020.
- A doorway covered in "dried meat juices and grime" in 2021.
- Green mold and flaking paint in 2022.
- "Unidentified slime" and "an abundance of insects" in 2023.
- A puddle of "blood, debris and trash" in 2024.

Boar's Head officials said in an email Monday that the violations documented in the three factories "do not meet our high standards." The company's remaining plants continue to operate under normal USDA oversight, they added. The Sarasota, Florida-based company has marketed itself for decades as a premier provider of deli meats and cheeses, advertising "excellence that stands apart in every bite."

Records from a fourth Boar's Head plant in Holland, Michigan, do not show similar problems.

Boar's Head stopped making liverwurst and shuttered its Jarratt, Virginia, plant in September after listeria poisoning tied to the product sickened more than 60 people in 19 states, including 10 who died.

Health officials in Maryland initially discovered listeria contamination in a package of unopened liverwurst. The company recalled more than 7 million pounds of ready-to-eat deli meat and poultry sold nationwide. About 2.6 million pounds was eventually recovered, according to the Agriculture Department's Food Safety and Inspection Service.

The conditions revealed at the other Boar's Head plants are "really concerning," said Thomas Gremillion, director of food policy at the Consumer Federation of America, a nonprofit advocacy group.

"It's reasonable for some people to decide they don't want to eat deli meat," he said. "Companies like Boar's Head, they should have to earn consumers' trust."

Boar's Head faces multiple lawsuits connected to the outbreak.

"This makes me extremely angry and sad," said Garrett Dorman, whose mother, Linda Dorman, 73, of Oxford, Pennsylvania, died in July after eating Boar's Head liverwurst. She had cancer, and liverwurst was one of the few foods she would eat, he said. He is suing the company, according to court documents filed by Marler Clark, a Seattle law firm.

"I believe Boar's Head needs to completely revamp their program at all of their facilities," Dorman said in an email. "Boar's Head needs to put the welfare of people as their highest priority."

Lawmakers including Sen. Richard Blumenthal and Rep. Rosa DeLauro have sharply criticized USDA officials for not taking stronger action against the company, despite documentation of repeated problems. The USDA inspector general is reviewing the agency's handling of the situation. The U.S. Department of Justice is investigating whether criminal charges are warranted.

"The new records released by FSIS should be considered by the DOJ, especially as they potentially point to a wider, systemic problem," the lawmakers said in a statement. "These reports make clear that there is a culture of noncompliance of critical safety and sanitary protocols."

In a report released Friday, USDA officials said "inadequate sanitation practices" at the Jarratt plant

contributed to the outbreak. Product residue, condensation and structural problem in the buildings were key factors, the agency found. State inspectors working in partnership with USDA had documented mold, insects, liquid dripping from ceilings, and meat and fat residue on walls, floors and equipment, the AP previously reported.

USDA officials have promised new measures to control listeria in plants that make ready-to-eat foods, including broader testing, updated training and tools, increased inspections, more food safety reviews and stronger oversight of state inspectors who act on behalf of the agency.

Boar's Head is hiring a "food safety culture manager," according to Frank Yiannas, a former official at the U.S. Food and Drug Administration who is now advising the company.

## **Obesity won't be solely defined by BMI under new plan for diagnosis by global experts**

By JONEL ALECCIA AP Health Writer

A group of global experts is proposing a new way to define and diagnose obesity, reducing the emphasis on the controversial body mass index and hoping to better identify people who need treatment for the disease caused by excess body fat.

Under recommendations released Tuesday night, obesity would no longer be defined solely by BMI, a calculation of height and weight, but combined with other measurements, such as waist circumference, plus evidence of health problems tied to extra pounds.

Obesity is estimated to affect more than 1 billion people worldwide. In the U.S., about 40% of adults have obesity, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

"The whole goal of this is to get a more precise definition so that we are targeting the people who actually need the help most," said Dr. David Cummings, an obesity expert at the University of Washington and one of the 58 authors of the report published in *The Lancet Diabetes & Endocrinology* journal.

The report introduces two new diagnostic categories: clinical obesity and pre-clinical obesity.

People with clinical obesity meet BMI and other markers of obesity and have evidence of organ, tissue or other problems caused by excess weight. That could include heart disease, high blood pressure, liver or kidney disease or chronic severe knee or hip pain. These people would be eligible for treatments, including diet and exercise interventions and obesity medications.

People with pre-clinical obesity are at risk for those conditions, but have no ongoing illness, the report says.

BMI has long been considered a flawed measure that can over-diagnose or underdiagnose obesity, which is currently defined as a BMI of 30 or more. But people with excess body fat do not always have a BMI above 30, the report notes. And people with high muscle mass — football players or other athletes — may have a high BMI despite normal fat mass.

Under the new criteria, about 20% of people who used to be classified as obese would no longer meet the definition, preliminary analysis suggests. And about 20% of people with serious health effects but lower BMI would now be considered clinically obese, experts said.

"It wouldn't dramatically change the percentage of people being defined as having obesity, but it would better diagnose the people who really have clinically significant excess fat," Cummings said.

The new definitions have been endorsed by more than 75 medical organizations around the world, but it's not clear how widely or quickly they could be adopted in practice. The report acknowledges that implementation of the recommendations "will carry significant costs and workforce implications."

A spokesman for the health insurance trade group AHIP, formerly known as America's Health Insurance Plans, said "it's too early at this point to gauge how plans will incorporate these criteria into coverage or other policies."

There are practical issues to consider, said Dr. Katherine Saunders, an obesity expert at Weill Cornell Medicine and co-founder of the obesity treatment company FlyteHealth. Measuring waist circumference sounds simple, but protocols differ, many doctors aren't trained accurately and standard medical tape

measures aren't big enough for many people with obesity.

In addition, determining the difference between clinical and pre-clinical obesity would require a comprehensive health assessment and lab tests, she noted.

"For a new classification system to be widely adopted, it would also need to be extremely quick, inexpensive, and reliable," she said.

The new definitions are likely to be confusing, said Kate Bauer, a nutrition expert at the University of Michigan School of Public Health.

"The public likes and needs simple messages. I don't think this differentiation is going to change anything," she said.

Overhauling the definition of obesity will take time, acknowledged Dr. Robert Kushner, an obesity expert at the Northwestern Feinberg School of Medicine and a co-author of the report.

"This is the first step in the process," he said. "I think it's going to begin the conversation."

## Top DC prosecutor: Trump pardons couldn't erase impact of Capitol riot convictions

By MICHAEL KUNZELMAN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Pardoning rioters who stormed the U.S. Capitol four years ago can't erase the truth about what happened that day, the top federal prosecutor for Washington, D.C., said Tuesday as he prepares to leave office.

"There is no undoing these prosecutions," U.S. Attorney Matthew Graves told The Associated Press. "The vindication of the rule of law is something that has already occurred. And no one can take that away."

Graves helped lead the largest investigation in Justice Department history, overseeing hundreds of cases against rioters who stormed the Capitol on Jan. 6, 2021. His successor, whoever that will be, may preside over an abrupt end to that work.

President-elect Donald Trump has vowed to pardon Capitol rioters when he returns to the White House next week, but Graves said pardons can't undo "the record that was built through these prosecutions and the accountability that has already been imposed."

"There will always be a public record of what occurred on January 6th, and people who care to know the facts will be able to find out the facts," Graves said.

Graves, who has faced a torrent of online abuse and calls for retribution from Trump supporters, said he has no plans to seek a pardon for himself before President Joe Biden leaves office.

"I don't even begin to know what I could possibly be pardoned for as a prosecutor," he added. "There is no crime here. There is just public servants doing their job and enforcing the law."

Graves, who took office in November 2021, plans to step down Thursday ahead of Trump's inauguration Monday. Trump has vowed to issue pardons to Capitol rioters on his first day back in the White House, repeatedly referring to them as "hostages" and "patriots."

More than 1,500 people have been charged with Capitol riot-related crimes. Nearly 1,300 of them have pleaded guilty or been convicted by a judge or jury after trials. And over 1,000 riot defendants have been sentenced, with roughly two-thirds receiving a term of imprisonment ranging from several days to 22 years.

Only two Capitol riot defendants have been acquitted of all charges — in both cases by a judge after a bench trial. Many Trump supporters have cited that as evidence that Washington juries can't be fair and impartial.

Graves believes his office's near-perfect conviction rate reflects the strength of their evidence. Many rioters used cellphones to record and narrate their crimes and posted confessions on social media in the days following their attack, which disrupted the peaceful transfer of presidential power from Trump to Biden after the 2020 election.

"This is the most recorded crime in the history of the country," Graves said. "The evidence is just overwhelming in these cases. As someone who is a career prosecutor, it's rare that you have this much evidence, which is why you're seeing these outcomes."



Over 100 police officers were injured while defending the Capitol from a mob of Trump supporters. Trump hasn't specified whether he would pardon rioters who assaulted officers, but Vice President-elect JD Vance said during an interview televised Sunday that rioters who engaged in violence "obviously" shouldn't be pardoned. Vance later said there was a "bit of a gray area" in some cases.

Graves said he doesn't see any basis for a pardon or clemency in any Jan. 6 case. He also expressed confidence that the Justice Department can remain free from political interference.

"I came in as a career prosecutor during a Republican administration," he said. "I've never seen a whiff of political interference in my time as a career prosecutor. I tend to believe past is prologue."

Graves said combating violent crime in Washington has been his primary focus over the past three years. He believes his office's efforts contributed to a 35% reduction in violent crime last year in the District of Columbia.

"Prosecutors can influence these crime trends. They don't control them. There are a host of other actors that are involved," he said.

Graves said he had planned to leave the U.S. Attorney's office in 2025 no matter who won the presidential election. In the short term, he is looking forward to taking a vacation.

"And then I'm sure at some point I will transition back to (law) practice, but that's all to be determined in the future," he said.

## **Chemicals in sewage sludge fertilizer pose cancer risk, EPA says**

By MICHAEL PHILLIS Associated Press

Harmful chemicals in sewage sludge that is spread on pasture land as fertilizer are causing cancer, the Environmental Protection Agency said Tuesday. The risk is highest for people who regularly consume milk, beef and other products from farms where it is spread. The risk is "several orders of magnitude" above what it considers acceptable, the agency said.

When cities and towns treat sewage, they separate the liquids from the solids and treat the liquid. The solids need to be disposed of and can make a nutrient-rich sludge often spread on farm fields. The agency now says those solids often contain toxic, lasting PFAS that treatment plants cannot effectively remove.

When people eat or drink foods containing these "forever" chemicals, the compounds accumulate in the body and can cause kidney, prostate and testicular cancer. They also harm the immune system and childhood development.

Most at risk are people who drink one quart of milk per day from dairy cows raised on pasture with the biosolids, eat one or two servings of fish a week from a lake contaminated by runoff, or drink PFAS-laden water, the draft risk assessment said. The EPA looked at farmers and those living nearby who regularly consumed these products over years — not the broader general public.

Organic farms aren't allowed to use the sludge, so the findings could reassure consumers who purchase organic grass-fed beef, although farms that transitioned to being organic may have had it applied earlier.

The federal government does have the power to regulate harmful substances in sewage sludge. Years ago, it set limits on some metals. But it does not regulate PFAS, or perfluoroalkyl and polyfluoroalkyl substances.

"This draft assessment provides important information to help inform future actions by federal and state agencies as well as steps that wastewater systems, farmers and other stakeholders can take to protect people from PFAS exposure, while ensuring American industry keeps feeding and fueling our nation," EPA Acting Administrator Jane Nishida said in a statement.

President-elect Donald Trump has nominated Lee Zeldin to head the EPA. When Trump announced the pick, he said Zeldin, "will ensure fair and swift deregulatory decisions" while also keeping the water and air clean.

Sewage sludge has been used as fertilizer for many years. Wastewater treatment plants produce millions of tons of it and tens of millions of acres of farmland have been allowed to use it, according to a group that's compiled state data. The EPA said this sludge is applied on less than 1% of fertilized acreage of

agriculture each year.

PFAS chemicals were used in nonstick pans, firefighting foam and other products in wide use. The two most common types of PFAS, the ones assessed by the agency, are not manufactured in the U.S. anymore, but are still in the environment and wastewater. Paper and textile manufacturers have released PFAS into the environment.

The risk may be higher for some farmers than the EPA assessment indicates. Many farms have far higher concentrations of PFAS than the study assumed. As the amount of PFAS increases, so does the health threat. And the EPA assumed people weren't exposed to PFAS from other sources when estimating risk, even though many people are.

Scott Faber, senior vice president of government affairs at the nonprofit Environmental Working Group, said the assessment finally makes official what regulators, polluters and utility operators have known for decades — that PFAS-contaminated fertilizer was getting into food and animal products. He called for tougher rules on its farm use and said EPA should limit how much PFAS manufacturers may release into waterways.

"There is no doubt that sending PFAS waste to wastewater treatment plants and then using that sludge as a fertilizer was a mistake. The only question is whether we'll continue to make the same mistake," Faber said.

The Biden administration has taken several actions to reduce PFAS levels in the environment including writing a rule to drastically reduce PFAS in drinking water.

A small number of states including Maine and Connecticut have limited or banned the use of PFAS-contaminated fertilizers made from sewage.

The EPA said officials monitor the food supply to protect people from exposure to forever chemicals.

## **Federal prosecutors won't seek charges in deadly arrest of Black motorist Ronald Greene**

By JIM MUSTIAN Associated Press

Federal prosecutors told family members Tuesday they will not bring charges in the deadly 2019 arrest of Black motorist Ronald Greene, closing the books on a lengthy FBI investigation into the white troopers who stunned, punched and dragged Greene on a roadside and allegations of an attempted cover-up by the Louisiana State Police.

The U.S. Justice Department informed Greene's family of the decision as officials were also preparing to release findings from a broader civil rights investigation that found a pattern of state troopers using excessive force, according to two officials familiar with the inquiry. The officials spoke to The Associated Press on condition of anonymity because they could not publicly discuss details ahead of an announcement expected later in the week.

That "pattern-or-practice" inquiry, launched in 2022, followed an AP investigation that found Greene's arrest was among at least a dozen cases in which state troopers and their bosses ignored or concealed evidence of beatings, deflected blame and impeded efforts to root out misconduct in the agency. In one case, a white trooper pummeled a Black man 18 times with a flashlight following a traffic stop, leaving him with a broken jaw, broken ribs and a gash to his head.

"There's no closure here," Greene's mother, Mona Hardin, told AP after meeting with prosecutors. "I knew it was coming. They're just pouring sugar on s—."

The AP's reporting also turned up state police violence against white suspects, including one beaten beyond recognition. Troopers shared the man's photograph in jeering text messages, saying he "shouldn't have resisted" and joking that his injuries had been caused by a fall following his 2019 arrest.

Federal prosecutors opened grand jury investigations into some of the cases but closed most of them without charges. In the Greene case, they wavered for years on whether to indict the troopers captured on graphic body-camera video swarming his vehicle following a high-speed chase outside Monroe, Louisiana.

The body-camera footage, withheld by officials for two years but published by AP in 2021, showed troop-

ers swarming Greene even as he appeared to raise his hands, plead for mercy and wail, "I'm your brother! I'm scared! I'm scared!" Troopers repeatedly jolted Greene with stun guns before he could even get out of the car, with one of them wrestling him to the ground, putting him in a chokehold and punching him in the face. Another called him a "stupid motherf---."

They then ordered a shackled Greene to remain face down on the ground, a prone restraint that experts said could have dangerously restricted Greene's breathing.

State police initially blamed the 49-year-old's death on a crash following a high-speed chase over a traffic violation. But that explanation was called into question by photos of Greene's body on a gurney showing his bruised and battered face, a hospital report noting he had two stun gun prongs in his back and the fact that his SUV had only minor damage. Even the emergency room doctor questioned the troopers' initial account of a crash, writing in his notes: "Does not add up."

A reexamined autopsy ordered by the FBI ultimately debunked the crash narrative and listed "prone restraint" among other contributing factors in Greene's death, including neck compression, physical struggle and cocaine use.

A federal indictment seemed imminent for several years, so much so that federal prosecutors asked the local district attorney to hold off on bringing state charges until the FBI inquiry ran its course. They later reversed course, and, in late 2022, a state grand jury indicted five officers on counts ranging from negligent homicide to malfeasance.

The state case withered away to charges against just two of those officers, one of whom dragged Greene by his ankle shackles and pleaded no contest last year to misdemeanor battery. The lone remaining defendant in the case is scheduled to enter a similar plea this week, concluding the state proceedings.

Perhaps the most significant hurdle to federal charges was the untimely death of Chris Hollingsworth, the trooper who was seen on the video repeatedly bashing Greene in the head with a flashlight and was later recorded by his own body camera calling a fellow officer and saying, "I beat the ever-living f--- out of him." Hollingsworth died in a high-speed, single-vehicle crash in 2020, hours after he was told he would be fired over his actions in Greene's death.

Another major sticking point was whether prosecutors could prove the troopers acted "willfully" in abusing Greene — a key component of civil rights charges that has complicated such prosecutions around the country. The FBI even enhanced the video of the arrest in an ultimately inconclusive attempt to determine whether he had been pepper-sprayed after he was in custody, focusing on an exchange in which a deputy jeeringly said, "S--- hurts, doesn't it?"

But the federal investigation also included a lengthy focus on the state police brass suspected of obstructing justice by suppressing video evidence, quashing a detective's recommendation to arrest a trooper and pressuring a state prosecutor.

Still pending is the federal wrongful death lawsuit Greene's family filed four years ago seeking damages from the officers, who have denied wrongdoing. The civil case was long put on hold as the criminal proceedings played out.

## What Americans think about Pete Hegseth, Trump's defense secretary pick

By LINLEY SANDERS Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Pete Hegseth faced an important test in his fiery confirmation hearing on Tuesday — but he didn't just have to prove himself to the senators who immediately began sparring over his nomination as defense secretary. The hearing was also an opportunity for Hegseth to make his case to the sizable share of Americans who don't know him or don't approve of President-elect Donald Trump's decision to tap him for this key role in his administration.

A new poll finds only about 2 in 10 Americans approve of Hegseth being nominated as the secretary of defense, a position that would put the 44-year-old Army National Guard veteran and former Fox News

Channel weekend host in charge of overseeing U.S. troops. The survey from The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research, which was conducted before Hegseth's confirmation hearings began, finds that roughly one-third of U.S. adults disapprove of Trump's choice, and about 1 in 10 say they neither approve nor disapprove. About one-third of Americans say they don't know enough about Hegseth to have an opinion.

Hegseth's experience in the Army National Guard is seen by the incoming administration and supporters in Congress 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 not to drink alcohol if he is confirmed to lead the Pentagon.

Republican men are more likely to have an opinion of Hegseth and approve of his nomination

More Republicans approve than disapprove of Trump nominating Hegseth -- about 4 in 10 approve, and only about 1 in 10 disapprove. But many Republicans, about one-third, still don't have an opinion of him yet.

About half of GOP men approve of Hegseth for defense secretary, compared to about one-third of Republican women. Republican women are less likely to express a view on his nomination either way. About half of Republican women do not have an opinion of him.

Hegseth faced some criticism for saying he opposes putting women in combat roles. He has walked those comments back since his nomination, saying "if we have the right standard and women meet that standard, roger. Let's go." Two former female combat veterans, Republican Sen. Joni Ernst of Iowa and Democrat Sen. Tammy Duckworth of Illinois, were among those who questioned him.

Older Republicans are also more likely to approve of Hegseth's nomination. About half of Republicans over 45 approve, compared to about 3 in 10 Republicans under 45. The younger Republicans are also less likely to have formed an opinion of him.

Only one-quarter see a lack of government experience as a plus

Hegseth acknowledged during his hearing that he does not have the traditional background of past defense secretaries, promising to be a "change agent" for the branch.

The poll finds, though, that a lack of government experience isn't a positive for many Americans. About half of Americans say it's a "very" or "somewhat" bad thing for the president to rely on people without any background in government for advice about government policy, and only about one-quarter say it's a "very" or "somewhat" good thing. About one-quarter are neutral, calling it neither good nor bad.

Republicans, however, are more likely than Democrats and independents to say it's good for the president to rely on people without government experience for input on policy. About 4 in 10 Republicans say this is a good thing, compared to about 2 in 10 independents and roughly 1 in 10 Democrats.

## **Dozens of survivors and dead pulled from abandoned South African mine as hundreds remain underground**

By MOGOMOTSI MAGOME and GERALD IMRAY Associated Press

STILFONTEIN, South Africa (AP) — Months after South African authorities initially cut off supplies to miners working illegally in an abandoned gold mine, rescuers brought dozens of bodies and emaciated survivors to the surface Tuesday with hundreds more still believed to be underground, many of them dead and others too weak to come out on their own.

At least 60 bodies and 92 survivors had been pulled from one of South Africa's deepest mines since Monday in a red cagelike device lowered thousands of feet underground, police said. Police are uncertain how many miners remain inside but said it is likely in the hundreds. Another nine bodies were brought out Friday in a community-led rescue effort, according to a group representing the miners.

The mine has been the scene of a tense standoff between police, miners and members of the local community since authorities launched an operation in November to force the miners out by cutting off food and water from the surface for a period of time. At the time, a Cabinet minister said the aim was to



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"smoke them out" and the government would not send help because they were "criminals."

But that tactic has been fiercely criticized by civic groups and the community, and the South African government is under scrutiny for the way it has dealt with the issue at the Buffelsfontein Gold Mine, where more than 100 miners are believed to have died underground of starvation or dehydration, according to the group representing them.

Authorities, who removed the ropes and pulley system miners used to enter and to lower supplies, say the survivors are able to come out but refuse to because of fear of arrest. That has been disputed by the civic groups, which won a court case to force authorities to allow food, water and medicine to be sent down to the miners. But they say the supplies aren't enough and many of the miners are dying of starvation and unable to climb out because the shaft is too steep.

Residents desperately waiting for news of family members gathered at the mine Tuesday near the town of Stilfontein, southwest of Johannesburg, some holding placards criticizing authorities for their response. One sign said there had been a "Sacrifice at Stilfontein" while some handcuffed survivors were led away in a line by police.

The community organized its own rescue operation on Friday before the official effort by authorities began Monday. They say a proper rescue operation should have been launched months ago.

"We are happy that this operation is happening, even though we believe that if it was done earlier, we wouldn't even have one dead person," said Mzukisi Jam, the regional chairperson of the South African National Civics Organization, an umbrella for civic and rights groups.

Authorities have grappled with informal mining for years

Illegal mining is common in parts of gold-rich South Africa where companies close down mines that are no longer profitable, leaving groups of informal miners to enter them illegally in a search for leftover deposits.

Large groups of miners often go underground for months to maximize their profits, taking food, water, generators and other equipment with them, but also relying on others in their group on the surface to send down more supplies.

Mineral Resources Minister Gwede Mantashe visited the site Tuesday and said that more than 1,500 miners who resurfaced from the Buffelsfontein mine have been arrested since authorities began a larger crackdown on illegal mining in late 2023. He said the vast majority were foreign nationals from neighboring countries.

Police have also doubled down on their assertion that the miners who are still underground aren't coming out because they are afraid of being arrested.

Activists said the only way out is for miners to make a dangerous trek to another shaft, which can take days, and crawl out there, but many are too weak or ill to climb out. The mine is 2.5 kilometers (1.5 miles) deep with multiple shafts, many levels and a maze of tunnels. The group representing the miners said there are numerous groups in various parts of the mine.

"The last time I spoke to my brother was in July, when he told us that he is going underground," said Zinzi Tom, a sister of one of the miners who remained underground. "We had not heard anything from him, but yesterday one of the miners who surfaced said he saw him about two weeks ago. Apparently he is very sick and he is struggling to survive."

Cellphone videos emerge from underground

The Mining Affected Communities United in Action group, which took authorities to court in December to force them to allow supplies to be sent down to the miners, released two cellphone videos that they said were from underground and showed dozens of dead bodies of miners wrapped in plastic. A spokesman for the group said "a minimum" of 100 miners had died.

The cellphone videos purportedly from the depths of the mine are filmed by a man who can be heard saying, "This is hunger. People are dying because of hunger," as he records emaciated-looking men sitting on the damp floor of the mine. He adds: "Please help us. Bring us food or take us out."

The rescue operation will go on for 10 days and authorities would then reassess, Police Minister Senzo Mchunu said. Police also said that the survivors who had been brought to the surface will be arrested and charged with illegal mining and trespassing after receiving medical attention.

Authorities made clear their approach when South African Cabinet Minister Khumbudzo Ntshavheni told reporters in November that the government would not help the miners, who they consider criminals.

"We are not sending help to criminals," she said. "We are going to smoke them out. They will come out." She added: "Criminals are not to be helped. Criminals are to be persecuted."

## **Trump says he will create an 'External Revenue Service' agency to collect tariff income**

By FATIMA HUSSEIN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President-elect Donald Trump on Tuesday announced plans to create a new agency called the External Revenue Service to collect tariffs and other revenues from foreign nations.

"We will begin charging those that make money off of us with Trade, and they will start paying," Trump said Tuesday on his social media site, Truth Social. He compared his planned creation to the Internal Revenue Service, which is the nation's domestic tax collector.

The creation of a new agency requires an act of Congress, and Republicans hold the majority of both the House and the Senate.

Trump, who has vowed to shrink the size of government, would be creating a new agency to do functions already handled by existing agencies, including the Commerce Department and the Customs and Border Patrol, which collect duties and revenues from other nations.

The president-elect has tapped two business titans to lead his Department of Government Efficiency, or DOGE, a nongovernmental task force assigned to find ways to fire federal workers, cut programs and slash federal regulations, all part of what he calls his "Save America" agenda for a second term in the White House.

Billionaire Elon Musk and fellow entrepreneur Vivek Ramaswamy are leading the DOGE's ambitious efforts to reduce the size and scope of the federal government.

Tariffs, with the threat of a potential 25% levy on all goods from allies like Canada and Mexico and 60% on goods from China, have become a benchmark of Trump's economic agenda as he heads into his second term.

Economists have said the cost of the tariffs will be passed on to consumers, and are generally skeptical of them, considering them a mostly inefficient way for governments to raise money and promote prosperity.

Democratic lawmakers were quick to criticize the External Revenue Service plan.

"No amount of silly rebranding will hide the fact that Trump is planning a multi-trillion-dollar tax hike on American families and small businesses to pay for another round of tax handouts to the rich," Oregon Sen. Ron Wyden, the top Democrat on the Senate Finance Committee, said in a statement.

## **Blinken makes the case for post-war reconstruction, security and governance of Gaza**

By MATTHEW LEE AP Diplomatic Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — Secretary of State Antony Blinken made a last-minute case Tuesday for a plan for the post-war reconstruction and governance of Gaza as a ceasefire between Israel and Hamas appears tantalizingly close to completion.

Blinken touted the proposal, which has been in the works for a year, and discussed the importance of ensuring its success after the Biden administration leaves office in a speech to the Atlantic Council, a Washington-based think tank.

"We have a responsibility to ensure that the strategic gains of the last 15 months endure and lay the foundation for a better future," Blinken said. "All too often, in the Middle East, we've seen how the shoes of one dictator can be filled by another, or give way to conflict and chaos."

Blinken said the plan, which he has referenced in the past, envisions the Palestinian Authority inviting "international partners" to stand up an interim governing authority to run critical services and oversee the

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territory. Other partners, notably Arab states, would provide forces to ensure security in the short term, he said.

That security mission would depend on a pathway to an independent Palestinian state unifying Gaza and the West Bank and would be tasked with creating "a secure environment for humanitarian and reconstruction efforts and ensuring border security," Blinken said. A Palestinian state, which Israel has refused, has been a sticking point.

At the same time, the U.S. would lead a new initiative to train, equip and vet a Palestinian-led security force for Gaza to focus on law and order that would take over from the interim mission, he said.

Blinken and his top aides have spent months trying to sell Israel, the Palestinian Authority and Gulf Arab nations on the plan, which outlines how Gaza would be run without Hamas in charge of the territory that has been devastated by a war that began in October 2023 after the militant group's attack inside Israel.

Those efforts initially met with resistance, with Israel objecting to calls for its complete withdrawal from Gaza and the Palestinian Authority taking a lead role in governance as well as Arab nations insisting that a ceasefire had to be sealed before discussion of a "day after" plan.

But during multiple trips to the region since last January, Blinken managed to get the Gulf Arab states, many of which would be asked to pay for reconstruction, on board with preparing the proposal.

Blinken's speech Tuesday was interrupted several times by protesters, who shouted that he was complicit in what they alleged were Israeli war crimes, calling him "secretary of genocide" and vowing that he would be held accountable for signing off on weapons shipments to Israel. The protests were brief and Blinken appeared unfazed.

America's top diplomat criticized Israel for not doing enough to rein in anti-Palestinian violence in the West Bank, withholding tax revenue from the Palestinian Authority and opposing any significant future role for the West Bank leadership in Gaza. He also took the PA to task for resisting longstanding demands for reforms that it has only recently begun to embrace.

"The PA will need to carry out swift, far-reaching reform to build more transparent, accountable governance, continuing a process that it began last year. Israel will have to accept reuniting Gaza in the West Bank under the leadership of a reformed PA," he said.

Blinken also covered other areas of the administration's Middle East policy. He praised the U.S. and others for coming to Israel's defense during two unprecedented missile attacks from Iran and stressed that multiple American administrations from both political parties have vowed never to allow Iran to develop nuclear weapons.

Meanwhile, the prospect of normalization between Israel and Saudi Arabia "is the best incentive to get the parties to make tough decisions necessary to fully realize the aspirations of both Israelis and Palestinians," Blinken said.

He noted that "much of the heavy lifting for normalization is complete," notably elements of a new U.S.-Saudi strategic alliance that would make Saudi Arabia a formal treaty ally and include a civil nuclear cooperation agreement and enhanced investment opportunities. But he cautioned that without a deal on Gaza and a pathway to a Palestinian state, normalization would not happen.

The urgency of keeping the post-war Gaza plan alive even without a ceasefire became more intense after the November election of President-elect Donald Trump. U.S. officials have brought Trump aides into the discussions over the past month to get their buy-in on the plan, which will require significant American involvement during Trump's presidency.

One fear was that the plan might be abandoned by Trump's team in a similar fashion to the way former President George W. Bush's administration tossed aside a U.S.-backed proposal for a post-Saddam Hussein Iraq that was crafted while Bill Clinton was in the White House.

That detailed, multi-volume plan designed to prevent Iraq from falling into chaos in the event of Saddam's ouster was the result of the "Future of Iraq" project that was started after Congress called for regime change in Iraq while Clinton was in office.

## France's new prime minister says he'll renegotiate a contested plan to raise the retirement age

By SYLVIE CORBET Associated Press

PARIS (AP) — France's new prime minister François Bayrou announced Tuesday the renegotiation of a contested plan raising the retirement age from 62 to 64, in a crucial move to seek more stability for his minority government.

In his first address to lawmakers at the National Assembly, Bayrou said: "I'm choosing to put this subject back on the agenda, with the social partners."

Bayrou vowed to seek "a new path of reform, without any totems or taboos, not even the retirement age," as long as the financing for the changes is guaranteed.

President Emmanuel Macron's plan to raise the retirement age from 62 to 64 unleashed months of mass protests from January to June 2023 that damaged his leadership.

Bayrou also outlined other top priorities, including key budget decisions, one month after he was appointed by President Emmanuel Macron.

What is Bayrou proposing?

Bayrou urgently needs to pass a budget bill for 2025. Following the collapse of the previous government, an emergency law has been approved to enable the state to levy taxes from Jan. 1, pay basic expenses and avoid a shutdown.

But only a proper budget would help reduce France's deficit and allow key expenses such as defense measures needed amid the war in Ukraine.

Bayrou also stressed the need for France and the European Union to remain strong in the face of recent Donald Trump's recent comments.

"The president-elect of the United States himself, unprecedentedly, articulates threats to annex sovereign territories: Greenland, the Panama Canal and even Canada," he regretted.

Financial markets, ratings agencies and the European Commission are pushing France to comply with EU rules limiting debt and keep France's borrowing costs from spiraling. That would threaten the prosperity of eurozone countries.

France's deficit is estimated to reach 6% of its gross domestic product in 2024. Bayrou on Tuesday said the government was aiming for a deficit of 5.4% this year, with the goal to reduce it to 3% —in line with EU rules— by 2029.

"Major spending cuts will be proposed," he said, without providing concrete details.

Why are pension reform talks key?

The pension reform, which was enacted into law in April 2023 despite mass protests, has gradually been implemented.

The Socialists urged Bayrou to announce a "suspension" of the reform with the aim of backtracking on the age of 64 and introducing specific measures for those who have long careers and certain professions considered to be hard work.

Bayrou on Tuesday stopped short of announcing such move, yet his proposal to renegotiate the measure appears as a hand stretched out towards the left.

The new prime minister wants to secure a nonaggression pact with the Socialists so that they wouldn't support any future move to topple the new government.

He suggested the age of 64, which was the most criticized change, could possibly be decreased depending on the outcome of the negotiations.

"We cannot deteriorate the financial balance" of the pension system, Bayrou insisted.

On the other side of the political spectrum, the conservatives have warned against any suspension of the pension changes.

"If we were to repeal the pension reform, the cost would be 3.4 billion euros (\$3.47 billion) in 2025 and almost 16 billion (\$16.3 billion) in 2032," the president of the Senate Gérard Larcher, a conservative, said.

Bayrou said a so-called "conclave" with representatives from workers' unions and employers' organiza-



tions would be aimed at negotiating for three months with a strict deadline for a potential deal. If they were to agree on pension changes, the proposals would be introduced into law.

Otherwise, Macron's initial plans would apply, he said.

Can the government be toppled again?

Bayrou's Cabinet relies on a fragile deal between Macron's centrist allies and conservatives of The Republicans party who even together have no parliamentary majority.

The previous government was in place for only three months before being brought down by opposition lawmakers from both the left and the far right amid a budget dispute.

This time, the Socialists said they were open to talks with Bayrou while staying in the opposition.

The head of the Socialist group at the National Assembly, Boris Vallaud, said his party accepts the offer to reopen negotiations on pension changes. Yet he already warned the goal was still to withdraw the reform and therefore maintain the retirement age to 62.

Meanwhile, the possibility of another no-confidence vote is still looming.

The hard-left France Unbowed party refused to enter into talks with the government and announced it would file a no-confidence motion.

"The sooner you're gone, the better," Mathilde Panot, head of the hard-left France Unbowed group of lawmakers, told Bayrou.

A vote later this week would have little chance of succeeding as the far right appears unwilling to support such move in the immediate term.

Yet the question could be raised again during the future budget debate at parliament, with more uncertainty on the result.

Does the far right still have leverage?

Far-right leader Marine Le Pen — Macron's fiercest rival — was instrumental in ousting the previous government.

Bayrou consulted her when forming the new government, and Le Pen remains a powerful force. Her National Rally party has the largest single group in the National Assembly, France's powerful lower house of parliament.

In recent days, Bayrou's government sought to sideline Le Pen by negotiating instead with the Socialists, the Greens and the Communists on budget issues.

National Rally lawmaker Jean-Philippe Tanguy said the "red lines" remained the same. The party said it would oppose any budget that would raise the cost of medication, provide more health care for migrants staying illegally in the country and impose new taxes on businesses.

"We tell the French : hold on, we're arriving," Tanguy said.

But Le Pen faces her own headaches in the months to come — a March court ruling over alleged illegal party financing could see her barred from running for office.

## **Biden health officials say they built up US pandemic defenses. Trump promises changes**

By MIKE STOBBE AP Medical Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — The Biden administration on Tuesday released a "roadmap" for maintaining government defenses against infectious diseases, just as President-elect Donald Trump pledges to dismantle some of them.

The 16-page report recaps steps taken in the last four years against COVID-19, mpox and other diseases, including vaccination efforts and the use of wastewater and other measures to spot signs of erupting disease outbreaks. It's a public version of a roughly 300-page pandemic-prevention playbook that Biden officials say they are providing to the incoming administration.

Biden officials touted the steps they took to halt or prevent disease threats, but some public health researchers offer a more mixed assessment of the administration's efforts. Several experts, for example, said not nearly enough has been done to make sure an expanding bird flu pandemic in animals doesn't

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turn into a global health catastrophe for people.

"Overwhelmingly you've heard a lot of frustration by outside experts that we've been under-reacting to what we see as really serious threat," said Jennifer Nuzzo, director of the Pandemic Center at the Brown University School of Public Health.

Public health experts worry the next administration could do less

Trump and his team plan to slash government spending, and Trump has endorsed prominent vaccine detractors for top government health posts. During the campaign last year, Trump told Time magazine that he would disband the White House office focused on pandemic preparedness, calling it "a very expensive solution to something that won't work."

Public health researchers also point to Trump's first administration, when the White House in 2018 dismantled a National Security Council pandemic unit. When COVID-19 hit two years later, the government's disjointed response prompted some experts to argue that the unit could have helped a faster and more uniform response.

In 2020, during the pandemic, Trump officials moved to pull the U.S. out of the World Health Organization. President Joe Biden reversed the decision, but Trump's team is expected to do it again. Experts say such a move would, among other things, hurt the ability to gain information about emerging new outbreaks before they come to U.S. shores.

Officials with the Trump transition team did not respond to emails requesting information about its pandemic planning.

Many public health experts praise Trump for "Operation Warp Speed," which helped spur the rapid development of COVID-19 vaccines. But several also noted that decades of planning and research under previous administrations laid the groundwork for it.

What do Biden officials say they accomplished?

COVID-19 vaccines did not start to trickle out to the public until after Biden defeated Trump in the 2020 election, and it was the Biden administration that stood up what it describes as the largest free vaccination program in U.S. history.

"President Biden came to office amidst the worst public health crisis in more than a century," said Dr. Paul Friedrichs, director of the White House Office of Pandemic Preparedness and Response Policy, in a statement. "He partnered with stakeholders across the nation and turned it around, ending the pandemic and saving countless lives."

Friedrichs's office was established by Congress in 2022. He said the administration has "laid the foundation for faster and more effective responses to save lives now and in the future."

What has been done to prepare for bird flu and other threats?

The pandemic office, which released the report Tuesday, said it has taken steps to fight bird flu, which has been spreading among animal species in scores of countries in the last few years.

The virus was detected in U.S. dairy herds in March. At least 66 people in the U.S. have been diagnosed with infections, the vast majority of them dairy or poultry workers who had mild infections. But that count includes an elderly Louisiana man who died.

Among other steps, the administration is stockpiling 10 million doses of vaccine that is considered effective against the strain that's been circulating in U.S. cattle, and spent \$176 million to develop mRNA vaccines that could quickly be adapted to mutations in the virus, with late stage trials "beginning shortly," the document says.

Having measures in place to quickly develop and mass produce new vaccines is crucial, said Michael Osterholm, a University of Minnesota expert on infectious diseases.

"We don't really have any understanding of what influenza virus will emerge one day to cause the next pandemic," Osterholm said. "It sure isn't this (bird flu strain), or it would be causing it (a pandemic) right now."

The U.S. should maintain collaborations that train disease investigators in other countries to detect emerging infections, public health experts say.

"We have to continue to invest in surveillance in areas where we think these infectious agents are likely

to emerge," said Ian Lipkin, an infectious diseases researcher at New York's Columbia University.

"I'm hoping that the Trump administration — as they are concerned about people coming across the border who may be infected with this or that or the other thing — will see the wisdom in trying to make sure that we do surveillance in areas where we think there's a large risk," he said.

## **Biden is packing up to leave the White House. But what about any classified documents?**

By COLLEEN LONG Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The last time Joe Biden packed up and left office, he took with him thousands of papers from his decades in public service — including some classified documents that should have gone to the National Archives for safekeeping.

That move spawned a federal investigation into whether Biden had knowingly broken the law and a damaging Justice Department report that referred to Biden as an "elderly man with a poor memory," igniting public concerns over his mental acuity that eventually led Biden to drop out of the race.

The discovery also watered down the significance of the criminal case against President-elect Donald Trump, who had been accused of purposefully hoarding top secret documents at his Florida estate — and it helped fuel Trump's claims of unfair political persecution.

The moving trucks are at the White House again, and Biden's staff is loading documents and items for storage as he prepares to depart next week. The administration has promised a new, more secure protocol to review and separate out classified information. But with just a week left to go, there's no word yet on recommendations from a federal task force formed at Biden's behest to develop best practices for transitions.

"We are going to do our best, certainly, to be careful, to follow the rules, to do this the right way, to follow traditions, obviously, as the president truly wants to do," White House press secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said of the packing effort.

When a president packs up and leaves the White House

Biden formed the presidential records task force early in 2024, in order to study past transitions to determine best practices for safeguarding classified information from an outgoing administration. It was also assessing the need for changes to existing policies and procedures to prevent the removal of sensitive information that by law should be kept with the National Archives and Records Administration.

White House officials said the work continues and were still expecting to provide recommendations "in advance of the next presidential transition."

Barbara Perry, director of presidential studies at the University of Virginia's Miller Center, said it would be better to err on the side of caution and keep more documents in safe storage. And although the U.S. government should probably revisit how and why documents are classified, she said, until the nation figures that out, the documents "need to be turned over to the National Archives and we need the best, easiest mechanism to do it."

"The most important thing is to make sure that state secrets remain secret," she said.

Generally speaking, when a president leaves the White House, he has to sort through all the stuff he's accumulated. That's what Biden is doing now as he prepares to leave office. He is allowed to take personal items, like diaries and family photos. But most of the papers and memos — and especially classified documents — are sent to the National Archives under the Presidential Records Act.

The 1978 law requires the preservation of presidential documents as property of the U.S. government. It was passed in the aftermath of the Watergate scandal, when a collection of secret tapes that President Richard Nixon had considered destroying played a defining role.

But the policies meant to control the handling of the nation's secrets are haphazardly enforced among top officials and rely almost wholly on good faith. Classified documents have been turning up in the garages and storage units and offices of government officials off and on for decades, from presidents and vice presidents to Cabinet members and staff across multiple administrations stretching as far back as

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Jimmy Carter.

When former officials discover they are in possession of such materials, they typically turn them over to authorities and that's the end of the matter. But Trump refused to give back boxes of classified material he took after he left office in 2021, prompting an unprecedented FBI seizure of thousands of pages of records.

Classified documents found at Mar-a-Lago

Trump was indicted on dozens of felony counts accusing him of illegally retaining sensitive documents at his Mar-a-Lago estate in Palm Beach, Florida, and obstructing efforts to get them back.

The Justice Department dismissed the case after Trump was elected, citing a long-standing policy prohibiting prosecutions against sitting presidents.

Trump had documents stored in various places around the private club where guests came and went, including a ballroom, a bathroom and shower, an office space, his bedroom and a storage room.

The documents included "information regarding defense and weapons capabilities of both the United States and foreign countries, United States nuclear programs, potential vulnerabilities of the United States and its allies to military attack, and plans for possible retaliation in response to a foreign attack," according to the indictment against him.

When Biden left the vice presidency in early 2017, he put items in his garage and at a think tank he planned to lead. In his telling, Biden was surprised to learn he had classified documents in his possession, wasn't sure what they were and turned them over right away.

"They found some documents in a box — you know, a locked cabinet, or at least a closet," Biden said in early 2023 in his first comments about the discovery. "And as soon as they did, they realized there were several classified documents in that box. And they did what they should have done: They immediately called the Archives — immediately called the Archives, turned them over to the Archives."

The investigation into Biden and classified documents

Biden said he never intended to retain the documents, which were first discovered in November 2022 by a personal attorney at the Penn Biden Center for Diplomacy and Global Engagement. He reported the discovery, and subsequent searches of his home turned up more material, including hand-written notes.

When Justice Department officials sought to investigate, Biden and his attorneys cooperated; the president sat for an interview with special counsel Robert Hur, tasked by Attorney General Merrick Garland to look into the matter.

The special counsel's final report listed dozens of sensitive documents found at Biden's home in Wilmington, Delaware, and at his former Washington office. The papers were marked as classified or later assessed to contain classified information.

The majority of the documents, Hur's report stated, appeared to have been mistakenly removed from government offices, though he also detailed some items that Biden appeared to knowingly retain. Hur concluded that criminal charges were not warranted.

"The special counsel acknowledged I cooperated completely. I did not throw up any roadblocks. I sought no delays," Biden said after report was released.

Legally, the report was a win for Biden, clearing away any criminality. But politically, the discussion about his mental acuity the report raised led to concerns about his ability to seek reelection, concerns that only grew louder and more persistent after his disastrous debate performance against Trump.

Biden bowed out of the race, giving Vice President Kamala Harris only a few months to pull together a campaign that normally would be years in the making. It ended with Trump winning the 2024 election and about take over the White House once again.



## Contaminated drinking water is a growing concern for cities facing wildfires

By BRITTANY PETERSON Associated Press

As fires continue to burn across Los Angeles, several utilities have declared their drinking water unsafe until extensive testing can prove otherwise.

A warmer, drier climate means wildfires are getting worse, and encroaching on cities — with devastating impact. Toxic chemicals from those burns can get into damaged drinking water systems, and even filtering or boiling won't help, experts say.

Last week, Pasadena Water and Power issued a "Do Not Drink" notice to about a third of its customers for the first time since it began distributing water more than a century ago. With at least one burned pump, several damaged storage tanks, and burned homes, they knew there was a chance toxic chemicals had entered their pipes.

"Out of the abundance of caution, you kind of have to assume the worst," said Stacie Takeguchi, chief assistant general manager for the utility.

This week, they lifted the notice for most of the area after testing.

### Why urban fires are a risk to drinking water

When large fires burn in towns and cities, rather than forests and grasslands, infrastructure can be heavily damaged. When drinking water systems are damaged in a fire, "we can have ash, smoke, soot, other debris and gases get sucked into the water piping network," said Andrew Whelton, a Purdue University engineering professor who researches water contamination in communities hit by fire.

Those elements can be particularly toxic because chemically engineered synthetics in building materials and households are heating, burning and releasing particles and gases, he said. Some of those chemicals are harmful even at low concentrations, experts say.

### How chemicals get into the pipes

Water systems typically are under enough internal pressure to keep harmful elements out. But that critical pressure can be lost in many ways during a fire, which means toxins can get in.

There's normal demand on the water system from people who didn't need to evacuate. Firefighters use a lot of water. Pipes in burned buildings can be damaged, spewing water.

Power loss can also cause pressure loss when pumps stop working, said Greg Pierce, professor of urban environmental policy at the University of California. This happened during the 2023 Maui fires.

"It's really hard, if not impossible, to keep up the power supply to the whole water system in the event of a fire, because you're either shutting off the power, because power can contribute to the fire, or it just goes out," Pierce said. "And then you're relying on generators at best in spots."

The loss of pressure can affect not only water quality but also water availability for firefighting. Hydrants ran dry in the Pacific Palisades neighborhood as surrounding homes burned. The utility says it was from high demand and the pumps were working, but California Gov. Gavin Newsom said the state will investigate.

### What's the health risk?

Toxic chemicals in drinking water after a fire pose risks ranging from temporary nausea to cancer, experts say.

"In Paradise (California), there were benzene levels high enough to acutely give a child a blood disorder" said Dr. Lynn Goldman, dean of the Milken Institute School of Public Health at George Washington University, referring to the 2018 Camp Fire that burned most of the city.

Even very low levels of some chemicals can be a concern. In California, state regulators say only one part per billion of benzene — a known carcinogen — is considered a safe level in drinking water, calculating for 70 years of exposure. The national recommendation is no more than five parts per billion.

"In terms of cancer risk, what we're really interested in is the cumulative amount that you're exposed to over your entire lifetime," Goldman said. "And if a short-term exposure adds a lot to that, that is a real risk."

Benzene and similar compounds are known as volatile because they tend to become airborne, like gasoline that turns to vapor when it drips from the pump onto your car. A group of heavier compounds,

called semi-volatile organic compounds, or SVOCs, were found in water pipes in Louisville, Colorado after the 2021 Marshall Fire, even when benzene and other better-known chemicals weren't. Whelton says it's critical to test for both.

What's next?

Vast Los Angeles County has more than 200 water service providers, but so far only a handful believe that damage or loss of pressure may have resulted in chemical contamination and have issued "Do Not Drink" notices. Utilities are focused on ensuring there's enough water for fighting fires, though some are beginning to test for contaminants. It can take weeks to months of testing before water can be declared safe for drinking in areas with minimal damage.

That is sometimes a best-case scenario.

In the Paradise Fire, most buildings burned. The city rebuilt a reservoir and is working to replace 10,000 service lines. It expects to spend the next decade and \$50 million to replace roughly 17 of 172 miles of main lines that were contaminated.

Whelton doesn't recommend people pay for expensive water testing in their homes until their utility has declared the public water system safe.

Many publicly available water quality tests are "not capable of finding fire-related drinking water contamination," Whelton wrote on X this week. Getting your water professionally tested once the utility's water is declared safe would be the best way to learn whether your pipes are contaminated, he said.

People should follow guidance issued by their utility or local health department on safety precautions until their water is declared safe.

## 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

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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 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.

## Today in History: January 15

### US Airways jet makes emergency landing in Hudson River

By The Associated Press undefined

Today is Wednesday, Jan. 15, the 15th day of 2025. There are 350 days left in the year.

Today in history:

On Jan. 15, 2009, US Airways Capt. Chesley "Sully" Sullenberger landed an Airbus A320 safely in the Hudson River after striking a flock of birds that disabled both engines shortly after takeoff; all 155 people aboard survived.

Also on this date:

In 1559, Elizabeth I was crowned queen of England and Ireland in Westminster Abbey.

In 1919, in Boston, a tank containing an estimated 2.3 million gallons (8.7 million liters) of molasses burst, flooding the city's North End and killing 21 people.

In 1929, civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. was born in Atlanta.

In 1943, work was completed on the Pentagon, headquarters of the U.S. Department of War (now Defense).

In 1967, the Green Bay Packers of the National Football League defeated the Kansas City Chiefs of the American Football League 35-10 in the first AFL-NFL World Championship Game, known retroactively as Super Bowl I.

In 1991, Sean Lennon's remake of his father's "Give Peace A Chance" was released to coincide with the United Nations' midnight deadline for Iraq to withdraw from Kuwait. The lyrics were updated to reflect concerns of the 1990s.

In 2001, Wikipedia, the free online encyclopedia maintained by volunteer editors, made its debut.

Today's birthdays: Actor Andrea Martin is 78. Football Hall of Famer Randy White is 72. Actor-director Mario Van Peebles is 68. Boxing Hall of Famer Bernard Hopkins is 60. Actor-director Regina King is 54. Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni is 48. Former NFL quarterback Drew Brees is 46. Rapper-reggaeton artist Pitbull is 44. Conservative commentator Ben Shapiro is 41. DJ-music producer Skrillex is 37. Actor-singer Dove Cameron is 29. Singer-songwriter Grace VanderWaal is 21.