

Groton Daily Independent

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Friday, Feb. 14

VALENTINE'S DAY

Senior Menu: Baked pork chop, wild rice, glazed carrots, cheesecake with frost glaze, dinner roll.

No School, Faculty In-service

Community Blood Drive, 8:45 a.m. to noon, Groton Community Center



Saturday, Feb. 15

Basketball Double-Header at Moberg-Pollock. Boys 8th at 11 a.m., boys 7th at noon, girls C at 11 a.m., boys C at noon, girls and boys junior varsity games at 1 p.m. followed by girls varsity and boys varsity.

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

Sunday, Feb. 16

Open gym, 2 p.m. to 5 p.m.

Junior High State Wrestling at Pierre.

St. John's Lutheran: Worship with communion at St. John's, 9 a.m.; at Zion, 11 a.m.; No Sunday School.

Emmanuel Lutheran: Worship, 9 a.m.; No Sunday School; Choir, 6 p.m.

United Methodist: Conde, 8:15 a.m.; Groton, 9:30 a.m.; Britton, 11:15 a.m.; No Sunday School; Coffee Hour, 10:30 a.m.

Catholic: SEAS Confession, 7:45-8:15 a.m.; SEAS Mass, 8:30 a.m.; Turton Confession, 10:30-10:45 a.m.; Turton Mass, 11 a.m.

First Presbyterian Church: Bible Study, 9:30 a.m.; Worship, 11 a.m.

Groton Daily Independent
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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.

SDNY Chief Resigns

The top federal prosecutor in Manhattan resigned yesterday after orders from the Justice Department to drop corruption charges against New York Mayor Eric Adams (D). Danielle Sassoon had been appointed acting US attorney for the Southern District of New York by President Donald Trump last month. Two other federal attorneys involved in the case also resigned.

Adams was indicted in September on five counts of bribery, fraud, and receiving illegal campaign donations following a three-year probe by the office and was set to go on trial in April. Monday's order from Deputy Attorney General Emil Bove said the decision to drop charges was not based on the strength of evidence, but suggested that the case against Adams had been politicized and that charges interfered with the city's 2025 mayoral election and Adams' ability to address challenges related to immigration and crime.

New York City's primaries—a strong predictor of who will win the November general election in majority Democratic city—are scheduled for June 24. Polls currently show Adams in a distant second place behind former Gov. Andrew Cuomo, 33% to 10%.

'SNL' Turns 50

"Saturday Night Live" will celebrate its 50th anniversary Sunday (8 pm ET, NBC) with a three-hour special featuring former cast members, hosts, and major musical guests. In its normal 11:30 pm ET slot Saturday, viewers can watch a rerun of the debut episode.

First aired Oct. 11, 1975, "SNL" was conceived as a countercultural, live sketch comedy show meant to fill a scheduling gap where reruns of "The Tonight Show Starring Johnny Carson" used to play. The show launched the careers of its original cast, including Chevy Chase and Dan Aykroyd, and became a staple in cultural discourse with its irreverent takes and satirical "Weekend Update." Dozens of alumni would go on to become A-list comedic actors like John Belushi, Eddie Murphy, Bill Murray, Adam Sandler, Chris Farley, Amy Poehler, Will Ferrell, and many more.

Television critics suggest "SNL's" success stemmed in part from its decision to rotate celebrity hosts and regularly turn over the cast to spotlight new comedians, as well as the guidance of longtime NBC producer Lorne Michaels.

Car Talks Collapse

Japanese auto giants Honda and Nissan have officially ended their \$60B merger discussions, which would have created the world's third-largest automaker. The pair said the deal collapsed due to disputes over management structure, with Honda proposing to make Nissan a subsidiary. Both companies emphasized the need for quick decision-making in the rapidly evolving electric vehicle market.

Merger talks began in December as a potential lifeline for Nissan, which has been struggling since its ex-CEO, accused of financial misconduct, made headlines by escaping Japan in a large box. Nissan reported a 78% drop from a year earlier in third-quarter operating profit. In contrast, Honda reported a 5% increase in third-quarter operating profit. Nissan also announced a turnaround plan yesterday that includes cutting costs by \$2.59B by 2026 through headcount reductions and production efficiency measures.

The pair said they would continue their strategic partnership in electric vehicles and other fields. Nissan, already part of an alliance with Mitsubishi and Renault, is reportedly exploring new partnerships, including with iPhone manufacturer Foxconn.

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Sports, Entertainment, & Culture

The 2025 NBA All-Star Game is set for Sunday (8 pm ET, TNT); will feature four-team mini-tournament for first time.

NASCAR Cup Series kicks off this Sunday (2:30 pm ET, Fox) with the 67th Daytona 500.

Closing arguments begin in rapper A\$AP Rocky's felony assault trial.

CBS, Comedy Central, and MTV among more than 20 channels that could go dark on YouTube TV amid contract dispute with the streamer.

New York Jets parting ways with four-time MVP Aaron Rodgers after he played just one full season with the team.

More than 1 million people expected to attend Philadelphia Eagles Super Bowl parade this morning.

Science & Technology

The Boring Company announces deal to build 10-mile-long underground tunnel in Dubai; Elon Musk-owned company built and operates similar project under Las Vegas.

Musk says he'll withdraw \$97B offer for OpenAI nonprofit arm if organization gives up for-profit plans.

Engineers decode electrical signals between the nervous system and hand movement, use patterns to create robotic movement that feels human-like.

New study suggests birds, reptiles, and mammals each developed complex brain circuitry independently despite sharing a common ancestor.

Business & Markets

US stock markets close higher (S&P 500 +1.0%, Dow +0.8%, Nasdaq +1.5%).

President Donald Trump signs memo directing federal agencies to examine how to adjust US tariff rates to match import taxes imposed by other countries.

Robinhood shares close up 14% after beating Q4 estimates; quarterly revenue rose 115% year over year.

Coinbase shares close up over 8% after reporting biggest quarterly revenue in three years due to post-election crypto rally.

US household debt—including credit cards, mortgages, and other loans—reaches all-time high of \$18T, per report from Federal Reserve Bank of New York; total credit card balances stand at record-high \$1.2T.

Politics & World Affairs

Robert F. Kennedy Jr. confirmed as health secretary in 52-48 Senate vote.

Minnesota Sen. Tina Smith (D) won't seek reelection, is second Senate Democrat to retire ahead of 2026 midterm elections.

Federal judge halt executive order seeking to end funding for gender-affirming youth care.

At least 30 people injured in Munich, Germany, after driver rams into labor union demonstration; suspect—a 24-year-old Afghan asylum-seeker—is in custody.

Hamas says it is ready to resume releasing hostages in Gaza this weekend, following talks in Cairo, as long as Israel holds up its end of ceasefire deal.

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Tina's Baskets! Text/Call at 605-397-7285 to reserve your basket now. They are going fast! Cash, check or Venmo.



2. White vase with sour suckers. \$7.50



3. Kit Kat Cake with Valentine suckers on top. \$35



4. Hersheys Cake, two tier with strawberry hard candy. \$40



7. Valentine container with fake roses and white bears. \$5



8. Reeses candy bars with Valentine suckers. \$50



9. Heart basket with assorted candy. \$15



10. Vase filled with strawberry drops and chocolate rose candy. \$9



12. Valentine's love balloon with fake flowers, MMs, skittles. \$15



14. Mini chip ahoy's cookies, be mine valentines book, a bear with a love heart on it and some hot wheels in it. \$12

15. Bet-sie Voucher book, puppy, mini chocolate hearts. Behind the dog a bag of heart bear gummies and a small box of mix chocolates. \$12



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25% OFF

EVERYTHING!

- Cakes in stock
- Cones
- Sundaes
- Blizzards
- Burgers
- Chicken Strips
- Fries

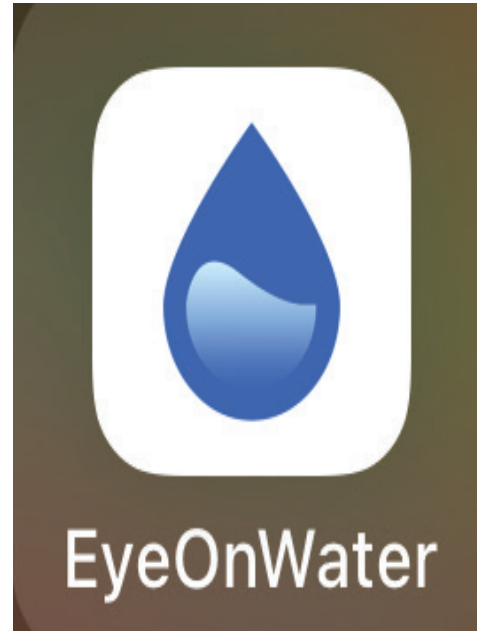
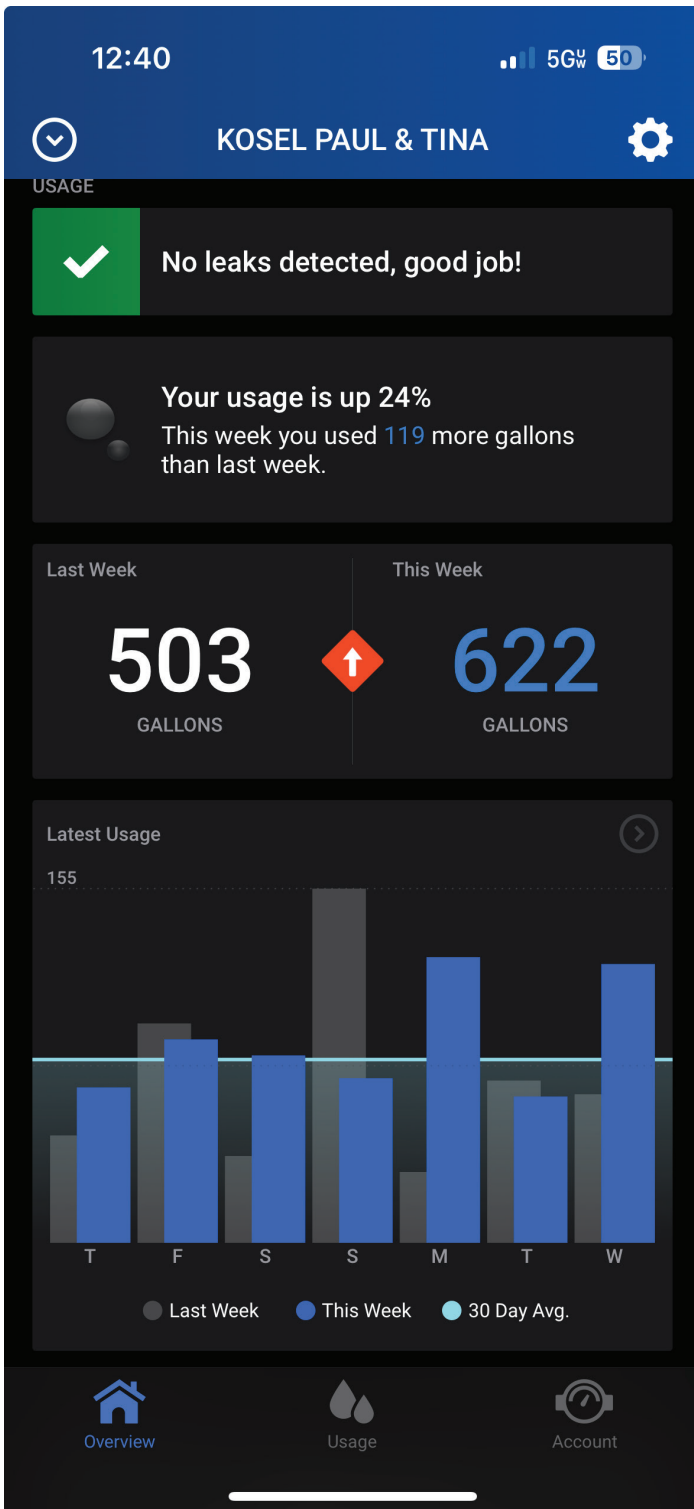
**Monday,
Feb. 17th**



11 E HWY 12
Groton
(605) 397-8627

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Monitor your water usage!

With the current system the City of Groton has, you can be notified if you have a water leak. Also, with the Eye on Water app, you can monitor your water usage. And the best thing is that it's a free service.

How do you sign up?

You just received your utility bill in the mail.

In the lower left you will see your account number. First - download the EyeOnWater App on your phone.

Once you have it downloaded, it will ask you for your account number.

Enter the first 12 digits of your account number and then add 201 at the end.

When it asks you for the zip code, enter 57445.

And just like that, you have access to your water usage!

If you have problems getting on, just text Paul at 605-397-7460 and he can help you through the process.

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Groton City Council Meeting Agenda

February 18, 2025 – 7:00pm
City Hall – 120 N Main Street

(IF YOU WOULD LIKE TO CALL IN TO THIS MEETING, PLEASE MAKE PRIOR ARRANGEMENTS TO DO SO BY CALLING CITY HALL 605-397-8422)

1. Approval of Agenda
2. Public Comments - pursuant to SDCL 1-25-1
(Public Comments will offer the opportunity for anyone not listed on the agenda to speak to the council. Speaking time will be limited to 3 minutes. No action will be taken on questions or items not on the agenda.)
3. Award Roof Repair Bid
4. Authorization to Bid 2025 Street Resurfacing Project
5. Authorization to Begin Accepting 2025 Gravel Quotes
6. Sign Audit Engagement Letter with Eide Bailly for 2022/2023
7. January Finance Report
8. Minutes
9. Bills
10. Reminder: Applications are Open for Summer Recreational Positions:
 - Baseball Coordinator
 - Softball Coordinator
 - Legion Coach
 - Jr. Legion Coach
 - Jr. Teener Coach
 - Girls' Softball Coaches (U8/U10/U12/U14)
 - Day Baseball/Softball Coach
 - Concessions Manager
 - Swimming Pool Manager
11. Executive session personnel & legal 1-25-2 (1) & (3)
12. Open Applications for Remaining Summer Employment Positions
13. First Reading of Ordinance No. 786 – 2025 Summer Salaries
14. Hire Summer Recreational Employees
15. Adjournment

South Dakota VFW Baseball Tournaments

In yesterday's edition of the Groton Daily Independent, we were notified that the sites were incorrect. Below is the current site locations with Groton being the host of the 12U State Tournament July 11-13.

TOURNAMENT DATES

CLASS B

- **8U:** 7/11-13/2025: **Madison**
 - *Class structure to be determined ranking in pool play*
- **12U:** 7/11-13/2025: **Groton** (White) & **Hot Springs** (Blue)
 - *Team assignment TBD after Registration*
- **10U:** 7/18-20/2025: **Webster** (White) & **Elkton** (Blue)
 - *Team assignment TBD after Registration*
- **17U:** 7/25-27/2025: **Gregory**
 - *(Regions should be completed by 7/17)*
- **14U:** 8/8-10/2025: **Britton**
 - *(Regions should be completed by 8/1)*

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DQ® CUPID CAKE

Share the love this Valentine's Day with a heart-shaped Dairy Queen® Cupid Cake. Perfectly sized for two, or follow your heart and make it all yours!

**Have a perfect dessert for
Valentine's Day
with these
Mini-Heart and
Regular Size Heart Cakes**

**Chocolate/Vanilla or Red
Velvet Blizzard Flavor**



Groton



Get yours today!

**11 E HWY 12
Groton
(605) 397-8627**



SOUTH DAKOTA SEARCHLIGHT

<https://southdakotasearchlight.com>

Rhoden unveils plan to slow property tax increases for five years

Proposal from governor's office one of many in Pierre this session

BY: JOHN HULT - FEBRUARY 13, 2025 6:11 PM

PIERRE — Responding to a public outcry about rising property taxes, South Dakota Gov. Larry Rhoden proposed a bill Thursday at the Capitol to cap growth in owner-occupied home valuations for five years.

The plan would also put stricter limits on the annual growth of local governments' property tax collections and expand eligibility for property tax relief programs.

Rhoden lauded the approach as a reasonable compromise in a legislative session where property tax relief has spurred a host of competing proposals.

The governor's version will take the form of Senate Bill 216, introduced as an empty "vehicle bill" seven days ago. This week, Rhoden's team filed a proposed amendment that outlines the plan's provisions. The governor described it as "an agreement" reached by a property tax working group made up of 10 state lawmakers and representatives from his office.

Flanked by that group's membership at a Thursday press conference in Pierre, Rhoden thanked them for their "passion to relieve the tax burden on South Dakota homeowners."

What it does

The total assessed value of all homes in a county is part of the math that determines a South Dakotan's annual property tax burden, as are the values of home improvements across the county.

An individual homeowner's property tax rate is set by dividing a local government's funding needs by the combined value of all of a county's homes, commercial properties and agricultural land.

Typically, the home value piece of that equation is tied to the housing market. In recent years, ballooning home values in some parts of South Dakota have pushed assessments – and the tax bills that ultimately flow from them – up.

The governor's plan to address the issue wouldn't lower anyone's property tax bills directly, but would instead make a handful of adjustments to keep them in check.

The proposal would cap growth in the total taxable value of a county's owner-occupied homes at 3% a year for the next five years. It would not make changes to valuations for commercial properties or agricultural land.

It would also shield home improvements worth less than 40% of a home's value from factoring into a county's total property value.

"Local governments shouldn't need to grow just because a homeowner makes small improvements," Rhoden said.

On the "funding need" side, the governor wants to cap how much money a local government can ask for in property taxes.

Currently, unless two-thirds of its voters "opt out" of the state's property tax limit, a local government can only ask for 3% more or the rate of inflation – whichever is lower – each year. On top of that, they can also ask for more based on new construction or home improvements.

Rhoden's bill would limit annual growth based on new construction and home improvements to 2% and apply the same limit to school capital outlay funds. Schools use their capital outlay funds for land, buildings and equipment.

Finally, the bill would increase income limits for the state's property tax freeze relief program for elderly

and disabled people – provided they've lived in the state for at least five years. Rhoden said the income limit for a multi-person household would rise from \$45,000 to \$65,000, for example, and the maximum value of a home eligible for the program would rise from \$350,000 to \$500,000.

Reaction, competing ideas

The Rhoden-backed bill is a corrective to changes in property tax policies on agricultural land more than a decade ago, he said, which put additional pressure on homeowners to pick up the tab in the years that followed.

Property taxes are a critical funding source for county governments and school districts. The state relies on sales taxes to pay the bulk of its bills.

Over the past five years or so, spiking property values in some areas of South Dakota have created sticker shock that drove lawmakers to appoint a study group on the issue last year and pledge to provide relief this session.

At a Republican leadership press conference held shortly before Rhoden unveiled his plan, lawmakers pointed to property tax relief as a top priority. House leadership said public school leaders might need to find ways to tighten their belts.

"To actually have a real property tax cut, you have to cut schools, because schools are 56% of our budget," said House Assistant Majority Leader Marty Overweg, R-New Holland.

Rhoden said he'd need to hear more about specific ways schools would save money before responding to Overweg's comments. He said he hadn't heard them yet.

Rhoden did acknowledge, however, the multitude of property tax and property tax-adjacent proposals circulating in Pierre this session.

Just this week, for example, the Senate defeated a bill from freshman Sen. John Carley, R-Piedmont, that would have given parents a property tax break if they choose to enroll their child in some manner of alternative to their local public school. Other property tax bills were deferred for later action as lawmakers waited for Rhoden's plan.

Rhoden didn't speak to specific proposals, but said lawmakers should settle on a plan by the end of the legislative session next month.

"Is this going to be an end-all, be-all? And the answer is no," Rhoden said. "There are a number of bills being worked on, and we'll consider them individually as they come forward. And quite frankly, I think there are some reasonable proposals in addition to what you see before you today."

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

SD Senate rejects property tax credits for nonpublic education options

BY: JOSHUA HAIAR - FEBRUARY 13, 2025 5:20 PM

A proposal to offer property tax credits for nonpublic education options failed in the South Dakota Senate on Thursday in Pierre.

The bill would have allowed property owners to claim tax credits for costs related to private school tuition, homeschooling or other forms of alternative instruction. The Senate voted 24-11 against the bill.

Some lawmakers opposed the bill due to its financial impact on public schools.

"This bill could be over \$100 million directly in property tax funds that the schools will not receive," said Sen. Kyle Schoenfish, R-Scotland.

Two other school choice bills failed during their initial committee hearings last month. The bills would have provided state funds for students to help cover their nonpublic education costs.

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

Budget cuts look more unavoidable after adoption of South Dakota's revenue estimates

BY: JOSHUA HAIAR - FEBRUARY 13, 2025 4:06 PM

South Dakota lawmakers adopted revenue projections Thursday at the Capitol in Pierre, confirming what many had feared: significant budget cuts could be unavoidable.

Republican Gov. Larry Rhoden, speaking at a press conference following the decision, said he had been optimistic that revenues would improve. They have not.

"If anything, they've declined even more," Rhoden said.

State government's day-to-day operations are funded by "ongoing" revenue, such as sales taxes, while money from federal stimulus programs and other "one-time" sources are typically used for one-time needs such as construction projects.

The deficit or gap between expected ongoing revenue and ongoing expenditures has expanded with the new projections. Former Gov. Kristi Noem's proposed budget tackled a \$51 million shortfall of ongoing revenue to ongoing expenses, and the new revenue projections have pushed that gap to \$57.4 million.

After delivering her budget address in December, Noem departed in January to become U.S. secretary of Homeland Security, elevating Rhoden to governor.

The legislative budget committee settled Thursday on a revised projection of \$2.39 billion in ongoing revenue for the current budget year, which is less than 2024's actual ongoing revenue of \$2.41 billion. This is the first year of declining revenue since 2010, when South Dakota was still recovering from the Great Recession.

For next year, lawmakers adopted an ongoing revenue estimate of \$2.46 billion, reflecting a 2.9% increase over this year's revised revenue estimate. Sales tax revenues are projected to be \$1.5 billion, a 4.3% increase from the \$1.44 billion revised projection for this year.

Next year's ongoing revenue estimate is close to what the Legislative Research Council recommended and is in line with then-Gov. Noem's initial projection. The state economist, who works for the governor's office, this week recommended a slightly lower estimate for next year of \$2.44 billion. He said drivers of his projection are slowing economic growth, persistently high interest rates and a dip in farm income.

Compounding the revenue problem is the temporary state sales tax rate reduction from 4.5% to 4.2% that lawmakers passed in 2023, which is scheduled to remain in effect until 2027, costing the state more than \$100 million per year in lost revenue.

With the new revenue estimates locked in, the Legislature will now work to finalize the state's fiscal year 2026 budget by next month, determining where cuts will fall. The state's total budget, including one-time, federal and other funding sources, is in excess of \$7 billion.

Noem recommended numerous cuts in her proposed budget, including to the Department of Social Services, Department of Human Services, the State Library, South Dakota Public Broadcasting and numerous additional departments and programs.

When asked at his Thursday press conference if he still views Noem's proposed cuts as the starting point, Rhoden said "that is the budget."

Looming over the budget talks is \$182 million that Noem and Rhoden proposed using to complete funding for construction of a proposed \$825 million men's prison near Sioux Falls, which lawmakers have been saving for in recent years. A legislative committee forwarded a bill providing spending authority for the project this week to the budget committee, but without a recommendation, signaling the unease some

lawmakers have about the project.

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

Legislative committee supports 'conscience exemption' vaccine bill

BY: MAKENZIE HUBER - FEBRUARY 13, 2025 12:48 PM

A legislative committee endorsed a bill Thursday at the state Capitol in Pierre that would allow South Dakotans to sue their employer, church or even family or neighbor if they're barred entrance to a building, lose their job or are demoted because they refuse vaccinations during a public health emergency.

House Bill 1223, introduced by Sioux Falls Republican Rep. Bobbi Andera, would not apply "conscience exemptions" to required school immunizations or health care facilities, or to the South Dakota National Guard if the vaccination is required for federal activation.

Andera was motivated by restrictions enforced during the COVID-19 pandemic tied to a person's vaccination status.

"I am supporting this bill because I support the people of South Dakota and science," Andera said. "Science is not quick. It never has and it never will be."

The other supporter of the bill to testify was a representative with South Dakota Citizens for Liberty, a conservative political advocacy group. The legislation faced a wave of opposition from business and medical organizations.

Justin Smith, a lobbyist representing the Greater Sioux Falls Chamber of Commerce, told lawmakers the bill attacks South Dakota's "employment at will" laws, because it would prioritize an employee's "inner conviction" over business owners' rights to protect themselves, customers, employees and private property.

Smith said the bill could empower employees to sue over something as mundane as being put on a different shift or being moved to a different building, which he said could constitute a "loss of employment status" under the language in the bill.

The bill also allows people who sue to collect three times their actual damages and attorney fees from the defendant if a court rules in the plaintiff's favor. The suing party would not be responsible for the defendant's attorney fees if they lose.

"Heads I win, tails you lose," Smith said.

Sioux Falls Republican Rep. Taylor Rehfeldt — a nurse anesthetist — was the most vocal critic of the bill. She said it gave her "angst" from both a business and public health perspective because a person could walk into another person's home despite that homeowner's personal health or wishes.

Passage of the bill would result in "extreme ramifications damaging as a whole to public health," Rehfeldt said.

"Where does somebody's personal freedom get to override somebody else's right to personal freedom?" Rehfeldt said.

Clear Lake Republican Dylan Jordan said he stands for the "freedom of everyday workers" in his support.

"You shouldn't be forced by your employer to get any shot you don't want," Jordan said.

The bill passed 7-6 out of the House Health and Human Services Committee. It'll head to the House of Representatives next.

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.

Rollins confirmed as secretary of U.S. Agriculture Department; Thune and Rounds vote yes

BY: STATES NEWSROOM STAFF - FEBRUARY 13, 2025 11:22 AM

WASHINGTON — Brooke Rollins was easily confirmed by the U.S. Senate on Thursday as the next secretary of the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

Senators backed her nomination 72-28. Rollins, a lawyer and Texas native, was picked by President Donald Trump to run a crucial agency that administers roughly \$213 billion in mandatory and discretionary funding.

Rollins, who has been the president and CEO of the pro-Trump America First Policy Institute, also served in the first Trump administration. She was unanimously approved by the Senate Agriculture, Nutrition and Forestry Committee earlier this month, with the backing of major farm groups.

Rollins' four-hour confirmation hearing before the committee showed she likely had the support to secure Senate approval, though members from both political parties raised concerns about the decline in family farms, the hollowing out of rural America, the speed with which USDA delivers disaster aid to farmers and the future of nutrition programs.

USDA manages food safety practices, conducts agriculture and conservation research, handles farm management and administers the government's largest food benefits program for low-income families, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP.

The agency also provides federal grants for the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children, or WIC.

Conservation groups including the Center for Biological Diversity in a letter earlier this month opposed Rollins' nomination, saying she would "bring a clear bias in favor of industry and is likely to undermine the implementation of our nation's core environmental laws that the Department of Agriculture is sworn to uphold."

But Senate Majority Leader John Thune, a South Dakota Republican, praised Rollins on the floor Thursday as a "policy wonk with a farmer's heart" who will work on priorities such as getting farm disaster aid out the door, controlling bird flu, completing the farm bill and focusing USDA on its "core mission" of meeting farmers' needs.

Rollins said during her confirmation hearing that she has "a lot to learn" about highly pathogenic avian influenza or bird flu, the virus that's wreaking havoc on the country's poultry industry and dairy farms.

Republican Sen. Chuck Grassley of Iowa said he worked with Rollins during the first Trump administration on criminal justice legislation but now "she's focusing on her agricultural roots" after growing up in Texas as a member of the Future Farmers of America and 4-H.

"Mrs. Rollins is taking on a large role, leading 100,000 employees and making policy decisions that will affect family farmers across the country and impact the efficiency and transparency of government," Grassley said in a Thursday statement.

"In her confirmation hearing, Mrs. Rollins assured me that she would, to the best of her ability, respond to my letters and make the Department of Agriculture a place where whistleblowers can come forward confidently," he said.

Grassley also said he will work with Rollins on enforcement of the Packers and Stockyards Act, which is intended to ensure fair competition and trade practices in the markets.

Rollins succeeds Tom Vilsack, a former governor of Iowa who served as secretary of agriculture under President Joe Biden and, earlier, President Barack Obama.

RFK Jr. confirmed as nation's health chief; Thune and Rounds vote yes

BY: JENNIFER SHUTT - FEBRUARY 13, 2025 10:48 AM

WASHINGTON — Robert F. Kennedy Jr. secured Senate confirmation Thursday to become secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services, overcoming concerns about dozens of false or misleading statements he has made regarding vaccine safety.

The 52-48 vote puts Kennedy, an environmental lawyer who has no background in health care or running a major organization, at the helm of one of the largest federal departments. Republican Sen. Mitch McConnell of Kentucky was the only member of the GOP to oppose Kennedy's confirmation.

HHS receives more than \$1.7 trillion in government funding annually and houses some of the nation's most prominent agencies, including the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, Food and Drug Administration, Indian Health Service, National Institutes of Health and the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration.

Most Republicans fall in line

Many GOP senators were skeptical of Kennedy's nomination during hearings in the Finance and Health, Education, Labor and Pensions committees, but ultimately voted to confirm him.

Louisiana Republican Sen. Bill Cassidy, chairman of the HELP Committee, gave a floor speech detailing multiple commitments from Kennedy and President Donald Trump that ultimately led Cassidy to support the nomination.

Among the assurances are that Kennedy will work within the current vaccine approval and safety monitoring systems and not establish parallel systems, maintain the CDC advisory committee on immunization practices recommendations without changes and keep statements on the CDC's website that state vaccines do not cause autism.

Sen. Lisa Murkowski, R-Alaska, announced Wednesday in a social media post that she would support Kennedy's confirmation, though she wrote she continued "to have concerns about Mr. Kennedy's views on vaccines and his selective interpretation of scientific studies, which initially caused my misgivings about his nomination."

"Vaccines have saved millions of lives, and I sought assurance that, as HHS Secretary, he would do nothing to make it difficult for people to take vaccines or discourage vaccination efforts," Murkowski wrote.

'We cannot take this man at his word'

Democratic Sen. Patty Murray, D-Wash., urged Republicans to vote against Kennedy, saying that a vote to confirm him would indicate to Americans that Congress supports his false statements about vaccines and the other conspiracy theories he's elevated over the years.

"If you ignore the warning signs and confirm RFK Jr., then when the wheels fall off the wagon, you may try to tell yourself you were lied to. But you knew who you were dealing with," Murray said.

She urged her GOP colleagues not to be "fooled" by commitments and promises Kennedy has made about what he will or won't do once confirmed.

"We cannot take this man at his word, something he has changed and gone back and forth on time and time again," Murray said. "But we can take him on his record, which is that he has consistently undermined vaccine confidence, And, by the way, he profited from that."

Oregon Democratic Sen. Ron Wyden told Republican senators that if they voted against confirming Kennedy, they would help stop the spread of vaccine misinformation and keep children safe.

"When disease rates for illnesses that have effective vaccines start to rise across the country and death tolls mount again, we will see Republicans say this is something that could have been prevented," Wyden said.

GOP senators who voted to confirm Kennedy, he said, "will be responsible for every child that dies as

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a result of not being vaccinated because it seems they care more about staying in the good graces of Donald Trump than they do about protecting the lives of kids.”

McConnell, a polio survivor, with his vote against Kennedy marked the third time he’s opposed a Trump nominee.

The former Senate Republican leader, who has clashed repeatedly with the president over the years, previously voted against Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth and Director of National Intelligence Tulsi Gabbard.

McConnell wrote in a statement explaining his vote that “a record of trafficking in dangerous conspiracy theories and eroding trust in public health institutions does not entitle Mr. Kennedy to lead these important efforts.”

“Mr. Kennedy failed to prove he is the best possible person to lead America’s largest health agency,” McConnell wrote. “As he takes office, I sincerely hope Mr. Kennedy will choose not to sow further doubt and division but to restore trust in our public health institutions.”

Kennedy probed on vaccine safety

Senators repeatedly asked Kennedy during his two confirmation hearings about statements on vaccine safety and other conspiracy theories.

Maryland Democratic Sen. Angela Alsobrooks raised concerns during the HELP Committee hearing about Kennedy saying he wanted to remove the “bad scientists” and replace them with “good scientists” at the NIH.

“The question is really whether you intend, as you said, to substitute your judgment for the judgment of these professional scientists and doctors,” Alsobrooks said.

Kennedy testified he wouldn’t “substitute” his judgment for science.

Alsobrooks also asked Kennedy about comments he made in 2021 when he said: “We should not be giving Black people the same vaccine schedule that’s given to whites because their immune system is better than ours.”

Kennedy said that he was referencing studies that suggested “Blacks need fewer antigens.”

Alsobrooks told Kennedy his confirmation would be “dangerous” since parents would look to him for advice about whether to vaccinate their children.

“Your views are dangerous to our state and to our country,” Alsobrooks said.

Conspiracy theories

During the Finance Committee’s hearing, Colorado Democratic Sen. Michael Bennet asked a series of questions about previous statements Kennedy has made on various public health issues.

“Mr. Kennedy, did you say that COVID-19 was a genetically engineered bioweapon that targets Black and white people, but spared Ashkenazi Jews and Chinese people?” Bennet asked.

Kennedy responded that he “didn’t say it was deliberately targeted.”

Kennedy said he “probably” had made comments that Lyme disease was a military engineered bioweapon.

Kennedy said he wasn’t sure if he had written in one of his books that it is “undeniable that African AIDS is an entirely different disease from Western AIDS,” following a question from Bennet.

Kennedy, however, denied making statements that pesticides cause children to become transgender.

Bennet said he would have those prior Kennedy statements entered into the committee’s official record.

Jennifer covers the nation’s capital as a senior reporter for States Newsroom. Her coverage areas include congressional policy, politics and legal challenges with a focus on health care, unemployment, housing and aid to families.

Deeply divided U.S. Senate Judiciary panel advances Kash Patel nomination for FBI head

BY: ASHLEY MURRAY - FEBRUARY 13, 2025 10:44 AM

WASHINGTON — Kash Patel is one step closer to leading the Federal Bureau of Investigation after Senate Republicans with jurisdiction over the judiciary advanced his nomination Thursday to the full Senate. Lawmakers on the Senate Committee on the Judiciary voted along party lines 12-10 to send Patel's nomination to be FBI director, a 10-year term, to the Senate floor. A vote has not yet been scheduled.

President Donald Trump's controversial pick to lead the federal law enforcement agency attracted headlines for individually naming dozens of former "deep state" U.S. officials in his 2023 book "Government Gangsters" — a list critics have described as Patel's "enemies list."

Democrats also questioned Patel's praise of Jan. 6 defendants and his embrace of QAnon conspiracy theorists during an early role with Trump's Truth Social platform. Patel remains on the board of directors for the Trump Media and Technology Group, the company behind Truth Social, and has agreed to resign if confirmed as FBI director.

Patel, 44, a frequent guest on right-wing media, told podcast host Shawn Ryan last year that he'd "shut down the FBI Hoover Building on day one and reopen it the next day as a museum of the 'deep state.'"

But Republicans on the Senate Judiciary Committee backed the former prosecutor and national security official, arguing he is the right choice to lead an agency "long overdue for massive reform."

Senators battle over nominee

Committee Chair Chuck Grassley said Patel has been subjected to "unfair attacks and character smears" during his confirmation process.

"Mr. Patel has spent his whole career fighting for righteous causes. He's been a public defender representing the accused against the power of the state. He's been a congressional staffer investigating the partisan weaponization of our legal system, and he served in key national security roles, protecting Americans from foreign enemies," the Iowa Republican said just before Thursday's vote.

Sens. Marsha Blackburn of Tennessee and Ashley Moody of Florida also spoke in favor of Patel ahead of the vote.

Blackburn said Patel "is going to work with me" to reveal who was involved with Jeffrey Epstein. The wealthy financier served jail time in Florida for sexually abusing a minor and died in a Manhattan jail awaiting federal prosecution on sex trafficking charges.

Sen. Dick Durbin, the Senate Judiciary Committee's top Democrat, said Thursday that Patel's confirmation would be an "invitation for a political free-for-all" at the bureau.

"After reviewing Kash Patel's record, meeting with him, questioning him at this hearing, I'm even more convinced that he has neither experience, the judgment, nor the temperament to lead the FBI," Durbin said.

Sens. Sheldon Whitehouse of Rhode Island, Amy Klobuchar of Minnesota, Chris Coons of Delaware, Richard Blumenthal of Connecticut, Mazie Hirono of Hawaii, Cory Booker of New Jersey and Peter Welch of Vermont, all members of the Judiciary panel, spoke in opposition to Patel's nomination ahead of the committee vote.

"So much of what (Patel) has written and said demonstrates that he is somebody that goes against the idea of integrity and independence that the FBI wants," Booker said.

Delay urged

Durbin urged further delaying the committee vote after he said he had "highly credible information from multiple sources" that Patel lied to the committee during his confirmation hearing regarding his involvement in recent FBI firings.

"It is unacceptable for a nominee with no current role in government, much less at the FBI, to personally direct unjustified and potentially illegal adverse employment actions against senior career FBI leadership

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and other dedicated, nonpartisan law enforcement officers," Durbin wrote. "If these allegations are true, Mr. Patel may have perjured himself before the Senate Judiciary Committee."

Patel was asked by Booker during his Jan. 30 confirmation hearing whether he knew of "any plans or discussions to punish in any way, including termination, FBI agents or personnel associated with Trump investigations."

Patel replied that he was "not aware" of current decisions at the agency.

Numerous FBI officials involved in the Jan. 6 attack prosecutions and the case against Trump for 2020 election interference have been fired.

The Judiciary Committee had already delayed the vote on Patel's nomination at its Feb. 6 meeting, during which Durbin criticized Patel's "lionization" of those who attacked the U.S. Capitol on Jan. 6, 2021, as they tried to stop Congress from certifying the 2020 presidential election results. Trump, on his first day in office, granted clemency to the nearly 1,600 defendants, including the most violent and serious offenders.

Patel was one of the producers on the recorded version of the "Star-Spangled Banner" sung by jailed Jan. 6 defendants, which Trump played on the campaign trail.

Investments, foreign clients

Patel's investments and representation of foreign clients have also drawn scrutiny. The nominee, whose net worth is as much as \$15 million, earned money from the Embassy of Qatar, the Chinese online retailer Shein and foreign arms conglomerate the Czechoslovak Group, according to an analysis of his financial disclosures by The Associated Press.

The Washington Post reported on Feb. 7 that Patel had received \$25,000 from a Russian filmmaker with ties to the Kremlin.

Patel's financial disclosure was not immediately available on the U.S. Office of Government Ethics website and must be requested, which can take up to two days. Disclosures for other nominees, including those like Attorney General Pam Bondi who are now confirmed, are immediately available.

Patel signed an ethics agreement to step away from many of his business ventures if confirmed as FBI director.

Books published

Patel's book, the full title of which is "Government Gangsters: the Deep State, the Truth and the Battle for Our Democracy," was published by Post Hill Press in September 2023. Patel worked with Steve Bannon to produce a 2024 film based on the book.

Patel also worked with Beacon of Freedom Publishing House and Brave Books from 2022 to 2024 to publish a series of three children's books, "The Plot Against the King," "The Plot Against the King 2,000 Mules" and "The Plot Against the King 3: Return of the King." The books respectively depict a cartoon Trump navigating the 2016 Russian election interference investigation, the false claim that the 2020 presidential election was stolen and Trump's campaign for his second presidency.

Patel served during the first Trump administration as deputy assistant to the president and senior director for counterterrorism at the National Security Council, and as a senior adviser to Trump's director of national intelligence, Rick Grenell. Patel briefly served as the chief of staff to the acting defense secretary from November 2020 to January 2021.

Prior to joining the Trump administration, Patel worked as a national security adviser on the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence from March 2018 to January 2019 and served as senior counsel for the committee in the months prior.

Patel was a trial attorney with the Department of Justice National Security Division from 2014 to 2017 during former President Barack Obama's administration.

Patel began his career as a public defender in Miami, Florida.

Patel received his law degree from Pace University Law School in 2005. Patel is from Garden City, New York.

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

You're hearing a lot about budget reconciliation in Congress. What does that mean?

BY: JENNIFER SHUTT - FEBRUARY 13, 2025 7:58 AM

WASHINGTON — Republicans in Congress have begun taking their first steps on the long and winding road that constitutes the budget reconciliation process.

GOP lawmakers plan to use the special legislative procedure to enact substantial changes to border security, defense, energy and tax law, as well as major spending reductions. If they succeed, there will be no Democratic votes needed.

On the way, Republicans have to jump through the many, many hoops that make up the reconciliation process and comply with its strict rules.

Here's a breakdown of how reconciliation works, how it differs from passing yearly spending bills that fund government operations and what obstacles Republicans are likely to run into along their journey.

What is a budget resolution in Congress?

The House and Senate must vote to approve the same budget resolution with identical reconciliation instructions to unlock the reconciliation process. This is the first step of several.

The budget resolution is a tax and spending blueprint. Congress is supposed to use it to plan out how much revenue the federal government brings in through taxes and how much money it spends across the 10-year budget window.

The budget resolution is not a bill and cannot become law. At most, if both the House and Senate agree, the budget resolution is adopted.

Important: The budget resolution doesn't actually include any money and doesn't fund any part of the federal government. Any changes proposed in the budget resolution must move through Congress via separate legislation and be signed into law by the president to take effect.

So Congress' budget resolution doesn't actually fund anything?

Correct.

So what the heck funds the government?

The dozen annual appropriations bills provide funding for most of the federal departments and agencies. That includes Agriculture, Defense, Energy, Homeland Security, Interior, Justice, NASA, State, Transportation and Housing and Urban Development.

The appropriations bills are supposed to become law by the start of the fiscal year on Oct. 1, but this year, Congress has used two stopgap spending bills to extend the deadline until March 14.

That is why, even if Congress adopts a budget resolution in the next few weeks, there could still be a partial government shutdown starting in mid-March. The money would run out.

Those dozen annual appropriations bills account for about one-third of all federal spending, with the other two-thirds coming from so-called mandatory programs, like Medicare, Medicaid and Social Security. Those programs don't require Congress to approve their funding each year.

You can see a breakdown of where discretionary spending goes here and details about how mandatory funds are allocated here, courtesy of easy-to-understand images from the nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office.

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Why does Congress have a budget process and a separate spending process? That seems ... confusing.

The budget resolution is supposed to provide an opportunity for Congress to step back and plan what the federal government's tax and spending laws should look like during the next decade.

It's meant to be a big-picture approach to revenue, discretionary spending, mandatory funding, the deficit and the debt.

After debating and agreeing to a budget resolution, Congress is then meant to get to work on the bills that would actually implement that vision.

The reconciliation process is intended to make it a bit easier for Congress to pass bills that change tax, spending, or debt to bring federal law closer to the vision detailed in the budget resolution.

What about the dozen annual appropriations bills, then?

They are intended to create a yearly debate within Congress about how much to allocate to the departments and agencies that receive discretionary spending.

So where does budget reconciliation fit into all this?

The process allows Congress to make changes to taxes, spending and debt in order to reconcile current law with what lawmakers planned out in the budget resolution.

Democrats and Republicans, however, tend to use it when they hold unified control of government to pass legislation they don't want to negotiate with the other political party.

The process comes with strict restrictions in the Senate that are overseen by the parliamentarian and known as the Byrd rule, which is actually a law.

Okay, fine, what's the Byrd rule?

West Virginia Sen. Robert C. Byrd proposed the original version of the Byrd rule in 1985. The elements changed a few times before lawmakers voted in 1990 to make it part of the 1974 Budget Act.

It prevents the Senate from adding any provisions to a reconciliation package that:

Don't change revenue or spending.

Change revenue or spending in a way deemed "merely incidental" by the parliamentarian.

Change policy outside the jurisdiction of the authorizing committee.

Don't comply with the committee's reconciliation instructions in the budget resolution.

Increase the deficit past the budget window (usually 10 years).

Change Social Security.

Why use budget reconciliation, instead of just passing a bill, if there are so many restrictions?

While the House can pass bills with a simple majority vote, the Senate has the legislative filibuster, which requires at least 60 lawmakers vote to limit debate on a bill before they can move onto the final passage vote.

It's extremely rare for either party to hold a supermajority of 60 or more seats in the Senate. So when either Democrats or Republicans hold the House, Senate and White House, they tend to use reconciliation to try to pass major initiatives.

What are the steps to budget reconciliation?

The House and Senate must vote to adopt a budget resolution with reconciliation instructions.

The committees that received reconciliation instructions draft their portions of the package, hold markups in their committees and then vote to approve their parts of the bill.

The Budget Committee holds a markup where it combines all of the bills into one large reconciliation package.

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The legislation goes to the floor for debate and a vote.

The package then goes to the other chamber, where lawmakers can approve it as is, or make changes. If changes are made through amendments, the bill then has to go back across the Capitol.

Both chambers must vote to approve the final version of the bill before it goes to the president for their signature.

What is a vote-a-rama?

The Senate holds an all-night, marathon amendment voting session on the budget resolution and then on the reconciliation package itself. The House does not use this approach.

The endeavor gives the majority party, right now Republicans, the chance to make changes to the budget resolution or the reconciliation package that they think would make it better.

The minority party, currently Democratic, typically tries to challenge senators from the other side of the aisle with difficult votes on policy areas they'd rather not vote on.

How often does Congress pass bills through reconciliation?

Typically, any time one political party holds unified control of government, they at least try to use reconciliation to make good on campaign promises.

Democrats passed two big, important packages through reconciliation during the beginning of the Biden administration — a \$1.9 trillion coronavirus relief bill and their signature climate change, health care and tax package, known as the Inflation Reduction Act, or IRA.

During President Donald Trump's first term in office, Republicans tried for months to repeal the 2010 health care law known as the Affordable Care Act, or Obamacare, via the reconciliation process, but were unsuccessful.

The GOP was able to use budget reconciliation to pass the 2017 tax law, referred to as the Tax Cuts and Jobs Act, that they hope to renew this year.

Congress has sent the president a total of 27 reconciliation packages since 1980, with 23 of those becoming law. The other four were vetoed, according to a report from the nonpartisan Congressional Research Service.

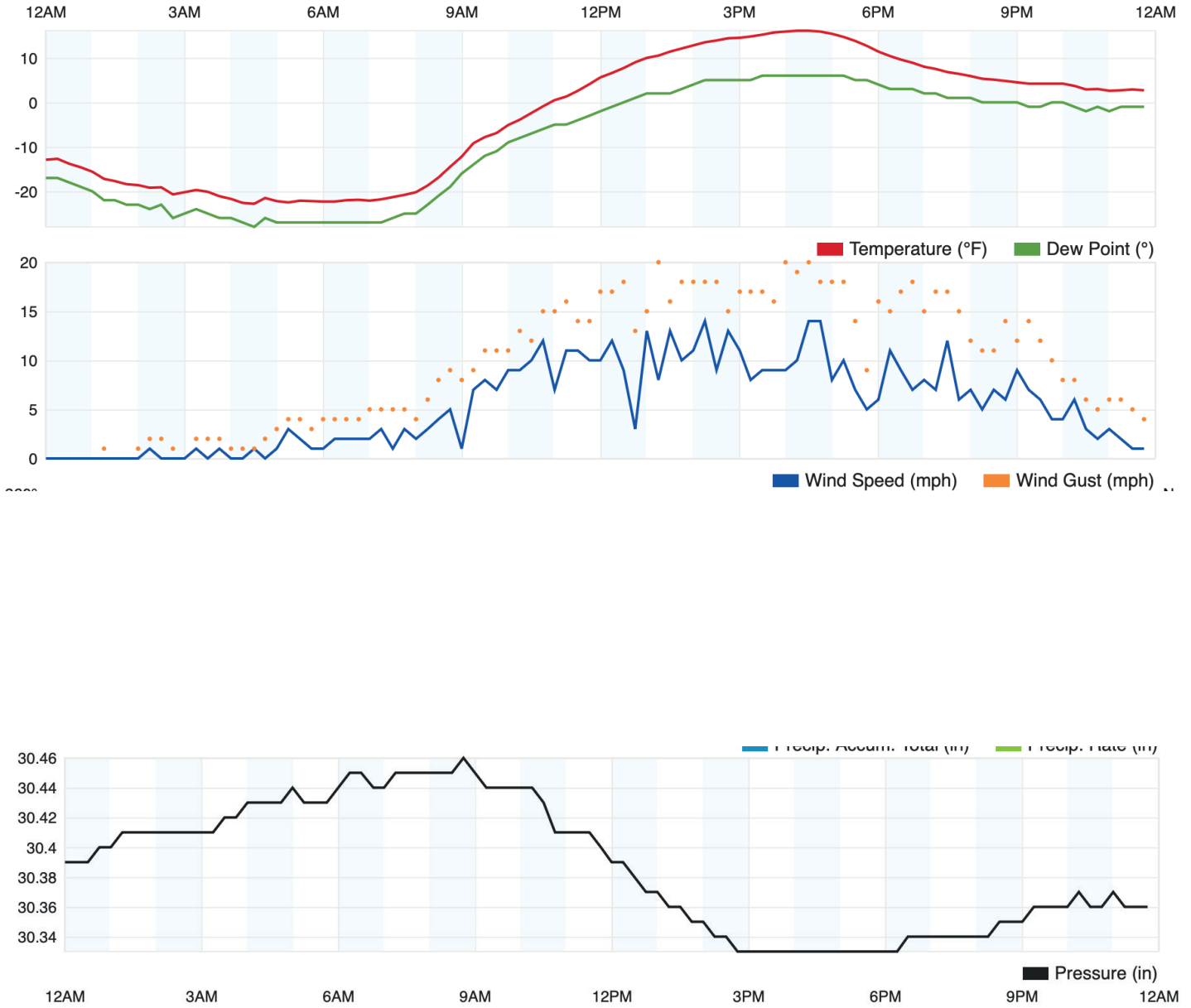
Ariana Figueroa and Shauneen Miranda contributed to this report.

Jennifer covers the nation's capital as a senior reporter for States Newsroom. Her coverage areas include congressional policy, politics and legal challenges with a focus on health care, unemployment, housing and aid to families.

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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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Today



High: 21 °F

Slight Chance
Snow

Tonight



Low: -4 °F

Slight Chance
Snow then
Mostly Cloudy

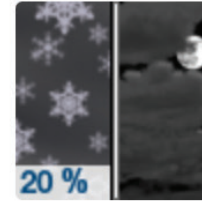
Saturday



High: 6 °F

Chance Snow

Saturday Night



Low: -10 °F

Slight Chance
Snow then
Mostly Cloudy

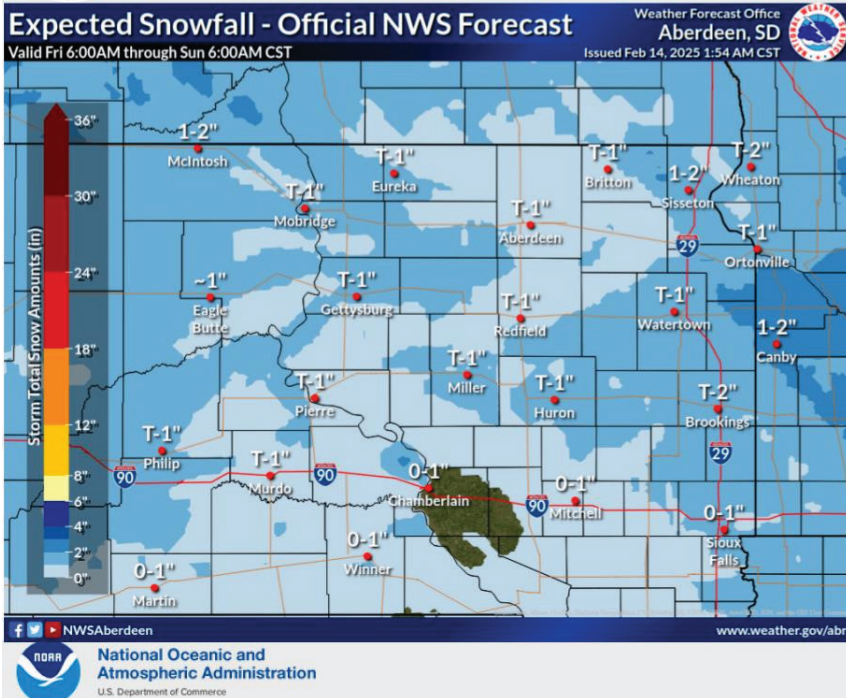
Sunday



High: 3 °F

Cold

Light Snow Friday into Sunday February 14, 2025 4:47 AM



Key Messages

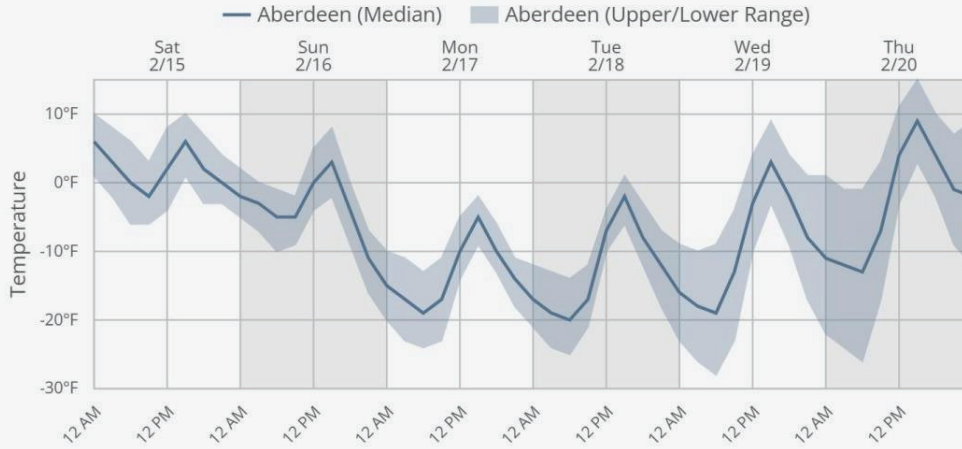
- Light snow Friday into Friday night over northeastern SD and west central MN.
 - ◆ Snow amounts of less than 1" expected, with highest totals of 1 to 2" over far northeastern SD and west central MN.
- Saturday another wave of light snow will move into central SD and travel east
 - ◆ Adding an additional half inch to inch of snowfall to Friday's snow amounts

Light snow will happen Friday with accumulations of less than an inch expected, with locally higher totals of 1-2" over far northeastern SD and west central MN. Another wave of light snow will move into central and eastern SD Saturday morning adding an additional half inch to inch of snow.



Extended Temperature Forecast

Saturday Morning, Feb 15 - Thursday, Feb 20



Information:

The range line chart shows the lower, median, and upper percentiles of a weather event occurring based on model predictions from the National Blend of Models. A larger shaded area means less certainty.

Additional Details

⇒ Cold Temperatures

- Temperatures well below normal are expected to return for the start of next week.
- Wind chills will range from -20° to -40° Monday through Wednesday mornings.

⚠ Potential Impacts

- Wind chills could cause frostbite on exposed skin in as little as 10 minutes.
- Stay indoors if possible.
- Dress in layers including a hat, gloves, and a face mask if you must go outside.

Valid: Sat 12 am CST - Fri 12 am CST

Issued: Thu, Feb 13, 2025, 11 am CST



Cold temperatures will return for the start of next week with wind chills of -20 to -40° during the morning hours Monday through Wednesday.

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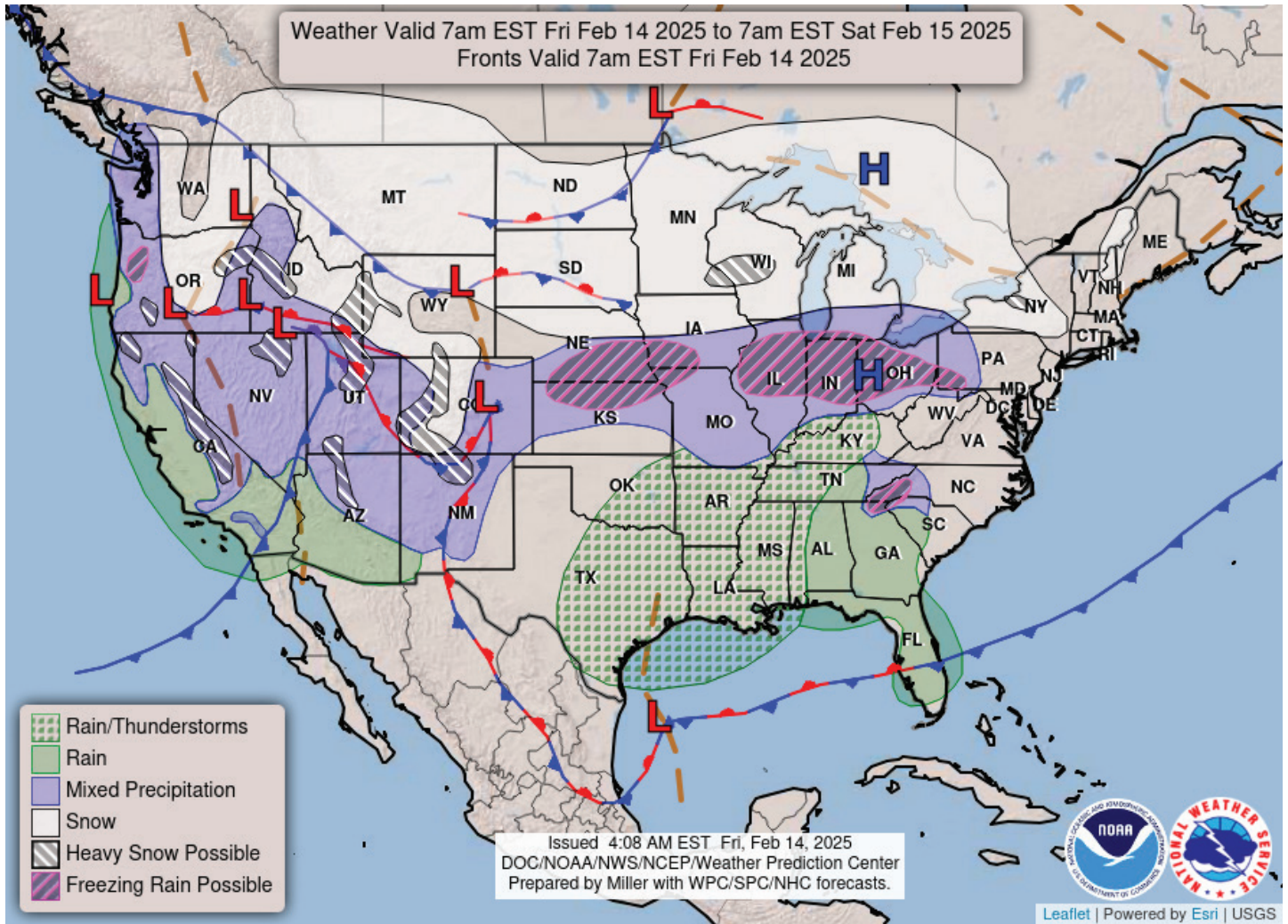
Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 16 °F at 4:06 PM
Low Temp: -23 °F at 4:23 AM
Wind: 20 mph at 1:09 PM
Precip: 0.00

Day length: 10 hours, 27 minutes

Today's Info

Record High: 57 in 1934
Record Low: -30 in 1936
Average High: 28
Average Low: 6
Average Precip in Feb.: 0.28
Precip to date in Feb.: 0.20
Average Precip to date: 0.83
Precip Year to Date: 0.20
Sunset Tonight: 6:00:00 pm
Sunrise Tomorrow: 7:31:28 am



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Today in Weather History

February 14th, 1967: The heaviest snow fell in the central part of the state, with Pierre receiving 10 inches with 14 inches reported near Harrold. Elsewhere, 1 to 4 inches of snow was typical. Winds of 20 to 30 mph with gusts over 40 mph caused extensive drifting and blowing snow reducing visibilities to near zero. As a result, many schools were closed, and other activities were canceled. Temperatures of 5 to 15 degrees below zero were typical on the morning of the 15th. A farmer died in the storm near Yale, where his car stalled, and he attempted to walk.

February 14th, 1979: High winds of 50 mph or greater and snow from a half-inch to more than 14 inches moved through the state late on the 14th, with winds slowly subsiding on the 16th. Visibility was reduced to near zero at the height of the storm, and no travel was advised. Temperatures fell to 25 degrees below zero, with wind chills to 80 to 90 below on the 15th. One man suffered frostbite after being stranded in his truck for seventeen hours. In addition, power was lost at Wall due to high winds snapping power lines together.

1895: The most significant snowfall in the history of Houston, Texas, occurred on the 14th and 15th. The Houston area saw 20 inches of snow.

1899 - A great blizzard struck the eastern U.S. Washington D.C. received 20.5 inches of snow to bring their total snow depth to nearly three feet. The storm produced 36 inches of snow at Cape May NJ. (David Ludlum)

1940: A St. Valentine's Day Blizzard blankets New England with up to 18 inches of snow. Gale force winds associated with the storm strand many in downtown Boston.

1982: A "meteorological bomb" exploded in the Atlantic southeast of Newfoundland. The term is used to describe a storm that rapidly intensifies. The intense cyclone off the Atlantic coast capsized a drilling rig killing 84 persons and sank a Soviet freighter resulting in 33 more deaths. The cyclone produced 80 mph winds that whipped the water into waves fifty feet high.

1987 - A powerful storm spawned severe thunderstorms in Texas and Oklahoma, and produced heavy snow in the Rocky Mountain Region. Snowfall totals in Colorado ranged up to 27 inches at Telluride. Straight line winds gusting to 104 mph howled through Guadalupe Pass in West Texas. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1988 - Strong northerly winds ushered arctic air into the north central U.S. Snow and high winds created blizzard conditions in Minnesota and the Dakotas. Winds gusted to 56 mph at Rapid City SD, and reached 65 mph at Cody WY. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1989 - While "Valentine's Day" was a soggy one in the Ohio Valley and the Tennessee Valley, unseasonably warm weather prevailed in the southeastern U.S. Seventeen cities reported record high temperatures for the date as readings warmed into the 70s and 80s. (The National Weather Summary)

1990 - Valentine's Day was a snowy one for many parts of the western and central U.S. Five to ten inches of snow fell across Iowa, and 6 to 12 inches of snow blanketed northern Illinois, and strong northeasterly winds accompanied the heavy snow. Air traffic came to a halt during the evening at O'Hare Airport in Chicago, where 9.7 inches of snow was reported. More than 250 traffic accidents were reported around Des Moines IA during the evening rush hour. An icestorm glazed east central sections of Illinois, causing twelve million dollars damage in Champaign County alone. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

2004 - Dallas receives 3 inches of snow, wreaking havoc with Valentine's Day flower deliveries. The greatest snowfall since 1978 caused numerous traffic accidents, power outages and flight cancellations at Dallas-Fort Worth International Airport.

2007: Light snow fell on Nepal's capital, Kathmandu, for the first time in over 60 years. They also saw light snow on February 28th, 2019.

2010: Vancouver struggled with above average, non-winter-like temperatures during the first weekend of the 2010 Winter Olympics. In fact, Vancouver was warmer, 48 degrees, than Miami, Florida, 45 degrees!



"IT MAY BE MY LAST"

It began as a day like any other day. James Galway, a brilliant flutist, was happily walking to his morning rehearsal. While crossing a street, a speeding motorcyclist hit him and shattered the bones in both of his legs and one arm.

He was rushed to the hospital and the orthopedic surgeons immediately began a lengthy operation as they attempted to repair the damage. Unfortunately, the bones did not heal as quickly or properly as they had anticipated. As a result, he had to remain in the hospital for many months. He was once known to have said, "It took quite a while to pick up the pieces."

Upon his release from the hospital and while he was still recovering from the accident, he is quoted as saying, "I decided from this moment on I will play every concert, record every album, give every performance and live every day as though 'it may be my last.'" Someone who knew him said that his new goal in life was to "make sure that every time he played, his performance would be as near to perfection as God wanted it to be!"

No doubt that is what Paul had in mind when he wrote, "Whatever you may do, do all to the glory and honor of God!"

There is a two-fold implication here: Whatever we do is a choice. And with the choice is an opportunity to bring honor and glory to God. So, not only are our choices critical but that Christ is exalted in the things we do.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, guide us in our choices and make us conscious of whatever we do, knowing that we are always representing You by the way we live. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God. 1 Corinthians 10:31

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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Password _____

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Pay with Venmo: [@paperpaul](https://venmo.com/paperpaul) Phone Number to Confirm: 7460

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WINNING NUMBERS

MEGA MILLIONS

WINNING NUMBERS: 02.11.25

7 30 39 41 70 13

MegaPlier: 3x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$129,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 15 Hrs 50 Mins 23 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LOTTO AMERICA

WINNING NUMBERS: 02.12.25

6 16 23 27 30 1

All Star Bonus: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$23,700,000

NEXT DRAW: 1 Days 15 Hrs 5 Mins 23 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LUCKY FOR LIFE

WINNING NUMBERS: 02.13.25

1 21 25 37 45 11

TOP PRIZE:

\$7,000/week

NEXT DRAW: 15 Hrs 20 Mins 23 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

DAKOTA CASH

WINNING NUMBERS: 02.12.25

4 7 8 17 27

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$35,000

NEXT DRAW: 1 Days 15 Hrs 20 Mins 23 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

DOUBLE PLAY

WINNING NUMBERS: 02.12.25

11 24 26 31 39 15

TOP PRIZE:

\$10,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 1 Days 15 Hrs 49 Mins 23 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

WINNING NUMBERS: 02.12.25

21 32 36 45 49 18

Power Play: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$172,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 1 Days 15 Hrs 49 Mins 23 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

Thursday's Scores

The Associated Press

BOYS PREP BASKETBALL

Baltic 64, Canton 40
Bennett County 73, Cody-Kilgore, Neb. 46
Castlewood 64, Deubrook 53
Cheyenne-Eagle Butte 63, McLaughlin 57
DeSmet 53, Wolsey-Wessington 51
Dupree 74, Faith 43
Elkton-Lake Benton 81, Estelline-Hendricks 74, 2OT
Faulkton 62, Potter County 53
Freeman 63, Corsica/Stickney 36
Gayville-Volin High School 64, Flandreau Indian 38
Great Plains Lutheran 51, Northwestern 43
Hamlin 71, Deuel 24
Harding County 73, Tiospaye Topa 53
Hill City 63, Douglas 48
Irene-Wakonda 71, Marty 53
James Valley Christian School 61, Arlington 35
Kimball-White Lake 63, Burke 40
Lyman 68, Philip 44
Mobridge-Pollock 75, Sully Buttes 59
Mt. Vernon/Plankinton 61, Ethan 39
Rapid City Christian 74, Lead-Deadwood 54
Spearfish 52, Custer 45
Tripp-Delmont-Armour 60, Avon 53
Waubay/Summit 56, Britton-Hecla 50
Wessington Springs 70, Hitchcock-Tulare 31
Western Christian, Iowa 89, Sioux Falls Christian 86, 2OT

GIRLS PREP BASKETBALL

Aberdeen Central 48, Huron 34
Andes Central/Dakota Christian 46, Freeman Academy-Marion 28
Arlington 59, James Valley Christian School 9
Bennett County 69, Cody-Kilgore, Neb. 31
Canton 68, Baltic 35
Deubrook 63, Castlewood 43
Ethan 59, Mt. Vernon/Plankinton 38
Gayville-Volin High School 82, Flandreau Indian 30
Great Plains Lutheran 48, Northwestern 43, OT
Hamlin 63, Deuel 22
Harding County 71, Tiospaye Topa 50
Herreid-Selby 43, Leola-Frederick High School 28
Hitchcock-Tulare 52, Wessington Springs 43
Iroquois-Lake Preston 54, Sunshine Bible Academy 51
Kadoka 54, Todd County 17

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Lower Brule 71, Cheyenne-Eagle Butte 52
Lyman 61, Philip 41
Marty 53, Irene-Wakonda 52
McIntosh High School 66, Takini 16
McLaughlin 68, Crazy Horse 22
Mobridge-Pollock 61, Sully Buttes 34
Pine Ridge 69, Crow Creek Tribal School 63
Rapid City Christian 67, Lead-Deadwood 23
Sisseton 59, Tiospa Zina 22
Spearfish 67, Custer 31
Tripp-Delmont-Armour 45, Avon 38
Waubay/Summit 48, Britton-Hecla 33

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

Bullock scores 26 as South Dakota beats Kansas City 79-72

By The Associated Press undefined

VERMILLION, S.D. (AP) — Quandre Bullock scored 26 points as South Dakota beat Kansas City 79-72 on Thursday night.

Bullock also contributed six steals for the Coyotes (16-10, 7-4 Summit League). Isaac Bruns scored 21 points while going 8 of 18 from the floor, including 2 for 5 from 3-point range, and 3 for 3 from the line and added three steals. Mayuom Buom shot 5 of 7 from the field and 1 of 3 from the free-throw line to finish with 11 points.

Jayson Petty finished with 21 points and eight rebounds for the Kangaroos (11-16, 3-9). Jamar Brown added 15 points and 13 rebounds for UMKC. Melvyn Ebonkoli finished with 13 points and 12 rebounds.

Bullock led South Dakota with 13 points in the first half to help put them ahead 38-34 at the break. Bruns scored a team-high 14 points in the final half.

Up next for South Dakota is a Sunday matchup with South Dakota State at home. Kansas City hosts Omaha on Wednesday.

Cluff scores 25, South Dakota State takes down Omaha 98-85

By The Associated Press undefined

BROOKINGS, S.D. (AP) — Oscar Cluff's 25 points helped South Dakota State defeat Omaha 98-85 on Thursday night.

Cluff also contributed 15 rebounds and six assists for the Jackrabbits (17-9, 8-3 Summit League). Joe Saylor scored 19 points while going 5 of 10 from the floor, including 3 for 5 from 3-point range, and 6 for 6 from the line. Owen Larson went 7 of 11 from the field (4 for 6 from 3-point range) to finish with 18 points.

Marquel Sutton finished with 20 points for the Mavericks (16-11, 10-2). Tony Osburn added 20 points for Omaha. JJ White also recorded 12 points and eight assists.

NEXT UP

Up next for South Dakota State is a Sunday matchup with South Dakota on the road, and Omaha visits St. Thomas on Saturday.

Bill to protect farms from spying could limit CAFA data

South Dakota News Watch undefined

Sioux Falls, SD (South Dakota News Watch)

Proposed legislation aimed at protecting South Dakota farmers from potential "agro-terrorism" activities could have a secondary effect of limiting access to some information about the state's largest animal

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feeding operations.

Senate Bill 14 seeks to strengthen a set of existing laws that make it a crime for anyone to steal farm animals, release animals, trespass on farms or interfere with farm operations.

As written, the bill also would add criminal penalties for using deception to enter or gain employment at an agricultural operation or to use cameras or other surveillance methods to spy on a farm or agricultural research facility. The bill also would make it a crime to interfere with or destroy crops or structures at farms and agricultural research facilities.

"Essentially, it's a property protection, property rights bill for farmers and ranchers," the bill's lead sponsor, Sen. Casey Crabtree (R-Madison), told News Watch.

The measure, Crabtree said, is similar to laws passed over roughly the past 15 years in Iowa that sought to prevent animal-rights activists or anyone else from entering or recording activities at farms in order to find evidence of possible animal mistreatment or abuse.

Dubbed "ag-gag" laws by opponents, the laws were challenged in court on First Amendment grounds. Despite some lower court rulings, the Iowa laws most similar to Crabtree's proposal were upheld as constitutional by a federal appeals court in 2024.

Crabtree said he hasn't heard of widespread efforts to infiltrate or interfere with South Dakota farm operations, but a mink farm in Arlington has experienced problems in the past.

Operators of that farm did not return a call seeking comment.

The intent of the bill is to stop "bad actors" from using deception or technology to possibly paint an unfair picture of what is happening on South Dakota farms, Crabtree said.

"We've got reports back about environmentalist groups that are attacking production facilities, or that they might be using drones and cameras, is really where this comes from," he said.

The drafting of SB 14 was aided by a number of farm groups that gathered last summer to identify ways to help agricultural producers in the 2025 legislative session, said Matthew Bogue, public policy director for the South Dakota Farm Bureau Federation.

South Dakota farmers deserve protection from anyone who may have "intent to cause physical or economic harm" to a farmer or farm operation, he said.

State farm groups have heard concerns from producers that people could break into their farms or trespass with ill intent, Bogue said.

"It's never a bad time to be proactive," he said. "In our opinion, this modernizes the existing statutes."

But the bill also would add a new section to state law that would make it more difficult for the public, the press and even local governments from obtaining information about the state's largest animal operations.

Concentrated animal feeding operations, or CAFOs, are large livestock operations where several hundred or even tens of thousands of cattle, hogs, chickens and turkeys are fed within a single farm, often in enclosed structures.

CAFOs are heavily regulated in South Dakota, and operators must obtain a permit and undergo inspection of their operations and their records to ensure proper waste management and protection of water resources.

Section 6 in SB 14 would bar the state Department of Agriculture and Natural Resources - which oversees CAFO permitting and inspection - from releasing a list of permitted CAFOs and their locations in South Dakota to anyone unless required by federal law.

The bill also would provide DANR discretion on whether to release a list of CAFOs to any "South Dakota state agency or local government for information regarding a permitted operation in the jurisdiction of the agency or local government."

Crabtree said an individual or government entity could still obtain a list of CAFOs and their locations by making an in-person request at the offices of DANR in Pierre.

The restriction on obtaining information about CAFOs worries Jay Gilbertson, manager of the East Dakota Water Development District, which promotes conservation and management of water resources in eastern South Dakota.

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The reason CAFOs are permitted in the first place is to maintain oversight of their operations and to allow for the state and others to ensure the large farms are not polluting the land and water, he said.

Restricting public access to CAFO permits could make it more likely that large livestock operators would cut corners or avoid expensive waste management or water protection systems without anyone knowing, Gilbertson said.

"The permits are pretty explicit and contain all sorts of things "thou shall or shan't do," which makes it easy to adhere to because the operator knows exactly what is expected," he said.

"At the same time, if I'm somebody who is concerned about a facility, I can look at the permit requirements and it will tell me, "This is exactly what is supposed to be going on." And if it is, fine. But if it isn't, there isn't any debate that there's a problem."

State officials said CAFOs are generally well operated and follow state laws. But problems do occur and fines have been levied against permit violators.

According to prior research by News Watch, permitted CAFOs in South Dakota violated state regulations 217 times from October 2009 to August 2019. The state received, on average, about two complaints about CAFOs from the public each month, and animal wastes from CAFOs leaked into state waterways on nine occasions during that time period, according to state records.

The number of animals raised and fed in CAFOs has increased steadily over the past decade.

The state and lawmakers have taken steps in recent years to make it easier for development of CAFOs and harder for residents and local governments to fight them. The state also has offered financial incentives to livestock producers to expedite development of new CAFO operations.

Brian Walsh, deputy secretary of DANR, wrote in an email to News Watch that the department already denies release of CAFO information to some who request it.

"DANR reviews and considers each individual request for information on Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations (CAFOs) as they are submitted. DANR has received requests for an aggregated listing of all CAFOs including specific location information (addresses, geographic coordinate systems locations, or legal locations) with the express purpose of sharing those locations online," Walsh wrote. "DANR has denied such requests in the past due to the issue of biosecurity and agro-terrorism risks. The bill as drafted would not change how DANR currently responds to requests for CAFO records requests."

But Gilbertson said it seems odd that language in the bill could prevent the public or local governments from knowing where CAFOs are located.

"The department (DANR) has the tools to allow people to look things up for all the permits they issue," he said. "But when it comes to animal feeding operations, if you really want to know, you have to go to Pierre, and try to get in the DANR building and dig through the paper files? That would just be silly."

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Please coordinate with carson.walker@sdnewswatch.org should you want to publish photos for this piece. This content cannot be modified, apart from rewriting the headline. To view the original version, visit: <https://www.sdnewswatch.org/south-dakota-legislature-animal-feeding-operations-cafo-senate-bill-14/>

Where US adults think the government is spending too much, according to AP-NORC polling

By LINLEY SANDERS Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Many U.S. adults believe the federal government is overspending — but polling also shows that many Americans, including Republicans, think the country is spending too little on major government programs such as Social Security.

The polls from The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research suggest that as President

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Donald Trump and adviser Elon Musk push for extensive cuts throughout the federal government, slashing funding for humanitarian aid and turning their attention to the Department of Education and the military, Americans may not agree with where Trump and Musk's cuts should ultimately fall.

About two-thirds of Americans say the U.S. government is spending "too little" on Social Security and education, according to a January AP-NORC poll. Another 6 in 10, roughly, say too little money is going to assistance to the poor. A similar share say spending is too low for Medicare, the national health care insurance program for seniors, and most also say Medicaid is under-funded by the federal government. About half say border security is not receiving enough funding.

The perpetual challenge for lawmakers is that although U.S. adults mostly think the government isn't spending enough on key issues and programs, they are broadly in favor of cuts to the federal budget. AP-NORC polling from March 2023 found that 6 in 10 U.S. adults said the U.S. government was spending "too much" overall.

Most think the US is overspending on foreign aid

Foreign aid is one area where there is broad consensus that the U.S. is overspending. The 2023 AP-NORC polling suggests that Americans tend to believe too much money is going to other countries.

Roughly 7 in 10 U.S. adults said the government was putting too much money toward "assistance to other countries." About 9 in 10 Republicans and just over half of Democrats agreed that the country was overspending on foreign aid at the time.

Richard Tunnell, a 33-year-old veteran living in Huntsville, Texas, said he believes the United States gets involved in other countries' problems too often. Tunnell, an independent who voted for Trump in November, is glad that Trump, a Republican, is prioritizing his "America First" policies.

"Americans need to worry about Americans," Tunnell said. "There's atrocities happening on American soil just as much as there is on foreign soil. You know, if we can't clean up our own house, why the hell are we trying to clean up somebody else's house?"

At the same time, polling has shown that U.S. adults tend to overestimate the share of the federal budget that is spent on foreign aid. Surveys from KFF have found that, on average, Americans say spending on foreign aid makes up 31% of the federal budget rather than the actual answer: closer to 1% or less.

Republicans and Democrats say spending is too low for Social Security

On both sides of the political aisle, very few U.S. adults think the country is spending too much on Social Security and Medicare, according to the January AP-NORC poll. But there are bigger divides on spending for the military, border security, Medicaid and assistance to the poor.

About one-third of U.S. adults say the federal government is spending "too much" on the military. About one-third say the military is getting "too little" funding, and another one-third say it takes in "about the right amount." But most Republicans say the military is underfunded, while slightly less than half of Democrats say it's getting too much money.

Jeremy Shouse, a 38-year-old Democrat in Durham, North Carolina, said he believes government assistance programs for ordinary Americans should be as well-funded as the U.S. military is.

"I think it's really a slap in our faces as Americans," he said, referring to the underfunding of programs like Medicaid, which he has needed to use.

"When it comes down to school, Medicaid, any type of government assistance programs, the money is just kind of not there," he said. "Not like it is for the military or the Army."

Strong majorities of Democrats say the U.S. government spends "too little" on assistance to the poor, education, Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid. They are divided on funding for border security — about 4 in 10 say the funding is about the right amount, while 3 in 10 say it's too high and about 3 in 10 say it's too little — and tend to say federal law enforcement agencies such as the CIA and the FBI are getting the right amount of funding.

Republicans tend to want more money for border security, Social Security and the military. About 8 in 10 Republicans say too little money is allocated to border security, and about two-thirds say that about Social Security.

Pope Francis hospitalized to treat bronchitis and perform other diagnostic tests, Vatican says

By NICOLE WINFIELD Associated Press

ROME (AP) — Pope Francis was hospitalized Friday to treat a weeklong bout of bronchitis and undergo some necessary diagnostic tests, the Vatican said, confirming the latest issues with the 88-year-old's pontiff's health.

Francis was diagnosed with bronchitis last Thursday, but had continued to hold daily audiences in his Vatican hotel suite. He attended his general audience Wednesday and even presided at an outdoor Mass on Sunday. But he had handed off his speeches for an aide to read aloud, saying he was having trouble breathing.

On Friday, he appeared bloated and pale during the handful of audiences he held before going to the hospital. The bloating is an indication the medication he is taking to treat the lung infection is making him retain water.

Francis, who had part of one lung removed as a young man, has long battled health problems, especially bouts of acute bronchitis in winter. He uses a wheelchair, walker or cane when moving around his apartment and recently fell twice, hurting his arm and chin.

Francis was hospitalized at Rome's Gemelli hospital, where he was last admitted in June 2023 to have surgery to remove intestinal scar tissue and repair a hernia in the abdominal wall. A few months before that, he spent three days in the hospital to receive intravenous antibiotics for a respiratory infection.

A Vatican statement said Francis would be admitted after his Friday audiences. In addition to regular Vatican officials, the pope met Friday morning with the Slovak prime minister, Robert Fico, and the head of CNN, Mark Thompson.

"This morning, at the end of the audiences, Pope Francis will be admitted to the Agostino Gemelli Polyclinic for some necessary diagnostic tests and to continue in a hospital setting treatment for bronchitis that is still ongoing," the statement said.

The Vatican didn't provide details of the duration of Francis' hospitalization or what would come of his scheduled events. He has a busy weekend agenda with another special Holy Year event planned, this time honoring artists. On the calendar is an audience with artists Saturday, a Mass on Sunday and a trip to Rome's famed Cinecitta studios on Monday.

The Vatican announcement, delivered ahead of Francis' hospitalization, came in sharp contrast to the 2023 hospitalization for bronchitis that caused confusion.

Initially, the Vatican had said he had gone in for scheduled tests, but the pontiff later revealed he had felt pain in his chest and was rushed to the hospital where bronchitis was diagnosed. He was put on intravenous antibiotics and was released April 1, quipping as he left that he was "still alive."

Francis spent 10 days at the same hospital in July 2021 following intestinal surgery for a bowel narrowing. He credited his personal nurse then with saving his life for having insisted he get the problem checked out.

It wasn't the first time he credited a nurse with saving his life. Francis recounted his near-death experience with his youthful lung infection in his recent autobiography "Hope," in which he credited his survival to a nurse, an Italian nun named Sister Cornelia Caraglio.

"She was an experienced, cultured woman who had worked as a teacher in Greece, and she quickly realized the seriousness of my situation: She called the specialist, who drained one and a half liters of fluid from my lungs. It began a slow and unsteady climb back from the brink between life and death," he recalled.

It was she who, after the doctor prescribed a certain dose of penicillin and streptomycin, ordered that it be doubled, he recalled.

"She had intuition and practical experience, and certainly no lack of courage," he recalled. "My companions came from the seminary to visit me; some also gave me their blood for transfusions. Gradually the fevers decided to leave me, and the light began to return."

Vance will meet Zelenskyy amid concerns about US-Russia talks to end the war in Ukraine

By AAMER MADHANI, MATTHEW LEE and STEFANIE DAZIO Associated Press

MUNICH (AP) — Vice President JD Vance hammered home the U.S. demand that the NATO alliance step up defense spending on Friday, ahead of a security meeting in Europe at a time of intense concern and uncertainty over the Trump administration's foreign policy.

The future of Ukraine is the top item on the agenda at the Munich Security Conference following a phone call between U.S. President Donald Trump and Russian leader Vladimir Putin this week, when they pledged to work together to end the 3-year-old Russia-Ukraine conflict.

Vance is expected to meet Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy later Friday for talks that many observers, particularly in Europe, hope will shed at least some light on Trump's ideas for a negotiated settlement to the war.

NATO defense spending

Vance started his day in Munich meeting separately with NATO Secretary-General Mark Rutte, German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier and British foreign secretary David Lammy. He used the engagements to reiterate the Republican Trump administration's call for NATO members to spend more on defense. Currently, 23 of NATO's 32 member nations are hitting the Western military alliance's target of spending 2% of the nation's GDP on defense.

"NATO is a very important military alliance, of course, that we're the most significant part of," Vance told Rutte. "But we want to make sure that NATO is actually built for the future, and we think a big part of that is ensuring that NATO does a little bit more burden sharing in Europe, so the United States can focus on some of our challenges in East Asia."

Rutte said he agreed that Europe needs to step up. "We have to grow up in that sense and spend much more," he said.

Chernobyl drone strike

Hours before Vance and Zelenskyy were set to meet, a Russian drone with a high-explosive warhead hit the protective confinement shell of the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant in the Kyiv region, the Ukrainian president said. Radiation levels have not increased, Zelenskyy and the U.N. atomic agency said.

Zelenskyy in Munich told reporters that he thinks the Chernobyl drone strike is a "very clear greeting from Putin and Russian Federation to the security conference."

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov on Friday denied Ukraine's claims. And Foreign Ministry spokesperson Maria Zakharova said the Munich organizers haven't invited Russia for several years, a decision she called "strange and politicized."

U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio was supposed to join Vance and Zelenskyy but was delayed when his Air Force plane had to return to Washington after developing a mechanical problem en route to Munich. He took a different aircraft, but it was unclear whether he would arrive in time for the meeting.

Trump, who opened years of steadfast U.S. support for Ukraine during his call with Putin on Wednesday, has been vague about his specific intentions — other than suggesting that a deal will likely result in Ukraine being forced to cede territory that Russia has seized since it annexed Crimea in 2014.

"The Ukraine war has to end," Trump told reporters Thursday. "Young people are being killed at levels that nobody's seen since World War II. And it's a ridiculous war."

Ukraine's bid to join NATO

Trump's musings have left Europeans in a quandary, wondering how — or even if — they can maintain the post-WWII security that NATO afforded them or fill the gap in the billions of dollars of security assistance that the Democratic Biden administration provided to Ukraine since Russia's February 2022 invasion.

Trump has been highly skeptical of that aid and is expected to cut or otherwise limit it as negotiations get underway in the coming days.

Both Trump and U.S. Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth this week undercut Ukraine's hopes of becoming part of NATO, which the alliance said less than a year ago was "irreversible," or of getting back its territory

captured by Russia, which currently occupies close to 20% including Crimea.

"I don't see any way that a country in Russia's position could allow ... them to join NATO," Trump said Thursday. "I don't see that happening."

But British Prime Minister Keir Starmer told Zelenskyy on Friday that Ukraine must be allowed to join NATO.

Trump in recent days said he wants to reach an agreement with Ukraine to gain access to the country's rare earth materials as a condition for continuing U.S. support for Ukraine's defense against Russia. He confirmed earlier this week that aides were working toward striking such a deal.

Asked Friday if a deal might be completed in Munich, Vance responded, "We'll see."

Possible sanctions against Russia

Vance, in an interview with the Wall Street Journal, said that the U.S. would hit Moscow with sanctions and potentially military action if Putin won't agree to a peace deal with Ukraine that guarantees Kyiv's long-term independence.

The warning that military options "remain on the table" was striking language from a Trump administration that's repeatedly underscored a desire to quickly end the war.

Zelenskyy won't accept agreements made without Ukraine

The U.S. reassurances may have somewhat allayed Zelenskyy's fears, although they will not replace any lost military or economic support that President Joe Biden's administration had provided.

The Ukrainian leader conceded Thursday that it was "not very pleasant" that Trump spoke first to Putin. But he said the main issue was to "not allow everything to go according to Putin's plan."

"We cannot accept it, as an independent country, any agreements (made) without us," Zelenskyy said as he visited a nuclear power plant in western Ukraine.

European turning point

The track Trump is taking also has rocked Europe, much as his dismissive comments about France and Germany did during his first term.

French Deputy Foreign Minister Benjamin Haddad described Europe as being at a turning point, with the ground shifting rapidly under its feet, and said Europe must wean itself off its reliance on the United States for its security. He warned that handing a victory to Russia in Ukraine could have repercussions in Asia, too.

"I think we're not sufficiently grasping the extent to which our world is changing. Both our competitors and our allies are busy accelerating," Haddad told broadcaster France Info on Thursday.

Guarded optimism in India as Trump and Modi outline plans to deepen defense partnership

By AIJAZ HUSSAIN Associated Press

SRINAGAR, India (AP) — There was guarded optimism among military experts in India as Prime Minister Narendra Modi and U.S. President Donald Trump outlined plans to ramp up sales of defense systems to New Delhi, including F-35 stealth fighter jets, to deepen the U.S.-India strategic relationship.

"Defense sector is a big money, and India happens to be one of the top buyers in the world," said Lt. Gen. Vinod Bhatia, India's director-general for military operations from 2012 to 2014. "As long as we buy, Trump will be happy but it's surely going to expand our conventional deterrence."

The meeting signaled that "defense diplomacy is the core of diplomacy these days," Bhatia said.

In a joint statement at the White House, the two leaders announced plans to sign a new 10-year framework later this year for the U.S.-India Major Defense Partnership.

Modi and Trump "pledged to elevate military cooperation across all domains — air, land, sea, space, and cyberspace — through enhanced training, exercises, and operations, incorporating the latest technologies," the statement said.

The leaders also "committed to break new ground to support and sustain the overseas deployments of the U.S. and Indian militaries in the Indo-Pacific, including enhanced logistics and intelligence sharing," the statement said.

While Indian military experts have long sought to diversify national defense procurements, analysts say it will take years to reduce New Delhi's dependency on Russian arms, even with expanded defense cooperation with the U.S.

Raja Mohan, an analyst at the Institute of South Asian Studies in Singapore, said expansion in defense cooperation would take time.

"What India wants is coproduction and more research and development in India. It's a long-term project," he said.

It is difficult for India to remain dependent on Russia for defense equipment owing to difficulties obtaining parts and upgrades. However, a deal with the U.S. for F-35 stealth fighter jets will not fill India's immediate need for more than 100 aircraft, said Rahul Bedi, an independent defense analyst based in India.

"They are not going to come tomorrow," Bedi said. "It's going to take several years to start arriving," he added.

As its geostrategic competition with China has grown manifold in recent years, India has diversified defense acquisitions from the U.S., Israel and France while seeking to move toward self-reliance in this sector. But New Delhi is still far from getting over its dependence on supplies and spare parts from Russia that makes up to 60% of Indian defense equipment.

With vast borders and protracted border conflicts with neighboring countries Pakistan and China, India also relies hugely on Moscow for military upgrades and modernization.

"India faces threats from China and Pakistan, and a threat from collaborative Pakistan-China. We need technologically capable systems to counter these threats and one country that can give such systems is America," said Lt. Gen. D.S. Hooda, who from 2014 to 2016 headed the Indian military's Northern Command.

China's rise as a global power also has pushed India closer to the U.S. and to the Quad, a new Indo-Pacific strategic alliance among the U.S., India, Australia and Japan.

The growing strategic alliance accuses China of economic coercion and military maneuvering in the region, upsetting the status quo, and has ruffled feathers in Beijing, which sees the relationship as a counterweight against China's rise.

Indian fears of Chinese territorial expansion are bolstered by the growing presence of the Chinese navy in the Indian Ocean and Beijing's efforts to strengthen ties with not only Pakistan but also Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Nepal.

"The major threat is from China which is outstripping India's capability," Hooda said.

In the early 1990s, about 70% of Indian army weapons, 80% of its air force systems and 85% of its navy platforms were of Soviet origin. From 2016 to 2020, Russia accounted for nearly 49% of India's defense imports while French and Israeli shares were 18% and 13%, respectively, according to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute.

Major Indian purchases from the U.S. included long-range maritime patrol aircraft, C-130 transport aircraft, missiles and drones.

The defense sales also can potentially offset the trade deficit between the two countries, Hooda said.

"It's a win-win for all. America will get more business, and we'll get modern weapons," Hooda said. "It will also help to ease pressure on the tariff issue and trade deficit."

Prosecutors see an Islamic extremist motive in the Munich car-ramming attack

By PHILIPP JENNE and GEIR MOULSON Associated Press

MUNICH (AP) — The suspect in the car-ramming attack in Munich that left more than 30 people injured appears to have had an Islamic extremist motive, but there's no evidence that he was involved with any radical network, authorities said Friday.

The 24-year-old Afghan, who arrived in Germany as an asylum-seeker in 2016 and lived in Munich, was arrested after driving his Mini Cooper into the back of a labor union demonstration in the Bavarian city on

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Thursday. Police officers pulled him out of the car after firing a shot at the vehicle, which didn't hit him, and arrested him.

It was the fifth in a series of attacks involving immigrants over the past nine months that have pushed migration to the forefront of the campaign for Germany's Feb. 23 election.

Prosecutor Gabriele Tilmann said that the suspect said "Allahu Akbar," or "God is great," to police and then prayed after his arrest — which prompted a department that investigates extremism and terror to take on the case immediately.

In questioning, he admitted deliberately driving into the demonstration and "gave an explanation that I would summarize as religious motivation," Tilmann said.

She didn't give details, but added: "According to all we know at the moment, I would venture to speak of an Islamist motivation." However, there were no indications the suspect was in any Islamic extremist organization, she added.

He posted content with religious references — such as "Allah, protect us always" — on social media, where he described himself as a bodybuilder and fitness model, Tilmann said.

The deputy head of Bavaria's state criminal police office, Guido Limmer, said investigators found a chat, apparently with relatives, in which the suspect wrote "perhaps I won't be there anymore tomorrow," but so far they have found nothing that points to concrete preparations for the attack or anyone else being involved.

The man had no previous convictions and had a valid residence permit, although his asylum application had been rejected. He had jobs, including as a store detective. Tilmann said there was no indication of mental illness.

Police said that they know of 36 people who were injured in the attack, two of them very seriously and eight seriously. Tilmann said the suspect is under investigation on 36 counts of attempted murder as well as bodily harm and dangerous interference with road traffic.

Well-wishers laid flowers and lit candles near the site of the attack.

"I'm speechless," said Anna Zagkoti, 37. "We had too many other cases like this in other German cities. For me it's really sad and it can't continue. Politicians have to do something and we as society as well. We have to stand together and fight it."

German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier laid a flower at the scene Friday morning. He condemned "the brutality of this act" and said that it "leaves us stunned."

The attack happened a day before the opening of the Munich Security Conference, an annual gathering of international foreign and security policy officials that is accompanied by heavy security.

U.S. Vice President JD Vance offered his condolences at the start of a bilateral meeting with Steinmeier on the sidelines of the event. "We wish the government the best as you recover and try to care for the victims and families," he said.

A look at Pope Francis' previous hospitalizations and health problems

VATICAN CITY (AP) — Pope Francis was being hospitalized Friday for the fourth time since he was elected pope in 2013, after he was diagnosed with bronchitis last week. Francis had part of one lung removed as a young man and has recurring bouts of bronchitis, especially in winter.

The 88-year-old pontiff has had a series of other health problems, too. In addition to having had a large chunk of his large intestine removed in 2021, he now uses a wheelchair, cane or walker because of strained knee ligaments.

Francis has a personal physician, Dr. Roberto Bernabei, who is an internist and geriatric specialist at the Catholic University of the Sacred Heart in Rome. He also has a personal nurse, Massimiliano Strappetti, an employee of the Vatican health system whom Francis credited with saving his life when Strappetti diagnosed the 2021 intestinal problem.

In 2022, Francis named Strappetti his "personal health care assistant." Strappetti and Bernabei usually

join Francis on his foreign trips.

Here's a look at the health of the pontiff.

1957: In his native Argentina, Francis, then in his early 20s, suffered from a severe respiratory infection that forced doctors to remove part of one lung. He later recalled that a nurse saved his life at the time, deciding to double the amount of drugs he had been given.

July 4-14, 2021: Francis spent 10 days in Gemelli hospital in Rome for what the Vatican said was a narrowing of the large intestine. Doctors removed 33 centimeters (13 inches) of his colon. Francis emerged, saying he could eat whatever he wants, but lamenting he didn't respond well to general anesthesia.

Jan. 24, 2023: Francis told The Associated Press that the diverticulosis, or bulges in his intestinal wall, that had prompted the 2021 surgery had returned but was under control.

March 29-April 1, 2023: Francis spent three days at Gemelli with a respiratory infection after feeling a sharp pain in his chest and having trouble breathing. Doctors diagnosed an acute bronchitis and treated him with intravenous antibiotics.

June 6, 2023: Francis underwent unspecified medical checks at Gemelli before returning to the Vatican.

June 7, 2023: Francis underwent abdominal surgery to remove scar tissue and repair an abdominal hernia. He was released nine days later.

Feb. 14, 2025: Francis returned to Gemelli for treatment of bronchitis and further diagnostic tests, the Vatican said.

Southern California hit by destructive debris flows caused by heavy rains

By CHRISTOPHER WEBER and PATRICK WHITTLE Associated Press

LOS ANGELES (AP) — Southern California faces the continued risk of rock and mudslides on wildfire-scarred hillsides Friday, a day after heavy rains sent debris across several roadways, including the Pacific Coast Highway, where a fire department vehicle was pushed into the ocean.

The storm hitting the region began to ease Thursday night, but dangerous slides can strike even after rain stops, particularly in scorched areas where vegetation that helps keep soil anchored has burned away.

One member of the Los Angeles Fire Department was in the vehicle when it went into the water in Malibu and was able to exit with minor injuries, department spokesperson Erik Scott said on the social platform X.

In Pacific Palisades on Thursday, one intersection of the highway was submerged in at least 3 feet (0.9 meters) of sludge, with some drivers trying to force their way through and police officers pushing one vehicle through the muck. Bulldozers worked to clear the roads not far from where just weeks ago they moved abandoned cars after people fleeing last month's wildfires got stuck in traffic and fled on foot.

In north Altadena, a road near the Eaton Fire burn scar was also covered in several feet of mud, vegetation and trees as a flood of water overcame concrete blocks put in place to prevent such debris flows. The area was mostly deserted.

To the north, snow and ice contributed to major pileups on highways in Oregon and Washington, injuring at least 10 people, as a winter storm descended on the Pacific Northwest.

The West Coast storms are just the latest in a week of bad weather across the U.S. that cut power to tens of thousands.

Too much rain too quickly in California?

As the downpour intensified Thursday, the National Weather Service issued flash flood and severe thunderstorm warnings for a swath of eastern Los Angeles County. The rain caused a rockslide and pushed mud onto the road in Malibu Canyon, and a large debris flow left about 8 inches (20 centimeters) of mud across a road in the Hollywood Hills.

Southern California reported 1 to 2 inches (2.5 to 5 centimeters) of rain in coastal areas and valleys and 3 to 6 inches (7.6 to 15.2 centimeters) across the coastal slopes on Thursday, according to the weather

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service.

More than 30,000 people in California were without electricity, according to PowerOutage.us.

Evacuation orders and warnings were issued in areas where hillsides were scarred by the Palisades Fire, the most destructive in LA history. In addition to burning the vegetation that keeps soil in place, the fires also added loose debris to the landscape, including ash, soil and rocks.

Ahead of the storm, officials distributed sandbags, positioned rescue swimmers and told residents to have go-bags ready. Sandbags and temporary concrete barriers were in place across Altadena, where the Eaton Fire destroyed thousands of homes.

Despite recent storms, much of Southern California remains in extreme or severe drought, according to the U.S. Drought Monitor. Daniel Swain, a climate scientist at the University of California, Los Angeles, said that while the area is desperate for rain, this storm might bring too much too quickly.

In Altadena, Mehran Daoudian prepared by laying tarp over a hole in his home's roof where fire burned through it last month. Daoudian said he was grateful that city workers arranged sandbags and concrete barriers in his neighborhood over the past few weeks.

"I did not leave the cars on the street because with the mudslide, (they) might go down," he said.

Near the burn scar for the Airport Fire in Orange County, Trabuco Canyon Road was overtaken by mud and debris, Orange County Public Works posted on social media.

In the San Francisco Bay Area, there were blackouts, small landslides and inundated roadways. Authorities urged people to evacuate Felton Grove, a small community along the central coast, as the San Lorenzo River threatened to top its banks.

In neighboring Nevada, the weather service said it recorded a measurable amount of rain in Las Vegas, ending a streak of 214 days without precipitation.

And in northern Utah, rain and snow created dangerous conditions on mountain roads leading to ski resorts. The state Department of Transportation issued a road safety alert warning of a mix of heavy snow and rain through Friday.

Pacific Northwest ice storm

First responders searched every vehicle in a pileup Thursday near Multnomah Falls, about 25 miles (40 kilometers) east of Portland, Oregon, the Multnomah County Sheriff's Office said. The office initially said more than 100 cars were involved, but the state transportation department later said the number was 20 to 30 vehicles. Oregon State Police said four people were taken to hospitals with minor injuries.

The pileup happened during near-whiteout conditions in the westbound lanes of Interstate 84, authorities said. An SUV caught fire, but its occupants escaped.

Multnomah County officials extended a state of emergency through at least Friday and said eight shelters would be open. Officials said 489 people went to the shelters Wednesday night.

Wind chills could dip to 10 degrees (minus 12 Celsius) in Portland, the weather service said.

In southern Washington, six people were taken to hospitals with injuries in another pileup of 22 vehicles on Interstate 5 near the Cowlitz River, state patrol spokesperson Will Finn said. There were 95 crashes Thursday in five counties in the state's southwest.

Stock market today: Asian stocks mostly up, as Chinese technology firms see stock rally

By ZEN SOO AP Business Writer

HONG KONG (AP) — Asian stocks were mostly up Friday on the back of a near-record rally on U.S. stocks, as investors paid little attention to U.S. President Donald Trump's latest tariff threats.

Hong Kong's Hang Seng index surged 3.69% to 22,620.33, while the Shanghai Composite was up 0.43% to 3,346.72. The Nikkei 225 slid 0.79% to 39,149.43. Meanwhile, the S&P/ASX 200 in Australia was up 0.19% to 8,555.80 and South Korea's KOSPI was up 0.31% to 2,591.05.

"There are much tailwinds for risk sentiments in the region to tap on, with the positive handover in Wall Street, weaker US dollar and lower Treasury yields," Yeap Jun Rong, a market strategist at IG, wrote in a

note.

“However, Japan’s Nikkei lagged, likely pressured by a stronger yen,” he said.

Chinese technology stocks listed on the Hong Kong stock exchange all gained on Friday, with stocks from video games firm Tencent and smartphone maker Xiaomi surging 7% while e-commerce firm Alibaba and online services firm Meituan gained over 6%.

Chinese technology firms have enjoyed renewed interest since Chinese AI company DeepSeek released an artificial intelligence model that rivals those of OpenAI while being trained on cheaper hardware. Companies like Alibaba have in recent weeks also released new iterations of their own AI models, and search engine firm Baidu said Friday that it would make its Ernie Bot AI chatbot available for free to public.

“With Beijing doubling down on AI as a national priority, investors are rushing to reprice China’s tech and innovation potential. This is no longer just a stimulus-driven bounce — it’s a paradigm shift,” said Stephen Innes, managing partner at SPI Asset Management.

“If momentum holds, the Hang Seng Index could finally break out of its multi-year slump, reigniting global appetite for Chinese equities.”

Early European trading Friday was mostly down after hitting record highs earlier this week as hopes rose for a Ukraine peace deal. France’s CAC 40 was up 0.3%, while Germany’s DAX dipped 0.13%. Britain’s FTSE 100 was down 0.25%.

On Thursday, the S&P 500 climbed 1% to pull within 0.1% of its all-time high set last month. The Dow Jones Industrial Average gained 342 points, or 0.8%, and the Nasdaq composite jumped 1.5%.

U.S. stocks rose after officials in Washington said reciprocal tariffs would take time to implement.

In energy trading, benchmark U.S. crude added 15 cents to \$71.44 a barrel. Brent crude, the international standard, rose 38 cents to \$75.40 a barrel.

In currency trading, the U.S. dollar weakened to 152.58 Japanese yen from 152.82 yen. The euro cost \$1.0481, up from \$1.0466.

Russia denies Ukrainian claim it struck Chernobyl reactor shell as radiation levels remain normal

By ILLIA NOVIKOV Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — A Russian drone with a high-explosive warhead hit the protective containment shell of the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant in the Kyiv region during the night, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said Friday, but a senior Russian official rejected blame for the strike.

Radiation levels at the plant have not increased, Zelenskyy and a U.N. agency said. The International Atomic Energy Agency said the strike did not breach the plant’s inner containment shell.

The IAEA did not attribute blame, saying only its team stationed at the site heard an explosion and were informed that a drone had struck the shell.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov denied the Ukrainian claims it was responsible. “There is no talk about strikes on nuclear infrastructure, nuclear energy facilities, any such claim isn’t true, our military doesn’t do that,” Peskov said in a conference call with reporters.

It was not possible to independently confirm who was behind the strike.

The strike came two days after U.S. President Donald Trump said he would meet with Russian President Vladimir Putin to discuss ending the war, in a move that seemed to identify Putin as the only player that matters and looked set to sideline Zelenskyy, as well as European governments, in any peace talks.

That was more unwelcome news for Ukraine, which is being slowly pushed backward by Russia’s bigger army along parts of the 1,000-kilometer (600-mile) front line and desperately needs more Western help.

Ukraine intends to provide detailed information to U.S. officials about the Chernobyl strike during the Munich Security Conference starting Friday, the head of Ukraine’s Presidential Office, Andrii Yermak, wrote on his Telegram channel.

Zelenskyy said that the strike damaged the structure and started a fire, which has been put out. The

Ukrainian Emergency Service provided a photograph it said showed a searchlight illuminating a ragged hole in the roof of the damaged sarcophagus.

Peskov suggested, without presenting evidence, that Ukrainian officials made the claim about a drone strike because they wanted to thwart efforts to end the war through negotiations between Trump and Putin.

"It's obvious that there are those (in the Ukrainian government) who will continue to oppose any attempts to launch a negotiation process, and it's obvious that those people will do everything to try to derail this process," Peskov said.

The U.N. International Atomic Energy Agency said the Chernobyl strike occurred at 1:50 a.m. local time (2350 GMT).

The outer shell that was hit is a protective cover built in 2016 over a heavy concrete containment structure. The inner layer was placed on the plant's fourth reactor soon after the 1986 disaster, which was one of the worst accidents in nuclear history. The containment shells seek to prevent radiation leaks.

The three-year Russia-Ukraine war has brought repeated warnings of dangers to Ukraine's four nuclear plants, especially at the Russian-occupied Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant in southern Ukraine, which is Europe's biggest and one of the 10 largest in the world.

IAEA chief Rafael Rossi said on X that the Chernobyl strike and the recent increase in military activity near the Zaporizhzhia plant "underline persistent nuclear safety risks," adding that the IAEA remains "on high alert."

The IAEA said its personnel at the site responded within minutes of the strike, adding there were no casualties.

"Radiation levels inside and outside remain normal and stable," the IAEA said on X.

Zelenskyy claimed on Telegram that the Chernobyl strike showed that "Putin is certainly not preparing for negotiations" — a claim Ukrainian officials have repeatedly made.

"The only state in the world that can attack such facilities, occupy the territory of nuclear power plants, and conduct hostilities without any regard for the consequences is today's Russia. And this is a terrorist threat to the entire world," he wrote.

"Russia must be held accountable for what it is doing," he added.

Trump wants denuclearization talks with Russia and China, hopes for defense spending cuts

By ZEKE MILLER and MICHELLE L. PRICE Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Donald Trump said Thursday that he wants to restart nuclear arms control talks with Russia and China and that eventually he hopes all three countries could agree to cut their massive defense budgets in half.

Speaking to reporters in the Oval Office, Trump lamented the hundreds of billions of dollars being invested in rebuilding the nation's nuclear deterrent and said he hopes to gain commitments from the U.S. adversaries to cut their own spending.

"There's no reason for us to be building brand new nuclear weapons, we already have so many," Trump said. "You could destroy the world 50 times over, 100 times over. And here we are building new nuclear weapons, and they're building nuclear weapons."

"We're all spending a lot of money that we could be spending on other things that are actually, hopefully much more productive," Trump said.

While the U.S. and Russia hold massive stockpiles of weapons since the Cold War, Trump predicted that China would catch up in their capability to exact nuclear devastation "within five or six years."

He said if the weapons were ever called to use, "that's going to be probably oblivion."

Trump said he would look to engage in nuclear talks with the two countries once "we straighten it all out" in the Middle East and Ukraine.

"One of the first meetings I want to have is with President Xi of China, President Putin of Russia. And I

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want to say, 'let's cut our military budget in half.' And we can do that. And I think we'll be able to."

Trump in his first term tried and failed to bring China into nuclear arms reduction talks when the U.S. and Russia were negotiating an extension of a pact known as New START.

Russia suspended its participation in the treaty during the Biden administration, as the U.S. and Russia continued on massive programs to extend the life-spans or replace their Cold War-era nuclear arsenals.

China has rebuffed past American efforts to draw it into nuclear arms talks, saying the U.S. and Russia first need to reduce their much larger arsenals. A government official reiterated that position on Friday.

"The U.S. and Russia should ... significantly and substantially reduce their nuclear arsenals and create the necessary conditions for other nuclear-armed states to join the nuclear disarmament process," Foreign Ministry spokesperson Guo Jiakun said at a daily briefing in Beijing.

Takeaways from Modi, Trump meeting: Cooperation on trade and defense — plus some mutual praise

By SHEIKH SAALIQ Associated Press

NEW DELHI (AP) — Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the U.S. President Donald Trump spoke about easing tariffs, resolving trade issues and shoring up defense ties in a meeting at the White House on Thursday.

Even though Trump threatened to impose tariffs, the two leaders said they'd talk about trade, signaling that New Delhi and Washington could offer each other concessions.

Trump called Modi a "much better negotiator than me," while Modi played on Trump's "MAGA," or "Make America Great Again," catchphrase, saying he he was determined to "Make India Great Again."

Here are some key takeaways from the meeting:

Concerns over trade and tariffs were the highlight of the meeting

Trade and tariffs issues figured extensively in the meeting. Trump said New Delhi will not be spared and said the import levies imposed by India are "very unfair and strong."

But he and Modi agreed to work on a deal to resolve trade concerns, which Modi said he expects to be completed later this year.

Trump also said that his administration wants to bring down the trade deficit with India — which stands at \$50 billion — by increasing U.S. energy exports to the country.

Modi offered to double bilateral trade with Washington to \$500 billion by 2030.

"The fact is that Trump is trying to change the global trading order. India recognizes this and now is looking for a pragmatic way to resolve the differences," said Raja Mohan, an analyst at the Institute of South Asian Studies in Singapore.

Modi and Trump signal a new defense partnership

Trump said the U.S. will increase its military sales to India and eventually provide F-35 stealth fighter jets. He did not provide a timeline, but Indian Foreign Secretary Vikram Misri told reporters that the process is "at the stage of a proposal."

Rahul Bedi, an India-based defense analyst, said such a deal could "take several years."

Since 2008, India has contracted for over \$20 billion worth of U.S.-origin defense equipment, and a recent deal will allow U.S.-based General Electric to partner with an Indian company to produce jet engines in India.

Modi and Trump also agreed to deepen security cooperation in the Indo-Pacific, a thinly veiled reference to competition with growing China in the region.

A terror attack accused will be extradited to India

Trump said he'd back extraditing one of the plotters of the 2008 Mumbai attacks in which 166 people were killed appearing to refer to Tahawwur Hussain Rana.

Indian officials have accused Pakistan's intelligence agency of working with Pakistan-based militant group Lashkar-e-Taibah to mastermind the attack, an allegation Islamabad has denied.

If Rana is extradited to India, it will boost Modi's domestic standing. He's positioned himself as tough

on archrival Pakistan.

Modi and Trump also said they discussed immigration, with the Indian prime minister saying India will take back any of its citizens living illegally in the U.S.

India recently accepted the return of 104 migrants brought back on a U.S. military plane.

Can suspending a cage-free egg law solve the soaring price problem? Nevada takes a crack at it

By JOSH FUNK, SEJAL GOVINDARAO and TY ONEIL Associated Press

LAS VEGAS (AP) — Back when egg prices remained securely under \$2 a dozen in 2021, Nevada joined several other states concerned about animal welfare in requiring cage-free eggs.

Now four years later, a dozen eggs costs an average of nearly \$5 in the U.S. because of the lingering bird flu, so Nevada passed a law the governor signed Thursday that will allow the state to suspend that law temporarily in hopes of getting residents some relief at the checkout counter.

But it is not quite that simple, which is why the other six states with the same laws are so far reticent to follow suit.

By relaxing the rule, Nevada might get access to additional eggs, but the supply of all eggs remains tight because nearly 159 million birds have been slaughtered since the bird flu outbreak began in 2022 to help limit virus spread. The virus prompts the slaughter of entire flocks anytime it is found.

It is not clear dropping cage-free laws will have a significant effect on egg prices that have peaked at an average of \$4.95 per dozen because the farmers who collectively invested several billion dollars in making the switch can't easily go back to raising chickens packed together in massive barns that they already spent the money to convert.

Even if all the cage-free laws went away, big corporations like McDonald's and Sodexo remain committed to buying only those kind of eggs, ensuring strong demand for cage-free eggs.

University of Arkansas agricultural economist Jada Thompson said opening up Nevada to all kinds of eggs "could ease egg prices in Nevada very slightly," but that it might make prices worse elsewhere because supplies are so tight.

Nevada tries to counter high egg prices

But Nevada is going to give it a try even if California, Massachusetts, Washington, Oregon, Colorado and Michigan don't seem to be considering it. Arizona, Rhode Island and Utah also have cage-free laws on the books, but theirs won't take effect for at least a couple more years.

Democratic Assemblymember Howard Watts III, who raises chickens in his Nevada backyard, advocated for the 2021 bill to promote the "standard of humane treatment" of the animals. But the ongoing bird flu outbreak in the U.S. has caused egg prices to hit a record high, and cage-free eggs are generally even more expensive.

"One of the things that was not foreseen at that time was this major animal disease outbreak," Watts testified Tuesday. "As a result, there was no regulatory flexibility to suspend those requirements in the event of a major supply chain disruption."

Republican Gov. Joe Lombardo approved the legislation Thursday. Nevada Department of Agriculture Director J.J. Goicoechea is expected to authorize the 120-day suspension of the cage-free egg requirements within a day, according to Goicoechea's spokesperson Ciara Ressel.

"We anticipate 30 days before we can see an impact at the grocery stores," Ressel said.

This month's jump in egg prices was the biggest since the nation's last bird flu outbreak in 2015. The previous high was set two years ago when eggs were selling for \$4.82 per dozen on average.

The average prices mask just how bad it is in some places. Some Californians these days are shelling out \$12.99 for a dozen, or more than a buck an egg. Some New York shops even started selling bundles of three eggs to help people who can't afford a full dozen.

Nevada resident Nancy Wong said she has been "outraged" by egg prices in the state. "We have gone to the store and eggs have been either rationed or completely out," she said.

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A minority of eggs are produced on cage-free farms

The concern with the cage-free requirements is that only about 121 million of the 304 million chickens laying eggs nationwide are raised on cage-free farms, so the supply is limited.

Many of the eggs those hens produce are promised to restaurant chains like McDonald's and Panera, food service giants like Sodexo and Aramark and grocers under long-term contracts that help keep prices down. But even when they do have to pay a premium, grocers sometimes lose money on eggs by selling them cheaply to try to get shoppers in the door.

The number of cage-free chickens has steadily increased in recent years because of the laws and the pressure from the companies buying eggs, increasing exponentially from just 38 million at the start of 2017. But the United Egg Producers trade group has estimated it would take at least 226 million cage-free hens to meet all the demand for those eggs, and more customers are clamoring for them, so the supply is tight.

The total flock of chickens nationwide used to number above 330 million before the bird flu outbreak began.

Even as more egg farmers were converting to cage-free setups over the past decade, prices stayed between \$1.40 and \$2 per dozen most of the time with only the normal seasonal price spikes around Easter and Thanksgiving until this current bird flu outbreak began in early 2022.

If bird flu outbreaks happen to hit cage-free farms hard, there are fewer eggs out there that can replace the lost ones. For example, out of the nearly 47 million birds slaughtered just since the start of December, more than 3 million of them were on five cage-free farms in California.

Anytime birds must be killed, it takes months for a farm to resume producing eggs because of the time required to dispose of the carcasses, sanitize the barns and raise new chickens until they are about 5 months old and capable of laying eggs.

Other states resist overturning cage-free laws

California won't consider dropping its cage-free law in part because the rule came from a measure voters passed in 2018, so voters would have to approve any major changes.

But there doesn't seem to be much support for changes in other states either.

Michigan state Rep. Jerry Neyer, a dairy farmer and chair of the state House Agriculture Committee, said the idea that new cage-free laws are driving up egg prices is a "misconception." The Republican added that most farms already adapted to comply with the law, so dropping the mandate wouldn't cut costs.

A bill to repeal Colorado's cage-free requirements, which just took effect on Jan. 1, was killed in its first committee vote last month. The sponsor, Republican state Rep. Ryan Gonzalez, argued that while the avian flu was a major factor in prices, the cage-free rules played a significant role. But the majority of lawmakers on the panel appeared skeptical.

Jonathan Kuester, who runs the small Historic Wagner Farm with about 200 Red Star hens in Illinois just outside Chicago, said he doesn't think cage-free practices are the cause of the egg shortages.

He acknowledged his farm is more vulnerable to a bird flu infection than a traditional farm where chickens are confined inside a barn that can be better protected. Kuester's birds roam free, where they might interact with ducks and geese that are the main carriers of the disease.

"The egg shortage that people are seeing is a result of some fairly large flocks being euthanized, and so fewer chickens are currently laying than were three or four months ago," Kuester said. "There's been a little bit of a panic, too. People are suddenly buying eggs as quickly as they can, and so you see that shortage."

Trump administration begins sweeping layoffs with probationary workers, warns of larger cuts to come

By CHRIS MEGERIAN and MICHELLE L. PRICE Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Trump administration on Thursday intensified its sweeping efforts to shrink the size of the federal workforce, the nation's largest employer, by ordering agencies to lay off nearly all probationary employees who had not yet gained civil service protection — potentially affecting hundreds of thousands of workers.

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In addition, workers at some agencies were warned that large workplace cuts would be coming.

The decision on probationary workers, who generally have less than a year on the job, came from the Office of Personnel Management, which serves as a human resources department for the federal government. The notification was confirmed by a person familiar with the matter, who spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to discuss it publicly.

Even workers in the personnel office itself were not immune: Dozens of probationary employees at OPM were told on a Thursday afternoon group call that they were being dismissed and then instructed to leave the building within a half-hour, according to another person who likewise spoke on condition of anonymity.

It's expected to be the first step in sweeping layoffs. President Donald Trump signed an executive order Tuesday that told agency leaders to plan for "large-scale reductions in force."

Elon Musk, whom President Trump has given wide leeway to slash government spending with his Department of Government Efficiency, called Thursday for the elimination of whole agencies.

"I think we do need to delete entire agencies as opposed to leave a lot of them behind," Musk said via a videocall to the World Governments Summit in Dubai, United Arab Emirates. "If we don't remove the roots of the weed, then it's easy for the weed to grow back."

Everett Kelley, the president of the American Federation of Government Employees representing federal workers, said the administration "abused" the probation status of workers "to conduct a politically driven mass firing spree, targeting employees not because of performance, but because they were hired before Trump took office."

Thursday's order was an expansion of previous directions from OPM, which told agencies earlier this week that probationary employees should be fired if they weren't meeting high standards. It's not clear how many workers are currently in a probationary period. According to government data maintained by OPM, as of March 2024, 220,000 workers had less than a year on the job — the most recent data available.

The firing of probationary employees began earlier this week and has included the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau and the Department of Education workers.

At least 39 were fired from the Education Department on Wednesday, according to a union that represents agency workers, including civil rights workers, special education specialists and student aid officials.

The layoffs also hit Department of Veterans Affairs researchers working on cancer treatment, opioid addiction, prosthetics and burn pit exposure, U.S. Sen. Patty Murray, a Democrat, said Thursday.

Murray said in a statement that she heard from VA researchers in her state who were told to stop their research immediately, "not because their work isn't desperately needed, but because Trump and Elon have decided to fire these researchers on a whim."

Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility, a group that defends government workers, said the Agriculture Department's Food Safety and Inspection Service would be hit especially hard by laying off probationary employees because it has trouble recruiting inspectors required to be present at all times at most slaughterhouses.

The civilian federal workforce, not including military personnel and postal workers, is made up of about 2.4 million people. While about 20% of the workers are in Washington D.C., and the neighboring states of Maryland and Virginia, more than 80% live outside the Capitol region.

Layoffs are unlikely to yield significant deficit savings. When the Congressional Budget Office looked at the issue, it found the government spent \$271 billion annually compensating civilian federal workers, with about 60% of that total going to workers employed by the departments of Defense, Homeland Security and Veterans Affairs.

The government could, in theory, cut all those workers and still run a deficit of over \$1 trillion that would continue to grow as tax revenues are needed to keep up with the growing costs of Social Security and Medicare.

Elaine Kamarck, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, said firing employees on probation is flawed because it targets younger workers.

"Baby Boomers are retiring right and left, so actually the people you want to keep are probably most of the people who are right now on probation," said Kamarck, who worked in former President Bill Clinton's

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Democratic administration when about 426,000 federal jobs were cut over more than eight years in a deliberative effort aimed at reinventing government. "They're younger and presumably have better skills, and that's who you want."

Trump's initial attempt to downsize the workforce was the deferred resignation program, commonly described as a buyout, which offered to pay people until Sept. 30 if they agreed to quit. The White House said 75,000 people signed up, and a federal judge cleared a legal roadblock for the program Wednesday.

However, the number of workers who took the offer was less than the administration's target, and Trump has made it clear he would take further steps.

Employees at the National Science Foundation and Housing and Urban Development Department were told this week that large reductions, in some cases a halving of the workforce, would be coming, according to a person familiar with the situation who spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to discuss it.

The order Trump signed Tuesday stipulated that government functions not required by law would be prioritized for cuts and hiring will be restricted. With exceptions for functions such as public safety, only one employee can be added for every four that leave. In addition, new hires would generally need approval from a representative of the DOGE, expanding the influence of Musk's team.

Trump has praised Musk's work to slash federal spending.

The Republican president has also been sharply critical of federal workers, especially those who want to keep working remotely, though his administration is simultaneously working to cut federal office space and ordering the termination of worksite leases throughout the government.

"Nobody is gonna work from home," Trump said Monday. "They are gonna be going out, they're gonna play tennis, they're gonna play golf, they're gonna do a lot of things. They're not working."

Trump calls India's Modi a 'great friend' but warns of higher U.S. tariffs on Indian goods

By WILL WEISSERT Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Donald Trump greeted Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi at the White House with a bear hug on Thursday and called him "a great friend of mine," but nonetheless warned that India won't be spared from higher tariffs he's begun imposing on U.S. trade partners around the world.

Trump, who had previously derided India as the "tariff king," called the import levies imposed by Modi's country "very unfair and strong."

"Whatever India charges, we charge them," Trump said at a joint news conference where he stood next to Modi. "So, frankly, it no longer matters to us that much what they charge."

As he has while recently hosting other foreign leaders, Trump talked about ensuring that the U.S. erases its trade deficit with India. He suggested that could be done by increasing U.S. energy exports to India but also promised to restore "fairness and reciprocity" to the economic relationship and said he and Modi had begun working on a major trade deal that could be completed later this year.

The U.S. and India have a trade deficit of \$50 billion in India's favor. The Indo-U.S. goods and services trade totaled around \$190.1 billion in 2023. According to India's External Affairs Ministry, the U.S. exports to India were worth nearly \$70 billion and imports \$120 billion.

Modi, meanwhile, continued his personal trend of heaping praise on Trump. The prime minister said that he's determined to "Make India Great Again," or "MIGA" — a play on the president's "MAGA" or "Make America Great Again" catchphrase and movement.

Trump also said he'd back extraditing one of the plotters of the 2008 Mumbai attacks — appearing to referencing Tahawwur Hussain Rana, who was convicted in 2011 in the U.S. for plotting an attack on a Danish newspaper.

"He's going to be going back to India to face justice," Trump said. The president later added, "We're giving him back to India immediately" and that more such extraditions could be coming.

Trump also said the U.S. would soon increase military sales to India by "many millions of dollars," pav-

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ing the way to ultimately provide India with the F-35 stealth fighter planes — something the country has long sought.

Before Modi's White House arrival, Trump signed an order to increase tariffs to match the tax rates that other countries charge on imports, which affects American trading partners around the world — including India.

Modi had been looking to avoid additional U.S. tariffs and to improve relations with Washington and the West overall, which have been frosty lately after Modi refused to condemn Russia for its war on Ukraine.

"The world had this thinking that India somehow is a neutral country in this whole process," Modi said, praising Trump for having phone calls with Russia and Ukraine's leaders on Wednesday. "But this is not true. India has a side, and that side is of peace."

Trump previously imposed tariffs on China, and says more are coming against the European Union — while threatening similar against Canada and Mexico. He also expanded tariffs on steel and aluminum he initially imposed during his first term.

The White House insists that in signing Thursday's round of what Trump called "reciprocal" tariffs, he is leveling the playing field between U.S. manufacturers and foreign competitors. These new taxes would likely be paid by American consumers and businesses either directly or in the form of higher prices, though.

Even before Modi arrived, New Delhi showed a willingness to buy more American oil and lower its tariffs on U.S. goods. That included levies on some Harley-Davidson motorcycles going from 50% to 40%. Also, India in 2023 dropped retaliatory tariffs on U.S. almonds, apples, chickpeas, lentils and walnuts.

Tariffs aside, Trump has used the opening weeks of his second term to say he'll stamp out U.S. trade deficits around the world, including during his meetings at the White House last week with Japanese Prime Minister Shigeru Ishiba.

Modi is the fourth foreign leader to visit Trump since his inauguration last month, following Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Ishiba of Japan and Jordan's King Abdullah II.

Prior to meeting with Trump, Modi sat down with national security adviser Mike Waltz. He also met with billionaire SpaceX founder and top Trump administration official Elon Musk.

Trump was asked if Musk spoke with Modi as a government worker or a tech magnate, amid concerns the meeting was related to the billionaire's business dealings.

"India is a very hard place to do business because of the tariffs. They have the highest tariffs, just about in the world, and it's a hard place to do business," Trump said. "No, I would imagine he met possibly because, you know, he's running a company."

Modi and Trump also said they'd discussed immigration.

India recently accepted the return of 104 migrants brought back on a U.S. military plane — the first such flight to the country as part of the Trump administration's crackdown on immigration and the U.S.-Mexico border.

More than 725,000 immigrants from India are in the U.S. without authorization, the third most of any country after Mexico and El Salvador, according to the Pew Research Center.

Recent years have also seen a jump in the number of Indians attempting to enter through the U.S.-Canada border. The U.S. Border Patrol arrested more than 14,000 Indians in the year ending Sept. 30 -- 60% of all arrests there and more than 10 times the number from two years ago.

Trump has promised a "mass deportation" of all who are in the U.S. illegally. Modi said Thursday that, "Any verified Indian who is in the U.S. illegally, we are fully prepared to take them back to India."

Order to drop New York Mayor Adams' case roils Justice Department as high-ranking officials resign

By LARRY NEUMEISTER, ALANNA DURKIN RICHER and ERIC TUCKER Associated Press
NEW YORK (AP) — Manhattan's top federal prosecutor, Danielle Sasso, and five high-ranking Justice Department officials resigned Thursday after she refused an order to drop corruption charges against New

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York City Mayor Eric Adams — a stunning escalation in a dayslong standoff over the Trump administration prioritizing political aims over criminal culpability.

Sassoon, a Republican who was interim U.S. attorney for the Southern District of New York, accused the department of acceding to a “quid pro quo” — dropping the case to ensure Adams’ help with Trump’s immigration agenda — and said she was “confident” the Democratic mayor committed the crimes spelled out in his indictment, and even more. Before the showdown, Sassoon said, prosecutors had been preparing to charge Adams with destroying evidence and instructing others to destroy evidence and provide false information to the FBI.

“I remain baffled by the rushed and superficial process by which this decision was reached,” Sassoon wrote Trump’s new attorney general, Pam Bondi, on Wednesday. The Associated Press obtained a copy of the letter.

The acting deputy U.S. attorney general, former Trump personal lawyer Emil Bove, had ordered on Monday that the Adams case be dropped. He told Sassoon, in a letter accepting her resignation that she was “incapable of fairly and impartially” reviewing the circumstances of the case. Bove placed case prosecutors on administrative leave and said they and Sassoon would be subject to internal investigations.

In Bove’s letter, also obtained by the AP, he said the Justice Department in Washington would file a motion to drop Adams’ charges and bar “further targeting” of the mayor. As of Thursday evening, Adams’ case was still active and no new paperwork had been filed.

The department’s public integrity section, which had been asked to take over the case, was also roiled by resignations.

The acting chief, three deputy chiefs and a deputy assistant attorney general in the criminal division who oversaw the section resigned, according to a person familiar with the matter who spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss personnel matters.

The departures amounted to a stunning condemnation of the actions of the department’s leadership just days after a close Trump ally, former Florida Attorney General Pam Bondi, was sworn in as attorney general. Just three weeks into Trump’s second term, the department has been rocked by firings, transfers and resignations.

Adams pleaded not guilty last September to charges that while in his prior role as Brooklyn borough president, he accepted over \$100,000 in illegal campaign contributions and lavish travel perks such as expensive flight upgrades, luxury hotel stays and even a trip to a bathhouse from people wanting to buy his influence. He has denied any wrongdoing.

Federal agents had also been investigating some of Adams’ aides. It was unclear what will happen to that part of the investigation.

In a memo Monday, Bove had directed Sassoon to drop the case as soon as practicable, so the mayor of America’s largest city could help with Trump’s immigration crackdown and could himself campaign for reelection unencumbered by criminal charges. Adams faces multiple challengers in June’s primary.

On Wednesday, after two days without action or public statements from Sassoon’s office, Bondi said she would “look into” why the case had yet to be dismissed. That same day, Sassoon laid out her objections to dropping the case in an eight-page letter to the attorney general.

Sassoon accused Adams’ lawyers of offering what amounted to a “quid pro quo” — the mayor’s assistance to the White House on immigration if the case were dropped — when they met with Justice Department officials in Washington last month.

“It is a breathtaking and dangerous precedent to reward Adams’ opportunistic and shifting commitments on immigration and other policy matters with dismissal of a criminal indictment,” Sassoon wrote.

Adams’ lawyer, Alex Spiro, said Thursday the “quid pro quo” claim was a “total lie.”

“We offered nothing and the department asked nothing of us,” Spiro wrote in an email to the AP. “We were asked if the case had any bearing on national security and immigration enforcement and we truthfully answered it did.”

The dueling letters from Sassoon in New York and Bove in Washington laid bare in starkly personal

language the gravity of a simmering, behind-the-scenes dispute over the handling of one of the Justice Department's most significant current public corruption cases.

The outcome not only threatens to create an irrevocable fissure in the relationship between department headquarters and one of its largest and most prestigious prosecutor's offices, but also risks reinforcing the perception that the administration will employ a transactional approach to law enforcement decisions.

The U.S. attorney's office for the Southern District of New York has a track record of tackling Wall Street malfeasance, political corruption and international terrorism. It has a tradition of independence from Washington, earned it the nickname "the sovereign district."

Matthew Podolsky, who has spent a decade in the office, was made the new acting U.S. attorney after Sassoon's departure. He was named Sassoon's top deputy only days ago.

Bove's directive to drop the case was all the more remarkable because Bove had been a longtime prosecutor and supervisor in the Southern District, and because department leaders are historically reluctant to intervene in cases where charges have been brought. Bove, who went into private practice before rejoining government, represented Trump as a defense lawyer in his recent criminal cases.

Bove's memo steered clear of any legal basis for the dismissal. His emphasis on political considerations, rather than evaluating the strength of the evidence, alarmed some career prosecutors who said it was a departure from long-standing norms.

Sassoon, a former clerk for the late U.S. Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia, was not the prosecutor who charged Adams. That was then-U.S. Attorney Damian Williams, who stepped down after Trump won reelection.

Sassoon was appointed as interim U.S. attorney Jan. 21, the day after Trump took office, and it was supposed to be a short-term assignment. Trump in November said he would nominate Jay Clayton, a former U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission chairman.

This is the second Justice Department tussle in five years between Washington and New York to result in a dramatic leadership turnover. In 2020, during Trump's first term, then-U.S. Attorney Geoffrey Berman was pushed out in a surprise nighttime announcement. Berman initially refused to resign, creating a brief standoff with the then-U.S. attorney general, William Barr, but he did leave after being assured his investigations into Trump's allies would not be disturbed.

Prosecutors said they had proof that Adams personally directed political aides to solicit foreign donations and disguise them to help the campaign qualify for a city program that provides a generous, publicly-funded match for small dollar donations. Under federal law, foreign nationals are banned from contributing to U.S. election campaigns.

As recently as Jan. 6, prosecutors had indicated their investigation remained active, writing in court papers that they continued to "uncover additional criminal conduct by Adams." _____

Richer and Tucker reported from Washington. Associated Press writers Jake Offenhartz and Michael R. Sisak contributed to this report.

Texas judge fines New York doctor for prescribing abortion pills to a woman near Dallas

By ANTHONY IZAGUIRRE and JAMIE STENGLE Associated Press

ALBANY, N.Y. (AP) — A Texas judge on Thursday ordered a New York doctor to pay more than \$100,000 in penalties for prescribing abortion pills to a woman near Dallas, a ruling that could test "shield laws" in Democratic-controlled states where abortion is legal.

The ruling was handed down on the same day New York Gov. Kathy Hochul rejected a request from Louisiana to extradite the same doctor, Dr. Maggie Carpenter, who was charged in that state with prescribing abortion pills to a pregnant minor.

Unlike Louisiana, Texas did not file criminal charges against Carpenter but accused her in a December lawsuit of violating state law by prescribing abortion medication via telemedicine. Texas has one of the most restrictive abortion bans in the nation.

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State District Judge Bryan Gantt issued the fine against Carpenter and ordered her to pay attorney's fees. He also issued an injunction barring Carpenter from prescribing abortion medication to Texas residents. Gantt noted in his order that despite being notified, Carpenter failed to appear in court.

Earlier Hochul, a Democrat, said she would not honor Louisiana's request to arrest and send the doctor to Louisiana after she was charged with violating the southern state's strict anti-abortion law.

"I will not be signing an extradition order that came from the governor of Louisiana," Hochul said at a news conference in Manhattan. "Not now, not ever."

She also said she sent out a notice to law enforcement in New York that instructed them to not cooperate with out-of-state warrants for such charges.

Carpenter is co-medical director and founder of the Abortion Coalition for Telemedicine. Julie Kay, the group's executive director, said the Texas ruling does not change shield laws and that "patients can access medication abortion from licensed providers no matter where they live."

The group also criticized Louisiana's efforts to extradite Carpenter.

The case against Carpenter in Louisiana appears to be the first instance of criminal charges against a doctor accused of prescribing abortion pills to another state.

Pills have become the most common method of abortion in the U.S. and are at the epicenter of political and legal fights over abortion access following the U.S. Supreme Court's overturning of *Roe v. Wade*.

Both the Texas and Louisiana cases will test New York's so-called shield law, which gives legal protections to doctors who prescribe abortion medication to conservative states where abortions are banned or otherwise limited. Other Democratic-controlled states have similar "shield laws."

Prosecutors in West Baton Rouge Parish, Louisiana, indicted Carpenter on charges that she violated the state's near-total abortion ban, which allows physicians convicted of performing abortions, including one with pills, to be sentenced up to 15 years in prison.

Louisiana authorities said the girl who received the pills experienced a medical emergency and had to be transported to the hospital. The girl's mother was also charged and has turned herself in to police.

In a videotaped statement Thursday, Republican Louisiana Gov. Jeff Landry said "there is only one right answer in this situation, and it is that that doctor must face extradition to Louisiana where she can stand trial and justice will be served."

Landry's office did not immediately return an emailed request for comment sent after Hochul refused the extradition request.

In the Texas case, the state's Republican Attorney General Ken Paxton has said that the 20-year-old woman who received the pills ended up in a hospital with complications. It was only after that, the state said in its filing, that the man described as "the biological father of the unborn child" learned of the pregnancy and the abortion.

Former Arkansas Gov. Jim Guy Tucker, who stepped down in the wake of Whitewater, dies at 81

By ANDREW DeMILLO and KELLY P. KISSEL Associated Press

LITTLE ROCK, Ark. (AP) — Jim Guy Tucker, who became Arkansas' governor when Bill Clinton was elected president but was later forced from office after being convicted during the Whitewater investigation, has died. He was 81.

Anna Ashton, Tucker's daughter, said the former governor died Thursday in Little Rock from complications from ulcerative colitis.

"Because he had a public life, there will be a lot of focus on the details of that," Ashton said. "In addition to that, he was a really wonderful father, an adventurous man, a fun person with a lot of friends who loved music, the outdoors. I couldn't have asked for a better dad."

Tucker ascended from lieutenant governor to succeed Clinton as governor in 1992, then won election to a four-year term in 1994 despite claims by his opponent that Tucker would soon be indicted for fraud. Tucker didn't help his cause by refusing to release his tax returns, saying they were complicated and

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subject to misinterpretation, but still beat Republican Sheffield Nelson easily.

A grand jury charged Tucker five months after he was sworn in for a full term, and a jury convicted him in 1996 of lying about how he had used a government-backed loan. He pleaded guilty in 1998 to a tax conspiracy count, then spent eight years fighting to withdraw his plea, claiming prosecutors used the wrong section of the law when charging him.

He had no connection to Clinton's north Arkansas land development that gave the Whitewater investigation its name. Whitewater prosecutor Kenneth Starr ensnared Tucker after winning court permission to broaden his probe into several Arkansas-based small businesses.

Tucker eventually was convicted of misusing a \$150,000 government-backed loan.

Instead of using the money to paint a water tower, Tucker used it toward the purchase of a water and sewer utility.

The Whitewater investigation ended in 2006 when the U.S. Supreme Court refused to take up Tucker's tax conspiracy conviction. He long lamented he would never have been pursued by prosecutors if not for Clinton, and when the case finally ended, deputy Whitewater prosecutor W. Hickman Ewing said, "It's probably true."

After his initial Whitewater case, Tucker announced he would step down July 15, 1996, but as the day approached laid claim to a new trial, saying a juror in his case had married into the family of a man whose clemency Tucker had previously rejected.

Minutes before the designated hour of his resignation with then-Lt. Gov. Mike Huckabee preparing to be sworn in as governor, Tucker reneged and withdrew his resignation.

The ensuing mayhem that day created confusion over who was running the state. Tucker relented later that evening after facing threats of impeachment from Huckabee and a lawsuit from the attorney general. Huckabee, now President Donald Trump's nominee to be ambassador to Israel, went on to serve 10 1/2 years as governor.

"I clearly made a terrible mistake in delaying the resignation I had announced," Tucker said in an interview 10 years after leaving office. "This is not an anniversary that I like to reflect that much on."

Clinton on Thursday said Tucker's public service "made Arkansas better, stronger, and fairer."

"He accomplished a great deal, and would have achieved even more had his tenure not been unjustly cut short by a partisan witch hunt," the former president said in a statement.

Arkansas Gov. Sarah Huckabee Sanders, Mike Huckabee's daughter, praised Tucker as someone who "was dedicated to public service and providing for the most vulnerable Arkansans."

Tucker's political career started in 1970 when he was elected prosecuting attorney for an area that includes Little Rock. He later served two terms as the state's attorney general before winning a seat in Congress in 1976.

"Jim Guy was smart as a whip and he was also tough," said former Gov. Mike Beebe, who served in the state Senate when Tucker was governor and lieutenant governor. "He put forth all of his effort to make our state a better place and he stood up for what he believed was right."

After losing a bid for governor in 1982, Tucker devoted time to his law practice and a growing cable television empire. He initially announced a run for governor in 1990 but switched to the lieutenant governor's race when Clinton said he would seek another term. Tucker won, and after Clinton's election as president became governor on Dec. 12, 1992.

Tucker's health problems began in 1983 when he was diagnosed with ulcerative colitis. He also had sclerosing cholangitis, a chronic and sometimes fatal disorder of the liver.

Tucker remained active in recent years and was among the mourners at the funeral for former Arkansas governor and senator David Pryor last year. He also appeared at the governor's mansion in 2020 to mark its 70th anniversary.

After Tucker's initial Whitewater conviction, his lawyers argued a prison term would be akin to a death sentence, and a federal judge agreed. The judge temporarily suspended Tucker's home detention in late 1996 so he could receive a liver transplant at the Mayo Clinic in Minnesota.

Tucker, born June 14, 1943, grew up in Arkansas before attending Harvard University. He also served in the U.S. Marine Corps Reserve and was a civilian war correspondent in Vietnam.

Tucker is survived by his wife, Betty; stepson Lance Alworth Jr.; stepdaughter Kelly Driscoll; and his daughters, Anna Ashton and Sarah Tucker.

Hamas says it will free 3 more hostages. That could resolve its ceasefire dispute with Israel

By SAMY MAGDY and MELANIE LIDMAN Associated Press

CAIRO (AP) — Hamas said Thursday it would go ahead with the release of three more Israeli hostages, paving the way toward resolving a major dispute over the ceasefire deal in the Gaza Strip.

The militant group had threatened to delay the next release of captives after accusing Israel of failing to meet its obligations to allow in tents and shelters, among other alleged violations of the truce. Israel, with the support of U.S. President Donald Trump, has said it will resume fighting if the hostages are not freed, but did not immediately comment on the statement by Hamas.

The announcement from Hamas could allow the ceasefire to continue for now, even after Israel said Thursday that a rocket had been launched from Gaza. But doubts remain about the long-term durability of the truce.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu was meeting Thursday with top military and security officials at the army's Southern Command headquarters near the Gaza border.

Hamas said it held talks in Cairo with Egyptian officials and was in contact with Qatar's prime minister about bringing in more shelters, medical supplies, fuel and heavy equipment for clearing vast amounts of rubble in Gaza — its key demand in recent days. It said in a statement that the mediators had pledged to "remove all hurdles."

Shortly after the announcement, Hamas spokesman Abdul Latif al-Qanou confirmed to The Associated Press by phone that three hostages will be released on Saturday, as stipulated in the ceasefire agreement.

Egypt's state-run Qahera TV, which is close to the country's security services, reported that Egypt and Qatar had succeeded in resolving the dispute. The two Arab countries have served as key mediators with Hamas and helped broker the ceasefire, which took effect in January, more than 15 months into the war.

Egyptian media also aired footage showing trucks carrying temporary housing and bulldozers on the Egyptian side of the Rafah crossing with Gaza. They reported that the trucks were heading to an Israeli inspection area before crossing into Gaza.

In central Gaza, one resident voiced hope Thursday that the fragile ceasefire deal will last.

"As civilian citizens we hope the war ends and the agreement is fully implemented," said Saed Abu Attia, who is displaced from his home in northern Gaza. "We paid a hefty price due to this war and we hope it ends as soon as possible."

The Israeli military said a rocket was fired from inside Gaza Thursday in what appeared to be the first such incident since the agreement took effect. The projectile landed within the territory and the military said later that it had struck the rocket launcher that had fired it.

Since the ceasefire began, Israeli fire has killed at least 92 Palestinians and wounded more than 800 others, said Munir al-Bursh, director general of the Gaza Health Ministry. The Israeli military says it has fired on people who approach its forces or enter certain areas in violation of the truce.

Trump has introduced more uncertainty

The truce faces a much bigger challenge in the coming weeks. The first phase is set to conclude at the beginning of March, and there have not yet been substantive negotiations over the second phase, in which Hamas would release dozens of remaining hostages in return for an end to the war.

Trump's proposal to remove some 2 million Palestinians from Gaza and settle them in other countries has thrown the truce's future into further doubt. The plan has been welcomed by Israel's government but vehemently rejected by Palestinians and Arab countries, which have refused to accept any influx of refugees. Human rights groups say it could amount to a war crime under international law.

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The proposal drew fresh criticism Thursday from both a U.S. ally and a foe.

In a rare rebuke, Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said Trump's recent actions — including his push to expel Palestinians from Gaza — pose a threat to global peace.

"To tell the truth, I do not find Mr. Trump's behavior in the past period and his current statements and challenges to many countries in the world to be right, and I do not see these as a positive development," Erdogan told an Indonesian television anchor in an interview.

Yemen's Houthi leader Abdul-Malik Al-Houthi threatened a "military intervention" if the plan proceeded.

"We will never remain passive in the face of such an aggressive plan against the Palestinian people," Al-Houthi said in a televised speech.

Netanyahu's far-right allies are already calling for a resumption of the war after the first phase with the goal of implementing Trump's plan and annihilating Hamas, which remains in control of the territory after surviving one of the deadliest and most destructive military campaigns in recent history.

The war began on Oct. 7, 2023, when Hamas-led militants stormed into Israel, killing some 1,200 people, mainly civilians, and abducting 251 people. More than half have been released in deals with Hamas or other agreements, eight have been rescued and dozens of bodies have been recovered.

The captives are among the only bargaining chips Hamas has left, and it may be difficult to get the group to commit to further releases if it believes the war will resume.

Trump has given mixed signals about what he wants to see in Gaza.

He took credit for brokering the ceasefire, which was reached days before he took office after more than a year of negotiations under the Biden administration. But he has also expressed misgivings about how the agreement is unfolding and says it's up to Israel whether to resume the war or not, while pledging continued U.S. military support.

Seventy-three hostages have not yet been released, around half of whom are believed to be dead. Nearly all the remaining hostages are men, including Israeli soldiers.

The war has killed over 48,000 Palestinians, mostly women and children, according to Gaza's Health Ministry, which does not say how many were fighters. Israel says it has killed over 17,000 militants, without providing evidence.

Israel's offensive has obliterated large parts of Gaza. At its height, the fighting had displaced 90% of the territory's population of 2.3 million. Hundreds of thousands have returned to their homes since the ceasefire took hold, though many have found only mounds of rubble and buried human remains and unexploded ordnance.

Trump signs a plan for reciprocal tariffs on US trading partners, ushering in economic uncertainty

By JOSH BOAK Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Donald Trump on Thursday rolled out his plan to increase U.S. tariffs to match the tax rates that other countries charge on imports, possibly triggering a broader economic confrontation with allies and rivals alike as he hopes to eliminate any trade imbalances.

"I've decided for purposes of fairness that I will charge a reciprocal tariff," Trump said in the Oval Office at the proclamation signing. "It's fair to all. No other country can complain."

Trump's Republican administration has insisted that its new tariffs would equalize the ability of U.S. and foreign manufacturers to compete, though under current law these new taxes would likely be paid by American consumers and businesses either directly or in the form of higher prices. The rates to be charged would be studied over the weeks ahead, which could create the potential space to resolve challenges or prolong a degree of suspense and uncertainty.

The politics of tariffs could easily backfire on Trump if his agenda pushes up inflation and grinds down growth, making this a high stakes wager for a president eager to declare his authority over the U.S. economy.

The tariff increases would be customized for each country with the partial goal of starting new trade negotiations. But other nations might also feel the need to respond with their own tariff increases on

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American goods. As a result, Trump may need to find ways to reassure consumers and businesses to counteract any uncertainty caused by his tariffs.

The United States does have low average tariffs, but Trump's proclamation as written would seem designed to jack up taxes on imports, rather than pursue fairness as the United States also has regulatory restrictions that limit foreign products, said Scott Lincicome, a trade expert at the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank.

"It will inevitably mean higher tariffs, and thus higher taxes for American consumers and manufacturers," he said. Trump's tariffs plan "reflects a fundamental misunderstanding of how the global economy works."

Trump's proclamation identifies value-added taxes — which are similar to sales taxes and common in the European Union — as a trade barrier to be included in any reciprocal tariff calculations. Other nations' tariff rates, subsidies to industries, regulations and possible undervaluing of currencies would be among the factors the Trump administration would use to assess tariffs.

A senior White House official, who insisted on anonymity to preview the details on a call with reporters, said that the expected tariff revenues would separately help to balance the expected \$1.9 trillion budget deficit. The official also said the reviews needed for the tariffs could be completed within a matter of weeks or a few months.

The possible tax increases on imports and exports could be large compared to the comparatively modest tariffs that Trump imposed during his first term. Trade in goods between Europe and the United States nearly totaled \$1.3 trillion last year, with the United States exporting \$267 billion less than it imports, according to the Census Bureau.

The president has openly antagonized multiple U.S. trading partners over the past several weeks, levying tariff threats and inviting them to retaliate with import taxes of their own that could send the economy hurtling into a trade war.

Trump has put an additional 10% tariff on Chinese imports due to that country's role in the production of the opioid fentanyl. He also has readied tariffs on Canada and Mexico, America's two largest trading partners, that could take effect in March after being suspended for 30 days. On top of that, on Monday, he removed the exemptions from his 2018 steel and aluminum tariffs. And he's mused about new tariffs on computer chips and pharmaceutical drugs.

But by Trump's own admission, his separate tariffs for national security and other reasons would be on top of the reciprocal tariffs, meaning that the playing field would not necessarily be level.

In the case of the 25% steel and aluminum tariffs, "that's over and above this," Trump said. Autos, computer chips and pharmaceuticals would also be tariffed at higher rates than what his reciprocal plan charges, he said.

The EU, Canada and Mexico have countermeasures ready to inflict economic pain on the United States in response to Trump's actions, while China has already taken retaliatory steps with its own tariffs on U.S. energy, agricultural machinery and large-engine autos as well as an antitrust investigation of Google.

The White House has argued that charging the same import taxes as other countries do would improve the fairness of trade, potentially raising revenues for the U.S. government while also enabling negotiations that could eventually improve trade.

But Trump is also making a political wager that voters can tolerate higher inflation levels. Price spikes in 2021 and 2022 severely weakened the popularity of then-President Joe Biden, with voters so frustrated by inflation eroding their buying power that they chose last year to put Trump back in the White House to address the problem. Inflation has risen since November's election, with the government reporting on Wednesday that the consumer price index is running at an annual rate of 3%.

The Trump team has decried criticism of its tariffs even as it has acknowledged the likelihood of some financial pain. It says that the tariffs have to be weighed against the possible extension and expansion of Trump's 2017 tax cuts as well as efforts to curb regulations and force savings through the spending freezes and staff reductions in billionaire adviser Elon Musk's Department of Government Efficiency initiative.

But an obstacle to this approach might be the sequencing of the various policies and the possibilities of

a wider trade conflict stifling investment and hiring amid the greater inflationary pressures.

Analysts at the bank Wells Fargo said in a Thursday report that the tariffs would likely hurt growth this year, just as the possibility of extended and expanded tax cuts could help growth recover in 2026.

Trump tried to minimize the likelihood that his policies would trigger anything more than a brief bump in inflation. But when asked if he would ask agencies to analyze the possible impact on prices, the president declined.

"There's nothing to study," Trump said. "It's going to go well."

Man to plead guilty to 2023 shooting of Black teen Ralph Yarl, 2 people familiar with case tell AP

By KIA BREAUX and HEATHER HOLLINGSWORTH Associated Press

KANSAS CITY, Mo. (AP) — An 86-year-old Kansas City man will plead guilty Friday to the 2023 shooting of Ralph Yarl, a Black honor student who rang the man's doorbell by mistake, two people familiar with the case told The Associated Press.

Andrew Lester was scheduled to stand trial next week on charges of first-degree assault and armed criminal action in the shooting of the then 16-year-old, who survived and has since graduated from high school.

Prosecutors said Thursday that Lester would appear in court the next day, but they did not say why or provide additional detail. Two people familiar with the case who requested anonymity to speak in advance of Friday's hearing told AP that Lester will plead guilty. One of those people said he will plead to a lesser charge of second-degree assault.

Yarl showed up on Lester's doorstep after he mixed up the streets where he was supposed to pick up his twin siblings.

Lester's attorney, Steve Salmon, has long argued that Lester was acting in self-defense and that he was terrified by the stranger who knocked on his door as he settled into bed for the night. He did not immediately respond to a phone message from The Associated Press on Thursday.

The shooting shocked the country and renewed national debate about gun policies and race in the U.S. Yarl testified at an earlier hearing that he rang the bell and then waited for someone to answer for what seemed "longer than normal." As the inner door opened, Yarl said, he reached out to grab the storm door.

"I assume these are my brothers' friends' parents," he said.

He said Lester, who is white, shot him in the head and uttered, "Don't come here ever again." Although the bullet didn't penetrate Yarl's brain, the impact knocked him to the ground. Yarl said Lester then shot him in the arm. The teen was taken to the hospital and released three days later.

His family said the shooting took a big emotional toll and they have filed a lawsuit against the retired aircraft mechanic.

As Lester's trial date approached, the court shut down access to online records in the case, so prospective jurors could not see or read any of the documents available to the public. A spokeswoman in the prosecutor's office said there have been no new filings in the case this month.

Salmon said last year that Lester's physical and mental condition had deteriorated. He said Lester has had heart issues, a broken hip and hospitalizations. Lester also has lost 50 pounds (23 kilograms), which Salmon blamed on the stress of intense media coverage and death threats he subsequently received.

A judge had previously ordered a mental evaluation of Lester but allowed for the trial to proceed after its completion. The results of that evaluation were not released publicly.

Russia rejoices at Trump-Putin call as Zelenskyy rejects talks without Ukraine present

By BARRY HATTON, ILLIA NOVIKOV and DASHA LITVINOVA Associated Press

Russian officials and state media took a triumphant tone Thursday after President Donald Trump jettisoned three years of U.S. policy and announced he would likely meet soon with Russian President Vladimir Putin to negotiate a peace deal in the almost three-year war in Ukraine.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, meanwhile, said he would not accept any negotiations about Ukraine that do not include his country in the talks. European governments also demanded a seat at the table.

Trump's change of tack seemed to identify Putin as the only player that matters in ending the fighting and looked set to sideline Zelenskyy, as well as European governments, in any peace talks. The Ukrainian leader recently described that prospect as "very dangerous."

Putin has been ostracized by the West since Russia's February 2022 invasion of its neighbor, and in 2023 the International Criminal Court issued an arrest warrant for the Russian leader alleging war crimes.

Trump's announcement created a major diplomatic upheaval that could herald a watershed moment for Ukraine and Europe.

Russia rejoices at Putin's spotlight role

Russian officials and state-backed media sounded triumphant after Wednesday's call between Trump and Putin that lasted more than an hour.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said Thursday that the "position of the current (U.S.) administration is much more appealing."

The deputy chair of Russia's National Security Council, Dmitry Medvedev, said in an online statement: "The presidents of Russia and the U.S. have talked at last. This is very important in and of itself."

Senior lawmaker Alexei Pushkov said the call "will go down in the history of world politics and diplomacy."

"I am sure that in Kyiv, Brussels, Paris and London they are now reading Trump's lengthy statement on his conversation with Putin with horror and cannot believe their eyes," Pushkov wrote on his messaging app.

Russian state news agency RIA Novosti said in an opinion column: "The U.S. finally hurt Zelenskyy for real," adding that Trump had found "common ground" with Putin.

"This means that the formula 'nothing about Ukraine without Ukraine' — a sacred cow for Zelenskyy, the European Union and the previous U.S. administration — no longer exists. Moreover, the opinion of Kyiv and Brussels (the European Union) is of no interest to Trump at all," it added.

The pro-Kremlin Russian tabloid Komsomolskaya Pravda went even further and published a column stating in the headline that "Trump signed Zelenskyy's death sentence."

"The myth of Russia as a 'pariah' in global politics, carefully inflated by Western propaganda, has burst with a bang," the column said.

Zelenskyy won't accept talks without Ukraine

In his first comments to journalists since Trump held individual calls first with Putin and then Zelenskyy, the Ukrainian leader conceded that it was "not very pleasant" that the American president spoke first to Putin. But he said the main issue was to "not allow everything to go according to Putin's plan."

"We cannot accept it, as an independent country, any agreements (made) without us," Zelenskyy said as he visited a nuclear power plant in western Ukraine.

While Trump was noncommittal on Wednesday, he offered some reassurances on Thursday when asked by reporters whether Ukrainians would have a seat at the table in U.S. negotiations with Russia. "Of course they would," Trump said. "I mean, they're part of it. We would have Ukraine, we have Russia, and we'll have other people involved too."

During the conversation with Trump on Wednesday, Zelenskyy said, the U.S. president told him he wanted to speak to both the Russian and Ukrainian leaders at the same time.

"He never mentioned in a conversation that Putin and Russia was a priority. We, today, trust these words. For us it is very important to preserve the support of the United States of America," Zelenskyy said.

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Alarm bells ring in Europe and NATO

Trump also effectively dashed Ukraine's hopes of becoming part of NATO, which the alliance said less than a year ago was an "irreversible" step, or getting back the parts of its territory captured so far by the Russian army. Russia currently occupies close to 20% of the country.

Trump has blamed Ukraine's desire to join the U.S.-led mutual defense pact for sparking Russia's invasion. "That's the way it is," Trump said Thursday of Russia's longstanding opposition to Ukraine joining NATO, "and I think that's the way it's going to have to be."

The U.S. administration's approach to a potential settlement is notably close to Moscow's vision of how the war should end. That has caused alarm and tension within the 32-nation NATO alliance and 27-nation European Union.

Some European governments that fear their countries could also be in the Kremlin's crosshairs were alarmed by Washington's new course, saying they must be part of negotiations.

"Ukraine, Europe and the United States should work on this together. TOGETHER," Poland's Prime Minister Donald Tusk wrote Wednesday on social media.

EU foreign affairs chief Kaja Kallas said: "It is clear that any deal behind our backs will not work. You need the Europeans. You need the Ukrainians."

Others balked at Trump's overtures and poured cold water on his upbeat outlook.

"Just as Putin has no intention of stopping hostilities even during potential talks, we must maintain Western unity and increase support ... to Ukraine, and political and economic pressure on Russia," Estonian Foreign Minister Margus Tsahkna said. "Our actions must show that we are not changing course."

German Chancellor Olaf Scholz said it was right for Trump to speak to Putin, and Scholz noted that he had done so himself as recently as November. He said "a dictated peace" would never win European support.

"We also will not accept any solution that leads to a decoupling of American and European security," Scholz said. "Only one person would benefit from that: President Putin."

A Ukrainian soldier is resigned to Trump and Putin talking

A soldier from Ukraine's 53rd Brigade fighting in the eastern Donetsk region said it was normal for Trump and Putin to speak to each other.

"If dialogue is one way to influence the situation, then let them talk — but let it be meaningful enough for us to feel the results of those talks," the soldier said, insisting on anonymity due to security risks for her family in occupied Ukrainian territory.

But she was skeptical about the negotiations, given the incompatible demands tabled in the past by Russia and Ukraine.

"The conditions are unacceptable for everyone. What we propose doesn't work for them, and what they propose is unacceptable for us," she said. "That's why I, like probably every soldier here, believe this can only be resolved by force."

A Ukrainian army officer, who said he's in touch with more than 40 brigades, said the troops he regularly speaks with don't want a peace deal at any price even as they are desperate for more Western military aid.

"The stock we currently have, in terms of ammunition, is enough to last two or three weeks, maybe a month," he told The Associated Press, asking that his name not be used because he wasn't authorized to speak to the media.

"We definitely cannot deal with it on our own," he added.

Why asteroid 2024 YR4 is unlikely to hit Earth in 2032 and how scientists keep track

By MARCIA DUNN AP Aerospace Writer

CAPE CANAVERAL, Fla. (AP) — The threat of a newly discovered asteroid has risen slightly in the past few weeks, as the world's telescopes rush to track its course. But the chance of an impact is still quite slim.

New calculations suggest there's a 2% chance the space rock 2024 YR4 will smack Earth in 2032. This also means there's a 98% chance it will safely pass our planet. The odds of a strike will almost certainly

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continue to go up and down as the asteroid's path around the sun is better understood, and astronomers said there's a good chance the risk likely will drop to zero.

NASA and the European Space Agency's Webb Space Telescope will observe this near-Earth asteroid in March before the object disappears from view. Once that happens, scientists will have to wait until 2028 when it passes our way again.

What's an asteroid?

Asteroids are space rocks orbiting the sun that are considerably smaller than planets. Scientists believe they're the leftovers from the solar system's formation 4.6 billion years ago.

There are so many asteroids orbiting between Mars and Jupiter — millions of them — that this region is known as the main asteroid belt. They sometimes get pushed out of the belt and can end up all over the place — like this one.

How do scientists track potentially dangerous asteroids?

A telescope in Chile discovered the asteroid 2024 YR4 in December. It's estimated to be 130 feet to 300 feet (40 meters to 90 meters) across. Observations by the Webb telescope should provide a more precise measurement, according to NASA.

NASA and the European Space Agency initially put the odds of a strike at just over 1%. By Thursday, it had risen to roughly 2%. NASA describes that as still "extremely low."

Until scientists have a better understanding of the asteroid's path around the sun, they caution the odds will continue to fluctuate — and quite possibly fall to zero.

"You don't have to be worried about anything. It's a curiosity," said Larry Denneau, senior software engineer with the University of Hawaii's asteroid impact alert system that first spotted the asteroid. "Don't panic. Let the process play out, and we'll have a for-sure answer."

In 2021, NASA gave the all-clear to another potentially worrisome asteroid, Apophis, after new telescope observations ruled out any chance of it hitting Earth in 2068.

Should we worry about asteroid 2024 YR4?

It's way too soon to fret over this asteroid, according to the experts.

"No one should be concerned that the impact probability is rising. This is the behavior our team expected," Paul Chodas, director of NASA's Center for Near-Earth Object Studies, said in an email. "To be clear, we expect the impact probability to drop to zero at some point."

Since the asteroid's size and orbit are uncertain, it's unclear where it might hit and what the possible impacts would be should it strike Earth. If the asteroid is on the smaller end, ESA said any potential impacts would be local similar to the Tunguska event that flattened thousands of square miles of forest in remote Siberia in 1908. But if it's close to 330 feet (100 meters), "the consequences would be significantly worse."

Chodas said once Webb pinpoints the asteroid's size, NASA can predict "how serious an impact this asteroid could produce and how difficult a task it might be to deflect this asteroid."

NASA already has some experience nudging an asteroid. The space agency's Dart spacecraft deliberately rammed a harmless asteroid in 2022 in the first planetary defense test of its kind, altering its orbit around its larger companion asteroid.

Federal judge pauses President Trump's order restricting gender-affirming care for trans youth

By LEA SKENE Associated Press

BALTIMORE (AP) — A federal judge on Thursday temporarily blocked President Donald Trump's recent executive order aimed at restricting gender-affirming health care for transgender people under age 19.

The judge's ruling came after a lawsuit was filed earlier this month on behalf of families with transgender or nonbinary children who allege their health care has already been compromised. A national group for family of LGBTQ+ people and a doctors organization are also plaintiffs in the court challenge, one of many lawsuits opposing a slew of executive orders Trump has issued as he seeks to reverse the policies of former President Joe Biden.

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Judge Brendan Hurson, who was nominated by Biden, granted the plaintiffs' request for a temporary restraining order following a hearing in federal court in Baltimore. The restraining order, which lasts 14 days but could be extended, essentially puts Trump's directive on hold while the case proceeds.

That means medical institutions can't have their federal funding pulled because they provide gender-affirming care services.

The restraining order is nationwide in scope and will apply to institutions across the country. Attorneys for the government didn't indicate whether they plan to appeal it.

Shortly after taking office, Trump signed an executive order directing federally run insurance programs to exclude coverage for such services. That includes Medicaid, which covers gender-affirming care in some states, and TRICARE for military families. Trump also signed an earlier executive order that narrowly defined the sexes as male and female while commanding that federal funds "shall not be used to promote gender ideology."

The lawsuit includes several accounts from families of appointments being canceled as medical institutions react to the new directive. Some hospitals immediately paused gender-affirming care, including prescriptions for puberty blockers and hormone therapy.

Those immediate impacts were a main focus of the hearing Thursday afternoon, when Hurson repeatedly asked attorneys on both sides to discuss the risks associated with allowing Trump's orders to take full effect and continue limiting health care access. Hurson directly challenged the assertion that the president's goal is to protect transgender youth.

"The order seems to deny that this population even exists, or deserves to exist," Hurson said, noting that transgender people already face a statistically elevated risk of suicide, poverty, addiction and other hardships.

Disrupting their health care out of the blue could cause them "irreparable harm," the judge said in announcing his ruling.

Attorneys for the government argued that Trump, through his orders, was simply directing federal agencies to take lawful steps to carry out his policy preferences. They said the orders weren't aimed at restricting health care access for transgender youth, but rather a decision from the president on how his administration would distribute federal funding.

But the plaintiffs' attorneys said the orders are "unlawful and unconstitutional" because they violate antidiscrimination laws while infringing on the rights of parents.

Dozens of transgender people and advocates rallied outside the courthouse in downtown Baltimore before the hearing, holding signs and waving pride flags while upbeat music played from a nearby speaker.

"We will not be erased," said Iya Dammons, executive director of the nonprofit Baltimore Safe Haven, which provides services to trans people. "We've been here before and we're not going back."

Shortly before the hearing began, the group filed slowly into the courtroom, filling its large gallery and listening attentively as the attorneys delivered their arguments.

Lee Binder of Trans Maryland said some of the transgender community's most vulnerable members are being used as political pawns, so it's important to show solidarity.

Trump's approach on the issue represents an abrupt change from the Biden administration, which sought to explicitly extend civil rights protections to transgender people. Trump has used strong language in opposing gender-affirming care, asserting falsely that "medical professionals are maiming and sterilizing a growing number of impressionable children under the radical and false claim that adults can change a child's sex."

Major medical groups such as the American Medical Association and the American Academy of Pediatrics support access to gender-affirming care.

Young people who persistently identify as a gender that differs from their sex assigned at birth are first evaluated by a team of professionals. Some may try a social transition, involving changing a hairstyle or pronouns. Some may later also receive puberty blockers or hormones. Surgery is extremely rare for minors.

Like legal challenges to state bans on gender-affirming care, the recent lawsuit alleges the policy is

discriminatory because it allows federal funds to cover the same treatments when they're not used for gender transition. The suit also says Trump is overstepping his presidential authority by seeking to withhold federal funds previously authorized by Congress.

The judge's ruling was a victory for transgender youth and their parents, said Omar Gonzalez-Pagan, an attorney for Lambda Legal representing the plaintiffs. He said hopefully hospitals that canceled appointments will start rescheduling them in light of the temporary restraining order that protects their funding.

"I hope that this is bringing the joy and the sense of security that these families need right now," he said in remarks to reporters after the hearing. He said the next step is to keep fighting.

"Across the country, this unlawful order from the president has sown fear among transgender youth and confusion among their providers," Joshua Block, an attorney for the American Civil Liberties Union who also represents the plaintiffs, said in a written statement after the hearing. "But today's decision should restore both their access to healthcare and protections under the Constitution." _____

Associated Press reporters Geoff Mulvihill in Cherry Hill, New Jersey; and Lindsay Whitehurst in Washington contributed to this report.

Goodyear Blimp at 100: From Ronald Reagan to Ice Cube, 'floating piece of Americana' still thriving

By MARK LONG AP Sports Writer

DAYTONA BEACH, Fla. (AP) — Flying a few hundred feet above the streets and shores of Daytona Beach, the Goodyear Blimp draws a crowd.

Onlookers stare and point. Drivers pull over for better looks, snapping pictures, recording videos and trying to line up the perfect selfie. For some, it's nostalgic. For others, it's a glimpse at a larger-than-life advertising icon.

At 100 years old, the blimp is an ageless star in the sky. And the 246-foot-long airship will be in the background of the Daytona 500 on Sunday — roughly 1,500 feet above Daytona International Speedway, actually — to celebrate its latest and greatest anniversary tour.

Even though remote camera technologies — drones, mostly — are improving regularly and changing the landscape of aerial footage, the blimp continues to carve out a niche. At Daytona, with the usual 40-car field racing around a 2½-mile superspeedway, views from the blimp aptly provide the scope of the event.

"It's great to show the pack racing," Fox Sports director Artie Kempner said, adding that he expected to use aerial shots from the blimp about 50 times during Sunday's race.

The Goodyear Blimp has been a regular at major sporting events since flying above the 1955 Rose Bowl. A few years later, it became a service vehicle for television coverage while simultaneously functioning as a highly visible advertising platform. It's been at every Daytona 500 since 1962.

During that streak, blimps have undergone wholesale changes and improved dramatically: steering technology, safety innovations, high-definition cameras, gyro-stabilized aerial views and much quieter rides thanks to relocated engines and propellers.

Nowadays, riding on the blimp isn't much different from traveling on a small plane. The 12-seater comes with reclining seats, tray tables, seatbelts, a safety briefing and a bathroom with amazing views. A few windows serve as the only air conditioning onboard. The blimp offers a smooth ride even at top speed, creeping along at 73 mph — well below the cars pushing 200 mph on the track.

"It's an iconic symbol for our nation, a floating piece of Americana," blimp pilot Jensen Kervern said. "There's nothing like it in the world."

The blimp has covered more than 2,500 events and taken more than 500,000 passengers for rides, according to Goodyear. Former President Ronald Reagan might be the most famous passenger, and rapper Ice Cube raised the blimp's street cred when he included a line about it in his 1992 song titled "It Was A Good Day."

But not just anyone can climb aboard. Rides are invitation only even though phones at blimp headquar-

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ters — the three U.S.-based airships are housed in California, Florida and Ohio — ring off the hook with people inquiring about buying a ride.

As part of the blimp's 100-year anniversary celebration, however, Goodyear is giving three U.S. residents a chance to join the exclusive club and win a ride. The sweepstakes will provide each winner a certificate for two to fly on the blimp. The prize also includes \$3,000 for travel expenses to one of Goodyear's airship hangars.

It would be a once-in-a-lifetime experience, no doubt.

The blimp flies low enough to spot pods of dolphins or flotillas of sea turtles in the Atlantic Ocean. The view over Daytona International Speedway is equally stunning, with the ability to see every inch of the famed track while watching (and hearing) race cars turning laps.

Already in 2025, the Goodyear fleet has flown over the Rose Bowl, the Orange Bowl, the Pro Bowl and Pebble Beach. Its upcoming schedule includes the Academy Awards, Coachella and WrestleMania.

But will the blimp survive another 100 years?

Drone imagery and resolution continue to improve along with maneuverability, stability and flight longevity. And where drones can be flown by one person, the Goodyear Blimp crew at Daytona tops 20 staffers.

But given the blimp's longevity, adaptability and celebrity, no one should bet against it sticking around for generations to come.

"Despite changes in technology and our environment, people still get so excited to see the blimp," Kervern said. "It's just an iconic symbol for our nation."

Breakfast is booming at US restaurants. Is it also contributing to high egg prices?

By DEE-ANN DURBIN AP Business Writer

It's a chicken-and-egg problem: Restaurants are struggling with record-high U.S. egg prices, but their omelets, scrambles and huevos rancheros may be part of the problem.

Breakfast is booming at U.S. eateries. First Watch, a restaurant chain that serves breakfast, brunch and lunch, nearly quadrupled its locations over the past decade to 570. Eggs Up Grill has 90 restaurants in nine southern states, up from 26 in 2018. Florida-based Another Broken Egg Café celebrated its 100th restaurant last year.

Fast-food chains are also adding more breakfast items. Starbucks, which launched egg bites in 2017, now has a breakfast menu with 12 separate items containing eggs. Wendy's reintroduced breakfast in 2020 and offers 10 items with eggs.

Reviews website Yelp said 6,421 breakfast and brunch businesses opened in the United States last year, 23% more than in 2019.

In normal times, producers could meet the demand for all those eggs. But an ongoing bird flu outbreak, which so far has forced farms to slaughter nearly 159 million chickens, turkeys and other birds — including nearly 47 million since the start of December — is making supplies scarcer and pushing up prices. In January, the average price of eggs in the U.S. hit a record \$4.95 per dozen.

The percentage of eggs that go to U.S. restaurants versus other places, like grocery stores or food manufacturers, is not publicly available. U.S. Foods, a restaurant supplier, and Cal-Maine Foods, the largest U.S. producer of shell eggs, did not respond to The Associated Press' requests for comment.

But demand from restaurants is almost certainly growing. Foot traffic at U.S. restaurants has grown the most since 2019 for morning meals, 2019, according to market research firm Circana. Pre-lunchtime hours accounted for 21% of total restaurant visits in 2024.

Breakfast sandwiches are the most popular order during morning visits, Circana said, and 70% of the breakfast sandwiches on U.S. menus include eggs.

Eggs Up Grill CEO Ricky Richardson said breakfast restaurants took off after the COVID pandemic because people longed for comfort and connection. As inflation made food more expensive, customers saw breakfast and lunch as more affordable options for eating out, he said.

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The growth in restaurant demand reverses a pattern that emerged during the pandemic, when consumers tried to stock up on eggs for home use but restaurants needed fewer of them because many of them had to close for a time, according to Brian Earnest, a lead economist for animal proteins at CoBank.

U.S. egg consumption declined for more than five decades before reaching a low of 247 per person in 2008, according to data from the U.S. Department of Agriculture. As nutritional research and marketing established eggs as an inexpensive protein source instead of heart-clogging cholesterol bombs, per capita consumption of egg products grew to the equivalent of 292 fresh eggs in 2019, the data shows.

"Consumers think eggs are really fresh, so if you're making something with eggs, you know it's fresh," Earnest said.

Before the pandemic reduced demand and bird flu outbreaks impacted supplies, the USDA had forecast that Americans would continue eating more eggs. By 2023, the most recent year for which annual data is available, they were down to 249 eggs per person.

Other trends have impacted the economics of eggs. To address animal rights concerns, McDonald's and some other companies have switched to 100% cage-free eggs, which limits the sources they will buy from. Ten states, including California and Colorado, have passed laws restricting egg sales to products from cage-free environments.

"It makes the market much more complicated than it was 20 years ago," Earnest said.

The higher prices are hitting restaurants hard. Wholesale egg prices hit a national average of \$7.34 per dozen last week, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture. That was 51% higher than at the beginning of the year. Wholesale costs may be higher than retail prices since grocers use eggs as a loss leader to get customers in the door.

Some chains, like Waffle House, have added a surcharge to help offset the cost of eggs. Others may turn to egg substitutes like tapioca starch for some recipes or cut egg dishes from the menu, said Phil Kafarakis, the president and CEO of the International Foodservice Manufacturers Association.

First Watch President and CEO Chris Tomasso said eggs are critical for the chain's brand and are found in the majority of its offerings, whether at the center of the plate or as an ingredient in batters. So far, he said, the company has been able to obtain the eggs it needs and isn't charging extra for them.

First Watch is also increasing portion sizes for non-egg items like meat and potatoes, Tomasso said.

Richardson, of Eggs Up Grill, said he recently met with franchisees to discuss adding a surcharge but they decided against it.

"Eggs have always been and will continue to be an important part of American diets," Richardson said.

Trump's call with Putin ends U.S. efforts to isolate Russia

By VLADIMIR ISACHENKOV Associated Press

MOSCOW (AP) — By saying Ukraine's NATO membership is "impractical" and the return of Russian-occupied territories to Kyiv is "illusionary," the Trump administration is giving its blessing to key items on President Vladimir Putin's wish list — even before a potential settlement of the conflict.

Rarely was a policy change between Moscow and Washington so swift and drastic than President Donald Trump's phone call with Putin, abruptly ending a three-year, U.S.-led effort to isolate the Russian leader over Ukraine.

And the fighting in Ukraine wasn't the only issue the two leaders discussed in Wednesday's call. They talked about the Middle East settlement, the role of the dollar, global energy markets and even artificial intelligence.

The broad agenda was exactly what Putin has long wanted — Russia and the U.S. sitting down to talk about global issues while the rest of the world stood by.

It's unclear how the prospective Ukraine peace talks could evolve, but the call already has marked a watershed, immediately breaking the ice between Moscow and Washington.

Putin's goals in Ukraine

Putin sent troops into Ukraine on Feb. 24, 2022, amid Kyiv's bid to join NATO that he described as a "red

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line" for Moscow. He had cast the alliance's eastward expansion as a major threat to Russia and sought NATO's guarantees that it would never offer membership to Ukraine.

Putin expected a quick victory, but the steadfast Ukrainian resistance and a flow of Western weapons to Kyiv quickly thwarted Kremlin hopes. The fighting has produced heavy casualties on both sides, becoming Europe's largest military conflict since World War II.

After suffering early setbacks, Russia gradually regained the initiative in combat, unleashing a series of offensives across the 1,000-kilometer (600-mile) front line in slow but steady gains throughout 2024. It controls about a fifth of Ukrainian territory, including the Crimean Peninsula, taken in 2014

Putin has demanded that Ukraine withdraw its troops from the four regions that Russia has seized but never fully controlled, renounce its bid to join NATO, and protect the rights of Russian speakers. He and his lieutenants repeated all of that in recent statements, reaffirming Moscow's maximalist approach.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy has rejected Moscow's demands, but the grim battlefield situation and the latest statements from Trump set the stage for talks in which Kyiv could potentially be forced into painful compromises.

Trump signals openness to Russian demands

Trump described his call with Putin as "lengthy and highly productive" and thanked Putin "for his time and effort," emphasizing their shared desire to halt the fighting without saying a word that it was Russia which sent troops into Ukraine.

He said he later spoke to Zelenskyy, but he remained noncommittal about whether Ukraine would be an equal participant in the peace talks — an apparent signal that Kyiv could be presented with a deal negotiated behind its back in a dramatic shift from the Biden administration's policy of "nothing about Ukraine without Ukraine."

Also on Wednesday, U.S. Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth told a meeting of Ukraine's Western allies that Kyiv shouldn't hope to get all its territory back from Russia and will not be allowed to join NATO.

And while Europe has demanded to be part of any talks about the Ukrainian settlement, Trump and his team have shown little interest in bringing the allies on board.

Hegseth insisted that NATO should play no role in any future military mission to police the peace in Ukraine and that any peacekeeping troops should not be covered by the part of NATO's founding treaty that obliges all allies to come to the aid of any member under attack.

"For Russia, the fact that for now it looks like it's going to be Russia and the United States outlining the scheme for cessation of hostilities and potential resolution of the conflict or turning it into frozen conflict will be happening between Moscow and Washington, and Kyiv and European capitals will be a sideshow here," said Alexander Gabuev, director of Carnegie Russia Eurasia Center.

Many in Europe seemed flabbergasted by Washington's drastic policy change.

"It's certainly an innovative approach to a negotiation to make very major concessions even before they have started," former Swedish Prime Minister Carl Bildt, who co-chairs the European Council on Foreign Relations. said on social platform X.

In Moscow, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov mocked what he described as the EU and NATO "stupor" after the Trump-Putin call, saying that "many in the West, starting with the EU leaders, were stunned when a normal, basic conversation between two well-mannered, polite people took place."

"I'm very sorry, but the Western reaction shows that there are practically no such people left there," Lavrov said.

Expanding a US-Russian agenda

Trump posted on social media that he and Putin both "reflected on the Great History of our Nations, and the fact that we fought so successfully together in World War II, remembering that Russia lost tens of millions of people, and we, likewise, lost so many!"

Those words were music to Putin's ears. He has made the enormous Soviet suffering and sacrifice during World War II a key ideological pillar and a rallying point for the country, as well as a justification of its claim of a superpower status.

"Trump borrowed a lot of Putin's talking points about the role of Russia in World War II and all of the

multiple casualties," Gabuev said.

Putin, in turn, has been praising Trump even before the call, echoing his repeated claim that he would have prevented the hostilities in Ukraine had he been in office. Putin also has endorsed Trump's refusal to accept his defeat in the 2020 election.

Trump said his campaign motto of "COMMON SENSE" was cited by Putin in the conversation, adding that "we both believe very strongly in it."

He said they "agreed to work together, very closely, including visiting each other's nations" and added that they would "probably" meet in Saudi Arabia in the near future.

The various global issues that Trump said he discussed with Putin — including the Middle East, energy markets, the dollar and AI — reflected the broad agenda that the Kremlin leader has long sought to address, seeking to regain Moscow's Cold War-era status of a superpower on par with the U.S.

"The way that Trump frames this new approach, the way that he talks about his first official on-the-record conversation with President Putin, is definitely seen as a symbolic win by Moscow," Gabuev said. "It's really a discussion on peer competitor or what Moscow sees as kind of peer great power. It is much broader than just Ukraine."

Jets announce they've told Aaron Rodgers they're moving forward without him

By DENNIS WASZAK Jr. AP Pro Football Writer

Aaron Rodgers' disappointing two-year stint with the New York Jets is over. And the team's only Super Bowl trophy is still standing by itself.

The Jets announced Thursday they told the 41-year-old quarterback they are moving on without him next season.

While Rodgers hasn't said whether he intends to continue playing for a 21st NFL season, the Jets — with new general manager Darren Mougey and coach Aaron Glenn in charge — have officially ruled out a return to New York.

In a joint statement issued by the team, Mougey and Glenn said they met with Rodgers last week and informed him "that our intention was to move in a different direction at quarterback."

"It was important to have this discussion now to provide clarity and enable each of us the proper time to plan for our respective futures," Mougey and Glenn said in the statement. "We want to thank him for the leadership, passion, and dedication he brought to the organization and wish him success moving forward."

The four-time MVP, who's the fifth player in NFL history to throw 500 touchdown passes in the regular season, has one year left on his contract, worth a non-guaranteed \$37.5 million.

New York would absorb a \$49 million dead money charge next season unless it designates Rodgers a post-June 1 cut and can spread out that charge over two years. If the Jets do that, Rodgers would remain on their roster — while carrying a \$23.5 salary cap charge — until the start of the NFL's new league year on March 12.

In April 2023, Rodgers was traded to the Jets after 18 seasons with the Green Bay Packers — looking to help the franchise end a Super Bowl drought that dates to the glory days of Joe Namath and the 1968 season.

At his introductory news conference, Rodgers noted how the franchise's only Vince Lombardi Trophy looked "lonely" in the team's lobby.

The hope was Rodgers would change all that.

The reality ended up being more of the same for the Jets.

Rodgers' first season in New York ended just four snaps into his debut because of a torn left Achilles tendon that sank the Jets' Super Bowl hopes that were stirred by the QB's arrival.

He worked his way back to the field to start every game this past season, but he and the offense struggled with consistency and results and the Jets finished 5-12. Rodgers finished his Jets tenure with six wins — including the victory during which he was injured — in 18 starts.

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"I personally want to thank Aaron for his time at the New York Jets," owner Woody Johnson in a statement. "His arrival in 2023 was met with unbridled excitement and I will forever be grateful that he chose to join us to continue his Hall of Fame career. From Day 1, he embodied all that it meant to be a New York Jet, embraced our fans and immersed himself in our city. That is what I will remember most when I look back at his time here.

"He will always be welcome, and I wish him only the best in whatever he chooses to do next."

Rodgers' 28 touchdown passes and 3,897 yards passing both rank third for a single season in franchise history. But he lacked some mobility early in his return and then dealt with a few additional leg injuries, including a significant hamstring ailment.

The Jets' offense with Rodgers struggled to produce, the defense was a shell of its formerly dominant self and it cost both general manager Joe Douglas and coach Robert Saleh their jobs in the middle of the season.

In what turned out to be his final appearance with New York, Rodgers threw a season-high four touchdown passes in a win over Miami on Jan. 5.

It was a vintage performance — and a somewhat frustrating flash to fans of how things could have gone for Rodgers and the Jets.

His short Big Apple tenure also wasn't without some controversy.

Last offseason, Rodgers made headlines when he missed mandatory minicamp for the Jets and instead went on a trip to Egypt he planned while recovering from his injury. He also was mentioned by Robert Kennedy Jr. as a possible vice presidential candidate during Kennedy's run for the presidency.

Rodgers instead insisted he was focused on football and completing his comeback with a successful season — which included the Jets trading for close friend and former Packers teammate Davante Adams.

But now the franchise will be looking for a new quarterback while Rodgers contemplates his next move. He said at the end of the season he wanted to take a mental break before making a decision on his playing future.

Fox Sports reported last Sunday that Rodgers met with the Jets in New Jersey and was told of the team's plans.

Tyrod Taylor, a 35-year-old veteran, remains on the roster, as does Jordan Travis, who spent his entire rookie season on the non-football injury list, and Adrian Martinez, who was on the practice squad signed to a reserve-future contract last month.

But New York could explore the free agent market next month to replace Rodgers. The Jets also have the No. 7 overall pick in the draft in April.

Rodgers has 503 regular-season touchdown passes (fifth in NFL history), joining Tom Brady (649), Drew Brees (571), Peyton Manning (539) and Brett Favre (508) as the only players to throw at least 500.

Rodgers, whose 62,952 yards passing rank seventh in NFL history, led the Packers to their last Super Bowl title in the 2010 season, but hasn't played on football's biggest stage since despite reaching the NFC championship game four other times.

If he does choose to continue playing, Rodgers would likely prefer a team that's close to contending for a title — giving him one last chance at another championship.

Some people didn't know they had a bird flu infection, study of veterinarians suggests

By MIKE STOBBE AP Medical Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — A new study shows that bird flu has silently spread from animals to some veterinarians.

The study published Thursday by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention echoes two smaller ones that detected evidence of infection in previously undiagnosed farmworkers. In those studies, several of the infected workers remembered having symptoms of H5N1 bird flu, while none of the veterinarians in the new paper recalled any such symptoms.

The new study is more evidence that the official U.S. tally of confirmed human bird flu infections — 68

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in the last year — is likely a significant undercount, said Dr. Gregory Gray, an infectious disease researcher at the University of Texas Medical Branch in Galveston.

“This means that people are being infected, likely due to their occupational exposures, and not developing signs of illness and therefore not seeking medical care,” Gray said. He said it shows that officials cannot fully understand bird flu transmission by only tracking people who go to medical clinics with symptoms.

Study suggests bird flu cases are undercounted

CDC researchers went to an American Association of Bovine Practitioners veterinary conference in September 2024 in Columbus, Ohio. They recruited 150 vets from 46 states to fill out a questionnaire and agree to have their blood drawn. None said they had suffered red eyes or other symptoms associated with bird flu.

Testing found three of the vets, or 2%, had evidence of antibodies to H5N1 infection. All three worked with dairy cattle, as well as other animals. None said they’d worked with a herd that was known to be infected, although one had worked with a flock of infected poultry.

Gray and some colleagues did a study last year of 14 dairy farmworkers and found two, or 14%, had evidence of past infections. Both had experienced symptoms but were never diagnosed.

Another study published last year by the CDC checked 115 dairy workers. The researchers found that eight of them, or 7%, had evidence in their blood of recent infection. Half recalled feeling ill.

The studies were far too small to use as a basis to provide a solid estimate of how many undiagnosed human infections are out there, Gray said. But even just a very small percentage could translate to hundreds or thousands of Americans who were infected while working with animals, he noted.

That’s not necessarily a reason to be alarmed, said Jacqueline Nolting, an Ohio State University researcher who helped CDC with the latest study.

Available studies suggest people who are infected mount antibody responses and may develop natural immunity, which is “good news,” she said.

However, if the virus changes or mutates to start making people very sick, or to start spreading easily from person to person, that would be “a completely different story,” Nolting said.

Experts urge caution around animals

The H5N1 bird flu has been spreading widely among wild birds, poultry, cows and other animals. Its escalating presence in the environment increases the chances people will be exposed, and potentially catch it, officials have said.

Right now the risk to the general public is low, the CDC says. But officials continue to urge people who have contact with sick or dead birds to take precautions, including wearing respiratory and eye protection and gloves when handling poultry.

“No one’s really questioning that the virus has been moving around the country more than has been reported,” said Keith Poulsen, director of the Wisconsin Veterinary Diagnostic Laboratory.

He said he expected to see stepped-up information reminding veterinarians across the country to protect themselves with gloves, masks and other equipment to halt infection.

What causes mudslides, and what can be done to lessen the danger?

By The Associated Press undefined

Mudslides are dangerous torrents that are usually referred to by geologists and first responders as debris flows. They have been particularly lethal in parts of California where landscape, climate, weather and geology can combine to make them more likely.

California has worked to add tools to protect against mudslides, including pinpointing hot spots, creating basins and placing nets to capture falling debris before it hits homes.

Why is California prone to mudslides?

California has relatively young mountains from a geology standpoint, meaning much of its steep terrain is still in motion and covered in loose rocks and soil that can be sloughed off easily, especially when the

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ground is wet, according to geologists.

Severe drought can be a problem, too. Experts say that when hard rains fall on extremely dry and hard-packed soil, it can rush downhill and pick up energy, carrying soil and debris away.

And wildfires — an increasing problem across the West — can leave hillsides with little to no vegetation to hold the soil in place.

What are the most vulnerable areas?

The areas most at risk are on or near hillsides that have burned in recent years, with little or no vegetation left to hold soil in place.

Burning vegetation and soil on a slope more than doubles the rate of water runoff, according to the California Department of Conservation, and there have been severe events over the years.

On Jan. 9, 2018, intense rain fell on a weeks-old wildfire burn scar in the mountains above Montecito on the Santa Barbara County coast, unleashing huge torrents that tore through the community, killing 23 people and destroying or damaging hundreds of homes.

In 1934 a storm over the Southern California mountains unleashed runoff so intense that 30 people were killed, more than 480 homes were destroyed.

And on Christmas Day in 2003, rain over fire-scarred mountains unleashed a debris flow that killed 16 people who had gathered at a church facility in a canyon.

What can be done to protect communities?

One of the best ways to manage landslides is with debris basins — pits carved out of the landscape to catch material flowing downhill that the U.S. Geological Survey says can reach speeds exceeding 35 mph (56 kph).

Often located at the mouths of canyons, the basins collect debris while allowing water to continue downstream, according to Los Angeles County Public Works. This prevents blockages of the storm drain system but requires the removal of sediment from the basins, something that can take days or months depending on their size.

But basins, which can require a lot of land, can also disrupt the natural ecosystem and lead to beaches needing to be replenished by collecting sediment that flows out of the canyons, according to experts. They're also costly — Santa Barbara County spent \$20 million on a new basin after 2018 — and must be emptied occasionally or they can be overwhelmed by new landslides or mudslides.

After the 2018 mudslides hit Montecito, the Los Angeles Times reported that debris basins above the community were undersized and hadn't been sufficiently emptied. The community raised millions to address the problem, hiring an engineering company to map the canyons and install debris nets.

The California Department of Conservation runs a geological and landslide mapping team that seeks to identify hot spots, and continually updates its map so local communities can make decisions including potential evacuations.

Experts say agencies use a variety of tools to gauge the likelihood of landslides in a given area, including terrain maps and lidar — pulsed light from lasers to penetrate foliage to see the ground. Then they can watch for early warnings, such as changes over time in photos taken from the air, or from satellites, or in data from GPS monitoring stations, tilt meters and or other on-site instrumentation.

Igloo recalls over a million coolers after handle hazard causes fingertip amputation injuries

NEW YORK (AP) — Igloo is recalling more than 1 million of its coolers sold across the U.S., Mexico and Canada due to a handle hazard that has resulted in a handful of fingertip injuries, including some amputations.

The now-recalled "Igloo 90 Qt. Flip & Tow Rolling Coolers" have a tow handle can pinch users' fingertips against the product — posing potential amputation and other crushing risks, according to a Thursday recall notice from the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission.

Igloo has received 12 injury reports in the U.S., the CPSC notes, which include fingertip amputations,

bone fractures, and lacerations. There are no known injuries in Canada or Mexico.

Consumers in possession of the coolers are urged to stop using them immediately — and contact Igloo for a free replacement handle.

The now-recalled coolers were sold at major retailers like Costco, Target, Dick's and Amazon between 2019 and January 2025 for between \$80 and \$140. About 1.06 million were purchased in the U.S., in addition to 47,000 in Canada and another 23,000 in Mexico.

The affected products can be identified by model number and description. They were sold in multiple colors with the word "IGLOO" printed on the side and manufactured in the U.S. prior to January 2024.

Consumers can register for the recall online or contact Katy, Texas-based Igloo at 888-943-5182 or igloo90qt@sedgwick.com to request a handle replacement.

In a statement, Igloo said that it was recalling these rolling coolers and providing free replacement handles "with consumer safety as our top priority." The company added that, "through rigorous testing and proactive steps, we are constantly improving our products to meet the highest safety standards."

Additional information can be found on the websites for the CPSC, Health Canada and the OECD's global recall portal.

NATO allies insist Ukraine and Europe must be in peace talks as Trump touts Putin meeting

By LORNE COOK Associated Press

BRUSSELS (AP) — Several NATO allies stressed on Thursday that Ukraine and Europe must not be cut out of any peace negotiations as U.S. Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth denied that the United States is betraying the war-ravaged country.

European governments are reeling after the Trump administration signaled that it is planning face-to-face talks with Russia on ending the Ukraine war without involving them, insisted that Kyiv should not join NATO, and said that it's up to Europe to protect itself and Ukraine from whatever Russia might do next.

"There can be no negotiation about Ukraine without Ukraine. And Ukraine's voice must be at the heart of any talks," U.K. Defence Secretary John Healey told reporters at NATO headquarters, as the organization's 32 defense ministers met for talks on Ukraine.

German Defense Minister Boris Pistorius said: "For me, it's clear ... that Europe must be involved in the negotiations — and I think that's very easy to understand," particularly if Europe is "supposed to play a central or the main role in the peace order."

Europe "will have to live directly" with the consequences, he added.

Hegseth denied that the U.S. has betrayed Ukraine by launching negotiations about its future without Kyiv's full involvement. After talks with Russian President Vladimir Putin and then Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, Trump said on Wednesday he would "probably" meet in person with the Russian leader in the near term, possibly in Saudi Arabia.

"There is no betrayal there. There is a recognition that the whole world and the United States is invested and interested in peace. A negotiated peace," Hegseth told reporters.

The European Union's foreign policy chief, Kaja Kallas, expressed surprise that Hegseth and Trump had listed what appeared to be concessions to Russia even before talks have begun in earnest.

"We shouldn't take anything off the table before the negotiations have even started, because it plays to Russia's court," she said. "Why are we giving them everything that they want even before the negotiations have been started? It's appeasement. It has never worked."

Hegseth fired back later, saying in his first major news conference as defense secretary that "it's just a cheap political point to say, oh, we've left all the negotiating cards off the table by recognizing some realities that exist on the ground."

He said that neither Russia nor Ukraine will "get everything that they want" in negotiations to end the war.

Hegseth also warned that the war in Ukraine must "be a wakeup call" for NATO's European allies to spend more on their own defense budgets.

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Twenty-three of the 32 member countries were forecast to have met the organization's guideline of spending 2% of gross domestic product on their national defense budgets last year, but a third still do not.

European countries, he said, must spend more on their own defense, otherwise the U.S. is forced to "be everywhere for everybody, all the time."

Asked when the U.S. might raise its defense spending from 3.4% to the 5% Washington is demanding of other allies, Hegseth demurred, saying that "3.4% is a very robust investment, larger than most."

But Hegseth's French counterpart, Sébastien Lecornu, described the wrangling over greater defense spending as "a false debate," saying that governments and parliaments across Europe are already approving more weapons purchases and bigger military budgets while helping Ukraine stave off an invasion.

Lecornu warned that the future of NATO itself is now in question.

"To say that it's the biggest and most robust alliance in history is true, historically speaking. But the real question is will that still be the case in 10 or 15 years," he said, after the U.S. — by far NATO's biggest and most powerful member — signaled that its security priorities lie elsewhere, including in Asia.

NATO Secretary-General Mark Rutte, who was chairing Thursday's meeting, said that whatever agreement is struck between Russia and Ukraine, it is crucial that the "peace deal is enduring, that Putin knows that this is the end, that he can never again try to capture a piece of Ukraine."

It's a 6-pack of All-Star rookies: Wembanyama, Herro, Williams, Sengun, Mobley and Cunningham

By TIM REYNOLDS AP Basketball Writer

SAN FRANCISCO (AP) — Victor Wembanyama went to All-Star weekend in Indianapolis last year as one of the featured attractions. The San Antonio star was at the league's Tech Summit, plus played in the Rising Stars event and was a participant in the Skills Challenge.

He left all that with a clear goal.

"Next year, hopefully, the big game," Wembanyama said.

Next year is here. The big game — or games, perhaps — await.

Wembanyama, to no one's surprise, is a first-time All-Star who'll compete in the NBA's new All-Star mini-tournament on Sunday in San Francisco. He'll have these seven players for teammates: Denver's Nikola Jokic, Oklahoma City's Shai Gilgeous-Alexander, Indiana's Pascal Siakam, New York's Karl-Anthony Towns, Cleveland's Donovan Mitchell, Atlanta's Trae Young and another first-timer — Houston's Alperen Sengun.

Wembanyama's selection almost seemed like a formality. The league's reigning rookie of the year is already a global name; the NBA says Wembanyama content on social media is among the most viewed of all players and his jersey ranks No. 5 on the league's worldwide sales list.

"I've been talking to a few people about a moment he had when he was in New York," NBA Commissioner Adam Silver said. "He played the Knicks on Christmas Day and then he played the Brooklyn Nets a few days later, so he spent some time in New York, and Victor, who plays chess, went down to a famous park in New York City, Washington Square Park, and brought his chess board and just began playing a few games, and within a few days, something like 100 million people had seen that on social media.

"So, it just speaks to the popularity of Victor and the dramatic interest we're seeing in players' lifestyles and their interests and everything they enjoy doing. That was remarkable."

There are six All-Star rookies in this year's event: Wembanyama, Sengun, Miami's Tyler Herro, Cleveland's Evan Mobley, Detroit's Cade Cunningham and Oklahoma City's Jalen Williams. Of that group, Wembanyama is the youngest (just turned 21), the tallest (officially 7-foot-3) and will surely be the one with the most eyeballs on him in San Francisco this weekend.

"I think that was one of the most active days that we've had in our group chat since the summer when Vic made the All-Star Game," Spurs forward Harrison Barnes said. "I think it was really just a testament to the person that he is. Obviously, he works extremely hard. He gets so much attention, and he always tries to put it back on the team, make it more about the team and less about him."

Of the six All-Star rookies, Herro is the oldest and the one who's been in the NBA the longest. He's

averaging 23.5 points this season.

"Man, I'm truly proud of him because there has been a lot of media that's thrown that man's name in the mud," Heat captain Bam Adebayo said. "Thrown his name in trade rumors, y'all said he's not good enough, he can't do this, he can't do that, all the way to down to somebody's wingspan. It's a testament to him."

For Williams, the All-Star trip is a homecoming of sorts. The Thunder guard played his college basketball at Santa Clara, about an hour from Chase Center — where he'll play on Sunday night.

"What am I most excited about? Honestly, I haven't seen my parents in a minute, so that'll be cool to see them out there," Williams said. "I'm going to be down the street from my school basically, so I think that's going to be cool. I'll be able to see some people I haven't seen in a while."

Cunningham is leading one of the NBA surprise stories this season: The Pistons, who were awful a year ago, are squarely in the playoff mix right now and his 25.4 points per game are obviously a big reason why that's happening.

"It's a great feeling. It's hard to put words on it," Cunningham said. "It's been a lot of work, a lot of wins, losses, lessons, all that stuff that's led up to this point. I'm just thankful for the moment."

Sengun is part of another turnaround in Houston; the Rockets made a push that fell short of the playoffs last year, but now are in position to even have home-court advantage in Round 1 of what will surely be a loaded postseason in the Western Conference.

"Thank you to my team, my country, the city of Houston and all the fans for believing in me," Sengun said. "This is just the beginning."

And for Mobley, the All-Star nod shows that people still notice defense and rebounding in the NBA. He's one of the leaders of a Cleveland team that goes into the break leading the Eastern Conference and is right there with Oklahoma City for the best record in the NBA.

"I worked real hard to get to this point," Mobley said. "Hopefully more to come."

Trump's education secretary may be asked to dismantle the Education Department. Here's what it does

By ANNIE MA AP Education Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — If Linda McMahon is confirmed as education secretary, President Donald Trump has said he wants her to "put herself out of a job."

A plan being considered by the White House would direct the education secretary to dismantle the department as much as legally possible while asking Congress to abolish it completely. At her confirmation hearing Thursday, McMahon indicated she would seek "a better functioning Department of Education," with more efficient programs that might be better implemented by different federal agencies.

Eliminating the department altogether would be a cumbersome task; McMahon said she believed that would require action from Congress. Already, the department has cut \$900 million in contracts for its office that tracks progress of students in schools across America.

The agency's main role is financial. Annually, it distributes billions in federal money to colleges and schools and manages the federal student loan portfolio. Closing the department would mean redistributing each of those duties to another agency. The Education Department also plays an important regulatory role in services for students, ranging from those with disabilities to low-income and homeless kids.

Indeed, federal education money is central to Trump's plans for colleges and schools. Trump has vowed to cut off federal money for schools and colleges that push "critical race theory, transgender insanity, and other inappropriate racial, sexual or political content" and to reward states and schools that end teacher tenure and support universal school choice programs.

Federal funding makes up a relatively small portion of public school budgets — roughly 14%. Colleges and universities are more reliant on it, through research grants along with federal financial aid that helps students pay their tuition.

Here is a look at some of the department's key functions, and how Trump has said he might approach them.

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Student loans and financial aid

The Education Department manages approximately \$1.5 trillion in student loan debt for over 40 million borrowers. It also oversees the Pell Grant, which provides aid to students below a certain income threshold, and administers the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), which universities use to allocate financial aid.

President Joe Biden's administration made cancellation of student loans a signature effort of the department's work. Even though Biden's initial attempt to cancel student loans was overturned by the Supreme Court, the administration forgave over \$175 billion for more than 4.8 million borrowers through a range of changes to programs it administers, such as Public Service Loan Forgiveness.

The loan forgiveness efforts have faced Republican pushback, including litigation from several GOP-led states.

Trump has criticized Biden's efforts to cancel debt as illegal and unfair, calling it a "total catastrophe" that "taunted young people." Trump's plan for student debt is uncertain: He has not put out detailed plans.

Civil rights enforcement

Through its Office for Civil Rights, the Education Department conducts investigations and issues guidance on how civil rights laws should be applied, such as for LGBTQ+ students and students of color. The office also oversees a large data collection project that tracks disparities in resources, course access and discipline for students of different racial and socioeconomic groups.

Trump has suggested a different interpretation of the office's civil rights role. Under his administration, the department has instructed the office to prioritize complaints of antisemitism above all else and has opened investigations into colleges and school sports leagues for allowing transgender athletes to compete on women's teams.

In his campaign platform, Trump said he would pursue civil rights cases to "stop schools from discriminating on the basis of race." He has described diversity and equity policies in education as "explicit unlawful discrimination" and said colleges that use them will pay fines and have their endowments taxed.

Trump also has pledged to exclude transgender students from Title IX protections, which affect school policies on students' use of pronouns, bathrooms and locker rooms. Originally passed in 1972, Title IX was first used as a women's rights law. Last year, Biden's administration said the law forbids discrimination based on gender identity and sexual orientation, but a federal judge undid those protections.

College accreditation

While the Education Department does not directly accredit colleges and universities, it oversees the system by reviewing all federally recognized accrediting agencies. Institutions of higher education must be accredited to gain access to federal money for student financial aid.

Accreditation came under scrutiny from conservatives in 2022, when the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools questioned political interference at Florida public colleges and universities. Trump has said he would fire "radical left accreditors" and take applications for new accreditors that would uphold standards including "defending the American tradition" and removing "Marxist" diversity administrators.

Although the education secretary has the authority to terminate its relationship with individual accrediting agencies, it is an arduous process that has rarely been pursued. Under President Barack Obama, the department took steps to cancel accreditors for a now-defunct for-profit college chain, but the Trump administration blocked the move. The group, the Accrediting Council for Independent Colleges and Schools, was terminated by the Biden administration in 2022.

Money for schools

Much of the Education Department's money for K-12 schools goes through large federal programs, such as Title I for low-income schools and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. Those programs support services for students with disabilities, lower class sizes with additional teaching positions, and pay for social workers and other non-teaching roles in schools.

During his campaign, Trump called for shifting those functions to the states. He has not offered details on how the agency's core functions of sending federal money to local districts and schools would be handled.

The Heritage Foundation's Project 2025, a sweeping proposal outlining a far-right vision for the country,

offered a blueprint. It suggested sending oversight of programs for kids with disabilities and low-income children first to the Department of Health and Human Services, before eventually phasing out the funding and converting it to no-strings-attached grants to states.

Gas explosion at Taiwan food court kills 4 and injures 26

TAIPEI, Taiwan (AP) — A gas explosion at a department store in Taiwan on Thursday killed four people and injured 26, fire authorities said.

The blast occurred at the food court on the 12th floor of the Shin Kong Mitsukoshi department store in Taichung city, the Taichung Fire Bureau said. The higher floors of the upscale department store were blown out, raining debris on pedestrians below.

Among the dead were two people visiting from Macau, Macao's Tourism Office confirmed Thursday. Local media reported that they were part of a family of seven who were there for tourism. The other five were also injured and are now being treated at local hospitals in Taichung.

Part of the store was under renovation, but it's not clear if the work was connected to the explosion, Taichung Vice Mayor Cheng Chao-hsin told reporters at the scene. "If it's found there were illegal actions or parts that violated renovation regulations, it will be dealt with appropriately," Cheng said.

Dozens of firefighters were deployed to the scene at about 11:30 a.m. Parts of the building's exterior were damaged and scattered fragments were strewn on the streets.

Taichung Mayor Lu Shiow-yen told reporters at the scene that she felt the shock at her office nearby. She said the fire bureau would focus on a rescue operation first, but an investigation was also underway and officers were checking whether there were other sources of danger.

Taiwan's President Lai Ching-te said he had asked all relevant government agencies to investigate the cause of the accident.

Elon Musk calls for the US to 'delete entire agencies' from the federal government

By JON GAMBRELL Associated Press

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates (AP) — Elon Musk called on Thursday for the United States to "delete entire agencies" from the federal government as part of his push under President Donald Trump to radically cut spending and restructure its priorities.

Musk offered a wide-ranging survey via a videocall to the World Governments Summit in Dubai, United Arab Emirates, of what he described as the priorities of the Trump administration interspersed with multiple references to "thermonuclear warfare" and the possible dangers of artificial intelligence.

"We really have here rule of the bureaucracy as opposed to rule of the people — democracy," Musk said, wearing a black T-shirt that read: "Tech Support." He also joked that he was the "White House's tech support," borrowing from his profile on the social platform X, which he owns.

"I think we do need to delete entire agencies as opposed to leave a lot of them behind," Musk said. "If we don't remove the roots of the weed, then it's easy for the weed to grow back."

While Musk has spoken to the summit in the past, his appearance on Thursday comes as he has consolidated control over large swaths of the government with Trump's blessing since assuming leadership of the Department of Government Efficiency. That's included sidelining career officials, gaining access to sensitive databases and inviting a constitutional clash over the limits of presidential authority.

Musk's new role imbued his comments with more weight beyond being the world's wealthiest person through his investments in SpaceX and electric carmaker Tesla.

His remarks also offered a more-isolationist view of American power in the Middle East, where the U.S. has fought wars in both Afghanistan and Iraq since the Sept. 11, 2001, terror attacks.

"A lot of attention has been on USAID for example," Musk said, referring to Trump's dismantling of the U.S. Agency for International Development. "There's like the National Endowment for Democracy. But I'm

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like, 'Okay, well, how much democracy have they achieved lately?'"

He added that the U.S. under Trump is "less interested in interfering with the affairs of other countries."

There are "times the United States has been kind of pushy in international affairs, which may resonate with some members of the audience," Musk said, speaking to the crowd in the UAE, an autocratically ruled nation of seven sheikhdoms.

"Basically, America should mind its own business, rather than push for regime change all over the place," he said.

He also noted the Trump administration's focus on eliminating diversity, equity and inclusion work, at one point linking it to AI.

"If hypothetically, AI is designed for DEI, you know, diversity at all costs, it could decide that there's too many men in power and execute them," Musk said.

On AI, Musk said he believed X's newly updated AI chatbot, Grok 3, would be ready in about two weeks, calling it at one point "kind of scary."

He criticized Sam Altman's management of OpenAI, which Musk just led a \$97.4 billion takeover bid for, describing it as akin to a nonprofit aimed at saving the Amazon rainforest becoming a "lumber company that chops down the trees." A court filing Wednesday on Musk's behalf in the OpenAI dispute said he'd withdraw his bid if the ChatGPT maker drops its plan to convert into a for-profit company.

Musk also announced plans for a "Dubai Loop" project in line with his work in the Boring Company — which is digging tunnels in Las Vegas to speed transit.

A later statement from Dubai's crown prince, Sheikh Hamdan bin Mohammed Al Maktoum, said the city-state and the Boring Company "will explore the development" of a 17-kilometer (10.5-mile) underground network with 11 stations that could transport over 20,000 passengers an hour. He offered no financial terms for the deal.

"It's going to be like a wormhole," Musk promised. "You just wormhole from one part of the city — boom — and you're out in another part of the city."

A far-right party is heading for its strongest result yet in Germany's election

By GEIR MOULSON Associated Press

BERLIN (AP) — Alternative for Germany appears to be heading for its strongest national election result yet this month and is fielding its first candidate to lead the country. Even though it's highly unlikely to take a share of power soon, it has become a factor that other politicians can't ignore and helped shape Germany's debate on migration.

The far-right party first entered Germany's national parliament eight years ago on the back of discontent with the arrival of large numbers of migrants in the mid-2010s, and curbing migration remains its signature theme. But the party has proven adept at harnessing discontent with other issues: Germany's move away from fossil fuels, restrictions during the COVID-19 pandemic and support for Ukraine after Russia's full-scale invasion nearly three years ago.

How did it start?

Alternative for Germany, or AfD, was founded in 2013 and initially focused on opposition to bailouts for struggling countries in the eurozone debt crisis — measures that then Chancellor Angela Merkel described as "without alternative." It was sometimes known as a "party of professors," a reference to leading figures in the early days, though it already had a strong streak of hard-right, anti-establishment identity.

Over the years, AfD became more radical and repeatedly changed leaders. It was Merkel's decision in 2015 to allow in large numbers of migrants that supercharged it as a political force, and in the 2017 national election, it won 12.6% of the vote to take seats in the German parliament for the first time.

Where does it stand now?

After returning to parliament in 2021 with reduced support of 10.3%, AfD picked up strength as Chan-

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cellor Olaf Scholz's center-left government bickered through a series of crises — some of its own making — and finally collapsed.

Germany saw a wave of protests a year ago triggered by a report that right-wing extremists met to discuss the deportation of millions of immigrants, including some with German citizenship, and that AfD members were present.

But that didn't do long-term poll damage to AfD. It finished second in the European Parliament election in June, and in September, the best-known figure on its hardest-right wing, Björn Höcke, secured the first far-right win in a state election in post-World War II Germany.

AfD is going into the Feb. 23 election with renewed confidence and radical language. Alice Weidel, its first candidate for chancellor, has embraced the term "remigration" as the party calls for large-scale deportations of people with no legal entitlement to be in Germany — a politically loaded word that featured in last year's controversy.

AfD calls for the immediate lifting of sanctions against Russia and opposes weapons deliveries to Ukraine. It wants Germany to reintroduce a national currency and for the European Union to be turned into a looser "association of European nations," though it isn't explicitly advocating leaving the 27-nation bloc.

Germany's domestic intelligence agency has the party under observation for suspected right-wing extremism. The AfD's branches in three eastern states are designated "proven right-wing extremist" groups. AfD strongly objects to those assessments and rejects any association with the Nazi past. Höcke has appealed two convictions for knowingly using a Nazi slogan at a political event.

Who supports it?

AfD has support across Germany and is represented in all but two of the 16 state legislatures, but the party is strongest in the formerly communist and less prosperous east.

It has a unique ability to seize on issues "that other parties don't handle with this clarity, with this intensity, with this radicalism and this emotionality," said Wolfgang Schroeder, a political science professor at the Berlin Social Science Center. "And on top of that, it's an internet party and from the beginning used the emotionalizing power of the internet for its own communication — much better than all other German parties together."

That has helped it to perform strongly among young voters in recent regional elections. The party portrays itself as an anti-establishment force at a time of low trust in politicians, sometimes dismissing the "old parties" as a "cartel."

Schroeder described it as "something like an aircraft carrier for resentment and anger." Other parties say they won't work with it.

Who are its friends abroad?

AfD's rise has coincided with that of far-right parties in many other European countries, including Austria's Freedom Party and the National Rally in France, with which it has plenty of common ground. Weidel was in Budapest to visit Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán on Wednesday.

However, it isn't part of those parties' Patriots for Europe group in the European Parliament after some tensions before last year's EU elections. AfD was thrown out of one of the group's predecessors after its leading candidate at the time, Maximilian Krah, said that not all Nazi SS men "were necessarily criminals."

The party has found an enthusiastic supporter in billionaire Elon Musk, a close ally of U.S. President Donald Trump. Musk has declared that "only the AfD can save Germany." He held a live chat on X with Weidel and appeared live by video link at an AfD campaign rally.

At that rally, Weidel vowed to "make Germany great again" in an echo of the U.S. president's slogan.

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Today in History: February 14

17 killed in Parkland, Florida, high school shooting

By The Associated Press undefined

Today is Friday, Feb. 14, the 45th day of 2025. There are 320 days left in the year. This is Valentine's Day.

Today in history:

On Feb. 14, 2018, a gunman identified as a former student opened fire with a semi-automatic rifle at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, killing 17 people in the nation's deadliest school shooting since the Sandy Hook Elementary School attack in Newtown, Connecticut, more than five years earlier. (Nikolas Cruz pleaded guilty to murder in October 2021 and was sentenced in November 2022 to life in prison without the possibility of parole.)

Also on this date:

In 1779, English explorer James Cook was killed on the island of Hawai'i during a melee following Cook's attempt to kidnap Hawaiian monarch Kalani'ōpu'u, who was to be used as leverage for the return of a boat stolen from one of Cook's ships.

In 1876, inventors Alexander Graham Bell and Elisha Gray applied separately for patents related to the telephone. (The U.S. Supreme Court eventually ruled Bell the rightful inventor.)

In 1929, the "St. Valentine's Day Massacre" took place in a Chicago garage as seven rivals of Al Capone's gang were gunned down.

In 1984, 6-year-old Stormie Jones became the world's first heart-liver transplant recipient when the surgery was performed at Children's Hospital of Pittsburgh.

In 1989, Iran's Ayatollah Khomeini issued a fatwa calling on Muslims to kill Salman Rushdie, author of "The Satanic Verses," a novel the Ayatollah condemned as blasphemous against Islam.

In 2013, double-amputee Olympic sprinter Oscar Pistorius shot and killed his girlfriend, Reeva Steenkamp, at his home in Pretoria, South Africa; he was later convicted of murder and served nearly nine years of a sentence of 13 years and five months before being released from prison in January 2024.

In 2017, a former store clerk, Pedro Hernandez, was convicted in New York of murder in one of the nation's most haunting missing-child cases, nearly 38 years after 6-year-old Etan Patz (AY'tahn payts) disappeared while on the way to a school bus stop.

Today's birthdays: Businessman-politician Michael Bloomberg is 83. Saxophonist Maceo Parker is 82. Journalist Carl Bernstein is 81. Magician Teller (Penn and Teller) is 77. Journalist-radio host Terry Gross is 74. Actor Ken Wahl is 68. Opera singer Renée Fleming is 66. Actor Meg Tilly is 65. Football Hall of Famer Jim Kelly is 65. Sen. Bernie Moreno, R-Ohio, is 58. Actor Simon Pegg is 55. Rock singer Rob Thomas (Matchbox Twenty) is 53. Former NFL quarterback Drew Bledsoe is 53. Actor Danai Gurira is 47. Actor Freddie Highmore is 33.