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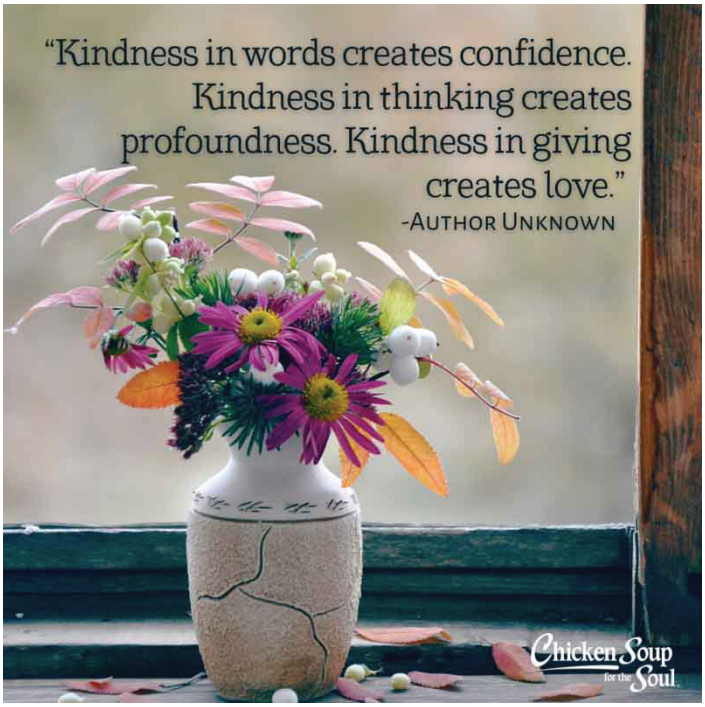


Position Opening

Parish Secretary opening for Bethesda- Butler Lutheran Churches. Approximately 25-30 hours per month with the option of some work from home hours. Mail resume to Bethesda Lutheran Church, PO Box 426, Bristol, SD 57219 before October 1st. (0914.0928)

Upcoming Events

Friday, Sept. 17
Homecoming Parade, 1 p.m.
FFA Pork Loin Supper @ Football Field 5:30 PM
TigerPalooza at GHS Gym, 2:30 p.m. to 4:30 p.m.
Football hosting Mobridge-Pollock, 7 p.m.

Saturday, Sept. 18
Girls Soccer at Garretson, 1 p.m.
Boys Soccer at Freeman Academy, 5 p.m.
Groton Fly-In/Drive-In at Groton Airport

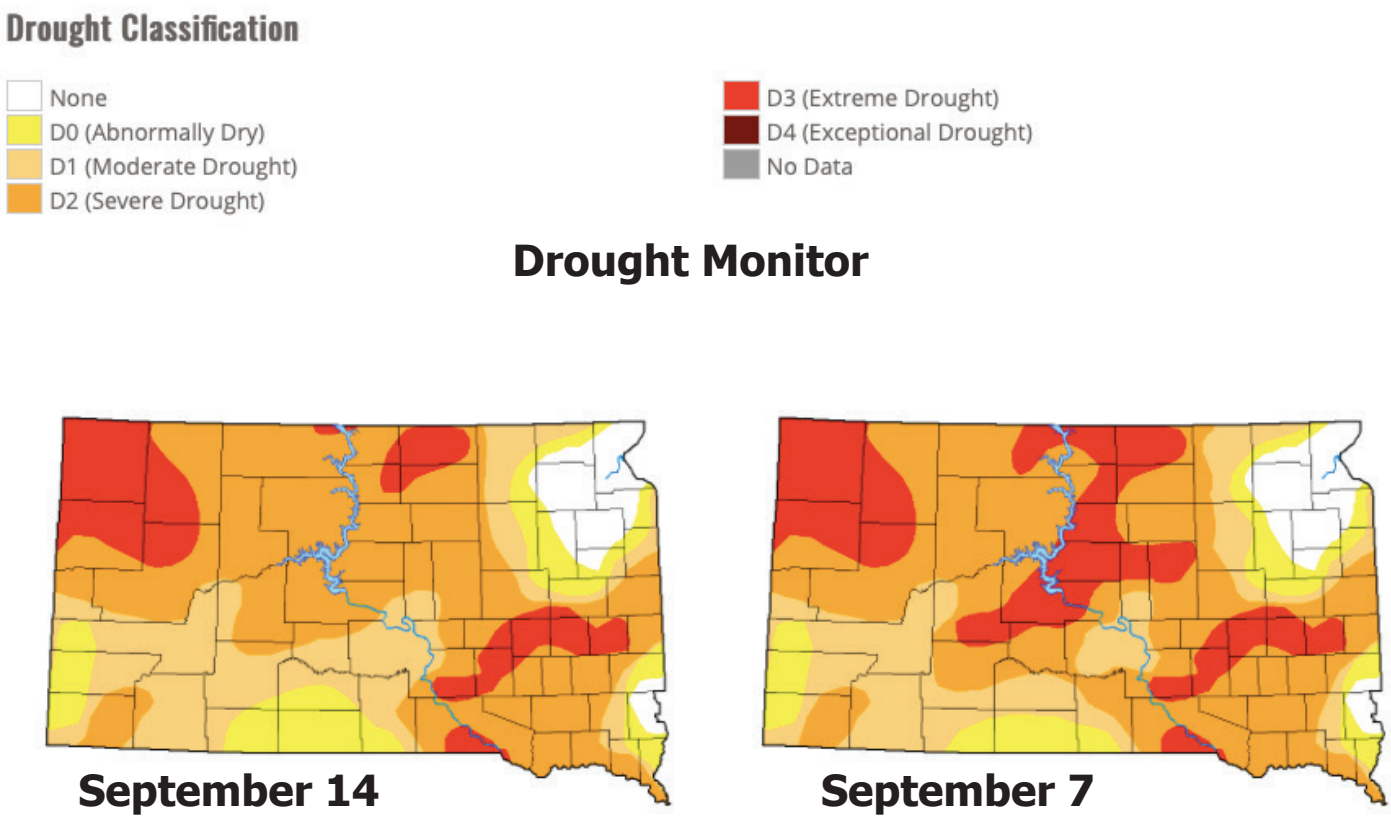
Sunday, Sept. 19
Groton Fly-In/Drive-In at Groton Airport

Homecoming Week Dress up days

Day	MS/HS	Elementary
Friday	Spirt Day	Spirit Day

OPEN: Recycling Trailer in Groton

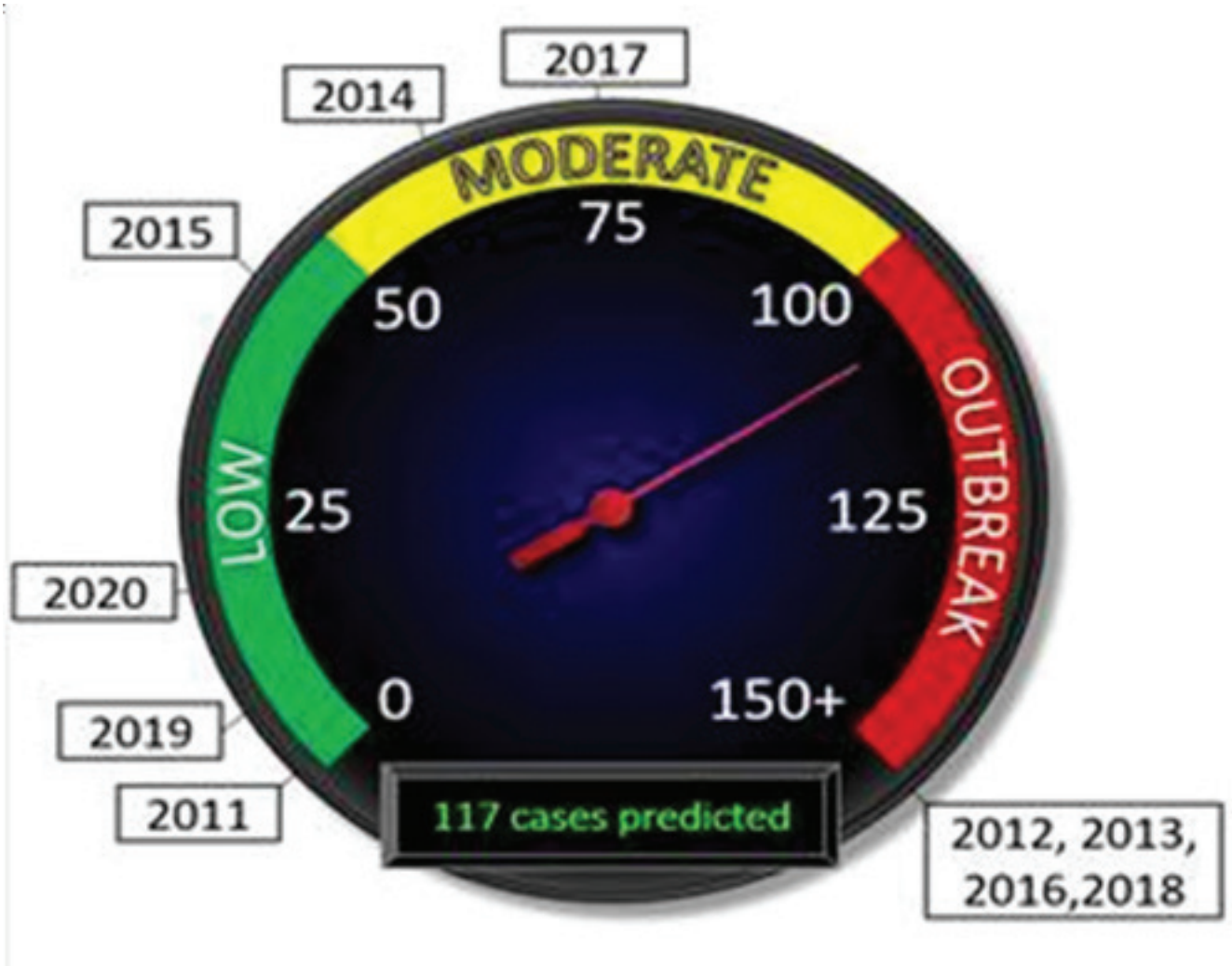
The recycling trailer is located west of the city shop. It takes cardboard, papers and aluminum cans.



High Plains

Short-term dryness and drought has become more apparent in recent weeks across the southern section of the region, including parts of Kansas and Colorado, aggravated by periods of late-summer heat. A monthly record of 89°F was tied on September 10 in Alamosa, Colorado. Alamosa again reached 89°F on September 11, tying the record first set on September 5 and 6, 2020, while Colorado Springs, Colorado, achieved a new September standard (98°F; previously, 97°F on September 6, 2020). Across the High Plains, September 10-11 featured consecutive triple-digit, daily-record highs in communities such as McCook, Nebraska (102 and 104°F); Goodland, Kansas (103 and 102°F); and Burlington, Colorado (101 and 100°F). Dodge City, Kansas (105°F on the 11th), achieved a 105-degree reading in September for only the third time on record, following 106°F on September 3, 1947, and 107°F on September 1, 2011. Farther north, there were some adjustments (mostly improvements) to the drought depiction, primarily in the Dakotas, based on favorable impacts from recent rain events. For example, improvements in topsoil moisture have led to some greening of drought-affected pastures and have encouraged winter wheat producers to begin planting. Still, the U.S. Department of Agriculture reported on September 12 that topsoil moisture was 64 to 71% very short to short in the Dakotas, while rangeland and pastures were rated 77 to 80% very poor to poor, reflecting the long road ahead regarding drought recovery. On the same date, statewide topsoil moisture on the High Plains ranged from 39% very short to short in Nebraska to 79% in Wyoming.

West Nile Update – South Dakota, 16 September 2021



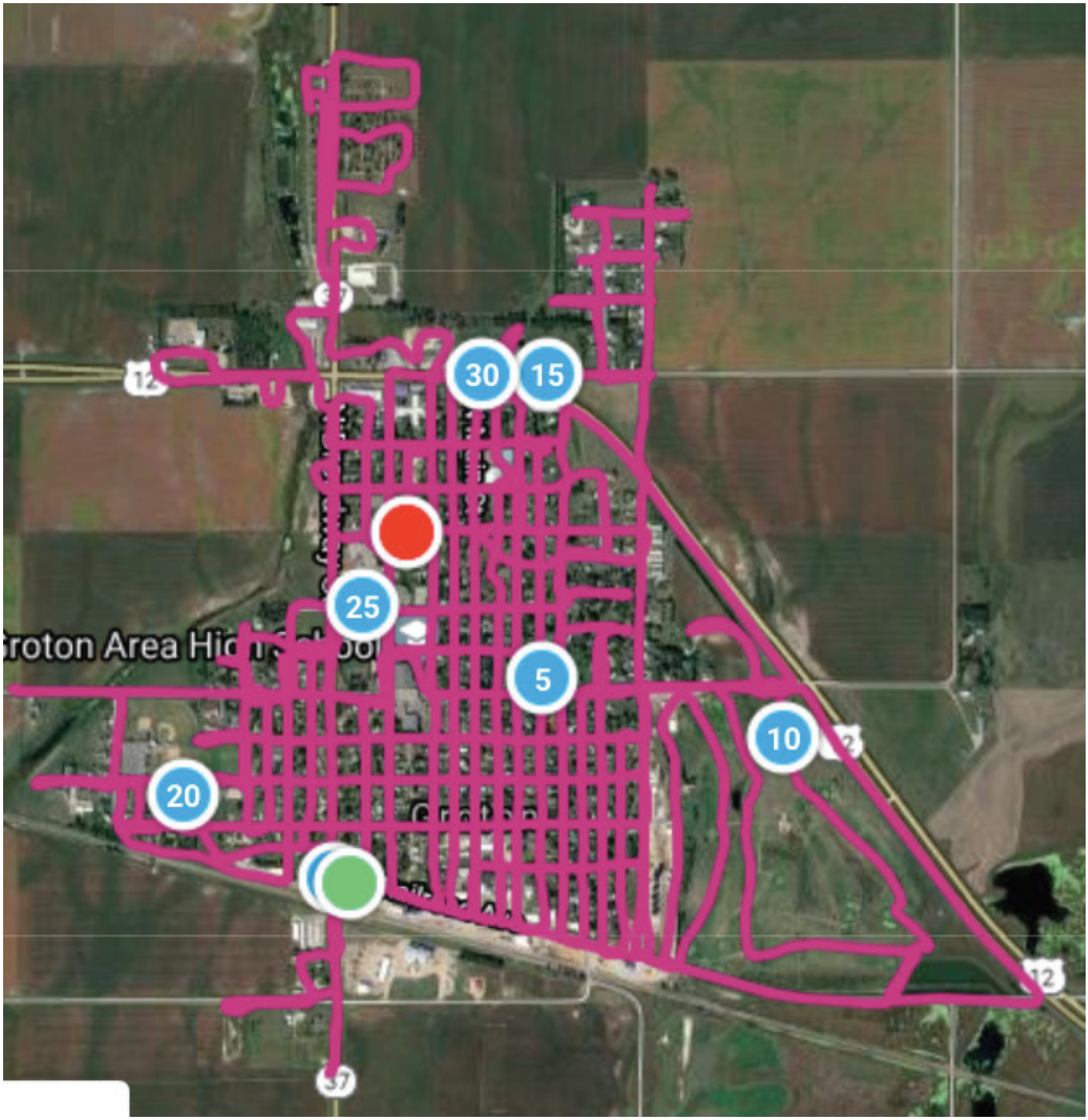
SD WNV (as of September 15): 36 human cases reported (Beadle, Bon Homme, Brown, Clark, Davison, Day, Dewey, Douglas, Hamlin, Hand, Hughes, Hutchinson, Kingsbury, Lake, Lawrence, Minnehaha, Moody, Oglala Lakota, Potter, Roberts, Sanborn, Spink, Stanley, Tripp, Union, Walworth, Yankton) and 1 death

Positive blood donors (as of September 15): 3 (Clark, Day, Hand)

8 counties with positive mosquito pools (Beadle, Brookings, Brown, Codington, Hand, Hughes, Lincoln, Minnehaha)

US WNV (as of September 7): 210 cases (AL, AZ, AR, CA, CO, GA, ID, IL, IA, KS, LA, MD, MA, MI, MN, MO, NE, NJ, NY, ND, OH, OK, OR, PA, SC, SD, TN, TX, UT) and 9 deaths

WNV Prediction Model – Total Number of Cases Projected for 2021, South Dakota (as of September 13)



Mosquito Control Last Night

The City of Groton conducted an adult mosquito control Thursday night. The wind was northerly about 10 mph with temperature in the low 60s. 12 gallons of Evolver 4x4 was used for the control. Not shown on the map is the airport which was also done last night.

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Gonsoir is state finalist for Presidential Award

By Dorene Nelson

Kristen Gonsoir, science and chemistry teacher for the Groton Area School District, is one of three State finalists for the Presidential Award for Excellence in Mathematics and Science Teaching (PAEMST). Around 100 nation-wide individuals are chosen annually.

The PAEMST is one of the most prestigious honors in the nation for teachers and recognizes exemplary teaching and leadership in mathematics and science education.

After each state selects its three finalists, a national committee selects the winners who will receive a $10,000 award and a paid trip to Washington, DC. During this week-long trip, winners participate in a series of networking opportunities and recognition events, plus a special citation signed by the President of the United States.

Gonsoir, who has been teaching for 28 years, currently teaches tenth through twelfth grade general chemistry, eleventh and twelfth grade organic chemistry, and twelfth grade physics.

Gonsoir teaches the top science classes in the school, often using college textbooks to do so. Several of her classes are weighted due to their difficulty. This helps her students to earn extra grade points when doing well in these advanced courses.

Many of her former students return home to thank her for helping to make their college course work easier because of her teaching methods and skill.

Gonsoir earned her Bachelor's Degree in Chemistry and Secondary Education at Northern State University (NSU) in 1992. Furthering her education, she next received her Master's Degree in Education in 2015, also from NSU.

In 2019 Gonsoir was a Japan-U.S. Fulbright program teacher. The Fulbright program focuses on utilizing technology to promote global citizenship with students.

On the local level, she has been involved with the Department of Education (DOE) Mentor Teacher program and with Science Standards Translations Team.

Gonsoir has also received multiple honors and awards while serving as her district's debate coach. She started coaching oral interpretation and debate when she was still in college.

Mobridge-Pollock beats Gorton Area in volleyball

Mobridge-Pollock defeated Groton Area in volleyball action played Thursday at the Groton Area Arena, 3-0. Game scores were 25-17, 25-21 and 26-24.

Madeline Fliehs had four kills, an ace serve and a block. Sydney Leicht had three kills and an ace serve. Anna Fjeldheim had three kills. Aspen Johnson had two kills and two blocks. Elizabeth Fliehs had two kills and an ace serve. Emma Schinkel had a kill and two ace serves. Megan Fliehs had one kill.

Landyn Henderson led Mobridge-Pollock with seven kills while Mariah Goehring had five kills, Emma Keller had four kills, Emily Hatzenbuehler had two kills and two blocks, Leah Overland had two kills, four ace serves and one block, Grace Overland had two kills and Katy Kemnitz had three ace serves.

Mobridge-Pollock won the junior varsity match, 25-16 and 25-12. Aspen Johnson had three kills, Marlee Tollifson had two kills, Emma Schinkel and Carly Guthmiller each had two ace serves, Lydia Meier had an ace and a kill, Laila Roberts had an ace and Anna Fjeldheim had a kill.

Groton Area won the C match, 25-21 and 25-9. Ashley Johnson had five ace serves and a kill, Kyla Lehr had four kills, Emma Kutter had three kills, a block and an ace serve, Carly Giblert had two ace serves, Jerrica Locke had an ace and a kill and Talli Wright had a kill.

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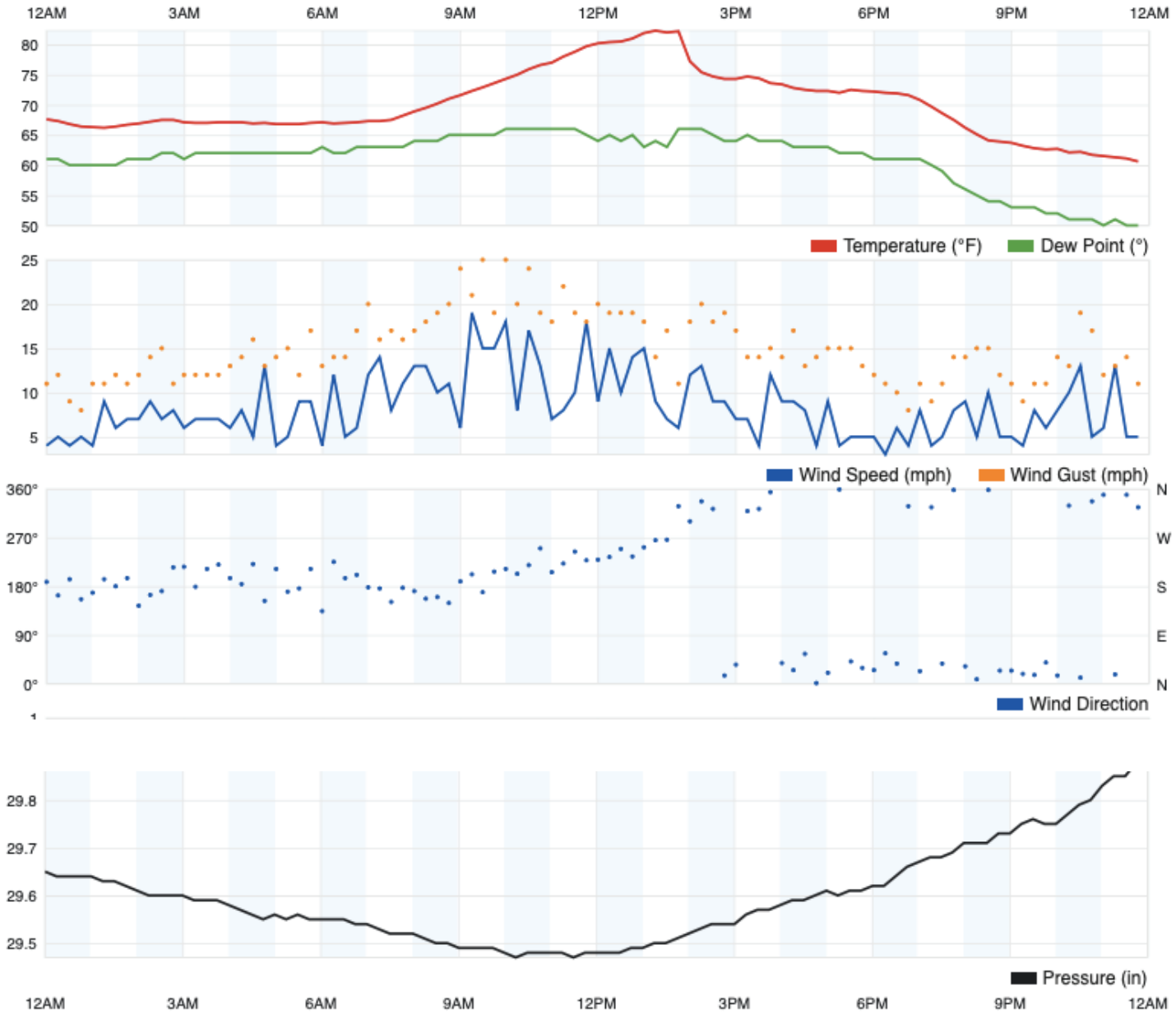
Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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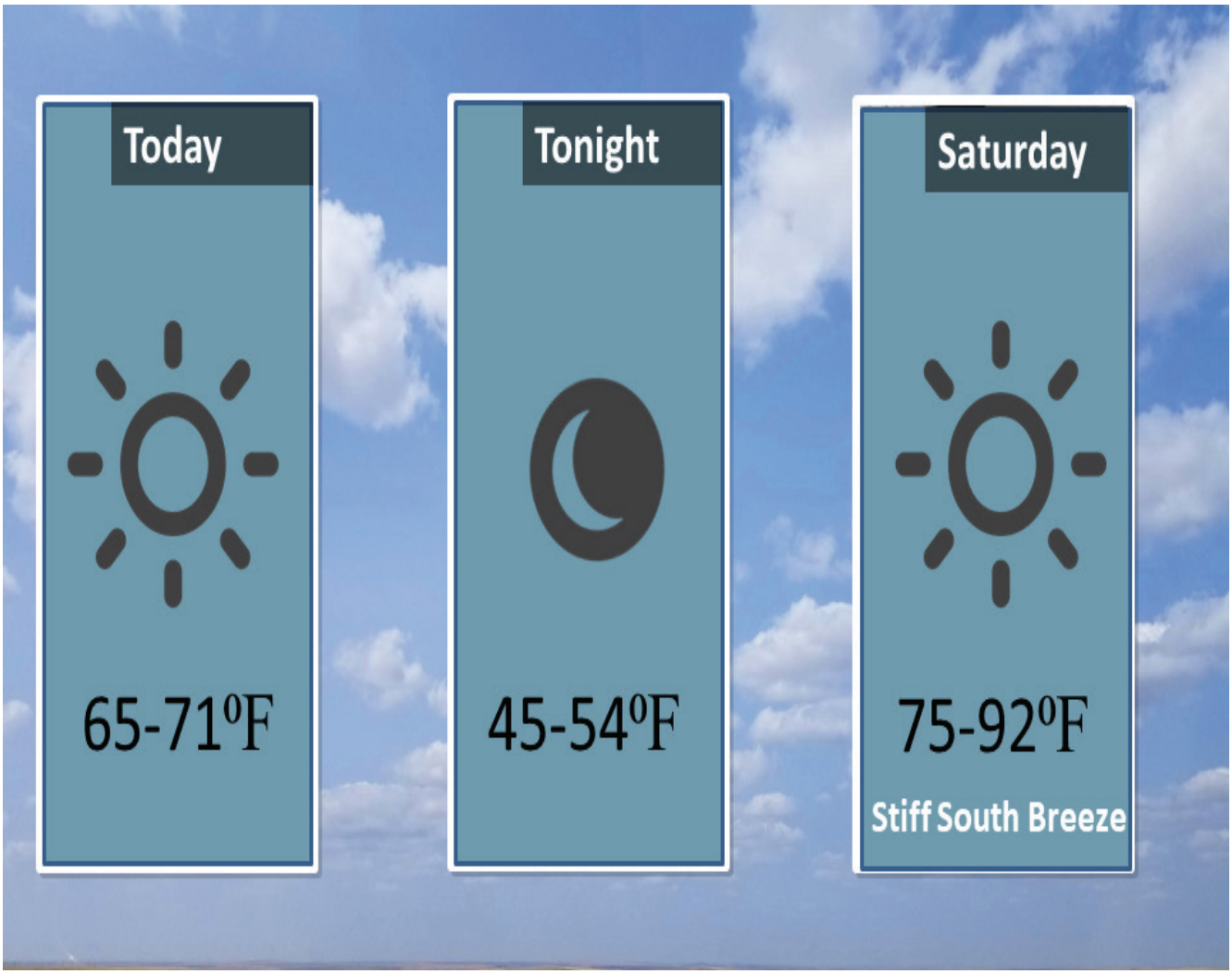
Today	Tonight	Saturday	Saturday Night	Sunday
				
Becoming Sunny	Mostly Clear	Sunny and Breezy	Mostly Clear	Mostly Sunny
High: 69 °F	Low: 47 °F	High: 82 °F	Low: 65 °F	High: 88 °F



High pressure moves overhead today with light winds and ample sunshine. As high pressure moves east for Saturday, winds will increase out of the south and temperatures will once again jump above average.

Today in Weather History

September 17, 1911: Pipestone, Minnesota is hit with baseball-sized hail that smashes numerous windows at the Calumet Hotel and high school. The local observer measured hail three inches deep.

September 17, 1969: In the late afternoon 16 miles east of Pierre in Hughes County, 60 mph wind-driven penny size hail-damaged crops and buildings in the area. Unofficial amounts of 5 to 6 inches of rain also occurred with the storms.

September 17, 1975: Heavy rain and hail fell in the Pierre area during the night flooding streets and some basements. The high winds downed power lines. The damage estimate was more than 100,000 dollars.

September 17, 1975: Lightning started a grass fire in western Stanley County in the early morning hours of the 17th. With the arid and windy conditions, the fire quickly spread and consumed 25,000 acres of grassland before it was under control. Smoke from the fire was seen from 40 miles away. The fire also destroyed six outbuildings and an old unoccupied farmhouse. Some roads had to be closed due to the fire and smoke. Several electrical poles were also burned. Many residents were notified of possible evacuations. The fire was finally put out in the early morning hours of the 18th.

1829: A typhoon, Japan's most catastrophic storm, inflicts widespread damage over much of the country. On the southern island of Kyushu, the storm surge off the Ariake Sea kills over 10,000. The German physician Philipp Franz von Siebold was present during this storm and succeeded in taking barometric pressure readings around Nagasaki at the risk of drowning.

1923: A devastating fire threatens the University of California at Berkeley on this day. This fire killed two and caused $10 million in damages. While the exact cause is unknown, the fire began in the dry forest northeast of Berkeley. Strong northeasterly winds blew cinders into the air which lead to the rapid-fire growth.

1932 - Concord NH was drenched with 5.97 inches of rain in 24 hours to establish a record for that location (16th- 17th). (The Weather Channel)

1963 - Nearly two and a half inches of rain fell at Yuma AZ in 24 hours. It was the most intense rain for Yuma during the period between 19S09 and 1977. (The Weather Channel)

1965 - A storm produced a band of heavy snow across parts of Wyoming. Totals of 23 inches at Rawlins and 20.7 inches at Lander easily surpassed previous snowfall record totals for so early in the season. (15th-17th) (The Weather Channel)

1987 - Thunderstorms produced large hail, damaging winds, and heavy rain in the northeastern U.S. Heavy rain in southwestern Pennsylvania forced evacuation of twenty homes along Four Mile Run Creek, near Darlington. Harrisburg PA established a record for the date with 2.11 inches of rain. A cold front in the central U.S. brought freezing temperatures to parts of Montana and Wyoming. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1988 - Early in the morning a tornado hit Kelly Air Force Base in San Antonio, TX, injuring three persons and causing twenty-eight million dollars damage. A second tornado on the northwest side of San Antonio caused six million dollars damage, and a third tornado in Bexar County killed one person and injured another. Thunderstorms associated with Hurricane Gilbert spawned a total of forty-seven tornadoes in a two day period, with forty of those tornadoes in central and south central Texas. (Storm Data) (The National Weather Summary)

1989 - Hurricane Hugo hit the Virgin Islands, producing wind gusts to 97 mph at Saint Croix. Hurricane Hugo passed directly over the island of Saint Croix causing complete devastation and essentially cutting off the island from communications. A storm surge of five to seven feet occurred at Saint Croix. The only rain gauge left operating, at Caneel Bay, indicated 9.40 inches in 24 hours. Hurricane Hugo claimed the lives of three persons at Saint Croix, and caused more than 500 million dollars damage. A ship, Nightcap, in the harbor of Culebra, measured wind gusts as high as 170 mph. A cold front brought high winds to the Great Basin and the Rocky Mountain Region, and thunderstorms along the cold front produced wind gusts to 66 mph at Yellowstone Park WY. (Storm Data) (The National Weather Summary)

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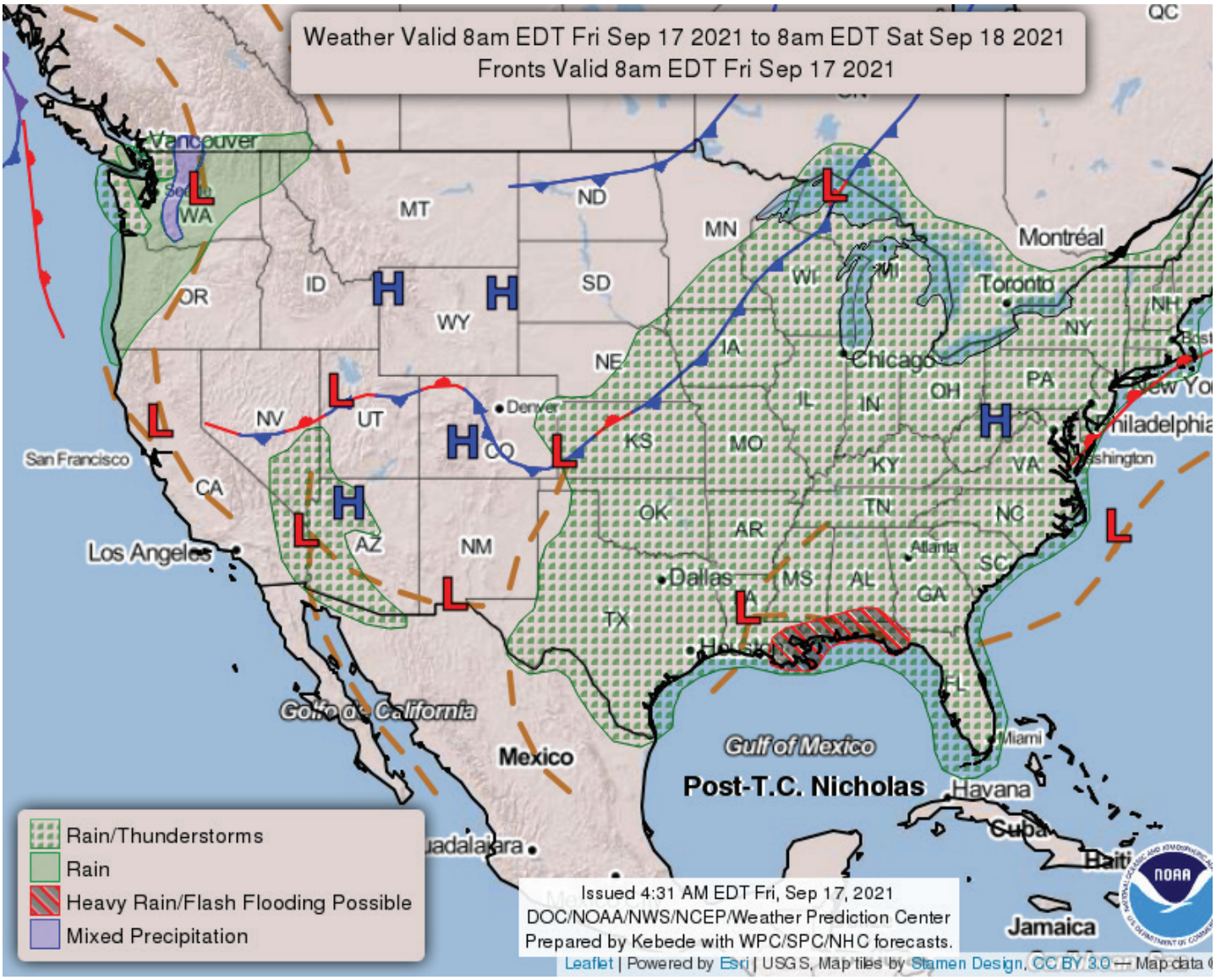
Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 82.3 °F at 1:15 PM
Low Temp: 60.6 °F at 11:45 PM
Wind: 25 mph at 9:30 AM
Precip: 0.00

Today's Info

Record High: 97° in 1955
Record Low: 28° in 1903
Average High: 75°F
Average Low: 46°F
Average Precip in Sept.: 1.14
Precip to date in Sept.: 2.32
Average Precip to date: 17.48
Precip Year to Date: 15.16
Sunset Tonight: 7:40:54 PM
Sunrise Tomorrow: 7:13:43 AM



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TIME FOR A NEW SONG?

Sunday church bulletins quite often reveal more than the words printed on them. Other than the date on the front of the bulletin, the order of service changes very little. There seems to be three important words that appear every Sunday in every order of service: Invocation, Offering and Benediction. In between those words are the hymns, Scripture, and special music which are "recycled" from week to week. But there is little new or different. Even contemporary worship services seem to follow the same format and formula week after week.

Sounds boring, doesn't it?

Perhaps that's why Psalm 96:1 explodes with a challenge: "Sing to the Lord a NEW SONG!" - which literally means "SING NEW THINGS!" If God is alive and well in our lives and in our churches, we will surely be seeing new things and singing new songs because we will see Him at work in our lives and in the life of our churches. Prayers will be answered, and lives changed, sinners will be saved, and His disciples will be called to serve Him in new and different ways - showing His love and care to those around us. We will have to rearrange the order of service to make time for public praise to share what God is doing and sing new songs of praise for the blessings we are enjoying!

And then in verse two we read, "Proclaim His salvation day after day!" When the proclamation of His salvation and its rewards is the centerpiece of our world and worship, we will be overcome with His joy and discover "new songs to sing!"

Prayer: Lord, may we accept Your challenge to sing a "new song" as we live and experience Your great salvation. May our joy from You be real! In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: Sing to the Lord a new song; sing to the Lord, all the earth. Psalm 96:1

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2021 Community Events

Cancelled Legion Post #39 Spring Fundraiser (Sunday closest to St. Patrick's Day, every other year)
03/27/2021 Lions Club Easter Egg Hunt 10am Sharp at the City Park (Saturday a week before Easter Weekend)
04/10/2021 Dueling Pianos Baseball Fundraiser at the American Legion Post #39 6-11:30pm
04/24/2021 Firemen's Spring Social at the Fire Station 7pm-12:30am (Same Saturday as GHS Prom)
04/25/2021 Princess Prom (Sunday after GHS Prom)
05/01/2021 Lions Club Spring City-Wide Rummage Sales 8am-3pm (1st Saturday in May)
05/31/2021 Legion Post #39 Memorial Day Services (Memorial Day)
6/7-9/2021 St. John's Lutheran Church VBS
06/17/2021 Groton Transit Fundraiser, 4-7 p.m.
06/18/2021 SDSU Alumni & Friends Golf Tournament at Olive Grove
06/19/2021 U8 Baseball Tournament
06/19/2021 Postponed to Aug. 28th: Lions Crazy Golf Fest at Olive Grove Golf Course, Noon
06/26/2021 U10 Baseball Tournament
06/27/2021 U12 Baseball Tournament
07/04/2021 Firecracker Golf Tournament at Olive Grove
07/11/2021 Lions Club Summer Fest/Car Show at the City Park 10am-4pm (Sunday Mid-July)
07/22/2021 Pro-Am Golf Tournament at Olive Grove Golf Course
07/30/2021-08/03/2021 State "B" American Legion Baseball Tournament in Groton
08/06/2021 Wine on Nine at Olive Grove Golf Course
08/13/2021 Groton Basketball Golf Tournament
Cancelled Lions Club Crazy Golf Fest 9am Olive Grove Golf Course
08/29/2021 Groton Firemen Summer Splash Day at GHS Parking Lot (4-5 p.m.)
09/11/2021 Lions Club Fall City-Wide Rummage Sales 8am-3pm (1st Saturday after Labor Day)
09/12/2021 Sunflower Classic Golf Tournament at Olive Grove
09/18-19 Groton Fly-In/Drive-In, Groton Municipal Airport
10/08/2021 Lake Region Marching Band Festival (2nd Friday in October)
10/09/2021 Pumpkin Fest at the City Park 10am-3pm (Saturday before Columbus Day)
10/29/2021 Downtown Trick or Treat 4-6pm
10/29/2021 Groton United Methodist Trunk or Treat (Halloween)
11/13/2021 Legion Post #39 Turkey Party (Saturday closest to Veteran's Day)
11/25/2021 Community Thanksgiving at the Community Center 11:30am-1pm (Thanksgiving)
12/04/2021 Olive Grove Tour of Homes
12/11/2021 Santa Claus Day at Professional Management Services 9am-Noon

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News from the Associated Press

Thursday's Scores

The Associated Press undefined
PREP VOLLEYBALL=
Aberdeen Christian def. Wolsey-Wessington, 25-22, 25-19, 20-25, 20-25, 15-11
Aberdeen Roncalli def. Tiospa Zina Tribal, 25-18, 25-9, 25-14
Arlington def. Castlewood, 25-21, 25-13, 25-19
Baltic def. Flandreau, 25-12, 25-10, 25-8
Bon Homme def. Irene-Wakonda, 20-25, 25-21, 15-25, 25-16, 15-5
Brandon Valley def. Watertown, 25-12, 25-12, 25-20
Bridgewater-Emery def. Viborg-Hurley, 25-10, 25-13, 25-13
Britton-Hecla def. Deuel, 26-24, 21-25, 25-22, 25-14
Chester def. Howard, 25-18, 25-14, 25-16
Colman-Egan def. Lake Preston, 25-11, 25-5, 25-15
Dakota Valley def. Canton, 25-16, 25-16, 25-17
Dell Rapids def. Tri-Valley, 21-25, 25-12, 18-25, 25-13, 15-12
Deubrook def. Dell Rapids St. Mary, 15-25, 25-8, 25-22, 25-12
Elk Point-Jefferson def. Tea Area, 25-20, 25-21, 25-17
Elkton-Lake Benton def. DeSmet, 25-18, 25-15, 22-25, 25-23
Estelline/Hendricks def. Oldham-Ramona/Rutland, 25-23, 25-14, 22-25, 25-22
Ethan def. Corsica/Stickney, 25-16, 25-12, 25-21
Faulkton def. Miller, 25-20, 25-14, 25-21
Freeman def. Tripp-Delmont/Armour, 25-21, 24-26, 22-25, 25-19, 15-12
Great Plains Lutheran def. Waubay/Summit, 25-20, 25-16, 25-16
Hamlin def. Milbank, 25-19, 25-16, 25-11
Harrisburg def. Huron, 25-20, 21-25, 23-25, 25-15, 15-10
Highmore-Harrold def. Hitchcock-Tulare, 20-25, 25-22, 25-10, 21-25, 15-11
Hill City def. Sturgis Brown, 25-12, 25-8, 25-9
Kadoka Area def. Faith, 25-22, 25-16, 25-22
Lennox def. Parkston, 25-19, 16-25, 25-8, 21-25, 18-16
Madison def. Vermillion, 25-15, 25-13, 25-18
McCook Central/Montrose def. Beresford, 25-15, 22-25, 25-11, 25-12
Northwestern def. Ipswich, 25-17, 25-11, 25-18
Parker def. Alcester-Hudson, 25-11, 25-15, 23-25, 25-16
Philip def. Harding County, 25-20, 25-19, 25-14
Potter County def. McLaughlin, 25-8, 25-8, 25-5
Redfield def. Sisseton, 25-15, 26-24, 25-19
Sioux Falls Christian def. Jackson County Central, Minn., 25-17, 25-14, 25-13
Sioux Falls Lincoln def. Aberdeen Central, 25-14, 25-16, 25-11
Sioux Falls Washington def. Pierre, 25-16, 26-24, 25-17
Sully Buttes def. Lyman, 25-20, 25-21, 25-23
Timber Lake def. Dupree, 22-25, 25-19, 25-11, 25-20
Webster def. Clark/Willow Lake, 23-25, 25-23, 25-21, 17-25, 15-7
Wessington Springs def. Crow Creek, 25-19, 25-15, 25-17
Winner def. Kimball/White Lake, 14-25, 25-14, 25-13, 26-24
Boyd County Triangular=
Boyd County, Neb. def. Gregory, 25-13, 25-20, 25-18

Stuart, Neb. def. Gregory, 25-12, 25-17, 25-19
Gayville-Volin Triangular=
Gayville-Volin def. Centerville, 25-13, 25-19, 25-14
Gayville-Volin def. Freeman Academy/Marion, 25-11, 25-6, 25-11
Newell Triangular=
Lemmon def. Tiospaye Topa, 25-8, 25-14, 25-20
Newell def. Lemmon, 25-15, 25-10, 23-25, 25-23
POSTPONEMENTS AND CANCELLATIONS=
Little Wound vs. Todd County, ppd.
Oelrichs vs. Lakota Tech, ppd.
Wakpala vs. McIntosh, ppd.

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Some high school volleyball scores provided by Scorestream.com, https://scorestream.com/

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Information from: ScoreStream Inc., http://ScoreStream.com

South Dakota is 1 of 4 states not resettling Afghan evacuees

By STEPHEN GROVES Associated Press

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — South Dakota is one of four states, along with the District of Columbia, that won't be resettling any of the nearly 37,000 Afghan evacuees who made it to the U.S. during the final days of its chaotic withdrawal from Afghanistan last month.

Lutheran Social Services of South Dakota, which is the state's refugee resettlement agency, decided not to accept any Afghans after weighing local conditions and its ability to resettle them.

Rebecca Kiesow-Knudsen, the group's chief operating officer, said Thursday that those arriving from Afghanistan without special immigrant visas are currently not eligible to work or receive federal aid to help them resettle.

"We had really significant concerns about our ability to provide the level of support to help make that integration successful," she said.

Kiesow-Knudsen said the agency was facing a "rapidly evolving situation" that could change depending on whether Congress decides to provide funding and work eligibility for evacuees who have not been granted refugee status.

The Biden administration this week began telling governors and state refugee coordinators how many Afghan evacuees they would receive. The numbers ranged from more than 5,200 people who are headed to California to as few as 10 being resettled in Alabama and 10 in Mississippi. South Dakota, along with Hawaii, West Virginia, Wyoming and the District of Columbia, are not expected to resettle anyone from the first group.

Republican Gov. Kristi Noem last month expressed reservations about accepting evacuees from Afghanistan. She told KSFY-TV, "We do not want them coming here unless we know they are an ally and a friend, and that they don't want to destroy this country."

Noem in 2019 decided to continue allowing refugees to be resettled in the state after former President Donald Trump attempted to allow states to opt out of the program. But refugee numbers in South Dakota have plummeted in recent years. Lutheran Social Services reported resettling 50 people during the last fiscal year — a drop from 439 just four years earlier.

States with large numbers of Afghans who settled in the U.S. over the past 20 years, including California, Maryland, Texas and Virginia, are again welcoming a disproportionate number of evacuees, according to data for the Afghan Placement and Assistance program obtained by The Associated Press.

Kiesow-Knudsen said there isn't much of an Afghan community in South Dakota. The agency has resettled 12 people from the country in the last five years.

She said, "We want to make sure that anyone who would arrive in South Dakota would be successful

in integrating."

Monument Health implements vaccination requirement

RAPID CITY, S.D. (AP) — Monument Health is joining dozens of other health care systems across the country, including Sanford Health and Avera Health, in requiring that its physicians and caregivers be vaccinated against COVID-19.

The Rapid City-based system includes five hospitals and 38 medical clinics and specialty centers. Its vaccination requirement begins Dec. 1.

"We are grateful for all of the hard work and heroism our Physicians and Caregivers have shown throughout this pandemic. We look forward to the day when COVID-19 is no longer a threat to our care teams, our patients, and our communities," said Brad Archer, Monument's chief medical officer. "The only way to get there is through vaccination."

Monument Health, as other health systems, will consider exemption requests for specific conditions and religious beliefs.

The highly transmissible Delta variant of the COVID-19 virus has been spreading rapidly in western South Dakota. The number of new weekly West River coronavirus cases has nearly tripled in three weeks with Monument Health treating a record number of hospitalized patients.

"Every day we see the damage that this virus does to patients," Archer added. "As health care professionals, we owe it to our communities to do whatever we can to contain and control COVID-19. And extensive studies show that the vaccines are safe and effective."

Monument Health said that among its hospitalized COVID-19 patients, approximately 82 percent are unvaccinated. Among those receiving ICU-level care, 91 percent are unvaccinated and among patients on ventilators, 88 percent are unvaccinated.

University to receive $11 million for cold weather research

RAPID CITY, S.D. (AP) — The South Dakota School of Mines and Technology has been awarded an $11 million federal grant to develop better material and manufacturing technology to withstand cold weather.

South Dakota Mines will partner with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' Cold Regions and Engineering Lab. The research will be done over five years and is aimed at developing better materials and technology to support the Army's military objectives in cold and remote regions.

U.S. Sen. Mike Rounds said funding for the project has been his top defense appropriation request for three years, the Rapid City Journal reported.

"I congratulate South Dakota School of Mines and the Army Corps of Engineers on this important collaborative research effort. Thanks to the work that has already begun, the conditions have been set for the research team to design enduring systems and processes for use in cold and remote conditions."

Dr. Jim Rankin, president of South Dakota Mines, said the research is a win-win for the university and for national defense.

"It will aid our nation's defense and it will lead to new technology, new materials and new manufacturing processes that will spin off into start-up companies right here in the Black Hills," Rankin said. "This translates to more local high-paying jobs for our graduates and an economic boost to our community."

Milley: Calls to China were 'perfectly' within scope of job

By LOLITA C. BALDOR Associated Press

ATHENS, Greece (AP) — The top U.S. military officer said Friday that calls he made to his Chinese counterpart in the final stormy months of Donald Trump's presidency were "perfectly within the duties and responsibilities" of his job.

In his first public comments on the conversations, Gen. Mark Milley such said calls are "routine" and were done "to reassure both allies and adversaries in this case in order to ensure strategic stability." The

chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff spoke to The Associated Press and another reporter traveling with him to Europe.

Milley has been at the center of a firestorm amid reports he made two calls to Gen. Li Zuocheng of the People's Liberation Army to assure him that the United States was not going to suddenly go to war with or attack China.

Descriptions of the calls made last October and in January were first aired in excerpts from the forthcoming book "Peril" by Washington Post journalists Bob Woodward and Robert Costa. The book says Milley told Li that he would warn Li in the event of an attack.

Milley on Friday offered only a brief defense of his calls, saying he plans a deeper discussion about the matter for Congress when he testifies at a hearing later in September.

"I think it's best that I reserve my comments on the record until I do that in front of the lawmakers who have the lawful responsibility to oversee the U.S. military," Milley said. "I'll go into any level of detail Congress wants to go into in a couple of weeks."

Milley and U.S. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin are scheduled to testify Sept. 28 before the Senate Armed Services Committee, in what initially was going to be a hearing on the U.S. military withdrawal from Afghanistan and the chaotic evacuation of Americans, Afghans and others from that country.

Now, however, Milley is expected to face tough questioning on the telephone calls, which came during Trump's turbulent last months in office as he challenged the results of the 2020 election. The second call, on Jan. 8, came two days after a violent mob attacked the U.S. Capitol in an effort to prevent Congress from certifying Joe Biden's White House victory.

A special House committee that is investigating the Jan. 6 riot at the Capitol has asked for details about Milley's calls. U.S. Reps. Bennie Thompson, D-Miss., and Liz Cheney, R-Wyo., leaders of the committee, have also sought records related to the November election, the transfer of power from Trump to Biden and the riot.

Milley was appointed Joint Chiefs chairman by Trump in 2019 and has remained in that post in the Biden administration. As chairman, Milley is the top military adviser to the president and to the defense secretary.

The White House and the Pentagon chief have said they continue to have full trust and confidence in Milley.

The new book says Milley, fearful of Trump's actions late in his term, twice called his Chinese counterpart to assure him that the U.S. was not going to attack China. One call took place on Oct. 30, four days before the American election. The second call was on Jan. 8, less than two weeks before Biden's inauguration and two days after the insurrection at the Capitol by supporters of Trump.

Some U.S. lawmakers have said Milley overstepped his authority, and they have called for Biden to fire him. Trump blasted Milley as treasonous, called him "a complete nutjob" and said Milley "never told me about calls being made to China."

Biden told reporters after the disclosures in the book that "I have great confidence in Gen. Milley."

Milley's office, in a statement this week, said the calls were intended to convey "reassurance" to the Chinese military and were in line with his responsibilities as Joint Chiefs chairman.

The statement from Milley spokesman Col. Dave Butler also said that the calls were "staffed, coordinated and communicated" with the Pentagon and other federal agencies.

According to the book, which the AP obtained, Milley assured his Chinese counterpart in the first call that "the American government is stable and everything is going to be okay." It said he told Li, "We are not going to attack or conduct any kinetic operations against you."

"If we're going to attack, I'm going to call you ahead of time. It's not going to be a surprise," Milley reportedly said.

Milley spoke with a number of other military leaders around the world after the Jan. 6 riot; they included leaders from the United Kingdom, Russia and Pakistan. A description of those calls in January referred to "several" other counterparts that Milley spoke to with similar messages of reassurance that the U.S. government was strong and in control.

The second call was meant to placate Chinese fears about the events of Jan. 6. But the book reports that Li wasn't as easily assuaged, even after Milley promised him: "We are 100 percent steady. Everything's fine. But democracy can be sloppy sometimes."

In response to the book, U.S. Sen. Marco Rubio, R-Fla., urged Biden to fire Milley, saying the general worked to "actively undermine" the American commander in chief, Trump.

Navalny app removed from online stores as Russian polls open

By DARIA LITVINOVA Associated Press

MOSCOW (AP) — An app created by allies of imprisoned Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny disappeared from Apple and Google stores on Friday as polls opened across Russia for three days of voting in a parliamentary election.

It comes as Russian authorities seek to suppress the use of Smart Voting, a project designed by Navalny to promote candidates that are most likely to defeat those backed by the Kremlin. This weekend's election is widely seen as an important part of President Vladimir Putin's efforts to cement his grip on power ahead of the 2024 presidential election, for which control of the parliament is key.

Apple and Google have come under pressure in recent weeks, with Russian officials urging them to remove the app, which features Smart Voting, saying failure to do so will be interpreted as interference in the election and threatening them with fines.

Last week, Russia's Foreign Ministry summoned U.S. ambassador John Sullivan over the situation.

On Thursday, representatives of Apple and Google were invited to a meeting in the upper house of Russia's parliament, the Federation Council. The commission said in a statement after the meeting that Apple agreed to cooperate with the Russian authorities.

Apple and Google have not responded to a request for comment.

Google was forced to remove the app because it faced legal demands by regulators and threats of criminal prosecution in Russia, according to a person with direct knowledge of the matter who also said Russian police officers visited Google's offices in Moscow on Monday to enforce a court order to block the app. The person spoke on condition of anonymity because of the sensitivity of the issue.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told reporters Friday that the presidential administration "definitely, of course" welcomes the companies' decision to remove the app, as it comes in compliance with Russian laws. Peskov said that the app was "outside the law" in Russia.

In recent months, authorities have unleashed a sweeping crackdown against Navalny's allies and supporters in an effort to suppress Smart Voting.

After recovering from poisoning with a nerve agent last year, Navalny was given a 2½-year prison sentence for violating parole over a previous conviction. He says both the poisoning and the conviction were politically motived — charges the Kremlin denies.

His top allies were slapped with criminal charges, and his Foundation for Fighting Corruption, as well as a network of regional offices, have been outlawed as extremist organizations. That has exposed hundreds of people associated with the groups to prosecution. Many of his top associates have left the country. About 50 websites that his team ran have been blocked, and dozens of regional offices have been closed.

The authorities have moved to block the Smart Voting website as well, but some internet users can still access it. Navalny's team has also created a Smart Voting chat bot on the messaging app Telegram and published a list of candidates Smart Voting endorses in Google Docs and on YouTube.

Navalny's close ally Ivan Zhdanov on Friday tweeted a screenshot of what appears to be an email from Apple, explaining why the app should be removed from the store. The screenshot cites the extremism designation for the Foundation for Fighting Corruption and allegations of election interference. "Google, Apple are making a big mistake," Zhdanov wrote.

Leonid Volkov, Navalny's top strategist, wrote on Facebook that the companies "bent to the Kremlin's blackmail." He noted that the move doesn't affect users who have already downloaded the app, and that it should be functioning correctly.

Peskov on Friday called Smart Voting "another attempt at provocations that are harmful for the voters."

As voting got underway in Russia on Friday morning, long lines and large crowds formed at some polling stations in Moscow and other cities. Russian media attributed them to state institutions and companies forcing their employees to vote.

Peskov dismissed the allegations and suggested that those queuing at polling stations came there voluntarily because they had to work on the weekend or wanted to "free up" Saturday and Sunday.

Dr. Anna Trushina, a radiologist at a Moscow hospital, told the AP that she came to a polling station in central Moscow "to be honest, because we were forced (to come and vote) by my work. Frankly speaking."

She added: "And I also want to know who leads us."

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Kelvin Chan in London and Vladimir Kondrashov in Moscow contributed reporting.

White House warns that debt limit showdown could hurt states

By JOSH BOAK Associated Press

The White House is warning state and local governments about severe cuts to disaster relief, Medicaid, infrastructure grants. school money and other programs if Congress fails to raise the U.S. debt limit.

A fact sheet for state and local officials that was obtained by The Associated Press is an attempt to ratchet up the public pressure on Senate Republican leader Mitch McConnell. President Joe Biden has insisted so far on bipartisan backing to increase the cap on debt that was almost entirely accrued before he took office, but McConnell, R-Ky., has been unmoved and has repeatedly said that Democrats must act on their own.

The Treasury Department has engaged in extraordinary measures to keep the government running after the suspended debt limit was reinstated in August at a level of $22 trillion, about $6 trillion less than the current total debt load. Treasury's extraordinary measures will be exhausted by October, creating the potential for default.

The debt limit is the amount of money Congress allows the Treasury to borrow. It was suspended three times during the Trump administration and has been lifted dozens of times since 1960. Created at the start of World War I so Congress would no longer need to approve each bond issuance, the debt limit has evolved into a political weapon as borrowing has sharply escalated over the past two decades.

McConnell has said he will not sanction further increases and that the Democrats have the ability to go it alone.

"With a Democratic President, a Democratic House, and a Democratic Senate, Democrats have every tool they need to raise the debt limit," the Kentucky senator tweeted on Wednesday. "It is their sole responsibility. Republicans will not facilitate another reckless, partisan taxing and spending spree."

Biden has countered that Republicans are to blame for the rising deficit and that his plans for child care, schooling, health care, infrastructure and adapting to climate change will be fully paid for in the long term.

"Let me remind you, these are the same folks who just four years ago passed the Trump tax cut," Biden said in Thursday remarks at the White House. "It just ballooned the federal deficit."

With the total debt standing at $28.4 trillion, the government would be forced to cut deeply into programs unless the restrictions on borrowing are lifted or suspended. The risk of a recession and turmoil in the financial market would make it harder for states and cities to borrow, while also playing havoc with public pension investments.

The Biden administration's fact sheet makes the case that the pain would be spread among the states because many programs rely on federal dollars. The government's ability to respond to natural disasters such as hurricanes, earthquakes or wildfires would be curtailed.

States would face severe Medicaid shortfalls because the federal government covers two-thirds of the costs. About 20% of Americans get their health insurance through Medicaid and the Children's Health Insurance Program.

Roughly $100 billion in infrastructure grants for highways, airports and public transit would be jeopardized. The more than $50 billion for special education, school districts serving poorer students and other

programs would also be threatened, as would $30 billion in food assistance and $10 billion for public health.

Black Iowa police chief faces backlash after bringing change

By RYAN J. FOLEY Associated Press

WATERLOO, Iowa (AP) — The first Black police chief in Waterloo, Iowa, is facing intense opposition from some current and former officers as he works with city leaders to reform the department, including the removal of its longtime insignia that resembles a Ku Klux Klan dragon.

Joel Fitzgerald says his 16-month tenure in Waterloo, a city of 67,000 with a history of racial divisions, is a "case study" for what Black police chiefs face as they seek to build community trust and hold officers to higher standards. In an interview with The Associated Press, he said the attacks were driven by misinformation and racism toward him and his boss, the city's first Black mayor.

"I don't think there's been any police chief in America in a small- or medium-sized department that have endured this for the reasons I have endured it and I think the reasons have to do with race," said Fitzgerald, who previously served as the chief of larger departments in Fort Worth, Texas and Allentown, Pennsylvania. "This is my fourth job being the first Black police chief. I've dealt with pushback in other places but never so overt. Never so nonfactual."

Jacinta Gau, a University of Central Florida professor and expert on race and policing, said new, reform-minded chiefs always face backlash, and that is intensified when they are Black leaders of historically white forces.

"The power dynamic in America has always been that Black people are subordinate to white people. When Black people acquire leadership positions, that power dynamic is flipped on its head and white people who were comfortable with the status quo are now feeling very threatened," she said.

The backlash against Fitzgerald has intensified since last fall when the City Council began pushing to remove the department's emblem — a green-eyed, red-bodied, winged creature known as a griffin that had adorned patches on officers' uniforms since the 1960s.

After a messy process, the council voted 5-2 last week to order the department to remove the symbol from its uniforms by the end of September.

It was the latest among several changes the department has made under Fitzgerald that have won praise from Mayor Quentin Hart, most City Council members and some community leaders — while angering the police union, retired officers and conservatives.

A white City Council member running to unseat Hart in November has portrayed herself as a champion of police while vowing to oust Fitzgerald if elected. A political action committee supporting her and other "pro-law enforcement candidates" called Cedar Valley Backs the Blue has attacked Fitzgerald and Hart on Facebook, claiming they are mismanaging the department.

Three of Fitzgerald's predecessors as chief released a letter saying they were outraged at what the department had become under his leadership, claiming it was "imploding" and that morale had hit an all-time low.

Adding to the backlash is that Fitzgerald is an outsider to Waterloo with academic degrees some critics mock as elitist. He acknowledges "it didn't look good" when news emerged that he was a finalist for chief openings in bigger cities during his first year.

Opponents have attacked everything from Fitzgerald's salary — which is in line with similar chiefs in Iowa — to his off-duty trips to visit family in Texas, where his teenage son continues treatment for a brain tumor that was removed in 2019.

Last year, he took over a department that has long experienced tension with the city's Black community, which comprises 17% of the city population.

Hart said Waterloo could have been a hotbed of racial unrest after George Floyd's death given its history, but Fitzgerald helped ease tensions the day before he was sworn on June 1, 2020, in by meeting with protesters for hours to hear their concerns.

"It was a resetting of the clock moment," Fitzgerald said.

Numerous changes soon followed: banning chokeholds, outlawing racial profiling, requiring officers to

intervene if they see excessive force, and investigating all complaints of misconduct.

The Waterloo Commission on Human Rights called for the removal of the griffin emblem, saying it evoked fear and distrust among some given its resemblance to the KKK symbol.

But generations of Waterloo officers had seen it as a symbol of their vigilance. The Waterloo Police Protective Association, which represents officers, denied it had racist intent and mobilized against its removal.

Fitzgerald, one of a handful of officers of color in the 123-member department, said he was met with fierce pushback when he suggested the department rebrand itself voluntarily before the council acted.

Supporters of the griffin, including the Back the Blue group, framed its removal as an affront to officers.

"The beatdown of our police officers continues," City Council member Margaret Klein, who is running for mayor, wrote on Facebook, citing the "devastating impact of removing the beloved 50-year patch design." She has called for Fitzgerald's resignation.

Hart said the debate over the griffin missed the bigger picture. He said the department has undergone a "complete paradigm shift," adopting a community policing model that has been popular.

"Decency and respect, that's what I want. But I'm pro-law enforcement," said Hart, who was elected in 2015 and re-elected in 2017 and 2019.

The Back the Blue group has labeled Hart a "radical mayor" and released an anonymous survey taken by half the current officers and dozens of retirees showing all 98 believed Fitzgerald was the wrong man for the job. Officers complained that they didn't feel supported by the community or the administration.

"It's sad and it's pathetic but this is what's going on at the Waterloo Police Department," said group chairman Lynn Moller, a retired investigator.

Fitzgerald said officer morale is a national problem and Waterloo has eight vacancies after some officers retired or left for other jobs. He proposed a strategic plan to improve morale and hire more officers in coming years.

City Council member Jonathan Grieder said Fitzgerald had been slandered by people claiming to love the police.

"We are grappling with the very real issues that have long been embedded of race and force and policing," he said. "I get that some people have never had to reckon with that until now. I get that it's uncomfortable."

Justice Department reviewing policies on transgender inmates

By MICHAEL BALSAMO and MOHAMED IBRAHIM Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Justice Department is reviewing its policies on housing transgender inmates in the federal prison system after protections for transgender prisoners were rolled back in the Trump administration, The Associated Press has learned.

The federal Bureau of Prisons' policies for transgender inmates were thrust into the spotlight this week after a leader of an Illinois anti-government militia group — who identifies as transgender — was sentenced to 53 years in prison for masterminding the 2017 bombing of a Minnesota mosque.

Emily Claire Hari, who was charged, tried and convicted as Michael Hari, was sentenced Monday for the bombing of Dar Al-Farooq Islamic Center in Bloomington, Minnesota. It will now be up to the Bureau of Prisons' Transgender Executive Council — a group of psychology and correctional officials — to determine where to house Hari in a system of 122 federal prisons.

Under the Obama administration, the bureau's policies for transgender inmates — known as the Transgender Offender Manual — called for that council to "recommend housing by gender identity when appropriate." That language was changed in the Trump administration to require the committee to "use biological sex as the initial determination."

The Trump-era manual, which remains in effect, says the agency would assign an inmate to a facility based on identified gender only "in rare cases." About 1,200 inmates — of the nearly 156,000 federal prisoners in the United States — identify as transgender, a Justice Department official said.

The prison transgender council, established in 2016, consists of about 10 people, including two psychologists, a psychiatrist and prison designation experts, a Justice Department official told the AP. The official

was not authorized to speak publicly about the issue and spoke on condition of anonymity.

The council must consider an inmate's health and safety, any potential history of disciplinary action and the security level of the federal prison where the inmate could be assigned. Other factors include staffing in prisons, and the programs or classes the inmate might need.

Because Hari has already been sentenced, the council must decide quickly on a prison because Hari will have to be transferred into the Bureau of Prisons.

A Justice Department spokesperson said the bureau is committed to providing all inmates with a safe and humane environment, "Including providing gender-affirming housing where appropriate. BOP is in the process of reviewing the current version of its policy regarding transgender inmates."

There are few high-security federal prisons for female inmates, which would also factor into Hari's placement. Because of the crime Hari committed, it is likely Hari would need to be housed in a high-security prison, as opposed to a medium or low-security facility.

Many transgender inmates also don't request to be assigned to prisons to match their gender identity, the Justice Department official said, in part for their own safety.

Prosecutors said during the trial that hatred for Muslims motivated Hari to carry out the attack, which didn't physically hurt anyone but traumatized the mosque's community.

Several men were gathered for early morning prayers at Dar Al-Farooq on Aug. 5, 2017, when a pipe bomb was thrown into an imam's office and detonated. Hari and co-defendants Joe Morris and Michael McWhorter, were tracked by authorities to Clarence, Illinois, a rural community about 120 miles (190 kilometers) south of Chicago where they lived, after a seven-month investigation.

Hari, 50, was convicted in December of five counts that include using explosives, obstructing the free exercise of religious beliefs and damaging property because of its religious character. Prosecutors said Hari masterminded the attack, citing anti-Muslim rhetoric in Hari's manifesto called The White Rabbit Handbook, named after the militia Hari formed that included Morris, McWhorter and others.

According to court documents, Hari informed a Minnesota jail deputy in late December about her gender dysphoria, and requested to be moved to a women's facility and provided with hormone replacement therapy. Documents filed by the defense describe Hari's gender dysphoria as "unbearable" and that, along with right-wing misinformation, fueled an "inner conflict" during the time of the bombing.

"She strongly desired making a full transition but knew she would be ostracized from everyone and everything she knew," defense lawyer Shannon Elkins wrote. "Thus, as she formed a rag-tag group of freedom fighters or militia men and spoke of missions to Cuba and Venezuela, Ms. Hari secretly looked up 'sex change,' 'transgender surgery,' and 'post-op transgender' on the internet."

Elkins said Hari was living a double life, planning a trip to Thailand for male-to-female surgery and purchasing female clothes while buying military fatigues for the militia.

Elkins did not return calls seeking an interview on where Hari hoped to serve the prison sentence.

Prosecutors said it was offensive to use gender dysphoria to deflect guilt from the attack, which prosecutors said Hari refused to take responsibility for. U.S. District Judge Donovan Frank, who was appointed by President Bill Clinton, said during Monday's sentencing hearing that he was prepared to recommend that Hari be sent to a women's facility but the final decision was up to the Bureau of Prisons.

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Ibrahim reported from Minneapolis.

Australian PM rejects Chinese criticism of nuclear sub deal

By ROD McGUIRK Associated Press

CANBERRA, Australia (AP) — Prime Minister Scott Morrison on Friday rejected Chinese criticism of Australia's new nuclear submarine alliance with the United States and said he doesn't mind that President Joe Biden might have forgotten his name.

China reacted angrily when Biden, Morrison and British Prime Minister Boris Johnson used a virtual news

conference this week to announce a trilateral defense alliance that will provide Australia with a fleet of at least eight nuclear-powered submarines.

Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson Zhao Lijian said it was "highly irresponsible" for the U.S. and Britain to export the nuclear technology.

Morrison said Australia wanted to boost peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific region.

"Everything we've done with the United States is consistent with the partnerships and relationships and alliances we've already had with the United States," Morrison said.

Australia's nearest neighbor after Papua New Guinea, Indonesia, was "deeply concerned over the continuing arms race and power projection in the region," the Indonesian Ministry of Foreign Affairs said in a statement.

News of the alliance received a positive response in Singapore. The city state's Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong told Morrison in a phone call he hoped the nuclear deal would "contribute constructively to the peace and stability of the region and complement the regional architecture," Singapore's Ministry of Foreign Affairs said.

French leaders and the European Union are angered at being excluded from the alliance that scuppers a contract with France to build 12 conventional diesel-electric submarines for Australia.

Observers say Biden appeared to have forgotten Morrison's name during Thursday's news conference, which was televised from three countries. The president referred to the Australian as "pal" and "that fellow Down Under."

Biden didn't use Morrison's name, while he referred to Johnson as "Boris."

It reminded Australians of when then-President Donald Trump's spokesman Sean Spicer repeatedly referred to Morrison's predecessor, Malcolm Turnbull, in 2017 as "Mr. Trumble."

Morrison laughed off what some have described as an awkward exchange with Biden that undermined Australia's significance to the United States.

"Usually when we speak privately, he refers to me as 'pal,'" Morrison said.

Morrison said he and the president enjoyed a great working relationship.

"Oh, I didn't pay much attention to it. I mean, these things happen. They happen frequently," Morrison said. "From time to time, you know, I've been known to let the odd name slip from my memory — that's pretty normal in our line of work, I've got to be honest."

Morrison said he referred to Biden as "Mr. President" or "mate" in private conversations.

Morrison will visit the United States next week for the first time since Biden became president. They will be joined by the leaders of India and Japan for a meeting of the Quad security dialogue.

Chinese astronauts return after 90 days aboard space station

BEIJING (AP) — A trio of Chinese astronauts returned to Earth on Friday after a 90-day stay aboard their nation's first space station in China's longest mission yet.

Nie Haisheng, Liu Boming and Tang Hongbo landed in the Shenzhou-12 spaceship just after 1:30 p.m. (0530 GMT) after having undocked from the space station Thursday morning.

State broadcaster CCTV showed footage of the spacecraft parachuting to land in the Gobi Desert where it was met by helicopters and off-road vehicles. Minutes later, a crew of technicians began opening the hatch of the capsule, which appeared undamaged.

The three astronauts emerged about 30 minutes later and were seated in reclining chairs just outside the capsule to allow them time to readjust to Earth's gravity after three months of living in a weightless environment. The three were due to fly to Beijing on Friday.

"With China's growing strength and the rising level of Chinese technology, I firmly believe there will even more astronauts who will set new records," mission commander Nie told CCTV.

After launching on June 17, the three astronauts went on two spacewalks, deployed a 10-meter (33-foot) mechanical arm, and had a video call with Communist Party leader Xi Jinping.

While few details have been made public by China's military, which runs the space program, astronaut

trios are expected to be brought on 90-day missions to the station over the next two years to make it fully functional.

The government has not announced the names of the next set of astronauts nor the launch date of Shenzhou-13.

China has sent 14 astronauts into space since 2003, when it became only the third country after the former Soviet Union and the United States to do so on its own.

China's space program has advanced at a measured pace and has largely avoided many of the problems that marked the U.S. and Russian programs that were locked in intense competition during the heady early days of spaceflight.

That has made it a source of enormous national pride, complementing the country's rise to economic, technological, military and diplomatic prominence in recent years under the firm rule of the Communist Party and current leader Xi Jinping.

China embarked on its own space station program in the 1990s after being excluded from the International Space Station, largely due to U.S. objections to the Chinese space program's secrecy and military backing.

China has simultaneously pushed ahead with uncrewed missions, placing a rover on the little-explored far side of the Moon and, in December, the Chang'e 5 probe returned lunar rocks to Earth for the first time since the 1970s.

China this year also landed its Tianwen-1 space probe on Mars, with its accompanying Zhurong rover venturing out to look for evidence of life.

Another program calls for collecting samples from an asteroid, an area in which Japan's rival space program has made progress of late.

China also plans to dispatch another mission in 2024 to bring back lunar samples and is pursuing a possible crewed mission to the moon and eventually building a scientific base there, although no timeline has been proposed for such projects. A highly secretive space plane is also reportedly under development.

Virus fallout, slow internet worry businesses in German vote

By PIETRO DE CRISTOFARO and GEIR MOULSON Associated Press

GOLSSEN, Germany (AP) — A mill owner in eastern Germany hopes the next government will restore supply chains disrupted by the coronavirus pandemic. A brewer in the country's south wants a more predictable strategy for responding to the virus and a better cellphone network. A hotel owner in the west wants money, fast, to clean up after devastating floods.

A crowded race to succeed Chancellor Angela Merkel after she decided not to extend her 16 years in office has left many Germans uninspired and undecided ahead of the Sept. 26 parliamentary election. While some of the issues that voters say are most important to them — including climate change and the economy — are global or national in scope, many have local and personal priorities.

Looming over the election in Europe's biggest economy, as elsewhere, is uncertainty over how much more disruption the pandemic will cause — and small business owners are especially hoping a new leader might help them avoid a repeat of the pain of the last 18 months.

But they are also interested in how the next chancellor will guide efforts to rebuild areas hit by flash floods in July and address unfinished business from the Merkel era — such as improving Germany's internet and cellphone service or reducing its onerous bureaucracy.

At the Kanow Mill in Golssen, in the rural, eastern state of Brandenburg, owner Christian Berendt is grateful for the financial support his seventh-generation family vegetable oil business has received as part of efforts by authorities to strengthen local business.

But, while he said that parts of the formerly communist east have developed well, many rural areas there and across the country still need help.

"Rural structures have to be strengthened" in a coordinated, long-term way, he said.

In the shorter term, Berendt, 37, hopes the next government can ease the problems still being caused by the pandemic. His mill suffered because it missed out on business at local markets and trade fairs,

but it has stepped up direct shipments to customers. Still, disruption to supply chains, for packaging and some seeds, continue to plague him.

"At the moment, you either have very, very long delivery times or you have to pay a horrendous price," he said.

A few hundred kilometers (miles) southwest in Salz, in the Rhoen hills in Bavaria, brewer Florian Rehbock is also worried about the pandemic — and hopes the next administration can soften its blows. When restaurants and bars, which make up 85% of Rehbock's business were shuttered during lockdowns, the brewer was forced to throw out large quantities of beer that takes weeks to prepare.

"There was no support for the beer that was destroyed — it was just gone. That's serious for a small company like me and can even endanger livelihoods," he said. "I would like ... the new government to set itself up better strategically, that we don't just get day-to-day policies that go one way one week, another the next."

Rehbock, who brews his beer in several small breweries, said some of his customers fear another lockdown after the election. Average daily deaths from the virus have more than doubled over the past two weeks, according to data from Johns Hopkins University, and the vaccination campaign has slowed to a crawl. Still, Germany has generally managed the pandemic better than many of its peers and its daily death toll remains below that of neighboring France, which has a smaller population, for instance. All three candidates for chancellor say no new lockdown will be needed, at least as things stand.

But the 41-year-old Rehbock, who has been self-employed since 2016, said his concerns go beyond the pandemic.

"Germany is not the optimal location" for entrepreneurs, he said, citing problems that include complications in registering with tax authorities and getting construction permits.

He also bemoaned that in rural areas like his, a good internet connection is hard to come by and so is reliable cellphone coverage.

"If you're on the phone with clients, you can expect that on at least a third of calls, the call drops out from time to time," he said.

Rather than talking about grandiose plans for a state-of-the-art 5G network, "I'd say start with a normal cellphone network — that would be enough for me for the time being," he said.

Across the country in Gemuend, near the Belgian border, Manfred Pesch has no time to focus on national issues. He is still cleaning up at his waterside Hotel Friedrichs after the small Urft river swelled to a raging torrent in mid-July.

Germany's parliament last week approved a 30 billion-euro ($35 billion) rebuilding fund for the swath of the country's west affected by the flooding. Overseeing that long-term effort will fall to the next administration.

"The help must really come quickly," said Pesch, 55. "At the moment, to be honest, what's really important is that we get our problems here solved. I don't have any time really to see the other problems, because I'm in such difficulty."

The flood compounded the struggles he and others in the tourism business already faced because travel dried up during the pandemic and many staff left.

"We have to hope that tourism will return and a lot of young people will again find their way into catering," he said. "If we overcome the pandemic, and we can look to a positive future, that would be super."

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Moulson reported from Berlin. Associated Press journalists Christoph Noelting in Salz, Germany, and Daniel Niemann in Gemuend, Germany, contributed to this report.

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Follow AP's coverage of Germany's election at https://apnews.com/hub/germany-election

EXPLAINER: Fighting fire with fire to protect sequoia trees

By BRIAN MELLEY Associated Press

LOS ANGELES (AP) — With flames advancing toward the signature grove of ancient massive trees in Sequoia National Park, firefighters on Thursday fought fire with fire.

Using firing operations to burn out flammable vegetation and other matter before the wildfire arrives in the Giant Forest is one of several ways firefighters can use their nemesis as a tool to stop, slow or redirect fires.

The tactic comes with considerable risks if conditions change. But it is routinely used to protect communities, homes or valuable resources now under threat from fires, including the grove of about 2,000 massive sequoias, including the General Sherman Tree, the world's largest by volume.

Here's how it works:

IT'S ALL ABOUT THE FUEL

Three things influence how hot and fast a fire burns: the landscape, with fire burning faster up steep slopes; weather, with winds and dry conditions fanning flames; and fuel, the amount of material that can burn.

The first two can't be controlled, but there are ways to reduce fuels long before any fire breaks out — or even as one is approaching.

"Of all the things that affect fire behavior, the fuels is really where we can take action," said Maureen Kennedy, a professor of wildfire ecology at the University of Washington.

Historically, low- to moderate-severity fires every five to 30 years burned out excess brush and timber before deadly fires in the early 20th century led to aggressive firefighting and a U.S. Forest Service policy to suppress all fires by 10 a.m. the day after they were reported.

That led to dense forests of dead trees, fallen logs and overgrown brush that accumulated over the past century, fueling more massive fires.

SLOWING FIRE BY CREATING FIRE

For centuries, Native Americans have used fire to thin out forests.

Prescribed burns set under favorable weather conditions can help mimic the lower-intensity fires of the past and burn off excess fuels when they are not at risk of getting out of control. If fire eventually burns the area, it will likely do so at lower intensity and with less damage.

The idea is the same during a wildfire. Fire chiefs try to take advantage of shifting winds or changing landscapes to burn out an area before the fire gets there, depriving it of the fuel it needs to keep going.

"They're trying to achieve the same effect," Kennedy said. "They're trying to moderate the fire behavior. They're trying to remove the fuels that make the fire burn so intensely. Of course, their goal there is to better contain and control the fire and protect the more valuable resources."

SAFELY SETTING MILD FIRES

All wildland firefighters learn about burnout operations in basic training, but it takes a higher level of training to plan and carry out firing operations.

"You need to know how to fight fire before you light fire," said Paul Broyles, a former chief of fire operations for the National Park Service.

Burning an area between the fire front and a projected point — such as a firebreak or the Giant Forest in Sequoia — requires the right conditions and enough time to complete the burnout before the fire can reach a fire line constructed by firefighters.

Often such operations are conducted at night when fires tend to die down or slow their advance as temperatures cool and humidity rises.

The convection of a fire pulls in winds from all direction, which can help. As fires climb steep terrain, burnouts are sometimes set on the other side of a ridge so any embers will land in an area where dry grasses and brush have already burned.

The firing operations require a crew making sure the fire does not spread in the wrong direction. It may also include bulldozers cutting fire lines or air tankers dropping retardant to further slow the flames.

All of it has to work in sync, Broyles said.

"Air tankers by themselves do not put fires out unless you follow up with personnel," he said. "It's like

the military. You don't just bomb the hell out of your enemy without ground troops."

While burnouts are commonly used, they can backfire if winds shift or they aren't lit early enough.

"When you put more fire on the ground, there is a risk," said Rebecca Paterson, a spokeswoman for Sequoia National Park. "It carries the potential to create more problems than it solves."

Broyles said there were times he didn't get a burnout started in time and firefighters had to be evacuated.

"Fortunately, in my case, we didn't have any losses," he said.

SMALL FLAMES TO PROTECT GIANT SEQUOIAS

Firefighters on Thursday were conducting burnout operations in the Giant Forest at almost a micro level, moving from tree to tree, Paterson said. Ground cover and organic debris known as duff close to the trees was being set on fire, allowing the flames to creep away from the tree to create a buffer.

The General Sherman and other massive conifers were wrapped in aluminum blankets to protect them from the extreme heat.

The park was the first in the West to use prescribed fire more than 50 years ago and regularly burns some of its groves to remove fuels. Paterson said that was a reason for optimism.

"Hopefully, the Giant Forest will emerge from this unscathed," she said.

Hopkins converts 2nd chance, Washington beats Giants 30-29

By NOAH TRISTER AP Sports Writer

LANDOVER, Md. (AP) — Taylor Heinicke and Dustin Hopkins made the most of their second chances.

Washington needed every last second — and then some — to earn a long-awaited win over the New York Giants.

Hopkins made a 43-yard field goal on an untimed down — after a penalty negated his miss seconds earlier — and Washington beat New York 30-29 on Thursday night, snapping a five-game win streak for the Giants in the series.

It also gave Heinicke another moment in the sun after he cost Washington dearly with a late interception. The 28-year-old quarterback was making his second career start in the regular season and first since 2018 with Carolina. He became a bit of a sensation when Washington had to use him in last season's playoffs against Tom Brady and Tampa Bay, but his team lost that game.

"It's amazing," Heinicke said. "The first start was what, two or three years ago in Carolina? Threw three picks, tore my tricep, it was just a brutal thing — and that was my last start until last year (against) Tampa. Come in to Tampa last year, had a good game, but ultimately fell up short. And finally get that first win."

Heinicke, playing because of an injury to Ryan Fitzpatrick, threw for 336 yards and two touchdowns. His interception set up Graham Gano's fifth field goal of the game, which gave the Giants a 29-27 lead with 2:00 remaining. Heinicke then guided Washington back into field goal range.

"He does have the ability to throw the ball and make all the throws. We've seen that," coach Ron Rivera said. "And he's got a lot of confidence."

Hopkins missed his first attempt to win the game, but he was given a reprieve when Dexter Lawrence was flagged for being offside. His next attempt was good, giving Washington (1-1) a wild victory.

"Somebody out there check on my mother," Hopkins said. "She's probably had a heart attack."

Daniel Jones threw for 249 yards and a touchdown for the Giants (0-2). He also ran for 95 yards and a TD.

For most of the night, it was Washington's highly touted defense that wasn't pulling its weight. New York scored on its first four possessions of the second half, but after the Giants went up 26-20, Heinicke needed just 17 seconds to put Washington ahead.

J.D. McKissic slipped downfield for a 56-yard reception, and then Ricky Seals-Jones outjumped Adoree' Jackson in the corner of the end zone for a 19-yard TD that put Washington up 27-26.

The Giants had to punt after that, but as Washington was trying to run out the clock, James Bradberry picked off a pass by Heinicke, giving the Giants the ball at the Washington 20.

Washington's defense forced a field goal, giving Heinicke another chance. Then the penalty on Lawrence gave Hopkins his extra opportunity.

"It's going to be a tough lesson," Giants coach Joe Judge said. "I'm not going to put this on Dexter."

After struggling to stop Justin Herbert and the Chargers last weekend, Washington's defense had its problems again at the start of this game. New York went 79 yards in 11 plays the first time it had the ball, taking a 7-0 lead on a 6-yard run by Jones.

After Washington tied it on Heinicke's 11-yard scoring pass to Terry McLaurin, Jones broke free for what initially looked like a 58-yard touchdown run. That play was shortened by a holding penalty, however, and the Giants settled for a field goal.

Washington took a 14-10 lead on a 2-yard TD run by McKissic in the final minute of the half.

Jones found Darius Slayton for a 33-yard TD in the third quarter that put New York ahead 20-14.

MISSED CHANCES

Washington's biggest defensive breakdown wasn't punished. With the Giants up 23-20 in the fourth quarter, Slayton was all alone behind the defense, but the pass bounced off his outstretched hands.

That play — and the penalties on the final field goal and the long run by Jones — will likely haunt the Giants during their long break before the next game.

"It's a pretty tough one. You give it your all and fight and it comes down the tail end," Giants receiver Sterling Shepard said. "See that first one miss and you see those flags it's not a fun feeling at all."

The Giants had 11 penalties for 81 yards. Washington had nine for 80 — and some of those were costly, too.

PERFECT AGAIN

Gano has now made 35 consecutive field goals, the longest active streak in the NFL. His five field goals Thursday included kicks from 47, 52 and 55 yards.

INJURIES

Giants: OL Nick Gates was carted off with a broken leg in the first quarter. Gates, normally a center, played guard Thursday after New York put Shane Lemieux on injured reserve.

Washington: DT Matt Ioannidis left in the first half with a knee injury but returned to the game.

UP NEXT

Giants: New York returns home to face the Atlanta Falcons on Sept. 26.

Washington: Two straight road games await Washington, with the first coming Sept. 26 against the Buffalo Bills.

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Follow Noah Trister at https://twitter.com/noahtrister

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House Republican who voted to impeach Trump won't run again

By JILL COLVIN and JULIE CARR SMYTH Associated Press

One of the 10 House Republicans who voted to impeach former President Donald Trump for his role in inciting the Jan. 6 insurrection at the Capitol announced Thursday night he will not seek reelection in Ohio next year.

U.S. Rep. Anthony Gonzalez, a former NFL player with a once-bright political future, cited his two young children for his decision and noted "the chaotic political environment that currently infects our country." He is the first Latino to represent Ohio in Congress.

"While my desire to build a fuller family life is at the heart of my decision, it is also true that the current state of our politics, especially many of the toxic dynamics inside our own party, is a significant factor in my decisions," Gonzalez said in his statement.

Gonzalez, 36, would have faced Max Miller in the 2022 primary. Trump has endorsed Miller, his former White House and campaign aide, as part of his bid to punish those who voted for his impeachment or blocked his efforts to overturn the results of the election. Trump rallied for Miller this summer.

In a statement, Miller's campaign called Gonzalez's announcement Thursday "good news for the voters

of our district," said Gonzalez had "dishonored the office by betraying his constituents" with his impeachment vote.

Gonzalez represents northeast Ohio's 16th Congressional District, in the northeastern part of the state.

The Ohio Republican Party censured Gonzalez in May for voting in February to impeach Trump. Gonzalez has stood by his impeachment vote in the face of fierce pushback from his party's conservative wing.

It remains unclear whether any of the other House Republicans who joined Gonzalez in voting for impeachment will follow in his footsteps.

In an interview with the New York Times announcing his decision, Gonzalez called Trump "a cancer for the country" who represents a threat to democracy and said that Jan. 6 had been "a line-in-the-sand moment" for him.

While he said there seemed to have been a moment then when the party might break with the former president, he has been dismayed by its decision to instead embrace Trump.

"This is the direction that we're going to go in for the next two years and potentially four, and it's going to make Trump the center of fund-raising efforts and political outreach," Gonzalez told the newspaper. "That's not something I'm going to be part of."

He said he plans to spend his time now working to prevent Trump from being elected to the White House again.

"Most of my political energy will be spent working on that exact goal," he said.

Trump aides did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

Organizer of Saturday rally looks to rewrite Jan. 6 history

By BRIAN SLODYSKO Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The architect of a Washington protest planned for Saturday that aims to rewrite history about the violent January assault on the U.S. Capitol is hardly a household name.

Matt Braynard worked as an analyst for the Republican Party, crunched data for a small election firm and later started a consulting business that attracted few federal clients, records show. He started a nonprofit after he was dismissed by Donald Trump's 2016 campaign following several months on the job, but struggled to raise money. The group's tax-exempt status was revoked last year.

But Braynard's fortunes changed abruptly after Trump's 2020 election loss. He joined an aggrieved group of Trump allies seeking to overturn the election — and in the process reaped recognition, lucrative fees and a fundraising windfall that enabled him to rekindle his nonprofit.

Now, Braynard and his group, Look Ahead America, are using his newfound platform and resources to present an alternate history of the Jan. 6 attack that was meant to stop Congress from certifying Joe Biden's victory, rebranding those who were charged as "political prisoners."

Although many members of Congress, including those who are allied with Braynard's cause, have been mum on whether they will attend Saturday's protest, the event has put law enforcement on edge, led to stepped-up security measures and created worries that members of the same extremist groups that were present on Jan 6. could also be in attendance.

How much of a draw his "Justice for J6" rally ends up being will test the reach and potency of the emerging far-right movement, as well as the extent of Braynard's own reach.

Braynard, who is in his 40s, did not respond to a request for comment for this story. The Associated Press earlier declined to accept his condition that an interview of him be broadcast live.

But a review of court records, campaign finance disclosures and social media postings, as well as Braynard's past interviews with journalists that he has posted online, document his efforts to build his influence over the past year, culminating in Saturday's event.

"At no point will I cancel this rally," Braynard told WTOP radio in Washington. "This is happening even if I'm there by myself with a megaphone."

The seeds of the rally were planted the day after the 2020 election as Trump made false claims of widespread voter fraud, which were later rejected by numerous courts, election officials and his own attorney

general at the time, William Barr.

Braynard suggested on Twitter that there could have been fraud in the election, while promoting an online fundraiser he created to defray the cost of analyzing voting data in states where the Trump campaign insisted it was winning.

He told BuzzFeed News in a summer interview that he brought some early findings to the attention of the Trump campaign. The campaign, which had declined to rehire him earlier in the 2020 campaign as a low-level field staffer, initially agreed to hear him out. But after he arrived at campaign headquarters, campaign officials changed their minds, he said.

"I stood on the sidewalk for an hour while they fought inside about whether or not to let me in," he said. "Ultimately, I was told I would not be let in and I went home."

His online fundraising, however, took off. After the crowdfunding site GoFundMe.com took down an early effort, citing misleading information, Braynard migrated to an conservative friendly site and quickly took in over $675,000.

A subsequent report he wrote on his findings — which one expert excoriated as "riddled with errors" and violating "basic standards for scientific evidence" — was embraced by Trump's allies and served as an evidentiary cornerstone in numerous court cases that were later dismissed.

His participation also earned him at least $230,000 in consulting fees, court records show.

Since then, Braynard has used the influx of resources to revive Look Ahead America and reapply for tax-exempt status, which has yet to be approved, according to an IRS database. The group now lists 11 staffers on its website.

The Jan. 6 attack quickly became an organizing principle for Braynard's efforts.

His first post after creating an account on the conservative-friendly social media site Telegram came days after the attack and featured a picture of the 1933 fire at Germany's parliament building, the Reichstag, which the Nazi party used as a pretext to seize power. Braynard's caption: "The real coup is being conducted by Silicon Valley right now," a reference to a widespread complaint by conservatives that they are being silenced on social media.

Since then, he's shared a link to a fundraiser for Ethan Nordean, a member of the Proud Boys extremist group, who was charged in the attack. "If you don't share this post I don't ever want to hear y'all say you're fighting back against this oppressive government," he wrote.

Look Ahead America also tweeted from its account last February that the group would be present at the America First Political Action Conference in Orlando, which was a one-day event hosted by Nick Fuentes, a far-right internet personality who has promoted white supremacist beliefs.

But Braynard has also sought to make inroads with more mainstream conservatives.

Look Ahead America was a sponsor at this year's Conservative Political Action Conference, a gathering that typically draws Republican presidential contenders. The group garnered considerable attention for a large golden statue of a "surfer" Trump, complete with red, white and blue shorts, that was part of their booth.

But they have also done things to irk organizers of the conference.

After Georgia Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene, who has repeatedly trafficked in conspiracy theories and endorsed violence against Democrats, wasn't recognized at the event, Look Ahead America claimed credit for "uncancelling" her by giving her a speaking slot at one of their side events.

At a subsequent CPAC event in Texas in July, Look Ahead America billed a speech at a side event by Florida Rep. Matt Gaetz as an "official" CPAC event. Gaetz is a pro-Trump provocateur under federal investigation for sex trafficking allegations; he has denied wrongdoing.

After CPAC organizers released a statement saying Look Ahead America's Gaetz event wasn't part of the official programming, Braynard tweeted that was a "100% Lie" because "the room/event was part of our sponsor package."

He has once again thrust himself into the spotlight, this time with Saturday's rally, and has repeatedly downplayed the possibility of violence there.

Trump has not endorsed the rally but did release a statement Thursday claiming people charged in the

Jan. 6 attack are "being persecuted so unfairly."

Still, Republicans in Congress appear to be keeping their distance.

So far, the only guest speakers Braynard has announced are clients of his who are running against sitting GOP members of Congress who voted to impeach Trump. And the permit granted for the rally allows it to be no larger than 700 people, according to a person who was briefed on the matter but spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss confidential details.

"I don't know what it is," Sen. Ted Cruz, R-Texas, said when asked about the event.

Missouri Sen. Josh Hawley, who along with Cruz led the Jan. 6 objections to Biden's certification, also dismissed the idea.

"I'm not going," Hawley said. "I'm not following it at all."

Sen. Ron Johnson, a Wisconsin Republican, has voiced sympathy for those charged in connection with the Jan. 6 attack. But Johnson, who said he would not be attending Saturday's event, offered some advice to those who are.

"Don't break any laws whatsoever."

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Associated Press writer Mary Clare Jalonick in Washington contributed to this report.

Biden angers France, EU with new Australia, UK initiative

By MATTHEW LEE AP Diplomatic Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden's decision to form a strategic Indo-Pacific alliance with Australia and Britain to counter China is angering France and the European Union. They're feeling left out and seeing it as a return to the Trump era.

The security initiative, unveiled this week, appears to have brought Biden's summer of love with Europe to an abrupt end. AUKUS, which notably excludes France and the European Union, is just the latest in a series of steps, from Afghanistan to east Asia, that have taken Europe aback.

After promising European leaders that "America is back" and that multilateral diplomacy would guide U.S. foreign policy, Biden has alienated numerous allies with a go-it-alone approach on key issues. France's foreign minister expressed "total incomprehension" at the recent move, which he called a "stab in the back," and the EU's foreign policy chief complained that Europe had not been consulted.

France will lose a nearly $100 billion deal to build diesel submarines for Australia under the terms of the initiative, which will see the U.S. and Britain help Canberra construct nuclear-powered ones.

As such, French anger on a purely a commercial level would be understandable, particularly because France, since Britain's handover of Hong Kong to China in 1997, is the only European nation to have significant territorial possessions or a permanent military presence in the Pacific.

But French and European Union officials went further, saying the agreement calls into question the entire cooperative effort to blunt China's growing influence and underscores the importance of languishing plans to boost Europe's own defense and security capabilities.

Some have compared Biden's recent actions to those of his predecessor, Donald Trump, under Trump's "America First" doctrine. That's surprising for a president steeped in international affairs who ran for the White House vowing to mend shaken ties with allies and restore U.S. credibility on the world stage.

Although it's impossible to predict if any damage will be lasting, the short-term impact seems to have rekindled European suspicions of American intentions — with potential implications for Biden's broader aim to unite democracies against authoritarianism, focused primarily on China and Russia.

Just three months ago, on his first visit to the continent as president, Biden was hailed as a hero by European counterparts eager to move beyond the trans-Atlantic tensions of the Trump years. But that palpable sense of relief has now faded for many, and its one clear winner, German Chancellor Angela Merkel, is on her way out.

Since June, Biden has infuriated America's oldest ally, France, left Poland and Ukraine questioning the U.S. commitment to their security and upset the European Union more broadly with unilateral decisions

ranging from Afghanistan to east Asia. And, while Europe cheered when Biden pledged to return to nuclear negotiations with Iran and revive Israeli-Palestinian peace talks, both efforts remain stalled nine months into his administration.

The seeds of discontent may have been sown in the spring but they began to bloom in July over Biden's acquiescence to a Russia-to-Germany gas pipeline that will bypass Poland and Ukraine, and a month later in August with the chaotic U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan that left Europe scrambling to keep up after it had expressed reservations about the pullout.

Then just this week, Biden enraged France and the European Union with his announcement that the U.S. would join post-Brexit Britain and Australia in a new Indo-Pacific security initiative aimed at countering China's increasing aggressiveness in the region.

Unsurprisingly, China reacted angrily, accusing the U.S. and its English-speaking partners of embarking on a project that will destabilize the Pacific to the detriment of global security. But, the reactions from Paris and Brussels were equally severe. Both complained they were not only excluded from the deal but not consulted on it.

The White House and Secretary of State Antony Blinken say France had been informed of the decision before it was announced on Wednesday, although it was not exactly clear when. Blinken said Thursday there had been conversations with the French about it within the past 24 to 48 hours, suggesting there had not been an in-depth consultation.

French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian, who in June extolled the "excellent news for all of us that America is back," expressed "total incomprehension" at the announcement of the initiative. "It was really a stab in the back," he said. "It looks a lot like what Trump did."

White House press secretary Jen Psaki dismissed the comparison. "I would say the president doesn't think about it much," she told reporters. "The president's focus is on maintaining and continuing our close relationships with leaders in France, with the United Kingdom, with Australia and to achieving our global objectives, which include security in the Indo-Pacific."

In Brussels, EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell echoed the French minister's complaints. "I suppose that an agreement of this nature was not cooked up the day before yesterday. It takes a certain amount of time, and despite that, no, we were not consulted," he said. "That obliges us, once again … to reflect on the need to put European strategic autonomy high on the agenda."

Indeed, the 27-member European Union on Thursday unveiled a new strategy for boosting economic, political and defense ties in the Indo-Pacific, just hours after the announcement by the U.S., Britain and Australia. The EU said the aim is to strengthen and expand economic relations while reinforcing respect of international trade rules and improving maritime security. It said it hopes the strategy will result in more European naval deployments to the region.

U.S. officials brushed aside the French and EU complaints on Thursday.

"There are a range of partnerships that include the French and some partnerships that don't, and they have partnerships with other countries that don't include us," Psaki said. "That is part of how global diplomacy works."

Speaking alongside Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin and the Australian defense and foreign ministers, Blinken said there "is no regional divide" with Europe over Indo-Pacific strategy. "We welcome European countries playing an important role in the Indo-Pacific," he said, calling France a "vital partner."

But how closely they will work together remains to be seen.

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AP writers Darlene Superville, Sylvie Corbet in Paris and Lorne Cook in Brussels contributed to this report.

Fire crews struggling to save California giant sequoias

By NOAH BERGER and JOHN ANTCZAK Associated Press

THREE RIVERS, Calif. (AP) — Firefighters wrapped the base of the world's largest tree in a fire-resistant blanket as they tried to save a famous grove of gigantic old-growth sequoias from wildfires burning in

California's rugged Sierra Nevada.

The colossal General Sherman Tree in Sequoia National Park's Giant Forest, some other sequoias, the Giant Forest Museum and other buildings were wrapped for protection against the possibility of intense flames, fire spokeswoman Rebecca Paterson said.

The aluminum wrapping can withstand intensive heat for short periods. Federal officials say they have been using the material for several years throughout the U.S. West to protect sensitive structures from flames. Near Lake Tahoe, some homes that were wrapped in protective material survived a recent wildfire while others nearby were destroyed.

The Colony Fire, one of two burning in Sequoia National Park, was expected to reach the Giant Forest, a grove of 2,000 sequoias, at some point within days, fire officials said.

However, the fire didn't grow significantly Thursday as a layer of smoke reduced its spread in the morning, fire spokeswoman Katy Hooper said.

It comes after a wildfire killed thousands of sequoias, some as tall as high-rises and thousands of years old, in the region last year.

The General Sherman Tree is the largest in the world by volume, at 52,508 cubic feet (1,487 cubic meters), according to the National Park Service. It towers 275 feet (84 meters) high and has a circumference of 103 feet (31 meters) at ground level.

Sequoia and Kings Canyon national parks Superintendent Clay Jordan stressed the importance of protecting the massive trees from high-intensity fire during a briefing for firefighters.

A 50-year history of using prescribed burns — fires set on purpose to remove other types of trees and vegetation that would otherwise feed wildfires — in the parks' sequoia groves was expected to help the giant trees survive by lessening the impact if flames reach them.

A "robust fire history of prescribed fire in that area is reason for optimism," Paterson said. "Hopefully, the Giant Forest will emerge from this unscathed."

Giant sequoias are adapted to fire, which can help them thrive by releasing seeds from their cones and creating clearings that allow young sequoias to grow. But the extraordinary intensity of fires — fueled by climate change — can overwhelm the trees.

That happened last year when the Castle Fire killed what studies estimate were 7,500 to 10,600 large sequoias, according to the National Park Service.

A historic drought and heat waves tied to climate change have made wildfires harder to fight in the American West. Scientists say climate change has made the region much warmer and drier in the past 30 years and will continue to make weather more extreme and wildfires more frequent and destructive.

A national interagency fire management team took command of efforts to fight the 11.5-square-mile (30-square-kilometer) Paradise Fire and the 3-square-mile (8-square-kilometer) Colony Fire, which was closest to the grove. Operations to burn away vegetation and other fuel that could feed the flames were done in that area.

The fires forced the evacuation of the park this week, and parts of the town of Three Rivers outside the main entrance remained evacuated.

To the south, a fire on the Tule River Indian Reservation and in Giant Sequoia National Monument grew significantly overnight to more than 6 square miles (15 square kilometers), and crews had no containment of it, a Sequoia National Forest statement said.

The Windy Fire, also started by lightning, has burned into part of the Peyrone Sequoia Grove in the national monument, and other groves were threatened.

"Due to inaccessible terrain, a preliminary assessment of the fire's effects on giant sequoia trees within the grove will be difficult and may take days to complete," the statement said.

The fire led the Tulare County Sheriff's Office to warn the communities of Ponderosa, Quaking Aspen, Johnsondale and Camp Whitsett, a Boy Scouts camp, to be ready to evacuate if necessary.

The wildfires are among the latest in a long summer of blazes that have scorched nearly 3,550 square miles (9,195 square kilometers) in California, destroying hundreds of homes.

Crews had limited ground access to the Colony Fire and the extreme steepness of the terrain around the Paradise Fire prevented it completely, requiring extensive aerial water and flame-retardant drops on both fires. The two fires were being managed collectively as the KNP Complex.

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Antczak reported from Los Angeles. Associated Press reporter Brian Melley contributed from Los Angeles.

EXPLAINER: Kim's launches show push to boost nuke arsenal

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

SEOUL, South Korea (AP) — North Korea's recent sword-rattling after months of relative quiet makes clear that leader Kim Jong Un is working on expanding his weapons arsenal.

Nuclear-capable missiles hidden in trains that can be launched anywhere along a railway. A new cruise missile resembling the U.S. Tomahawk that can be potentially topped with atomic warheads. The apparent resumption of making fuel for potential nuclear bombs.

Likely they are an attempt to wrest concessions from Washington if, and when, long-stalled diplomatic talks on Kim's nuclear program resume. Part of the message is aimed domestically, however, to reinforce internal unity as North Koreans cope with deeper hardship in a never-healthy economy that's been battered by the coronavirus pandemic.

Here, then, is a look at Kim's recent weapons tests, the first of their kind in six months, and what they may mean for efforts to confront the North's nuclear ambitions.

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THE NEW WEAPONS

North Korea called its first train-launched ballistic missile tests successful, saying the two weapons launched Wednesday struck a target in the sea 800 kilometers (500 miles) away.

That puts all of South Korea and the U.S. military bases it hosts in range. Experts say the missiles are nuclear-capable.

Firing from trains also adds another platform for missile launches — in addition to mobile trucks, ground pads and a submarine method still being tested. A train-based platform utilizes North Korea's national rail network and allows for secret movement and launch, although experts note rail networks are vulnerable targets in a crisis.

For South Korea, "which has to defend itself from North Korean missiles, it's yet another headache," said Lee Choon Geun, a missile expert at South Korea's Science and Technology Policy Institute.

Last weekend, North Korea also tested what it called a new cruise missile, which flew about 1,500 kilometers (930 miles), making it the North's longest-range cruise missile, capable of reaching all of Japan, which is also home to 50,000 U.S. troops.

It's being developed as nuclear capable and flies at a low altitude, making it harder to detect. Its development demonstrates North Korea's push to break enemy defense lines and diversify a weapons inventory that's heavy on ballistic missiles.

Satellite photos also show signs North Korea has restarted operations at its main factory for producing weapons-grade plutonium, a key ingredient used to make nuclear weapons.

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WHAT KIM WANTS

Kim's resumed testing activities are largely meant "for developing military capabilities, but can also be attempts at shoring up domestic unity," said Leif-Eric Easley, associate professor of international studies at Ewha Womans University in Seoul. "Pyongyang could launch a provocation even when in desperate economic need because it wants to hide its weaknesses and extract external concessions."

Kim may also be going back to a tried-and-true technique of pressuring the world with missile launches and outrageous threats before offering negotiations at the last minute meant to extract aid.

"It bears further watching on how things go, but it's possible that we are near another phase in (North Korean) brinkmanship," said Park Won-gon, a professor of North Korea studies at Ewha Womans University.

North Korea's recent tests could be low-key reactions to the continuation of joint U.S.-South Korean military drills and to South Korean efforts to build up its arms programs.

Kim's ultimate goal is likely winning relief from crippling international economic sanctions even as he gains U.S. recognition as a nuclear state, allowing him to hold onto nuclear weapons that he may see as his only guarantee for survival.

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WHAT'S NEXT?

North Korea may keep ramping up its pressure campaign, at least until China starts pushing for calm ahead of the Beijing Olympics early next year. But it still could hold back on tests of more provocative weapons as it looks for less coercive diplomacy.

The North will have until around November to advance its weapons development with testing, Park, the analyst, said. After that, it risks hurting relations with China.

North Korea may also conduct another weapons test around a major state anniversary, like the ruling Workers' Party foundation day on Oct. 10.

"For upgrading weapons capabilities, next in the testing queue may not be a nuclear device or ICBM but a submarine-based system," Easley said.

Despite its recent weapons tests, North Korea has maintained a self-imposed moratorium on nuclear and long-range missile tests for more than three years. That suggests that it still wants to keep chances for future diplomacy with Washington alive.

It's possible that Pyongyang is carefully measuring its actions while looking for a window back into diplomacy.

"It wouldn't be surprising if the North makes some effort soon to reach out to Washington or to Seoul, if just only to measure their intent," said Hong Min, an analyst at Seoul's Korea Institute for National Unification.

Rising numbers of migrants risk lives crossing Darien Gap

By ASTRID SUAREZ Associated Press

ACANDI, Colombia (AP) — It was 5 a.m. and in dozens of small tents around 500 migrants began showing signs of life, rising, packing their bags and preparing to cross the Darien Gap, the thick jungle teeming with snakes, bandits and treacherous rivers that separates Colombia from Panama.

Over a fire, Emile and Claude cooked some yucca and pasta to take on the six-day journey, along with 20 liters of drinking water for which they paid the steep price of $20. The men declined to provide their last names because they had entered Colombia illegally and feared being fined.

Emile, 29, said he had left his home country of Haiti 13 years ago to work in the Dominican Republic. Then he lived in Chile for four years, and two months ago he decided to leave for the United States.

The pair picked up their belongings and started walking away from the grasslands that surround the Colombian town of Acandi toward the rainforest. Residents of Acandi served as guides, charging the migrants $50 each to show them the way toward Panama.

As borders open around the world after months of pandemic-related lockdowns some illegal migration routes are also seeing an uptick in crossings. Muddy paths across the Darien jungle have long been used by smugglers to take migrants from South America to Central America as they make their way to the U.S.

Panamanian immigration officials say the number of people crossing the Darien Gap has reached record levels, with 70,000 migrants making the dangerous trek so far this year and registering at shelters in Panama.

Most of those currently crossing the Darien are Haitians who were living in Brazil and Chile and were left with little work due to the pandemic. Visa requirements make it almost impossible for low-income migrants from Haiti to take flights to Panama, Mexico or the United States. So many make the dangerous trek across the jungle in the hopes of starting a new life in the U.S.

"The jungle is very tough, we just walk without a precise idea of where we're headed," said Davidson

Lafleur, a 24-year-old Haitian.

Lafleur had lived in Chile for three years, and was traveling to the U.S. with his wife and their 11-month old daughter.

"I paid someone $120 to carry my bags to the (Panama) border," he said.

In August, Colombia and Panama agreed to limit the number of migrants crossing the Darien each day in a bid to ease pressure on shelters on the Panamanian side of the jungle.

But this created bottlenecks and confusion on the Colombian side. Every day hundreds of migrants arrive in the town of Necocli on Colombia's Caribbean coast, where they need to catch a boat that will take them across the Gulf of Uraba.

Necocli's mayor, Jorge Tobon, says 1,000 to 1,500 migrants are arriving in the town each day, but only 500 are allowed to leave on boats heading across the gulf and toward the Panamanian border due to the recent agreement between the countries.

Tobon says more than 14,000 migrants are currently stuck in the town, with boat tickets sold out until the end of this month.

Accommodation in hotels and local homes is scarce. Many migrants sleep in tents next to the beach, where they use seawater to bathe and cook.

Once migrants are able to sail out of Necocli their next stop is the Colombian town of Acandi. There the migrants are sprayed with an alcohol solution at the town's ramshackle port by locals trying to stop the spread of COVID-19.

The trail into the jungle begins 6 miles (10 kilometers) away from the town's center across a green savannah dotted with farms. While some walk, many pay $20 to get to the start of the trail on a cart pulled by a horse. Others hop on motorcycle taxis that take them for $35.

Ones Armonte, a 36-year-old migrant from the Dominican Republic, paid for the motorcycle ride. Within an hour he was at the edge of the rainforest where a seven-day trek across the jungle awaited him.

"We depend on God's will now," he said. "Nobody wants to face the risk of crossing this jungle, but I need to make money to send to my children."

After spending a night at the start of the trail, Armonte and dozens of others began the trek through the jungle.

They descended a steep hill and waded across a river where the water reached waist level. The current was strong and the sound of the water drowned out the voices of migrants and guides. As they headed into the rainforest many of the migrants became exhausted and started to leave some of their belongings behind to carry less weight.

Wedding portraits, jackets and jeans were strewn along the trail. A woman carried a foam mat in her arms, and was told by guides to drop it because it would be of no use in the jungle. She persisted and carried it while balancing a bag on her head.

Trailing the group, a 50-year-old woman fainted after crossing a river. She suffered from asthma and obesity.

"Yesterday we had another lady with asthma, her inhalator emptied and we had to turn back," said one of the local guides, who declined to give his name over fears of being prosecuted for human trafficking.

In the jungle, dangers are plenty. Some migrants try to keep snakes away by tying pieces of garlic to their ankles, or rubbing a disinfectant on their legs.

The greatest danger, however, are other humans. In the Darien, armed groups control trails that are also used to traffic drugs.

Once migrants cross into Panama they are often abandoned by Colombian guides, who do not want to risk being captured abroad for human trafficking. Bandits often target groups of migrants and steal their possessions.

According to Doctors Without Borders, which runs a health post in the village of Bajo Chiquito on the Panamanian side of the Darien, 96 women were sexually assaulted by bandits in the months of May and July, while they tried to cross the jungle.

The illnesses most frequently reported by migrants who make it across the jungle are foot funguses, gastrointestinal problems and respiratory infections. Yet thousands continue to make the trek.

According to Panamanian officials more than 20,000 people crossed the Darien jungle on foot in August, accounting for almost a third of all crossings this year.

Children have reportedly died in the jungle, and some pregnant women have given birth. Migrants say they have seen skulls and cadavers along the routes that cross the Darien.

"Fear is always with us," Lafleur said as he crossed a river. "But we have no choice but to keep on going."

Rittenhouse hearing to decide on evidence allowed at trial

By TODD RICHMOND Associated Press

MADISON, Wis. (AP) — A judge was set to decide Friday whether jurors at the trial of a man accused of killing two men and wounding a third during a police brutality protest in Wisconsin last year will see video that prosecutors say shows him talking about wanting to shoot people.

It's among several requests that Kenosha County Judge Bruce Schroeder will consider to determine what evidence and testimony will be allowed during Kyle Rittenhouse's trial. Friday's hearing is expected to be the last before the trial begins with jury selection on Nov. 1.

Rittenhouse shot the men after coming to Kenosha from his home about 20 miles (32 kilometers) away in Antioch, Illinois, on Aug. 25, 2020, having seen a post on social media asking people to help protect businesses from protesters. The city was in the throes of several days of chaotic demonstrations sparked by a white police officer shooting Jacob Blake, a Black man, after the officer responded to a domestic disturbance. The shooting left Blake paralyzed from the waist down.

Prosecutors say a 29-second video taken 15 days before the protest shootings shows Rittenhouse watching some men exit a CVS Pharmacy store and commenting that he wished he had his rifle so he could shoot them. Prosecutors say it's evidence of Rittenhouse's eagerness to use deadly force.

He faces multiple charges in the protest shootings, including two counts of first-degree intentional homicide and illegal firearm possession. Rittenhouse, who was 17 at the time, opened fire with an AR-style semiautomatic rifle on Joseph Rosenbaum, 36, of Kenosha, and Anthony Huber, 26, of Silver Lake, killing both. He also shot Gaige Grosskreutz, of West Allis, who survived.

Rittenhouse maintains that the three men — all white — attacked him and he fired in self-defense. His arrest quickly became a rallying cry for conservatives and gun rights advocates frustrated with protests over police shootings across the country; conservatives covered his $2 million bail with donations. Black Lives Matter supporters have portrayed Rittenhouse, who is white, as a trigger-happy racist.

Other motions on the table Friday include:

— A prosecution request to prevent police use-of-force expert John R. Black from testifying. Assistant District Attorney Thomas Binger argues that the jury does not need an expert to understand the concept of self-defense and police use-of-force strategies are irrelevant in Rittenhouse's case.

— A defense request to exclude evidence related to a July 2020 case in which Rittenhouse allegedly hit a woman who was involved in an altercation with Rittenhouse's younger sister. Defense attorney Mark Richards argues the case has no bearing on whether Rittenhouse acted in self-defense on Aug. 25, 2020.

— A defense request to exclude evidence that Rittenhouse went to a Racine bar in January with members of the Proud Boys dressed in a T-shirt that read "Free as (expletive)." Richards says nothing shows Rittenhouse knew the men before that night or that his presence in Kenosha on Aug. 25, 2020, was connected to the Proud Boys or any other white nationalist group.

— A defense request to introduce evidence that Rosenbaum was convicted of having sexual contact with a minor in Arizona in 2002. Richards argues that supports a defense theory that Rosenbaum attacked Rittenhouse to steal Rittenhouse's gun because Rosenbaum couldn't legally possess a firearm.

— A defense request to dismiss the illegal firearm charge. Richards maintains that under Wisconsin law, Rittenhouse was too young to possess short-barreled shotguns and rifles. His AR-style rifle doesn't meet that definition.

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Follow Todd Richmond on Twitter at https://twitter.com/trichmond1

California wildfires threaten famous giant sequoia trees

By NOAH BERGER and JOHN ANTCZAK Associated Press

THREE RIVERS, Calif. (AP) — Firefighters wrapped the base of the world's largest tree in a fire-resistant blanket as they tried to save a famous grove of gigantic old-growth sequoias from wildfires burning Thursday in California's rugged Sierra Nevada.

The colossal General Sherman Tree in Sequoia National Park's Giant Forest, some other sequoias, the Giant Forest Museum and other buildings were wrapped as protection against the possibility of intense flames, fire spokeswoman Rebecca Paterson said.

The aluminum wrapping can withstand intensive heat for short periods. Federal officials say they have been using the material for several years throughout the U.S. West to protect sensitive structures from flames. Near Lake Tahoe, some homes that were wrapped in protective material survived a recent wildfire while others nearby were destroyed.

The Colony Fire, one of two burning in Sequoia National Park, was expected to reach the Giant Forest, a grove of 2,000 sequoias, at some point within days. It was unclear Thursday night whether that had happened. The fire didn't grow significantly as a layer of smoke reduced its spread, fire spokeswoman Katy Hooper said.

It comes after a wildfire killed thousands of sequoias, some as tall as high-rises and thousands of years old, in the region last year.

The General Sherman Tree is the largest in the world by volume, at 52,508 cubic feet (1,487 cubic meters), according to the National Park Service. It towers 275 feet (84 meters) high and has a circumference of 103 feet (31 meters) at ground level.

Sequoia and Kings Canyon national parks Superintendent Clay Jordan stressed the importance of protecting the massive trees from high-intensity fire during a briefing for firefighters.

A 50-year history of using prescribed burns — fires set on purpose to remove other types of trees and vegetation that would otherwise feed wildfires — in the parks' sequoia groves was expected to help the giant trees survive by lessening the impact if flames reach them.

A "robust fire history of prescribed fire in that area is reason for optimism," Paterson said. "Hopefully, the Giant Forest will emerge from this unscathed."

Giant sequoias are adapted to fire, which can help them thrive by releasing seeds from their cones and creating clearings that allow young sequoias to grow. But the extraordinary intensity of fires — fueled by climate change — can overwhelm the trees.

That happened last year when the Castle Fire killed what studies estimate were 7,500 to 10,600 large sequoias, according to the National Park Service.

A historic drought and heat waves tied to climate change have made wildfires harder to fight in the American West. Scientists say climate change has made the region much warmer and drier in the past 30 years and will continue to make weather more extreme and wildfires more frequent and destructive.

A national interagency fire management team took command of efforts to fight the 11.5-square-mile (30-square-kilometer) Paradise Fire and the 3-square-mile (8-square-kilometer) Colony Fire, which was closest to the grove. Operations to burn away vegetation and other fuel that could feed the flames were done in that area.

The fires forced the evacuation of the park this week, and parts of the town of Three Rivers outside the main entrance remained evacuated Thursday. A bulldozer was cutting a line between the fire and the community.

To the south, a fire on the Tule River Indian Reservation and in Giant Sequoia National Monument grew significantly overnight to more than 6 square miles (15 square kilometers), and crews had no containment of it, a Sequoia National Forest statement said.

The Windy Fire, also started by lightning, has burned into part of the Peyrone Sequoia Grove in the national monument, and other groves were threatened.

"Due to inaccessible terrain, a preliminary assessment of the fire's effects on giant sequoia trees within the grove will be difficult and may take days to complete," the statement said.

The fire led the Tulare County Sheriff's Office to warn the community of Johnsondale and Camp Whitsett, a Boy Scouts camp, to be ready to evacuate if necessary.

The wildfires are among the latest in a long summer of blazes that have scorched nearly 3,550 square miles (9,195 square kilometers) in California, destroying hundreds of homes.

Crews had limited ground access to the Colony Fire and the extreme steepness of the terrain around the Paradise Fire prevented it completely, requiring extensive aerial water and flame-retardant drops on both fires. The two fires were being managed collectively as the KNP Complex.

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Antczak reported from Los Angeles. Associated Press reporter Brian Melley contributed from Los Angeles.

AP FACT CHECK: Biden's shaky claims on jobs, gasoline

By CHRISTOPHER RUGABER and DAVID KOENIG Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Boasting that government policies can make a difference in improving the economy, President Joe Biden went too far Thursday in taking credit for job growth since taking office.

He also made a dubious suggestion that wrongdoing is behind higher gasoline prices — something that his administration will seek to fix. But analysts say there is little evidence that is the case.

A look at his claims and the facts:

BIDEN: "When I was sworn in as president, the nation was struggling to pull out of the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression. Job growth was anemic, with just over 60,000 new jobs per month in the three months before I was sworn in. Then we went to work. We passed the American Rescue Plan back in March. And it worked; it's still working. Over the last three months, we have created on average 750,000 new jobs per month."

THE FACTS: Biden is taking more credit for his plan than it deserves.

The robust hiring since his inauguration largely reflects the reopening of the U.S. economy after a huge winter wave of coronavirus infections started to peak in January. Widespread vaccinations, which topped three million a day in the spring, played a key role in enabling restaurants, bars and entertainment venues to reopen and start hiring again. Airplanes filled up, as did hotels.

Biden's $1.9 trillion financial rescue package, approved by Congress in March, did play an important role. By providing a third round of stimulus checks and extending an expanded unemployment benefits program through the first week of September, Biden's plan goosed spending and the economy by putting more money in Americans' pockets.

But hiring slowed sharply i n August to a gain of just 235,000 jobs, as the delta variant drove case counts higher, underscoring the ongoing hold that the virus has on the economy.

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BIDEN: "We're also going after the bad actors and pandemic profiteers in our economy. There's a lot of evidence gas prices should be going down, but they haven't. We're taking a close look at that."

THE FACTS: There actually is little evidence something nefarious is behind the higher gasoline prices, as Biden suggests.

Gasoline prices indeed usually fall after Labor Day, after the peak summer driving season. While that hasn't happened yet this year, analysts say other factors besides malfeasance appear to be in play. U.S. gasoline and oil prices, for instance, have been affected by a hurricane that temporarily shut most oil production in the Gulf of Mexico, several big refineries, and a major fuel pipeline to the East Coast.

The national average price for a gallon of gasoline is $3.19, according to the auto club AAA. That is unchanged from a month ago, though up a dollar from this time last year.

Gasoline prices usually track oil prices, and the price of benchmark U.S. crude is back close to its early-July highs after falling in August.

Jeffery Born, an energy-markets expert at Northeastern University, said current gasoline prices are partly

a result of production and refining capacity that was knocked offline by Hurricane Ida and other factors – even a shortage of tanker drivers.

"In short, I think we are having supply-chain problems," Born said. "I'm sure Joe wants prices to come down — you and I do, too. I'd also like to be 20 pounds lighter tomorrow."

Phil Flynn, an energy analyst at the Price Futures Group and a critic of Biden's energy policy, said prices reflect demand that came back stronger than expected from the pandemic and lower U.S. oil production, compounded by events like the hurricane.

"I'm not seeing any profiteering or bad actors," Flynn said.

Tom Kloza, chief analyst for the Oil Price Information Service consulting firm, said Hurricane Ida and lingering effects on production and refining are causing summer-like prices to "linger for longer," especially east of the Rockies. He predicted that pump prices will soon ease in the West, Southwest and Rocky Mountain states.

Energy economist Philip Verleger said gasoline prices are being propped up by U.S. independent producers and OPEC members limiting their oil production, by the cost of blending ethanol into gasoline and by lower gasoline inventories.

There already are some signs retail gasoline prices have peaked, with the Energy Information Administration reporting last week that gasoline prices are likely to decline in coming months. It forecast that prices would average $3.14 a gallon in September before falling to $2.91 in the last three months of the year, as driving declines in the winter months and refining operations come back online after being damaged by the hurricane.

Biden joins a rich tradition of presidents w ho express frustration with high gasoline prices. In 2019, then-President Donald Trump tweeted at OPEC, the Saudi Arabia-led cartel of oil producers.

"Oil prices getting too high," Trump tweeted. "OPEC, please relax and take it easy. World cannot take a price hike - fragile!"

Biden tried that approach himself last month, when he urged OPEC members to increase oil output just as concern was rising that higher energy prices could slow the U.S. economy's recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic.

"Production cuts made during the pandemic should be reversed as the global economy recovers in order to lower prices for consumers," Biden said at the time.

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Koenig reported from Dallas. Associated Press writer Hope Yen contributed to this report.

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EDITOR'S NOTE — A look at the veracity of claims by political figures.

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Fighting fire with fire to protect ancient sequoia trees

By BRIAN MELLEY Associated Press

LOS ANGELES (AP) — With flames advancing toward the signature grove of ancient massive trees in Sequoia National Park, firefighters on Thursday fought fire with fire.

Using firing operations to burn out flammable vegetation and other matter before the wildfire arrives in the Giant Forest is one of several ways firefighters can use their nemesis as a tool to stop, slow or redirect fires.

The tactic comes with considerable risks if conditions change. But it is routinely used to protect communities, homes or valuable resources now under threat from fires, including the grove of about 2,000 massive sequoias, including the General Sherman Tree, the world's largest by volume.

Here's how it works:

IT'S ALL ABOUT THE FUEL

Three things influence how hot and fast a fire burns: the landscape, with fire burning faster up steep slopes; weather, with winds and dry conditions fanning flames; and fuel, the amount of material that can burn.

The first two can't be controlled, but there are ways to reduce fuels long before any fire breaks out — or even as one is approaching.

"Of all the things that affect fire behavior, the fuels is really where we can take action," said Maureen Kennedy, a professor of wildfire ecology at the University of Washington.

Historically, low- to moderate-severity fires every five to 30 years burned out excess brush and timber before deadly fires in the early 20th century led to aggressive firefighting and a U.S. Forest Service policy to suppress all fires by 10 a.m. the day after they were reported.

That led to dense forests of dead trees, fallen logs and overgrown brush that accumulated over the past century, fueling more massive fires.

SLOWING FIRE BY CREATING FIRE

For centuries, Native Americans have used fire to thin out forests.

Prescribed burns set under favorable weather conditions can help mimic the lower-intensity fires of the past and burn off excess fuels when they are not at risk of getting out of control. If fire eventually burns the area, it will likely do so at lower intensity and with less damage.

The idea is the same during a wildfire. Fire chiefs try to take advantage of shifting winds or changing landscapes to burn out an area before the fire gets there, depriving it of the fuel it needs to keep going.

"They're trying to achieve the same effect," Kennedy said. "They're trying to moderate the fire behavior. They're trying to remove the fuels that make the fire burn so intensely. Of course, their goal there is to better contain and control the fire and protect the more valuable resources."

SAFELY SETTING MILD FIRES

All wildland firefighters learn about burnout operations in basic training, but it takes a higher level of training to plan and carry out firing operations.

"You need to know how to fight fire before you light fire," said Paul Broyles, a former chief of fire operations for the National Park Service.

Burning an area between the fire front and a projected point — such as a firebreak or the Giant Forest in Sequoia — requires the right conditions and enough time to complete the burnout before the fire can reach a fire line constructed by firefighters.

Often such operations are conducted at night when fires tend to die down or slow their advance as temperatures cool and humidity rises.

The convection of a fire pulls in winds from all direction, which can help. As fires climb steep terrain, burnouts are sometimes set on the other side of a ridge so any embers will land in an area where dry grasses and brush have already burned.

The firing operations require a crew making sure the fire does not spread in the wrong direction. It may also include bulldozers cutting fire lines or air tankers dropping retardant to further slow the flames.

All of it has to work in sync, Broyles said.

"Air tankers by themselves do not put fires out unless you follow up with personnel," he said. "It's like the military. You don't just bomb the hell out of your enemy without ground troops."

While burnouts are commonly used, they can backfire if winds shift or they aren't lit early enough.

"When you put more fire on the ground, there is a risk," said Rebecca Paterson, a spokeswoman for Sequoia National Park. "It carries the potential to create more problems than it solves."

Broyles said there were times he didn't get a burnout started in time and firefighters had to be evacuated.

"Fortunately, in my case, we didn't have any losses," he said.

SMALL FLAMES TO PROTECT GIANT SEQUOIAS

Firefighters on Thursday were conducting burnout operations in the Giant Forest at almost a micro level, moving from tree to tree, Paterson said. Ground cover and organic debris known as duff close to the trees was being set on fire, allowing the flames to creep away from the tree to create a buffer.

The General Sherman and other massive conifers were wrapped in aluminum blankets to protect them from the extreme heat.

The park was the first in the West to use prescribed fire more than 50 years ago and regularly burns some of its groves to remove fuels. Paterson said that was a reason for optimism.

"Hopefully, the Giant Forest will emerge from this unscathed," she said.

Future of Lake Tahoe clarity in question as wildfires worsen

By SAM METZ Associated Press/Report for America

CARSON CITY, Nev. (AP) — When a wildfire crested the mountains near North America's largest alpine lake, embers and ash that zipped across a smoky sky pierced Lake Tahoe's clear blue waters.

The evacuation order for thousands to flee their homes has been lifted, but those who returned have found black stripes of ash building up on the shoreline — a reminder that success fighting the Caldor Fire won't insulate the resort region on the California-Nevada line from effects that outlast wildfire season.

Scientists say it's too soon to draw conclusions about the lasting damage that record-setting wildfires will have on Lake Tahoe. But they're not wasting time. Researchers and state officials on the Tahoe Science Advisory Council discussed future study at a meeting Thursday.

Scientists funded by California, Nevada and the League to Save Lake Tahoe are researching lake clarity and biodiversity during and after wildfires. They're using collection buckets — some loaded with glass marbles — to capture and measure the size and quantity of particles and pollutants from wildfires that have sullied the normally crystal-clear waters. They're studying how particles enter the lake, how they move around it and the effect on algae production.

The clarity of the iconic alpine lake can vary even without catastrophic wildfires. On average, Lake Tahoe is clear 65 feet (20 meters) below the water's surface. Through wildfire season, scientists stationed near the lake's center have only been able to see 50 feet (15 meters) below the surface — a reduction they aren't sure is due to particles, algae or simply lack of sunlight, said Geoff Schladow, professor of civil and environmental engineering and director of the University of California, Davis' Tahoe Environmental Research Center.

"My feeling is, in some ways, it may look worse than it is," Schladow said. "What smoke in the basin actually does, particularly when it lasts for months, is something we don't really know. We're finding that out as we speak."

Smoke from Northern California wildfires has cloaked the Lake Tahoe basin in past years. But as blazes have grown in size and intensity — partially due to climate change, scientists say — smoke that has sat atop the lake for two to three months in the past two wildfire seasons has exceeded the expectations of many residents and tourists who flock to the deep blue lake for its clean alpine air and fragrant pine trees.

It's also concerned scientists, who have spent years studying how algae, erosion and air pollution from vehicles that 15 million tourists drive in each year affect clarity. They say the sheer amount of wildfire smoke that has lingered could harm lake clarity in ways that weren't previously considered.

"Our bread-and-butter sources of declining lake clarity are pretty well understood," said Allison Oliver, an ecologist at the Skeena Fisheries Commission in western Canada who studied how rivers and creeks delivered murky sediment to Lake Tahoe after the 2007 Angora Fire.

"This new phenomenon where we're getting these big shifts in climate regimes and this pattern of big summer fires," she said of the Sierra Nevada mountains, "that's not something that was on people's radar as much 15 or 20 years ago. Now, it's routine."

On many days, smoke has blotted out views of the mountains that wrap the lake's pristine waters and left an inescapable campfire stench on clothes, in cars and beneath fingernails.

"It's really apparent that we need to be concerned about not only fires burning in the basin that cause erosion and burn scars, but the smoke generated from massive fires outside the basin," said Jesse Patterson, the League to Save Lake Tahoe's chief strategy officer. "We need to think bigger, if we want to keep Tahoe blue decades to come."

The league, best known for its "Keep Tahoe Blue" bumper stickers, has aggressively pursued environmental restoration projects to maintain the lake's clarity, prevent erosion and replant burn scars. But amid accelerating climate change, Patterson fears local land management efforts may no longer be enough to protect the lake.

Scientists fear alpine lakes can act as "sponges," soaking up the microscopic particles in wildfire smoke, said Sudeep Chandra, a biology professor and director of the Global Water Center at the University of Nevada, Reno. Regardless of whether studies end up showing smoke obscures algae-fighting sunlight or increases the flow of pollutants into the lake, he believes the challenge for scientists will be expanding the scope of research into factors affecting Lake Tahoe.

Chandra applauded efforts to maintain lake clarity through restoring rivers, preventing erosion and encouraging responsible development. But after he saw how much smoke from California's Dixie Fire further north in the Sierra Nevada ended up in the basin, he said questions about the lake's future need to reckon with broader climate change trends.

"We're clearly regionally connected. That's going to be a new way of thinking about managing the Lake Tahoe basin," he said.

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Metz is a corps member for the Associated Press/Report for America Statehouse News Initiative. Report for America is a nonprofit national service program that places journalists in local newsrooms to report on undercovered issues.

Minnesota high court OKs ballot question on Minneapolis PD

By STEVE KARNOWSKI Associated Press

MINNEAPOLIS (AP) — The Minnesota Supreme Court cleared the way Thursday evening for voters in Minneapolis to decide on the future of policing in the city where George Floyd was killed, just ahead of the start of early and absentee voting.

The state's highest court overturned a lower court ruling that rejected ballot language approved by the City Council. A district judge said the wording failed to adequately describe the effects of a proposed charter amendment that would replace the Minneapolis Police Department with a new Department of Public Safety that "could include" police officers "if necessary."

But Chief Justice Lorie Gildea said in a three-page order that the justices concluded that the challenge to the ballot language did not meet the "high standard" that the court set in earlier cases. She said the court will issue a full opinion laying out its legal reasoning sometime later to avoid impeding the start of voting.

"Now voters have the opportunity to make their voices heard on this ballot question," City Attorney Jim Rowader said.

The Supreme Court was under pressure to rule quickly because early and absentee voting opens at 8 a.m. Friday in the Minneapolis municipal elections. The ballots were already being printed when Hennepin County District Judge Jamie Anderson ruled against the language Tuesday. It was the second time she had struck down the council's wording. Gildea put the case on the fast track Wednesday.

Lawyers on both sides said beforehand that they expected the high court ruling allowing the ballot language to be the final word, given the late hour. Leaders of the pro-amendment Yes 4 Minneapolis campaign have a rally set for Friday afternoon.

"We're all very pleased that the system worked," said Terrance Moore, an attorney for Yes 4 Minneapolis. "As ugly as it sometimes looks, the process went through from beginning to end and in the end the Supreme Court followed the law and its precedent. And the voters get to vote on the ballot question."

The proposal has its roots in the "defund the police" movement, which gained steam after Floyd's death last summer sparked protests, civil unrest and a national reckoning on racial justice. The amendment does not use the term "defund." But it would remove the city charter's requirement that Minneapolis have a police department with a minimum staffing level. Many details of how the new agency would work would be left up to the the City Council and mayor to decide later.

Yes 4 Minneapolis, which spearheaded the initiative, insists that the city would continue to have police if voters approve the amendment, but that the new department would be free to take a fresh approach to public safety that could reduce excessive policing against communities of color.

Opponents of the amendment, including former council member Don Samuels and his wife, Sondra, who were behind the court challenge, said the ballot language leaves too many important questions unexplained for voters about how the new department would be implemented, led, staffed and funded.

The All of Minneapolis anti-amendment campaign said it will start running its first ad on Friday. Its message is that the lack of a plan for what comes next if the proposal passes is alarming to many residents, especially given the track record of City Council members who have expressed varying degrees of support over time for defunding or abolishing the police.

Yes 4 Minneapolis argued in its filing with the Supreme Court that the Minneapolis Police Department would not automatically disappear if the amendment passed. The group said the department would continue to exist under current city ordinances until the City Council passed new laws to establish the new agency, and that the council could keep the force in place as long as necessary for an orderly transition.

COVID-19 surge forces health care rationing in parts of West

By REBECCA BOONE Associated Press

BOISE, Idaho (AP) — In another ominous sign about the spread of the delta variant, Idaho public health leaders on Thursday expanded health care rationing statewide and individual hospital systems in Alaska and Montana have enacted similar crisis standards amid a spike in the number of unvaccinated COVID-19 patients requiring hospitalization.

The decisions marked an escalation of the pandemic in several Western states struggling to convince skeptical people to get vaccinated.

The Idaho Department of Health and Welfare made the announcement after St. Luke's Health System, Idaho's largest hospital network, asked state health leaders to allow "crisis standards of care" because the increase in COVID-19 patients has exhausted the state's medical resources.

Idaho is one of the least vaccinated U.S. states, with only about 40% of its residents fully vaccinated against COVID-19.

Crisis care standards mean that scarce resources such as ICU beds will be allotted to the patients most likely to survive. Other patients will be treated with less effective methods or, in dire cases, given pain relief and other palliative care.

A hospital in Helena, Montana, was also forced to implement crisis standards of care amid a surge in COVID-19 patients. Critical care resources are at maximum capacity at St. Peter's Health hospital, officials said Thursday.

And earlier this week Providence Alaska Medical Center, Alaska's largest hospital, also started prioritizing resources.

Thursday's move in Idaho came a week after state officials started allowing health care rationing at hospitals in northern parts of the state.

"The situation is dire — we don't have enough resources to adequately treat the patients in our hospitals, whether you are there for COVID-19 or a heart attack or because of a car accident," Idaho Department of Welfare Director Dave Jeppesen said in statement.

He urged people to get vaccinated and wear masks indoors and in crowded outdoor settings.

"Our hospitals and health care systems need our help," Jeppesen said.

In Idaho's St. Luke's Health System, patients are being ventilated by hand — with a nurse or doctor squeezing a bag — for up to hours at a time while hospital officials work to find a bed with a mechanical ventilator, said chief medical officer Dr. Jim Souza.

Others are being treated with high-flow oxygen in rooms without monitoring systems, which means a doctor or nurse might not hear an alarm if the patient has a medical emergency, he said. Some patients are being treated for sepsis — a life-threatening infection — in emergency department waiting rooms.

The normal standards of care act as a net that allows physicians to "carry out the high wire acts that we do every day, like open heart surgery and bone marrow transplants and neuro-interventional stroke care," Souza said. "The net is gone, and people will fall from the high wire."

One in every 201 Idaho residents tested positive for COVID-19 over the past week, according to a tally by Johns Hopkins University. The mostly rural state ranks 12th in the U.S. for newly confirmed cases per capita.

Hospitalizations have skyrocketed. On Monday, the most recent data available from the state showed that 678 people were hospitalized statewide with coronavirus.

Meanwhile, the number of COVID-19 patients in intensive care unit beds has stayed mostly flat for the last two weeks at 170 people each day — suggesting the state may have reached the limit of its ability to treat ICU patients.

Though all of the state's hospitals can now ration health care resources as needed, some might not need to take that step. Each hospital will decide how to implement the crisis standards of care in its own facility, public health officials said.

On Wednesday, nearly 92% of all of the COVID-19 patients in St. Luke's hospitals were unvaccinated. Sixty-one of the hospital's 78 ICU patients had COVID-19. St. Luke's physicians have pleaded with Idaho residents for months to get vaccinated and take steps to slow the spread of coronavirus, warning that hospitals beds were quickly running out.

The health care crisis isn't just impacting hospitals — primary care physicians and medical equipment suppliers are also struggling to cope with the crush of coronavirus-related demand.

One major medical supplier, Norco Medical, said demand for oxygen tanks and related equipment has increased, sometimes forcing the company to send patients home with fewer cylinders than they would normally provide. High-flow oxygen equipment — normally used in hospital or hospice care settings — is also being more frequently requested for at-home patients, said Norco President Elias Margonis.

"It seems like they're discharging aggressively to free up beds for new patients coming into the hospitals," Margonis said.

Margonis spent much of his morning on the phone with public health leaders and hospitals, trying to determine how the crisis standards of care will change the way patients are discharged from hospitals. Already, the company has seen an increase in customers seeking specialty oxygen equipment that flows at a rate of 8, 12 or 20 liters per minute rather than the standard 4 or 5 liters per minute, he said.

"When someone goes home, we bring their bed, we bring their wheelchair, we bring their cannula, their oxygen," Margonis said. "This is where we're saying, it's important that you can't just discharge the problem, even if the patient is on the mend and on the way to getting healthy. To recover, they need the right support."

Primary Health Medical Group, Idaho's largest independent primary care and urgent care system, has been forced to shorten operating hours because its waiting rooms were so packed with patients that staffers were staying hours past closing in order to see them all. Meanwhile, the company was dealing with higher-than-normal numbers of staffers out sick because they had been exposed to coronavirus in the community or had symptoms and were awaiting tests.

Now the medical group is also preparing to monitor patients who are released from hospitals earlier than normal or trying to avoid emergency rooms completely, said CEO Dr. David Peterman, and they will likely be sicker and need more care.

"This is heart-wrenching. I've practiced medicine in southwest Idaho for 40 years and I have never seen anything like this," he said.

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This story has been corrected to show that the average daily number of patients in intensive care unit beds statewide is about 170, not 70.

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Iris Samuels contributed to this report from Helena, Montana. Samuels is a corps member for the As-

sociated Press/Report for America Statehouse News Initiative. Report for America is a nonprofit national service program that places journalists in local newsrooms to report on undercovered issues.

Lawyer Murdaugh exits jail after $10M insurance fraud arrest

By JEFFREY COLLINS Associated Press

COLUMBIA, S.C. (AP) — Instead of a suit and tie, lawyer Alex Murdaugh found himself in a jail jumpsuit Thursday in a cramped South Carolina courtroom, struggling to wipe tears from his eyes with handcuffed wrists as his lawyer detailed how his life crumbled over the past three months.

Murdaugh discovered the bodies of his wife and son, shot multiple times at their Colleton County home June 7. His drug addiction got worse and in a deep depression on Sept. 4, he decided he should die, but instead of killing himself, he hired someone to do it, defense attorney Dick Harpootlian said.

The goal was to get his surviving son a $10 million life insurance benefit, state police said. But the shot only grazed his head and Murdaugh, 53, was charged Thursday with insurance fraud, conspiracy and filing a false police report. — all felonies that could bring up to 20 years in prison if convicted of all three charges. There is no minimum sentence.

The killings of Murdaugh's wife, Maggie, and son Paul in June remain unsolved. Harpootlian said Murdaugh is adamant he had nothing to do with their deaths

Murdaugh spent about five hours in the Hampton County jail before being issued a $20,000 bond and being released on his own recognizance. Prosecutors had asked for a higher bond and GPS monitoring.

"Sometimes those who have everything and who are suffering a possible fall from grace are actually more of a concern than a hardened criminal," said Creighton Waters with the South Carolina Attorney General's Office.

But Magistrate Tonja Alexander noted Murdaugh had no prior criminal record and she didn't think he would be a risk to the community.

Murdaugh's surrender culminated a tumultuous 36 hours for a man whose father, grandfather and great-grandfather were all elected prosecutors in the area. A giant law firm in town was founded by his family more than a century ago.

Murdaugh said almost nothing during the brief bond hearing. At times he bowed his head low, or appeared to struggle to wipe tears from his eyes.

Murdaugh's former client was arrested late Tuesday on an assisted suicide charge, and then state police opened a sixth investigation into him and his family — this time involving a housekeeper and nanny who died in his home in 2018.

Murdaugh told his lawyers on Monday that he had arranged his own shooting, and they then spoke to police.

"The only violence he has ever been involved in is this, which was to have himself executed," Harpootlian said. "He's not a danger to the community. He's only a danger to himself."

Murdaugh agreed to give up his passport even as Harpootlian said his client's financial condition is "ruinous" and he couldn't leave the country if he wanted to.

Murdaugh needed to return to his out-of-state rehab center before the end of Thursday to keep his bed, Harpootlian said. His attorney promised to contact prosecutors and investigators when Murdaugh's rehab stint is finished so they can figure out what to do next.

Authorities said Murdaugh asked Curtis Edward Smith to kill him with a shot to the head on Sept. 4 so his surviving son could collect a $10 million life insurance policy, authorities said.

Murdaugh bought drugs from the former client, Harpootlian has said.

Murdaugh's lawyers said he has spent the past 10 days or so in drug rehab after his law firm fired him over missing money that could total millions of dollars. Harpootlian said Murdaugh is fighting a 20-year addiction to painkillers.

"If anyone wants to see the face of what opioid addiction does, you're looking at it," Harpootlian said.

The investigations into the the Murdaughs started June 7, when Alex Murdaugh found the bodies of his

52-year-old wife, Maggie, and their 22-year-old son Paul shot multiple times after returning to their Colleton County home after visiting his sick father, who would die days later from cancer.

Those killings remain unsolved, and Murdaugh's lawyers have said he is adamant he had nothing to do with their deaths.

On Sept. 3, Murdaugh was fired by the PMPED law firm founded by his family after the firm determined he took money.

Murdaugh's lawyers said he decided to kill himself the next day, but have someone else shoot him. Murdaugh gave Curtis Edward Smith a gun and they headed to lonely Old Salkehatchie Road. Smith fired one shot that only grazed Murdaugh's head, a State Law Enforcement Division agent said in a sworn statement.

Murdaugh was able to call 911 and his initial story was someone in a passing pickup truck shot at him as he checked a tire that was low on pressure.

Smith, 61, remained jailed Thursday on numerous charges, including assisted suicide, assault and battery of a high aggravated nature and distribution of methamphetamine. He didn't have a lawyer or speak about the charges at a hearing where his bond was set at $55,000. Smith left jail hours later.

Along with the killings of Maggie and Paul Murdaugh and the shooting of Alex Murdaugh, the State Law Enforcement Division is also investigating the missing money, whether anyone tried to obstruct an investigation into a 2019 boat crash for which Paul Murdaugh was eventually charged and a July 2015 hit-and-run death in Hampton County.

The agency also announced Wednesday that they are now investigating Gloria Satterfield's death at the request of Hampton County Coroner Angela Topper, who said her death certificate lists describes natural causes, which is inconsistent with a trip-and-fall accidental death. She said her office did not perform an autopsy because it was not informed.

Satterfield's two sons filed a lawsuit Wednesday saying they haven't seen any of the $505,000 wrongful death settlement that Murdaugh had friends arrange.

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Follow Jeffrey Collins on Twitter at https://twitter.com/JSCollinsAP.

Jane Powell, Hollywood golden-age musicals star, dies at 92

By LYNN ELBER AP Television Writer

LOS ANGELES (AP) — Jane Powell, the bright-eyed, operatic-voiced star of Hollywood's golden age musicals who sang with Howard Keel in "Seven Brides for Seven Brothers" and danced with Fred Astaire in "Royal Wedding," has died. She was 92.

Powell died Thursday at her Wilton, Connecticut, home, longtime friend Susan Granger said. Granger said Powell died of natural causes.

"Jane was the most wonderful friend," Granger said. "She was candid, she was honest. You never asked Jane a question you didn't want an absolutely honest answer to."

Granger was a youngster when she met the then-teenaged Powell, who was making her film debut in 1944's "Song of the Open Road," directed by Granger's father, S. Sylvan Simon.

She performed virtually her whole life, starting about age 5 as a singing prodigy on radio in Portland, Oregon. On screen, she quickly graduated from teen roles to the lavish musical productions that were a 20th-century Hollywood staple.

Her 1950 casting in "Royal Wedding" came by default. June Allyson was first announced as Astaire's co-star but withdrew when she became pregnant. Judy Garland was cast, but was withdrawn because of personal problems. Jane Powell was next in line.

"They had to give it to me," she quipped at the time. "Everybody else is pregnant." Also among the expectant MGM stars: Lana Turner, Esther Williams, Cyd Charisse and Jean Hagen.

Powell had just turned 21 when she got the role; Astaire was 50. She was nervous because she lacked dancing experience, but she found him "very patient and understanding. We got along fine from the start."

"Seven Brides for Seven Brothers" proved to be a 1954 "sleeper" hit.

"The studio didn't think it was going to do anything," she recalled in 2000. "MGM thought that `Brigadoon' was going to be the big moneymaker that year. It didn't turn out that way. We were the ones that went to the Radio City Music Hall, which was always such a coup."

The famed New York venue was a movie theater then.

Audiences were overwhelmed by the lusty singing of Keel and Powell and especially by the gymnastic choreography of Michael Kidd. "Seven Brides" achieved classic status and resulted in a TV series and a Broadway musical.

"Blonde and small and pretty, Jane Powell had the required amount of grit and spunk that was needed to play the woman who could tame seven backwoodsmen," John Kobal wrote in his book "Gotta Sing Gotta Dance: A Pictorial History of Film Musicals."

After 13 years at MGM, though, Powell quit the studio, reasoning that she was going to be fired "because they weren't going to be doing musicals anymore."

"I thought I'd have a lot of studios to go to," she said in 2000, "but I didn't have any, because no one wanted to make musicals. It was very difficult, and quite a shock to me. There's nothing worse than not being wanted."

She found one musical at RKO, "The Girl Most Likely," a 1958 remake of "Tom, Dick and Harry." Aside from a couple of minor films, her movie career was over.

She was born Suzanne Lorraine Burce in Portland, Oregon, in 1928. She began singing on local radio as a small child, and as she grew, her voice developed into a clear, high-pitched soprano.

When the Burce family planned a trip to Los Angeles, the radio station asked if Suzanne would appear on a network talent show there. The tiny girl with a 2½-octave voice drew thunderous applause with an aria from "Carmen" and was quickly put under contract to MGM.

Her first movie was a loanout to an independent producer for "Song of the Open Road," a 1944 mishmash with W.C. Fields (at the end of his career) and Edgar Bergen and Charlie McCarthy.

The character's name in "Song of the Open Road" was Jane Powell, and MGM decided that that would be her movie name.

She played teens in such films as "Holiday in Mexico," "Three Daring Daughters" and "A Date With Judy." But she pleaded with the studio bosses to be given grown-up roles and finally succeeded in "Royal Wedding."

Frothy romances and musicals continued to dominate her career, including "Young, Rich and Pretty," "Small Town Girl" and "Three Sailors and a Girl."

After her movie career ended, musical theater offered plenty of work for a star of her prominence and talent. She sang in supper clubs, toured in such shows as "The Unsinkable Molly Brown" and "I Do! I Do!" and replaced Debbie Reynolds in the Broadway run of "Irene."

She frequently appeared on television, notably in the Judy Garland role in a new version of "Meet Me in St. Louis."

As she approached her 70s, Powell abandoned her singing career. "I can't hit the high notes, and I won't be second-rate," she explained in 2000. She switched to drama, appearing in New York theater in such plays as "Avow," portraying mother of an unmarried, pregnant daughter and a son who wanted to marry his male partner.

Powell's first four marriages ended in divorce: to Geary Steffen (son Geary, daughter Suzanne), Patrick Nerney (daughter Lindsay), James Fitzgerald and David Parlour.

Powell met fifth husband Dick Moore when he interviewed her for his book about child actors. As Dickie Moore, he had been a well-known child actor in the 1930s and '40s and gave Shirley Temple her first screen kiss in "Miss Annie Rooney" (1942). Moore, head of a New York public relations office, and Powell married in 1988. He died in 2015.

Jane Powell's survivors include her daughter, Lindsey Nerney, Granger said.

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Biographical material in this report was compiled by late AP Entertainment Writer Bob Thomas.

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Biden angers France, EU with new Australia, UK initiative

By MATTHEW LEE AP Diplomatic Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden's decision to form a strategic Indo-Pacific alliance with Australia and Britain to counter China is angering France and the European Union. They're feeling left out and seeing it as a return to the Trump era.

The security initiative, unveiled this week, appears to have brought Biden's summer of love with Europe to an abrupt end. AUKUS, which notably excludes France and the European Union, is just the latest in a series of steps, from Afghanistan to east Asia, that have taken Europe aback.

After promising European leaders that "America is back" and that multilateral diplomacy would guide U.S. foreign policy, Biden has alienated numerous allies with a go-it-alone approach on key issues. France's foreign minister expressed "total incomprehension" at the recent move, which he called a "stab in the back," and the EU's foreign policy chief complained that Europe had not been consulted.

France will lose a nearly $100 billion deal to build diesel submarines for Australia under the terms of the initiative, which will see the U.S. and Britain help Canberra construct nuclear-powered ones.

As such, French anger on a purely a commercial level would be understandable, particularly because France, since Britain's handover of Hong Kong to China in 1997, is the only European nation to have significant territorial possessions or a permanent military presence in the Pacific.

But French and European Union officials went further, saying the agreement calls into question the entire cooperative effort to blunt China's growing influence and underscores the importance of languishing plans to boost Europe's own defense and security capabilities.

Some have compared Biden's recent actions to those of his predecessor, Donald Trump, under Trump's "America First" doctrine. That's surprising for a president steeped in international affairs who ran for the White House vowing to mend shaken ties with allies and restore U.S. credibility on the world stage.

Although it's impossible to predict if any damage will be lasting, the short-term impact seems to have rekindled European suspicions of American intentions — with potential implications for Biden's broader aim to unite democracies against authoritarianism, focused primarily on China and Russia.

Just three months ago, on his first visit to the continent as president, Biden was hailed as a hero by European counterparts eager to move beyond the trans-Atlantic tensions of the Trump years. But that palpable sense of relief has now faded for many, and its one clear winner, German Chancellor Angela Merkel, is on her way out.

Since June, Biden has infuriated America's oldest ally, France, left Poland and Ukraine questioning the U.S. commitment to their security and upset the European Union more broadly with unilateral decisions ranging from Afghanistan to east Asia. And, while Europe cheered when Biden pledged to return to nuclear negotiations with Iran and revive Israeli-Palestinian peace talks, both efforts remain stalled nine months into his administration.

The seeds of discontent may have been sown in the spring but they began to bloom in July over Biden's acquiescence to a Russia-to-Germany gas pipeline that will bypass Poland and Ukraine, and a month later in August with the chaotic U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan that left Europe scrambling to keep up after it had expressed reservations about the pullout.

Then just this week, Biden enraged France and the European Union with his announcement that the U.S. would join post-Brexit Britain and Australia in a new Indo-Pacific security initiative aimed at countering China's increasing aggressiveness in the region.

Unsurprisingly, China reacted angrily, accusing the U.S. and its English-speaking partners of embarking on a project that will destabilize the Pacific to the detriment of global security. But, the reactions from Paris and Brussels were equally severe. Both complained they were not only excluded from the deal but not consulted on it.

The White House and Secretary of State Antony Blinken say France had been informed of the decision before it was announced on Wednesday, although it was not exactly clear when. Blinken said Thursday

there had been conversations with the French about it within the past 24 to 48 hours, suggesting there had not been an in-depth consultation.

French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian, who in June extolled the "excellent news for all of us that America is back," expressed "total incomprehension" at the announcement of the initiative. "It was really a stab in the back," he said. "It looks a lot like what Trump did."

White House press secretary Jen Psaki dismissed the comparison. "I would say the president doesn't think about it much," she told reporters. "The president's focus is on maintaining and continuing our close relationships with leaders in France, with the United Kingdom, with Australia and to achieving our global objectives, which include security in the Indo-Pacific."

In Brussels, EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell echoed the French minister's complaints. "I suppose that an agreement of this nature was not cooked up the day before yesterday. It takes a certain amount of time, and despite that, no, we were not consulted," he said. "That obliges us, once again … to reflect on the need to put European strategic autonomy high on the agenda."

Indeed, the 27-member European Union on Thursday unveiled a new strategy for boosting economic, political and defense ties in the Indo-Pacific, just hours after the announcement by the U.S., Britain and Australia. The EU said the aim is to strengthen and expand economic relations while reinforcing respect of international trade rules and improving maritime security. It said it hopes the strategy will result in more European naval deployments to the region.

U.S. officials brushed aside the French and EU complaints on Thursday.

"There are a range of partnerships that include the French and some partnerships that don't, and they have partnerships with other countries that don't include us," Psaki said. "That is part of how global diplomacy works."

Speaking alongside Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin and the Australian defense and foreign ministers, Blinken said there "is no regional divide" with Europe over Indo-Pacific strategy. "We welcome European countries playing an important role in the Indo-Pacific," he said, calling France a "vital partner."

But how closely they will work together remains to be seen.

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AP writers Darlene Superville, Sylvie Corbet in Paris and Lorne Cook in Brussels contributed to this report.

NYC's Rikers Island jail spirals into chaos amid pandemic

By MICHAEL R. SISAK Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — A spate of inmate deaths. Cellblocks unguarded. Staggering staffing shortages caused by AWOL guards. Detainees deprived of food and medical care.

New York City's notorious Rikers Island jail complex, troubled by years of neglect, has spiraled into turmoil during the coronavirus pandemic. It's not just inmates and advocates saying that. City officials, including the mayor, admit there are serious problems.

One jail watchdog called it "a complete breakdown in the operation of the jails."

"In our office's 50 years of monitoring the city jails, this is one of the most dangerous times we've seen," said Mary Lynne Werlwas, a lawyer and the director of the Prisoners' Rights Project at the Legal Aid Society.

At one point during the summer, more than one-third of the city's jail guards — about 3,050 of 8,500 — were on sick leave or medically unfit to work with inmates, according to the agency that runs the city's jails, the Department of Correction. Some guards have been missing shifts without any explanation.

The growing crisis, brought to light in recent weeks by advocates, news reports and a federal monitor who wrote of "grave concerns" with the city's jails, has sent officials scrambling for remedies amid plans to close Rikers by 2026.

Mayor Bill de Blasio this week unveiled reforms that include requiring absent guards to get a doctor's note if they're out for more than a day, speeding inmate intake procedures and fixing infrastructure problems like broken cell doors.

On Wednesday, the city started suspending jail guards for 30 days without pay if they refused to come to work. Last week, the city said the staffing situation was so dire it was enlisting a telemarketing company

to entice recently retired correctional officers to return to work.

Advocates, lawmakers and even the union for jail guards say the measures aren't enough to fix a system where 10 inmates have died this year, at least five in suspected suicides.

Advocates want inmates released immediately. Some say Rikers should be closed right away.

Lawmakers who toured Rikers complex this week said it's filthy and inhumane, with overflowing toilets and floors covered in dead cockroaches, feces and rotting food. State Assemblywoman Jessica González-Rojas said inmates told her they felt like they were being treated like slaves and animals.

The union, meanwhile, has said that hiring more guards is the answer and that suspensions will leave remaining officers working "triple and quadruple shifts with no meals and no rest."

"The mayor cannot discipline his way out of this staffing crisis that he caused by refusing to hire a single correction officer for nearly three years, even as the inmate population doubled," said Benny Boscio Jr., the president of the Correction Officers Benevolent Association.

In actuality, the city's jail population has risen by about 58%, topping 6,000 inmates at the end of last week after falling below 3,900 inmates as bail reforms took effect, arrests slowed and some inmates were sent home early in the pandemic. In addition, city jail Commissioner Vincent Schiraldi said Monday that the city has authorized the hiring of at least 200 correctional officers.

De Blasio has blamed virus-related court backlogs for the increases and called on judges to use supervised release instead of jail for people accused of nonviolent offenses. He wants the state's prison system to transfer sentenced inmates from Rikers within five days and joined advocates and lawmakers in calling on Gov. Kathy Hochul to sign a bill overhauling the parole system.

Most of the city's jail inmates are being held for trial or on parole violations.

Problems at Rikers aren't new. The Associated Press and other news organizations have reported on past concerns including violence, deaths, sexual assaults and mistreatment of mentally ill inmates.

"It's taken a really long time to mess this place up. It has been decades of neglect out here," said Schiraldi, the jail commissioner since June. "I call it the junk drawer of the criminal justice system."

Inmates have wallowed for days at a single intake unit without basic medical attention, like having their blood sugar checked, and unable to make phone calls to relatives, lawmakers and advocates said.

Inmates have lashed out at guards and each other. In July, an inmate tossed feces at a jail captain. In August, an inmate slashed a guard.

In March, in what was supposed to be a secure and closely watched mental health observation unit, authorities said an inmate managed to kill himself.

"These conditions are not just responding to the crisis of the pandemic that hit the jails 17 months ago," said Werlwas. "This is a severe and remarkable decline in the very most basic security and operations of our jails."

The jail's federal monitor, Steve J. Martin, said in a letter to U.S. District Judge Laura Swain in August that worsening conditions in the city's jails — rising violence, self-harm, death and use of force by guards — were tied directly to a spike in "excessive and unchecked staff absences" dating to April.

Guards who did show up said they were forced to work double and triple shifts, leading the union to sue the city over what it called "inhumane" working conditions. Some housing units had no guards at all, Martin said, and some Rikers inmates were able to access off-limits areas that were supposed to be highly secure.

The five suspected suicides at Rikers this year are the most there since 2005. In the past five weeks, three inmates have died. One of them, 25-year-old Brandon Rodriguez, had been there a week. Another, 24-year-old Esias Johnson, who died on Sept. 7, was a month into his stay.

State Senator Jessica Ramos said lawmakers touring Rikers on Monday saw a man trying to kill himself.

"Everything goes back to the problem of Rikers Island itself," de Blasio said. "We need to get the hell out of there as quickly as possible, but in the meantime, we have immense challenges."

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Associated Press writer Michelle L. Price contributed to this report. Follow Michael Sisak on Twitter at twitter.com/mikesisak

Study: Childhood obesity in U.S. accelerated during pandemic

By MIKE STOBBE AP Medical Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — A new study ties the COVID-19 pandemic to an "alarming" increase in obesity in U.S. children and teenagers.

Childhood obesity has been increasing for decades, but the new work suggests an acceleration last year — especially in those who already were obese when the pandemic started.

The results signal a "profound increase in weight gain for kids" and are "substantial and alarming," said one of the study's authors, Dr. Alyson Goodman of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

It's also a sign of a vicious cycle. The pandemic appears to be worsening the nation's longstanding obesity epidemic, and obesity can put people at risk for more severe illness after coronavirus infection.

The CDC on Thursday released the study, which is the largest yet to look at obesity trends during the pandemic.

It found:

—An estimated 22% of children and teens were obese last August, up from 19% a year earlier.

—Before the pandemic, children who were a healthy weight were gaining an average of 3.4 pounds a year. That rose to 5.4 pounds during the pandemic.

—For kids who were moderately obese, expected weight gain rose from 6.5 pounds a year before the pandemic to 12 pounds after the pandemic began.

—For severely obese kids, expected annual weight gain went from 8.8 pounds to 14.6 pounds.

The rate of obesity increased most dramatically in kids ages 6 to 11, who are more dependent on their parents and may have been more affected when schools suspended in-person classes, the researchers said.

The research was based on a review of the medical records of more than 432,000 kids and teens, ages of 2 to 19, who were weighed and measured at least twice before the pandemic and at least once early in the pandemic.

Some limitations: It only included children who got care before and during the pandemic, the researchers said. And it also did not offer a look at how obesity trends may have differed between racial and ethnic groups.

Earlier this week, the CDC said the number of states in which at least 35% of residents are obese increased last year by four.

Delaware, Iowa, Ohio and Texas joined the list. In 2019, there were 12 states — Alabama, Arkansas, Indiana, Kansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, Michigan, Mississippi, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, and West Virginia.

Those results was based on surveys where adults described their own height and weight, and are not as accurate as medical records.

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The Associated Press Health & Science Department receives support from the Howard Hughes Medical Institute's Department of Science Education. The AP is solely responsible for all content.

Outbreaks strand some students at home with minimal learning

By BRYAN ANDERSON and HEATHER HOLLINGSWORTH Associated Press/Report for America

RALEIGH, N.C. (AP) — Within his first week back at school after a year and a half, 7-year-old Ben Medlin was exposed to a classmate with COVID-19, and he was sent home, along with 7,000 other students in the district, for 14 days of quarantine.

Not much learning went on in Ben's home.

On some days last week, the second-grader was given no work by his teachers. On others, he was done by 9:30 a.m., his daily assignments consisting of solving 10 math problems or punctuating four sentences, according to his mother.

"It was very much just thrown together and very, very, very easy work," Kenan Medlin said.

As coronavirus outbreaks driven by the delta variant lead districts around the U.S. to abruptly shut down or send large numbers of children into quarantine at home, some students are getting minimal schooling.

Despite billions of dollars in federal money at their disposal to prepare for new outbreaks and develop contingency plans, some governors, education departments and local school boards have been caught flat-footed.

Also, some school systems have been handcuffed by state laws or policies aimed at keeping students in classrooms and strongly discouraging or restricting a return to remote learning.

The disruptions — and the risk that youngsters will fall further behind academically — have been unsettling for parents and educators alike.

The school board in Ben's district in Union County, outside Charlotte, relented on Monday and voted to allow most of its quarantining students to return to the classroom as long as they aren't known to be infected or have no symptoms. On Wednesday, the state's top health official threatened legal action against the district unless it returns to stricter quarantine procedures.

Union County school officials said they are not offering virtual instruction but are contacting parents of affected children to help them line up tutors or other help for their youngsters. One in 6 students in the mask-optional district were quarantined last week.

In the rural district of Wellington, Kansas, students got a week off from schoolwork when a COVID-19 outbreak struck. Instead of going online, the district decided to add 10 minutes to each day to make up for the lost time when it reopened on Tuesday. Masks also are required now.

Districts in Kansas risk losing funding if they offer online or hybrid learning for more than 40 hours per student per year.

In Georgia, Ware County's 6,000-student district halted schooling altogether for three weeks in mid-August. The district said it was unreasonable for teachers to have to offer virtual and in-person instruction at the same time. It also cited a lack of internet service in some rural areas.

In Missouri, the Board of Education rescinded a rule in July that allowed school districts to offer hybrid and remote instruction for months at a time. Districts that close entirely because of COVID-19 outbreaks, as eight small rural school systems have done this year, now are limited to 36 hours of alternative instruction, such as Zoom classes. After that, they have to make up the time later.

The U.S. Education Department said Tuesday that states and school districts should have policies to ensure continued access to "high-quality and rigorous learning" in the event COVID-19 cases keep students from attending school.

The Illinois State Board of Education recently passed a resolution forcing districts to make remote instruction available to quarantined students.

Randi Weingarten, president of the American Federation of Teachers, said laws restricting virtual instruction are short-sighted. She noted that some of these states have no mask or vaccine requirements either.

"It is just crazy because this is a pandemic still, and as much as we had all hoped that it would be over, delta has made clear that it is not over," she said.

In North Carolina, state health officials in July eliminated the requirement that districts provide remote learning for quarantining students, saying virtual options are "not supported by current evidence or are no longer needed due to the lower rates of community transmission and increased rates of vaccination."

In the meantime, parents are left with some difficult decisions to make.

Medlin on Thursday pulled her two children out of school and plans to home-school them as she did last year.

Emily Goss, another Union County parent, said she likewise is planning to home-school her 5-year-old kindergartener after he was put under quarantine six days into the school year with no remote learning option in place.

"He's supposed to be playing outside, riding bikes and learning how to make new friends, and he's wondering what's going to happen to him. That's not how childhood is supposed to be, and it's just heartbreaking," she said. "We can't do this all year."

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Follow AP coverage of the virus outbreak at https://apnews.com/VirusOutbreak.

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Follow Anderson on Twitter at https://twitter.com/BryanRAnderson.

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Hollingsworth reported from Mission, Kansas. Associated Press writers Jeff Amy in Atlanta and Collin Binkley in Boston also contributed. Anderson is a corps member for the Associated Press/Report for America Statehouse News Initiative. Report for America is a nonprofit national service program that places journalists in local newsrooms to report on undercovered issues.

Body composting a 'green' alternative to burial, cremation

By THOMAS PEIPERT Associated Press

LAFAYETTE, Colo. (AP) — In a suburban Denver warehouse tucked between an auto repair shop and a computer recycling business, Seth Viddal is dealing with life and death.

He and one of his employees have built a "vessel" they hope will usher in a more environmentally friendly era of mortuary science that includes the natural organic reduction of human remains, also known as body composting.

"It's a natural process where the body is returned to an elemental level over a short period of time," said Viddal, who likened the practice to backyard composting of food scraps and yard waste. "This is the same process but done with a human body inside of a vessel, and in our case, in a controlled environment."

On Sept. 7, Colorado became the second state after Washington to allow human body composting. Oregon will allow the practice beginning next July. In Washington, the three businesses licensed to compost human remains have transformed at least 85 bodies since the law took effect in May 2020, and more than 900 people have signed up for the service as natural funerals become more popular.

Viddal, who co-owns The Natural Funeral in Lafayette, lobbied the Colorado Legislature for the option and started building a prototype vessel in an industrial area soon after the bipartisan bill was signed into law.

Based on a design being used in Washington, the insulated wooden box is about 7 feet long (2 meters), 3 feet wide and 3 feet deep, lined with waterproof roofing material and packed with wood chips and straw. Two large spool wheels on either end allow it to be rolled across the floor, providing the oxygenation, agitation and absorption required for a body to compost.

Viddal calls the process an "exciting ecological option," and in death, he also sees life.

"Composting itself is a very living function and it's performed by living organisms. ... There are billions of microbial, living things in our digestive tracts and just contained in our body. And when our one life ceases, the life of those microbes does not cease," he said.

After about three months, the vessel is opened and the "soil" is filtered for medical devices like prosthetics, pacemakers or joint replacements. The remaining large bones are then pulverized and returned to the vessel for another three months of composting. Teeth are removed to prevent contamination from mercury in fillings.

The vessel must reach 131 degrees Fahrenheit (55 Celsius) for 72 continuous hours to kill any bacteria and pathogens. The high temperature occurs naturally during the breakdown of the body in an enclosed box.

In six months, the body, wood chips and straw will transform into enough soil to fill the bed of a pickup truck. Family members can keep the soil to spread in their yards, but Colorado law forbids selling it and using it commercially to grow food for human consumption and only allows licensed funeral homes and crematories to compost human bodies.

"It accomplishes the conversion of the body back into a very beneficial substance — soil, earth," said Viddal, who envisions building more than 50 body composting vessels.

The Natural Funeral charges $7,900 for body composting, compared with $2,200 for flame cremation, and Viddal notes that a traditional burial and service in the Denver area can run well north of $10,000. The company has not yet composted any bodies, but several people have signed up and paid for the service.

AJ Killeen, 40, of Boulder, has already expressed interest in having his body composted when he dies, even though he is relatively young.

After a car accident a couple years ago, a doctor discovered Killeen had a heart condition. That got Killeen thinking about what would happen to his body after he dies, and composting seemed like a natural fit.

"It's what's going to happen anyway, right? I mean, we're all going to turn to dust, basically. So this is just a little more natural," he said. "They're going to control the humidity. They're going to control the soil amendments and hopefully some worms and some mushrooms find a good home in me for a few months. And, you know, at the other end of it, I'll be just a few bags of dirt."

Killeen, who manages commercial real estate, said his concern for the environment played a large role in considering the option. Flame cremation burns fossil fuels that can contribute to climate change, and the process also releases toxic, mercury-laden fumes into the atmosphere. Traditional burial takes up space in a cemetery that will use additional resources to keep the plot constantly watered and mowed.

"I always joke that I hope I expire on trash day if that's just easier for my family," said Killeen, who composts food scraps and yard waste through the city's collection program.

Killeen is among a growing number of people considering more natural funeral options, especially since the pandemic began, and he thinks the option will become more accepted once people get over "the ick factor."

The Colorado Catholic Conference, a group of bishops aimed at molding public policy, opposed the bill, saying body composting "does not promote human dignity." Some rabbis also are against body composting because they say it violates Jewish religious law. Other opponents are concerned there is not enough research on whether the compost contaminates soil and there is no way to prevent people from using it in home vegetable gardens.

"We don't know what they're going to do with it if they take it all home," said Stacey Kleinman, a board member of the Colorado Funeral Directors Association. They helped craft the legislation, but the group's stance is neutral.

Even with the opposition, several states are considering the option as Americans become more open to afterlife alternatives.

According to a Choice Mutual Insurance Agency survey of 1,500 Americans this summer, when many were burying loved ones killed by the coronavirus, 21% said the pandemic changed how they want their body disposed of. Traditional burial and cremation remained the front-runners, but 11% said they would opt for burial involving natural decomposition without a casket. Only 4% said they would choose that option in a similar survey conducted in 2020.

Choice Mutual, which specializes in burial insurance, did not specifically ask about body composting, but the survey highlights an increased interest in more natural and environmentally friendly options.

Micah Truman, CEO and founder of Return Home south of Seattle, runs an 11,500-square-foot (1,068-square-meter) facility that includes 74 vessels. So far, his company has composted 16 bodies in what he describes as an "extremely precise scientific operation" that takes only 60 days.

Truman said that because the composting option is so new, "it's really a matter of changing hearts and minds right now." But he has been surprised by how many young people are interested, including someone who recently signed up their 8-year-old child.

"Our young people are going to teach us how to die better. It's been really powerful for us," Truman said. "I think what's happened is that the younger generation really genuinely understands that we have to make sure that our Earth can stay whole."

US faith leaders recall Sikh's bias killing post Sept. 11

By ANITA SNOW Associated Press

MESA, Ariz. (AP) — Sikh businessman Balbir Singh Sodhi was helping plant a flower bed at his Arizona gas station when he was shot dead by a man seeking to avenge 9/11. Mistaken for an Arab Muslim because of his turban and beard, Sodhi was the first person to die in a wave of bias crimes unleashed by the attacks.

"Five shots rang out and Balbir uncle fell and died right there, he bled to death not knowing who shot him or why," Sikh activist Valarie Kaur told scores of people gathered Wednesday night at the Chevron station for the 20th anniversary of Sodhi's murder. "His killer, when arrested, said: 'I am a patriot.'"

9/11 released a dangerous wave of white supremacy and Islamophobia that, two decades later, continues to manifest in attacks on members of a variety of belief traditions. But religious leaders say Sept. 11 also broadened, diversified and solidified interfaith movements as more Muslims and members of other lesser-known groups increasingly were pulled in.

"Sept. 11 opened a spigot for hate and bigotry in the United States, but it also opened a space for groups to come together and know each other better," said Tony Kireopoulos, who oversees interfaith relations for the National Council of Churches in New York the largest Christian ecumenical organization in the U.S.

One example is his group's ongoing dialogue efforts with Sikhs, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus and Jews, said Kireopoulos, a Greek Orthodox theologian and associate general secretary for the council.

The council of Christian denominations was involved in the early efforts of the Shoulder to Shoulder Campaign, a national coalition formed a decade after Sept. 11 to counter anti-Muslim sentiment amid an uproar over efforts to build an Islamic center near ground zero.

Increased anti-Islam rhetoric also prompted the council to deepen its Muslim-Christian dialogue to not only create understanding, but help people from different faiths form true friendships, said Kireopoulos.

"We've always had contact with the Muslim groups, but after 9/11 it became more intentional," he said. "When you meet frequently you get to know each other, so you can respond as neighbors and friends."

Maggie Siddiqi, senior director of faith initiatives at the Center for American Progress, a Washington policy institute, said those kinds of interfaith efforts were broadly welcomed by Muslims in the U.S., who were targeted more aggressively than ever before.

Hate crimes against Muslims surged from 28 in 2000 to 481 in 2001, according to FBI statistics. There were 176 hate crimes against Muslims and 49 against Sikhs in 2019. Such crimes against Sikhs were not recorded in a separate category until 2015.

"It's hard sometimes to see the silver lining, but there has been a lot of learning going on over the last 20 years," said Siddiqi, who was trained as a Muslim chaplain.

In the leadup to this month's Sept. 11 memorial events, she noted, Anti-Defamation League CEO Jonathan Greenblatt apologized to Muslims for his organization's opposition a decade ago to the opening of an Islamic Center blocks from the World Trade Center site, calling it "wrong, plain and simple." The league's opposition came several years before Greenblatt joined the civil rights organization. The center was never built.

Suspicion of Muslims didn't start with Sept. 11, but the terror attacks amplified the mistrust.

A poll by The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research conducted ahead of the 9/11 anniversary found that 53% of Americans have unfavorable views toward Islam, compared with 42% who have favorable ones. That's in contrast to mostly favorable opinions about Christianity and Judaism.

The Sikh Coalition was formed in the wake of 9/11 to advocate for the rights of Sikh Americans and educate people about the faith, even working to include Sikh history in school curriculum standards. It also has documented more than 300 cases of violence and discrimination against Sikh Americans in just the first few months after the attacks.

Such attacks and others against people of different faiths cause religious leaders to warn that countering bias remains an urgent task.

"I still don't think we are in a good place," said Rabbi Shmuly Yanklowitz, president and dean of Valley Beit Midrash, a Phoenix-based global center for learning and action rooted in Jewish teachings. "I really worry for minority groups in general and especially for Muslims, Sikhs and refugees seeking asylum."

Yanklowitz was unable to join this year's memorial honoring Sodhi because it coincided with Yom Kippur, the holiest night on the Jewish calendar. But more than 100 people attended, including local and national politicians and Sikh, Christian and Muslim leaders.

There was hardly a mention of Frank Roque, who is serving a life sentence in the Sept. 15, 2001 killing. He also was accused of drive-by shootings that same day at an Afghan family's home and a Lebanese

man's convenience store, although no one was injured in those attacks.

Rana Singh Sodhi has since forgiven the killer and works to keep his brother's legacy alive, sharing his story with schoolchildren, faith groups and government officials.

"We celebrate not only my brother's life but all the victims of 9/11 and all the victims of hate crimes," Sodhi said from a stage in front of the gas pumps as cars whooshed by in the dark. "To show unity and love to each other ... that's the only way we can combat the hate."

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'Jeopardy!' hosts: Bialik, Ken Jennings will finish 2021

NEW YORK (AP) — Mayim Bialik and Ken Jennings will split "Jeopardy!" hosting duties for the remainder of 2021.

Sony Pictures Television announced the plan Thursday, the same week that episodes filmed by ousted host Mike Richards are airing.

Richards, who also lost his role as "Jeopardy!" executive producer, was initially tapped as Alex Trebek's successor but left the show after past misogynistic and disparaging comments surfaced.

Bialik was tapped as interim host, and her episodes will air through Nov. 5. After that, Sony says Jennings and Bialik will share hosting duties based on their schedules through the end of the calendar year. No on-air auditions of other potential hosts were announced.

Jennings, the record-holder for longest "Jeopardy!" winning streak, is a consulting producer on the show. Bialik has already been chosen to host "Jeopardy!" prime-time and spinoff series, including a new college championship.

"Jeopardy!" used a series of guest hosts, including Richards, for shows filmed after Trebek's death. The beloved host died last November of cancer.

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This story has been corrected to show that Ken Jennings and Mayim Bialik will host through the end of the calendar year, not the full TV season.

Hezbollah brings Iran fuel to Lebanon despite US sanctions

By FADI TAWIL and BILAL HUSSEIN Associated Press

AL-AIN, Lebanon (AP) — Dozens of trucks carrying Iranian diesel arrived in Lebanon on Thursday, the first in a series of deliveries organized by the militant Hezbollah. The powerful group operates independently from Lebanese authorities, which are struggling to deal with a crippling energy crisis.

The overland delivery through neighboring Syria violates U.S. sanctions imposed on Tehran after former President Donald Trump pulled America out of a nuclear deal between Iran and world powers in 2018.

The shipment is being portrayed as a victory by Hezbollah, which stepped in to supply the fuel from its patron, Iran, while the cash-strapped Lebanese government grapples with months-long fuel shortages that have paralyzed the country.

"This is a very big and great thing for us because we broke the siege of America and foreign countries. ... We are working with the help of God and our great mother Iran," said Nabiha Idriss, a Hezbollah supporter gathered with others to greet the convoy as it passed through the eastern town of Al-Ain.

There was no immediate comment from Lebanese or U.S. officials on the Iranian fuel delivery. Local commentators said Washington, worried about chaos in Lebanon amid raging, multiple crises, may have decided to look the other way.

Hezbollah has portrayed the Lebanese economic meltdown, which began in late 2019, as partly caused by an informal siege imposed by America due to the militant group's power and influence in Lebanon.

The group — designated a terrorist organization by Washington — has been sanctioned by consecutive U.S. administrations.

Lebanon's crisis is rooted in decades of corruption and mismanagement by the ruling class and a sectarian-based political system that thrives on patronage and nepotism. Severe shortages in fuel have resulted in crippling power cuts. People wait hours in line for gasoline. Protests and scuffles have broken out at gas stations around Lebanon including in some Hezbollah strongholds.

Hezbollah's leader, Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah, announced last month that Iran was sending fuel to Lebanon to help ease the crisis. The first Hezbollah-commissioned Iranian oil tanker arrived in the Syrian port of Baniyas on Sunday and the diesel was unloaded to Syrian storage places before it was brought overland to Lebanon on Thursday by tanker trucks.

The convoy of 60 trucks, each carrying 50,000 liters (13,210 gallons), went through an informal border crossing in Qusayr in Syria. Another convoy of 60 tanker trucks is expected Friday.

Hezbollah, often accused of operating a state-within-a-state, has been taking part in Syria's civil war alongside government forces. It manages its own crossing points along the Lebanon-Syria border, away from formal border crossings.

Nasrallah said in a televised speech earlier this week that the tanker did not offload its cargo directly in Lebanon to avoid embarrassing authorities and risking sanctions on Lebanon.

Hezbollah's Al-Manar TV called it "the tanker truck convoys to break the American siege." It said the trucks were on their way to the eastern Lebanese city of Baalbek where a Hezbollah-linked distribution company will start distributing the fuel. Nasrallah said the company, al-Amana, which is already under U.S. sanctions, won't risk new penalties.

For critics, however, the convoy is a symbol of the dissolution of the Lebanese state. While the oil delivery was seen as a victory for Hezbollah, the group is facing growing internal criticism for increasingly pulling Lebanon into Iran's orbit and for defending its political allies who resist change rather than push for reform.

"Don't forget this day," tweeted Laury Haytayan, a Lebanese oil and gas expert and activist, describing it as the day Hezbollah won over the Lebanese state.

Lebanese gathered on the roadside leading to Lebanon's Bekaa Valley to greet the convoy. Hezbollah's yellow flags and banners praising the Iran-backed group and Syria's President Bashar Assad decorated the streets. A few women showered the trucks with rice and flowers as they drove past. Others raised banners reading: "Thank you Iran," and "Thank you Syria." Heavy gunfire, and at least one rocket propelled-grenade, were fired in celebration.

Lebanon's new Prime Minister Najib Mikati, whose government was formed last week after a 13-month political deadlock, has not commented on Hezbollah's deal to import fuel from Iran.

Nasrallah has said a month's worth of diesel would be donated to public hospitals, nursing homes, orphanages, water stations and the Lebanese Red Cross. He said fuel would also be sold at discount prices to private hospitals, pharmaceutical factories, bakeries and cooperatives that sell food products.

He said three other tankers carrying diesel and one carrying gasoline are to arrive in the coming weeks.

Faced with the possibility of Iranian fuel arriving in Lebanon, U.S. officials have said they are discussing long-term solutions for the energy crisis in Lebanon, including a recently revived natural gas line from Egypt.

Polis, 1st openly gay governor elected, marries in Colorado

BOULDER, Colo. (AP) — Colorado's Jared Polis, who became the first openly gay man in the United States to be elected governor in 2018, has married his longtime partner and first gentleman Marlon Reis, a writer and animal welfare advocate.

Polis, 46, and Reis, 40, were married in a traditional Jewish ceremony attended by family and friends in Boulder on Wednesday, the governor's office said. Rabbi Tirzah Firestone officiated.

They have been together for 18 years and have two children, a 7-year-old boy and a 9-year-old girl. The family lives in Boulder.

Polis, a Democrat, and Reis were engaged in December as Reis was preparing to be hospitalized after contracting COVID-19. Reis was released from the hospital after two days. Polis also caught the coronavirus

but had only mild symptoms.

"The greatest lesson we have learned over the past eighteen months is that life as we know it can change in an instant," the couple said in a statement. "We are thankful for the health and wellbeing of our family and friends, and the opportunity to celebrate our life together as a married couple."

Nuclear submarine deal will reshape Indo-Pacific relations

By NICK PERRY Associated Press

WELLINGTON, New Zealand (AP) — The U.S., Britain and Australia have announced they're forming a new security alliance that will help equip Australia with nuclear-powered submarines. The alliance will see a reshaping of relations in the Indo-Pacific region and beyond. Here's what it might mean for various players:

THE UNITED STATES

Ten years ago under President Barack Obama, the U.S. began discussing the need to focus more attention on the Indo-Pacific region while pivoting away from conflicts in the Middle East. Under President Joe Biden, the U.S. has now withdrawn its troops from Afghanistan while finding that tensions with China have only grown. In the Pacific, the U.S. and others have been concerned about China's aggressive actions in the South China Sea and its antipathy toward Japan, Taiwan and Australia. In announcing the deal, none of the three leaders mentioned China, although the alliance was seen as a provocative move by Beijing. The U.S. had previously only shared the nuclear propulsion technology with Britain. Biden said it was about ensuring peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific over the long term.

BRITAIN

Leaving the European Union under Brexit has left Britain seeking to reassert its global position. Part of that has been an increased focus — or tilt — toward the Indo-Pacific. British Prime Minister Boris Johnson said the new alliance would allow the three nations to sharpen their focus on an increasingly complicated part of the world. He said that perhaps most significantly, it would bond the three nations even more closely together.

AUSTRALIA

Under the arrangement, Australia will build at least eight nuclear-powered submarines using U.S. expertise, while dumping a contract with France for diesel-electric subs. Experts say the nuclear subs will allow Australia to conduct longer patrols and give the alliance a stronger military presence in the region.

Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison said he had called the leaders of Japan and India to explain the new alliance. Japan, India, Australia and the U.S. already have a strategic dialogue known as "the Quad." Biden is set to host fellow Quad leaders at the White House next week.

FRANCE

Australia told France it would end its contract with state majority-owned DCNS to build 12 of the world's largest conventional submarines. The contract was worth tens of billions of dollars. France is furious, demanding explanations from all sides.

"It was really a stab in the back. We built a relationship of trust with Australia, and this trust was betrayed," said French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian on France-Info radio.

CHINA

China said the alliance would severely damage regional peace and stability, and jeopardize efforts to halt nuclear weapon proliferation. It said it was "highly irresponsible" for the U.S. and Britain to export the nuclear technology, and that Australia was to blame for a breakdown in bilateral relations.

"The most urgent task is for Australia to correctly recognize the reasons for the setbacks in the relations between the two countries, and think carefully whether to treat China as a partner or a threat," said Zhao Lijian, a spokesperson of China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Beijing has been unhappy with the Biden administration calling it out over human rights abuses in the Xianjing region, the crackdown on democracy activists in Hong Kong, and cybersecurity breaches. Biden spoke by phone with China's President Xi Jinping last week. After the call, the official Xinhua News Agency reported that Xi expressed concerns that U.S. government policy toward China has caused "serious dif-

ficulties" in relations.

NEW ZEALAND

Left out of the new alliance is Australia's neighbor New Zealand. It has a longstanding nuclear-free policy that includes a ban on nuclear-powered ships entering its ports. That stance has sometimes been a sticking point in otherwise close relations with the U.S. Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern said New Zealand wasn't asked to be part of the alliance and wouldn't have expected an invitation. Still, it leaves New Zealand out of a deal to share a range of information including artificial intelligence, cyber and underwater defense capabilities.

'New' Van Gogh drawing to go on display in Amsterdam museum

By MIKE CORDER Associated Press

AMSTERDAM (AP) — A drawing newly attributed to Vincent van Gogh that has never been displayed publicly before is going on show at the Amsterdam museum that bears the Dutch master's name.

The "new" Van Gogh, "Study for 'Worn Out,'" from November 1882, is part of a Dutch private collection and was known to only a handful of people, including a few from the Van Gogh Museum.

The owner, who is remaining anonymous, asked the museum to determine if the unsigned drawing is by Van Gogh.

From the style, to the materials used — a thick carpenter's pencil and coarse watercolor paper — it conforms to Van Gogh's Hague drawings, Senior Researcher Teio Meedendorp said Thursday.

There are even traces of damage on the back linking it to the way Van Gogh used wads of starch to attach sheets of paper to drawing boards.

"It's quite rare for a new work to be attributed to Van Gogh," the museum's director Emilie Gordenker said in a statement. "We're proud to be able to share this early drawing and its story with our visitors."

It comes from a time in the artist's career when he was working to improve his skills as a painter of people and portraits by drawing them. Over and over again.

The museum already owns the almost identical drawing, "Worn Out."

"It was quite clear that they are related," Meedendorp said.

The study has been loaned to the museum and goes on show from Friday through Jan. 2.

It shows an elderly, balding man sitting, hunched forwards, on a wooden chair, his balding head in his hands. Even the model's pants appear to conform to the English title — a patch is clearly visible on the right leg.

It is a far cry from the vibrant oil paintings of vases of sunflowers and French landscapes that eventually turned the tormented Van Gogh — after his death in 1890 — into one of the world's most famous artists, whose works have garnered astronomical prices at auction.

Instead, it illustrates how as a young artist in practicing his craft in The Hague in 1882, Van Gogh had to confront an uncomfortable truth.

"He discovered that he lacked the ability to paint people. So he was already drawing them but he liked to paint," Meedendorp said. "So in order to be able to paint people as well he went back to the drawing board."

Van Gogh, who was famously reliant on his brother Theo's generosity throughout his life, gave the drawings an English title in a bid to build a bit of name recognition and possibly even land a job at an illustrated magazine.

"In his mind, he had an idea that he would reach out farther than Holland in the end as an artist," Meedendorp said.

Drought haves, have-nots test how to share water in the West

By GILLIAN FLACCUS and BRITTANY PETERSON Associated Press

MADRAS, Ore. (AP) — Phil Fine stands in a parched field and watches a harvester gnaw through his carrot seed crop, spitting clouds of dust in its wake. Cracked dirt lines empty irrigation canals, and dust

devils and tumbleweeds punctuate a landscape in shades of brown.

Across an invisible line separating Fine's irrigation district from the next, it's another world. Automated sprinklers hiss as they douse crops, cattle munch on green grass and water bubbles through verdant farmland.

In this swath of central Oregon, where six irrigation districts rely on the Deschutes River, the consequences of the strict hierarchy dictated by the American West's arcane water law — "first in time, first in right" — are written on the land. As drought ravages the West, the districts with century-old water claims are first in line for the scarce resource while others nearby with more recent claims have already run out.

"It's like the Wizard of Oz. ... It's shocking the difference," said Matt Lisignoli, a farmer who got nearly five times more water on his land in one irrigation district than on fields in another.

"I've learned more about water in the last two months than I have in the last 20 years, because it's always been here," he said. "You don't know until you get in a bind."

The stark contrast between the haves and have-nots two hours southeast of Portland has brought new urgency to efforts to share water. Proposals to create "water banks" or "water markets" would allow farmers with excess supply to lease it to those in need. The idea is part of a discussion about letting the free market play a bigger role in water conservation as human-caused climate change fuels drought and farmers run out of options.

Yet the concept is fraught with risks and resistance. Larger-scale efforts to spread water more equitably have been uneven. Along the Deschutes River, where every drop is accounted for, many farmers worry that if they lease their water rights, even temporarily, they may not get them back.

"Whether it's feasible or not is a very local question," said Brett Bovee of WestWater Research, a consulting firm for water market research.

Many Western water markets compensate farmers for diverting water to wildlife and cities instead of fields. Far fewer avenues get water to farmers, and the biggest challenge is moving it between irrigation districts, said Scott Revell, manager of the Roza Irrigation District in Washington state's Yakima Valley.

The districts oversee water deliveries to customers and often operate as fiefdoms, each with water claims and history. Outdated infrastructure and bureaucracy — often compounded by rigid state laws — make water transfers difficult even between cooperating districts.

In central Oregon, for example, Lisignoli wanted to take irrigation from his farmland in a district with senior water rights and transfer it to parched crops he grows in a neighboring district with lesser rights.

Lisignoli's application had to be approved by both districts and Oregon's water agency, which required an 11-day public notice period, he said.

Desperate, he purchased emergency water from a vineyard for $2,700, but water in that district ran out last month. He hasn't watered 16 acres of pumpkins in weeks and hopes they will survive for Halloween sales.

"It was a futile effort," he said. "But I'm hoping that it shows the flaws in the system."

California, meanwhile, has one of the most flexible water markets in the West, allowing irrigation districts to move water where it's most needed. After a major drought in the 1970s, lawmakers made transfers easier and emphasized that leasing water wouldn't jeopardize rights, said Ellen Hanak, director of the Water Policy Center at the Public Policy Institute of California.

Once a farmer has a transfer approved, renewing it is expedited and in many cases, water can follow demand without a lengthy environmental review, she said.

In central Oregon, water-sharing is a charged topic.

The 960 farmers in the North Unit Irrigation District, which has the area's lowest-ranking water rights, grow 60% of the world's carrot seed, bound for carrot farmers or seed packets.

Districts with senior rights, meanwhile, tend toward hobby farms with llamas and alpacas, cattle pastures and hay fields. Those farmers have had to cut back for the first time but are still receiving 55% of their water.

The water disparity is compounded by efforts to preserve the federally protected Oregon spotted frog. A habitat conservation plan requires the North Unit district to release water for the frog from its storage

reservoir over three decades.

That reservoir, which is filled by the Deschutes River, is almost empty, with once-submerged tree stumps jutting from cracked mudflats.

Other irrigation districts also gave up water for the frog, but "North Unit definitely got the short end of the stick," general manager Josh Bailey said. "It made our situation being the junior water rights holder ... even worse."

The nonprofit Deschutes River Conservancy and the Central Oregon Irrigation District, which has senior water rights, are studying a water bank. It would provide financial incentives for farmers with extra water to lease it to needy irrigation districts or return it to the river to bolster its flows.

The coalition could launch a pilot project next year. A recent study says about 164,000 acre-feet of water may be freed up by using price incentives, said Kate Fitzpatrick, conservancy executive director. An acre-foot of water is enough to cover a football field a foot (a third of a meter) deep.

Everyone wants to avoid a crisis like in the Klamath River basin, a region on the Oregon-California border locked in a decadeslong fight over water where household wells are running dry.

"We're trying to figure out ways for water to move around more flexibly," Fitzpatrick said. "If we can find those win-win solutions, I believe that the Deschutes can be a model for the West as the West faces increasing drought and scarcity and population growth."

Some water customers are eager to try it; others are wary.

Oregon law requires a water rights holder to use their share every five years or lose it. Some worry that without safeguards, investors could snatch up those rights or they could lose them if they join a water bank.

The state loosened some rules this summer amid a drought emergency, but many say more reforms are necessary to make sharing easier and expand the ways to maintain water rights.

An informal call this summer about helping those with less water, for example, fizzled when only a handful of senior water rights holders stepped forward, said Shon Rae, Central Oregon Irrigation District's deputy managing director.

"Bottom line, the paperwork and cost and time it took to do it just wasn't going to work," she said. "People would be interested in doing it if it were easier. Rules and laws are one of the biggest barriers."

Those championing water markets acknowledge the idea can't be the only answer, and more incentives are needed to reduce water use and upgrade aging infrastructure.

Along the Deschutes River, plans include replacing irrigation canals with pipes to reduce leaks and pumping water from a massive lake to struggling farmers — both long-term projects.

"What we're trying to do is put in these big projects and be drought resilient. But the water marketing and leasing is ... something we can do now," said Fine, the carrot seed farmer. "And if we don't do something soon, we can't keep going on like this. People will go broke."

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Peterson reported from Denver. The Associated Press receives support from the Walton Family Foundation for coverage of water and environmental policy. The AP is solely responsible for all content. For all of AP's environmental coverage, visit https://apnews.com/hub/environment and drought coverage, visit https://apnews.com/hub/droughts

US unemployment claims rise after hitting pandemic low

By CHRISTOPHER RUGABER AP Economics Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — The number of Americans seeking unemployment benefits moved up last week to 332,000 from a pandemic low, a sign that the spread of the delta variant may have slightly increased layoffs.

Applications for jobless aid rose from 312,000 the week before, the Labor Department said Thursday. That was the lowest level since March 2020. Jobless claims, which generally track the pace of layoffs, have fallen steadily for two months as many employers, struggling to fill jobs, have held onto their workers.

Last week's increase was small and may be temporary. The four-week average of jobless claims, which

smooths out fluctuations in the weekly data, dropped for the fifth straight week to just below 336,000. That figure is also the lowest since the pandemic began.

Separately, the Commerce Department reported that retail sales unexpectedly rose 0.7% last month, as Americans kept spending despite the rise in coronavirus cases. But how they spent continues to be skewed by the pandemic. Online shopping jumped in August but spending at restaurants, bars and other businesses that rely on crowds, appears to have gone into a holding pattern.

Unemployment aid applications jumped 4,000 in Louisiana, evidence that Hurricane Ida led to widespread job losses in that state. Ida will likely nick the economy's growth in the current July-September quarter, though repairs and rebuilding efforts are expected to make up for some of that in the coming months.

Still, Ida shut down oil refineries in Louisiana and Mississippi about two weeks ago and left more than 1 million homes and businesses without electricity. But Ida's impact was limited: Applications for jobless aid fell slightly in Mississippi.

The job market and the broader economy have been slowed in recent weeks by the delta variant, which has discouraged many Americans from traveling, staying in hotels and eating out. Earlier this month, the government reported that employers added just 235,000 jobs in August after having added roughly a million people in both June and July.

Hiring in August plummeted in industries that require face-to-face contact with the public, notably restaurants, hotels and retailers. Still, some jobs were added in other areas, and the unemployment rate actually dropped to 5.2% from 5.4%.

The steady fall in weekly applications for unemployment benefits coincides with a scaling-back of aid for jobless Americans. Last week, more than 8 million people lost all their unemployment benefits with the expiration of two federal programs that covered gig workers and people who have been jobless for more than six months. Those emergency programs were created in March 2020, when the pandemic first tore through the economy.

An additional 2.7 million people who are receiving regular state unemployment aid lost a $300-a-week federal unemployment supplement last week.

'A big gray elephant': Paris' Arc de Triomphe is wrapped up

By ARNO PEDRAM Associated Press

PARIS (AP) — The city of Paris is unveiling a monumental artwork built around an actual monument: the Arc de Triomphe completely wrapped in silver and blue fabric.

The installation by late artist couple Christo and Jeanne-Claude, who conceived the project in 1961, will open on Saturday. Visits will take place for almost three weeks. At weekends, the Arc de Triomphe's traffic-heavy roundabout will be entirely pedestrianized.

Visitors to the famous Napoleonic arch, which dominates the Champs-Elysees Avenue, will not only be able to see the gleaming fabric, but to touch it too — as the artists had intended.

Those climbing the 50 meters (164 feet) to the top will step on it when they reach the roof terrace.

At a press conference on the project entitled "Arc de Triomphe, Wrapped," France's Culture Minister Roselyne Bachelot called it "a formidable gift offered to Parisians, the French and beyond, to all art lovers."

Bachelot added that it was "a posthumous testimony of artistic genius."

Bulgarian-born Christo Vladimirov Javacheff met Jeanne-Claude Denat de Guillebon in Paris in 1958 and they later became lovers. The idea for the artwork was born in the early '60s, when they lived in Paris. Jeanne-Claude died in 2009, and Christo in May last year. The monument was to be wrapped last fall, but the COVID-19 pandemic delayed it.

Christo "wanted to complete this project. He made us promise him that we will do it," the couple's nephew, Vladimir Yavachev, told The Associated Press.

The 14 million-euro ($16.4 million) project is being financed through the sale of Christo's preparatory studies, drawings, scale models, and other pieces of work, Yavachev said.

Passersby on Thursday looked up in awe. "It makes me think of a big gray elephant placed in Paris on

the Champs-Elysee" said 47-year-old Thomas Thevenoud, who works nearby.

"You really rediscover the beauty of the form," said 39-year-old Parisian Agnieszka Wojel. "I couldn't stop taking pictures because it's extraordinary... We are very lucky."

The artists were known for elaborate, temporary creations that involved blanketing familiar public places with fabric, including Berlin's Reichstag and Paris' Pont Neuf bridge, and creating giant site-specific installations, such as a series of 7,503 gates in New York City's Central Park and the 24.5-mile "Running Fence" in California.

Yavachev said he plans to complete another one of their unfinished projects: a 150-meter-tall (492 feet) pyramid-like mastaba in Abu Dhabi.

"We have the blueprints, we just have to do it," he said.

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Masha Macpherson and Alex Turnbull in Paris contributed

California recall could boost Newsom's clout for 2022

By ADAM BEAM Associated Press

SACRAMENTO, Calif. (AP) — The recall election that once threatened to derail California Gov. Gavin Newsom's political future has instead given it new life, offering a rare midterm vote of confidence that could fuel an ambitious legislative agenda featuring new coronavirus vaccine mandates, housing for the homeless and health insurance for people living in the country illegally.

Nearly 64% of voters in the recall election voted to keep Newsom in office, according to early returns, giving him a larger margin of victory so far compared to his 2018 election.

On Wednesday, one day after surviving the recall that a few months ago had him sweating, Newsom indicated he planned to go even bigger in 2022 as he heads into his reelection campaign.

"When you face a recall ... it sharpens your focus about time," Newsom said. "Things that you may have looked at on the horizon and said, 'You know over the next two, three years, we want to get this done,' you start looking very differently and say, 'What's possible in the next two to three months?'"

Newsom was not afraid to take big swings in his first term, often eschewing the moderate tendencies of some of his predecessors. While he hasn't always satisfied the most liberal wing of the Democratic Party, he has relished governing what he calls a "nation state" given its status as the nation's most populous.

In his first three years in office, Newsom signed legislation that allowed college athletes to get paid, gave free lunch to every public school student and issued executive orders aiming to ban the sale of new gas-powered cars by 2035 and end all oil extraction in the state by 2045.

This year, he has already issued orders requiring all of the state's roughly 2.2 million health care workers to get vaccinated to keep their jobs. He's also required all state workers and public school teachers and staff to either get vaccinated or submit to weekly testing.

President Joe Biden has already ordered large employers to require their workers be vaccinated. But some Democrats in California's Legislature want to go further by applying that standard to companies with fewer than 100 employees and to schoolchildren old enough to be immunized.

State Assemblywoman Buffy Wicks, a Democrat from Oakland who is preparing to introduce vaccine verification legislation, said the Newsom campaign didn't hold back from saying "vaccine mandate" in campaign ads.

"And the voters responded to it. I see that, I think my fellow legislators see that," she said. "We can't be intimidated by a very small group that live in baseless conspiracy theories."

Some local governments are already doing this. San Francisco requires proof of full vaccination for a host of indoor activities, including dining inside and visiting the gym. Los Angeles County will implement a similar policy for customers and workers at bars and nightclubs starting next month. The Los Angeles Unified School District will soon require all eligible students to be inoculated.

Newsom said Wednesday that he supports those decisions and urged other local governments to do the same thing but he's satisfied with local rules right now, though he said there are "conversations" happen-

ing about a statewide vaccine mandate for public school students.

The pandemic has also intensified efforts to increase the number of people who have health insurance in California for primary and preventive care. The UC Berkeley Labor Center estimates nearly 3.2 million Californians won't have health insurance next year, the largest percentage of them immigrants who are living in the country illegally.

Newsom's budget this year offers government-funded health insurance to low-income adults 50 and over who are living in the country illegally, but some Democrats want him to expand coverage to all low-income adults, regardless of their immigration status.

"I believe this year was a significant down payment for us to work toward universal coverage," said Assemblyman Joaquin Arambula, a Democrat from Fresno who chairs the budget subcommittee that oversees health care spending.

Newsom indicated Wednesday that he plans to renew his focus on housing the homeless. He devoted his entire 2020 State of the State address to that issue, but the pandemic soon hit and quickly shifted his focus to public health. Still, Newsom pointed to his administration getting 6,000 housing units for the homeless online in only five-and-a-half months, a remarkable pace made possible by the urgency of the pandemic.

He added: "That's now focused my energy to say what more can we do in that space with that same sense of urgency on climate change, on issues of affordability of housing?"

Advancing those issues will require reaching consensus among Democrats who dominate the state Legislature, a task that's not as easy as California's progressive reputation would suggest.

But Michael Bustamante, a Democratic consultant who worked for former Democratic Gov. Gray Davis during the recall campaign that led to his 2003 ouster, said Newsom should not hold back.

"When you have a near-death experience, it seems to me that people tend to become far more appreciative of the life that they have," he said. Newsom "almost has nothing to lose and everything to gain by thinking big, by being aggressive."

Americans have little trust in online security: AP-NORC poll

By MATT O'BRIEN AP Technology Writer

Most Americans don't believe their personal information is secure online and aren't satisfied with the federal government's efforts to protect it, according to a poll.

The poll by The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research and MeriTalk shows that 64% of Americans say their social media activity is not very or not at all secure. About as many have the same security doubts about online information revealing their physical location. Half of Americans believe their private text conversations lack security.

And they're not just concerned. They want something done about it. Nearly three-quarters of Americans say they support establishing national standards for how companies can collect, process and share personal data.

"What is surprising to me is that there is a great deal of support for more government action to protect data privacy," said Jennifer Benz, deputy director of the AP-NORC Center. "And it's bipartisan support."

But after years of stalled efforts toward stricter data privacy laws that could hold big companies accountable for all the personal data they collect and share, the poll also indicates that Americans don't have much trust in the government to fix it.

A majority, 56%, puts more faith in the private sector than the federal government to handle security and privacy improvements, despite years of highly publicized privacy scandals and hacks of U.S. corporations from Target to Equifax that exposed the personal information of millions of people around the world.

Indeed, companies such as Apple have made a big push to pitch themselves as attuned to consumer privacy preferences and committed to protect them.

"I feel there is little to no security whatsoever," said Sarah Blick, a professor of medieval art history at Kenyon College in Ohio. The college's human resources department told Blick earlier this year that someone fraudulently applied for unemployment insurance benefits in her name.

Such fraud has spiked since the pandemic as perpetrators buy stolen personal identifying information on the dark web and use it to flood state unemployment systems with bogus claims.

"I believe my information was stolen when one of the credit bureaus was hacked, but it also could have been when Target was hacked or any other of the several successful hacks into major corporations," Blick said.

About 71% of Americans believe that individuals' data privacy should be treated as a national security issue, with a similar level of support among Democrats and Republicans. But only 23% are very or somewhat satisfied in the federal government's current efforts to protect Americans' privacy and secure their personal data online.

"This is not a partisan issue," said Colorado state Rep. Terri Carver, a Republican who co-sponsored a consumer data privacy bill signed into law by Democratic Gov. Jared Polis in July. It takes effect in 2023.

The legislation, which met opposition from Facebook and other companies, follows similar measures enacted in California and Virginia that give people the right to access and delete personal information. Colorado's also enables people to opt out of having their data tracked, profiled and sold.

"That was certainly one of the pieces where we got the strongest pushback but we felt it was so important," Carver said. "There's great frustration that individuals have that they don't have the tools and the legal support to establish any kind of effective control over their personal data."

Carver said it took several years to get the law passed, and advocates had to abandon some priorities, such as the idea of enabling people to opt in if they want to allow processing of their personal data — instead of making them opt out. She hopes the efforts by Colorado and other states push Congress to set nationwide protections.

"We need a strong federal data privacy bill," she said. "It would just make sense, given interstate commerce."

The poll also found broad agreement in how Americans look at technology: 81% of Democrats and 78% of Republicans say they view technology as playing a major role in the country's ability to compete globally. Seventy-nine percent of Democrats and 56% of Republicans see value in the government's technology investments.

At least 6 in 10 adults support the federal government taking measures such as spending more on technology, expanding access to broadband internet and strengthening copyright protections to improve U.S. competitiveness.

There are some generational variations in support for government policies to safeguard data privacy and security, though majorities across age groups are in favor. While 85% of adults age 40 and older are in favor of stronger punishments for cyber criminals, 70% of younger adults say the same.

"The underlying current is that this is an area where people do see a direct role in government," Benz said. "This is something pretty tangible for people."

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The AP-NORC poll of 1,004 adults was conducted June 24-28 using a sample drawn from NORC's probability-based AmeriSpeak Panel, which is designed to be representative of the U.S. population. The margin of sampling error for all respondents is plus or minus 4.3 percentage points.

Today in History

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Friday, Sept. 17, the 260th day of 2021. There are 105 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On Sept. 17, 1787, the Constitution of the United States was completed and signed by a majority of delegates attending the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia.

On this date:

In 1862, more than 3,600 men were killed in the Civil War Battle of Antietam (an-TEE'-tum) in Maryland.

In 1908, Lt. Thomas E. Selfridge of the U.S. Army Signal Corps became the first person to die in the crash of a powered aircraft, the Wright Flyer, at Fort Myer, Virginia, just outside Washington, D.C.

In 1937, the likeness of President Abraham Lincoln's head was dedicated at Mount Rushmore.

In 1939, the Soviet Union invaded Poland during World War II, more than two weeks after Nazi Germany had launched its assault.

In 1944, during World War II, Allied paratroopers launched Operation Market Garden, landing behind German lines in the Netherlands. (After initial success, the Allies were beaten back by the Germans.)

In 1954, the novel "Lord of the Flies" by William Golding was first published by Faber & Faber of London.

In 1971, citing health reasons, Supreme Court Justice Hugo Black, 85, retired. (Black, who was succeeded by Lewis F. Powell Jr., died eight days after making his announcement.)

In 1978, after meeting at Camp David, Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin (men-AH'-kem BAY'-gihn) and Egyptian President Anwar Sadat signed a framework for a peace treaty.

In 1980, former Nicaraguan president Anastasio Somoza (suh-MOH'-sah) was assassinated in Paraguay.

In 1987, the city of Philadelphia, birthplace of the U.S. Constitution, threw a big party to celebrate the 200th anniversary of the historic document; in a speech at Independence Hall, President Ronald Reagan acclaimed the framing of the Constitution as a milestone "that would profoundly and forever alter not just these United States but the world."

In 1994, Heather Whitestone of Alabama was crowned the first deaf Miss America.

In 2001, six days after 9/11, stock prices nosedived but stopped short of collapse in an emotional, flag-waving reopening of Wall Street; the Dow Jones industrial average ended the day down 684.81 at 8,920.70.

Ten years ago: A demonstration calling itself Occupy Wall Street began in New York, prompting similar protests around the U.S. and the world. Charles H. Percy, 91, a Chicago businessman who became a U.S. senator and was once widely viewed as a top presidential contender, died in Washington.

Five years ago: A bomb explosion rocked Manhattan's Chelsea neighborhood, injuring 30 people. (An Afghan-born U.S. citizen was convicted in the bombing and sentenced to life in prison.)

One year ago: At a drive-in campaign event in Pennsylvania, Democrat Joe Biden denounced President Donald Trump's handling of the pandemic as "close to criminal." Marking the 233rd anniversary of the signing of the Constitution, Trump downplayed the historical legacy of slavery in the United States and blasted efforts to address systemic racism as divisive. Firefighter Charles Morton, a member of an elite Hotshot crew, died while battling a blaze in the mountains east of Los Angeles; the fire was sparked when a couple used a device that was supposed to emit blue or pink smoke to reveal their baby's gender. Rescuers on the Gulf Coast of Florida and Alabama used boats and high-water vehicles to reach people cut off by floodwaters in the aftermath of Hurricane Sally.

Today's Birthdays: Sen. Charles E. Grassley, R-Iowa, is 88. Retired Supreme Court Justice David H. Souter (SOO'-tur) is 82. Singer LaMonte McLemore (The Fifth Dimension) is 86. Retired U.S. Marine Gen. Anthony Zinni is 78. Basketball Hall of Fame coach Phil Jackson is 76. Singer Fee Waybill is 73. Actor Cassandra Peterson ("Elvira, Mistress of the Dark") is 70. Comedian Rita Rudner is 68. Director-actor Paul Feig is 59. Movie director Baz Luhrmann is 59. Singer BeBe Winans is 59. TV personality/businessman Robert Herjavec (TV: "Shark Tank") is 58. Actor Kyle Chandler is 56. Director-producer Bryan Singer is 56. Rapper Doug E. Fresh is 55. Actor Malik Yoba is 54. Rock singer Anastacia is 53. Actor Matthew Settle is 52. Rapper Vin Rock (Naughty By Nature) is 51. Actor-comedian Bobby Lee is 50. Actor Felix Solis is 50. R&B singer Marcus Sanders (Hi-Five) is 48. Actor-singer Nona Gaye is 47. Singer-actor Constantine Maroulis is 46. NASCAR driver Jimmie Johnson is 46. Country singer-songwriter Stephen Cochran is 42. Rock musician Chuck Comeau (Simple Plan) is 42. Actor Billy Miller is 42. Rock musician Jon Walker is 36. NHL forward Alex Ovechkin (oh-VECH'-kin) is 36. Actor Danielle Brooks is 32. Gospel singer Jonathan McReynolds is 32. Actor-singer Denyse Tontz is 27. NHL center Auston Matthews is 24.