

Groton Daily Independent

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UpComing Events

Monday, Dec. 13

4:30 p.m.: Junior High Wrestling at Webster
Junior High GBB hosts Warner. (7th at 6 p.m. followed by 8th grade game)
7 p.m.: School Board Meeting

Thursday, Dec. 16

Basketball Double Header with Hamlin at Groton.
Girls JV at 4 p.m., Boys JV at 5 p.m., Girls Varsity at 6:15 p.m. followed by boys varsity.

Friday, Dec. 17

Brookings Bell Debate

Saturday, Dec. 18

Brookings Bell Debate
10 a.m.: Wrestling at Sioux Valley High School
Boys Basketball at Sioux Falls Lutheran. JV at 3 p.m. with varsity at 4 p.m.

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

OPEN: Recycling Trailer in Groton

The recycling trailer is located west of the city shop. It takes cardboard, papers and aluminum cans.
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Rural Emergency Medical Systems in Crisis

Emergency medical services (EMS) in rural America are in a state of crisis. Difficulty recruiting emergency medical technicians (EMTs) and the financial constraints of EMS agencies are the major causes of this crisis.

The majority of South Dakota is considered a medically underserved area (MUA), indicating too few primary care providers, high infant mortality, high poverty or a high elderly population. Most of the MUAs are also designated as rural or frontier, increasing the likelihood of prolonged transport times to hospital-based medical care. Rural and frontier MUAs are historically served by volunteer EMS services. Seventy three percent of EMS agencies in South Dakota utilize volunteers. In 2016, 32 percent of volunteer agencies reported missing calls due to staff shortages. These conditions have led to a disparity in mortality rate for traumas for rural residents.

An ad hoc group comprised of the University of South Dakota School of Medicine, South Dakota State Medical Association, Northeast and West River Area Health Education Centers (AHEC), Sanford Academic Affairs EMS Outreach, and Community Memorial Hospital in Redfield has received funding through the U.S. Department of Labor, and Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration to combat the EMS crisis in South Dakota and improve health outcomes for rural residents.

For many students, grant money is available to cover costs of the EMT training available at Sanford EMS Outreach. The synchronous online classes can be completed by the student at home, while the hands-on portion may require weekend travel.

In addition, members of the ad hoc group developed the Dakota Responder class curriculum, the goal of which is to train more people. Through a unique collaboration with Agtegra, a farmer-owned grain and agronomy cooperative with more than 6,300 members-owners in eastern North and South Dakota, the Dakota Responder classes will initially be made available to Agtegra employees. Those who attend the classes will be trained to provide emergency care for serious bleeding, opioid overdose, and use of automatic defibrillators. Agtegra employees located in rural areas of the Dakotas are well-positioned to provide life-saving care until EMS personnel arrive on scene.

Ultimately, the goal is to increase the number of trained EMTs to staff rural EMS centers and improve emergency response times. To encourage this endeavor in your community, share this information with your neighbors and contact your legislators and county commissioners to urge their support for local EMS centers where you live.

Matthew Owens, M.D. practices family medicine in Redfield, South Dakota. He is a contributing Prairie Doc® columnist and a guest this week on the Prairie Doc® television show. For free and easy access to the entire Prairie Doc® library, visit www.prairiedoc.org and follow Prairie Doc® on Facebook featuring On Call with the Prairie Doc® a medical Q&A show streaming on Facebook and broadcast on SDPB most Thursdays at 7 p.m. central.



Matthew Owens, MD

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Weekly Vikings Roundup

By Jack & Duane Kolsrud

It was a tale of two halves Thursday night for the Minnesota Vikings against the Pittsburgh Steelers. As a team that has consistently struggled to play well on both sides of the ball, the Vikings offense and defense put together their best half of football. Their offense put up a total of 300 yards in the first half, thanks in part to Dalvin Cook's 153 rushing yards (a Vikings record for rushing yards in the first half). Coming into the game Thursday, many were unsure if Dalvin Cook would play given his shoulder injury in San Francisco just 11 days ago. However, their offensive line ensured a relatively safe game for Cook as they created holes big enough to fit a Viking ship through them.

The defense was no slouch either. The Vikings held the Pittsburgh Steelers offense to a paltry 66 total yards. Ben Roethlisberger, who will turn 40 in a few months, wished he could retire at halftime as the Vikings crushed him endlessly, which totaled in 4 sacks. As the first half ended, the Vikings saw themselves with a very comfortable lead of 23-0, against a completely dejected Steelers team.

The start of the second half for the Vikings was no different. The Vikings controlled field position and gave the Steelers no hope for a comeback. After going up 29-0 after two Joseph field goals, a penalty seemed to offer a breath of life for the Steelers. A tackle for a loss, negated by a taunting penalty on Kris Boyd, and the Steelers scored their first touchdown with 2:15 left in the 3rd quarter. The game still felt like the Vikings were in complete control. However, that sense of control quickly dissipated for the Vikings when Kirk Cousins threw an interception, and the Steelers scored again to make it 29-14.

If you have watched this Vikings team all year, you would know that they can never make any game easy. Even games where they jump out to a massive 29-point lead, for some reason, become intense. It feels the same every time, offense stalls and the defense implodes. And this game was no different.

With 2:16 remaining in the game and the score 36-28, the Vikings again saw themselves needing a defensive stop to win the game. In a matter of 12 plays and 84 yards, the Steelers drove down the field to the Minnesota 12-yard line for one last play. With 0:03 remaining, Ben Roethlisberger dropped back and fired a ball to the middle of the endzone to his tight end, Pat Freiermuth. As the ball landed into the hands of Freiermuth, Vikings defenders Harrison Smith, Xavier Woods, and Anthony Barr all came in at once to collide with Freiermuth and cause the ball to slip out of his hands. The Vikings win 36-28.

Looking ahead, the Vikings are now 6-7 with a ½ game deficit for the 7th seed in the NFC playoffs. They will take on the Chicago Bears at Soldier Field next Monday night with the hopes of getting their record back to .500. Oddly enough, this will be their fifth primetime game at Soldier Field over the last six seasons. The Bears are led by their rookie quarterback Justin Fields, who returns after he missed the past couple of games due to a rib injury. Although Fields has had moments that make Bears fans excited for the future, the Bears are still a team that struggles mightily on offense. Given how this season has gone for the Vikings, we should expect another intense game that comes down to the wire. Anything else, and that would be very un-Vikinglike of our beloved team in purple.

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DACOTAH BANK

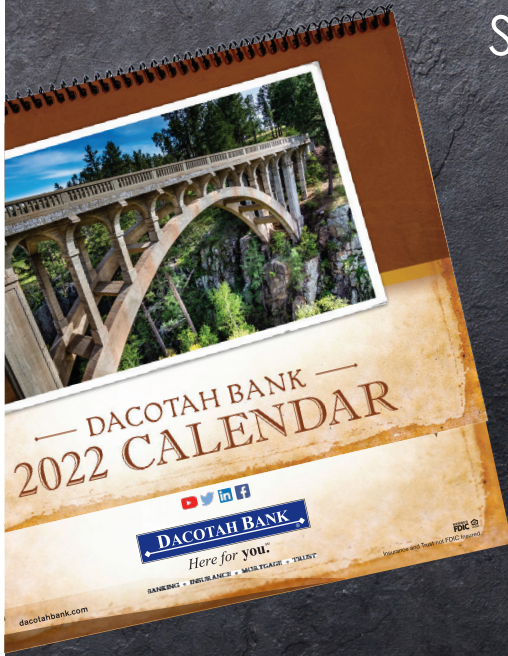
Cookies & Calendar OPEN HOUSE

Stop by the Groton Dacotah Bank
for cookies, coffee, cider
& a calendar

FRI. *December 17*

9:00 am - 5:00 pm

7 East US Hwy 12 • (605) 397-2711



MEMBER FDIC Insurance and Trust not FDIC Insured.

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Wage Library Grand Opening, the Clauses show up in Groton



A lot of people showed up at the Groton City Hall / Wage Memorial Library Grand Opening held Saturday morning. (Photo by Paul Kosel)



Mrs. Claus made an appearance at Wage Memorial Library on Saturday. (Photo by Paul Kosel)



Kelly Abeln helped with the Santa Claus Day at Professional Management Services.

(Photo by Paul Kosel)

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Trace Peterson was one of many children that had a chance to see Santa Saturday morning and Professional Management Services. (Photo by Paul Kosel)



Cookie decorating at the Groton City Library Saturday morning. (Photo by Bruce Babcock)



Mrs Claus reading stories and handing out treats. (Photo by Bruce Babcock)

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SDHSAA Enrollment- Grades 9-11 by Name 2022-23 and 2023-24 School Years



| | School Name | Total 9-11 |
|----|---|------------|
| 1 | Aberdeen Central High School | 1040 |
| 2 | Aberdeen Christian High School | 61 |
| 3 | Aberdeen Roncalli High School | 90 |
| 4 | Alcester-Hudson High School | 76 |
| 5 | Andes Central High School | 60 |
| 6 | Arlington High School | 69 |
| 7 | Armour High School | 35 |
| 8 | Avon High School | 62 |
| 9 | Baltic High School | 131 |
| 10 | Belle Fourche High School | 341 |
| 11 | Bennett County High School | 100 |
| 12 | Beresford High School | 195 |
| 13 | Bison High School | 33 |
| 14 | Black Hills Christian Academy High School | 24 |
| 15 | Bon Homme High School | 103 |
| 16 | Bowdle High School | 36 |
| 17 | Brandon Valley High School | 1042 |
| 18 | Bridgewater-Emery High School | 75 |
| 19 | Britton-Hecla High School | 89 |
| 20 | Brookings High School | 769 |
| 21 | Burke High School | 69 |
| 22 | C-EB High School | 270 |
| 23 | Canistota High School | 57 |
| 24 | Canton High School | 224 |
| 25 | Castlewood High School | 67 |
| 26 | Centerville High School | 67 |
| 27 | Chamberlain High School | 215 |
| 28 | Chester Area High School | 83 |
| 29 | Clark High School | 77 |
| 30 | Colman-Egan High School | 76 |
| 31 | Colome High School | 50 |
| 32 | Corsica-Stickney High School | 48 |
| 33 | Crazy Horse High School | 70 |
| 34 | Crow Creek High School | 119 |
| 35 | Custer High School | 224 |
| 36 | Dakota Christian High School | 24 |
| 37 | Dakota Valley High School | 339 |
| 38 | De Smet High School | 51 |
| 39 | Dell Rapids High School | 222 |
| 40 | Dell Rapids St. Marys High School | 51 |
| 41 | Deubrook High School | 77 |
| 42 | Deuel High School | 127 |
| 43 | Doland High School | 23 |
| 44 | Douglas High School | 633 |

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| | | |
|----|---------------------------------|------|
| 45 | Dupree High School | 100 |
| 46 | Edgemont High School | 41 |
| 47 | Edmunds Central High School | 26 |
| 48 | Elk Mountain High School | 2 |
| 49 | Elk Point Jefferson High School | 159 |
| 50 | Elkton High School | 97 |
| 51 | Estelline High School | 69 |
| 52 | Ethan High School | 62 |
| 53 | Eureka High School | 32 |
| 54 | Faith High School | 58 |
| 55 | Faulkton High School | 61 |
| 56 | Flandreau High School | 171 |
| 57 | Flandreau Indian High School | 70 |
| 58 | Florence High School | 67 |
| 59 | Frederick High School | 49 |
| 60 | Freeman Academy High School | 27 |
| 61 | Freeman High School | 65 |
| 62 | Garretson High School | 114 |
| 63 | Gayville-Volin High School | 62 |
| 64 | Gettysburg High School | 49 |
| 65 | Great Plains Luth High School | 101 |
| 66 | Gregory High School | 87 |
| 67 | Groton Area High School | 132 |
| 68 | Hamlin High School | 176 |
| 69 | Hanson High School | 94 |
| 70 | Harding County High School | 45 |
| 71 | Harrisburg High School | 1152 |
| 72 | Henry High School | 49 |
| 73 | Herreid High School | 29 |
| 74 | Highmore-Harrold High School | 48 |
| 75 | Hill City High School | 123 |
| 76 | Hitchcock-Tulare High School | 44 |
| 77 | Hot Springs High School | 193 |
| 78 | Hoven High School | 20 |
| 79 | Howard High School | 88 |
| 80 | Huron High School | 625 |
| 81 | Ipswich High School | 80 |
| 82 | Irene-Wakonda High School | 67 |
| 83 | Iroquois High School | 56 |
| 84 | James Valley Chr High School | 39 |
| 85 | Jones County High School | 39 |
| 86 | Kadoka Area High School | 55 |
| 87 | Kimball High School | 68 |
| 88 | Lake Preston High School | 37 |
| 89 | Lakota Tech High School | 412 |
| 90 | Langford Area High School | 38 |
| 91 | Lead-Deadwood High School | 175 |
| 92 | Lemmon High School | 60 |

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| | | |
|-----|-----------------------------------|------|
| 93 | Lennox High School | 275 |
| 94 | Leola High School | 36 |
| 95 | Little Wound High School | 262 |
| 96 | Lower Brule High School | 74 |
| 97 | Lyman High School | 70 |
| 98 | Madison High School | 272 |
| 99 | Marion High School | 43 |
| 100 | Marty High School | 63 |
| 101 | McCook Central High School | 93 |
| 102 | McCrossan High School | 28 |
| 103 | McIntosh High School | 46 |
| 104 | McLaughlin High School | 135 |
| 105 | Menno High School | 59 |
| 106 | Milbank High School | 250 |
| 107 | Miller High School | 94 |
| 108 | Mitchell Christian High School | 22 |
| 109 | Mitchell High School | 729 |
| 110 | Mobridge High School | 157 |
| 111 | Montrose High School | 41 |
| 112 | Mount Vernon High School | 69 |
| 113 | New Underwood High School | 69 |
| 114 | Newell High School | 64 |
| 115 | Northwestern High School | 69 |
| 116 | O`Gorman High School | 543 |
| 117 | Oelrichs High School | 56 |
| 118 | Oldham-Ramona High School | 28 |
| 119 | Parker High School | 119 |
| 120 | Parkston High School | 110 |
| 121 | Philip High School | 74 |
| 122 | Pierre T F Riggs High School | 649 |
| 123 | Pine Ridge High School | 212 |
| 124 | Plankinton High School | 69 |
| 125 | Platte-Geddes High School | 102 |
| 126 | Rapid City Central High School | 1517 |
| 127 | Rapid City Christian High School | 164 |
| 128 | Rapid City Stevens High School | 1358 |
| 129 | Red Cloud High School | 146 |
| 130 | Redfield High School | 125 |
| 131 | Rosholt High School | 56 |
| 132 | Rutland High School | 33 |
| 133 | Sanborn Central High School | 31 |
| 134 | Scotland High School | 67 |
| 135 | Selby High School | 40 |
| 136 | SF Christian High School | 300 |
| 137 | Sioux Falls Jefferson High School | 1367 |
| 138 | Sioux Falls Lincoln High School | 1427 |
| 139 | Sioux Falls Lutheran High School | 24 |
| 140 | Sioux Falls Roosevelt High School | 1340 |

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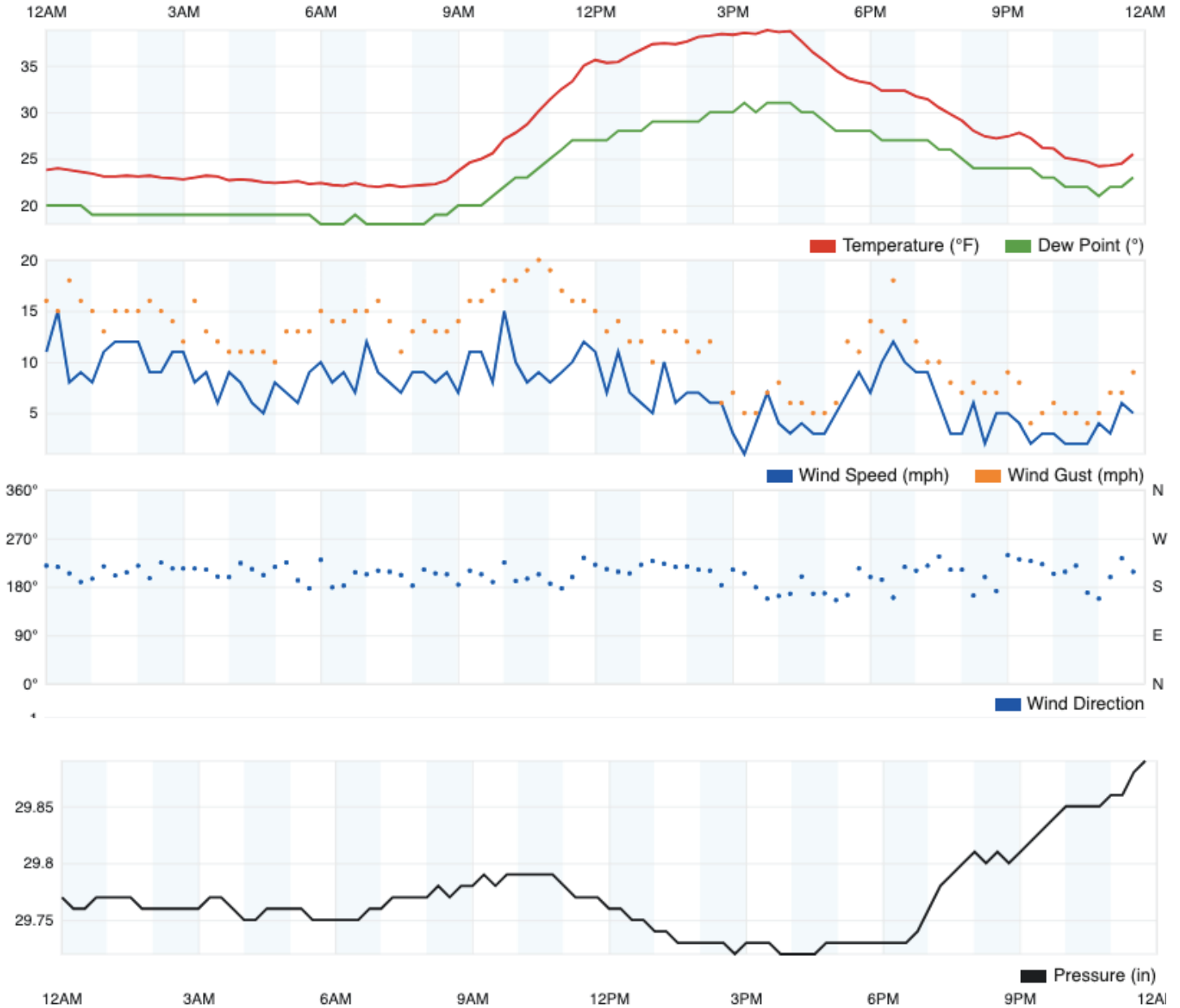
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| | | |
|-----|--|------|
| 141 | Sioux Falls Washington High School | 1479 |
| 142 | Sioux Valley High School | 153 |
| 143 | Sisseton High School | 235 |
| 144 | South Dakota Shool for the Blind and Visually Impaired | 8 |
| 145 | Spearfish High School | 575 |
| 146 | St Thomas More High Sch | 136 |
| 147 | St. Francis High Sch | 151 |
| 148 | Stanley County High School | 98 |
| 149 | Sturgis Brown High School | 687 |
| 150 | Sully Buttes High School | 57 |
| 151 | Summit High School | 49 |
| 152 | Sunshine Bible High School | 9 |
| 153 | Takini High School | 34 |
| 154 | Tea Area High School | 443 |
| 155 | Timber Lake High School | 78 |
| 156 | Tiospa Zina High School | 122 |
| 157 | Tiospaye Topa High School | 37 |
| 158 | Todd County High School | 431 |
| 159 | Tri-Valley High School | 215 |
| 160 | Tripp-Delmont High School | 36 |
| 161 | Vermillion High School | 307 |
| 162 | Viborg-Hurley High School | 85 |
| 163 | Wagner High School | 154 |
| 164 | Wakpala High School | 59 |
| 165 | Wall High School | 71 |
| 166 | Warner High School | 68 |
| 167 | Watertown High School | 953 |
| 168 | Waubay High School | 43 |
| 169 | Waverly/South Shore High School | 63 |
| 170 | Webster Area High School | 110 |
| 171 | Wessington Springs High School | 53 |
| 172 | Wessington Springs High School Cyber School | 56 |
| 173 | West Central High School | 316 |
| 174 | White Lake High School | 31 |
| 175 | White River High School | 86 |
| 176 | Willow Lake High School | 41 |
| 177 | Wilmot High School | 52 |
| 178 | Winner High School | 148 |
| 179 | Wolsey-Wessington High School | 80 |
| 180 | Woonsocket High School | 61 |
| 181 | Yankton High School | 700 |

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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs

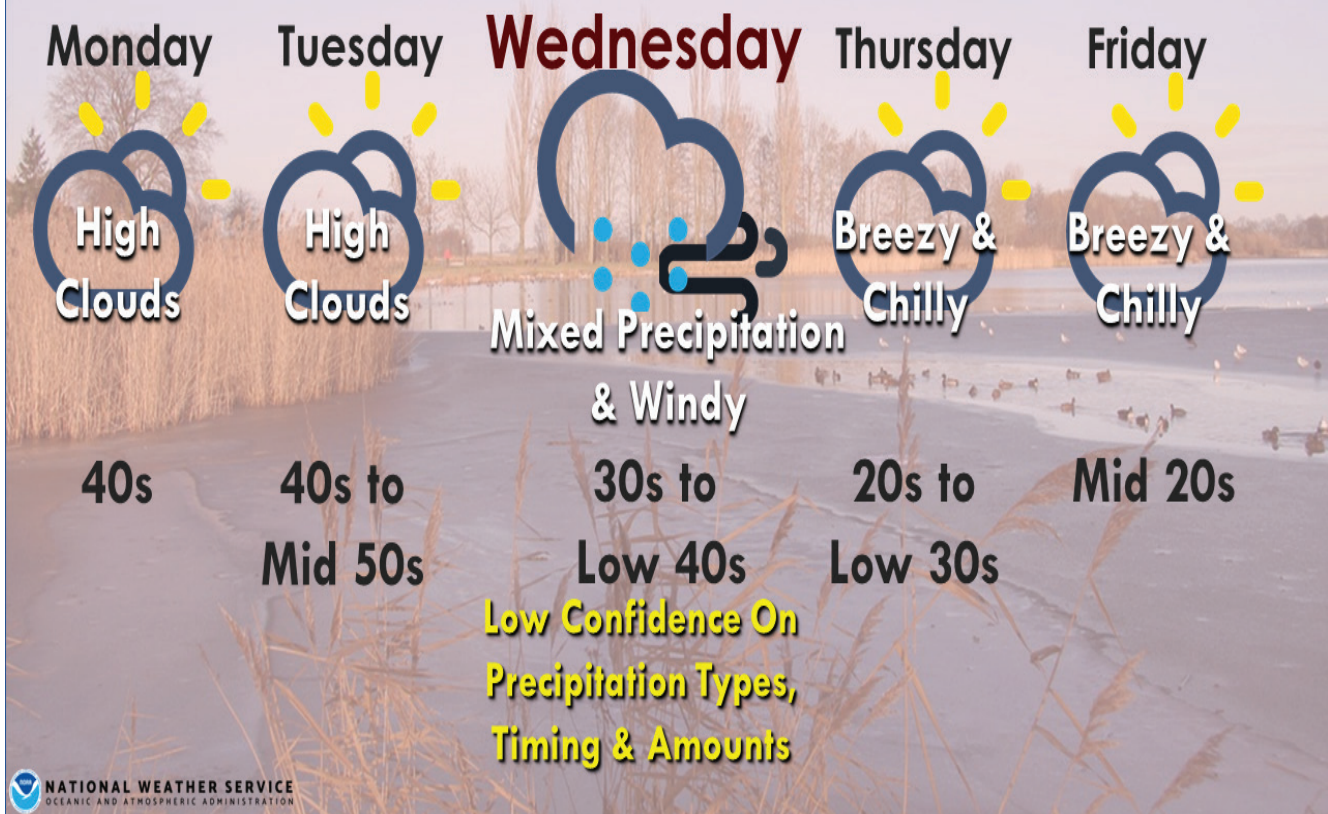


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| Today | Tonight | Tuesday | Tuesday Night | Wednesday |
|---|---|---|--|---|
|  |  |  |  |  |
| Increasing Clouds | Mostly Cloudy | Partly Sunny | Partly Cloudy | Partly Sunny then Chance Wintry Mix and Breezy |
| High: 42 °F | Low: 24 °F | High: 43 °F | Low: 25 °F | High: 37 °F |

Mild Start – Mid Week System



Mild and predominantly dry conditions are expected to continue through mid-week before a system zips through with very strong winds and light precipitation. High uncertainty on who will see what types of precipitation, but general indications are for a mix before changing to snow. Strong winds and snow may lead to reduced visibility late Wednesday.

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Today in Weather History

December 13, 2008: An intense low-pressure area moved out of the Rockies and across the Central Plains bringing widespread snow, blizzard conditions, and extreme winds chills to central and northeast South Dakota as well as west central Minnesota into the early morning hours of the 15th. Snowfall amounts of 1 to as much as 12 inches along with winds gusting to 50 mph caused widespread near zero visibilities and dangerous travel conditions. Winds chills fell into the 35 below to 45 below zero range. Many vehicles became stuck or stranded along several highways and along Interstates 29 and 90. Interstate 90 was closed from the Wyoming line to Murdo from late on the 13th until the morning of the 14th. Interstate 29 was also closed for much of the 14th. The Onida, Agar, and Gettysburg Volunteer Fire Department found it difficult to respond to a structure fire south of Gettysburg. Due to whiteout conditions, the structure was lost to the fire by the time the fire departments arrived. Most area schools were closed on Monday due to the road conditions along with the bitter cold wind chills. Some of the heaviest snowfall amounts included: 6 inches at Watertown, Browns Valley, Sisseton, Waubay, and Castlewood; 7 inches at Ortonville, Webster, Clear Lake, Faulkton, and Aberdeen; 8 inches at Milbank, 9 inches at Britton and Wheaton; 10 inches at Clear Lake, and 12 inches at Roscoe. Mobridge received 2 inches and Pierre received 4 inches of snowfall with this storm

December 13, 1997: A freak cold snap and snowstorm struck parts of northern Mexico left 12 people dead, and the area paralyzed. It snowed in the city of Guadalajara for the first time since 1881, leaving amazed residents to gawk at the white stuff and make snowmen. The temperature plunged to 5 degrees in Chihuahua.

1915 - A heavy snowstorm kicked off the snowiest winter in modern records for western New England. (The Weather Channel)

1962 - A severe Florida freeze occurred. Morning lows reached 35 degrees at Miami, 18 degrees at Tampa, and 12 degrees at Jacksonville. It was the coldest December weather of the 20th century and caused millions of dollars damage to crops and foliage. In Georgia, the morning low of 9 degrees below zero at Blairsville established a state record for the month of December. (David Ludlum) (The Weather Channel)

1987 - A major winter storm produced high winds and heavy snow in the Southern Rockies and the Southern High Plains. Snowfall totals in New Mexico ranged up to 25 inches at Cedar Crest, with up to three feet of snow reported in the higher elevations. Winds of 75 mph, with gusts to 124 mph, were reported northeast of Albuquerque NM. El Paso TX was buried under 22.4 inches of snow, including a single storm record of 16.8 inches in 24 hours. The snowfall total surpassed their previous record for an entire winter season of 18.4 inches. Record cold was experienced the next three nights as readings dipped into the single numbers. High winds ushering unseasonably cold air into the southwestern U.S. gusted to 100 mph at Grapevine CA. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1988 - Low pressure off the Atlantic coast produced up to a foot of snow in eastern Nassau County and western Suffolk County of southeastern New York State. Mild weather prevailed across the western half of the country. Nine cities reported record high temperatures for the date, including Goodland KS with a reading of 74 degrees. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1989 - Strong northwesterly winds, ushering bitterly cold arctic air into the central U.S., produced squalls with heavy snow in the Great Lakes Region. Snowfall totals in Upper Michigan ranged up to 24 inches at Manistique. Nine cities in Arkansas and Texas reported record low temperatures for the date, including Calico Rock AR with a reading of 4 degrees above zero. (Storm Data) (The National Weather Summary)

2002 - A powerful Pacific storm system plowed into the western United States during the 13th-16th, producing high winds, heavy rains, significant mountain snowfall and causing 9 deaths (Associated Press). Rainfall amounts exceeding 10 inches occurred in parts of California, and wind gusts over 45 mph produced up to 1.9 million power outages during the period (Pacific Gas & Electric).

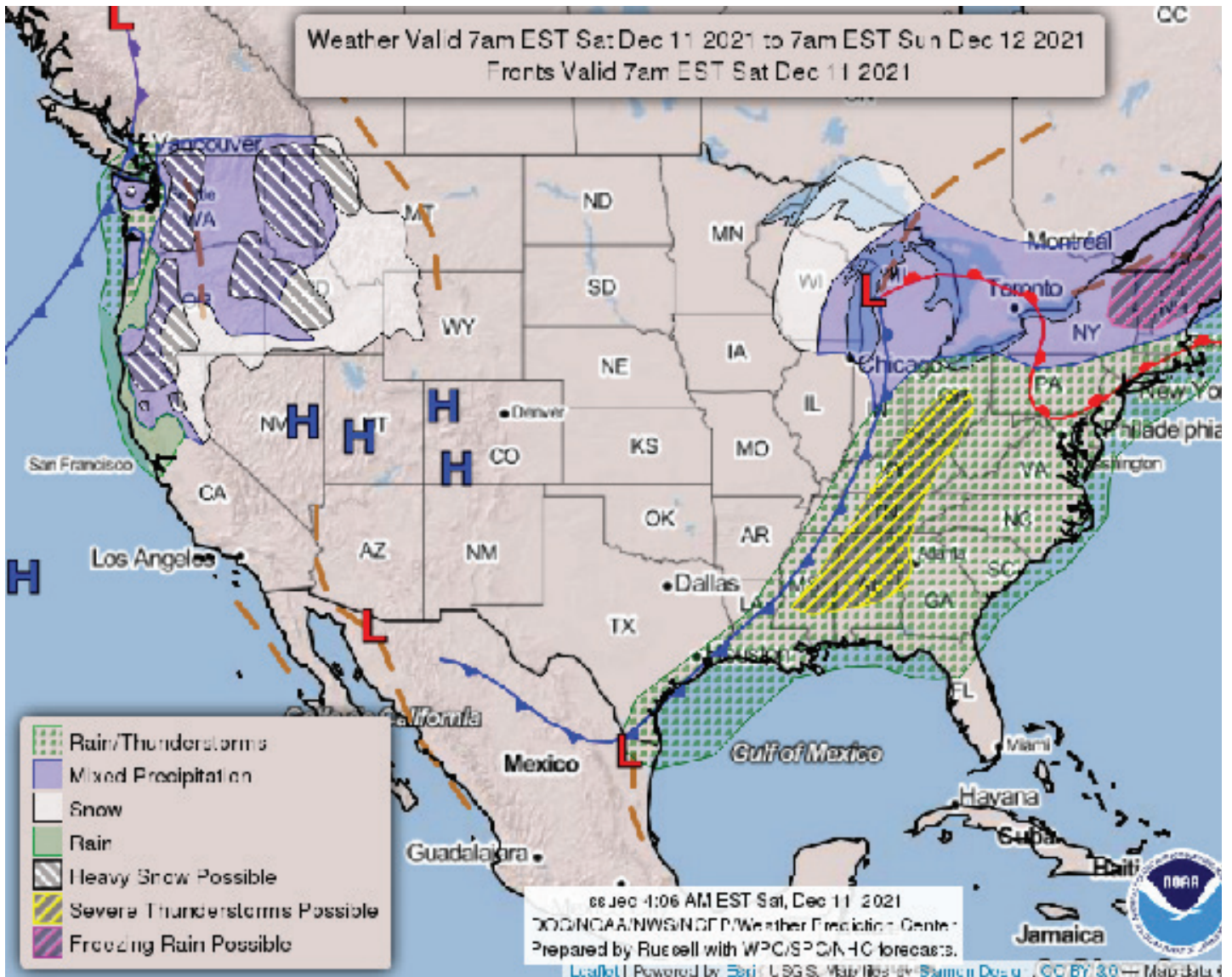
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Yesterday's Groton Weather Today's Info

High Temp: 38.8 °F at 3:45 PM
Low Temp: 22.0 °F at 7:45 AM
Wind: 20 mph at 10:45 AM
Precip: 0.00

Record High: 57° in 1921
Record Low: -34° in 1917
Average High: 29°F
Average Low: 9°F
Average Precip in Dec.: 0.25
Precip to date in Dec.: 0.11
Average Precip to date: 21.46
Precip Year to Date: 19.97
Sunset Tonight: 4:51:09 PM
Sunrise Tomorrow: 8:03:13 AM



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THE REAL THING!

It has always been difficult for missionary families to be together at special times for important occasions. Often hearts ache for the joy and happiness that bonds hearts and unites loved ones for special reasons and seasons.

The headmaster of a school for the children of missionaries knew that feeling very well. His parents were missionaries, and he spent many birthdays alone as well as many holidays apart from family members. He knew that one of his students, in particular, was having a difficult time one Christmas and decided to visit him in his room.

After talking for a few minutes he asked, "John, what would you like for Christmas this year?"

Looking at a picture of his father on the wall, he said, "I would like my father to step out of that frame."

That's what Jesus did. He "stepped out" of the Old Testament "frames" that prophesied His coming. He became the "real thing" when he walked among the people, laid His hands on the sick, and restored them to health, fed the hungry with bread that would last throughout eternity, and gave the water of life to those dying of thirst.

The Son of God willingly and voluntarily made Himself "nothing" when He assumed a human body and a human nature and became the "real thing." Jesus is God seeing us through human eyes, hearing us with human ears, touching lives with human hands, and loving us with a human heart. In Jesus, we see God with us – Immanuel!

Prayer: Thank You, Father, for sending us the "Real Thing." Through Your Son we know how much You love us, understand us, and know our every need. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: Philippians 2:5-11 Who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men.

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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)
11/11/2021 Veteran's Day Program at the GHS Arena
11/21/2021 Groton Area Snow Queen Contest
11/25/2021 Community Thanksgiving at the Community Center 11:30am-1pm (Thanksgiving)
11/30/2021 James Valley Telecommunications Holiday Open House 10am-4pm
12/04/2021 Olive Grove Tour of Homes
12/11/2021 Santa Claus Day at Professional Management Services 9am-Noon

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The Groton Independent Printed & Mailed Weekly Edition

Subscription Form

All prices listed include 6.5% Sales Tax

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State, Zip Code _____

Phone Number _____

The following will be used for your log-in information.

E-mail _____

Password _____

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News from the Associated Press

South Dakota dinosaur fossil goes for \$7.7 million

By LACEY PETERSON Black Hills Pioneer

BELLE FOURCHE, S.D. (AP) — An unnamed private buyer purchased “Big John,” a 67-million-year-old Triceratops skeleton that was uncovered in Perkins County in 2014, for \$7.7 million at a Paris auction on Oct. 21.

Walter Stein, a professional dinosaur fossil hunter and vertebrate paleontologist who specializes in Late Cretaceous theropods, has discovered, excavated, or prepared more than 40 dinosaur skeletons and hundreds of isolated fossils over the last 25 years.

Stein, of Belle Fourche-based PaleoAdventures, was the lucky paleontologist who discovered Big John in 2014, the Black Hills Pioneer reported. He said that even after a quarter of a century honing his craft, being the first person to set eyes upon a piece of history that has been buried for more than 65 million years never gets old.

“Every time you find a skeleton, it’s a celebration. We do a little victory dance in the badlands whenever you find something cool,” Stein told the Pioneer in a Thursday email. “It was certainly an honor to find this beast and help bring it back to life, so to speak. When I was 6, I dreamed of heading west and digging dinosaurs, so every day I get to do this, I’m living my dream.”

PaleoAdventures is a small, family-owned independent commercial paleontology company dedicated to helping preserve the vertebrate fossils, such as those of dinosaurs and marine reptiles, long buried under the surface of the Northern Plains. Stein and his wife, Heather Stein, created PaleoAdventures in 2005, and provide a wide range of services including paleontological education and tours.

Stein unearthed Big John, a Triceratops dating to the late Cretaceous period, in 2014 north of Butte County within in the Hell Creek Formation.

Since the discovery, Big John has been declared the Guinness World Record title holder of the largest documented skeleton of a Triceratops dinosaur. The mounted skeleton measures approximately 23-feet-5-inches long from snout to tail and stands 8-feet-10-inches high at the hips. The reconstructed skull measures 8-feet-7-inches long and 6-feet-6-inches wide with a basal skull length of 5-feet-1-inches, making it 5–10% larger than any other Triceratops skull reported to date, according to Guinness.

Resurrecting Big John

In the summer of 2014, Stein said he was exploring an area of a private Mud Butte ranch in southwestern Perkins County that he’d recently contracted to explore for palaeontologic findings.

“I drove to a patch of badlands, jumped out of the truck, and within maybe 10-15 minutes of searching, I found the skeleton,” Stein said, adding that he spotted the exhilarating find from 20 feet away.

Stein recalled that he observed a large debris field of broken fragments of the fossilized skeleton that led into a hillside, indicating that Big John had been weathering for a very long time.

“One of the first bones I noticed was the remains of a brow horn going into the mud,” he said. “It was in rough shape, but I could immediately tell it was from a Triceratops, and a big one at that.”

Fueled by enthusiasm, Stein said he began excavating the skeleton – a task that sounds easier in phrase than in practice.

“You don’t just find some bones and throw them into the back of a pickup truck,” he explained. “It’s a long process and a lot of hard work.”

After notifying the landowners of the discovery, Stein said he began documentation of the find, logging details about the geology and stratigraphy, and surveying a baseline for mapping. “We triple checked the location to make sure we were where we thought we were,” he said. “Then we got down to excavation and documentation.”

Stein said he and his team spent the better part of two summers to complete the dig operation, unearthing approximately 40% of the prehistoric animal’s skeleton and about 70% of the skull. A feat of that

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magnitude requires many helpful hands, and for Stein, he's grateful for those who pitched in to assist with uncovering the ancient remains.

"PaleoAdventures is a small, family-run company," Stein said. "My wife and I have been blessed with lots of family and friends who have helped our operations over the years."

To exhume Big John, Stein said six other people helped on the dig, including two of his guides, a summer intern, a friend, Heather Stein, his wife, and the couple's oldest son, William.

"I even hired an excavator to come help take some of the overlying rock off of the top to make it easier to get to the bone-bearing layer," he said. "Getting Big J out of the ground was a group effort."

The owners of the property also assisted with the effort, Stein said.

"Big John is named after the landowner, John R., who unfortunately passed away due to COVID last year," he said. "John was one of the nicest and kindest guys I've ever met. He would give you the shirt off of his back if you needed it. So, I hope the skeleton is a great tribute to this great man and his wonderful family."

Stein declined to provide the landowner's last name to protect his privacy.

Like most dinosaur skeletons, Stein said Big John had an interesting taphonomic story. Taphonomy is the study of how organisms decay and become fossilized or preserved in the paleontological record.

"One day, 67 million years ago, our Triceratops died out on a muddy floodplain near a river system," he said. "Shortly after, the river flooded its banks, dumping a bunch of mud and debris around the skeleton. This covered portions of the body, like the one shoulder and arm, but left other parts sticking up in the air."

As time passed, the portions of Big John that were exposed to the air and elements deteriorated, broke down, and were displaced by scavengers or stream currents, Stein explained.

"Eventually, these were covered with a second layer, but this time sand," he said. "The bones in the mud were buried first and (as a result were) much better preserved. The ones up in the sand, like the horns and frill, were exposed longer and not in as good of shape."

Exacerbating the situation, Stein said groundwater was able to remain in the sand layer longer, introducing minerals like iron sulfides to portions of the skeleton.

"... which is not a great thing for dinosaur bone," he said. "We call this iron-pyrite disease, which produces a lot of iron concretion and secondary minerals like gypsum which blow apart the bone."

To add insult to injury, Stein said that tree and vegetation roots preferred the conditions of sandy layers due to the groundwater that the strata held well.

"So, (the parts of Big John) in the sand layers (were) pretty root rotted and weathered by the time I found it," he said.

"In short, the skeleton was what we paleontologists call disarticulated, but associated," Stein said, explaining that portions of Big John were found in a main pile where he fell, including the skull, shoulder, arm, vertebrae, and ribs, while the legs and tail were washed approximately 13-16 feet further downstream from the main pile.

Stein said when you look in the right places, it's not hard to find dinosaur bone.

"The trick is to know how to get it out of the ground in one piece," he said. "Whenever you find a skeleton and it's over 20% complete, that's a win. So, with each bone, we knew we had a good one."

As Stein and crew uncovered bones in the field, he said they brought the fossils to their lab to begin fossil preparation – the process of removing a fossil specimen from the surrounding matrix in which it is embedded. Preparation of a skeleton the size of Big John's is slow moving and sometimes daunting, he said.

"With just me doing most of the prep work, it was an incredibly slow process," Stein said, adding that it took him approximately a month's time to complete Big John's left lower jawbone. "This was a big dinosaur, too, with heavy bones," he said.

Following preparation, Stein said he would have loved to assemble the gargantuan artifact himself. However, he said the PaleoAdventures facility did not have enough space to accommodate doing so properly.

So, for approximately six years, Stein said he and his crew tried to find Big John a home in a museum, to no avail.

Shortly after the COVID-19 pandemic hit the U.S., after consulting with the landowners of the property that formerly served as Big John's resting place, the decision was made to sell the unfinished and mostly

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unprepared 40% complete Triceratops skeleton to an Italian company.

After the sale, Stein said the company commenced preparations for an auction of Big John's remains which entailed a year's worth of tedious effort to prepare, restore, and assemble the skeleton utilizing castings of original parts to help fill in the missing parts not recovered from the dig site.

"They did a good job with it, and I wish them well," he said of the Italian company which sold the skeleton for \$7.7 million in an Oct. 21 auction.

Following his 2020 sale of the skeleton, Stein said he and Big John parted ways.

"Once we sold the skeleton to the Italians, we were out of it," he explained. "I'd like to say we were millionaires right now, but we aren't. We sold the skeleton for a small fraction of what they got at auction."

Stein said he watched the auction, which was livestreamed online, and was shocked by the multimillion-dollar price tag Big John acquired.

"Triceratops, being a comparatively common genus, has never brought that kind of money," he said.

After the shock wore off, Stein said he felt a little sad to see Big John go.

"Unfortunately, because of the auction format, (the skeleton) was picked up by a private bidder and not a museum," he said. "I would have felt better about it had it gone to a museum." Hopefully the new owner will put it on public display somewhere soon, so others can love the specimen like we did."

Parting with specimens found in the field and painstakingly cared for by Stein and his crew can be bittersweet, he said.

"When you love fossils as much as I do, it's tough to just let them go, even if it's to a good home," he said. "Having said that, we are a private company, and we do need to pay the electric bill."

Unlike academic institutions, Stein said that private paleontological outfits like his don't qualify for grant funds and cannot collect tax revenue to assist with funding operations. Additionally, he said that landowners deserve to be compensated for skeletons found on their properties.

"So, one of the ways we stay independent, is via guided dig site tours each summer," Stein said. "Another way is by selling common fossils and skeletons. Whenever we find a \$10,000 (valued) Tyrannosaurus rex tooth, I call that 'nature providing me a grant.'"

While Stein may not be a millionaire as a result of Big John's sale, his passion fuels PaleoAdventure's forward momentum, which he hopes could offer some light at the end of the tunnel with the goal of retaining more dinosaurs found in South Dakota.

"It has always been our goal to build our own dinosaur museum right here in western South Dakota," he said. "Unfortunately, my wife and I were not born with silver spoons in our mouths, and building a museum takes a lot of money and time."

With a small field station in Belle Fourche and museum exhibits on display for visitors to take in, Stein said the space is too small to accommodate his dream.

"This winter, I am working on raising capital, finding investors, and putting some of our museum plans into motion," he said. "Hopefully by 2023, we will be poised and ready to keep more dinosaurs in South Dakota."

EXPLAINER: Will ex-official clear up Noem nepotism probe?

By STEPHEN GROVES Associated Press

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — South Dakota lawmakers are readying to hear Tuesday from a former state employee at the center of questions over whether Gov. Kristi Noem interfered in a state agency that was evaluating her daughter's application for a real estate appraiser license.

It could be the first time that longtime agency director Sherry Bren speaks publicly about a meeting in the governor's mansion last year since The Associated Press first reported on it in September. The Republican governor held the meeting just days after Bren's agency moved to deny Noem's daughter, Cassidy Peters, an upgrade to her appraiser license. Peters received another opportunity to pursue her license through an agreement signed the week after the meeting.

Lawmakers have tried to dig into the facts of the episode. Noem has repeatedly denied wrongdoing.

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And Bren has mostly stayed silent.

Here's what to know about the committee's inquiry that has stretched nearly two months:

WHAT HAPPENED AT THE GOVERNOR'S MEETING?

It's still not clear.

In an October testimony, Noem's secretary of labor, Marcia Hultman, described the meeting as innocuous — mostly a policy discussion aimed at changes to the application process for appraiser licenses. She acknowledged that it was uncommon to have an applicant in such a meeting and said there was a "brief discussion at the end" about a plan to allow Peters to fix problems with her application and try again. Hultman excused any appearance of impropriety by saying that details of the agreement with Peters were in place before that meeting.

Noem had echoed a similar defense to reporters, saying that "the decision was already made on her path forward." She insisted the agreement was not even broached at the meeting and Peters had only given "her personal experiences through the program."

However, when the committee pressed Hultman's department to show them a copy of Peters' agreement, it was revealed that it was not signed until more than a week after the meeting.

Bren also has said she was presented with a letter at the meeting from Peters' supervisor that slammed the agency's decision to deny the license.

WHO IS SHERRY BREN?

She helped start the state's Appraiser Certification Program and was its director for nearly three decades. Appraisers describe her as a by-the-books regulator.

"It doesn't matter who you are, she's the same for everyone," said Amy Frink, the vice president of the Professional Appraiser Association of South Dakota, a group that has been critical of changes to the agency since Bren's departure.

But the governor has implied that Bren was getting in the way of changes she wanted to make as the state saw a shortage of appraisers.

Hultman began pressuring Bren to retire shortly after Peters received her appraiser certification in November 2020. Bren filed an age-discrimination complaint and received a \$200,000 payment from the state to withdraw the complaint and leave her job in March.

WHY IS SHE SPEAKING NOW?

She received a subpoena that compels her to answer questions.

Bren — through her lawyer — actually suggested that lawmakers subpoena her because she is barred from disparaging state officials as part of a settlement.

"Most lawyers would say, 'Don't do it unless you are subpoenaed and then you are compelled to be there,'" said Tom Wilka, a lawyer who specializes in employment litigation. "It provides more of a defense of Bren."

WHAT WILL SHE SAY?

After Hultman's testimony in October, Bren told the AP she wanted "to correct any factual inaccuracies" from the cabinet secretary's account. It's not clear beyond that.

The trajectory of Bren's testimony will largely depend on what lawmakers ask and how much they press for details.

One powerful Republican lawmaker, Sen. Lee Schoenbeck, told the committee he hoped questioning would be limited to the "functionality of the appraisal program."

But those words amount to little more than guidance.

Lawmakers on the committee, especially the two Democrats, previously have asked head-on questions about the governor's meeting, Peters' application and why Bren was pushed to retire.

They have yet to receive clear answers.

Study: SD's 6 universities have \$2 billion economic impact

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — An analysis conducted for the South Dakota Board of Regents shows the significant

impact of public higher education on the state's economy.

The state's six public universities supported 12,354 jobs and generated \$2.1 billion in annual economic impact in fiscal 2019, according to the analysis by the consulting firm, Parker Philips, Inc. The universities together generated more than \$74 million in state and local taxes for the fiscal year.

More than 33,000 students attend Black Hills State University, Dakota State University, Northern State University, South Dakota School of Mines & Technology, South Dakota State University and the University of South Dakota.

The financial data used in the study was gleaned from operational and capital expenditures, employee payroll and benefits and estimated spending by visitors and students beyond tuition and fees, according to Park Philips.

The reports notes that while the universities are a primary economic engine of the state, they are not without challenges. Those include declining population, decreased student enrollment, affordability of higher education and decreased state aid.

Total enrollment in the state's public universities has declined by 8.1% over the past five years as the number of high school graduates declines, the analysis said.

Among six neighboring states, Iowa, Minnesota, Montana, Nebraska, North Dakota, and Wyoming, the annual cost for undergraduate tuition and fees in South Dakota is second only to Minnesota. Total costs for tuition, fees, and room and board were \$16,251 at South Dakota's public universities in 2019.

North Korea's Kim at critical crossroads decade into rule

By KIM TONG-HYUNG Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea (AP) — Too young. Too weak. Too inexperienced.

Since taking power following his father's sudden death 10 years ago this week, Kim Jong Un has erased those widespread doubts that greeted his early attempts to extend his family's brutal dynastic grip over North Korea.

Early predictions about a regency, a collective leadership or a military coup were crushed by an estimated hundreds of executions and purges targeting family members and the old guard. That ruthless consolidation of power, together with a larger-than-life personality seemingly made for carefully packaged TV propaganda, has allowed Kim to make clear that his authority is absolute.

But as North Korea's first millennial dictator marks a decade in rule this Friday, he may be facing his toughest moment yet, as crushing sanctions, the pandemic and growing economic trouble converge. If Kim can't uphold his public pledge to develop both nukes and his moribund economy, something many experts see as impossible, it could spell trouble for his long-term rule.

The modest economic growth he achieved for several years through trade and market-oriented reforms was followed by a tightening of international sanctions since 2016, when Kim accelerated his pursuit of nuclear weapons and missiles targeting the United States and its Asian allies.

After basking in the global spotlight at summits with former U.S. President Donald Trump in 2018 and 2019, Kim is now stuck at home, grappling with a decaying economy worsened by pandemic-related border closures.

Negotiations with Washington have been deadlocked for more than two years after he failed to win badly needed sanctions relief from Trump. President Joe Biden's administration seems in no hurry to cut a deal unless Kim shows a willingness to wind down his nuclear weapons program, a "treasured sword" he sees as his biggest guarantee of survival.

While still firmly in control, Kim appears increasingly unlikely to achieve his stated goals of simultaneously keeping his nukes and bringing prosperity to his impoverished populace. Kim laid out this goal in his first public speech as leader in early 2012, vowing that North Koreans would "never have to tighten their belts again."

How Kim handles the economy in the coming years could determine the long-term stability of his rule and possibly the future of his family's dynasty, said Park Won Gon, a professor of North Korea studies at

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Seoul's Ewha Womans University.

"The nuclear weapons program, the economy and the stability of the regime are all interconnected. If the nuclear issue doesn't get resolved, the economy doesn't get better, and that opens the possibility of disquiet and confusion in North Korea's society," Park said.

Kim desperately needs the removal of U.S.-led sanctions to build his economy, which has also been damaged by decades of mismanagement and aggressive military spending.

But meaningful U.S. relief may not come unless Kim takes concrete steps toward denuclearization. Despite his pursuit of summitry, Trump showed no interest in budging on sanctions, which he described as Washington's main leverage over Pyongyang, and it's unclear if Kim will ever see another U.S. president as willing to engage with the North as Trump was.

Their diplomacy fell apart after their second summit in February 2019, when the Americans rejected North Korea's demand for a major removal of sanctions in exchange for dismantling an aging nuclear facility, which would have amounted to a partial surrender of its nuclear capabilities.

The two sides haven't met publicly since a failed follow-up meeting between working-level officials in October of that year. Two months after that Kim vowed at a domestic political conference to further expand his nuclear arsenal in the face of "gangster-like" U.S. pressure, urging his people to stay resilient in the struggle for economic self-reliance.

But the global COVID-19 crisis has hampered some of Kim's major economic goals by forcing the country into a self-imposed lockdown that crippled its trade with China, its only major ally and economic lifeline.

South Korea's spy agency recently told lawmakers that North Korea's annual trade with China declined by two-thirds to \$185 million through September 2021. North Korean officials are also alarmed by food shortages, soaring goods prices and a lack of medicine and other essential supplies that have accelerated the spread of water-borne diseases like typhoid fever, according to lawmakers briefed by the agency.

Talks with the United States are in limbo. The Biden administration, whose pullout from Afghanistan underscored a broader shift in U.S. focus from counterterrorism and so-called rogue states like North Korea and Iran to confronting China, has not offered much more than open-ended talks.

The North has so far rejected the overture, saying Washington must first abandon its "hostile policy," a term Pyongyang mainly uses to refer to sanctions and U.S.-South Korea military exercises.

"North Korea is not going to surrender its nuclear weapons, no matter what," said Andrei Lankov, a professor at Seoul's Kookmin University. "The only topic they are willing to talk about is not the pipe dream of denuclearization but rather issues related to arms control."

Kim may benefit, however, from the Washington-Beijing confrontation, which increases North Korea's strategic value to China, Lankov said. China is willing to keep North Korea afloat by expanding food, fuel and other aid, and that reduces pressure on Kim to negotiate with the United States.

"Instead of growth, North Korea will have stagnation, but not an acute crisis," Lankov said. "For Kim Jong Un and his elite, it's an acceptable compromise."

North Korea has been taking aggressive steps to reassert greater state control over the economy amid the country's pandemic border closure. This rolls back Kim's earlier reforms, which embraced private investments and allowed more autonomy and market incentives to state enterprises and factories to facilitate domestic production and trade.

There have also been signs that North Korean officials are suppressing the use of U.S. dollars and other foreign currencies in markets, an apparent reflection of worry about depleting foreign currency reserves.

Restoring central control over the economy could also be crucial for mobilizing state resources so that Kim could further expand his nuclear program, which would otherwise be challenging as the economy worsens.

While Kim has suspended the testing of nuclear devices and long-range missiles for three years, he has ramped up testing of shorter-range weapons threatening U.S. allies South Korea and Japan.

"Nukes brought Kim to this mess, but he's maintaining a contradictory policy of further pushing nukes to get out of it," said Go Myong-hyun, a senior analyst at Seoul's Asan Institute for Policy Studies.

"The U.S.-led sanctions regime will persist, and a return to a state-controlled economy was never the answer for North Korea in the past and won't be the answer now. At some point, Kim will face a difficult

choice over how long he will hold on to his nukes, and that could happen relatively soon," Go added.

Long queues form as UK starts booster blitz against omicron

By JILL LAWLESS Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — Long lines formed at vaccination centers in Britain as people heeded the government's call for all adults to get booster shots to protect against the omicron variant of the coronavirus, which the prime minister said Monday has caused at least one death.

In a televised announcement late Sunday, Prime Minister Boris Johnson said everyone 18 and up would be offered a third vaccine dose by Dec. 31 — less than three weeks away, and a month earlier than the previous target.

"We are now facing an emergency in our battle with the new variant, omicron," Johnson said. He said boosters would "reinforce our wall of vaccine protection" against an anticipated "tidal wave of omicron."

U.K. health authorities say omicron cases are doubling every two to three days in Britain, and it will replace delta as the dominant strain within days. But it's unclear whether the expected wave of infections will inundate the country's health system.

About 10 people are in U.K. hospitals with COVID-19 caused by omicron, and Johnson on Monday reported the country's first COVID-19 death involving the variant.

Scientists in South Africa, where omicron was first identified, say they see signs the variant may cause less severe disease than delta but cautioned it was too soon to be certain. Health authorities around the world are watching Britain closely to see what an omicron surge looks like in a country with an older, more highly vaccinated population than South Africa's.

The U.K. Health Security Agency says existing vaccines appear less effective in preventing symptomatic infections in people exposed to omicron, though effectiveness appears to rise to between 70% and 75% after a third vaccine dose.

More than 80% of people age 12 and up in Britain have received two vaccine doses, and 40% of adults have had three. Giving the rest boosters by the end of the month will be a huge challenge, requiring almost 1 million doses administered a day. Johnson acknowledged that many routine medical procedures would have to be postponed to meet the goal.

Teams of military planners and thousands of volunteer vaccinators will help give the jabs at doctors' offices, hospitals, pharmacies and pop-up vaccination centers.

While the online appointment booking system will not be open to under-30s until Wednesday, Johnson said any adult could show up at a walk-in center to get a booster starting Monday.

Lines built up at big London vaccination clinics on Monday morning. The line for shots at St. Thomas' Hospital, on the south bank of the River Thames in London, stretched across Westminster Bridge toward Parliament.

The government's appointment-booking website struggled to keep up with demand. The National Health Service advised people to try accessing the site later in the day or on Tuesday, if they were having problems.

The government also ran out of rapid at-home virus test kits, which have been distributed free to households during the pandemic. The website where tests can be ordered said none were available on Monday. Starting Wednesday, people in England must show proof of vaccination or a negative test to enter nightclubs and other crowded venues.

Johnson's Dec. 31 target applies to England. The other parts of the U.K. — Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland — are also expected to speed up their vaccination campaigns.

The British government raised the country's official coronavirus threat level on Sunday, warning the rapid spread of omicron "adds additional and rapidly increasing risk to the public and health care services" at a time when COVID-19 is already widespread.

Concerns about the new variant led Johnson's Conservative government to bring in vaccine certificates for nightclubs and to reintroduce restrictions that were lifted almost six months ago. Masks must once again be worn in most indoor settings and as of Monday, people were urged to work from home, if possible.

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Many scientists say those measures are unlikely to be enough and are calling for tougher ones. But cafes, pubs and other businesses located in city centers fear plummeting commuter numbers will hammer business in the usually busy pre-Christmas period.

Johnson is facing a major rebellion from unhappy Conservative lawmakers when Parliament votes on the new restrictions Tuesday. Dozens are expected to oppose the restrictions — especially vaccine passports, which they say are unfair and economically damaging.

The measures are still highly likely to pass, with support from the opposition Labour Party.

Robert Read, professor of infectious diseases at the University of Southampton, said it was still unclear how severe cases of COVID-19 from omicron would be but “the evidence is that omicron probably requires much larger amounts of antibody in the blood in order to thwart the virus as much as possible”

“We need to get those third doses into as many adults as we possibly can, just in case this virus turns out to be a raging bull just rather than a pussy cat,” Read told radio station LBC.

Follow AP’s pandemic coverage at <https://apnews.com/hub/coronavirus-pandemic>

Tornadoes kill dozens in 5 states; final toll still unclear

By BRUCE SCHREINER and DYLAN LOVAN Associated Press

MAYFIELD, Ky. (AP) — Rescuers were forced to crawl over the dead to get to the living at a Kentucky candle factory walloped by a tornado, part of an unusual cluster that killed dozens in the Midwest and South and flattened whole towns.

By the time churchgoers gathered Sunday morning to pray for the lost, more than 24 hours had elapsed since anyone had been found alive. Instead, crews recovered pieces of peoples’ lives — a backpack, a pair of shoes and a cellphone with 27 missed messages were among the items. Still, a definitive death toll remained elusive, though it was expected to be lower than initially feared.

Kentucky was the worst-hit by far in a swarm of twisters across several states, remarkable because they came at a time of year when cold weather normally limits tornadoes. They left at least eight people dead at the state’s Mayfield Consumer Products candle factory and another 12 were reported killed in and around Bowling Green. At least another 14 people died in Illinois, Tennessee, Arkansas and Missouri.

Authorities are still trying to determine the total number of dead amid confusion over how many were able to escape the factory and the difficulties of searching other hard-hit areas. The twisters made door-to-door searches impossible in some places. “There are no doors,” said Kentucky Gov. Andy Beshear.

“We’re going to have over 1,000 homes that are gone, just gone,” he said.

Beshear said Saturday that only 40 of the 110 people working in the candle factory at the time were rescued, and that “it’ll be a miracle if anybody else is found alive in it.” But on Sunday, the company said that while eight were confirmed dead and eight remained missing, more than 90 others had been located.

“Many of the employees were gathered in the tornado shelter and after the storm was over they left the plant and went to their homes,” said Bob Ferguson, a spokesman for the company. “With the power out and no landline they were hard to reach initially. We’re hoping to find more of those eight unaccounted as we try their home residences.”

Night-shift workers were in the middle of the holiday rush, cranking out candles, when the word went out to seek shelter.

For Autumn Kirks, that meant tossing aside wax and fragrance buckets to make an improvised safe place. She glanced away from her boyfriend, Lannis Ward, who was about 10 feet away at the time.

Suddenly, she saw sky and lightning where a wall had been, and Ward had vanished.

“I remember taking my eyes off of him for a second, and then he was gone,” Kirks said.

Later in the day, she got the terrible news — that Ward had been killed in the storm.

“It was indescribable,” Pastor Joel Cauley said of the disaster scene. “It was almost like you were in a twilight zone. You could smell the aroma of candles, and you could hear the cries of people for help. Candle smells and all the sirens is not something I ever expected to experience at the same time.”

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Four twisters hit Kentucky in all, including one with an extraordinarily long path of about 200 miles (322 kilometers), authorities said. Beshear had said Sunday morning that the state's toll could exceed 100. But after state officials heard the candle company's update, he said that afternoon it might be as low as 50.

"We are praying that maybe original estimates of those we have lost were wrong. If so, it's going to be pretty wonderful," the governor said.

"We're going to grieve together, we're going to dig out and clean up together, and we will rebuild and move forward together. We're going to get through this," Beshear said.

With afternoon high temperatures forecast only in the 40s, tens of thousands of people were without power. About 300 National Guard members went house to house, checking on people and helping to remove debris. Cadaver dogs searched for victims.

The outbreak also killed at least six people in Illinois, where an Amazon distribution center in Edwardsville was hit; four in Tennessee; two in Arkansas, where a nursing home was destroyed and the governor said workers shielded residents with their own bodies; and two in Missouri.

Pope Francis expressed his sadness over the "devastating impact" of the tornadoes. In a telegram sent Monday by Vatican secretary of state, Cardinal Pietro Parolin, the pope offered prayers for those who died, "comfort to those who mourn their loss and strength to all those affected by this immense tragedy."

Debris from destroyed buildings and shredded trees covered the ground in Mayfield, a city of about 10,000 in western Kentucky. Twisted sheet metal, downed power lines and wrecked vehicles lined the streets. Windows were blown out and roofs torn off the buildings that were still standing.

In the shadows of their crumpled church sanctuaries, two congregations in Mayfield came together on Sunday to pray for those who were lost. Members of First Christian Church and First Presbyterian Church met in a parking lot surrounded by rubble, piles of broken bricks and metal.

"Our little town will never be the same, but we're resilient," Laura McClendon said. "We'll get there, but it's going to take a long time."

Associated Press writers Kristin Hall and Claire Galofaro in Mayfield; Jay Reeves in Birmingham, Alabama; Seth Borenstein in Washington; and Travis Loller in Nashville, Tennessee, contributed to this report.

Jan. 6 panel set to vote on holding Meadows in contempt

By MARY CLARE JALONICK Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The House panel investigating the Jan. 6 Capitol insurrection is set to recommend contempt charges against former White House chief of staff Mark Meadows on Monday as lawmakers are releasing new details about thousands of emails and texts he has handed over to the committee.

In laying out the case for the contempt vote, the nine-member panel released a 51-page report Sunday evening that details its questions about the documents he has already provided — including 6,600 pages of records taken from personal email accounts and about 2,000 text messages.

The panel did not release the documents but described some of them. The report gives details about Meadows efforts' to help Donald Trump overturn his defeat in the presidential election, communications with members of Congress and organizers of a rally held the morning of the insurrection and frantic messages among aides and others as the violent attack unfolded that day.

The panel says it also wants to know more about whether Trump was engaged in discussions regarding the response of the National Guard, which was delayed for hours as the violence escalated and the rioters brutally beat police guarding the Capitol building.

The report says that the documents provided by Meadows show that he sent an email to an unidentified person saying that the guard would be present to "protect pro Trump people" and that more would be available on standby. The committee does not give any additional details about the email.

The committee says in the report that Trump's former top White House aide "is uniquely situated to provide key information, having straddled an official role in the White House and unofficial role related to

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Mr. Trump's reelection campaign."

The contempt vote comes after more than two months of negotiations with Meadows and his lawyer and as the panel has also struggled to obtain information from some of Trump's other top aides, such as his longtime ally Steve Bannon. The House voted to recommend charges against Bannon in October, and the Justice Department indicted him on two counts of contempt last month.

The panel is aiming to develop the most comprehensive record yet of the violent attack, in which hundreds of Trump's supporters violently pushed past the law enforcement officers, broke into the Capitol and interrupted the certification of Biden's victory. Meadows' testimony could be key, as he was Trump's top aide at the time and was with him in the White House as the rioters breached the building.

The committee's chairman, Democratic Rep. Bennie Thompson of Mississippi, scheduled the vote last week after Meadows failed to show up at his deposition. In a transcript of that meeting released on Sunday, a member of the panel's investigative staff details several of the questions they would have asked. Many of the questions center on Trump's efforts to overturn the election in the weeks before the insurrection, including Meadows' outreach to states and his communications with members of Congress.

Committee staff said they would have interviewed Meadows about emails "to leadership at the Department of Justice on December 29th and 30th, 2020, and January 1st, 2021, encouraging investigations of suspected voter fraud," even though election officials and courts across the country had refuted the claims.

The panel said Meadows, a former Republican congressman from North Carolina, also provided text messages sent to and from members of Congress "before, during, and after the attack on the United States Capitol. One exchange with a lawmaker concerned efforts to contact state legislators about the election because "POTUS wants to chat with them." POTUS stands for president of the United States.

In a text exchange with an unidentified senator, the committee said, Meadows said that Trump believed that Vice President Mike Pence had power to reject electors in his role presiding over the certification. Pence did not have that power under the law, as the vice president's function is largely ceremonial.

In other texts, sent the day of the attack, Meadows' former colleagues encouraged him to get Trump to discourage the violence, the committee said. Similarly, in an exchange with an organizer of the rally that morning — where Trump told his supporters to "fight like hell" — the organizer told Meadows that they "desperately" needed direction from him because things "have gotten crazy."

Meadows, who has balked at the committee's questions, citing Trump's claims of executive privilege, has sued the panel, asking the court to invalidate two subpoenas that he says are "overly broad and unduly burdensome." The lawsuit accuses the committee of overreaching by issuing a subpoena to Verizon for his cell phone records.

Thompson and the committee's Republican vice chairwoman, Wyoming Rep. Liz Cheney, said the lawsuit "won't succeed at slowing down the Select Committee's investigation or stopping us from getting the information we're seeking."

The panel has already interviewed almost 300 witnesses and lawmakers say they plan a series of hearings early next year to make many of their findings public.

The panel's expected vote to recommend charges of contempt of Congress would send the matter to the full House, which is likely to approve the measure and expose Meadows to criminal prosecution by the Justice Department.

Biden aims to cut bureaucratic runaround for gov't services

By JOSH BOAK Associated Press

President Joe Biden on Monday will sign an executive order aimed at saving Americans time and frustration when seeking a broad array of federal services, like renewing passports, applying for Social Security benefits and getting aid after natural disasters.

Two senior White House officials confirmed details of the executive order, speaking on the condition of anonymity before the announcement. Parts of the order also were provided in advance to advocacy groups that have called for the government to improve its level of service to the public.

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The order is aimed at reducing the current bureaucratic runaround, under which people often have to visit offices, endure long phone calls or struggle with the delays of mail and fax machines when trying to contact federal agencies.

The White House hopes that improving the public's experiences with federal agencies will help to renew faith in government and democracy itself at time when deep political polarization has eroded trust in U.S. institutions.

That's a tall order, considering that the federal government has persisted in its lumbering ways despite repeated attempts over generations to make it more nimble. Former President Bill Clinton famously pledged in 1993 to "reinvent government" with an interagency task force.

The country has seen a strong economic rebound as coronavirus relief programs sent money directly to Americans. But support for the president has slumped as the United States faces inflation at a nearly four-decade high and the coronavirus pandemic lingers.

The new executive order should bring government services into the digital era, said Bill Sweeney, senior vice president of government affairs for AARP, an association for older Americans.

"We do our banking online," Sweeney said. "We do our work online. We can order food online. We can order groceries from our phone. I think people are accustomed to that now and they're demanding that government keep up as well."

The goal is to implement most of the order's changes across 17 federal agencies within the next year. Officials said that existing funds should be enough for agencies to pay for improvements and that better service and efficiency would ultimately save the government money. Biden plans to sign the order Monday afternoon.

The government has identified 35 service providers in federal agencies that can reduce administrative burdens and develop "new online tools and technologies that can provide a simple, seamless, and secure customer experience," according to a fact sheet obtained by The Associated Press.

For retirees and the nearly 4 million Americans who turn 65 each year, the order requires that they be able to claim Social Security benefits online more easily. Medicare recipients are to be able to access personalized online tools for saving money on drugs and managing their health care. Taxpayers will be able to schedule callbacks with the IRS instead of waiting on hold or having to manage issues through letters and faxes.

For travelers, Americans will be able to renew their passports online instead of having to print forms and pay with a paper check or money order. New security machines and computers with advanced screening features are to streamline the process of going through security lines for the roughly 2 million people who fly daily.

The 45 million people with student debt will be able to manage their federal loans through a single portal, instead of several websites with different passwords. Paperwork is also to be reduced for people seeking loan forgiveness.

Natural disasters strike about 25 million U.S. households and small businesses each year. The survivors seeking federal aid should no longer be required to complete multiple forms across several agencies, while being able to use virtual inspections and smart phone pictures of the damage to support claims.

Military veterans are to be able to access their benefits with a single login. Poorer families should find it easier to certify their incomes and enroll in eligible social safety net programs without the extra paperwork. Loan programs for small businesses and farmers are to become more responsive. Families receiving food aid should be able to buy groceries online. It should become easier to update mailing addresses with the government or change names with the Social Security Administration.

Anne Zimmerman, an accountant based in the Cincinnati area, said the changes in the order are necessary because companies are frequently on their own when navigating the federal bureaucracy. As co-chair of the advocacy group Small Business for America's Future, she was briefed by the White House about the order before the announcement.

"It's needed because things have really gotten worse," Zimmerman said. "There's too big a labyrinth to

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weed your way through when you're trying to deal with the government."

The White House officials hope that the changes will enhance people's relationships with the government. Online forms could also reduce fraud risks, while the administration takes steps to ensure that personal information is secure.

Why hasn't all of this happened earlier?

Officials said the pandemic caused increased calls to the IRS and other agencies. It also showed how the government could adjust and innovate despite closed offices and remote workers.

Even if government services improve, it remains unclear if that will pay off politically for Biden, whose efforts to steer the economy to the strongest growth since 1984 have been overshadowed by inflation.

Roughly a third of Americans called the economy "good" under the president's watch, down from 47% in June, according to a survey this month by AP-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research. The poll found that 48% approve of Biden, while 51% disapprove.

The AP Interview: Taliban seek ties with US, other ex-foes

By KATHY GANNON Associated Press

KABUL, Afghanistan (AP) — Afghanistan's new Taliban rulers are committed in principle to education and jobs for girls and women, a marked departure from their previous time in power, and seek the world's "mercy and compassion" to help millions of Afghans in desperate need, a top Taliban leader said in a rare interview.

Afghan Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi also told The Associated Press that the Taliban government wants good relations with all countries and has no issue with the United States. He urged Washington and other nations to release upward of \$10 billion in funds that were frozen when the Taliban took power Aug. 15, following a rapid military sweep across Afghanistan and the sudden, secret flight of U.S.-backed President Ashraf Ghani.

"Sanctions against Afghanistan would ... not have any benefit," Muttaqi said Sunday, speaking in his native Pashto during the interview in the sprawling pale brick Foreign Ministry building in the heart of the Afghan capital of Kabul.

"Making Afghanistan unstable or having a weak Afghan government is not in the interest of anyone," said Muttaqi, whose aides include employees of the previous government as well as those recruited from the ranks of the Taliban.

Muttaqi acknowledged the world's outrage at the Taliban-imposed limitations on girls' education and on women in the work force. In many parts of Afghanistan, female high school students between the grades of seven and 12 have not been permitted to go to school since the Taliban took over, and many female civil servants have been told to stay home. Taliban officials have said they need time to create gender-segregated arrangements in schools and work places that meet their severe interpretation of Islam.

When they first ruled from 1996-2001, the Taliban shocked the world by barring girls and women from schools and jobs, banning most entertainment and sports and occasionally carrying out executions in front of large crowds in sports stadiums.

But Muttaqi said the Taliban have changed since they last ruled.

"We have made progress in administration and in politics ... in interaction with the nation and the world. With each passing day we will gain more experience and make more progress," he said.

Muttaqi said that under the new Taliban government, girls are going to school through to Grade 12 in 10 of the country's 34 provinces, private schools and universities are operating unhindered and 100% of women who had previously worked in the health sector are back on the job. "This shows that we are committed in principle to women participation," he said.

He claimed that the Taliban have not targeted their opponents, instead having announced a general amnesty and providing some protection. Leaders of the previous government live without threat in Kabul, he said, though the majority have fled.

Last month, the international group Human Rights Watch published a report saying the Taliban summar-

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ily killed or forcibly disappeared more than 100 former police and intelligence officials in four provinces. However, there have been no reports of large-scale retribution.

Muttaqi charged the Afghan government that took power after the U.S-led coalition ousted the Taliban regime in 2001 carried out widespread revenge attacks against the Taliban. Hundreds disappeared or were killed, causing thousands to flee to the mountains, he said. The Taliban were ousted for harboring al Qaida and Osama bin Laden who masterminded the 9/11 terrorist attacks in the U.S.

Muttaqi insisted poverty and the dream of a better life — not fear — drove thousands of Afghans to rush the Kabul airport in mid-August in hopes of getting to America. The crush of people had generated searing images of men clinging to a departing American C-17 aircraft, while others fell to the ground as the wheels retracted.

He said the Taliban have made mistakes in their first months in power and that “we will work for more reforms which can benefit the nation.” He did not elaborate on the mistakes or possible reforms.

Muttaqi pushed back against comments by U.S. Marine Gen. Frank McKenzie who told the AP last week that the al-Qaida extremist group has grown slightly inside Afghanistan since U.S. forces left in late August. McKenzie is Washington’s top military commander in the Middle East.

In a February 2020 deal that spelled out the terms of a U.S. troop withdrawal, the Taliban had promised to fight terrorism and deny terrorist groups a safe haven.

Muttaqi said Sunday that the Taliban have kept that promise, along with a pledge not to attack U.S. and NATO forces during the final phase of the withdrawal which ended in late August.

“Unfortunately, there are (always) allegation against the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan , but there is no proof,” said Muttaqi. “If McKenzie has any proof, he should provide it. With confidence I can say that this is a baseless allegation.”

Meanwhile, Islamic State militants have stepped up attacks on Taliban patrols and religious minorities in the past four months. The IS affiliate in Afghanistan has targeted Shiite mosques in the provincial capitals of Kunduz and Kandahar, and carried out frequent attacks on Taliban vehicles.

Muttaqi however said the Taliban have gained the upper hand in recent weeks, saying there had not been a major attack in the last month. Washington’s ability to track IS activities in Afghanistan has been handicapped since the troop withdrawal.

Muttaqi said he does not envision cooperating with the U.S. in the battle against the Islamic State group. However, he did express hope that with time, “America will slowly, slowly change its policy toward Afghanistan” as it sees evidence that a Taliban-ruled country able to stand on its own is a benefit to America.

“My last point is to America, to the American nation: You are a great and big nation and you must have enough patience and have a big heart to dare to make policies on Afghanistan based on international rules and relegation, and to end the differences and make the distance between us shorter and choose good relations with Afghanistan.”

Hungary’s media, health experts seek more COVID-19 data

By JUSTIN SPIKE Associated Press

BUDAPEST, Hungary (AP) — As coronavirus infections and deaths soar in Hungary, the country’s journalists and public health professionals are demanding more detailed data on the outbreak from the government, with some experts saying that greater transparency might boost lagging vaccination rates.

Information is often hard to find in the country of over 9 million people, where infection rates have broken records and daily deaths per capita are among the highest in the world.

Although Hungary has secured vaccine doses from China and Russia in addition to those provided by the European Union, nearly a third of its adults still have not received a single shot. That hesitancy is something immunologist Andras Falus said can be partly attributed to official communications about the pandemic being “extremely poor, inconsistent and totally incapable of maintaining trust.”

“A significant proportion of the population no longer believes when they receive real data, or resign themselves to not paying attention to the data because they feel almost viscerally that it is inconsistent

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and unreliable," said Falus, professor emeritus at Semmelweis University in Budapest.

On Friday, the government's official coronavirus website reported 166 daily deaths, 6,884 new infections and 6,939 virus patients being treated in hospitals, 573 of whom were on ventilators.

While governments in many countries like the U.S. and others in the EU publish detailed online dashboards showing pandemic trends through interactive maps, graphs and other data, Hungary's website features neither geographic breakdowns of data nor visualizations showing rises or drops in indicators.

Illes Szurovecz of the Hungarian news website 444.hu says the information released by the conservative government of Prime Minister Viktor Orban does not provide a clear picture of how the outbreak is developing and that it is opaque and difficult to follow.

"There's a lot we don't know," Szurovecz said. "If there was more detailed data, people would be better able to judge how severe the pandemic is and how dangerous the virus is. ... Doctors from different parts of the country would be better able to compare their results and care could be improved."

In lieu of more comprehensive data from official channels, Szurovecz and his colleagues track what few numbers the government releases and create detailed data visualizations on trends in the pandemic. Without that, he said, "it would be virtually impossible to look back in Hungary today and see how the pandemic has gone."

Lacking official information on how hospitals are faring, many journalists have tried to report from inside COVID-19 wards to get a clearer picture.

But Hungary's government has barred journalists from entering medical facilities to report on the pandemic and prohibited medical staff from giving interviews, something journalists say has made it impossible to report on worsening conditions, creating a false picture of the situation's severity.

Experts and journalists have requested regional and municipal breakdowns of infections, deaths and vaccination rates, along with information from individual hospitals on how many patients are in ICUs and how many have been vaccinated and with which vaccines.

That kind of information could be used to formulate localized responses to outbreaks and determine where vaccination campaigns should focus their attention, said Falus, the immunologist.

"If there had been more data ... the responses would have been much more effective," he said. "We could have known which cities and which counties had particularly virulent infections."

Hungary's government defended its data practices, saying in an email that it was "setting an example by communicating on a daily basis epidemiological data."

"This is one of the reasons behind the cooperation of the population, successful disease control and the fact that we are the first in the EU in terms of booster vaccination," a government spokesperson wrote, adding that criticisms of its pandemic response were "politically motivated."

Yet last month, Hungary's own National Authority for Data Protection and Freedom of Information asked the government to release infection data at the municipal level to mayors, writing that both local leaders and the public "need to know the figures in order to make informed decisions about how to protect themselves against the pandemic."

Similar problems were reported earlier in the pandemic in the Czech Republic, where mayors said they lacked details about the numbers of infected people in their communities that harmed mitigation efforts like distributing personal protective equipment.

Those issues were ultimately remedied late last year.

Trust of official statistics also has been a problem in Russia, where some experts have criticized official data on COVID-19 infections and deaths provided by the state coronavirus task force, arguing the reported numbers were likely an undercount.

Data analysts have pointed to inconsistencies in Russia's virus statistics that they say suggest manipulation. While the task force reported over 9.9 million confirmed COVID-19 cases and 287,180 deaths as of Friday — the highest death toll in Europe so far — a report released last week by the state statistics agency Rosstat put the overall number of virus-linked deaths between April 2020 and October 2021 to over 537,000 — almost twice the official toll.

In Hungary, journalists and experts have often taken matters into their own hands in an effort to procure

more detailed information, despite efforts by the government to withhold data.

After the government denied a freedom of information request earlier this year, news site 444.hu filed a lawsuit to get detailed figures on daily hospitalizations, deaths and the number of those treated in hospital ICUs during previous surges.

A court in November ruled that the data had been unlawfully withheld, ordering its release.

Scott Griffen, deputy director of the Austria-based International Press Institute, said that his group "continues to condemn the Hungarian government's efforts to block media access to information on the pandemic."

Withholding such data was "fully in line with Orban's policy of controlling the message, restricting public debate, and hindering the ability of independent media to do their job," Griffen said.

Hungary's government has argued that virus testing is an ineffective means of controlling the pandemic, and that only mass vaccination can save lives. It also contends that the country's high official death rate is the result of broader criteria for attributing deaths to COVID-19.

During comments in Hungary's parliament this week, an opposition lawmaker asked Orban why the COVID-19 death rate in Hungary was so much higher than some of its neighbors.

"Anyone who says that more people die in Hungary than elsewhere is also saying that our doctors are doing a worse job," Orban said, "and I will defend them against your accusations."

Associated Press writers Dasha Litvinova in Moscow and Karel Janicek in Prague, Czech Republic, contributed.

Follow AP's pandemic coverage at <https://apnews.com/hub/coronavirus-pandemic>

After UAE law change, out-of-wedlock babies still in shadows

By ISABEL DEBRE Associated Press

SHARJAH, United Arab Emirates (AP) — Over a dozen unmarried women huddled in a jail cell south of Dubai last year, locked up for the crime of giving birth, when a guard entered and declared them free.

The incident, described by one of the women, was among the first concrete signs that the United Arab Emirates had decriminalized premarital sex in an overhaul of its Islamic penal code.

But a year later, these unwed mothers remain trapped in limbo, fighting to obtain birth certificates for babies born in the shadows.

A new law that comes into effect in two weeks still does not offer unmarried women a clear path to acquiring birth certificates for their babies. At the same time, the law criminalizes women lacking such documents.

Although unwed mothers no longer face jail after the UAE legalized premarital sex in November 2020, they now face a maze of red tape.

Obtaining birth certificates for their babies is a costly process that the country's poorest residents — foreign workers who clean offices, serve food and care for the children of other mothers — cannot afford. Expats outnumber locals by nearly nine to one in the Emirates.

"We were so full of hope," said Star, one of those released from Sharjah Central Jail in December 2020 with her 3-month-old daughter. "Then came trouble I didn't think I'd have the strength to get through."

Star gave only her first name for fear of reprisals. She and six other unmarried women, most of them Filipinas, described their legal battles to The Associated Press.

Before last year's law change, several had given birth at hospitals, where health authorities denied them birth certificates and called the police. Others withdrew to their shared apartments, scared and alone, to have their babies.

In the UAE, hospitals issue birth certificates only to married parents. Without the certificates, children are unable to receive medical care, attend school or travel. Their mothers, who lost work and residency during prosecution under the old law, become stranded. The number of undocumented children in the

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UAE is not known.

Lawyers say the obstacles stem from an enduring conservative mindset and lack of government coordination.

Some women even yearn for the previous punishment, typically one-year detention and deportation. While terrifying, it at least guaranteed a flight home and identity documents for their children.

"It has only gotten harder since the law changed," said 25-year-old mother Sitte Honey. "They won't take you to jail and they don't want you to give birth," she added, noting abortion is also forbidden. "We're stuck."

Dirar Belhoul Al Falasi, a member of the UAE's advisory Federal National Council, argued last year's decriminalization had an impact.

"Prior to this, there was nothing in my hand to legalize what they have," he told the AP. "But now, there is a law ... that we can help them with."

Under a new law that comes into force on Jan. 2, parents who fail to document their children face a minimum of two years in prison. It makes no reference to health authorities issuing birth certificates to single mothers. The law demands that parents marry or acquire travel documents and other paperwork to prove their children's identities, without detailing how.

That has stoked panic among unmarried mothers who fear further punishment.

Last year, as lawyers scrambled to understand the opaque legal code, women like Star walked out of jail across the country. Conditions at the facilities varied and in some, mothers were separated from their children.

Star said her daughter was taken from her during detention. She said 15 women shared a single bathroom, subsisted on only rice and bread and were let out 30 minutes each day for fresh air. Other women described police interrogations about their sexual history as deeply humiliating.

But after these women were freed, they still couldn't get the one thing they wanted most: identity documents.

Maya, a 36-year-old mother, turned herself into authorities in November 2020 when she heard it would help her get a birth certificate for her 1-year-old. After several torturous weeks in Dubai's Al Qusais Police Station, authorities became alerted to the law change and freed her. But they never granted legal status to her daughter, forcing her to ricochet from one government office to another in her quest.

"These massive fundamental changes are highly welcome, but so much still needs to catch up," said Ludmila Yamalova, managing partner of LYLAW, a firm taking on cases of unwed mothers.

"Emotionally and mentally, people are not prepared to accept the law as reality," she added, referring to health and law enforcement agencies.

Women continue to raise undocumented children in secret. Noraida Gamama, desperate to document her 3-year-old daughter, has plastered the door of her Sharjah apartment with signs warning her half-dozen roommates to check the peephole before answering to ensure it's not a government official.

Living on expired visas and struggling to feed infants on wisps of income, many can't afford court fees and lawyers' bills. It costs over \$350 to open a birth certificate petition case independently at Dubai's Family Court.

Ann, 36, works multiple part-time jobs, sleeping a few hours a night, to feed her undocumented 2-year-old girl. She recounted the agony of delivering her on the floor of a rented Dubai room. "All I want is to give her a name, to bring her back to the Philippines where she could live a better life," Ann said.

Still, a growing number of women are taking their cases to court, with mixed success. A clerk at one Dubai court said the system handled over 50 "baby cases" daily.

When Honey discovered she was pregnant with her boyfriend's child two years ago, she appealed to the Philippine Consulate to send her home. But while waiting for help that never came, baby Naya was born in her tiny apartment.

Lacking legal status after fleeing abusive employers who confiscated her passport, Honey has grown desperate to get out of Dubai. But authorities cannot repatriate her until Naya gets papers.

"This is a nightmare. No money, no visa, no rent, no plan," Honey said.

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To hasten her return, Honey's 47-year-old mother moved to Qatar as a housemaid, pulling together the money needed to open a case in Dubai last month. She's still waiting for her first hearing and trying to get a written acknowledgement of paternity from her ex-boyfriend.

The process requires an unwed mother to provide a ream of personal documents, take a DNA test and testify before a judge. If the judge approves, the mother may request her child's birth certificate.

Some, like Star, have persevered and made it through.

"That kind of joy is overwhelming, to know your daughter is not illegal anymore," Star said from her family's home in Davao City, Philippines. "It's like I'm breathing for the first time."

'A way we resist': Quilts honor victims of racial violence

By LEAH WILLINGHAM Associated Press/Report for America

JACKSON, Miss. (AP) — Long after he was killed, Myrtle Green-Burton wouldn't let anyone wear her 17-year-old son's high school track team jacket.

James Earl Green, an aspiring Olympic runner, was supposed to receive the green and yellow coat at his graduation in Mississippi half a century ago. It became a symbol of his life — and her loss, said his sister Gloria Green-McCray.

"She just kept it until it dry-rotted because that was all she really had to remember his dream — his vision," Green-McCray said of her mother.

A cross-stitch portrait of Green wearing his track jacket is now included with 115 others in a quilting project dedicated to memorializing lives lost to racial violence in the U.S. The two quilts are open for public viewing on weekdays through Dec. 17 at Jackson State University's Margaret Walker Center.

James Earl Green and 21-year-old Jackson State student Phillip Lafayette Gibbs were fatally shot on the Jackson State campus during a violent police response to a protest against racial injustice in 1970. Green was not a student at the historically Black university, but was walking through the campus on his way home from his grocery store job.

Twelve more people were injured. No officer ever faced criminal charges.

On a visit to Jackson State's campus last week to see the portrait, Green-McCray, now in her late 60s, recalled her older brother's ambitions of running in college and then in the Olympics. In the weeks leading up to his death, graduating and getting that track jacket were all he could talk about, she said.

"He didn't get the chance to wear it," she said, reaching out and running her finger across the tiny portrait.

The Stitch Their Names Memorial Project was started by Eugene, Oregon, high school math teacher Holli Johannes in July 2020 as so many around the U.S. reckoned with the country's legacy of systematic racism in the wake of George Floyd's murder at the hands of Minneapolis police. A group of 75 stitchers from across the U.S. and beyond worked together to construct the two quilts and a website containing biographies of each victim.

Johannes said they wanted to create a piece of art that would humanize the lives lost.

Each stitcher took a different, personalized approach: Some portraits are headshots, some full-body. They include different backdrops and details to inform viewers about the victims' lives.

Elijah McClain, 23, a massage therapist killed by police in Aurora, Colorado, in 2019, is pictured playing the violin next to a tabby cat. McClain loved animals and taught himself how to play the guitar and violin.

John Crawford III, 22, was killed by police inside a Beavercreek, Ohio, Walmart store in 2014. He is depicted with his two young sons.

Gibbs — killed in Jackson the same night as Green — is wearing a gray suit. He was studying to be a lawyer.

Ebony Lumumba, department chair and associate professor of English at Jackson State, said quilting has long been a powerful form of activism and of reclaiming history — especially for Black women in America, whose voices are often overlooked.

"It's a history that sometimes supersedes what can be written down," said Lumumba, who is also the city of Jackson's first lady. "That's significant for our community because we have been denied the privilege

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of being documented for so many centuries and so this is one of the ways that we resist that.”

At Jackson State, Green-McCray said she hadn't seen a quilt made since she was a little girl — the ones stitched by the women who raised her. She remembered how quilting was a form of storytelling for them. Her mother would piece together quilts using pieces of aprons, hats and dresses from her grandmother.

“Each little piece represents something — each piece had a significant meaning,” she said. “It was not just a piece of cloth, but it was a piece of history, a piece of that person.”

Green-McCray said the quilts would evoke memories, even of a time before she was born — a reminder of “the struggle of survival.”

“It's like you re-live it,” she said. “My mother came from a family of sharecroppers, old slaves, and I can remember the history.”

Green-McCray said if people don't learn about history, it repeats itself. When her brother was killed, everyone asked her, “Do you think this will ever happen again?”

“At that time, we was thinking it was going to soon end, and it will never happen again,” she said. “Now today, you see them saying ‘Black Lives Matter,’ and that really grieves my spirit. We've come a long way, but we still got such a long way to go.”

Leah Willingham 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.

Rain, snow fall as California braces for brunt of storm

By FELICIA FONSECA Associated Press

The Western U.S. is bracing for the brunt of a major winter storm expected to hit Monday, bringing travel headaches, the threat of localized flooding and some relief in an abnormally warm fall.

Light rain and snow fell in Northern California on Sunday, giving residents a taste of what's to come. The multiday storm could drop more than 8 feet (2.4 meters) of snow on the highest peaks and drench other parts of California as it pushes south and east before moving out midweek.

“This is a pretty widespread event,” said National Weather Service meteorologist Anna Wanless in Sacramento. “Most of California, if not all, will see some sort of rain and snow.”

The precipitation will bring at least temporary relief to the broader region that's been gripped by drought caused by climate change. The latest U.S. drought monitor shows parts of Montana, Oregon, California, Nevada and Utah in exceptional drought, which is the worst category.

Most reservoirs that deliver water to states, cities, tribes, farmers and utilities rely on melted snow in the springtime.

The storm this week is typical for this time of the year but notable because it's the first big snow that is expected to significantly affect travel with ice and snow on the roads, strong wind and limited visibility, Wanless said. Drivers on some mountainous passes on Sunday had to wrap their tires in chains.

Officials urged people to delay travel and stay indoors. Rain could cause minor flooding and rockslides, especially in areas that have been scarred by wildfires, according to the forecast. The San Bernardino County sheriff's department issued evacuation warnings for several areas, citing the potential for flooding. Los Angeles County fire officials urged residents to be aware of the potential for mud flows.

Forecasters also said strong winds accompanying the storm could lead to power outages. Karly Hernandez, a spokesperson for Pacific Gas & Electric, said the utility that covers much of California didn't have any major outages on Sunday. Crews and equipment are staged across the state to respond quickly if the power goes out, Hernandez said.

Rain fell intermittently across California on Sunday. Andy Naja-Riese, chief executive of the Agricultural Institute of Marin, said farmers markets carried on as usual in San Rafael and San Francisco amid light wind.

The markets are especially busy this time of year with farmers making jellies, jams and sauces for the holidays, he said. And, he said, rain always is needed in a parched state.

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"In many ways, it really is a blessing," Naja-Riese said.

Lichen Crommett, manager of the San Lorenzo Garden Center in Santa Cruz, California, said customers weren't deterred by a light sprinkling of rain Sunday morning.

"It's not like raincoat worthy just yet, but any second it could change," she said.

A second storm predicted to hit California midweek could deliver almost continuous snow, said Edan Weishahn of the weather service in Reno, which monitors an area straddling the Nevada state line. Donner Summit, one of the highest points on Interstate 80 and a major commerce commuter route, could have major travel disruptions or road closures, Weishahn said.

The weather follows a calm November that was unseasonably warm.

"With this storm coming in, it's going to be a wakeup call to a lot of folks," Weishahn said.

Vail Resorts' three Tahoe-area ski resorts opened with limited offerings over the weekend after crews worked to produce artificial snow. Spokeswoman Sara Roston said the resorts are looking forward to more of the real thing.

"We will assess once the storm comes in, but we do expect to open additional terrain following," she wrote in an email.

Meanwhile, the Sierra Avalanche Center warned heavy snow and strong winds on top of a weak snow-pack could cause large and destructive avalanches. One man died Saturday at a ski resort in the Pacific Northwest when he was caught in an avalanche that temporarily buried five others.

Associated Press writer Amy Taxin in Orange County, California, contributed to this story.

"Y'all pray for Mayfield": Town grieves in tornado aftermath

By CLAIRE GALOFARO AP National Writer

MAYFIELD, Ky. (AP) — Judy Burton's hands shivered as she gazed up at what had been her third-floor apartment. She could see her clothes still hanging in the closet, through the building's shredded walls. Across the street, her church was boarded up. A few blocks away, the spire was ripped away from the town's grand courthouse, its roof caved in. The restaurant where neighbors met for lunch, too, was lost in the rubble.

She clasped her hands together and tried to quiet their quivering. Burton and her dog had narrowly escaped as a tornado hit her town, part of an outbreak of twisters across the Midwest and South. Now, she stood among the grind of heavy machinery clearing the wreckage of landmarks, businesses and homes of Mayfield, population 10,000.

"It's gone. It's terrible, just terrible, I'm shaking," she said. "It's going to take me awhile to settle my nerves."

Burton can't imagine a single family here not mourning. Theirs is the sort of town where everyone is connected to everyone else. Mayfield was one of the worst-hit towns in the unusual mid-December spate of tornadoes, and Burton looked around at a disorienting jumble of boards and bricks and broken glass.

Hundreds of buildings have been reduced to nothing. Roofs are sheared off those that stand. Some streets are littered with snapped trees, clothes, chunks of insulation and blown-away Christmas decorations. The fire station is inoperable, most police cars destroyed.

At least eight people working at a Mayfield candle factory were killed, and eight more are missing. It's still unclear how many others in Mayfield died. Kentucky Gov. Andy Beshear had feared more than 100 dead statewide, but on Sunday afternoon he scaled back that estimate to as low as 50, with many at the candle factory accounted for.

Burton worries for her neighbor and her little dog. They're feared among the dead, as they were probably unable to escape as the walls collapsed around them.

Burton and others evacuated in the middle of the night. She harnessed her dog, grabbed a neighbor by the hand and herded them to the elevator toward the basement. About 15 people there cried, screamed and prayed for protection as the wind blew open locked doors.

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Down the hall, Johnny Shreve had been watching the storm approach from his window. Lightning crashed, and in that split second of brightness, he realized that their town would not be the same come morning: He saw an office building across the street disintegrate. Then he dove onto his kitchen floor as chunks of concrete pelted his body.

"It felt like everything in the world came down on me," he said.

He lay there for more than an hour, trying to dig himself out and shouting for his neighbors and his Shih Tzu, Buddy. Finally, Shreve broke through into the living room. There was Buddy, trying to scratch toward him from the other side.

He posted on Facebook that they were alive, and added: "Y'all pray for Mayfield."

"It blew my mind when the sun came up," Shreve said, when he and others returned over the weekend to salvage what they could and traded stories of survival in the parking lot. "I don't see how this town can recover. I hope we can, but we need a miracle."

In the nearby town of Wingo, more than 100 people took shelter at a church — babies, people in their 80s and 90s, family pets. Everyone has a story, a reason they have nowhere else to go.

Meagan Ralph, a schoolteacher volunteering to coordinate the shelter, pulled up an aerial photo of Mayfield, her hometown, on her phone. She zoomed in, seeking a landmark to orient herself.

"I can't recognize it, it's not recognizable," she said. "I can't even identify what I'm looking at, it's that bad."

But she has found hope at the shelter. Donations have poured in. Volunteers from surrounding counties came in droves. People from Mayfield take care of each other, she said.

As the news spread of the horrors at the candle factory on the night of the storm, hundreds of ordinary people arrived at the factory to help, braving slippery rubble until authorities told them to go home, said Stephen Boyken, who's a chaplain there. That spirit is part of the fabric of Mayfield, he said: "If you're off in a ditch, there's somebody going to stop by, probably three or four trucks try to get you out and help you."

By the time the sun came up, they were lined up at churches and school gymnasiums to give piles of clothes and coats, food and water.

"We will recover, absolutely," Ralph said. "We're small but mighty."

She looked around the shelter, and noted that the task before them is extraordinary, with hundreds of their neighbors now with nothing and nowhere to go.

Wanda Johnson, 90, ended up here after she was evacuated from the same apartment building where Burton escaped. Johnson's windows burst, and she clung to her doorframe, pleading: "Dear God, help me, please help me get out of here."

At the shelter with her son and granddaughter, she wonders what will become of them now.

"They tell me we don't have a town," Johnson said. "Everything's gone. It's just wiped away. It just flipped over our city."

"We don't know where we're going to go — we don't know what's left to go to."

White House group's annual Christmas ornament honors LBJ

By DARLENE SUPERVILLE Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Luci Baines Johnson recalls December 1967 as a hectic time in her father's White House.

Her sister Lynda, the eldest of President Lyndon B. Johnson's two children, was about to get married at the White House, and the president spent the days leading up to Christmas racking up miles on a last-minute trip to Australia, southeast Asia and Europe. He also looked forward to spending the holiday with his infant grandson, Patrick, Luci's child.

Those memories and more come rushing back when Luci Baines Johnson looks at this year's annual Christmas tree ornament from the White House Historical Association. It honors her father.

The holidays are a time for "remembering, remembering the people you love, trying to make sure you reach out to them," she told The Associated Press. "So to have the White House Historical Association

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remember the people my sister and I loved and say that they value them is a extraordinary gift to us.”

The 2021 official White House ornament — 41st in the series — honors President Johnson with its reproduction of a painting of the Blue Room tree the family had in December 1967. Johnson’s wife, Lady Bird, had commissioned the watercolor for that year’s White House Christmas card.

The back of the ornament features Johnson’s quote that “our mission is at once the oldest and the most basic of this country: to right wrong, to do justice, to serve man.”

Every year since 1981, when first lady Nancy Reagan first gave approval, the historical association has designed an ornament honoring a president or a key White House anniversary.

The association is working its way through all 46 presidents; Johnson was the 36th.

The 2022 official ornament will honor Richard Nixon, the 37th president, with a design set to be unveiled at his presidential library in Yorba Linda, California, on Presidents Day.

Ornament sales are a major source of money for the nonprofit, nonpartisan historical association, which was created in 1961 — 60 years ago — by first lady Jacqueline Kennedy to help pay for White House restoration and acquisition projects.

The ornaments have become collectibles, with about 1 million now sold annually, the association said. Sales figures were not provided.

Stewart McLaurin, president of the association, said it used to be that people in Washington would pop into the association’s gift shop near the White House to buy ornaments to give away as Christmas presents.

That still happens, he said. But with the reach of the internet, “now we get orders from literally all over the country and around the world with people buying them. And once you start giving them to someone, it’s really hard to stop. They always expect to get the one the next year.”

The White House is not involved in designing the ornaments, which since 1981 have been made by ChemArt, a veteran-owned company in Lincoln, Rhode Island.

So what happens when the association runs through every president? McLaurin speculated that the series would be reset to George Washington and start over with a new set of ornaments.

The ornaments that go on to become best-sellers depict either the White House or a Christmas tree. “Those have been the two icons that seem to be the most popular,” McLaurin said.

The 2019 White House Christmas ornament is one of those that depicts the White House, specifically the south side, to honor President Harry Truman. He added the Truman balcony to the top floor as part of a major renovation and expansion of the executive mansion during his presidency.

Clifton Truman Daniel, Truman’s oldest grandson, told the AP that his grandfather took some flak over the balcony addition. But it has become very popular with first families.

First lady Jill Biden said she sometimes hides behind a pillar on the balcony to watch her husband, President Joe Biden, come and go on the presidential helicopter. Johnson’s daughters, Luci Baines Johnson and Lynda Johnson Robb, recently joined Jill Biden to hang the ornament for their father at the White House.

Truman, of course, is known for more than a balcony. Among his accomplishments is a plan to aid the economic recovery of western Europe after World War II.

But as Daniel noted, “it’s very hard to put the Marshall Plan on an ornament.”

Associated Press deputy Washington bureau chief Jack Aresto and Associated Press video journalist Nathan Ellgren contributed to this report.

Potter trial enters second week with medical examiner on tap

By AMY FORLITI and STEVE KARNOWSKI Associated Press

MINNEAPOLIS (AP) — The trial of a Minnesota police officer charged in the shooting death of Daunte Wright opens its second week of testimony Monday, with a medical examiner expected to walk jurors through Wright’s autopsy.

Wright, 20, was slain April 11 after being pulled over by police in the Minneapolis suburb of Brooklyn Center for expired license plate tags and an air freshener hanging from his rearview mirror. Kim Potter,

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49, is charged with manslaughter.

Potter, a 26-year veteran, said she meant to draw her Taser to stop Wright after he pulled away and got back in his car as officers tried to arrest him on a warrant for a weapon charge. Potter is white and Wright was Black. His death, which came while Derek Chauvin was on trial in nearby Minneapolis in George Floyd's death, set off several nights of angry protests in Brooklyn Center.

Prosecutors spent the first week of testimony showing jurors police video of the traffic stop, in which an officer in training, Anthony Luckey, took the lead under Potter's guidance.

The video showed the critical moments where Wright pulled away as Luckey was on the verge of handcuffing him, followed by Potter shouting "I'll tase you!" and "Taser, Taser, Taser!" and then shooting him once with her handgun.

Jurors saw Potter falling to the ground and wailing immediately afterward, with other officers attempting to console her. She resigned two days later.

The defense has called the shooting a horrific mistake, but has also asserted that Potter would have been within her rights to use deadly force on Wright because he might have dragged a third officer, then-Sgt. Mychal Johnson, with his car.

Johnson testified Friday that he was holding Wright's right arm with both hands to try to handcuff him, but dropped Wright's arm when he heard Potter shout. Video appeared to show Johnson's hands still in the car when the shot was fired.

Prosecutors have argued that Potter had extensive Taser training that included multiple warnings about not confusing it with a handgun. One of them, Matthew Frank, noted that Johnson hadn't drawn either his Taser or gun.

The trial also has included extensive testimony and video from officers who hurried to the scene after Wright's car, moving away from the traffic stop, collided with an oncoming vehicle.

Prosecutors blamed Potter for not immediately radioing details of the shooting so that Wright might have gotten medical aid more quickly; it took about 8 1/2 minutes before officers, uncertain of what they were dealing with, pulled him from his crashed vehicle.

Defense attorney Paul Engh complained that prosecutors were showing too much video that had nothing to do with the shooting of Wright, and requested a mistrial. But prosecutors are seeking an aggravated sentence if they win conviction and have to show that Potter's actions endangered others. Judge Regina Chu dismissed the request.

The case is being heard by a mostly white jury.

State sentencing guidelines call for just over seven years in prison upon conviction of first-degree manslaughter and four years for second-degree, though prosecutors have said they plan to push for even longer sentences.

Associated Press writer Tammy Webber contributed from Fenton, Michigan.

Find the AP's full coverage of the Daunte Wright case: <https://apnews.com/hub/death-of-daunte-wright>

Tornado survivor: 'Not knowing is worse than knowing'

By BRUCE SCHREINER Associated Press

MAYFIELD, Ky. (AP) — Autumn Kirks said she and her boyfriend, Lannis Ward, had been dating for about a year and were saving money to buy a house. They were both working the night shift at the candle factory for extra money when the tornado struck.

Then Ward, described by Kirks as "a big teddy bear," disappeared — and all she could do was wait.

"Not knowing is worse than knowing right now," she said early Sunday as she stood outside His House Ministries, a nondescript prefabricated building on the edge of Mayfield where people have been told to go to wait for word about the missing.

Later in the day, she got the terrible news — that Ward had been killed in the storm.

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In the aftermath of the massive tornado that roared through the western Kentucky darkness early Saturday morning, the chances for good news seem to diminish by the hour.

Autumn Kirks brought a photo of her boyfriend to the recovery center and described his tattoo, scars and other features. She said the authorities asked her to bring back a glass or bath sponge or something that might have his DNA on it to potentially help identify him.

An unusual mid-December swarm of twisters across the Midwest and the South leveled entire communities and left dozens dead in five states. The death toll is expected to go higher in Kentucky.

In the terrible moments before the storm hit, Kirks had moved to a hallway in the innermost part of the building that housed Mayfield Consumer Products, where employees were working the night shift to crank out Christmas candles.

"They said, 'Duck and cover,'" she recalled. "I pulled my safety goggles down, jumped under the closest thing, and seconds later I looked to my left and instead of wall there was sky and lightning and just destruction everywhere."

The closest thing was a row of metal stands with nets across the top, used to store wax and fragrance buckets. Kirks said she and some other employees moved the buckets and took cover under the stands. She tried to keep an eye on Ward, but she is a team leader and had to make sure other co-workers were safe.

"I remember taking my eyes off of him for a second, and then he was gone," she said.

An eerie silence preceded the storm, Kirks said, "and then all of a sudden you hear just crumbling, and it's like the whole world is just falling down around you."

Kirks said she and three co-workers were trapped under a concrete wall, but that a co-worker lifted the wall to rescue them.

"I still wish I knew who it was that lifted that wall off of us," she said. "He was our superman that night."

Another woman entered the building weeping. To help those struggling to cope, a state trooper came in with teddy bears. A golden retriever was there to offer pet therapy.

Autumn Kirks brought a photo of her boyfriend to the recovery center and described his tattoo, scars and other features. She said the authorities asked her to bring back a glass or bath sponge or something that might have his DNA on it to potentially help identify him later.

She was headed home to look for something that would work.

Vicente Fernández, revered Mexican singer, dies at 81

By BERENICE BAUTISTA Associated Press

MEXICO CITY (AP) — Vicente Fernández, an iconic and beloved singer of regional Mexican music who was awarded three Grammys and nine Latin Grammys and inspired a new generation of performers, including his son Alejandro Fernández, died on Sunday. He was 81.

Fernández was known for hits such as "El Rey," and "Lástima que seas ajena," his command of the ranchera genre and his dark and elegant mariachi suits with their matching wide-brimmed sombreros.

His music attracted fans far beyond Mexico's borders. Songs like "Volver, Volver" and "Como Mexico no hay dos" were extremely popular among Mexican immigrant communities in the U.S. because of how they expressed the longing for the homeland.

"It was an honor and a great pride to share with everyone a great musical career and give everything for the audience," Fernández's family said on his official Instagram account. "Thank you for continuing to applaud, thank you for continuing to sing."

Fernández, known also by his nickname "Chente," died at 6:15 a.m. in a hospital in Jalisco state, his family said. In August, he had suffered a serious fall and had been hospitalized since then for that and other ailments.

Beginning early on Sunday, people began posting messages, many of them recalling the lyrics to one of the favorite mariachi requests at parties and restaurants that goes "I am still the king."

Music greats such as Gloria Estefan, Ricky Martin, Pitbull and Maluma took to social media to post heartfelt condolences, some citing how his music influenced them. Famous country singer George Strait said

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he was "one of my heroes."

"I am broken hearted. Don Chente has been an angel to me all my life," Ricky Martin said. "The only thing that gives me comfort at this moment, is that every time we saw each other I told him how important he was to me."

Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador also expressed his condolences, calling him "a symbol of the ranchera music."

On Sunday night, his widow, María del Refugio Abarca Villaseñor, along with his children, grandchildren and hundreds of relatives and friends said goodbye to Fernández at his favorite place, his ranch.

The earth of Los Tres Potrillos ranch on the outskirts of Guadalajara vibrated when his fans in the stands and mariachis on a stage covered with flowers bid goodbye the giant of Mexican music. The song "Mexico Lindo" opened the public funeral at Los Tres Potrillos. His iconic charro hat was perched on the coffin. His private burial was to take place on Monday.

The timing of his death was also highlighted by fans as Fernández often sang on Dec. 12 to mark the Catholic pilgrimage to the Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe in Mexico City, an event that attracts vast crowds. The commemoration was being held on Sunday after it was canceled last year because of the pandemic.

Vicente Fernández Gómez was born on February 17, 1940 in the town of Huentitán El Alto in the western state of Jalisco. He spent most of his childhood on the ranch of his father, Ramón Fernández, on the outskirts

The artist sold more than 50 million records and appeared in more than 30 films. In 1998, he was given a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame.

In April 2016, he said goodbye to the stage before about 85,000 people in Azteca Stadium in Mexico City. Spectators had traveled from northern Mexico as well as the United States, Colombia and other Latin American countries for the occasion.

Associated Press writer Adriana Gomez Licon contributed to this report from Miami.

Kentucky tornado toll in dozens; less than feared at factory

By BRUCE SCHREINER and DYLAN LOVAN Associated Press

MAYFIELD, Ky. (AP) — Workers on the night shift at Mayfield Consumer Products were in the middle of the holiday rush, cranking out candles, when a tornado closed in on the factory and the word went out: "Duck and cover."

Autumn Kirks pulled down her safety goggles and took shelter, tossing aside wax and fragrance buckets to make room. She glanced away from her boyfriend, Lannis Ward, and when she looked back, he was gone.

Gov. Andy Beshear initially said Saturday that only 40 of the 110 people working in the factory at the time were rescued, and that "it'll be a miracle if anybody else is found alive in it." But on Sunday, the candle company said that while eight were confirmed dead and eight remained missing, more than 90 others had been located.

Dozens of people in several Kentucky counties are still believed to have died in the storms, but Beshear, after saying Sunday morning the state's toll could exceed 100, said that afternoon it might be as low as 50.

"We are praying that maybe original estimates of those we have lost were wrong. If so, it's going to be pretty wonderful," the governor said.

Kentucky was the worst-hit state by far in an unusual mid-December swarm of twisters across the Midwest and the South that leveled entire communities and left at least 14 people dead in four other states.

At the candle factory, rescuers had to crawl over the dead to get to the living at a disaster scene that smelled like scented candles.

But by the time churchgoers gathered Sunday morning to pray for the lost, more than 24 hours had elapsed since anyone had been found alive in the wreckage. Instead, crews recovered pieces of peoples' lives — a backpack, a pair of shoes and a cellphone with 27 missed messages were among the items.

Layers of steel and cars 15 feet deep were on top of what used to be the factory roof, the governor said.

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"We're going to grieve together, we're going to dig out and clean up together, and we will rebuild and move forward together. We're going to get through this," Beshear said. "We're going to get through this together, because that is what we do."

Four twisters hit the state in all, including one with an extraordinarily long path of about 200 miles (322 kilometers), authorities said. The outbreak was all the more remarkable because it came at a time of year when cold weather normally limits tornadoes.

Warren County coroner Kevin Kirby said the death toll from the storms in an around Bowling Green grew by one on Sunday to 12.

"I've got towns that are gone, that are just, I mean gone. My dad's hometown — half of it isn't standing," Beshear said of Dawson Springs.

He said that going door to door in search of victims is out of the question in the hardest-hit areas: "There are no doors."

"We're going to have over 1,000 homes that are gone, just gone," the governor said.

With afternoon high temperatures forecast only in the 40s, tens of thousands of people were without power. About 300 National Guard members went house to house, checking on people and helping to remove debris. Cadaver dogs searched for victims.

Kirks said she and her boyfriend were about 10 feet apart in a hallway when someone said to take cover. Suddenly, she saw sky and lightning where a wall had been, and Ward had vanished.

"I remember taking my eyes off of him for a second, and then he was gone," she said.

Later, she got the terrible news — that Ward had been killed in the storm.

"It was indescribable," Pastor Joel Cauley said of the disaster scene. "It was almost like you were in a twilight zone. You could smell the aroma of candles, and you could hear the cries of people for help. Candle smells and all the sirens is not something I ever expected to experience at the same time."

The outbreak also killed at least six people in Illinois, where an Amazon distribution center in Edwardsville was hit; four in Tennessee; two in Arkansas, where a nursing home was destroyed and the governor said workers shielded residents with their own bodies; and two in Missouri.

Debris from destroyed buildings and shredded trees covered the ground in Mayfield, a city of about 10,000 in western Kentucky. Twisted sheet metal, downed power lines and wrecked vehicles lined the streets. Windows were blown out and roofs torn off the buildings that were still standing.

In the shadows of their crumpled church sanctuaries, two congregations in Mayfield came together on Sunday to pray for those who were lost. Members of First Christian Church and First Presbyterian Church met in a parking lot surrounded by rubble, piles of broken bricks and metal.

"Our little town will never be the same, but we're resilient," Laura McClendon said. "We'll get there, but it's going to take a long time."

Associated Press writers Kristin Hall and Claire Galofaro in Mayfield; Jay Reeves in Birmingham, Alabama; Seth Borenstein in Washington; and Travis Loller in Nashville, Tennessee, contributed to this report.

Photo from tornado-damaged home lands almost 130 miles away

By MIKE SCHNEIDER Associated Press

When Katie Posten walked outside Saturday morning to her car parked in her driveway, she saw something that looked like a note or receipt stuck to the windshield.

She grabbed it and saw it was a black and white photo of a woman in a striped sundress and headscarf holding a little boy in her lap. On the back, written in cursive, it said, "Gertie Swatzell & J.D. Swatzell 1942." A few hours later, Posten would discover that the photo had made quite a journey - almost 130 miles (209 kilometers) on the back of monstrous winds.

Posten had been tracking the tornadoes that hit the middle of the U.S. Friday night, killing dozens of people. They came close to where she lives in New Albany, Indiana, across the Ohio River from Louisville, Kentucky. So she figured it must be debris from someone's damaged home.

"Seeing the date, I realized that was likely from a home hit by a tornado. How else is it going to be

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there?" Posten said in a phone interview Sunday morning. "It's not a receipt. It's well-kept photo."

So, doing what any 21st century person would do, she posted an image of the photo on Facebook and Twitter and asked for help in finding its owners. She said she was hoping someone on social media would have a connection to the photo or share it with someone who had a connection.

Sure enough, that's what happened.

"A lot of people shared it on Facebook. Someone came across it who is friends with a man with the same last name, and they tagged him," said Posten, 30, who works for a tech company.

That man was Cole Swatzell, who commented that the photo belonged to family members in Dawson Springs, Kentucky, almost 130 miles (209 kilometers) away from New Albany, as the crow flies, and 167 miles (269 kilometers) away by car. Swatzell on Sunday didn't respond to a Facebook message seeking comment.

In Dawson Springs — a town of about 2,700 people 60 miles (97 kilometers) east of Paducah — homes were leveled, trees were splintered and search and rescue teams continued to scour the community for any survivors. Dozens of people across five states were killed.

The fact that the photo traveled almost 130 miles is "unusual but not that unusual," said John Snow, a meteorology professor at the University of Oklahoma.

In one documented case from the 1920s, paper debris traveled 230 miles from the Missouri Bootheel into southern Illinois. The paper debris rides winds, sometimes reaching heights of 30,000 to 40,000 feet above the ground, he said.

"It gets swirled up," Snow said. "The storm dissipates and then everything flutters down to the ground."

Posten wasn't alone in finding family photos and school pictures that had traveled dozens of miles in the tornadoes' paths. A Facebook group was set up after the storms so people could post photos and other items like an ultrasound image they had found deposited in their yards.

Posten plans to return the photo to the Swatzell family sometime this week.

"It's really remarkable, definitely one of those things, given all that has happened, that makes you consider how valuable things are — memories, family heirlooms, and those kinds of things," Posten said. "It shows you the power of social media for good. It was encouraging that immediately there were tons of replies from people, looking up ancestry records, and saying 'I know someone who knows someone and I'd like to help.'"

Follow Mike Schneider on Twitter at <https://twitter.com/MikeSchneiderAP>

Rain, snow fall as California braces for brunt of storm

By FELICIA FONSECA Associated Press

The Western U.S. is bracing for the brunt of a major winter storm expected to hit Monday, bringing travel headaches, the threat of localized flooding and some relief in an abnormally warm fall.

Light rain and snow fell in Northern California on Sunday, giving residents a taste of what's to come. The multiday storm could drop more than 8 feet (2.4 meters) of snow on the highest peaks and drench other parts of California as it pushes south and east before moving out midweek.

"This is a pretty widespread event," said National Weather Service meteorologist Anna Wanless in Sacramento. "Most of California, if not all, will see some sort of rain and snow."

The precipitation will bring at least temporary relief to the broader region that's been gripped by drought caused by climate change. The latest U.S. drought monitor shows parts of Montana, Oregon, California, Nevada and Utah in exceptional drought, which is the worst category.

Most reservoirs that deliver water to states, cities, tribes, farmers and utilities rely on melted snow in the springtime.

The storm this week is typical for this time of the year but notable because it's the first big snow that is expected to significantly affect travel with ice and snow on the roads, strong wind and limited visibility, Wanless said. Drivers on some mountainous passes on Sunday had to wrap their tires in chains.

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Officials urged people to delay travel and stay indoors. Rain could cause minor flooding and rockslides, especially in areas that have been scarred by wildfires, according to the forecast. The San Bernardino County sheriff's department issued evacuation warnings for several areas, citing the potential for flooding. Los Angeles County fire officials urged residents to be aware of the potential for mud flows.

Forecasters also said strong winds accompanying the storm could lead to power outages. Karly Hernandez, a spokesperson for Pacific Gas & Electric, said the utility that covers much of California didn't have any major outages on Sunday. Crews and equipment are staged across the state to respond quickly if the power goes out, Hernandez said.

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The markets are especially busy this time of year with farmers making jellies, jams and sauces for the holidays, he said. And, he said, rain always is needed in a parched state.

"In many ways, it really is a blessing," Naja-Riese said.

Lichen Crommett, manager of the San Lorenzo Garden Center in Santa Cruz, California, said customers weren't deterred by a light sprinkling of rain Sunday morning.

"It's not like raincoat worthy just yet, but any second it could change," she said.

A second storm predicted to hit California midweek could deliver almost continuous snow, said Edan Weishahn of the weather service in Reno, which monitors an area straddling the Nevada state line. Donner Summit, one of the highest points on Interstate 80 and a major commerce commuter route, could have major travel disruptions or road closures, Weishahn said.

The weather follows a calm November that was unseasonably warm.

"With this storm coming in, it's going to be a wakeup call to a lot of folks," Weishahn said.

Vail Resorts' three Tahoe-area ski resorts opened with limited offerings over the weekend after crews worked to produce artificial snow. Spokeswoman Sara Roston said the resorts are looking forward to more of the real thing.

"We will assess once the storm comes in, but we do expect to open additional terrain following," she wrote in an email.

Meanwhile, the Sierra Avalanche Center warned heavy snow and strong winds on top of a weak snowpack could cause large and destructive avalanches. One man died Saturday at a ski resort in the Pacific Northwest when he was caught in an avalanche that temporarily buried five others.

Associated Press writer Amy Taxin in Orange County, California, contributed to this story.

Crews search rubble after 6 die at Illinois Amazon facility

By SOPHIA TAREEN Associated Press

CHICAGO (AP) — Search efforts at an Amazon facility in Illinois where at least six people were killed in a tornado were expected to take several days, but authorities said they did not expect to find additional survivors.

The company has not said how many people were in the building not far from St. Louis when the tornado hit at 8:35 p.m. Friday — part of a swarm of twisters across the Midwest and the South that leveled entire communities. Authorities said they didn't have a full count of employees because it was during a shift change and there were several part-time employees.

Both sides of the warehouse used to prepare orders for delivery collapsed inward and the roof caved, according to Edwardsville Fire Chief James Whiteford. Authorities received reports of workers being trapped and the fire unit arrived within six minutes, Whiteford said. Police helped pull people from the rubble. While 45 employees survived, six people were killed and a seventh person was airlifted to a hospital.

Whiteford said crews would search the rubble for several days.

Madison County Coroner Stephen Nonn on Sunday identified the six people who were killed. Four were from Illinois: 26-year-old Austin J. McEwen of Edwardsville, 29-year-old Clayton Lynn Cope of Alton, 46-year-

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old Larry E. Virden of Collinsville and 62-year-old Kevin D. Dickey of Carlyle. Two others — 28-year-old Deandre S. Morrow and 34-year-old Etheria S. Hebb — were from St. Louis.

Cope's younger sister, Rachel Cope, said her brother had worked for Amazon for over a year and served in the Navy. He was also an avid motorcycle rider, lover of video games and his dog, Draco.

"He would go out of his way for anyone," she told The Associated Press in a written message.

Nonn's said Sunday there were no pending reports of missing people related to the building collapse.

"Search efforts continue to ensure that there are no additional victims," he said in a statement.

The damage to the building was extensive; the structure's steel support pillars were exposed after the walls and roof caved.

"These walls are made out of 11-inch thick concrete, and they're about 40 feet tall, so a lot of weight from that came down," Whiteford said at a Saturday news conference.

Employee Amanda Goss had just started her first week in a new job as an Amazon delivery driver when the tornado hit.

"As I look up, the corner of the building was shaking, and it comes down the garage area and then I felt the gates coming in behind me," Goss told KTVI-TV. "All I do is sit there in my van hoping it don't move."

The Amazon facility, among three in Edwardsville, is a 1.1 million square foot (102,193 square meter) "delivery station" that employs about 190 workers across several shifts, according to Amazon. The facility, which opened in July 2020, prepares orders for "last-mile delivery" to customers. Edwardsville is about 25 miles (40 kilometers) northeast of St. Louis.

"Our thoughts and prayers are with the victims, their loved ones, and everyone impacted by the tornado," Amazon spokesperson Kelly Nantel said in a statement. "We're continuing to support our employees and partners in the area."

Amazon said that when a site is made aware of a tornado warning, all employees are notified and directed to move to a shelter.

But company officials declined to answer specific questions about when employees were warned.

A union representing retail employees that has pushed to organize Amazon employees blasted the company for "dangerous labor practices" for having employees work during the severe weather.

"Time and time again Amazon puts its bottom line above the lives of its employees," Stuart Appelbaum, President of the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union Requiring, said in a statement. "Requiring workers to work through such a major tornado warning event as this was inexcusable."

Follow Sophia Tareen on Twitter: <https://twitter.com/sophiatareen>.

Spielberg 'West Side Story' debuts weakly with \$10.5M

By JAKE COYLE AP Film Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Despite critical acclaim and two years-worth of anticipation, Steven Spielberg's lavish "West Side Story" revival made little noise at the box office, debuting with \$10.5 million in ticket sales, according to studio estimates Sunday — a worrisome result for a movie industry struggling to recapture its finger-snapping rhythm.

A dazzling widescreen adaptation and Spielberg's first musical, "West Side Story" was one of the year's most eagerly awaited titles. With a script by Tony Kushner and Rita Moreno returning to her breakthrough film 60 years later, the \$100-million "West Side Story" epitomizes a grand-scale prestige film that Hollywood infrequently produces anymore. It hit theaters on a wave of glowing reviews and expectations that it could play a starring role in March's Academy Awards.

But "West Side Story" faced a challenging marketplace for both adult-driven releases and musicals. Audiences have steadily returned to multiplexes in the second year of the pandemic, but older moviegoers, who made up the bulk of ticket-buyers for Spielberg's latest, have been among the slowest to return.

Musicals, too, have struggled to catch on in theaters. Lin-Manuel Miranda's "In the Heights" launched with \$11 million in June but the Warner Bros. release simultaneously streamed on HBO Max. The critically

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panned "Dear Evan Hansen," from Universal, debuted with \$7.4 million in September.

But this was Spielberg. If anyone could reignite moviegoing, the thinking went, it was him. Surely, one of the movies' dazzling craftsmen, a director synonymous with box office, could spark a fuller revival in theaters. "West Side Story," too, is among the most beloved musicals. The 1961 film, directed by Jerome Robbins and Robert Wise, made \$43.7 million (or about \$400 million adjusted for inflation) and won 10 Oscars, including best picture.

"West Side Story" can still be expected to play well through the lucrative holiday corridor, during which younger-skewing films like "Spider-Man: No Way Home" (expected to next weekend become the first pandemic release to open with \$100 million or more domestically) and "Sing 2" will likely be the top draws. Film executives are hoping the spreading omicron variant of COVID-19 doesn't set the box office back just as Hollywood is nearing its most profitable period.

But the muted reception for "West Side Story" will concern the industry. Hopes had long been pinned on Spielberg, with his song-and-dance spectacular, to bring back some of the movies' mojo. Instead, little right now outside of Marvel releases is finding big audiences. Many moviegoers simply haven't returned yet.

"To draw moviegoers to adult dramas in huge numbers right now seems like a pretty heavy lift," said Paul Dergarabedian, senior media analyst for data firm Comscore. "That will wane over time, but it is concerning for filmmakers and studios."

"But I don't think this is the final act for 'West Side Story,'" added Dergarabedian. "A lot of people counted out 'The Greatest Showman.'"

That 2017 release launched with a modest \$8.8 million opening weekend before enjoying a rare, lengthy run that made it, with \$435 million worldwide, one of the highest grossing live-action musicals ever. During the pandemic, though, movies have faded quickly at the multiplex, and often been steered more quickly to streaming or home release.

Starring newcomer Rachel Zegler and Ansel Elgort as Maria and Tony, "West Side Story" took in \$4.4 million in 37 overseas territories. Because the film includes a transgender character, it was banned in Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Bahrain, Oman and Kuwait.

David A. Gross, who runs the movie consultancy Franchise Entertainment, called the opening "soft."

"If 'West Side Story' is going to be profitable, it will need to connect internationally as well domestically," Gross said in an email. "So far, the first European openings have been good, but this is going to be a challenge with moviegoing conditions as difficult as they are."

Spielberg's film was a long time coming. Its release was delayed a year by the pandemic. It was developed at 20th Century Fox, which was acquired by the Walt Disney Co. shortly before production began. Days before its Lincoln Center premiere, the musical's revered lyricist, Stephen Sondheim, died at the age of 91.

Second place for the weekend went to Disney's animated "Encanto," which held strongly in its third week, dropping only 27% from the previous weekend. It grossed \$9.6 from Friday to Sunday, bringing its cumulative total to \$71.3 million domestically and \$80.5 million internationally.

The weekend's only other new wide release — STX Films' college football drama "National Champions" — went largely unnoticed, pulling in \$300,000 in 1,197 theaters.

Estimated ticket sales for Friday through Sunday at U.S. and Canadian theaters, according to Comscore. Final domestic figures will be released Monday.

1. "West Side Story," \$10.5 million.
2. "Encanto," \$9.4 million.
3. "Ghostbusters: Afterlife," \$7.1 million.
4. "House of Gucci," \$4.1 million.
5. "Eternals," \$3.1 million.
6. "Resident Evil: Welcome to Raccoon City," \$1.7 million.
7. "Clifford the Big Red Dog," \$1.3 million.
8. "Christmas With the Chosen," \$1.3 million.
9. "Dune," \$857,000.

10. "Venom: Let There Be Carnage," \$850,000.

Follow AP Film Writer Jake Coyle on Twitter at: <http://twitter.com/jakecoyleAP>

South African president tests positive for COVID, mildly ill

By ANDREW MELDRUM Associated Press

JOHANNESBURG (AP) — South African President Cyril Ramaphosa is receiving treatment for mild COVID-19 symptoms after testing positive for the disease Sunday, his office said.

Ramaphosa started feeling unwell and a test confirmed COVID-19, a statement from the presidency announced.

He is self-isolating in Cape Town and is being monitored by the South African Military Health Service, the statement said. He has delegated all responsibilities to Deputy President David Mabuza for the next week.

Ramaphosa, 69, is fully vaccinated. The statement didn't say whether he had been infected with the omicron coronavirus variant.

Last week, Ramaphosa visited four West African countries. He and all members of his delegation were tested for COVID-19 in each of the countries during the trip. Some in the delegation tested positive in Nigeria and returned directly to South Africa. Throughout the rest of the trip, Ramaphosa and his delegation tested negative. Ramaphosa returned from Senegal on Dec. 8

Ramaphosa said his own infection serves as a caution to all people in South Africa to be vaccinated and remain vigilant against exposure, the statement said. Vaccination remains the best protection against severe illness and hospitalization, it said.

People in South Africa who have had contact with Ramaphosa on Sunday are advised to watch for symptoms or to have themselves tested, it said.

South Africa is currently battling a rapid resurgence driven by the omicron variant, health officials say.

The country recorded more than 18,000 new confirmed cases Sunday night. More than 70% of the cases are estimated to be from omicron, according to genetic sequencing surveys.

After a period of low transmission of about 200 new cases per day in early November, South Africa COVID-19 cases began rising dramatically. On Nov. 25, scientists in southern Africa confirmed the omicron variant, which has more than 50 mutations. Omicron appears to be highly transmissible and has quickly become dominant in the country. So far, the majority of cases have been relatively mild and the percentage of severe cases needing oxygen have been low, say doctors.

Follow AP's pandemic coverage at <https://apnews.com/hub/coronavirus-pandemic>

Boris Johnson: UK faces 'tidal wave' of omicron cases

By JILL LAWLESS Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — Prime Minister Boris Johnson warned Sunday that Britain faces a "tidal wave" of infections from the omicron coronavirus variant, and announced a huge increase in booster vaccinations to strengthen defenses against it.

In a televised statement, Johnson said everyone age 18 and older will be offered a third shot of vaccine by the end of this month in response to the omicron "emergency." The previous target was the end of January.

He said cases of the highly transmissible variant are doubling every two to three days in Britain, and "there is a tidal wave of omicron coming."

"And I'm afraid it is now clear that two doses of vaccine are simply not enough to give the level of protection we all need," Johnson said. "But the good news is that our scientists are confident that with a third dose — a booster dose — we can all bring our level of protection back up."

He announced a "national mission" to deliver booster vaccines, with pop-up vaccination centers and seven-day-a-week getting extra support from teams of military planners and thousands of volunteer vaccinators.

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Johnson's Dec. 31 target applies to England. The other parts of the U.K. — Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland — are also expected to speed up their vaccination campaigns.

The U.K. Health Security Agency says existing vaccines appear less effective in preventing symptomatic infections in people exposed to omicron, though preliminary data show that effectiveness appears to rise to between 70% and 75% after a third vaccine dose.

More than 80% of people age 12 and up in Britain have received two doses of vaccine, and 40% of adults have had three doses. Giving the rest a booster in the next three weeks will be a huge challenge, requiring almost 1 million doses delivered a day. Johnson acknowledged that many routine medical procedures would have to be postponed to meet the goal.

Johnson's announcement came hours after the government raised the country's official coronavirus threat level, warning the rapid spread of the omicron variant had pushed the U.K. into risky territory.

The chief medical officers of England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland said the 10f the highly transmissible new strain "adds additional and rapidly increasing risk to the public and health care services" at a time when COVID-19 is already widespread. They recommended raising the alert level from 3 to 4 on a 5-point scale. The top level, 5, indicates authorities think the health care system is about to be overwhelmed.

The doctors said early evidence shows omicron is spreading much faster than the currently dominant delta variant, and that vaccines offer less protection against it. British officials say omicron is likely to replace delta as the dominant strain in the U.K. within days.

"Data on severity will become clearer over the coming weeks but hospitalizations from omicron are already occurring and these are likely to increase rapidly," they said.

Concerns about the new variant led Johnson's Conservative government to reintroduce restrictions that were lifted almost six months ago. Masks must be worn in most indoor settings, COVID-19 certificates must be shown to enter nightclubs and people are being urged to work from home if possible.

Many scientists say that's unlikely to be enough, however, and are calling for tougher measures, which the government so far has resisted.

Scientists in South Africa, where omicron was first identified, say they see signs it may cause less severe disease than delta, but caution that it is too soon to be certain.

Follow AP's pandemic coverage at <https://apnews.com/hub/coronavirus-pandemic>

Verstappen wins 1st F1 title with last lap pass of Hamilton

By JENNA FRYER AP Auto Racing Writer

ABU DHABI, United Arab Emirates (AP) — The most dramatic Formula One season in years should have ended with Max Verstappen's championship-deciding pass of Lewis Hamilton on the final lap of the Abu Dhabi Grand Prix.

The conclusion instead came nearly five hours after Verstappen became the first Dutch champion in F1 history, when the FIA denied a pair of protests lodged by Mercedes over the controversial finish of Sunday's race.

But the messy affair still isn't over: Mercedes filed for reconsideration to the International Court of Appeal, turning in the paperwork as Hamilton left Yas Marina Circuit without commenting.

"Not much really to say about that. I think it also sums up a little bit the season," Verstappen said hours earlier as the FIA heard Mercedes' two protests.

Hamilton had a record eighth championship ripped away with five laps remaining when a crash by Nicholas Latifi triggered the safety car and gave race director Michael Masi a decision. The season-ending race and championship could be decided under yellow, or, the track could be cleaned for one final lap of racing.

Hamilton had been on cruise control and dominated Sunday after surging past pole-sitter Verstappen at the start. He led 51 of the 58 laps and was minutes away from breaking a tie with Michael Schumacher for an eighth title that would strengthen his case as best in F1 history.

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The decision by Masi to go green with a lap to go allowed Verstappen to pass Hamilton in turn five — Hamilton got a good look at the lead in turn nine but couldn't complete the move — in a stunning conclusion to a title fight that will go down as one of the best ever.

Verstappen and Hamilton arrived in Abu Dhabi tied in the standings after 21 races across four continents, the first time since 1974 the contenders were level ahead of the finale. The rivals went wheel-to-wheel all season, crashing three times with Verstappen sent to the hospital after a collision at Silverstone.

It made for a bitter feud between Mercedes and Red Bull that intensified this high-stakes and sometimes chaotic title fight. It was compelling action every week, on-and-off track drama likened to the epic championship battles of James Hunt and Niki Lauda in 1976, and Ayrton Senna and Alain Prost in 1990.

Hamilton, winner of three straight races coming into the finale to even the fight, had this one in hand and knew it until the Latifi crash. Whatever Hamilton said over his radio when Latifi brought out the safety car was replayed only as one long bleep to cover his expletives.

Masi controversially settled to resume racing with one final lap — the only chance for Red Bull, which lobbied to go back to green. Verstappen chased Hamilton through the first four turns, made his pass in five and at last achieved his childhood dream.

Verstappen and Red Bull celebrated in a champagne soak, he received hugs from his fellow competitors — including Hamilton and Hamilton's father — and made his way to the DJ stand to jump wildly up and down to the music. The "Orange Army" of Dutch fans erupted in joy and fired off their traditional orange flares. The fans also chanted Latifi's name in appreciation as they exited the circuit.

"My goal when I was little was to become a Formula One driver and to go for wins, to be on the podium," said Verstappen. "When they play the national anthem, you want it to be yours, and when you stand here and they tell you that you are the world champion, it's something incredible and special."

And that was how this gripping season ended, with the more dominant team atop the final podium.

Verstappen's 10 victories this year equaled the number of wins scored over his first six seasons in F1, and he led an F1-high 652 of the 1,211 laps while scoring 18 podium finishes.

But he'd been criticized for aggressive driving with Hamilton himself saying Verstappen was over the edge. Verstappen had complained all weekend he's been treated unfairly by the race stewards, who he believed held him to a higher standard than other drivers.

He repeated that he wanted race control to play no role in the finale, but when Masi did, it went in Verstappen's favor.

"I think (the track) was clear, so why would you run it out behind the safety car?" Verstappen said. "When everything is clear, you have to release the track, so I think that's a fair point from the race director. Of course, now it works for me. But it also works against me, I know that."

Hamilton did not participate in the post-race news conference with Verstappen and third-place finisher Carlos Sainz. He did one interview before the victory podium and congratulated Verstappen and Red Bull.

Hamilton, who turns 37 next month, used a late season surge to knock all 19 points off Verstappen's lead in the standings. But his eight wins this season are the fewest for Hamilton since 2013, when he only won once and finished fourth in the standings.

He praised the effort of Mercedes.

"It's been the most difficult of seasons. I'm so proud of them, so grateful to be on the journey with them. We gave it absolutely everything, we never gave up and that's the most important thing," Hamilton said. "I've been feeling great in the car this past couple of months, particularly at the end. But if I'm honest, we're still in the pandemic and I just wish everyone to stay safe and have a good Christmas with their families, and we'll see about next year."

Red Bull won its first F1 title since 2013; Mercedes had won every championship since.

The Mercedes mood was sour and Hamilton at first sat motionless in his car for several moments. The defeat ended his reign of four consecutive titles, and Mercedes boss Toto Wolff was incredulous on the radio as he demanded to Masi "the last lap be reinstated."

"Toto, it's called a motor race," Masi tersely replied. "We went car racing."

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Hamilton received a long hug from his father, who then went to the Red Bull garage and hugged both Verstappen and Verstappen's father. Jos Verstappen was himself a former F1 driver and raised his 24-year-old son to become a world champion.

It took Verstappen seven seasons to make it to the top — he was the youngest driver in series history when he debuted at age 17, and the youngest winner when he won the next season at 18 — and he savored it with "Jos The Boss." His father had not even made it to congratulate his son before he'd pulled on a championship sweatshirt.

Jos Verstappen, a one-time teammate of Schumacher, was winless in 107 races over eight seasons.

"With my dad, traveling through all of Europe, for that one goal to be in the Formula One, to hope that you can win a race and hear your national anthem, and then of course the ultimate goal is the world championship, which is very hard to achieve," said Verstappen.

Mission accomplished and Red Bull celebrated by playing "We are the Champions" in its garage.

More AP auto racing: <https://apnews.com/hub/auto-racing> and https://twitter.com/AP_Sports

Fox anchor Chris Wallace makes his own news with move to CNN

By DAVID BAUDER AP Media Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Veteran anchor Chris Wallace has left Fox News after 18 years for CNN, dealing a significant blow to Fox's news operation at a time that it has been overshadowed by the network's opinion side.

Wallace delivered the surprising news that he was leaving at the end of the "Fox News Sunday" show he moderates, and within two hours CNN announced he was joining its new streaming service as an anchor. CNN+ is expected to debut in early 2022.

"It is the last time, and I say this with real sadness, we will meet like this," Wallace, who is 74, said on his show, which airs on the Fox network and is later rerun on Fox News Channel. "Eighteen years ago, the bosses here at Fox promised me they would never interfere with a guest I booked or a question I asked. And they kept that promise."

Wallace was a veteran broadcast network newsmen, working at both ABC and NBC News, before the late Roger Ailes lured him to Fox with the promise of his own Sunday show. Methodical and never showy — in contrast to his father Mike, the legendary "60 Minutes" reporter — Chris Wallace was known for his willingness to ask hard questions of all guests no matter their politics.

He was the first Fox News personality to moderate a presidential debate, doing it in 2016 and 2020. The debate he moderated last year went off the rails when then-President Donald Trump repeatedly interrupted Democratic challenger Joe Biden.

"He is the most tenacious interviewer in the television business, based on intense preparation and plain old persistence," said Howard Kurtz, host of Fox's "Media Buzz." "He has the kind of seasoned judgment that only comes from so many years of covering political issues and he may be the best debate moderator ever."

Kurtz said it was "a major loss for Fox News, no question about it."

Wallace generally co-existed with Fox's opinion side and infrequently took them on publicly, although in 2017 he said it was "bad form" when opinion hosts bashed the media.

But he had grown privately frustrated with the overall tenor at Fox, where conservative opinion hosts have been elevated and amplified, particularly after the network's ratings took a brief hit following the 2020 election. The network ousted two news executives involved in the controversial — but correct — Election Night declaration that Biden had won in Arizona, a call that infuriated Republican Trump.

Wallace had expressed his concern about the strident opinion programming to Fox executives multiple times, including recently after Tucker Carlson's documentary on the Jan. 6 Capitol insurrection, "Patriot Purge," aired on Fox's streaming service. Two Fox News contributors, Jonah Goldberg and Stephen Hayes, cited that program in choosing to quit the network.

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Wallace was one of a prominent triumvirate of straight-news anchors at Fox who offered a contrast to popular opinion hosts such as Carlson and Sean Hannity. Shepard Smith left in 2019 and is now doing a news show at CNBC. Bret Baier remains at Fox as host of a Washington-based evening news program.

His track record had given Wallace a large measure of independence at Fox, despite the network's overall tilt. "I have been free to report to the best of my ability, to cover the stories I think are important, to hold our country's leaders to account," he said on Sunday. "It's been a great ride."

His announcement came as a surprise; even guests on his show Sunday hadn't been tipped off they were seeing his finale.

In contrast to when Smith left, Wallace was coming to the end of his contract with Fox. But he turned down an offer for a multiyear extension and pay raise to leave for CNN.

"We are extremely proud of our journalism and the stellar team that Chris Wallace was a part of for 18 years," Fox said on Sunday. "The legacy of 'Fox News Sunday' will continue."

Until a successor is named, Fox said Wallace will be replaced by a rotating series of guest anchors, including Baier, John Roberts, Shannon Bream, Martha MacCallum, Jennifer Griffin, Neil Cavuto, Dana Perino and Bill Hemmer.

Wallace said that he wanted to "try something new, to go beyond politics to all the things I'm interested in."

In CNN's announcement, he said, "I look forward to the new freedom and flexibility streaming affords in interviewing major figures across the news landscape — and finding new ways to tell stories."

CNN said more details about Wallace's new role will be forthcoming. He's the biggest name among the hires at CNN+, which has also brought on former NBC News anchor Kasie Hunt and business journalist Scott Galloway.

Inflation is painfully high, but some relief may be coming

By STAN CHOE and CATHY BUSSEWITZ AP Business Writers

NEW YORK (AP) — Inflation is painfully high, but this hopefully is close to as bad as it gets.

Consumer prices rose 6.8% for the 12 months ending in November, a 39-year high. Many economists expect inflation to remain near this level a few more months but to then moderate through 2022 for a variety of reasons. And they don't see a repeat of the 1970s or early 1980s, when inflation ran above 10% for frighteningly long stretches.

Households could even see relief in some areas within weeks. Prices have dropped on global markets for crude oil and natural gas, which is filtering into lower prices at the pump and for home heating. That should keep inflation somewhat in check, even if prices keep rising elsewhere in the economy.

To be sure, economists say inflation will likely stay higher than it was before the pandemic, even after it eases through 2022. More often than not in the last 10 years, inflation was below 2%, and it even scraped below zero during parts of 2015. The bigger danger then was too-low inflation, which can also lead to a weak economy.

"This is not going to be an easy fix," said Nela Richardson, chief economist at ADP. "Just because inflation will eventually moderate doesn't mean that prices are going to go down. They're up. We're just lowering the rate of change, not the level of prices."

Russell Price, chief economist at Ameriprise, expects inflation to peak at 7.1% in December and January, for example. After that, he expects the inflation rate to fall toward 4% by the summer and below 3% by the end of the year, but to stay above 2% through 2023.

One reason for the moderation, he said, is improving supply chains. They had become ensnarled when the global economy suddenly returned to life following its brief shutdown, and economists hope increasing availability of everything from computer chips to shipping containers will help inflation to ease.

"It's in no one's interests to have the supply chain as disruptive as it has been," Price said.

Then there's the Federal Reserve. Wall Street expects the Fed to say this upcoming week that it will accelerate its exit from a monthly bond-buying program meant to support the economy. That would open

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the door for it to begin raising short-term interest rates.

Both the bond buying and low rates are intended to spur borrowing, which gets people and companies to buy more things. That can help drive inflation higher, as demand outstrips supply.

The U.S. government will also potentially offer less aid to households in 2022, whether that's through child tax credit payments or beefed-up unemployment benefits. That could also lead to fewer purchases by Americans, further lessening the pressure on inflation.

Most immediately, Americans should see swings in inflation via energy costs.

A gallon of regular gasoline has fallen about 2.4% over the last month, to a little less than \$3.35 per gallon on Friday, according to AAA. That's progress, though drivers are still paying far higher prices than last year, when a gallon of regular was only \$2.16.

The U.S. Energy Information Administration forecasts gasoline will drop again to an average of \$3.13 in December and to \$2.88 for all of 2022 after averaging \$3.39 last month, the highest since 2014.

"That should provide some relief for consumers when they go to fill up their tanks. Now how much relief? That's really hard to tell," said Andrew Gross, spokesman for AAA. "It's really hard to gauge what sort of world events are happening. And it really doesn't take much to spike oil prices."

Oil prices have dropped for a number of reasons. On one side, nations have made agreements to boost oil supplies. On the other, the omicron variant of the coronavirus dented expectations for demand on worries it would cause lockdowns and canceled travel. Benchmark U.S. crude oil has fallen nearly 15% since the start of November.

Home heating costs are also likely to be lower than projected, although bills will still likely be higher than last year, as prices for natural gas fall with other fuels on global markets.

The average cost to heat a home this winter will be an estimated \$972, according to Mark Wolfe, executive director of the National Energy Assistance Directors Association. That's less than the \$1,056 his group was projecting in October, but still higher than the \$888 consumers paid to heat their homes last year.

"This is a consumer beware situation," Wolfe said. "Don't get your hopes up that prices are going to come down to last year's levels."

Perhaps the biggest wildcard in where inflation is heading is what happens with workers' wages.

Workers across the country are fighting for higher pay. Deere & Co. employees recently won a deal that will deliver 10% raises immediately, for example.

Usually, companies will try to pass such increases along to their customers through higher prices. And with the unemployment rate low and companies chasing after workers — there were nearly 1.5 job openings at the end of October for every person on unemployment — the pressure may be building for faster wage gains.

On top of that is whether the spike already seen in inflation will scare U.S. households into speeding up purchases to get ahead of any further price increases. That could create its own feedback loop, driving prices higher.

"We've seen a real awareness on Main Street that prices have gone up," ADP's Richardson said.

"It's a concern because when you're battling inflation on multiple fronts — it's not just the supply chain, it's not just the labor market shortages, but now you've got the consumer who's in the mix — it just increases the difficulty in bringing inflation under control."

As violence in Haiti spikes, aid groups struggle to help

By DÁNICA COTO and EVENS SANON Associated Press

PORT-AU-PRINCE, Haiti (AP) — A spike in violence has deepened hunger and poverty in Haiti while hindering the very aid organizations combating those problems in a country whose government struggles to provide basic services.

Few relief workers are willing to speak on the record about the cuts — perhaps worried about drawing attention following the October kidnapping of 17 people from Ohio-based Christian Aid Ministries — 12 of whom remain held hostage.

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But several confirmed, without giving details, that they had sent some staff out of the country and have been forced to temporarily cut back aid operations.

Gang-related kidnappings and shootings have prevented aid groups from visiting parts of the capital, Port-au-Prince, and beyond where they had previously distributed food, water and other basic goods.

A severe shortage of fuel also has kept agencies from operating at full capacity.

"It's just getting worse in every way possible," said Margaret Lubin, Haiti director for CORE, a U.S. nonprofit organization.

"You see the situation deteriorating day after day, impacting life at every level," Lubin said, adding that aid organizations have gone into "survival mode."

Few places in the world are so dependent on aid groups as Haiti, a nation frequently called "the republic of NGOs." Billions of dollars in aid have been poured through hundreds – by some estimates several thousand – of aid groups even as the government has grown steadily weaker and less effective.

Shortly after the July 7 assassination of the president, Prime Minister Ariel Henry assumed leadership of a country still trying to regain political stability. Nearly all the seats in parliament are vacant and there's no firm date yet for long-delayed elections, though Henry said he expects them early next year.

Less than a dozen elected officials are currently representing a country of more than 11 million people.

And in the streets, the gangs hold power.

More than 460 kidnappings have been reported by Haiti's National Police so far this year, more than double what was reported last year, according to the United Nations Integrated Office in Haiti.

The agency said Haitians are "living in hell under the yoke of armed gangs. Rapes, murders, thefts, armed attacks, kidnappings continue to be committed daily, on populations often left to fend for themselves in disadvantaged and marginalized neighborhoods of Port-au-Prince and beyond."

The agency added: "Without being able to access these areas under the control of gangs, we are far from knowing and measuring the extent of these abuses and what Haitians really experience on a daily basis..."

"Humanitarian actors have also limited their interventions due to the security risks to their staff and access challenges," it added.

Large organizations like the U.N. World Food Program have found alternate ways to help people, such as using barges rather than vulnerable trucks to ferry goods from the capital to Haiti's southern region. But smaller organizations don't always have such means.

World Vision United States, which is based in Federal Way, Washington and helps children in Haiti, told The Associated Press that it has relocated at least 11 of 320 employees as a result of the violence and is taking undisclosed security measures for other staff.

Water Mission, a South Carolina nonprofit, said it's exploring relocating to other areas in Haiti and it said kidnappings and overall violence have forced it to change staffing plans to ensure people's safety.

"These issues sometimes result in slower progress in our ongoing safe water project work," the organization said. "However, we continue with our work despite any temporary interruptions that arise."

The difficulties come at a time of growing pleas for help. A magnitude 7.2 earthquake in mid-August destroyed tens of thousands of homes and killed more than 2,200 people. The country also is struggling to cope with the recent arrival of more than 12,000 deported Haitians, the majority from the U.S.

In addition, more than 20,000 people have fled their homes due to gang violence this year, according to UNICEF, with many living in temporary shelters amid extremely unsanitary conditions and the pandemic. The U.N. agency estimates it needs \$97 million to help 1 million people in Haiti next year.

Among them is Martin Jean Junior, a 50-year-old who used to resell scrap metal. He said his house was set on fire in mid-June amid fighting between police and gangs.

"I have been in the streets since," he said as he lay on a blue sheet he had spread on the hard floor of a Port-au-Prince school temporarily converted into a shelter.

Things could soon get even worse: A prominent gang leader warned Haitians this week to avoid the embattled community of Martissant because rival gangs will fight each other in upcoming days.

"Even the dogs and the rats won't be saved. Anything that moves, trucks, motorcycles, people, will be considered allies of Ti-Bois," the gang leader known as "Izo" said in a video, referring to a rival gang.

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"Martissant is declared a combat zone, and those who ignore this warning will pay with their life."

Most already avoid the area for fear of being kidnapped, shot or having cargo looted. That has largely cut off the country's southern peninsula because the main highway runs through the neighborhood.

Those recently killed by crossfire in Martissant include a nurse, a 7-year-old girl and at least five passengers aboard a public bus. The violence forced the aid group Doctors Without Borders in August to close an emergency clinic that had served the community for 15 years.

Liman Pierre, a 40-year-old mechanic, said he recently had to cross Martissant to go to work and saw four dead people, including two elderly neighbors and the motorcycle driver transporting them.

"The criminals kill with impunity and abandon the dead to the dogs," he said. "Those who aren't devoured by dogs are set on fire, pure and simple. This can't be."

For now, Pierre is sleeping on the streets of Port-au-Prince because he fears having to cross Martissant to get back home: "You don't even get the opportunity to visit parents and friends who are in difficulty."

"The state doesn't exist," Pierre said. "Criminals have been in power for over six months. It is December, and we do not see the light at the end of the tunnel."

Coto reported from San Juan, Puerto Rico.

Anne Rice, who breathed new life into vampires, dies at 80

By JAKE COYLE AP Film Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Anne Rice, the novelist whose lush, best-selling gothic tales, including "Interview With a Vampire," reinvented the blood-drinking immortals as tragic antiheroes, has died. She was 80.

Rice died late Saturday due to complications from a stroke, her son Christopher Rice announced on her Facebook page and his Twitter page.

"As a writer, she taught me to defy genre boundaries and surrender to my obsessive passions," Christopher Rice, also an author, wrote. "In her final hours, I sat beside her hospital bed in awe of her accomplishments and her courage."

Rice's 1976 novel "Interview With the Vampire" was later adapted, with a script by Rice, into the 1994 movie directed by Neil Jordan and starring Tom Cruise and Brad Pitt. It's also set to be adapted again in an upcoming TV series on AMC and AMC+ set to premiere next year.

"Interview With the Vampire," in which reporter Daniel Molloy interviews Louis de Pointe du Lac, was Rice's first novel but over the next five decades, she would write more than 30 books and sell more than 150 million copies worldwide. Thirteen of those were part of the "Vampire Chronicles" begun with her 1976 debut. Long before "Twilight" or "True Blood," Rice introduced sumptuous romance, female sexuality and queerness — many took "Interview With the Vampire" as an allegory for homosexuality — to the supernatural genre.

"I wrote novels about people who are shut out life for various reasons," Rice wrote in her 2008 memoir "Called Out of Darkness: A Spiritual Confession." "This became a great theme of my novels — how one suffers as an outcast, how one is shut out of various levels of meaning and, ultimately, out of human life itself."

Born Howard Allen Frances O'Brien in 1941, she was raised in New Orleans, where many of her novels were set. Her father worked for the postal service but made sculptures and wrote fiction on the side. Her older sister, Alice Borchardt, also wrote fantasy and horror fiction. Rice's mother died when Rice was 15.

Raised in an Irish Catholic family, Rice initially imagined herself becoming a priest (before she realized women weren't allowed) or a nun. Rice often wrote about her fluctuating spiritual journey. In 2010, she announced that she was no longer Christian, saying "I refuse to be anti-gay. I refuse to be anti-feminist. I refuse to be anti-artificial birth control."

"I believed for a long time that the differences, the quarrels among Christians didn't matter a lot for the individual, that you live your life and stay out of it. But then I began to realize that it wasn't an easy thing to do," Rice told The Associated Press then. "I came to the conclusion that if I didn't make this declaration, I was going to lose my mind."

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Rice married the poet Stan Rice, who died in 2002, in 1961. They lived amid the bohemian scene of Haight-Ashbury in 1960s San Francisco where Rice described herself as “a square,” typing away and studying writing at San Francisco State University while everyone else partied. Together they had two children: Christopher and Michelle, who died of leukemia at 5 in 1972.

It was while grieving Michelle’s death that Rice wrote “Interview With the Vampire,” turning one of her short stories into a book. Rice traced her fascination with vampires back to the 1934 film, “Dracula’s Daughter,” which she saw as a young girl.

“I never forgot that film,” Rice told the Daily Beast in 2016. “That was always my impression of what vampires were: earthlings with heightened sensibility and a doomed appreciation of life.”

Though Rice had initially struggled to get it published, “Interview With a Vampire” was a massive hit, particularly in paperback. She didn’t immediately extend the story, following it up with a pair of historical novels and three erotic novels penned under the pseudonym A. N. Roquelaure. But in 1985, she published “The Vampire Lestat,” about the “Interview With a Vampire” character she would continually return to, up to 2018’s “Blood Communion: A Tale of Prince Lestat.”

In Rice’s “Vampire Chronicles,” some critics saw only cheap eroticism. But others — including millions of readers — saw the most consequential interpretation of vampires since Bram Stoker.

“Let me suggest one reason why the books found a mass audience. They were written by someone whose auditory and visual experiences shaped the prose,” Rice wrote in her memoir. “I am a terrible reader. But my mind is filled with these auditory and visual lessons and, powered by them, I can write about five times faster than I can read.”

Rice’s longtime editor, Victoria Wilson, recalled her as “a fierce storyteller who wrote large, lived quietly, and imagined worlds on a grand scale.”

“She summoned the feelings of an age long before we knew what they were,” Wilson said in a statement. “As a writer, she was decades ahead of her time.”

Rice will be interred during a private ceremony at a family mausoleum in New Orleans, her family said. A public celebration will also be planned for next year in New Orleans. “Ramses the Damned: The Reign of Osiris,” a novel Rice wrote with her son Christopher, will be published in February.

Follow AP Film Writer Jake Coyle on Twitter at: <http://twitter.com/jakecoyleAP>

Satellite images, expert suggest Iranian space launch coming

By JON GAMBRELL Associated Press

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates (AP) — Iran appears to be preparing for a space launch as negotiations continue in Vienna over its tattered nuclear deal with world powers, according to an expert and satellite images.

The likely blast off at Iran’s Imam Khomeini Spaceport comes as Iranian state media has offered a list of upcoming planned satellite launches in the works for the Islamic Republic’s civilian space program, which has been beset by a series of failed launches. Iran’s paramilitary Revolutionary Guard runs its own parallel program that successfully put a satellite into orbit last year.

Conducting a launch amid the Vienna talks fits the hard-line posture struck by Tehran’s negotiators, who already described six previous rounds of diplomacy as a “draft,” exasperating Western nations. Germany’s new foreign minister has gone as far as to warn that “time is running out for us at this point.”

But all this fits into a renewed focus on space by Iran’s hard-line President Ebrahim Raisi, said Jeffrey Lewis, an expert at the James Martin Center for Nonproliferation Studies at the Middlebury Institute of International Studies who studies Tehran’s program. With Iran’s former President Hassan Rouhani who shepherded the nuclear deal out of office, concerns about alienating the talks with launches that the U.S. asserts aids Tehran’s ballistic missile program likely have faded.

“They’re not walking on eggshells,” Lewis said. “I think Raisi’s people have a new balance in mind.”

Iranian state media did not acknowledge the activity at the spaceport and Iran’s mission to the United

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Nations did not respond to a request for comment. The U.S. military, which tracks space launches, did not respond to requests for comment.

Satellite images taken Saturday by Planet Labs Inc. obtained by The Associated Press show activity at the spaceport in the desert plains of Iran's rural Semnan province, some 240 kilometers (150 miles) southeast of Tehran.

A support vehicle stood parked alongside a massive white gantry that typically houses a rocket on the launch pad. That support vehicle has appeared in other satellite photos at the site just ahead of a launch. Also visible is a hydraulic crane with a railed platform, also seen before previous launches and likely used to service the rocket.

Other satellite images in recent days at the spaceport have shown an increase in the number of cars at the facility, another sign of heightened activity that typically precedes a launch. A building also believed to be the "checkout" facility for a rocket has seen increased activity as well, Lewis said.

"This is fairly traditional pre-launch activity," he told the AP.

The activity comes after Iran's state-run IRNA news agency on Dec. 5 published an article saying its space program had four satellites ready for launch. It described one, the low-orbit imaging satellite Zafar 2, as being "under the final phase of preparation." Zafar, which means "victory" in Farsi, weighs some 113 kilograms (250 pounds).

The Zafar 1, however, failed to enter orbit after a February 2020 launch at the spaceport. That launch used a Simorgh, or "Phoenix," rocket, but it failed to put the satellite into orbit at the correct speed, according to Iranian officials at the time. Iran had spent just under 2 million euros to build the satellite.

Iran's civilian space program has seen a series of setbacks and fatal explosions plague it in recent years. One mysterious blast even caught the attention of then-President Donald Trump in 2019, who tweeted out what appeared to be a classified U.S. spy satellite picture of the explosion's aftermath with the caption: "The United States of America was not involved in the catastrophic accident."

Meanwhile, the Guard in April 2020 revealed its own secret space program by successfully launching a satellite into orbit. The head of the U.S. Space Command later dismissed the satellite as "a tumbling webcam in space" that wouldn't provide Iran vital intelligence — though it showed Tehran's ability to successfully get into orbit.

Over the past decade, Iran has sent several short-lived satellites into orbit and in 2013 launched a monkey into space. But under Raisi, Iran's Supreme Council of Space has met for the first time in 11 years, according to a recent report by state-run television.

Raisi said at the November meeting that it "shows the determination of this government to develop the space industry." A high-ranking member of the Guard who runs its aerospace program, Gen. Amir Ali Hajizadeh, attended the meeting along with Foreign Minister Hossein Amirabdollahian.

The U.S. alleges such satellite launches defy a U.N. Security Council resolution calling on Iran to undertake no activity related to ballistic missiles capable of delivering nuclear weapons.

Iran, which long has said it does not seek nuclear weapons, maintains its satellite launches and rocket tests do not have a military component. Tehran also says it hasn't violated the U.N. resolution as it only "called upon" Tehran not to conduct such tests.

But the possible launch also comes as tensions again rise over Iran's nuclear program. Since Trump unilaterally withdrew America from Tehran's nuclear accord with world powers in 2018, Iran slowly abandoned all the limits the deal put on its program.

Today, Tehran enriches uranium up to 60% purity — a short technical step from weapons-grade levels of 90%. Its stockpile of enriched uranium also continues to grow and international inspectors face challenges in monitoring its advances.

Lewis said he expects to see the space program accelerate given Raisi's interest.

"They're not constrained by worries about the Iran deal in the same way that Rouhani was," he said.

Associated Press writer Amir Vahdat in Tehran, Iran, contributed to this report.

Follow Jon Gambrell on Twitter at www.twitter.com/jongambrellAP.

Will new bacon law begin? California grocers seek delay

By SCOTT McFETRIDGE Associated Press

ELLIOTT, Iowa (AP) — A coalition of California restaurants and grocery stores has filed a lawsuit to block implementation of a new farm animal welfare law, adding to uncertainty about whether bacon and other fresh pork products will be much more expensive or in short supply in the state when the new rules take effect on New Year's Day.

The lawsuit is the latest step in a tumultuous three-year process of enacting rules overwhelmingly approved by voters but that remain in question even as the law is set to begin. Since voters approved Proposition 12 by a 2-to-1 ratio in November 2018, state officials have missed deadlines for releasing specific regulations covering the humane treatment of animals that provide meat for the California market.

Most hog producers haven't made changes to comply with the law. And now a coalition of business owners is seeking more than a two-year delay.

"We're saying this is not going to work," said Nate Rose, a spokesman for the California Grocers Association.

While groups are working to delay the measure, the state has eased the transition to the new system. It has allowed pork processed under the old rules and held in cold storage to be sold in California in 2022, which could prevent shortages for weeks or even months.

As Josh Balk, who leads farm animal protection efforts at the Humane Society of the United States, put it, California residents need not fear "pork industry claims of the apocalypse."

Put simply, the law requires that breeding pigs, egg-laying chickens and veal calves be given enough space to stand and turn around. For pigs, that means they no longer can be kept in narrow "gestation crates" and must have 24 square feet (2.23 square meters) of usable space.

Producers of eggs and veal appear able to meet the new law, but hog farmers argued the changes would be too expensive and couldn't be carried out until the state approved final regulations for the new standards. An estimate from North Carolina State University found the new standard would cost about 15% more per animal for a farm with 1,000 breeding pigs.

The National Pork Producers Council has challenged California's right to impose standards on businesses in other states, but so far those efforts have failed.

California is the nation's largest market for pork, and producers in major hog states like Iowa provide more than 80% of the roughly 255 million pounds (115 million kilograms) that California's restaurants and groceries use each month, according to Rabobank, a global food and agriculture financial services company.

Without that supply, it's unclear if a state that consumes about 13% of the nation's pork supply will have all the meat it demands. The North American Meat Institute, an industry group, said packers and processors "will do their best to serve the California market."

"What will happen in California? I don't know," said Michael Formica, the general counsel for the National Pork Producers Council. "One thing we know is there will be finite supplies to sell there."

Adding to the uncertainty is the lawsuit filed last month in Sacramento County by the California Grocers Association, California Restaurant Association, California Hispanic Chambers of Commerce, California Retailers Association and Kruse & Sons, a meat processor. The suit seeks a 28-month delay until final regulations for enforcement of the rules are officially adopted.

California's agriculture and health departments have said the voter-backed measure didn't give them enough time to approve final regulations. The agencies were still accepting public comments for revisions in December. That means it could be months before final rules are approved.

Given that delay, the groups claim in the lawsuit that they can't be sure they're complying and could be subject to penalties stipulated in the law.

"Our concern is the uncertainty," said Rose, of the grocers association. He said a judge has scheduled

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a hearing for March, but the group is pushing for an earlier date.

If the law takes effect Jan. 1, it's possible the state could avoid immediate shortages or steep price increases because the industry has about 466 million pounds (211 million kilograms) of pork in storage. Not all of that meat can be sent to California, of course, but when combined with new supplies from processors that meet the new standards, it should meet at least some of the demand.

If there is a disruption, it "would be significantly smoothed," said Daniel Sumner, a professor at the University of California-Davis, who teamed with colleagues to study the price and supply implications of Proposition 12.

While an earlier study projected bacon prices soaring by up to 60% in California, a UC-Davis report estimated that the uncooked pork prices rising eventually by a more manageable 8% in California.

Massachusetts has approved a similar animal welfare law that takes effect next month, but state lawmakers are considering a one-year delay because of supply concerns.

The accuracy of the California estimates could depend on how many farmers adopt the new standards and how long the transition takes.

Iowa farmer Ron Mardesen already meets the California standards, and for much of the year gives sows free rein to roam through large areas of his farm about 100 miles (160 kilometers) southwest of Des Moines.

With so much room, "They're like a bunch of big, old sisters," he said. "You can tell they're happy. No one is squealing or crying."

Chris Oliviero, general manager of Niman Ranch, a specialty meat company in Westminster, Colorado, said he hopes California's new rules help change a system he calls "lower cost at any cost." Although Niman charges more for its pork, he said he hopes the new California rules help limit the environmental consequences of large-scale animal agriculture.

"There is volatility in the markets, so I understand the fears that comes with that, but I also think most large agricultural companies have shown that when they put their mind to it they're very capable of solving complex problems," Oliviero said.

Follow Scott McFetridge on Twitter: <https://twitter.com/smcfetridge>

This story has been updated to correct the amount of pork consumed in California and the amount in cold storage. Josh Balk's last name has also been corrected.

New Caledonia votes to stay in France; separatists boycott

By CHARLOTTE ANTOINE-PERRON Associated Press

NOUMEA, New Caledonia (AP) — Voters in the French island territory of New Caledonia chose overwhelmingly Sunday to stay part of France, in a referendum boycotted by pro-independence forces and closely watched around the South Pacific.

French President Emmanuel Macron hailed the result as a resounding confirmation of France's role in the Indo-Pacific, and announced negotiations on the territory's future status. Separatist activists expressed dismay, or resignation.

They had urged a delay in the vote because of the pandemic, and were angry over what they felt were French government efforts to sway the campaign. So they called on their supporters to stay away from voting stations.

And they did. Official results showed a staggering 96% of those who took part chose to stay in France. Overall turnout was less than 44% — barely half the numbers who showed up in a previous independence referendum last year, where support for breaking away was 46.7%.

"Tonight we are French, and we will stay that way. It's no longer negotiable," said Sonia Backes, president of the Southern Province region and a fervent loyalist.

The vote was monitored by the U.N. and regional powers, amid global efforts toward decolonization and amid growing Chinese influence in the region. New Caledonia, colonized by Napoleon's nephew in the

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19th century, is a vast archipelago of about 270,000 people east of Australia that is 10 time zones ahead of Paris — and hosts a French military base.

“Tonight France is more beautiful because New Caledonia decided to stay,” Macron said in a national televised address.

He did not address the boycott. Noting that the electorate “remains deeply divided,” Macron pledged “respect for all Caledonians,” including those who voted to leave.

Sunday’s vote was the third and last in a decades-long process aimed at settling tensions between native Kanaks seeking independence and those who want the territory to remain part of France.

The process does not end with the last referendum. The state, separatists and non-separatists now have 18 months to negotiate a new status for the territory and its institutions within France.

“We are reaching a new stage,” Macron said, calling for negotiations on new structures to handle health crises, boost the economy, improve women’s rights and protect the environment from climate change — a major concern in this island territory.

Pro-independence party FLNKS threatened to seek international recourse to try to invalidate the results, and said it won’t start negotiating until it has time to analyze next steps.

“The Kanak people’s right to self-determination of the won’t end Sunday night or Monday morning,” Jean-Philippe Tjibaou, son of a slain separatist leader, told public broadcaster France-Info. Speaking from a town that voted 100% for independence in the last two referendums but boycotted Sunday’s vote, he said, “We pursued the work of our elders. And our children will pursue it after us.”

A tropical storm warning also dampened enthusiasm for the referendum. Lines snaked out of some polling stations, as winds whipped palm trees lining the streets of the regional capital Noumea. But turnout at others was barely a trickle.

The campaign and voting day were unusually calm because of the boycott call, though the state deployed 1,750 police and security forces in case of unrest.

While support for a “yes” vote seemed to be growing, the region’s first coronavirus outbreak in September threw the political debate into disarray. Until then, New Caledonia had been one of the few virus-free places left on the planet.

Indigenous groups felt they couldn’t campaign out of respect for their dead, and demanded that the referendum be postponed. But pro-France groups insisted it should take place as scheduled, to end uncertainty over New Caledonia’s future and boost its economic prospects.

Pro-independence activists announced they would refuse to take part, accusing the government in Paris of imposing the referendum date and violating neutrality by publishing a document seen as casting the consequences of independence in a negative light.

The vote to stay French is a boost for Macron both domestically — where he’s expected to face a tough challenge from far-right nationalists in April’s presidential election — and internationally.

France is trying to cement its presence in the Indo-Pacific region after it lost a multibillion-dollar submarine contract because of a partnership Australia formed with the United States and the U.K. The secretly negotiated submarine project, announced in September and aimed at countering Chinese ambitions in the region, was a huge blow to France.

Some countries in the region “could appreciate France’s balanced posture in what you could call a Chinese-American cold war,” said Caroline Gravelat of the University of New Caledonia.

Others see France’s role in South Pacific as outdated.

The U.N. and the Pacific Islands Forum sent delegations to observe the vote. New Caledonia is among 17 former colonies worldwide that the U.N. still categorizes as “non-self-governing” and slated for decolonization efforts. The others are primarily islands administered by Britain or the United States.

Angela Charlton contributed to this report from Paris.

EXPLAINER: Was tornado outbreak related to climate change?

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By SUMAN NAISHADHAM and SETH BORENSTEIN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The calendar said December but the warm moist air screamed of springtime. Add an eastbound storm front guided by a La Nina weather pattern into that mismatch and it spawned tornadoes that killed dozens over five U.S. states.

Tornadoes in December are unusual, but not unheard of. But the ferocity and path length of Friday night's tornadoes likely put them in a category of their own, meteorologists say. One of the twisters — if it is confirmed to have been just one — likely broke a nearly 100-year-old record for how long a tornado stayed on the ground in a path of destruction, experts said.

"One word: remarkable; unbelievable would be another," said Northern Illinois University meteorology professor Victor Gensini. "It was really a late spring type of setup in the middle of December."

Warm weather was a crucial ingredient in this tornado outbreak, but whether climate change is a factor is not quite as clear, meteorologists say.

Scientists say figuring out how climate change is affecting the frequency of tornadoes is complicated and their understanding is still evolving. But they do say the atmospheric conditions that give rise to such outbreaks are intensifying in the winter as the planet warms. And tornado alley is shifting farther east away from the Kansas-Oklahoma area and into states where Friday's killers hit.

Here's a look at what's known about Friday's tornado outbreak and the role of climate change in such weather events.

WHAT CAUSES A TORNADO?

Tornadoes are whirling, vertical air columns that form from thunderstorms and stretch to the ground. They travel with ferocious speed and lay waste to everything in their path.

Thunderstorms occur when denser, drier cold air is pushed over warmer, humid air, conditions scientists call atmospheric instability. As that happens, an updraft is created when the warm air rises. When winds vary in speed or direction at different altitudes — a condition known as wind shear — the updraft will start to spin.

These changes in winds produce the spin necessary for a tornado. For especially strong tornadoes, changes are needed in both the wind's speed and direction.

"When considerable variation in wind is found over the lowest few thousand feet of the atmosphere, tornado-producing 'supercell thunderstorms' are possible," said Paul Markowski, professor of meteorology at Pennsylvania State University. "That's what we had yesterday."

There's usually a lot of wind shear in the winter because of the big difference in temperature and air pressure between the equator and the Arctic, Gensini said.

But usually, there's not a lot of instability in the winter that's needed for tornadoes because the air isn't as warm and humid, Gensini said. This time there was.

WHAT CONDITIONS LED TO STORMS OF THIS SCALE?

A few factors, which meteorologists will continue to study.

Spring-like temperatures across much of the Midwest and South in December helped bring the warm, moist air that helped form thunderstorms. Some of this is due to La Nina, which generally brings warmer than normal winter temperatures to the Southern U.S. But scientists also expect atypical, warm weather in the winter to become more common as the planet warms.

"The worst-case scenario happened. Warm air in the cold season, middle of the night," said John Gordon, a National Weather Service meteorologist in Louisville, Kentucky.

Once the storm formed, exceptionally strong wind shear appears to have prevented the tornadoes from dissipating, experts say. Tornadoes are thought to die off when thunderstorm updrafts lose energy.

Tornadoes typically lose energy in a matter of minutes, but in this case it was hours, Gensini said. That's partly the reason for the exceptionally long path of Friday's storm, going more than 200 miles (322 kilometers) or so, he said. The record was 219 miles (352 kilometers) and was set by a tornado that struck three states in 1925. Gensini thinks this one will surpass it once meteorologists finish analyzing it.

"In order to get a really long path length, you have to have a really fast moving storm. This storm was moving well over 50 miles (80 kilometers) per hour for a majority of its life," Gensini said. That's not the

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speed of the winds, but of the overall storm movement.

"You're talking about highway-speed storm motions," Gensini said.

HOW RELATED IS CLIMATE CHANGE TO TORNADO OUTBREAKS?

It's complicated. Scientists are still trying to sort out the many conflicting factors about whether human-caused climate change is making tornadoes more common — or even more intense. About 1,200 twisters hit the U.S. each year — though that figure can vary — according to the NOAA National Severe Storms Laboratory. No other country sees as many.

Attributing a specific storm like Friday's to the effects of climate change remains very challenging. Less than 10% of severe thunderstorms produce tornadoes, which makes drawing conclusions about climate change and the processes leading up to them tricky, said Harold Brooks, a tornado scientist at the National Severe Storms Laboratory.

Scientists have observed changes taking place to the basic ingredients of a thunderstorm, however, as the planet warms. Gensini says in the aggregate, extreme storms are "becoming more common because we have a lot warmer air masses in the cool season that can support these types of severe weather outbreaks."

The U.S. is likely to see more tornadoes occur in the winter, Brooks said, as national temperatures rise above the long-term average. Fewer events will take place in the summer, he said.

Furtado of the University of Oklahoma said tornado alley, a term used to describe where many twisters hit the U.S., has shifted eastward into the Mississippi River Valley. That shift is because of increases in temperature, moisture and shear.

"Bottom line: The people in the Mississippi River Valley and Ohio River Valley are becoming increasingly vulnerable to more tornadic activity with time," he said.

This story corrects that the 1925 tornado affected three states, not four.

Follow Suman Naishadham on Twitter @sumannaishadham and Seth Borenstein at @borenbears

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G7 warns Russia of 'massive' consequences if Ukraine invaded

By JILL LAWLESS Associated Press

LIVERPOOL, England (AP) — The Group of Seven economic powers told Russia on Sunday to "de-escalate" its military buildup near the Ukrainian border, warning that an invasion would have "massive consequences" and inflict severe economic pain on Moscow.

Foreign ministers from the United States, Britain and the rest of the G-7, joined by the European Union's foreign affairs chief, issued a joint statement declaring themselves "united in our condemnation of Russia's military buildup and aggressive rhetoric towards Ukraine."

The G-7 called on Russia to "de-escalate, pursue diplomatic channels, and abide by its international commitments on transparency of military activities," and praised Ukraine's "restraint."

"Any use of force to change borders is strictly prohibited under international law. Russia should be in no doubt that further military aggression against Ukraine would have massive consequences and severe cost in response," the statement said.

Russia's movement of weapons and troops to the border region dominated weekend talks among foreign ministers from the G-7 wealthy democracies in the English city of Liverpool.

The U.S. and its allies worry that the buildup could be precursor to an invasion, and have vowed to inflict heavy sanctions on Russia's economy if that happens.

Moscow denies having any plans to attack Ukraine and accuses Kyiv of its own allegedly aggressive

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designs.

British Foreign Secretary Liz Truss, the conference host, said the G-7 was sending a “powerful signal to our adversaries and our allies.”

The statement promised a “common and comprehensive response” but contained no details. Truss said the G-7 was “considering all options” when it came to economic sanctions. U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on NBC’s “Meet the Press” that “we are prepared to take the kinds of steps we’ve refrained from taking in the past” if Russia didn’t step back.

The U.S. and its allies have played down talk of a military response to defend Ukraine, with efforts focusing on tough sanctions that would hit the Russian economy, rather than just individuals.

In the U.S., reporters asked President Joe Biden on Saturday about the possibility of sending combat troops to Ukraine, and he said that idea was never considered. “Are you ready to send American troops into war and go into Ukraine to fight Russians on the battlefield?” he said.

Biden, who spoke to Russian President Vladimir Putin on a video call last week, said he had made clear that in the event of an invasion, “the economic consequences for his economy are going to be devastating. Devastating.”

Truss said Biden had made clear to Putin that the U.S. stance “carries the support of the G-7 countries as a whole. And that should be very concerning for Vladimir Putin.”

China’s muscle-flexing in the Indo-Pacific region and the ailing Iran nuclear deal were also on the agenda for the meeting of top diplomats from the U.K., the United States, Canada, France, Germany, Italy and Japan at the dockside Museum of Liverpool.

Getting a unified response to global crises from the G-7, a group of countries with disparate interests, has often proved tough.

Germany plans on getting gas from Russia soon through the contentious Nord Stream 2 pipeline, which bypasses Ukraine — though Blinken said it was hard to see the pipeline becoming operational “if Russia has renewed its aggression on Ukraine, if it takes renewed action.”

“So I think President Putin has to factor that in, too, as he’s thinking about what he’s going to do next,” he said.

Britain, which isn’t dependent on Russian gas, also has criticized the pipeline — but faces tricky questions about London’s financial district and property market, both hubs for Russian money.

U.K. bank and financial authorities have long been criticized for allegedly turning a blind eye to ill-gotten gains.

Truss insisted Britain has “very strong anti-corruption and anti-money laundering rules,” but also suggested that Russian money and Russian gas came at a high price.

“We cannot have short term economic gain at the expense of our long term freedom and democracy,” she said.

G-7 nations are also increasingly concerned about China’s growing economic and technological dominance, especially in developing countries. The G-7 has launched a “Build Back Better World” initiative to offer developing nations funding for big infrastructure projects as an alternative to money from China that, the West argues, often comes with strings attached.

Truss, who also invited ministers from the Association of Southeast Asian Nations to the Liverpool meeting, said the G-7 was “concerned about the coercive economic policies of China.”

“What we’ve set out is a positive agenda about making sure that countries have alternative sources of investment, alternative sources of trade,” she said. “And that we’re making sure that we abide by — and ensure others are abiding by — the rules based international system” for trade.

A unified stance towards China continues to prove elusive, however, with the U.S. and Britain generally more hawkish than other G-7 members.

AP Diplomatic Writer Matthew Lee contributed to this story.

Spanish island volcano eruption hits local record of 85 days

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MADRID (AP) — A volcanic eruption in Spain's Canary Islands shows no sign of ending after 85 days, becoming the island of La Palma's longest eruption on record Sunday.

The eruption has surged and ebbed since it first began spewing lava on Sept. 19. It has since destroyed almost 3,000 local buildings and forced several thousand people to abandon their homes.

On Sunday, after several days of low-level activity, the Cumbre Vieja volcano suddenly sprang to life again, producing loud explosions and blowing a vast cloud of ash high into the sky.

Scientists say volcanic eruptions are unpredictable. Spanish experts had initially said the La Palma eruption could last up to three months.

Mariano Hernández, the island's senior government official, described the volcano as "stable" in recent days.

"The fact is that all the key indicators have been low," he told Spanish public broadcaster RTVE. "But the scientists won't say exactly when it might come to an end."

He said experts continue to measure the number and magnitude of earthquakes in the area and local sulfur dioxide levels.

From Saturday to Sunday, authorities recorded 24 earthquakes, but none was felt by local people.

Despite the damage, no injuries or deaths have been directly linked to the eruption. Much of the area covered by rivers of lava, which are dumping molten rock into the sea, is farmland.

Life has continued largely as normal on most of La Palma, where a section of the southwestern side is hardest hit.

The volcanic Canary Islands, which are a favorite warm weather vacation site for Europeans, lie off Africa's northwest coast.

Details of Emmett Till killing still a mystery as probe ends

By JAY REEVES Associated Press

BIRMINGHAM, Ala. (AP) — The investigation into the lynching of Black teenager Emmett Till nearly 70 years ago ended as it began, with a mystery that might never be solved. All these decades later, it's still not even clear whether the gruesome homicide was the work of a pair of racist brutes or a larger group of conspirators.

Two white men publicly confessed to the slaying after being acquitted by an all-white jury in Mississippi in 1955, but a Justice Department report released last week said at least one more, unnamed person was involved in Till's abduction. Experts who've studied the case believe others participated, from a half-dozen to more than 14.

The lack of answers to decades-old, nagging questions has created a void for Till's family. Thelma Wright Edwards, a relative who recalled putting diapers on Till as a child, talked about the emptiness left by the decision to end what will likely be the final investigation into his death.

"Nothing was settled. The case is closed, and we have to go on from here," she told a news conference in Chicago.

In a sense, the nation as a whole was denied a proper ending to an awful tale because the true story of one of the most infamous hate crimes of the last century may never be known.

"On abstract levels, truth has been lost and justice has been lost. The complexity of what happened has been lost," said Dave Tell, a professor at the University of Kansas who wrote "Remembering Emmett Till."

Till, who was 14 and from Chicago, went to Mississippi to visit relatives during the summer of 1955. On Aug. 24, witnesses said he whistled at a white woman in a rural grocery store, a violation of the South's racist societal codes at the time. In return, he was roused from bed and abducted from a great-uncle's home in the predawn hours four days later.

With relatives uncertain over the teen's whereabouts and fearing the worst, Till's body — weighted down with a large fan from a cotton gin — was pulled from the Tallahatchie River three days later. Roy Bryant, whose then-wife Carolyn was the subject of Till's whistle, and Roy Bryant's half-brother, J.W. Milam, were charged with murder and on trial before an all-white jury within two weeks.

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From the beginning, prosecutors portrayed the lynching as the work of a group, said David Beito, a retired University of Alabama professor and author who researched the case.

"Their official argument was that this beating occurred and that more than two people were involved. They argued a conspiracy, in effect," Beito said.

Although only Bryant and Milam were charged, Black teenager Willie Reed testified during their trial that he saw a group of white men and Black men in a truck with a person he later realized was Till based upon photos. Till's great-uncle testified that Bryant and Milam were accompanied by a third person with a voice "lighter" than a man's when they abducted Till, indicating the possible presence of a woman.

Acquitted of killing Till and no longer in legal jeopardy, Bryant and Milam were paid to do an interview for Look magazine in which they admitted killing Till and suggested they were honor-bound as white Southerners to take vengeance on a disrespectful Black boy who affronted Bryant's wife.

With the magazine's wide circulation at the time, the Look article reset the narrative reported in the Black press of a group killing, Tell said.

"For that period of about five months, there was a pretty widespread consensus that there were five white men involved and two African Americans. I feel pretty comfortable saying that," Tell said. "I think that's what happened."

Milam's relative Leslie Milam bolstered the idea that a group of people was involved in a deathbed confession years later to being involved in the lynching, Beito said. Several Black men were suggested through the years as having helped restrain Till in the back of a truck while their boss and other white men rode in the cab, he said.

"(The Black men) were under duress. They didn't have a choice," Tell said.

Keith Beauchamp, a filmmaker who investigated the case for his documentary "The Untold Story of Emmett Louis Till," said as many as 14 white and Black people were involved with the abduction, killing and cleanup.

Through it all, no one else was ever charged, and the narrative of exactly what happened remains murky. One after the other, all possible suspects died, save one.

A Mississippi grand jury declined in 2007 to indict Carolyn Bryant Donham, Bryant's one-time wife who is now in her 80s. The Justice Department reopened the investigation after a 2017 book quoted Donham as saying she lied when she claimed Till grabbed her, whistled and made sexual advances. But the investigation found no basis to charge her over the author's claim that she recanted her statements from 1955. Donham denied changing her story, the Justice Department report said.

The Rev. Wheeler Parker Jr., a cousin who was with Till both at the store and in the house the night he was abducted, expressed disappointment over the lack of justice and paucity of answers after decades of review. Parker said he heard his cousin whistle, but that was all that happened.

"We can't bring him back, but we can carry on and let America know we need to know the truth, and that's what we look for," he said.

Reeves is a member of the AP's Race and Ethnicity team.

California governor wants Texas-like law to ban assault guns

By ADAM BEAM Associated Press

SACRAMENTO, Calif. (AP) — California Gov. Gavin Newsom on Saturday pledged to empower private citizens to enforce a ban on the manufacture and sale of assault weapons in the state, citing the same authority claimed by conservative lawmakers in Texas to outlaw most abortions once a heartbeat is detected.

California has banned the manufacture and sale of many assault-style weapons for decades. A federal judge overturned that ban in June, ruling it was unconstitutional and drawing the ire of the state's Democratic leaders by comparing the popular AR-15 rifle to a Swiss Army knife as "good for both home and battle." California's ban remained in place while the state appealed.

Meanwhile, Republican lawmakers in Texas this year passed a law banning abortions after a fetal heartbeat is detected, which normally occurs at about six weeks into pregnancy. The Texas law allows private

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citizens to enforce the ban, empowering them to sue abortion clinics and anyone else who "aids and abets" with the procedure.

Friday, the U.S. Supreme Court allowed the Texas law to remain in effect while abortion clinics sue to block it. That decision incensed Newsom, a Democrat who supports abortion rights.

"If states can now shield their laws from review by the federal courts that compare assault weapons to Swiss Army knives, then California will use that authority to protect people's lives, where Texas used it to put women in harm's way," Newsom said in a statement released by his office at 7 p.m. on Saturday.

Newsom said he has directed his staff to work with the state's Legislature and its Democratic attorney general to pass a law that would let private citizens sue to enforce California's ban on assault weapons. Newsom said people who sue could win up to \$10,000 per violation plus other costs and attorneys fees against "anyone who manufactures, distributes, or sells an assault weapon" in California.

"If the most efficient way to keep these devastating weapons off our streets is to add the threat of private lawsuits, we should do just that," Newsom said.

The legal fight over the Texas abortion law has focused on its unusual structure and whether it improperly limits how the law can be challenged in court. Texas lawmakers handed responsibility for enforcing the law to private citizens, rather than state officials.

The case raised a complex set of issues about who, if anyone, can sue over the law in federal court, the typical route for challenges to abortion restrictions.

Newsom's gun proposal would first have to pass California's state Legislature before it could become law. The Legislature is not in session now and is scheduled to reconvene in January. It usually takes about eight months for new bills to pass the Legislature, barring special circumstances.

State Sen. Brian Dahle, a Republican from Bieber, would oppose the plan but predicted it could probably pass California's Democratic-dominated state Legislature. He said the proposal was most likely a stunt for Newsom to win favor with his progressive base of voters ahead of a possible run for president in the future.

"The right to bear arms is different than the right to have an abortion. The right to have an abortion is not a constitutional amendment. So I think he's way off base," Dahle said. "I think he's just using it as an opportunity to grandstand."

But Newsom's Saturday night declaration is a fulfilled prophecy for some gun rights groups who had predicted progressive states would attempt to use Texas' abortion law to restrict access to guns. That's why the Firearms Policy Coalition, a nonprofit group that advocates for gun rights, filed a brief with the U.S. Supreme Court opposing the Texas law.

"If Texas succeeds in its gambit here, New York, California, New Jersey, and others will not be far behind in adopting equally aggressive gambits to not merely chill but to freeze the right to keep and bear arms," attorney Erik Jaffe wrote on behalf of the Firearms Policy Coalition.

Today in History

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Monday, Dec. 13, the 347th day of 2021. There are 18 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On Dec. 13, 2000, Republican George W. Bush claimed the presidency a day after the U.S. Supreme Court shut down further recounts of disputed ballots in Florida; Democrat Al Gore conceded, delivering a call for national unity.

On this date:

In 1835, Phillips Brooks, the American Episcopal bishop who wrote the words to "O Little Town of Bethlehem," was born in Boston.

In 1928, George Gershwin's "An American in Paris" had its premiere at Carnegie Hall in New York.

In 1937, the Chinese city of Nanjing fell to Japanese forces during the Sino-Japanese War; what followed was a massacre of war prisoners, soldiers and citizens. (China maintains that up to 300,000 people were

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killed; Japanese nationalists say the death toll was far lower, and some maintain the massacre never happened.)

In 1978, the Philadelphia Mint began stamping the Susan B. Anthony dollar, which went into circulation the following July.

In 1981, authorities in Poland imposed martial law in a crackdown on the Solidarity labor movement. (Martial law formally ended in 1983.)

In 1993, the space shuttle Endeavour returned from its mission to repair the Hubble Space Telescope.

In 2001, the Pentagon publicly released a captured videotape of Osama bin Laden in which the al-Qaida leader said the deaths and destruction achieved by the September 11 attacks exceeded his "most optimistic" expectations.

In 2002, President George W. Bush announced he would take the smallpox vaccine along with U.S. military forces, but was not recommending the potentially risky inoculation for most Americans.

In 2003, Saddam Hussein was captured by U.S. forces while hiding in a hole under a farmhouse in Adwar, Iraq, near his hometown of Tikrit.

In 2007, Major League Baseball's Mitchell Report was released, identifying 85 names to differing degrees in connection with the alleged use of performance-enhancing drugs.

In 2014, thousands of protesters marched in New York, Washington and other U.S. cities to call attention to the killing of unarmed Black men by white police officers who faced no criminal charges.

In 2019, the House Judiciary Committee approved two articles of impeachment accusing President Donald Trump of abuse of power in his dealings with Ukraine and obstruction of Congress in the investigation that followed.

Ten years ago: Early sound recordings by Alexander Graham Bell that were packed away at the Smithsonian Institution for more than a century were played publicly for the first time using new technology that read the sound with light and a 3D camera. (In one recording, a man recites part of Hamlet's Soliloquy; on another, a voice recites the numbers 1 through 6.)

Five years ago: President-elect Donald Trump announced his choice of ExxonMobil CEO Rex Tillerson to be secretary of state. Actor Alan Thicke, best remembered as the beloved dad on the ABC series "Growing Pains," died in Los Angeles at age 69.

One year ago: The first vials of the Pfizer vaccine against COVID-19 began making their way to distribution sites across the United States. President Donald Trump said he was reversing an administration directive to vaccinate top government officials against COVID-19 while public distribution of the shot was limited to health care workers and people in nursing homes and long-term care facilities; hours earlier, the administration had confirmed that senior U.S. officials would be offered vaccines in the days ahead.

Today's Birthdays: Actor-comedian Dick Van Dyke is 96. Country singer Buck White is 91. Music/film producer Lou Adler is 88. Singer John Davidson is 80. Actor Kathy Garver (TV: "Family Affair") is 76. Singer Ted Nugent is 73. Rock musician Jeff "Skunk" Baxter is 73. Actor Robert Lindsay is 72. Country singer-musician Randy Owen is 72. Actor Wendie Malick is 71. U.S. Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack is 71. Former Federal Reserve Chairman Ben Bernanke is 68. Country singer John Anderson is 67. Singer-songwriter Steve Forbert is 67. Singer-actor Morris Day is 65. Actor Steve Buscemi (boo-SEH'-mee) is 64. Actor Johnny Whitaker (TV: "Family Affair") is 62. Rock musician John Munson (Semisonic; Twilight Hours) is 59. Actor-reality TV star NeNe Leakes is 55. Actor-comedian Jamie Foxx is 54. Actor Lusia Strus is 54. Actor Bart Johnson is 51. Actor Jeffrey Pierce is 50. TV personality Debbie Matenopoulos is 47. Rock singer-musician Thomas Delonge is 46. Actor James Kyson Lee is 46. Actor Kimee Balmilero (TV: "Hawaii Five-0") is 42. Actor Chelsea Hertford is 40. Rock singer Amy Lee (Evanescence) is 40. Actor Michael Socha is 34. Actor Marcel Spears (TV: "The Mayor") is 33. Singer Taylor Swift is 32. Actor Maisy Stella is 18.