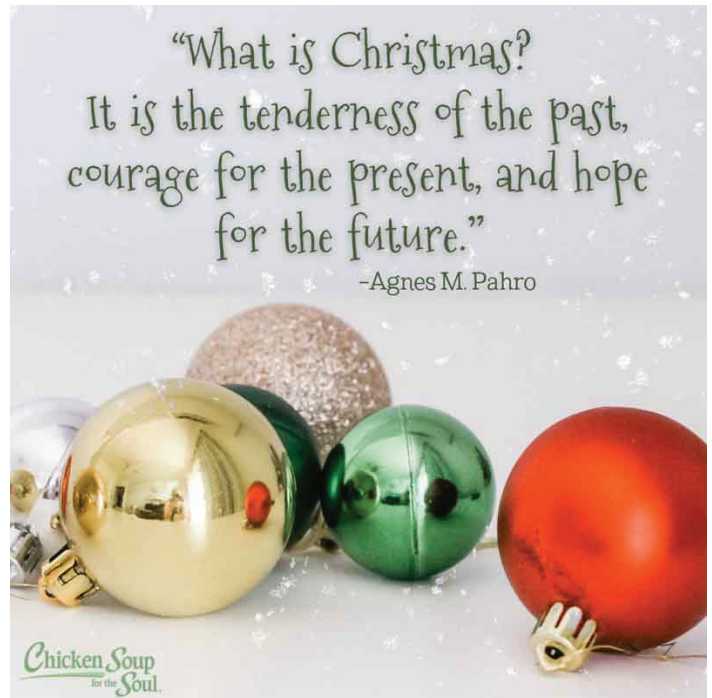


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UpComing Events

Wednesday, Dec. 22

St. John's Lutheran Christmas Program on GDIL-IVE.COM. 10:30 a.m. and Noon.

End of Second Quarter

1 p.m.: Elementary Christmas Concert

2 p.m.: Early dismissal for Christmas vacation

Monday, Dec. 27

6 p.m.: Boys Basketball at Jamestown College Classic (Harold Newman Arena), Groton Area vs. Kindred, N.D.

Thursday, Dec. 30

9:30 a.m.: Wrestling at Webster

Friday, Dec. 31

Girls Basketball at Webster. C game at 11 a.m. followed by JV and then varsity

Monday, Jan. 4

School resumes

Basketball Double Header at Warner. Girls JV at 4 p.m. followed by Boys JV, Girls Varsity and Boys Varsity.

5 p.m.: Junior High Wrestling Tournament at Groton.

Thursday, Jan. 6

6 p.m.: Wrestling Tri-angular at Groton with Redfield and Webster

Friday, Jan. 7

Penguin Classic Debate on-line

5 p.m.: Junior High Wrestling at Milbank

Girls Basketball hosts Sisseton with JV at 6 p.m. and varsity to follow

Saturday, Jan. 8

Groton Robotics Tournament, 8 a.m. to 6 p.m.

Penguin Classic Debate on-line

Girls Basketball Classic at Redfield

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.
© 2021 Groton Daily Independent

Groton Area boys take down Redfield

Groton Area defeated Redfield in a Northeast Conference game Tuesday night in Groton, 70-58.

The Tigers never trailed in the game, but the Pheasants kept the game interesting. Groton Area held a 15-8 lead after the first quarter. The second quarter proved to be a three-point show with Cole Simon coming off the bench to make three and Lane Tietz added two more while Peyton Osborn made two three-pointers and Jerron Haider one for the Pheasants. The Tigers 12-point lead, but Redfield cut it down to seven by halftime, 34-27.

Groton Area was back on top by 11, but once again, the Pheasants rallied to cut it down to a five-point game, 49-34, with 1:45 left in the third quarter. Groton Area made the last four points of the third quarter and took a 53-36 lead into the fourth quarter.

The Tigers made six of eight free throws in the fourth quarter and went on for the 70-58 win.

Lane Tietz led the Tigers with 25 points which included making six of 12 three-pointers, he had three rebounds, two assists and two steals. Cole Simon had 14 points which included making three of four three-pointers, he had one rebound and one assist. Jacob Zak had 13 points, six rebounds, three assists and three steals. Tate Larson had a double-double night with 12 points, 10 rebounds, one assist and three steals. Wyatt Hearnen had four points, three rebounds, two assists and one steal. Kaden Kurtz made two free throws, had four rebounds and three assists. Jayden Zak had one rebound, one assist and three steals. Teylor Diegel had one assist.

Groton Area made 17 of 33 field goals for 52 percent, nine of 30 three-pointers for 30 percent, made nine of 13 free throws for 69 percent off of Redfield's 11 team fouls, had eight turnovers, 18 assists, 12 steals and 14 team fouls.

Peyton Osborn led the Pheasants with 17 points while Jerron Haider had 15, Mitchell Mack had 12, Nolan Gall eight, Paul Juarez four and Justin Ratigan added two points.

Redfield made 24 of 42 field goals for 57 percent, four of 10 free throws for 40 percent off of Groton Area's 14 team fouls, had 23 turnovers of which 12 were steals, had 24 rebounds and 10 assists.

The game was broadcast live on GDILIVE.COM, sponsored by Allied Climate Professionals with Kevin Nehls, Groton Ford, the John Sieh Agency, Dacotah Bank and Bary Keith at Harr Motors.

Groton Area won the junior varsity game, 60-35. The game was broadcast live on GDILIVE.COM, sponsored by Kent and Darcy Muller with Charlie Frost as the guest commentator.

Colby Dunker led the Tigers with 12 points followed by Cole Simon with 11, Logan Ringgenberg eight, Teylor Diegel and Dillon Abeln with seven apiece, Tyson Parrow six, Turner Thompson and Holden Sippel with four each and Blake Pauli added two points.

Justin Ratigan led the Pheasants with 11 points.

Groton Area Senior Citizens

The Groton Senior Citizens met on December 13 for their pot luck Christmas dinner. Twenty members were present. Bingo was played after dinner. Dick Donovan won black out, cards were played after bingo. They surprised me with a birthday party and celebrating the service of secretary for 33 years or more. The birthday table was decorated with Christmas decorations, balloons, cards, gift and a birthday cake. Ruby Larson came to help celebrate. I was presented with a beautiful corsage that was the highlight of my day.

A Big thank you to all who helped me celebrate my 98 birthday. Door prizes went to Marilyn Thorson, Sarge Likness and Tony Goldade.

Elda Stange Sec.

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The Groton Dynamics Dance Team performed at halftime of the varsity basketball game Tuesday night. (Photo by Paul Kosel)



Santa (Lane Krueger) and an elf (Christian Ehresmann) did a little dancing as dress-up theme for the night was Christmas. (Photo by Deb Gengerke)

Sombke re-elected South Dakota Farmers Union president



Doug Sombke, Conde farmer was re-elected to serve as SDFU President during the 2021 South Dakota Farmers Union Convention held in Huron Dec. 16-17.

HURON, S.D. - True to South Dakota Farmers Union grassroots philosophy, as an organization focused on family farmers and ranchers, leaders of South Dakota Farmers Union (SDFU) are family farmers and ranchers.

During the 2021 State Convention held Dec. 16 and 17 in Huron, an election was held and members re-elected Conde farmer, Doug Sombke to serve as President; Lake Preston farmer, Wayne Soren to serve as Vice President; Wessington Springs farmer/rancher Scott Kolousek to serve as District 2 Director; Reliance rancher, David Reis to serve as District 4 Director and Parade rancher, Oren Lesmeister to serve as District 6 Director.

"I am honored to serve the family farmers and ranchers who make up this organization," Sombke said.

Read on to learn more about the leaders recently elected and the reasons they serve South Dakota family farmers and ranchers.

Doug Sombke, Conde farmer and SDFU President

Q: What motivates you as you begin another term of service to SDFU members?

A: There is work yet to be done. I am honored to work for our state's family farmers and ranchers.

Even though our organization has made great strides on issues like E30, and we believe we are close to a return of MCOOL because policymakers are beginning to agree that we need to hold packers accountable, now is not the time to relax.

We need to remain diligent and focused.

As a family farmer, I see my sons struggling with some of the same challenges I faced when I was a young farmer starting out. Like many of you, our family needs to have off-farm income to make it.

Although some of the struggles today's young farmers and ranchers face are the same ones those of us who got our start in the '80s experienced, the political climate within South Dakota has changed. Today, there are fewer farmer/rancher legislators. This underscores the need for our organization to provide education and serve as a resource to leaders in Pierre and D.C.

It takes time to build relationships and trust. During the years I have served, I have worked hard to do this. I will continue to work hard every day for South Dakota's family farmers and ranchers and the policy Farmers Union members put in place.

Wayne Soren, Lake Preston farmer and Vice President

Q: What motivates you as you begin another term of service to SDFU members?

A: There are many reasons I am motivated to serve. Farmers Union's continued involvement in coopera-

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tives and cooperative education is a big one.

I only need to think about the role cooperatives play in the rural communities we rely upon to appreciate the work our organization does to educate and provide leadership training to the next generation of co-op leaders. What would our communities be like without a rural electric cooperative or telephone/internet cooperative or rural water or the local elevator? When private companies would not provide these goods and services to rural communities, Farmers Union helped citizens form cooperatives. Development of cooperatives was our way of saying, "instead of being at the mercy of the market, let's do this ourselves."

As vice president I have diligently worked to support and guide our organization in its support of cooperatives. I have also applied this same energy and worked closely with our president and board to carry out all policy put in place by our members.

It is because of our policy to work for fair prices for family farmers and ranchers, that our organization is leading the fight to re-introduce competitive prices into the livestock markets by encouraging lawmakers to enforce the law and put an end to packer price fixing.

Like cooperative development, I see this as yet another issue where Farmers Union is supporting rural citizens in pulling on our work boots to get things done.

Oren Lesmeister, Parade rancher and District 6 Director

Q: What motivates you as you begin another term of service to SDFU members?

A: Serving on the state board of directors provides the opportunity to expand my level of service to our state's family farmers and ranchers.

In this role, I will continue building strong relationships with our state's policymakers. Building relationships is something I focus on as District 28-A Representative, and as a director, I will continue to work on building bridges for agriculture.

Speaking of policy, I appreciate the grassroots nature of this organization. Farmers Union members voted on policy to make growing industrial hemp legal in South Dakota. The support, education and research efforts of Farmers Union helped this bill pass. The organization continues to work to connect South Dakota producers with the information they need as they decide to try out this new crop for themselves.

Scott Kolousek, Wessington Springs farmer/rancher and District 2 Director

Q: What motivates you as you begin another term of service to SDFU members?

A: Ever since my wife, Amber and I attended our first Fly-In in 2014, I just love what the organization does for farmers and what they stand for. As a director I get to work to support growing the organization, supporting our county organizations, and encouraging member involvement in our grassroots policy.

As a Farmers Union member, it means a lot to me that my thoughts and actions at the county level can go directly to the policy meeting and if other members agree, the policy will go on to State Convention and from there, the National Convention. And if members across the nation agree, the policy we developed during a District 2 County Meeting can become policy the national organization lobbies for in D.C.

Right now, what Farmers Union policy is doing to help the cattle industry means a lot. And this policy originated at the producer level. It's not the organization telling its members what we stand for, it's boots on the ground telling the organization what to fight for. Because of this, I believe Farmers Union is on the

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right side of most ag issues.

David Reis, Reliance rancher and District 4 Director

Q: What motivates you as you begin another term of service to SDFU members?

A: I believe in the mission of South Dakota Farmers Union and the work that the board of directors does to fulfill its mission and guide our organization.

MCOOL is a policy issue I remain passionate about because as cattle producers we need to be able to differentiate our product from imported product. I appreciate the work Farmers Union has done historically and is doing to get it reinstated.

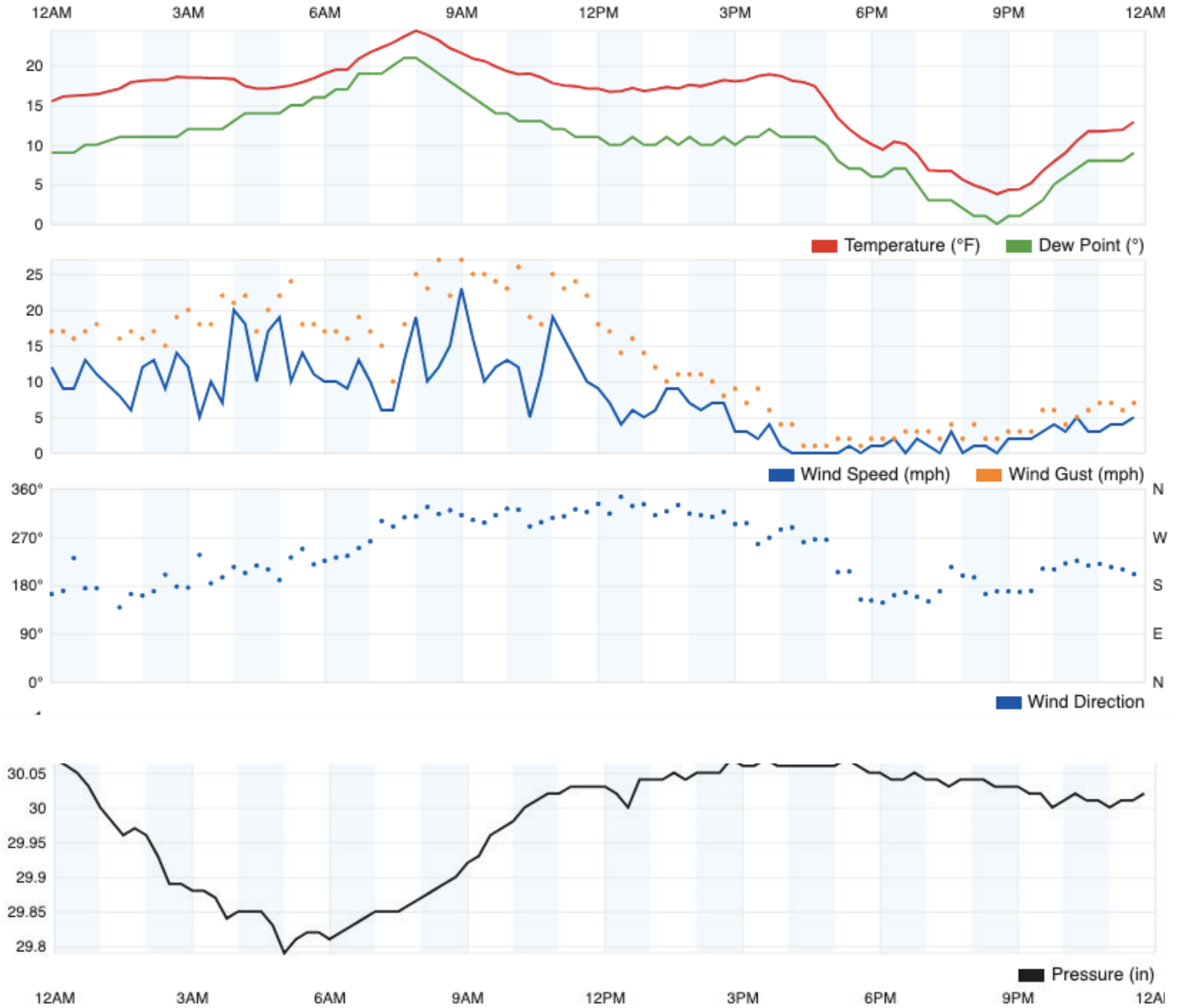
MCOOL is a step toward fair markets. Fair markets are not just a farmer/rancher issue. I just read an article about consumers upset over high retail prices for meat cuts. Here we are as cattle producers, barely able to keep our head above water financially, and at the same time consumers are having a tough time paying the high rates demanded at the meat counter.

I enjoy working together with the state board of directors. I feel together with members and our state staff we have accomplished a lot, but there is more to do. Fair prices have been a focus of Farmers Union member-led grassroots policy since the beginning. I appreciate the opportunity to continue serving so we can get to where we need to be so family ranchers and farmers can receive fair markets and prices. I hope to see this through to fruition.

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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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Today



Mostly Sunny

High: 27 °F

Tonight



Mostly Cloudy

Low: 12 °F

Thursday



Mostly Sunny

High: 36 °F

Thursday
Night



Mostly Cloudy

Low: 23 °F

Friday



Mostly Sunny

High: 37 °F



Relatively Mild Through Friday

December 22, 2021

3:02 AM

Today

Partly Sunny

Highs 20s east, 40s west

Thursday

Mostly Cloudy and Milder

Highs 30s east, Near 50 south

Friday

Partly Cloudy

Highs 30s and 40s

Holiday Weekend Outlook

Christmas Day
& Sunday

Highs Teens & 20s



National Oceanic and
Atmospheric Administration
U.S. Department of Commerce

National Weather Service
Aberdeen, SD

The rest of the work week looks mostly dry and relatively mild. However, there are some chances for light snow over the holiday weekend. #sdwx #mnwx

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Today in Weather History

December 22, 1990: Strong northwest winds, combined with air temperatures below zero, created wind chills from -40 to -65 degrees over west-central Minnesota early in the day on the 22nd. Air temperatures were generally in the -20 to -25 degree range, with afternoon highs around 15 below zero.

December 22, 1990: Strong northwest winds gusted to 35 miles per hour and caused near-whiteout conditions over a wide area of southwest and west-central Minnesota during the late afternoon on the 21st into the early morning of the 22nd. Several car accidents ensued. A 30-year old man was killed when he lost control of his truck and slid into a ditch in the near-blizzard conditions.

1989: The most significant cold spell of the century for the Deep South occurred from the 22 to the 26. New Orleans experienced 64 consecutive hours at or below 32 degrees Fahrenheit and a total of 81 out of 82 hours below freezing. A total of 15 hours was below 15 degrees with the lowest reading of 11 degrees on the morning of the 23rd. A low temperature of 8 degrees was recorded at Baton Rouge. Snow and sleet paralyzed transportation systems where as much as two to four inches of snow accumulated in Lafourche and Terrebonne Parishes. Snow and ice-covered the ground in New Orleans. The most significant impact was the breaking of water pipes in homes and businesses. Over 100 fires resulted in the New Orleans area within 24 hours due to a loss of water pressure and improperly utilized heating sources. Ice formed over shallow lakes and waterways where commercial fishing took heavy losses. Five weather-related deaths occurred in the service area during this rare Arctic outbreak.

2002: Heavy rains prompted flooding in the mountain city of Teresopolis, located about 90 km north of Rio de Janeiro in Brazil. A mudslide was responsible for 9 deaths and 50 injuries.

2004: Tremendous snows occurred in the Ohio Valley. The following cities set new records for their most significant snowstorm ever: Evansville, Indiana 22.3 inches, Dayton, Ohio 16.4 inches, and Paducah, Kentucky 14.2 inches. Other big snowfall totals were 31 inches at Liberty, Indiana, 28 inches at Buena Vista, Indiana, 24 inches at Greenville, Ohio, and 23 inches at Mansfield, Ohio.

1839 - The second of triple December storms hit the northeastern U.S. The storm produced 25 inches of snow at Gettysburg, PA, and gales in New England, but only produced light snow along the coast. (David Ludlum)

1961 - Holiday travel was paralyzed over extreme northeastern Kansas, and adjacent parts of Missouri, Iowa and Nebraska. The storm produced 5 to 15 inches of snow, with drifts up to ten feet high. (22nd-23rd) (The Weather Channel)

1983 - On the first day of winter 75 cities reported record low temperatures for the date, with twelve of those cities reporting record low temperatures for the month as a whole. The mercury plunged to 51 degrees below zero at Wisdom MT, and Waco TX set an all-time record low a reading of 12 above zero. (The National Weather Summary)

1987 - The first day of winter was a relatively tranquil one for much of the nation, but heralded a winter storm in the Central Rockies. The storm produced 40 inches of snow at the top of the Pomerelle Ski Resort, south of Burley ID, the heaviest snow of record for that location. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1988 - Strong winds prevailed in the foothills of Wyoming and Colorado. Winds gusted to 123 mph southwest of Fort Collins CO, and reached 141 mph at the summit of Mount Evans. An ice storm paralyzed parts of Upper Michigan during the day. The freezing rain left roads around Marquette MI blocked by cars and semi- trucks. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

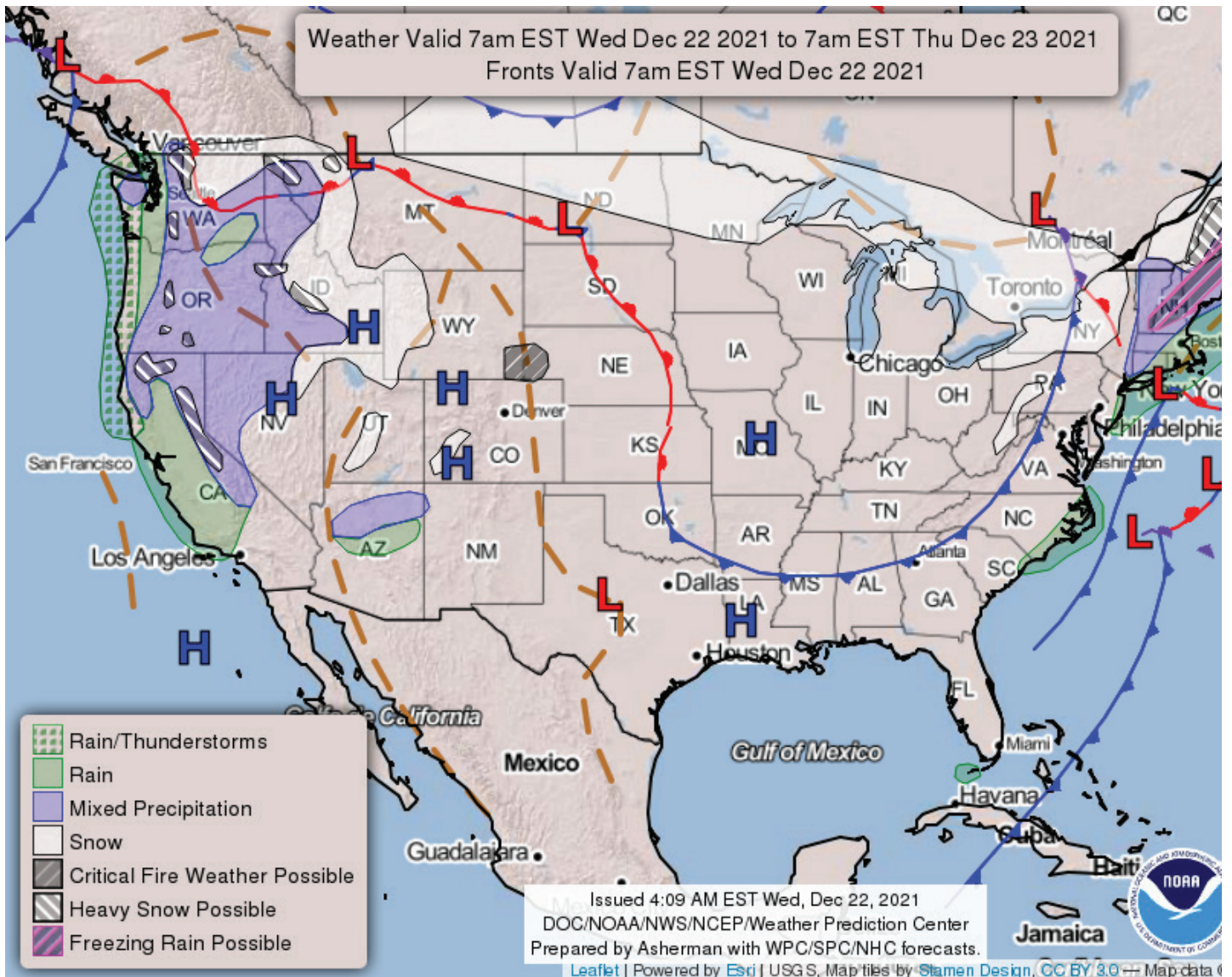
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Yesterday's Groton Weather Today's Info

High Temp: 24.4 °F at 8:00 AM
Low Temp: 3.8 °F at 8:45 PM
Wind: 27 mph at 9:00 AM
Precip: 0.00

Record High: 59° in 2020
Record Low: -28° in 1990
Average High: 26°F
Average Low: 6°F
Average Precip in Dec.: 0.42
Precip to date in Dec.: 0.47
Average Precip to date: 21.63
Precip Year to Date: 20.03
Sunset Tonight: 4:54:19 PM
Sunrise Tomorrow: 8:08:31 AM



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PROPHESIES FROM ISAIAH

"Therefore, the Lord Himself will give you a sign. Behold, a virgin will be with child and bear a son, and she will call his name Immanuel – God with us!

"The people who walk in darkness

Will see a great light;

Those who live in a dark land,

The light will come to them.

For a child will be born to us, a

son given to us;

And the government will rest on

His shoulders!

And His name will be called:

Wonderful!

Counselor!

Mighty God!

Eternal Father!

Prince of Peace!

There will be no end to the increase

of His government or of His peace.

"The spirit of the LORD will rest on Him,

The spirit of wisdom and understanding.

The spirit of counsel and strength,

The spirit of knowledge and

the fear of the Lord."

Prayer: Thank You, God, for keeping Your word! In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: Isaiah 7:14; Isaiah 9:2, 6-7; Isaiah 11:2-3

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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

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News from the Associated Press

As COVID fueled the drug crisis, Native Americans hit worst

By CLAIRE GALOFARO AP National Writer

BEMIDJI, Minn. (AP) — Rachel Taylor kissed her fingertips and pressed them to the crow sewn onto a leather bag on the couch in the living room. “Oh, my baby,” she whispered. She hugged the buckskin satchel filled with her son’s ashes.

Nearly a year ago, she opened his bedroom door and screamed so loud she woke the neighbor. Kyle Domrese was face down on his bed, one of more than 100,000 Americans lost in a year to overdoses as the COVID-19 pandemic aggravated America’s addiction disaster.

When he was 4, the medicine man had given him his Ojibwe name: Aandegoons — “little crow.” She traced the outline of the black bird on the sack.

“Love you,” Taylor said to the bag, as she does each time she leaves her home in this city surrounded by three Ojibwe reservations in remote northern Minnesota.

As the pandemic ravaged the country, deaths from drug overdoses surged by nearly 30%, climbing to a record high. The drug crisis also diversified from an overwhelmingly white affliction to killing people of color with staggering speed. The death rate last year was highest among Native Americans, for whom COVID-19 piled yet more despair on communities already confronting generations of trauma, poverty, unemployment and underfunded health systems.

Taylor’s tribe, the White Earth Nation, studied the lives they’ve lost to addiction.

“Their death certificates say they died of an overdose, but that’s not right,” one member of their study group said.

These deaths were a culmination of far more than that: Despite their resilience, Native Americans carry in their blood 500 years worth of pain from being robbed of their land, their language, their culture, their children. In living people’s memory, children were taken from their families and sent to boarding schools with the motto, “Kill the Indian, save the man.”

“What they died of is a broken heart,” the study says.

For years, Taylor tried to break the cycle.

Her grandmother was sent to a boarding school, where she was taught to be so ashamed of her Ojibwe language that she would only speak it once she’d eased the pain by drinking.

Taylor had her daughter when she was 19 and her son a few years later. She’d lost custody of them for a couple years as she battled her own addiction. She told them she wished she could fix all the dysfunctional things that happened when she was using.

“Then I thought, well, then my mom would have to go back and fix things, and then my grandma would have to go back, it would have to go on like that for generations,” she said.

Taylor had lived in more than 50 places before she turned 18, and faced sexual, physical and mental abuse.

She prayed to her creator to spare her children, and told her son every day that she loved him.

White Earth Nation too worked hard to save its people from addiction, and in many years lost no one to overdoses on the reservation. But then the pandemic arrived and proved too painful for some.

Taylor and her son quarantined together at her home in Bemidji, a city of 15,000 people.

He’d started abusing pills as a teenager when he got a prescription after having surgery for an infected finger. Then, consumed by the madness of addiction, he would smoke anything — methamphetamine, heroin, fentanyl — that might quiet his anxiety and depression.

The months of isolation dragged on, and he said it seemed like the pandemic would never end. He told her he felt like a bum.

“He just gave up,” she said. All around them, people were dying.

On the White Earth reservation, ambulance calls for overdoses tripled. They posted big red signs in gas stations and tribal buildings: “overdose alert.”

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The number of overdoses the regional drug task force investigated skyrocketed from 20 in 2019 to 88 last year, said Joe Kleszyk, its commander. Fifteen of those were fatal, triple the year before.

This year, there's been 148 overdoses, and 24 of those victims died. The vast majority were Native American.

When the American government forced Native Americans off their land, it signed treaties with tribes promising to provide for them necessities like health care. The dead from addiction prove it's never kept its word, said Minnesota Sen. Tina Smith.

Indian health care has been underfunded for years. The national average for health care spending is just over \$11,000 per person, but tribal health systems receive about a third of that and urban Indian groups even less, according to the National Council of Urban Indian Health. COVID-19 added another blow to this already stressed system.

Smith introduced a bill this summer that would usher \$200 million in grants to Indian organizations to bolster mental health and addiction treatment. It is stalled in Congress.

"I'm sick of telling people that their kids are dead," Kleszyk said.

In January, Rachel Taylor's heart began aching.

"It was like my heart knew before I did," she said. "My heart was broken four days before he even died."

On January 11, she opened his bedroom door. His skin was purple and ice cold.

"Come back, my baby, come back," she screamed.

The toxicology report said that he'd died of a combination of alprazolam, the drug in Xanax, and fentanyl. At first she put his ashes in an urn, but it was sharp metal. A friend made the buckskin bag that she could hug.

The anniversary of his death is approaching on Jan. 11, and it is customary in her culture to return him to nature after a year of grieving.

But every morning, she kisses his bag. He'd always loved to laugh, so Taylor teases it.

"Keep an eye on the cat," she'll say. Then she tells the cat to keep an eye on him.

"The medicine man says I have to let him go back to the Earth," she said. "But I don't think I'm going to be able to do that. He left me too soon."

SD Lottery

By The Associated Press undefined

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) _ These South Dakota lotteries were drawn Tuesday:

Mega Millions

25-31-58-64-67, Mega Ball: 24, Megaplier: 3

(twenty-five, thirty-one, fifty-eight, sixty-four, sixty-seven; Mega Ball: twenty-four; Megaplier: three)

Estimated jackpot: \$171 million

Powerball

Estimated jackpot: \$378 million

Tuesday's Scores

The Associated Press

GIRLS PREP BASKETBALL=

Alcester-Hudson 52, Canton 46

Bennett County 37, Lead-Deadwood 21

Centerville 60, Gayville-Volin 40

Chamberlain 52, Kimball/White Lake 44

Dakota Valley 67, Hartington Cedar Catholic, Neb. 28

Douglas 62, Rapid City Central 39

Faith 62, Dupree 37

Florence/Henry 61, Clark/Willow Lake 36

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Garretson 66, Dell Rapids 43
Harding County 54, Hettinger/Scranton, N.D. 44
Jones County 56, Stanley County 26
Kadoka Area 52, Philip 46
Lemmon 55, New England, N.D. 34
McCook Central/Montrose 53, Chester 51
Milbank 48, Webster 30
Miller 38, Wessington Springs 30
Mt. Vernon/Plankinton 62, Sanborn Central/Woonsocket 43
North Central, Neb. 48, Gregory 47, OT
Rapid City Stevens 63, Sturgis Brown 34
Scotland 38, Burke 35
Sioux Falls Jefferson 51, Tea Area 43
Sioux Falls Washington 72, Huron 50
Sioux Valley 58, Beresford 48
St. Thomas More 49, Hill City 38
Tripp-Delmont/Armour 44, Freeman Academy/Marion 30
Vermillion 47, Tri-Valley 37
Viborg-Hurley 53, Elk Point-Jefferson 41
Wagner 60, Menno 16
Wall 56, Belle Fourche 53
Yankton 40, Aberdeen Central 37

BOYS PREP BASKETBALL=

Aberdeen Roncalli 51, Northwestern 40
Canistota 50, Bridgewater-Emery 36
Canton 67, Alcester-Hudson 22
Chester 53, McCook Central/Montrose 44
Clark/Willow Lake 58, Florence/Henry 50
Deubrook 59, Madison 55
Elk Point-Jefferson 53, Viborg-Hurley 45
Faulkton 44, Wolsey-Wessington 36
Flandreau 78, Castlewood 56
Freeman Academy/Marion 68, Tripp-Delmont/Armour 41
Gayville-Volin 49, Centerville 42
Groton Area 70, Redfield 58
Harding County 54, Grant County/Mott-Regent Co-op, N.D. 49
Harding County 54, Mott-Regent, N.D. 49
Hot Springs 52, New Underwood 32
LeMars, Iowa 56, Harrisburg 51, OT
Lemmon 59, New England, N.D. 45
Milbank 55, Webster 44
Mt. Vernon/Plankinton 63, Sanborn Central/Woonsocket 29
North Central, Neb. 52, Gregory 44
Oldham-Ramona/Rutland 68, Arlington 62
Parkston 60, Parker 58
Philip 54, Kadoka Area 47
Rapid City Central 59, Douglas 52
Rapid City Stevens 60, Sturgis Brown 31

Sioux Falls Jefferson 63, Sioux Falls Lincoln 61
Sioux Falls Washington 61, Huron 53
Sioux Valley 77, Beresford 61
St. Thomas More 49, Hill City 38
Stanley County 56, Jones County 41
Vermillion 70, Tri-Valley 35
Wagner 69, Menno 31
Warner 69, Waverly-South Shore 34
Wessington Springs 59, Miller 45
Yankton 74, Aberdeen Central 43

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

Arrest warrant issued in Arkansas for ex-nursing home owner

LITTLE ROCK, Ark. (AP) — An arrest warrant has been issued for a former nursing home owner on eight Medicaid fraud charges involving his facilities in Arkansas, the state's attorney general said Monday.

Joseph Schwartz also faces two counts of state tax violations for failing to pay taxes that were withheld from employees' paychecks, Attorney General Leslie Rutledge said.

Schwartz operated Skyline Health Care, which at one point held licenses for one out of every 10 nursing homes in the state, the Arkansas Democrat-Gazette reported. Schwartz has relinquished most of his nursing homes, including those in Arkansas, because of financial insolvency.

Schwartz' attorney, Bill James, told the newspaper that his client is expected to surrender in January and that he will plead not guilty to the charges.

Schwartz was also sued in federal court in 2020 by former employees in multiple states who claimed that they were left without health insurance even though money had been deducted from their paychecks. Five plaintiffs who worked at Skyline-operated facilities in South Dakota, Kansas, Nebraska and Arkansas filed the suit.

Skyline once operated more than 100 nursing homes under numerous subsidiary companies. Those facilities were also in New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Florida, Massachusetts, Kentucky and Tennessee, according to an Associated Press review.

Noem pens bill to block race theory in schools, colleges

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — Republican Gov. Kristi Noem has drafted a bill that would block teaching critical race theory in South Dakota schools, public universities and technical colleges.

Noem announced the legislation on Monday, the Sioux Falls Argus Leader reported.

Critical race theory is an academic concept that originated in the 1970s. It focuses on how racism is embedded in legal systems in the United States.

South Dakota education officials say critical race theory isn't part of state curriculum in schools or colleges. But Noem said the theory teaches a false and divisive message.

Her bill would prohibit teaching that any race, religion, sex or ethnicity is inherently superior or inferior; that anyone should feel guilt, anguish or distress because of their race, religion, sex or ethnicity; or that people are inherently responsible for past actions because of their race, sex, religion or ethnicity.

The ACLU of South Dakota said Monday it opposes the bill, saying it could censor U.S. history discussions and local school districts should decide their own curriculums.

Twenty-nine other states have introduced similar bills or taken steps to restrict teaching critical race theory or limit how teachers discuss racism and sexism, according to Education Week. North Dakota has blocked critical race theory teachings.

Fire damages 12 rooms at Custer State Park lodge

CUSTER, S.D. (AP) — A fire damaged about a third of the rooms at a popular Custer State Park lodge this past weekend, authorities said.

Firefighters were called to the Sylvan Lake Lodge on Saturday night and discovered heavy smoke and flames extending to the roof. Numerous departments worked throughout the night to extinguish the blaze.

South Dakota Public Radio reported Monday that firefighters contained the flames to the lodge's hotel wing. Twelve of 35 rooms were severely damaged. Park Superintendent Matt Snyder says the building is insured and the state will rebuild the damaged portions. The lodge was already closed for the winter when the fire broke out.

The stone-and-timber lodge was built in 1937, funded in part through Depression-era New Deal programs. A wing of additional rooms was added in 1991. The original Sylvan Lake Hotel was a stopping point for adventurers looking to climb Black Elk Peak, the highest point in America east of the Rockies, according to the lodge's website.

Russian pipeline faces big hurdles amid Ukraine tensions

By DAVID McHUGH and VLADIMIR ISACHENKOV Associated Press

FRANKFURT, Germany (AP) — The pipeline is built and being filled with natural gas. But Russia's Nord Stream 2 faces a rocky road before any gas flows to Germany, with its new leaders adopting a more skeptical tone toward the project and tensions ratcheting up over Russia's troop buildup at the Ukrainian border.

The pipeline opposed by Ukraine, Poland and the U.S. awaits approval from Germany and the European Union to bypass other countries and start bringing natural gas directly to Europe. The continent is struggling with a shortage that has sent prices surging, fueling inflation and raising fears about what would come next if gas supplies become critically low.

The U.S. has stressed targeting Nord Stream 2 as a way to counter any new Russian military move against Ukraine, and the project already faces legal and bureaucratic hurdles. As European and U.S. leaders confer on how to deal with Russia's pressure on Ukraine, persistent political objections — particularly from EU members like Poland — add another challenge to one of Russian President Vladimir Putin's key projects.

Former German Chancellor Angela Merkel backed the pipeline, and the country's new leader, Olaf Scholz, did so as her finance minister. But his new government took a more distanced tone after the Greens party joined the governing coalition. The Greens' campaign position was that the fossil fuel pipeline doesn't help fight global warming and undermines strategic EU interests.

Top German officials, including Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock, have said the project doesn't meet EU anti-monopoly regulations.

"Nord Stream 2 was a geopolitical mistake," Habeck recently told the newspaper Frankfurter Allgemeine Sonntagszeitung. "The question is open if it will be able to start operating," adding that further "aggression" meant "nothing is off the table."

As chancellor, Scholz has been cautious in his comments, and it's not clear if he's willing to go as far as U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken, who has said it's "very unlikely" that gas will flow if Russia "renewed its aggression" toward Ukraine.

Pressed on whether an invasion would halt the pipeline, deputy German government spokesman Wolfgang Buechner said Nord Stream 2 is "an undertaking of a private business that is largely completed" and that regulatory approval "has no political dimension." He but stressed that military aggression would have "high costs and sanctions."

Scholz "never makes things completely clear," said Stefan Meister, an expert on Russian energy policy at the German Council on Foreign Relations. "So I am not sure under which conditions he would really agree to stop the pipeline."

Still, Meister said, there was "a new tone, a new rhetoric from the new German government."

The pipeline would double the volume of gas pumped by Russian-controlled gas giant Gazprom directly to Germany, adding to a similar pipeline under the Baltic Sea and circumventing existing links through

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Poland and Ukraine. Gazprom argues it would allow more reliable long-term supply and help save billions in transit fees paid to Poland and Ukraine. Gazprom says the pipeline is part of its role as a long-term supplier of affordable energy to Europe, which is heavily dependent on natural gas imports.

Pipeline critics say it increases Russia's leverage over Europe, pits member states against each other and deprives Ukraine of key financial support. Europe also went into winter with scant gas reserves that have sent prices soaring to eight times what they were at the start of the year, with Putin using the crunch to underline his push for final approval of the project.

Gazprom didn't sell gas above its long-term contracts this summer, further increasing unease about Russian motives. Analysts say existing pipelines have enough capacity for Gazprom to have sent more, but it filled domestic reserves first.

For now, the approval process for the pipeline is on hold. German regulators say they can only approve a company formed there, so the Swiss-based Nord Stream 2, owned by a Gazprom subsidiary, is creating a German arm. A decision won't come in the first half of 2022. The European Union's executive commission then must review the project.

Analysts say those decisions are legal, bureaucratic ones not subject to politics.

Critics say Nord Stream 2 doesn't meet an EU requirement to separate the gas supplier from the pipeline operator to prevent a monopoly that could hurt competition and mean higher prices for consumers.

Nord Stream said it "undertakes all necessary efforts to ensure compliance with applicable rules and regulations" and has permits by the four EU countries it passes through.

Even if the pipeline clears regulators, it's not necessarily in the clear because of Poland's opposition. EU members can sue in the European Court of Justice if they disagree with regulators, said Alan Riley, senior fellow at the Atlantic Council and a lawyer specializing in European antitrust and energy issues. EU anti-monopoly rules could bring years of litigation, even a ruling temporarily halting pipeline operations until the case is decided.

"This could go on for some time," Riley said. Final approval "is not a slam-dunk by any means."

Konstantin Kosachev, a deputy speaker of the upper house of Russian parliament, deplored the "artificial" obstacles against quickly launching Nord Stream 2. While some argue that Europe has grown more dependent on Russian gas, the country has met all its obligations, he said.

"The opponents of gas projects by Russia and the EU nations fear not that Russian supplies would fail, but just the opposite, that all problems would be solved, leaving no opportunity to accuse Moscow of harboring ill intentions or using energy as a weapon," Kosachev said.

While noting that German Foreign Minister Baerbock's anti-Nord Stream 2 comments reflect her and her party's views, Kosachev emphasized that she represents the entire country now.

"Explaining the failure to provide cheap fuel exclusively by tales about what Russia could allegedly do wouldn't be the best start for the ruling coalition in Berlin," he said. "That's why I don't think that the position of the 'green' minister would have a radical impact on the pipeline's fate, although it's obvious that she wouldn't support it or speed it up."

Even if it never starts, Nord Stream 2 has been worth it for the Kremlin's geopolitical goals because it has sowed division among EU members and between Germany, the EU and the U.S., said Meister of the German Council on Foreign Relations.

"Without being online, the pipeline has already repaid the Kremlin," he said. "Politics and security always trump the economy in Russia."

China defends science exchange program following US arrest

BEIJING (AP) — China on Wednesday defended its international scientific exchange programs in the wake of the conviction of a Harvard University professor charged with hiding his ties to a Chinese-run recruitment program.

Foreign Ministry spokesperson Zhao Lijian said China manages such exchanges along the same lines as the U.S. and other countries.

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U.S. agencies and officials should not “stigmatize” such programs and “instead do something conducive to China-U.S. scientific and people-to-people exchanges and cooperation,” Zhao said.

Charles Lieber, 62, the former chair of Harvard’s department of chemistry and chemical biology, pleaded not guilty to filing false tax returns, making false statements, and failing to file reports for a foreign bank account in China.

Lieber’s defense attorney, Marc Mukasey, had argued that prosecutors lacked proof of the charges, maintaining that investigators kept no records of their interviews with Lieber prior to his arrest.

Prosecutors argued that Lieber, who was arrested in January, knowingly hid his involvement in China’s Thousand Talents Plan to protect his career and reputation. The Chinese program is designed to recruit people with knowledge of foreign technology and intellectual property who could pass secrets on to China.

Lieber denied his involvement during inquiries from U.S. authorities, including the National Institutes of Health, which had provided him with millions of dollars in research funding, prosecutors said.

Lieber also concealed his income from the Chinese program, including \$50,000 a month from the Wuhan University of Technology, up to \$158,000 in living expenses and more than \$1.5 million in grants, according to prosecutors.

In exchange, they said, Lieber agreed to publish articles, organize international conferences and apply for patents on behalf of the Chinese university.

The case is among the highest profile to come from the U.S. Department of Justice’s “China Initiative.”

The effort, launched in 2018 to curb economic espionage from China, has faced criticism that it harms academic research and amounts to racial profiling of Chinese researchers.

Hundreds of faculty members at Stanford, Yale, Berkeley, Princeton, Temple and other prominent colleges have signed letters to U.S. Attorney General Merrick Garland calling on him to end the initiative.

The academics say the effort compromises the nation’s competitiveness in research and technology and has had a chilling effect on recruiting foreign scholars. The letters also complain the investigations have disproportionately targeted researchers of Chinese origin.

Lieber has been on paid administrative leave from Harvard since being arrested in January 2020.

Libya parliament says ‘impossible’ to hold presidential vote

By SAM MAGDY Associated Press

CAIRO (AP) — A Libyan parliamentary committee said Wednesday that it has become “impossible” to hold a long-awaited presidential election in two days as scheduled, in a major blow to international efforts to end a decade of chaos in the oil-rich country.

It was the first official statement that the vote would not happen on Friday, although it had been widely expected amid mounting challenges and calls for a delay. For nearly a year, the election was the lynchpin of international efforts to bring peace to Libya, and many have warned that either scenario — holding the vote on time or postponing it — could be a destabilizing setback.

In a letter to Parliament Speaker Aguila Saleh, lawmaker al-Hadi al-Sagheir, head of the committee tasked to follow the electoral process, said the group found “it is impossible to hold the election as scheduled on Dec. 24.” He did not specify whether another date had been set for the voting, or if it had been cancelled altogether.

The country’s election commission disbanded electoral committees late Tuesday, and it never named a final list of candidates as it was supposed to. It handed responsibility for the vote over to the parliament. Dozens of lawmakers have called on Libyans to take to the streets in protest over the failure of holding the election as planned.

Later Wednesday, the election commission proposed a new date for the first round of the presidential election — Jan. 24. It called on parliament to address the challenges that led to failure to hold the vote as planned on Friday.

Around hundred candidates had put themselves forward, including several high profile individuals who had been banned from the race — including the son of late dictator Moammar Gadhafi, who was

ousted and killed in a NATO-backed uprising in 2011.

Al-Sagheir said his committee reached its conclusion after "reviewing technical, security and judicial reports." He urged Saleh, who suspended his duties to join the presidential race, to return to his job so he could "mobilize efforts" to and help "re-draw a roadmap" to revive the political process.

The vote had faced many challenges, including disputes over the laws governing the elections and occasional infighting among armed groups. Other obstacles include a long-running rift between the country's east and west, and the presence of thousands of foreign fighters and troops in the North African country.

Libya plunged into turmoil after the 2011 uprising and split between rival governments — one in the east, backed by military commander Khalifa Hifter, and another U.N.-supported administration in the capital Tripoli, in the west. Each side is supported by a variety of militias and foreign powers.

In April 2019, Hifter and his forces, backed by Egypt and the United Arab Emirates, launched an offensive to try and capture Tripoli. His campaign collapsed after Turkey stepped up its military support of the U.N.-supported government with hundreds of troops and thousands of Syrian mercenaries.

The October 2020 cease-fire led to the formation of a transitional government with elections scheduled for Dec. 24. The fate of that government is now unclear, as the Parliamentary committee said the government's mandate ends on Dec. 24.

Case drop may show South Africa's omicron peak has passed

By ANDREW MELDRUM Associated Press

JOHANNESBURG (AP) — South Africa's noticeable drop in new COVID-19 cases in recent days may signal that the country's dramatic omicron-driven surge has passed its peak, medical experts say.

Daily virus case counts are notoriously unreliable, as they can be affected by uneven testing, reporting delays and other fluctuations. But they are offering one tantalizing hint — far from conclusive yet — that omicron infections may recede quickly after a ferocious spike.

South Africa has been at the forefront of the omicron wave and the world is watching for any signs of how it may play out there to try to understand what may be in store.

After hitting a high of nearly 27,000 new cases nationwide on Thursday, the numbers dropped to about 15,424 on Tuesday. In Gauteng province — South Africa's most populous with 16 million people, including the largest city, Johannesburg, and the capital, Pretoria — the decrease started earlier and has continued.

"The drop in new cases nationally combined with the sustained drop in new cases seen here in Gauteng province, which for weeks has been the center of this wave, indicates that we are past the peak," Marta Nunes, senior researcher at the Vaccines and Infectious Diseases Analytics department of the University of Witwatersrand, told The Associated Press.

"It was a short wave ... and the good news is that it was not very severe in terms of hospitalizations and deaths," she said. It is "not unexpected in epidemiology that a very steep increase, like what we saw in November, is followed by a steep decrease."

Gauteng province saw its numbers start sharply rising in mid-November. Scientists doing genetic sequencing quickly identified the new, highly mutated omicron variant that was announced to the world on Nov. 25.

Significantly more transmissible, omicron quickly achieved dominance in South Africa. An estimated 90% of COVID-19 cases in Gauteng province since mid-November have been omicron, according to tests.

And the world seems to be quickly following, with omicron already surpassing the delta variant as the dominant coronavirus strain in some countries. In the U.S., omicron accounted for 73% of new infections last week, health officials said — and the variant is responsible for an estimated 90% or more of new infections in the New York area, the Southeast, the industrial Midwest and the Pacific Northwest.

Confirmed coronavirus cases in the U.K. have surged by 60% in a week as omicron overtook delta as the dominant variant there. Worldwide, the variant has been detected in at least 89 countries, according to the World Health Organization.

In South Africa, experts worried that the sheer volume of new infections would overwhelm the country's hospitals, even though omicron appears to cause milder disease, with significantly less hospitalizations,

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patients needing oxygen and deaths.

But then cases in Gauteng started falling. After reaching 16,000 new infections on Dec. 12, the province's numbers have steadily dropped, to just over 3,300 cases Tuesday.

"It's significant. It's very significant," Dr. Fareed Abdullah said of the decrease.

"The rapid rise of new cases has been followed by a rapid fall and it appears we're seeing the beginning of the decline of this wave," said Abdullah, working in the COVID-19 ward at Pretoria's Steve Biko Academic Hospital.

In another sign that South Africa's omicron surge may be receding, a study of health care professionals who tested positive for COVID-19 at Chris Hani Baragwanath hospital in Soweto shows a rapid increase and then a quick decline in cases.

"Two weeks ago we were seeing more than 20 new cases per day and now it is about five or six cases per day," Nunes said.

But, she said, it is still very early and there are several factors that must be closely watched.

South Africa's positivity rate has remained high at 29%, up from just 2% in early November, indicating the virus is still circulating among the population at relatively high levels, she said.

And the country's holiday season is now underway, when many businesses close down for a month and people travel to visit family, often in rural areas. This could accelerate omicron's spread across South Africa and to neighboring countries, experts said.

"In terms of the massive everyday doubling that we were seeing just over a week ago with huge numbers, that seems to have settled," said Professor Veronica Uekermann, head of the COVID-19 response team at Steve Biko Academic Hospital.

"But it is way too early to suggest that we have passed the peak. There are too many external factors, including the movement during the holiday season and the general behavior during this period," she said, noting that infections spiked last year after the holiday break.

It's summertime in South Africa and many gatherings are outdoors, which may make a difference between the omicron-driven wave here and the surges in Europe and North America, where people tend to gather indoors.

Another unknown factor is how much omicron has spread among South Africans without causing disease.

Some health officials in New York have suggested that because South Africa appears to have experienced a quick, mild wave of omicron, the variant may behave similarly there and elsewhere in the U.S. But Nunes cautions against jumping to those conclusions.

"Each setting, each country is different. The populations are different. The demographics of the population, the immunity is different in different countries," she said. South Africa's population, with an average age of 27, is more youthful than many Western countries, for instance.

Most of the patients currently being treated for COVID-19 in hospitals are unvaccinated, Uekermann emphasized. About 40% of adult South Africans have been inoculated with two doses.

"All my patients in ICU are unvaccinated," Uekermann said. "So our vaccinated people are doing better in this wave, for sure. We have got some patients who are very ill with severe COVID, and these are unvaccinated patients."

AP journalist Mogomotsi Magome in Johannesburg contributed.

Follow all AP stories on the coronavirus pandemic at <https://apnews.com/hub/coronavirus-pandemic>

After SCOTUS hearing, a new look at baby 'safe haven' laws

By ASTRID GALVAN Associated Press

PHOENIX (AP) — For years, Nicole Olson had longed for a baby and gone through a rigorous and emotional adoption process. Then Olson and her husband got a call asking if they'd like to adopt a newborn.

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That day. As soon as possible.

The baby had been relinquished through what's known as a safe haven law. Such laws, which exist in every state, allow parents to leave a baby at a safe location without criminal consequences. The laws began to pass in state legislatures in the early 2000s in response to reports of gruesome baby killings and abandonments, which received copious media attention. Infants are at the highest risk of being killed in their first day of life, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Olson rushed to a Target, filled four carts with baby stuff and was home with the newborn boy by dinnertime. Ten years later, the baby Olson and her husband, Michael, named Porter is thriving. He's athletic, funny and has adjusted well after a rough time during the pandemic, Olson said.

Safe haven laws drew attention this month when U.S. Supreme Court Justice Amy Coney Barrett raised the role they play in the debate around abortion rights. Barrett made the comments during a hearing this month on a Mississippi law that would ban most abortions after 15 weeks of pregnancy — and possibly upend abortion rights established by the 1973 *Roe v. Wade* decision legalizing abortion throughout the United States, and upheld by the court's 1992 ruling in *Planned Parenthood v. Casey*.

Barrett, with a long record of personal opposition to abortion, zeroed in on a key argument against forcing women into parenthood, suggesting safe haven laws address those concerns. "Why don't the safe haven laws take care of that problem?" she asked.

Julie Rikelman, the attorney arguing against the Mississippi law, rebutted that argument, saying abortion rights are not just about forced motherhood but about forced pregnancy.

"It imposes unique physical demands and risks on women and, in fact, has impact on all of their lives, on their ability to care for other children, other family members, on their ability to work. And, in particular, in Mississippi, those risks are alarmingly high," said Rikelman, of the Center for Reproductive Rights.

In a traditional adoption, a family knows who the mother is. They have her medical history and often keep a relationship with her.

That's what Olson, a Phoenix-area high school teacher, was expecting when she and her husband worked with a private agency after years of trying other routes. Their son, Paul, who was 7 years old at the time, was also eager for a sibling.

But when they met their newborn, the couple didn't know his exact date of birth, his race, or any pertinent medical information.

"We didn't really know what we were walking into. It's just one of those things where it's a total leap of faith," Olson said. "But I feel like that's true of any child, whether it's your biological or adopted."

It's hard to find critics of safe haven laws, and advocates say if they save even one baby from being killed, they are worthwhile.

But some question their efficacy.

Adam Pertman, president and CEO of The National Center on Adoption and Permanency, said the laws' effectiveness, including in preventing death, aren't studied enough.

"It's flawed from the get-go because a woman who would put her kid in a trash can is not instead going to see a sign and say 'Oh I'll go to the police station instead,'" he said, adding that a woman in that situation is "not cogent enough to make a decision, or she wouldn't put her kid in the trash can."

Pertman said safe haven laws don't address the needs a woman might have if she were in such a crisis that she'd hurt her child, nor do they provide resources for someone in need.

Pertman says further restricting abortion access, or overturning *Roe v. Wade* altogether, could result in more children being left at safe havens and not adopted the traditional way — with medical background and thorough health information.

There isn't a national database that tracks the number of babies turned over through safe haven laws, but the National Safe Haven Alliance, a nonprofit that promotes the laws and provides resources to parents in need, collects figures from most states each year.

Slightly over 4,000 babies have been surrendered since the first law took effect in 1999, according to both the organization and the CDC, which put out a report in 2020.

The CDC found that a majority of infant homicides that take place on the day of birth are committed by

young, unmarried mothers with lower education levels who had not sought prenatal care, and that they're often associated with a hidden, unplanned pregnancy and with giving birth at home.

The study found that the overall infant homicide rate was 13% lower in the years since safe haven laws were adopted nationwide. The study compared data from 1989 to 1998 to data from 2008 to 2017. Every state had adopted safe haven laws by 2008.

The number of babies killed during their first day of life dropped by nearly 67%, according to the study. But most homicide victims were too old to have been relinquished under safe haven laws at the time of their deaths. In 11 states and Puerto Rico, only infants who are 72 hours old or younger can be relinquished to a designated safe haven, while 19 states accept infants up to 1 month old, and other states have varying age limits in their statutes.

The CDC recommends that states "evaluate the effectiveness of their Safe Haven Laws and other prevention strategies to ensure they are achieving the intended benefits of preventing infant homicides."

A vast majority of child welfare advocates praise safe haven laws, saying they keep babies alive and safe when a birth parent isn't able to care for them. The babies are adopted quickly, rarely going through foster care.

But many caution that safe haven placement as an alternative to abortion is flawed: It doesn't consider the health and economic risks a woman faces in pregnancy, nor does it account for the risks of childbirth in the nation with the highest maternal mortality rate among developed countries.

Olson helps with an organization that advocates for safe haven laws and hopes more people learn about them.

"The biggest message I've been trying to send out is when you have a desperate situation, somebody will be there to help," Olson said.

Galván writes about issues impacting Latinos in the U.S. for the AP's Race and Ethnicity team. Follow her on Twitter.

'We have stock': Smaller stores aim for last-minute shoppers

By MAE ANDERSON undefined

NEW YORK (AP) — After a wearying nearly two years of the pandemic, independent retailers are cautiously hoping their holiday seasons will be bright, despite the challenges this year ranging from supply chain snags to shortages of hot holiday items.

Many businesses ordered decorations, toys, stocking stuffers and other items well in advance this year and have turned to smaller vendors to fill in any gaps in their inventory. They've reached out directly to customers on social media. And they're hoping that shortages at bigger stores stemming from supply chain issues this year will lead to a burst of last-minute shopping in their stores.

So far, worries about omicron and rising cases haven't made a measurable dent on holiday shopping. For the week that ended Dec. 18, store traffic was up nearly 20% from a year earlier, though down 23% from the same week in the pre-pandemic year of 2019, according to Sensormatic Solutions. But there are still a few crucial shopping days left.

Small retailers are hoping they can capture some of the expected growth in holiday sales. The holiday shopping season is crucial because it can account for 20% or more of annual sales for retailers, and boosts store traffic and new customers. The National Retail Federation predicts a sales increase of 8.5% to 10.5% for all of November and December, after 8% growth in those months in 2020.

American consumers, flush with cash from government stimulus, rising stock prices and increases to their home equity, have kept spending despite high inflation and the ongoing pandemic. That's put pressure on the global supply chain, leaving business owners scrambling to stock up on the products consumers want.

Last December, vendors warned Teresa Pries that shipping costs would be on the rise. So Pries, owner of two Revival 23 clothing and gift boutiques in Fresno and Clovis, California, took a gamble for this year: She ordered about four times what she normally would before the price increases kicked in. She also

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rented storage units for the first time to have room for the extra inventory.

"It's a little scary being a small business investing so heavily, but it has really paid off, our customers are thrilled," she said. "We thought okay, let's go for it. It's probably one of the best business decisions we had. Scary but good."

That gamble has paid off big time for Pries; her sales are up 90% compared with the same period last year. Now, her worry is less whether she bought too much, but the fact that she's selling out of items.

"I'm nearly sold out of every single candle, which has been a big gift item," she said.

As far as any worries about omicron putting a damper on store traffic: "We haven't seen anything that would indicate that is a factor," she said.

Other businesses are keeping up practices they started during the pandemic. Ann Cantrell has owned Annie's Blue Ribbon General Store in Brooklyn for 14 years. She said social media promotions to reach out to customers during the pandemic are still boosting sales, including a video of new items each Friday.

"When something new comes in we put it in our (Instagram and Facebook) Story online," she said. "We really relied heavily on that video every Friday, it started during pandemic and got an immediate reaction."

Still, she fears some sales will be hampered by the supply chain. For important items she ordered from multiple vendors. For example, she ordered Hanukkah gelt – chocolate coins wrapped in foil -- from three vendors and got two out of three.

"I think this is the year when you see it you buy it, on some levels with the supply chain" she said. "We're grateful for what we have in store, and waiting for exciting things we ordered months ago and are still waiting for."

Corey O'Loughlin and Nina Vitalino co-own Prep Obsessed in Palm Beach Gardens, Florida, an online boutique that also has a brick-and-mortar location. Black Friday sales jumped more than 30% over last year, a relief for the owners.

"I think that our biggest takeaway (from the Black Friday shopping weekend) is we're limited only by the inventory we can get, and speed of shipping product," Vitalino said. "If we're able to get more great product we can sell it."

They've had some delays problems getting items from some larger suppliers, such as clothing, gift and home decor merchant Mud Pie. So they've gotten creative, sourcing "smaller vendors, mom and pop wholesalers that we haven't done big business with before," Vitalino said.

"Customers are regularly commenting about how pleased they are with our inventory levels and selection," O'Loughlin said. "Most large retailers are completely picked over at this point, but we have full stock of our items."

Businesses are hoping for a surge during the last few days before Christmas. Guido Campello, co-CEO of Journelle, operates four lingerie stores, three in Manhattan and one in Chicago, Illinois. Journelle also has its own lingerie line. They stocked up about 35% more for the holidays. So far it has paid off, with sales up 30% over the Black Friday shopping weekend compared with a year ago.

Having product in stock will boost last-minute shopping, Campello expects.

"It's very clear, my team has all been calling each other, going out to stores to shop for ourselves," he said. "Nobody has inventory, nobody has sizes. This is a size driven category. Every single bra has to have 14 sizes and different colors."

While sellouts are always an issue at the last minute, Campello says they're putting the word out they'll have plenty of offerings. The store's social advertising leading up to Christmas is communicating: "We have stock, we've got you covered."

Gaza's old battery pileups pose risk to health, environment

By FARES AKRAM Associated Press

GAZA CITY, Gaza Strip (AP) — Virtually every household in the Gaza Strip relies on batteries to keep their home running -- a result of years of chronic power outages.

These batteries, fueling everything from lights to internet routers to solar panels, have helped mitigate

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one crisis. But they are causing another one as huge mounds of old and used batteries pile up in a territory lacking the ability to safely dispose of them.

"There is a real danger that these batteries are collected and stored randomly in the open air; not in warehouses," said Mohammed Musleh, an official with Gaza's Environment Authority.

The most pressing threat, he said, is that "the batteries break and ooze liquid that includes sulfuric acid and leaks into the soil and then the water aquifer."

Gaza's Environment Authority estimates that there are 25,000 tons of old batteries piled up at several locations across the tiny and overcrowded coastal territory. There are no recycling facilities in Gaza and a punishing blockade imposed by Israel and Egypt prevents shipping the batteries abroad for safe disposal.

According to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, used batteries create a number of risks to public health and the environment. Different types of batteries contain potentially dangerous types of metals such as mercury, lead and cadmium, while some can catch fire.

Such risks are especially acute in Gaza, where the health care system has been ravaged by years of conflict and lack of funds and where the environment is already in dire condition. Nearly all of Gaza's water is undrinkable due to high saline levels caused by overextraction.

Israel bombed Gaza's sole power plant during a round of fighting in 2006 and imposed the blockade with Egypt the following year after the Hamas militant group seized power in the strip from rival Palestinian forces. The result: a daily blackout of at least eight hours, punctuated with longer outages that can last for days during winter storms or conflicts.

This has turned batteries into an integral part of day-to-day life for the territory's 2 million residents.

The Gaza City municipality has a hazardous waste unit that is meant to safely dispose of old batteries. But Ahmed Abu Abdu, head of the unit, says very few batteries reach him. Instead, a small private industry has sprouted up.

Every day, collectors in cars or donkey-drawn carts roam around Gaza, calling over loudspeakers for people wishing to sell old batteries. Depending on their size, old batteries can fetch up to \$2 apiece.

Khaled Ayyad is one of dozens of merchants who buy the old batteries. For eight years, he has collected and stored them at a warehouse in northern Gaza.

Ayyad has one goal in mind: to export the batteries and make a decent profit.

"As the Israeli side allows them (batteries) into Gaza, it has to let them go out," he said. "We can sell them to factories in Israel, European countries and all over the world."

But exporting batteries is still banned, and Ayyad is facing a new dilemma: He has about 500 tons of batteries accumulated in the warehouse.

He can't resell, export or dump them, and he has been paying storage fees. So, he has a message to Hamas: "We call on the officials in Gaza to speak to the Egyptian side to let us export them there."

There is a precedent. Hamas and Egypt have boosted trade cooperation in recent years through a crossing in the border town of Rafah. The crossing is used mainly to deliver goods like construction materials, fuel and tobacco products into Gaza. But it has also been used to ship scrap metal out to Egypt.

While Ayyad's warehouse has a concrete floor, most other storage locations are outdoors, risking spills of hazardous materials straight into the soil.

There have been no studies conducted on the threat to the environment, but research carried out in 2013 by a Gaza neurologist and an environmental science expert warned that children of people dealing with discarded batteries have "different degrees" of poisoning from exposure to lead.

Trying to reduce the danger, Hamas authorities have banned the import of secondhand batteries since 2017.

The Gaza-based al-Mezan Center for Human Rights, which in 2018 issued a report warning of the threat of batteries, said the danger is "far-reaching."

"There is a problem," said Hussein Hammad of the rights group. "Here, the batteries have started to affect human rights: the right to health, the right to clean environment and the right to life."

Development and conservation clash at Komodo National Park

By VICTORIA MILKO Associated Press

JAKARTA, Indonesia (AP) — On a dirt path, forked yellow tongue darting from its mouth, a member of world's largest lizard species lazes on an island in eastern Indonesia's Komodo National Park as tourists snap photos. And about 18 miles (30 kilometers) away on another park island that harbors Komodo dragons, trees have been removed and concrete poured for new tourist facilities that have aroused the ire of residents and environmental activists.

The construction is part of an ambitious Indonesian initiative that has generated tensions between a government that wants to develop natural attractions for luxury tourism and conservationists who fear habitat for the endangered Komodo dragon will be irreparably harmed. United Nations officials have also voiced concerns about potential tourism impacts on this unique wildlife-rich park.

Encompassing about 850 square miles (2,200 square kilometers) of land and marine area, Komodo National Park was established in 1980 to help protect the famed dragons. Indonesia's Ministry of Environment and Forestry estimates around 3,000 of the reptiles live there today, along with manatee-like dugongs, sea turtles, whales and more than a thousand species of tropical fish.

Because of its biodiversity and beauty, the park became a United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization World Heritage Site in 1991. And it's one of Indonesia's crown jewels for tourism, typically drawing hundreds of thousands of visitors from around the world each year.

For years the government has been trying to figure out how to best capitalize on the park, most recently designating it part of the country's "10 New Balis" initiative — an effort to draw more tourists, as the island of Bali did before border restrictions during the COVID-19 pandemic.

"We are embarking into a new era of tourism in Indonesia based on nature and culture, focusing on sustainability and quality tourism," Indonesian Minister of Tourism and Creative Economy Sandiaga Uno told The Associated Press.

Part of that multimillion dollar tourism development is a project on Rinca Island, where more than one-third of the park's dragons are estimated to live on generally hot and dry terrain. The construction includes an expanded ranger station, viewing platform, boat dock, toilets and other infrastructure.

The project worries local environmental activists and residents within park boundaries who say their livelihoods as tour guides, boat drivers and souvenir sellers depend on the draw of the area's natural beauty.

"When we talk about the development in the conservation area, we have to think ... whether this is a wisely considered economic effect for the local people — or the environmental effect," said Gregorius Afioma, a member of the local non-governmental organization Sun Spirit for Justice and Peace. "The situation now is like collective suicide.

"We think that this kind of business will eventually kill others' businesses and even themselves because they destroyed the environment," Afioma said, adding that local residents also fear they won't get construction jobs for the luxury tourist destination the Indonesian government is promoting.

UNESCO — the United Nations body that designates World Heritage Site status — has also raised concerns about development in the park.

"The state party did not inform us, as required by the operational guidelines," said Guy Debonnet, chief of the body's natural heritage unit. "This is definitely a project of concern, because we feel that the impacts on the universal value (of the park) have not been properly evaluated."

During a meeting in July, UNESCO expressed other concerns, such as the project's reduction of the park's wilderness zone to one-third the previous area, addition of tourism concessions within the property, lack of an adequate environmental impact assessment, and a target to dramatically increase visitors.

"Third-party information transmitted to the State Party indicates that a target of 500,000 annual visitors for the property has been proposed, which is more than double the pre-COVID-19 pandemic visitor numbers," said a report from the meeting. "This raises the question of how this tourism model fits (Indonesia's) vision of moving away from mass tourism to more sustainable approaches."

At UNESCO's request, the country submitted more information about the project. But after reviewing it, the U.N. agency requested in October 2020 that Indonesia not "proceed with any tourism infrastructure

project that may affect the Outstanding Universal Value of the property prior to a review of the relevant environmental impact assessment” by the International Union for Conservation of Nature.

IUCN is an international, non-governmental organization that provides UNESCO’s World Heritage Committee with technical evaluations of natural heritage properties.

After multiple attempts to get permission from government authorities, The Associated Press was unable to gain access to the construction site, which has been closed to the public for months. But satellite imagery shows construction continued after UNESCO requested the project be paused. The government did not respond to an email last week seeking comment.

As of Dec. 6, UNESCO still had not received the requested revised assessment, said Debonnet, the world heritage unit chief.

The Indonesian government also granted at least two business permits in Komodo National Park, including for projects on Rinca, Komodo and Padar islands, according to an email to the AP from Shana Fatina, president director at the Labuan Bajo Flores Tourism Authority, which helps coordinate government tourism efforts.

Some experts fear tourism expansion in the park could lead to disturbance of Komodo dragon habitat.

The predatory lizards, which can reach a length of 10 feet (3 meters) and more than 300 pounds (135 kilograms), were recently moved from “vulnerable” to “endangered” status on the IUCN list of threatened species. The organization cited the impacts of climate change and deterioration of the dragons’ habitat — including human encroachment — as reasons for the change.

Unless carefully managed, tourism projects could “have a big impact, not just from the number of people disturbing the behavior of the dragons and disturbing their prey, but also how much freshwater is being siphoned off,” said Bryan Fry, an associate professor at the School of Biological Sciences at the University of Queensland in Australia. “That could dramatically impact the very delicate balance of these islands.”

The opening date for the new Rinca Island facilities has yet to be announced. UNESCO’s Debonnet said it is engaged in talks with Indonesian officials to arrange a monitoring mission to assess the impact of ongoing development on the park and review its state of conservation.

And while World Heritage sites are usually discussed by the UNESCO committee on two-year cycles, Komodo National Park will be discussed in 2022, said Debonnet. “That is kind of an indication that we see there is some urgency in this issue,” he said.

Follow Victoria Milko on Twitter: @thevmilko

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Democrats ‘not giving up’ on Biden bill, talks with Manchin

By LISA MASCARO and FARNOUSH AMIRI Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden appears determined to return to the negotiating table with Sen. Joe Manchin, the holdout Democrat who effectively tanked the party’s signature \$2 trillion domestic policy initiative with his own jarring year-end announcement.

Biden, responding to reporters’ questions Tuesday at the White House, joked that he holds no grudges against the conservative West Virginia senator whose rejection of the social services and climate change bill stunned Washington just days ago.

Instead, the president spoke passionately about the families that would benefit from the Democrats’ ambitious, if now highly uncertain, plan to pour billions of dollars into child care, health care and other services.

“Sen. Manchin and I are going to get something done,” Biden said.

The president’s off-the-cuff remarks constitute his first public statement as Democrats struggle to pick up the pieces from Manchin’s announcement over the weekend that he would not support the bill, as is.

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Manchin essentially crushed Biden's sweeping policy measure in the 50-50 Senate, siding with all Republicans who oppose the bill.

Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer also struck a determined tone later Tuesday, telling Senate Democrats on 90-minute video call to expect a vote in January on the package as they push toward a deal.

Schumer acknowledged the frustration among Democrats but he told senators the party was "not giving up" on the proposal, according to a Democrat on the private call who provided details on the condition of anonymity.

But the Democrats face serious questions over whether the \$2 trillion initiative can be refashioned to win his crucial vote or the party will be saddled with a devastating defeat.

Manchin and his party are so far apart, his relationships so bruised after months of failed talks, it's unclear how they even get back to the negotiating table, let alone revive the sprawling more than 2,100-page social services and climate change bill.

Biden spoke forcefully of the economic pressures that strip away the "dignity of a parent" trying to pay the bills, and the assistance millions could receive from the federal government with the legislation. He also said his package would help ease inflationary pressures and pointed to analyses suggesting it would boost the economy.

"I want to get things done," Biden said. "I still think there's a possibility of getting Build Back Better done."

The setback has thrown Biden's signature legislative effort into deep doubt at a critical time, closing out the end of the president's first year and ahead of congressional midterm elections when the Democrats' slim hold on Congress is at risk.

Coupled with solid Republican opposition, Manchin's vote is vital on this and other initiatives, including the Democrats' priority voting rights legislation that Schumer also said would come to an early vote.

On Tuesday, Schumer said that if Republicans continued to block voting rights legislation in January, the Senate would bring forward proposals for changing the Senate rules, the Democrat on the call said. That's a nod to long-running efforts to adjust or end the filibuster, which typically requires 60-vote threshold for measures to advance.

While Manchin has said he cannot explain the bill to constituents in West Virginia, a union representing coal miners, including some of the nearly 12,000 from his home state, put out a statement urging the lawmaker to "revisit his opposition" to the package.

Cecil Roberts, the president of the United Mine Workers of America, outlined the ways the package would benefit union members, including those in West Virginia, which is the most coal-dependent state in the country.

Some of those provisions include language that would extend the current fee paid by coal companies to fund benefits received by victims of coal workers' pneumoconiosis, or black lung. The bill would also provide tax incentives to encourage manufacturers to build facilities in the coalfields, potentially employing miners who have lost their jobs, according to the union.

The next steps remain highly uncertain for the president and his party, with Congress on recess for the holiday break.

The White House appeared to take interest in Manchin's preference for a reimagined bill that would tackle a few top priorities, for longer duration, rather than the multifaceted and far-reaching House-passed version.

But it will be extraordinarily difficult for progressive and centrist Democrats to rebuild trust to launch a fresh round of negotiations having devoted much of Biden's first year in office to what is now essentially a collapsed effort.

The sweeping package was among the biggest of its kind ever considered in Congress, unleashing billions of dollars to help American families nationwide — nearly all paid for with higher taxes on corporations and the wealthy.

For families with children, it would provide free pre-school and child care aid. There are subsidies for health insurance premiums, lower prescription drug costs and expanded Medicaid access in states that do not yet provide it. The bill would start a new hearing aid program for seniors. And it includes more than

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\$500 billion to curb carbon emissions, a figure considered the largest federal expenditure ever to combat climate change.

A potential new deadline for Biden and his party comes with the expiration of an expanded child tax credit that has been sending up to \$300 monthly directly to millions of families' bank accounts. If Congress fails to act, the money won't arrive in January.

Associated Press writers Darlene Superville and Colleen Long contributed to this report.

He wore a wire, risked his life to expose who was in the KKK

By JASON DEAREN Associated Press

JACKSONVILLE, Fla. (AP) — For nearly 10 years, Joseph Moore lived a secret double life.

At times the U.S. Army veteran donned a white robe and hood as a hit man for the Ku Klux Klan in North Florida. He attended clandestine meetings and participated in cross burnings. He even helped plan the murder of a Black man.

However, Moore wore something else during his years in the klan – a wire for the FBI. He recorded his conversations with his fellow klansmen, sometimes even captured video, and shared what he learned with federal agents trying to crack down on white supremacists in Florida law enforcement.

One minor mistake, one tell, he believed, meant a certain, violent death.

"I had to realize that this man would shoot me in the face in a heartbeat," Moore said in a deep, slow drawl. He sat in his living room recently amid twinkling lights on a Christmas tree, remembering a particularly scary meeting in 2015. But it was true of many of his days.

Before such meetings, he would sit alone in his truck, his diaphragm heaving with the deep breathing techniques he learned as an Army-trained sniper.

The married father of four would help the federal government foil at least two murder plots, according to court records from the criminal trial for two of the klansmen. He was also an active informant when the FBI exposed klan members working as law enforcement officers in Florida at the city, county and state levels.

Today, he and his family live under new names in a Florida subdivision of manicured lawns where his kids play in the street. Geese wander slowly between man-made lakes. Apart from testifying in court, the 50-year-old has never discussed his undercover work in the KKK publicly. But he reached out to a reporter after The Associated Press published a series of stories about white supremacists working in Florida's prisons that were based, in part, on records and recordings detailing his work with the FBI.

"The FBI wanted me to gather as much information about these individuals and confirm their identities," Moore said of law enforcement officers who were active members of or working with the klan.

"From where I sat, with the intelligence laid out, I can tell you that none of these agencies have any control over any of it. It is more prevalent and consequential than any of them are willing to admit."

The FBI first asked Moore to infiltrate a klan group called the United Northern and Southern Knights of the KKK in rural north Florida in 2007. At klan gatherings, Moore noted license plate numbers and other identifying information of suspected law enforcement officers who were members.

Moore said he noted connections between the hate group and law enforcement in Florida and Georgia. He said he came across dozens of police officers, prison guards, sheriff deputies and other law enforcement officers who were involved with the klan and outlaw motorcycle clubs.

While operating inside this first klan group, Moore alerted the feds to a plot to murder a Hispanic truck driver. Then, he says, he pointed the FBI toward a deputy with the Alachua County Sheriff's Office, Wayne Kerschner, who was a member of the same group.

During Moore's years in the United Northern and Southern Knights, the FBI also identified a member of the klan cell working for the Fruitland Park, Florida, police department. Moore said he'd provided identifying information that was useful in that case.

His years as an informant occurred during a critical time for the nation's domestic terrorism efforts. In 2006, the FBI had circulated an intelligence assessment about the klan and other groups trying to infiltrate

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law enforcement ranks.

"White supremacist groups have historically engaged in strategic efforts to infiltrate and recruit from law enforcement," the FBI wrote. The assessment said some in law enforcement were volunteering "professional resources to white supremacist causes with which they sympathize."

The FBI did not answer a series of questions sent by the AP about Moore's work as a confidential informant.
CREATING A CHARACTER

Moore was not a klansman before working for the FBI, he said. He said he joined because the government approached him, and asked for his help. As a veteran and Army-trained sniper, he said he felt that if his country asked him to protect the public from domestic terrorists, he had a duty to do so. He saw himself, he said, as a safety net between the violent extremists and the public.

He said he never adopted their racist ideology. To keep a lifeline to his true character, Moore claims to have never used racial slurs while in character — even as his klan brethren tossed them around casually. On FBI recordings reviewed by the AP, he was never heard using racial slurs like his former klan brothers.

But he also acknowledges that successful undercover work required him to change into a wholly different person so that he could convince his klan brothers that he was one of them.

"I laid out a character that had been overseas. That had received medals in combat. That was proven. That had special operations experience — more experience than I had. But someone that they would feel confident would be a useful asset to the organization at a much higher level," Moore said.

It worked, and Moore was given high-level access and trust.

"If you're not credible, if you're not engaged on all levels, you don't get to go home to your family. So you have to jump all in in order to keep you and your family safe," he said.

It also required Moore to lie — to his wife, to her parents, to everyone. Nobody could know what he was doing. But eventually, Moore's wife became suspicious of his activities, and he cracked. He told her and her parents what he was doing.

"You can't tell them. And they continue to probe because they want to know what's going on in your life. So there's this concern that you have to lie to your own family and I didn't want to be lying to my family," he said.

Moore was also being treated for bipolar disorder and severe anxiety, which he'd gotten under control with medications. But given his struggles with mental illness, his wife didn't immediately believe him. He'd eventually take her with him to a few klan gatherings, a decision he regrets because it put her at risk.

When the FBI agents with whom he worked discovered that his wife knew, they ended the relationship with the agency, and Moore sought additional mental and physical health treatment through the Department of Veterans Affairs.

Still, after some time away, the FBI would come back to him and recruit him for his second mission.

THE GRAND KNIGHT HAWK

In 2013, an FBI agent who'd worked with Moore during his first stint as an informant recruited him again. This time he was asked to infiltrate the Florida chapter of a national group called the Traditionalist American Knights of the Ku Klux Klan.

Within a year of becoming "naturalized," he'd become a Grand Knight Hawk of the "klavern" based in rural north central Florida. He was in charge of security and internal communications, and because of his military background, he was the go-to guy for violence.

It was at a cross-burning ceremony in December 2014 that Charles Newcomb, the "Exalted Cyclops" of the chapter, pulled him aside to discuss a scheme to kill a Black man. Warren Williams was a former inmate who'd gotten into a fight with one of their klan brothers, a correctional officer named Thomas Driver. Driver, corrections Sgt. David Moran and Newcomb wanted Williams dead.

Moore alerted the FBI and was approved to make secret recordings over the next few months. By this time, he'd become enmeshed in Newcomb's life: They drank together, hung out at barbecues, and talked about life's problems. This allowed Moore to get close enough to record the three current and former Florida correctional officers as they planned Williams' murder. He captured discussions of the murder plot that would lead to criminal convictions for the three klansmen.

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"And this wasn't the only person that they wanted to target," said Moore. "There were other people in the community that they wanted to target. But this was the one that we could build a case on."

Over his decade inside, Moore said his list of other law enforcement officers tied to the klan grew. The links, he said, were commonplace in Florida and Georgia, and easier to identify once he was inside.

"I was on track to uncover more activity in law enforcement, but the immediate threat to the public with the murder plot was a priority," Moore said. "And I was only one person. There was only so much I could do."

Moore said the three current and former prison guards implicated in the murder plot case operated among a group of other officer-klan members at the Reception and Medical Center in Lake Butler, Florida, a prison where new inmates are processed and given health checks. He said the officers he knew were actively recruiting at the prison.

Florida's Department of Corrections said that's not true.

"Every day more than 18,000 correctional officers throughout the state work as public servants, committed to the safety of Florida's communities. They should not be defamed by the isolated actions of three individuals who committed abhorrent and illegal acts several years prior," the department said in an emailed statement.

Spokeswoman Michelle Glady has told the AP the agency found no evidence of a wider membership by extremist white supremacist groups, or a systemic problem. She said every allegation of wrongdoing is investigated by the department's inspector general.

"That statement by the state is not accurate based on the facts," said Moore, who asserts he saw evidence of a more pervasive problem than the state is publicly acknowledging. He said he gave the FBI information about other active white supremacists who were working as state prison guards and at other law enforcement agencies. He said he also provided information about klansmen applying to be state prison guards.

After testifying in the murder conspiracy case against the klansmen he'd spent years working with, Moore's work with the FBI ended. He'd been publicly identified, and in 2018 he began life under a new name.

By then the work had taken an enormous toll on his mental and physical health. He says the character of Joe Moore, Grand Knight Hawk of the KKK, had to develop a kinship and almost familial relations with those he was investigating in order to make it out alive.

But he lost close friends, he said, who were angry that he had claimed fraudulent military honors as part of his alter ego.

Today Moore is worried that the men he helped put into prison know where he is and are looking for revenge. They're all due out in a few years.

Moore has installed motion-detecting surveillance cameras outside the home that allow him to monitor any activity, and carries a gun everywhere he goes.

He said, at this point, he believes coming out of the shadows and publicly discussing his story is the best way to protect himself and his family.

"We have had to change our names. We have tried to move, we have had our address placed in confidentiality. However, there are people that have investigative capacities that have tracked us, they've uncovered our names," Moore said. In recent months, people connected to the klan have appeared at his house, he said. Moore alerted the FBI and filed a report with the local sheriff's office.

Moore also does not want his work, and those of other confidential informants who put their lives on the line to help expose domestic extremists, to have been in vain.

He said he wants Florida's corrections and law enforcement leaders to conduct systemwide investigations to root out white supremacists and other violent extremists.

"If you want to know why people don't trust the police, it's because they have a relative or friend that they witness being targeted by an extremist who happens to have a badge and a gun. And I know as a fact that this has occurred. I stopped a murder plot of law enforcement officers," said Moore.

Biden administration moves to expand solar power on US land

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By MATTHEW BROWN Associated Press

BILLINGS, Mont. (AP) — U.S. officials announced approval Tuesday of two large-scale solar projects in California and moved to open up public lands in other Western states to potential solar power development, as part of the Biden administration's effort to counter climate change by shifting from fossil fuels.

The Interior Department approved the Arica and Victory Pass solar projects on federal land in Riverside County east of Los Angeles. Combined they would generate up to 465 megawatts of electricity, or enough to power about 132,000 homes, according to San Francisco-based developer Clearway Energy. Approval of a third solar farm planned for 500 megawatts is expected in coming days, officials said.

The Interior Department also Tuesday issued a call to nominate land for development within "solar energy zones" in Colorado, Nevada and New Mexico that combined cover about 140 square miles (360 square kilometers).

The invitation to developers comes as officials under Democratic President Joe Biden promote renewable wind and solar power on public lands and offshore to reduce greenhouse gas emissions that are warming the planet. That's a pronounced change from Republican President Donald Trump's emphasis on coal mining and oil and gas drilling.

Biden suffered a huge blow to his climate agenda this week, as opposition from West Virginia Democrat Sen. Joe Manchin tanked the administration's centerpiece climate and social services legislation. The administration also has been forced to resume oil and natural gas lease sales in the Gulf of Mexico and numerous western states, after a federal judge sided with Republican-led states that sued when Biden suspended the sales.

During a Tuesday conference call with reporters, Interior Secretary Deb Haaland did not directly address a question about the faltering climate bill and instead pointed to clean energy provisions in the bipartisan infrastructure bill signed into law last month.

"We fully intend to meet our clean energy goals," Haaland said. She said the Trump administration stalled clean energy by shuttering renewable energy offices at the Bureau of Land Management and undermining long-term agreements, such as a conservation plan tied to solar development in the California desert.

"We are rebuilding that capacity," Haaland said.

But without the climate bill, tax incentives to build large-scale solar will drop to 10% of a developer's total capital costs by 2024, instead of rising to 30%, said Xiaojing Sun, head solar researcher at industry consulting firm Wood Mackenzie.

Incentives for residential-scale solar would go away completely by 2024, she said.

"It will significantly slow down the growth of solar," Sun said.

However, she added that streamlining access to federal land could help the industry, as large solar farms on non-federal lands face growing local opposition and cumbersome zoning laws.

The Bureau of Land Management oversees almost a quarter-billion acres of land, primarily in Western states. Agency director Tracy-Stone Manning said boosting renewable energy is now one of its top priorities.

Forty large-scale solar proposals in the West are under consideration, she said.

The agency in early December issued a draft plan to reduce rents and other fees paid by companies authorized to build wind and solar projects on public lands. Officials were unable to provide an estimate of how much money that could save developers.

In Nevada, where the federal government owns and manages more than 80% of the state's land, large-scale solar projects have faced opposition from environmentalists concerned about harm to plants and animals in the sun- and windswept deserts.

Developers abandoned plans for what would have been the country's largest solar panel installation earlier this year north of Las Vegas amid concerns from local residents. Environmentalists are fighting another solar project near the Nevada-California border that they claim could harm birds and desert tortoises.

Stone-Manning said solar projects on public lands are being sited to take environmental concerns into account.

The solar development zones were first proposed under the Obama administration, which in 2012 adopted

plans to bring utility-scale solar energy projects to public lands in Arizona, California, Colorado, Nevada, New Mexico and Utah. Officials have identified almost 1,400 square miles (3,500 square kilometers) of public land for potential leasing for solar power.

If all that land were developed, the bureau says it could support more than 100 gigawatts of solar power, or enough for 29 million homes.

That's almost equal to all U.S. solar capacity now in place.

The power generation capacity of solar farms operating on federal lands is a small fraction of that amount — just over 3 gigawatts, federal data shows.

In November the land bureau awarded solar leases for land in Utah's Milford Flats solar zone. Solar leases are expected to be finalized by the end of the month for about land at several sites in Arizona.

Solar power on public and private lands accounted for about 3% of total U.S. electricity production in 2020. After construction costs fell during the past decade, that figure is expected to grow sharply, to more than 20% by 2050, the U.S. Energy Information Administration projects.

Developers warn costs have been rising due to constraints on supplies of steel, semiconductor chips and other materials.

Associated Press writer Sam Metz in Carson City, Nevada, contributed to this report.

California says health care workers must get booster shots

By ADAM BEAM Associated Press

SACRAMENTO, Calif. (AP) — California health care workers will be required to have coronavirus booster shots to ensure that hospitals are ready to deal with a surge in cases as the more-transmissible omicron variant spreads throughout the state.

Gov. Gavin Newsom announced the order Tuesday on his personal Twitter account and planned to provide more details at a Wednesday news conference.

California already requires health care workers to be vaccinated against the coronavirus, a directive that took effect in September and has since led to the firing or suspension of thousands of people. Now it will join New Mexico as at least the second state to require booster shots for health care workers.

Last week, Newsom, who imposed the first statewide shutdown order in March 2020, warned that cases would likely rise and re-imposed a rule requiring everyone to wear masks at public indoor gatherings.

Concerns stem from the rise of omicron, which as of Monday was the dominant variant of the coronavirus in the United States. Areas in the Midwest and Northeast are seeing the biggest jump in cases and hospitalizations amid frigid temperatures that have kept people indoors.

Much about the variant remains unknown, including whether it causes more or less severe illness. Scientists say omicron spreads more easily than other coronavirus strains, including delta. Early studies suggest the vaccinated will need a third shot for the best chance at preventing infection but even without the extra dose, vaccination still should offer strong protection against severe illness and death.

California has so far fared far better than many other states. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention lists California as a place with "high" transmission of the virus, along with nearly everywhere else in the country. But in the last week California averaged 114 new cases per 100,000 people, less than half the national rate.

While 70% of Californians have been fully vaccinated, that still leaves 30% — or roughly 12 million people — who haven't been. The California Department of Public Health says people who are not vaccinated are seven times more likely to get infected, nearly 13 times more likely to be hospitalized and nearly 16 times more likely to die from the coronavirus.

Coronavirus related hospitalizations have been rising slowly in California, up 15% in the last 11 days to 3,852. That's less than half as many as during the late summer peak and one-fifth of a year ago, before vaccines were widely available.

But while hospitals overall have fewer patients than last winter, many have fewer workers to treat the

patients they do have. The staffing shortage comes as businesses are having trouble finding workers, including hospitals. A recent study by the University of California-San Francisco estimated the state's nursing shortage could persist until 2026.

Associated Press reporter Felicia Fonseca in Flagstaff, Arizona, contributed to this report.

De Blasio says 'No more shutdowns' as NYC faces virus spike

By MICHELLE L. PRICE Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio said he's committed to keeping the city open as it grapples with a huge spike in coronavirus cases.

The Democrat said Tuesday that New York can't see schools and businesses close again like they did when COVID-19 first hit the city in 2020.

De Blasio has faced questions over the past week about whether he would reinstate closures as the omicron variant surges in the city.

"Adamantly I feel this: No more shutdowns. We've been through them," de Blasio said at a virtual news conference Tuesday. "They were devastating. We can't go through it again."

De Blasio, in the waning days of his term as mayor, will decide by Christmas whether the annual New Year's Eve celebration in Times Square will continue as planned. The event was small and socially distanced last year but de Blasio had hoped to hold it this year at "full strength." That was before reports of COVID-19 cases ramped up again.

While the fate of the outdoor New Year's Eve event remained up in the air, De Blasio's successor Eric Adams postponed his inauguration ceremony, scheduled for Jan. 1 indoors at Brooklyn's Kings Theatre.

The mayor-elect issued a statement Tuesday saying that the ceremony would be rescheduled for a later date "to prioritize" the health of attendees, staff and reporters.

"It is clear that our city is facing a formidable opponent in the omicron variant of COVID-19, and that the spike in cases presents a serious risk to public health," Adams said.

Two other Democratic officials, the city's Comptroller-elect Brad Lander and Public Advocate Jumaane Williams, were also to participate in the ceremony and co-signed Adams' statement announcing its postponement. Williams has been quarantining at home after recently testing positive for COVID-19.

Adams will still take over as mayor on Jan. 1. His spokesperson, Evan Thies, said it would take a lot for the mayor-elect to shut down New York City again.

"He believes that we can balance the priorities of public health and keeping New York open in a safe and responsible way as we aggressively address the Omicron threat with more vaccinations, boosters and testing," Thies said.

Temporary restrictions were instituted at the city's jails late Tuesday, with the Department of Correction saying in-person visits and programs like religious services had been suspended.

De Blasio said the city is ramping up testing but the biggest tool to fight the pandemic remains vaccinations. De Blasio announced the city would begin offering a \$100 cash incentive to New Yorkers who get a booster shot of the COVID-19 vaccine starting Tuesday and going through the end of the year.

The city had previously offered similar incentives for people to get their first vaccine doses.

De Blasio said the federal government is expected to help set up more testing sites in New York City and the city will increase its city run sites, including brick-and-mortar locations and mobile testing vans.

As recently as Dec. 13, the city had been averaging fewer than 3,600 new cases of COVID-19 each day. But after nearly 63,500 people tested positive in just five days, the average daily number of infections had climbed to nearly 11,000 as of Monday — an increase of 207% in a week.

Associated Press writer Michael R. Sisak contributed to this report.

Jury in Kim Potter trial ends another day without verdict

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By AMY FORLITI and SCOTT BAUER Associated Press

MINNEAPOLIS (AP) — Jurors weighing the case of the suburban Minneapolis police officer who shot and killed Black motorist Daunte Wright asked the judge after a full day of deliberations Tuesday what they should do if they can't reach a verdict.

Judge Regina Chu told them to continue working, as was explained in the initial instructions she gave them. The jurors resumed deliberations for about 90 more minutes, then ended for the day shortly after 6 p.m. The jury also deliberated for about five hours on Monday.

Former Brooklyn Center officer Kim Potter, who is white, is charged with first- and second-degree manslaughter. If convicted of the most serious charge, Potter, 49, would face a sentence of about seven years under state guidelines, though prosecutors have said they will seek more.

Potter said she meant to use her Taser on Wright rather than her gun, and the jurors also asked if they could remove zip ties keeping Potter's gun in an evidence box so they could hold it. The judge said they could, overruling an objection from Potter attorney Paul Engh that the gun should remain in the box "for safety purposes."

During the trial, prosecutors presented evidence on the differences between the gun and the Taser, including weight, feel, size, color, and that the gun was holstered on Potter's right side and the Taser on her left.

Prosecutor Erin Eldridge said in her closing argument that the jurors would be able to hold both the Taser and the gun to compare them, "to get a feel for the two, and to get a sense of all those differences that you heard about in court, and see for yourselves how different they really are."

The jury's question about deliberating, read in court by Chu, said: "If the jury cannot reach consensus, what is the guidance around how long and what steps should be taken?"

The judge then reread from the jury instructions, telling the jurors to continue to "discuss the case with one another and deliberate with a view toward reaching agreement if you can do so without violating your individual judgment."

Potter's attorneys objected to the judge rereading that instruction, arguing that doing so inappropriately emphasized that paragraph over the rest of the instructions. Chu overruled.

Rachel Moran, a professor at the University of St. Thomas School of Law, noted that the jurors didn't say they were at an impasse.

"Judge (Regina) Chu is going to let them keep deliberating if they don't express concern or distress about how it's going," Moran said.

The judge has ordered that the jury be sequestered during deliberations — meaning they remain under the court's supervision in an undisclosed hotel and cannot return home until they have reached a verdict or the judge has determined they can't reach one. Her order allows them to communicate with family members as long as they avoid discussing the trial.

During closing arguments, prosecutors accused Potter of a "blunder of epic proportions" in Wright's death in an April 11 traffic stop — but said a mistake was no defense.

Potter's attorneys countered that Wright, who was attempting to get away from officers as they sought to handcuff him for an outstanding warrant on a weapons charge, "caused the whole incident."

The mostly white jury got the case after about a week and a half of testimony about an arrest that went awry, setting off angry protests in Brooklyn Center just as nearby Minneapolis was on edge over Derek Chauvin's trial in George Floyd's death. Potter resigned two days after Wright's death.

Eldridge called Wright's death "entirely preventable. Totally avoidable." She urged the jury not to excuse it as a mistake: "Accidents can still be crimes if they occur as a result of reckless or culpable negligence."

Potter attorney Earl Gray argued that Wright was to blame for trying to flee from police. Potter mistakenly grabbed her gun instead of her Taser because the traffic stop "was chaos," he said.

Potter testified Friday that she "didn't want to hurt anybody" and that she was "sorry it happened."

Chu told jurors that intent is not part of the charges and that the state doesn't have to prove Potter tried to kill Wright.

The judge said for first-degree manslaughter, prosecutors must prove that Potter caused Wright's death while committing the crime of reckless handling of a firearm. This means they must prove that she committed a conscious or intentional act while handling or using a firearm that creates a substantial or unjustifiable risk that she was aware of and disregarded, and that she endangered safety.

For second-degree manslaughter, prosecutors must prove she acted with culpable negligence, meaning she consciously took a chance of causing death or great bodily harm.

Associated Press writer Kathleen Foody in Chicago contributed to this story. Bauer reported from Madison, Wisconsin.

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

Harvard professor found guilty of hiding ties to China

BOSTON (AP) — A Harvard University professor charged with hiding his ties to a Chinese-run recruitment program was found guilty on all counts Tuesday.

Charles Lieber, 62, the former chair of Harvard's department of chemistry and chemical biology, had pleaded not guilty to two counts of filing false tax returns, two counts of making false statements, and two counts of failing to file reports for a foreign bank account in China.

The jury deliberated for about two hours and 45 minutes before announcing the verdict following five days of testimony in Boston federal court.

Lieber's defense attorney Marc Mukasey had argued that prosecutors lacked proof of the charges. He maintained that investigators didn't keep any record of their interviews with Lieber prior to his arrest.

He argued that prosecutors would be unable to prove that Lieber acted "knowingly, intentionally, or willfully, or that he made any material false statement." Mukasey also stressed Lieber wasn't charged with illegally transferring any technology or proprietary information to China.

Prosecutors argued that Lieber, who was arrested in January, knowingly hid his involvement in China's Thousand Talents Plan — a program designed to recruit people with knowledge of foreign technology and intellectual property to China — to protect his career and reputation.

Lieber denied his involvement during inquiries from U.S. authorities, including the National Institutes of Health, which had provided him with millions of dollars in research funding, prosecutors said.

Lieber also concealed his income from the Chinese program, including \$50,000 a month from the Wuhan University of Technology, up to \$158,000 in living expenses and more than \$1.5 million in grants, according to prosecutors.

In exchange, they say, Lieber agreed to publish articles, organize international conferences and apply for patents on behalf of the Chinese university.

The case is among the highest profile to come from the U.S. Department of Justice's so-called "China Initiative."

The effort launched in 2018 to curb economic espionage from China has faced criticism that it harms academic research and amounts to racial profiling of Chinese researchers.

Hundreds of faculty members at Stanford, Yale, Berkeley, Princeton, Temple and other prominent colleges have signed onto letters to U.S. Attorney General Merrick Garland calling on him to end the initiative.

The academics say the effort compromises the nation's competitiveness in research and technology and has had a chilling effect on recruiting foreign scholars. The letters also complain the investigations have disproportionately targeted researchers of Chinese origin.

Lieber has been on paid administrative leave from Harvard since being arrested in January 2020.

Rep. Scott Perry denies Jan. 6 panel's request for interview

By FARNOUSH AMIRI and MARY CLARE JALONICK Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Republican Rep. Scott Perry of Pennsylvania on Tuesday rebuffed a request for

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him to sit down for an interview and turn over documents to the House panel investigating the Jan. 6 U.S. Capitol insurrection, joining other allies of former President Donald Trump in trying to stonewall the committee.

In a statement, Perry called the committee "illegitimate."

In a letter to Perry on Monday night, Mississippi Rep. Bennie Thompson, the Democratic chairman of the panel, said the panel had received evidence from multiple witnesses, including then-acting Attorney General Jeffrey Rosen and then-acting Deputy Attorney General Richard Donoghue, that Perry had "an important role" in efforts to install Justice Department official Jeffrey Clark as acting attorney general.

The lawmaker's refusal will test how far the committee is willing to go in its quest for information as members have so far resisted subpoenaing one of their own as they investigate the insurrection by Trump's supporters and his efforts to overturn the 2020 presidential election. The letter is the first time the panel has publicly released a request to a fellow member of Congress as the members inquire about the details of Perry and other congressional Republicans who met with Trump ahead of the Capitol attack and strategized about how they could block the results at the Jan. 6 electoral count.

Also in the letter, Thompson added that while the panel "has tremendous respect for the prerogatives of Congress and the privacy of its Members," it also has "a solemn responsibility to investigate fully all of these facts and circumstances."

The committee has also asked for any documents and correspondence between Perry and Trump, his legal team or anyone involved in the planning of Jan. 6 events.

The lawmaker, representing Pennsylvania's 10th District, was cited more than 50 times in a Senate Judiciary report released in October outlining how Trump's effort to overturn his election defeat to Joe Biden brought the Justice Department to the brink of chaos and prompted top officials there and at the White House to threaten to resign.

Perry, who has continuously disputed the validity of Biden's victory in Pennsylvania, has said he obliged Trump's request for an introduction to Clark, then an assistant attorney general whom Perry knew from unrelated legislative matters. The three men went on to discuss their shared concerns about the election, Perry has said.

The Justice Department found no evidence of widespread fraud in Pennsylvania or any other state, and senior Justice officials dismissed Perry's claims.

The recent Senate report outlined a call Perry made to Donoghue last December to say the department wasn't doing its job with respect to the elections. Perry encouraged Donoghue to elicit Clark's help because he's "the kind of guy who could really get in there and do something about this," the report said.

Perry has said his "official communications" with Justice Department officials were consistent with the law.

The panel voted in November to hold Clark in contempt after he showed up for a deposition yet declined to answer questions. But Thompson has said he will hold off pursuing the charges and allow Clark to attend another deposition and try again. Clark's lawyer has said Clark intends to assert his Fifth Amendment right not to incriminate himself, but the deposition has been repeatedly postponed as Clark has dealt with an unidentified medical condition.

The panel has already interviewed around 300 people as it seeks to create a comprehensive record of the Jan. 6 attack and the events leading up to it.

Trump at the time was pushing false claims of widespread voter fraud and lobbying Vice President Mike Pence and Republican members of Congress to try to overturn the count at the Jan. 6 congressional certification. Election officials across the country, along with the courts, had repeatedly dismissed Trump's claims.

An angry mob of Trump supporters was echoing his false claims as it brutally beat Capitol police and broke into the building that day, interrupting the certification of Biden's victory.

Thompson, in his request for a meeting with Perry, wrote: "We would like to meet with you soon to discuss these topics, but we also want to accommodate your schedule."

Associated Press writer Marc Levy in Harrisburg, Pa., contributed to this report.

DOJ says inmates on home confinement can stay out of prison

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Justice Department on Tuesday reversed its own legal opinion and said it would allow federal inmates released on home confinement because of the coronavirus pandemic to stay out of prison.

The decision announced by Attorney General Merrick Garland came after months of pressure on President Joe Biden from criminal justice groups, lawmakers and other advocates. In the final days of the Trump administration, DOJ said released inmates would have to return to prison at the end of the emergency period declared during the pandemic. Nearly 3,000 former inmates would have potentially been taken back to prison.

DOJ's Office of Legal Counsel said Tuesday that it did not "lightly depart from our precedents, and we have given the views expressed in our prior opinion careful and respectful consideration."

The office concluded that the Federal Bureau of Prisons' "preexisting authorities does not require that prisoners in extended home confinement be returned en masse to correctional facilities when the emergency period ends."

The original releases was authorized under the authority of the \$2.2 trillion CARES Act that former President Donald Trump signed in March 2020. As the virus spread, then-Attorney General William Barr directed federal prisons to increase the use of home confinement and expedite the release of eligible high-risk inmates as coronavirus cases surged, particularly in detention settings. Priority was given to those at low- or medium-security prisons where the virus was spreading fastest.

"Thousands of people on home confinement have reconnected with their families, have found gainful employment, and have followed the rules," Garland said in a statement. "In light of today's Office of Legal Counsel opinion, I have directed that the Department engage in a rulemaking process to ensure that the Department lives up to the letter and the spirit of the CARES Act."

Garland added: "We will exercise our authority so that those who have made rehabilitative progress and complied with the conditions of home confinement, and who in the interests of justice should be given an opportunity to continue transitioning back to society, are not unnecessarily returned to prison."

More than 35,000 inmates were released as part of the effort to ease pandemic conditions as long as they met certain criteria, including they were not likely a danger to others. But 2,830 of the 4,879 people who remain on home confinement were slated to return to prison, the BOP said. The others have completed their sentences.

Garland called advocates Tuesday prior to the announcement.

"This is excellent news for thousands of people and their families to get before the holidays," Families Against Mandatory Minimums President Kevin Ring said in a statement. "There is no way the people on CARES Act home confinement should have been sent back to prison, and we are very grateful to the Biden administration for fixing this mistake."

Parents, schools face another reckoning over COVID-19 cases

By BOBBY CAINA CALVAN Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — Kathryn Malara, a Brooklyn teacher, lingered on a street Tuesday, filled with dread about going to her job.

"I'm sitting in my car terrified to walk into school," she wrote on Twitter just before taking a deep breath and heading to her classroom. "Cases exploding. People I really care about are sick & frightened."

The quick spread of the omicron variant of the coronavirus has stirred another angst-ridden reckoning about whether in-person schooling is worth the risk. Malara and other teachers worry about endangering their health by entering crowded schools. Frustrated parents wonder how to keep their children safe and whether campuses could become superspreader sites.

"It's creeping back up again, and I don't like this. I'm worried. Lives are at stake here — not just my

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son's life," said Starita Ansari, a public school parent in Manhattan who is keeping her 10th grader home after being rattled by the latest COVID-19 infections at his school.

Scientists say omicron spreads more easily than other coronavirus strains, including delta, though many details about it remain unknown, including whether it causes more or less severe illness. But even if it is milder, the new variant could still upend schooling and overwhelm health systems because of the sheer number of infections.

The federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said schools can remain safe when proper protocols are followed, including observing safe distancing, wearing masks and getting vaccinated.

"Detection of cases in schools does not necessarily mean that transmission occurred in schools," the CDC said.

On Monday, a fifth of New York City's public school students skipped in-person classes, an indication of the anxiety spawned by the resurgence of COVID-19 cases in New York state, which in recent days has broken infection records.

"Parents are voting with their feet, and many of them don't feel that the current protocols are actually keeping their families safe. And a lot of them don't think they're being given enough information about what's happening to allow them to make choices for their families," said Jennifer Jennings, a Princeton University researcher focused partly on the intersection of education and health care policy.

Most schools across the country are keeping classrooms open, despite the new threat from omicron, but some school districts have moved to limit in-person instruction as a precaution.

On Friday, one of the largest school districts on the East Coast, the Prince George's County district in Maryland, just outside Washington, said it would cancel in-person instruction in favor of virtual classes because of rising COVID-19 cases at its campuses.

Schools in Mount Vernon, New York, and elsewhere also reverted back to virtual instruction.

"There is great concern because we had been doing so well," said Daniel A. Domenech, executive director of the American Association of School Administrators.

"Just about a month ago, we had about 98 percent of the students in this country attending school in person, and omicron has brought about just a huge reversal in that process. And all of a sudden we're seeing infection rates skyrocket," he said, "It's affecting children much more than previous variants, so children are getting sick. Staff is getting sick, and it's just a spread that's alarming."

Boston school officials have not announced whether children will have to return to virtual classes — an unwelcome prospect for Alejandra Hung and his Boston family.

"We're going through this feeling of *deja vu*, but in reality things are better this time out," said Hung, who has two children in elementary school. "Remote learning took such a toll."

The availability of vaccines for children raised hopes that disruptions at school would be minimized. Public health officials now hope that concern about omicron will convince more parents to vaccinate their children.

That's been the case for Yahaira Lopez, who lives in a Boston suburb. She resisted vaccinating her twin 12-year-old sons, both of whom suffer from severe asthma. Even if she herself has been fully vaccinated and received a booster shot, she had doubts about the vaccines' safety for her children.

"But the numbers are increasing, and this virus is impacting a lot of students now, so I just want to be preventative and make sure nothing happens to them," Lopez said.

Her sons have appointments to get their first shots this week.

As of Thursday, nearly 7.4 million children in the United States have been infected since the start of the pandemic, representing 17.3% of all cases, according to data gathered by the American Academy of Pediatrics and the Children's Hospital Association.

Of those cases, almost 170,000 cases were reported over the last seven days of the tally.

The CDC has said that the extent to which children suffer long-term consequences of COVID-19 is still unknown. But it noted in a report last week that a disproportionate number of Black and Hispanic children suffer much more severe symptoms, including hospitalization that leads to admission to intensive care.

Back in New York, Liz Rosenberg decided to keep her two children, 17 and 11, home from the final days

of school before the holidays. It was still unclear if they would return to the classroom when in-person instruction reconvenes in the new year.

"The messaging that we're basically getting from lots of places right now is that getting COVID is inevitable," Rosenberg said. "And I just can't participate in that. Why would I send my kids to school knowing that that in their own buildings, cases have risen quite a bit?"

New York Gov. Kathy Hochul has vowed to keep schools open. She said the state would provide 2 million test kits to schools, which would then distribute the tests to children to take home.

"We believe that it's critically important that our children not end up in that same situation they were for so many months, when they were so displaced from their normal environment," Hochul said Monday.

Associated Press Writer Philip Marcelo in Boston contributed to this report.

Biden vows he, Manchin will 'get something done' on \$2T bill

By LISA MASCARO and FARNOUSH AMIRI Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden appeared determined Tuesday to return to the negotiating table with Sen. Joe Manchin, the holdout Democrat who effectively tanked the party's signature \$2 trillion domestic policy initiative with his own jarring year-end announcement.

Biden, responding to reporters' questions at the White House, joked that he holds no grudges against the conservative West Virginia senator whose rejection of the social services and climate change bill stunned Washington just days ago.

Instead, the president spoke passionately about the families that would benefit from the Democrats' ambitious, if now highly uncertain, plan to pour billions of dollars into child care, health care and other services.

"Sen. Manchin and I are going to get something done," Biden said.

The president's off-the-cuff remarks constitute his first public statement as Democrats struggle to pick up the pieces from Manchin's announcement over the weekend that he would not support the bill, as is. Manchin essentially crushed Biden's sweeping policy measure in the 50-50 Senate, siding with all Republicans who oppose the bill.

Biden spoke forcefully of the economic pressures that strip away the "dignity of a parent" trying to pay the bills, and the assistance millions could receive from the federal government with the legislation. He also said his package would help ease inflationary pressures and pointed to analyses suggesting it would boost the economy.

"I want to get things done," Biden said. "I still think there's a possibility of getting Build Back Better done."

But the Democrats face serious questions over whether the \$2 trillion initiative can be refashioned to win his crucial vote or the party will be saddled with a devastating defeat.

Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer was set to assemble Senate Democrats later Tuesday for a private virtual caucus meeting to discuss next steps.

Schumer vowed Monday that the chamber would vote early in the new year on Biden's "Build Back Better Act" as it now stands so every senator "has the opportunity to make their position known on the Senate floor, not just on television." That was a biting reference to Manchin's sudden TV announcement against the bill on Sunday.

But Manchin and his party are so far apart, his relationships so bruised after months of failed talks, it's unclear how they even get back to the negotiating table, let alone revive the sprawling more than 2,100-page social services and climate change bill.

Biden and Manchin spoke later Sunday, according to a person familiar with the call, first reported by Politico. It was cordial and respectful, said the person who spoke only on condition of anonymity.

The setback has thrown Biden's signature legislative effort into deep doubt at a critical time, closing out the end of the president's first year and ahead of congressional midterm elections when the Democrats' slim hold on Congress is at risk.

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Coupled with solid Republican opposition, Manchin's vote is vital on this and other initiatives, including the Democrats' priority voting rights legislation that Schumer also promised would come to an early vote.

Steeped in the politics of a state that Biden lost decisively to Donald Trump, Manchin has little to gain from aligning too closely with fellow Democrats, raising fresh questions over whether he still has a place in the party.

In a radio interview Monday, he reiterated his position that the social and environment bill has far too much government spending — on child care, health care and other programs — without enough restrictions on incomes or work requirements.

But the lifelong Democrat was less clear when asked if the party still has room for him — describing himself as “fiscally responsible and socially compassionate.”

Manchin said: “Now, if there's no Democrats like that then they have to push me wherever they want.”

After months of talks with the White House and fellow Democrats, he lashed out at hard-line tactics against him by those he said “just beat the living crap out of people and think they'll be submissive.”

While Manchin has said he cannot explain the bill to constituents in West Virginia, a union representing coal miners, including some of the nearly 12,000 from his home state, put out a statement urging the lawmaker to “revisit his opposition” to the package

Cecil Roberts, the president of the United Mine Workers of America, outlined the ways the package would benefit union members, including those in West Virginia, which is the most coal-dependent state in the country.

Some of those provisions include language that would extend the current fee paid by coal companies to fund benefits received by victims of coal workers' pneumoconiosis, or black lung. The bill would also provide tax incentives to encourage manufacturers to build facilities in the coalfields, potentially employing miners who have lost their jobs, according to the union.

The next steps remain highly uncertain for the president and his party, with Congress on recess for the holiday break.

The White House appeared to take interest in Manchin's preference for a reimagined bill that would tackle a few top priorities, for longer duration, rather than the multifaceted and far-reaching House-passed version.

But it will be extraordinarily difficult for progressive and centrist Democrats to rebuild trust to launch a fresh round of negotiations having devoted much of Biden's first year in office to what is now essentially a collapsed effort.

The sweeping package is among the biggest of its kind ever considered in Congress, unleashing billions of dollars to help American families nationwide — nearly all paid for with higher taxes on corporations and the wealthy.

For families with children, it would provide free pre-school and child care aid. There are subsidies for health insurance premiums, lower prescription drug costs and expanded Medicaid access in states that do not yet provide it. The bill would start a new hearing aid program for seniors. And it includes more than \$500 billion to curb carbon emissions, a figure considered the largest federal expenditure ever to combat climate change.

A potential new deadline for Biden and his party comes with the expiration of an expanded child tax credit that has been sending up to \$300 monthly directly to millions of families' bank accounts. If Congress fails to act, the money won't arrive in January.

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi struck an optimistic chord at an event Monday in her San Francisco district. “This will happen,” she said. “I'm not deterred at all.”

Associated Press writers Darlene Superville and Colleen Long contributed to this report.

Biden pivots to home tests to confront omicron surge

By JOSH BOAK, RICARDO ALONSO-ZALDIVAR and COLLEEN LONG Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Fighting the omicron variant surging through the country, President Joe Biden

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announced the government will provide 500 million free rapid home-testing kits, increase support for hospitals under strain and redouble vaccination and boosting efforts.

At the White House on Tuesday, Biden detailed major changes to his COVID-19 winter plan, his hand forced by the fast-spreading variant, whose properties are not yet fully understood by scientists. Yet his message was clear that the winter holidays could be close to normal for the vaccinated while potentially dangerous for the unvaccinated.

His pleas are not political, he emphasized. He noted that former President Donald Trump has gotten his booster shot, and he said it's Americans' "patriotic duty" to get vaccinated.

"It's the only responsible thing to do," the president said. "Omicron is serious and potentially deadly business for unvaccinated people."

Biden chastised social media and people on cable TV who have made misleading statements to discourage people from getting vaccinated.

The outbreak from this latest strain of the coronavirus has required the federal government to get more aggressive in addressing the wave of infections, but Biden promised a weary nation that there would not be a mass lockdown of schools or businesses.

"I know you're tired, and I know you're frustrated. We all want this to be over. But we're still in it," Biden said. "We also have more tools than we had before. We're ready, we'll get through this."

Scientists don't know everything about omicron yet, but they do know that vaccination should offer strong protection against severe illness and death. The variant has spread at such an alarming rate since it was identified in South Africa about a month ago that the Biden administration snapped into action to offer new tests and additional aid. Still more is needed, some medical experts said.

A cornerstone of the plan is for the government to purchase 500 million coronavirus rapid tests for free shipment to Americans starting in January. People will use a new website to order their tests, which will then be sent by U.S. mail at no charge. The 500 million could be increased, depending on developments.

It marks a major shift for Biden, who earlier had called for many Americans to purchase the hard-to-find tests on their own and then seek reimbursement from health insurance. For the first time, the U.S. government will send free COVID-19 tests directly to Americans, after more than a year of urging by public health experts.

Experts had criticized Biden's initial buy-first, get-paid-later approach as unwieldy and warned that the U.S. would face another round of testing problems at a critical time. Testing advocates point to nations including the U.K. and Germany, which have distributed billions of tests to the public and recommend people test themselves twice a week.

The federal government will also establish new testing sites and use the Defense Production Act to help manufacture more tests. The first new federally supported testing site will open in New York this week. The new sites will add to 20,000 already available. White House officials said they're working with Google so that people will be able to find them by searching "free COVID test near me."

Still, Biden's testing surge would need to be supported by a further jump in production for all Americans to test at the recommended rate of twice weekly. The U.S. would need 2.3 billion tests per month for everyone 12 and older to do that, according to the nonprofit Kaiser Family Foundation. That's nearly five times the half-billion tests Biden will deploy.

Currently, the U.S. can conduct about 600 million tests per month, with home tests accounting for about half, according to researchers from Arizona State University.

In another prong to Biden's amped-up plan, he is prepared to deploy an additional 1,000 troops with medical skills to assist hospitals buckling under the virus surge. Also, he is immediately sending federal medical personnel to Michigan, Indiana, Wisconsin, Arizona, New Hampshire and Vermont. And there are plans to ready additional ventilators and protective equipment from the national stockpile, expanding hospital resources.

As a backstop, the Federal Emergency Management Agency will deploy hundreds of ambulances and paramedic teams so that if one hospital fills up, it can transport patients to open beds in another. Ambu-

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lances are already headed to New York and Maine, and paramedic teams are going to New Hampshire, Vermont and Arizona.

But vaccination remains the main defense, since it can head off disease in the first place. The government will support multiple vaccination sites and provide hundreds of personnel to administer shots. New rules will make it easier for pharmacists to work across state lines to administer a broader range of shots.

Biden said in response to a question that he may lift the Southern Africa travel ban that was imposed to delay omicron from reaching the U.S.

Some prominent experts said that Biden's new actions are a step in the right direction but he hasn't gone far enough, given the risks of infections and hospitals being overwhelmed.

"I don't know that the measures being proposed are going to be adequate," said Dr. Peter Hotez, dean of the National School of Tropical Medicine at Baylor College of Medicine in Houston.

Hotez said the government may need to authorize a second booster shot for health care workers to prevent infections that would sideline clinicians when all hands are needed.

Dr. Eric Topol, professor of molecular medicine at Scripps Research in La Jolla, California, said the administration "finally sees the light" with Biden's plan to ship 500 million tests, but "we need to pull out all the stops, and we're not doing that still."

"We don't have control of this pandemic here," said Topol.

He said the government could redefine "fully vaccinated" as three shots instead of two of the Pfizer and Moderna vaccines, Biden could order a ban on air travel by people who are not fully vaccinated, and the government could use its authority to ramp up production of high quality masks for free distribution.

"There's a lack of boldness," Topol said. "I am disappointed."

Scientists say omicron spreads even more easily than other coronavirus strains, including delta. It accounted for nearly three-quarters of new U.S. infections last week.

Underscoring the reach of the virus, the White House said late Monday that Biden had been in close contact with a staff member who later tested positive for COVID-19. The staffer spent about 30 minutes around the president on Air Force One on Friday. The staffer, who was fully vaccinated and boosted, tested positive Monday, White House press secretary Jen Psaki said.

Psaki said Biden has tested negative twice since Sunday and will test again on Wednesday. He cleared his throat several times at Tuesday's event but spoke firmly and appeared fine.

In New York City, nearly 42,600 people citywide tested positive from Wednesday through Saturday — compared with fewer than 35,800 in the entire month of November. The city has never had so many people test positive in such a short period of time since testing became widely available.

Associated Press writers Matthew Perrone, Darlene Superville and Zeke Miller contributed to this report.

This story has been corrected to show the trip was from Orangeburg, not Orange.

Fauci says Fox's Watters should be fired for comments on him

By DAVID BAUDER AP Media Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Fox News defended Jesse Watters on Tuesday after he used the phrase "kill shot" in a speech urging young conservatives to confront Dr. Anthony Fauci in public with a hostile interview.

Fauci, asked about it on CNN, said that Watters should be fired "on the spot" but predicted he wouldn't be held accountable for his language.

Fox said Watters' words had been "twisted completely out of context."

Watters, a host on Fox News Channel's panel show "The Five" who made his initial mark doing aggressive interviews for Bill O'Reilly, spoke Monday to a group of college and high school conservatives. His audience booed at the mention of Fauci's name.

Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases and the government's most visible spokesman on the COVID-19 pandemic, has been the subject of frequent criticism by some Fox

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News commentators who have been seeking to appeal to audience members resistant to vaccinations.

Watters said that Fauci should be confronted on the subject of whether the National Institute of Health funded research at a lab in Wuhan, China, the city where the COVID-19 virus originated. He said an interviewer should suggest he lied about the topic — something Fauci has disputed.

"Now you go in for the kill shot, the kill shot with an ambush, deadly, because he doesn't see it coming," Watters said.

He suggested an interviewer say, "you know why people don't trust you, don't you?" Oh, he is dead. He's dead. He's done."

The interviewer should make sure the encounter is filmed and the footage given to conservative media, Watters said. It's a confrontation technique that has been used elsewhere in conservative politics by the group Project Veritas.

"Just make sure it's legal," Watters said.

A partial clip of Watters' speech, beginning with the "kill shot" quote, spread around the internet, with some commentators suggesting that he had advocated assassinating Fauci.

During an interview with Fauci on Tuesday, CNN's John Berman referred to Watters as a "Fox News entertainer," and asked about the comments without playing the clip, saying it was dangerous. Berman referred to a "rhetorical kill shot," and asked Fauci how much that language concerned him.

Fauci noted that for two years, he's been encouraging people to protect themselves against COVID-19 by practicing good public health practices and get vaccinated.

"For that, you have some guy out there saying people should be giving me a kill shot, to ambush me?" he said. "I mean, what kind of craziness is there in society these days? That's awful what he said. And he's going to go, very likely, unaccountable. Whatever network he is on is not going to do anything. The guy should be fired on the spot."

Fauci, in a "60 Minutes" interview in October, discussed death threats he had received and his need for a security detail.

In a statement, Fox said "based on watching the full clip and reading the entire transcript, it's more than clear that Jesse Watters was using a metaphor for asking hard-hitting questions ... and his words have been twisted completely out of context."

Watters' reference to "kill shot," however, baffled some people in television news.

"I've never used, or heard, that term used and I did my share of ambush interviews as an investigative producer," said Mark Lukasiewicz, dean of Hofstra University's School of Communication and a longtime journalist at NBC News.

Last month on Fox, Tucker Carlson compared Fauci to Italian World War II dictator Benito Mussolini, while Lara Logan said Fauci, to some people, represented Josef Mengele, the Nazi death doctor.

Fox has not commented on the statements that Carlson and Logan made about Fauci. Logan, a contributor to the Fox Nation streaming service who had appeared as a commentator on the television network, hasn't been on since.

2021 on track to surpass last year as nation's deadliest

By MIKE STOBBE AP Medical Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — U.S. health officials say 2021 is shaping up to be even deadlier than last year.

It's too early to say for sure, since all the death reports for November and December won't be in for many weeks. But based on available information, it seems likely 2021 will surpass last year's record number of deaths by at least 15,000, said Robert Anderson, who oversees the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's death statistics.

Last year was the most lethal in U.S. history, due largely to the COVID-19 pandemic. A CDC report being released Wednesday shows 2020 was actually even worse than the agency previously reported.

The report presents a final tally for last year of about 3.384 million U.S. deaths, about 25,000 more than a provisional count released earlier this year. Such jumps between provisional and final numbers are

common, but 2020's difference was higher than usual because of a lag in death records from some states that switched to new electronic reporting systems, Anderson said.

The CDC this week also revised its estimate of life expectancy for 2020. Life expectancy at birth that year was 77 years, a decrease of 1.8 years from 2019. The agency previously estimated the decline at 1.5 years.

Anderson said it's likely that the nation will see more than 3.4 million deaths in 2021. Other experts said they think deaths for the year will end up either about the same as in 2020, or higher.

"It's really sad," said Ali Mokdad, a mortality statistics expert at the University of Washington.

A large reason is COVID-19, which hit the U.S. hard around March 2020 and became the nation's No. 3 cause of death, behind heart disease and cancer.

Last year, COVID-19 was the underlying cause in about 351,000 deaths. This year, the number is already at 356,000, and the final tally could hit 370,000, Anderson said.

Experts also think the 2021 numbers will be affected by a drug overdose epidemic that is expected to — for the first time — surpass 100,000 deaths in a calendar year.

An increase in annual deaths is not unusual. The annual count rose by nearly 16,000 from 2018 to 2019 — before COVID-19 appeared.

But the coronavirus clearly had an impact. The nation had the smallest population gain rate in history between July 2020 and July 2021, primarily because of the COVID-19 deaths, said Kenneth Johnson, a University of New Hampshire researcher.

Officials had hoped COVID-19 vaccines would slash the death count. But vaccinations became available gradually this year, with only 7 million fully vaccinated at the end of January and 63 million at the end of March.

Since then, many Americans have chosen not to get vaccinated. The CDC says 204 million Americans are fully vaccinated — or about 65% of the U.S. population that are age 5 and older and eligible for shots.

Indeed, that's a big part of why COVID-19 deaths could climb despite the availability of effective vaccines, Mokdad said. The appearance of new, more transmissible variants of the coronavirus only made the problem worse, he added.

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

California to require booster shots for healthcare workers

By ADAM BEAM Associated Press

SACRAMENTO, Calif. (AP) — California will require health care workers to get a booster shot of the coronavirus vaccine, Gov. Gavin Newsom announced Tuesday, pledging to make sure hospitals are prepared as a new version of the disease begins to spread throughout the state.

California already requires health care workers to be vaccinated against the coronavirus, a directive that took effect in September and has since led to the firing or suspension of thousands of people. Now it will join New Mexico as at least the second state to require booster shots for health care workers.

Newsom made the announcement on his personal Twitter account. His office declined to give more details, including how many workers would be affected and whether frequent testing would be allowed as an alternative. Newsom has scheduled a news conference in the San Francisco Bay Area on Wednesday.

"California will require healthcare workers to get their booster," Newsom said. "With Omicron on the rise, we're taking immediate actions to protect Californians and ensure our hospitals are prepared."

California has so far fared far better than many other states that are dealing with a coronavirus surge, with areas in the Midwest and Northeast seeing the biggest jump in cases and hospitalizations amid frigid temperatures that have kept people indoors.

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention lists California as a place with "high" transmission of the virus, along with nearly everywhere else in the country. But in the last week California averaged 114 new cases per 100,000 people, less than half the national rate.

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Meanwhile, coronavirus related hospitalizations have been rising slowly in California, up 15% in the last 11 days to 3,852. That's less than half as many as during the late summer peak and one-fifth of a year ago, before vaccines were widely available.

But while hospitals overall have fewer patients than last winter, many have fewer workers to treat the patients they do have. The staffing shortage comes as businesses are having trouble finding workers, including hospitals. A recent study by the University of California-San Francisco estimated the state's nursing shortage could persist until 2026.

"The staffing shortages we are experiencing are worse than ever," Kiyomi Burchill, group vice president for policy for the California Hospital Association, said in an interview Tuesday before Newsom made his announcement about booster shots.

California is poised for a surge in new infections amid holiday parties and family gatherings forced indoors by a series of winter storms.

But experts say the nation's most populous state is likely to avoid the worst scenario — spikes in hospitalizations and deaths — because most Californians have either been vaccinated or already been infected. That gives a higher level of protection against the omicron variant that, while not guaranteeing people won't get sick, means they are less likely to need to go to the hospital.

"It's a highly transmissible respiratory virus and people are going to get it. And they are going to get it every winter," said Dr. Monica Gandhi, a professor of infectious diseases at the University of California, San Francisco. "We have to go toward measuring our true success with a disease, which is how we're doing with hospitalizations."

More than 70% of the state's nearly 40 million residents have been fully vaccinated while 42% have gotten a booster shot. As of Monday omicron is now the dominant variant of the coronavirus in the United States.

Much about the omicron variant remains unknown, including whether it causes more or less severe illness. Scientists say omicron spreads more easily than other coronavirus strains, including delta. Early studies suggest the vaccinated will need a third shot for the best chance at preventing infection but even without the extra dose, vaccination still should offer strong protection against severe illness and death.

Computer models used by state officials to forecast the virus say hospitalizations will stay steady through the holidays and dip slightly in mid-January.

"I'm on the fence a little bit about how horrible is this," said Dr. Brad Pollock, associate dean for public health sciences at the University of California, Davis School of Medicine. "We're going to have more people infected because of the more transmissible variant. It may be a little less virulent, which means it causes less symptoms."

In San Diego, researchers recently discovered the highest levels of coronavirus since February in a wastewater treatment plant that serves about 2.3 million people.

"Every time we've seen that kind of increase in the wastewater, a couple of weeks later we see an increase in cases," said Rob Knight, a professor at the University of California-San Diego School of Medicine.

Last week, Newsom, who imposed the first statewide shutdown order in March 2020, warned that cases would likely rise and re-imposed a rule requiring everyone to wear masks at public indoor gatherings. Los Angeles, the nation's second-largest city, once again canceled its in-person New Year's Eve celebration.

Mayor Eric Garcetti said Tuesday that he didn't anticipate another lockdown because "I think we're so much better protected than we were." However he said he believes restrictions such as masking indoors will continue into February and perhaps even March, depending on vaccination, hospitalization and infection rates.

While 70% of Californians have been fully vaccinated, that still leaves 30% — or roughly 12 million people — who haven't been. The California Department of Public Health says people who are not vaccinated are seven times more likely to get infected, nearly 13 times more likely to be hospitalized and nearly 16 times more likely to die from the coronavirus.

Places in California with lower vaccination rates, including Riverside and San Bernardino counties, have seen jumps in hospitalizations recently.

"The problem is there are counties in California, particularly in central California and eastern California,

where they have had neither high vaccination coverage or a lot of prior infections," said Dr. Jeffrey Klausner, a professor of infectious diseases at the University of Southern California's Keck School of Medicine. "We can expect in those communities that there may be an increase in hospitalizations for people at high risk for severe consequences."

Associated Press reporter Felicia Fonseca contributed reporting from Flagstaff, Arizona.

AP sources: NHL to withdraw from Olympics after COVID surge

By JOHN WAWROW and STEPHEN WHYNO AP Hockey Writers

The NHL is not sending players to the Beijing Olympics over concerns that the pandemic will disrupt the league's ability to complete a full season.

Two people with direct knowledge of discussions told The Associated Press on Tuesday that the league informed the NHL Players' Association it was exercising its right to withdraw from the Beijing Games because there was a material disruption to the season.

The people spoke to The AP on condition of anonymity because an announcement had yet to be made. An announcement was expected Wednesday.

The decision is an abrupt turnaround from September, when the NHL, union, International Olympic Committee and International Ice Hockey Federation struck a deal to put the best players in the world back on sports' biggest stage after they skipped the 2018 Pyeongchang Games. The fast-spreading omicron coronavirus variant forced the scrapping of those plans.

A week ago, the NHL attempted to halt the spread of the omicron variant by reintroducing more restrictive COVID-19 protocols, which included daily testing and limiting player gatherings, especially on the road.

Then a sudden rash of postponements brought the total to 50 this season, a daunting number to reschedule and complete an 82-game season while taking an Olympic break for more than two weeks in February. The NHL's bottom line is at stake, with the league and players drawing no direct money from competing at the Winter Games.

The decision comes long before the league faced a Jan. 10 deadline to pull out without financial penalty. As a result, the men's Olympic hockey tournament will go on without NHL players for the second consecutive time.

Winnipeg Jets goaltender Connor Hellebuyck, the likely U.S. Olympic starter, expressed displeasure Tuesday with the decision not to go and called the rash of postponements overkill.

Pittsburgh Penguins captain Sidney Crosby already was bracing for the possibility of the NHL not participating and, at the age of 34, ending what could be his final chance to represent Canada at the Olympics one more time.

"These are opportunities and experiences of a lifetime that you don't get very many of as an athlete, and you might only get one," said Crosby, who won Olympic gold with Canada in 2010 and 2014. "It just might happen to fall in your window and if it doesn't happen to work out, it's unfortunate."

While the NHL and NHLPA agreed on Olympic participation last year as part of a collective bargaining agreement extension, the deal to go to Beijing was contingent on pandemic conditions not worsening.

Unless the Beijing Games are postponed a year like Tokyo's, a generation of stars including American Auston Matthews, Canadians Connor McDavid and Nathan MacKinnon, German Leon Draisaitl and Swede Victor Hedman will need to wait until 2026 to play in the Olympic men's hockey tournament for the first time.

"It's a thing you've been looking forward to for a very long time," Hedman said. "For us to not be able to go, it's going to hurt for a while."

The NHL was full go on the Olympics until the delta and omicron coronavirus variants began spreading around North America earlier this month. Before Calgary's outbreak in the first half of December, only five games needed to be rescheduled and one was already made up.

The NHL did not participate in the Olympics until 1998, which started a string of five in a row through

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Sochi in 2014. The season was not stopped in 2018, leaving mostly professionals playing in Europe and some college players to make up the national rosters in South Korea, where the IOC was reluctant to pay for insurance and expenses.

Russia, which won gold at the Pyeongchang Games, immediately becomes the favorite without NHL players leading the Americans thanks to an influx of homegrown talent playing in the Kontinental Hockey League.

Several NHL players already had expressed hesitations about participating, including Vegas goalie Robin Lehner, who pulled his name out of consideration to represent Sweden. Lehner cited mental health reasons in noting the potentially lengthy quarantines for athletes who test positive during the competition.

"I'm very disappointed and it was a tough decision for me as it's a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. Reality is that what have been said about how it's going to be is not ideal for my mental health," Lehner wrote in a text.

McDavid referred to the potential five-week quarantine requirement as "unsettling."

"I'm still a guy that's wanting to go play in the Olympics," McDavid said. "But we also want to make sure it's safe for everybody. For all the athletes, not just for hockey players."

Pittsburgh's Mike Sullivan will be missing his first opportunity to serve as coach of the U.S. national team. He had been holding out hope for NHL participation earlier Tuesday.

"We're all human beings right. Emotions are a part of it. My hope is that we all have a chance to participate," said Sullivan, who served as an assistant coach on Peter Laviolette's staff at the 2006 Olympics. "It's an unbelievable honor to represent your nation in the Olympics, it's the honor of a lifetime quite honestly. And so I know I don't feel differently than a lot of people that pull their nation's sweaters over their heads."

AP Sports Writer Will Graves contributed to this report.

More AP Olympics: <https://apnews.com/hub/olympic-games> and https://twitter.com/AP_Sports

California says health care workers must get booster shots

By ADAM BEAM Associated Press

SACRAMENTO, Calif. (AP) — California health care workers will be required to have coronavirus booster shots to ensure that hospitals are ready to deal with a surge in cases as the more-transmissible omicron variant spreads throughout the state.

Gov. Gavin Newsom announced the order Tuesday on his personal Twitter account and planned to provide more details at a Wednesday news conference.

California already requires health care workers to be vaccinated against the coronavirus, a directive that took effect in September and has since led to the firing or suspension of thousands of people. Now it will join New Mexico as at least the second state to require booster shots for health care workers.

Last week, Newsom, who imposed the first statewide shutdown order in March 2020, warned that cases would likely rise and re-imposed a rule requiring everyone to wear masks at public indoor gatherings.

Concerns stem from the rise of omicron, which as of Monday was the dominant variant of the coronavirus in the United States. Areas in the Midwest and Northeast are seeing the biggest jump in cases and hospitalizations amid frigid temperatures that have kept people indoors.

Much about the variant remains unknown, including whether it causes more or less severe illness. Scientists say omicron spreads more easily than other coronavirus strains, including delta. Early studies suggest the vaccinated will need a third shot for the best chance at preventing infection but even without the extra dose, vaccination still should offer strong protection against severe illness and death.

California has so far fared far better than many other states. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention lists California as a place with "high" transmission of the virus, along with nearly everywhere else in the country. But in the last week California averaged 114 new cases per 100,000 people, less than half the national rate.

While 70% of Californians have been fully vaccinated, that still leaves 30% — or roughly 12 million people

— who haven't been. The California Department of Public Health says people who are not vaccinated are seven times more likely to get infected, nearly 13 times more likely to be hospitalized and nearly 16 times more likely to die from the coronavirus.

Coronavirus related hospitalizations have been rising slowly in California, up 15% in the last 11 days to 3,852. That's less than half as many as during the late summer peak and one-fifth of a year ago, before vaccines were widely available.

But while hospitals overall have fewer patients than last winter, many have fewer workers to treat the patients they do have. The staffing shortage comes as businesses are having trouble finding workers, including hospitals. A recent study by the University of California-San Francisco estimated the state's nursing shortage could persist until 2026.

Associated Press reporter Felicia Fonseca in Flagstaff, Arizona, contributed to this report.

Omicron casts a new shadow over economy's pandemic recovery

By PAUL WISEMAN and ANNE D'INNOCENZIO AP Business Writers

Just as Americans and Europeans were eagerly awaiting their most normal holiday season in a couple of years, the omicron variant has unleashed a fresh round of fear and uncertainty — for travelers, shoppers, party-goers and their economies as a whole.

The Rockettes have canceled their Christmas show in New York. Some London restaurants have emptied out as commuters avoid the downtown. Broadway shows are canceling some performances. The National Hockey League suspended its games until after Christmas. Boston plans to require diners, revelers and shoppers to show proof of vaccination to enter restaurants, bars and stores.

A heightened sense of anxiety has begun to erode the willingness of some people and some businesses to carry on as usual in the face of the extraordinarily contagious omicron variant, which has fast become the dominant version of the virus in the United States.

Other people are still traveling, spending and congregating as they normally do, though often with more caution. Holiday air travel remains robust. Many stores and restaurants are still enjoying solid sales. And omicron has yet to keep audiences away from movie theaters in significant numbers. This past weekend, record audiences across all demographics flocked to theaters for the new "Spider-Man" movie.

"The movie theater has not yet been hindered by omicron," said Steve Buck, the chief strategy officer of EntTelligence.

At the same time, no one knows yet what omicron will ultimately mean for the health of the Western economies, which have endured a wild ride of downturns and recoveries since early 2020.

"These mutations keep coming," said Robin Brooks, chief economist at the Institute of International Finance. "What is the probability that sometime we get a really nasty one? No one has any idea. This thing is mutating, and it's very, very hard to say."

Will omicron cause outbreaks at factories and ports, disrupt operations and worsen supply chain bottlenecks that have forced up prices and contributed to the hottest U.S. inflation in decades?

Will it mean people will hunker down at home again and spend less on services — restaurant meals, concerts, hotel stays — which could weaken the economy but potentially defuse inflationary pressures?

Will return-to-office plans for white collar workers be put on hold indefinitely, deepening the hit to many cities' downtown businesses?

Or will omicron prove a blip that scarcely slows what has become a surprisingly strong recovery from the short but intense pandemic recession?

Spooked by uncertainty and fear of the worst-case scenarios, stock markets around the world sold off for three days before rebounding Tuesday.

"We don't know whether this is good or bad for growth or inflation in the medium term," said Megan Greene, global chief economist at the Kroll Institute. "We just don't have enough data yet."

Unable to assess its longer-term consequences, businesses, consumers and policymakers have struggled to respond to the omicron threat.

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Danielle Ballantyne, a Chicago dietitian, had planned to visit some stores and seek inspiration for holiday gifts. But as omicron spread, she scrapped that idea in favor of staying home and shopping online.

"From what I have been hearing in the news," Ballantyne said, "omicron is more contagious. So I am trying to be more selective in where I go in terms of big public spaces."

At its stores in big cities like New York and Chicago, the clothier Untuckit is reporting a 15% drop in traffic, similar to what it experienced when the delta variant started spreading last summer.

"It impacts people's perception of comfort and safety and their willingness to go out," said Aaron Sanandres, CEO of the company.

As infections have spread, European countries have so far gone further than the United States, with restrictions ranging from a full lockdown in the Netherlands to indoor mask mandates in the United Kingdom.

A theater in western England refunded \$240,000 in tickets. The Advantage Travel Group, which represents U.K. travel agents, said that business — flights, cruises and package holidays — plummeted 40% in mid-December from a month earlier. A diner in central Madrid absorbed cancellations for about half its booked space one week recently.

In London, downtown restaurants are suffering as office workers stay home.

"As soon as they said work from home, it's completely emptied," said Sally Abe, a chef at the Conrad Hotel in central London.

On Tuesday, Britain announced that it would provide 1 billion pounds (\$1.3 billion) in grants and other aid to help the hospitality industry survive omicron. The government bowed to pressure from pubs, restaurants and other businesses whose income has plunged in the aftermath of public health warnings.

Since the pandemic hit nearly two years ago, it has imposed one economic challenge after another. Economies all but shut down when the virus struck early last year. More than 22 million people in the United States alone lost jobs. Bars, restaurants and hotels were particularly devastated.

But record-high infusions of government spending and, eventually, the rollout of vaccines triggered an unexpectedly powerful recovery, giving many households the confidence and financial wherewithal to resume shopping. And it sparked optimism for the 2021 holiday season: In an updated forecast shortly before omicron emerged as a serious threat, the National Retail Federation said U.S. holiday sales were on track for a record-breaking year.

One fear now is that omicron infections will further disrupt manufacturing and shipping, worsen the supply chain backlogs and keep inflation simmering. It could also increase consumers' already intensified demand for goods, which would magnify the supply shortages.

"If everybody is freaked out that going to a bar or restaurant is going to land them in a hospital, they may continue to buy goods," said Greene, the Kroll Institute economist. "So that could exacerbate the short-term trend and make inflation worse."

On the other hand, she said, "if growth is really dampened (by omicron), that should take the heat off inflation."

There are other reasons to think the recovery could decelerate. In the United States, economic aid from federal spending and relief checks is fading. The Federal Reserve is reducing its economic support. China's economy, the world's second-biggest after the United States, is slowing.

For now, the U.S. bond market is signaling more concern about economic weakness than about runaway inflation: The yield on the benchmark 10-year Treasury note remains at historically low levels, below 1.5%.

Citing omicron and other factors, Oxford Economics has downgraded its estimate of U.S. economic growth for the October-December quarter to a 7.3% annual pace, down from an earlier 7.8% estimate.

"Omicron has been so rampant," said Kathy Bostjancic, Oxford's chief U.S. financial economist. "And it is hitting in high-density areas of the Northeast. We think it is going to take a pretty big toll on economic activity."

That said, it's also possible that the economy will prove resilient against the latest challenge COVID has thrown at it. One measure of retail traffic shows that the new variant has made little difference — at least so far. For the week that ended Dec. 18, store traffic was up nearly 20% from a year earlier, though down

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23% from the same week in the pre-pandemic year of 2019, according to Sensormatic Solutions. For the Black Friday that ended Nov. 27, sales were up 30% from last year.

Peter McCall, Sensormatic's senior manager of retail consulting, noted that shoppers are still going to retail stores but are now favoring open-air shopping centers and outlet malls more than enclosed shopping centers.

Arnold Donald, CEO of Carnival Corp., the world's leading cruise company, said this week that Carnival had experienced "a little spike" in cancellations but predicted that it would prove just a short term blip.

"The booking patterns are strong," Donald said.

So is the traffic at some big retailers. Several hundred people lined up for the opening of the Toys R Us flagship store Sunday at the American Dream mall in East Rutherford, New Jersey.

"We were prepared for a big day, but it was even bigger than we thought," said Yehuda Shmidman, co-founder of WHP Global, which owns Toys R Us.

Abt Electronics in Chicago says it's enjoying a strong holiday season so far, with sales up 10% from a year ago. But Jon Abt, co-president and a grandson of the company's founder, said he's noticed that omicron is changing how some people shop. Though fewer customers are entering stores, there's increasing demand for curbside pickup.

He's also made changes for workers designed to prevent the spread of COVID: He's requiring them to stay at the counters or warehouses where they work instead of jumping back and forth to different workplaces.

"I am an optimist," Abt said. "I am not a worrier. This is life. And you have got to roll with the punches."

Wiseman reported from Washington, D'Innocenzio from Cape Cod, Massachusetts. AP Writers Martin Crutsinger in Washington, Lindsey Bahr in Los Angeles and Kelvin Chan, Sylvia Hui and Danica Kirka in London contributed to this report.

Policing experts: Series of errors preceded Wright shooting

By STEPHEN GROVES AND KATHLEEN FOODY Associated Press

The suburban Minneapolis police officer on trial for fatally shooting Daunte Wright has said she mistakenly used her gun when she was trying to grab a Taser during a chaotic attempt to arrest the Black motorist.

Policing experts say that regardless of Kim Potter's intent, the fatal shooting was preceded by smaller mistakes or questionable decisions that added up to a dangerous situation as she was training a new officer. They also say the tragic outcome shows how important it is for veteran officers like her to have not just the savvy to train rookies, but the willingness to correct them instantly in risky situations — even if it means the trainee might lose face.

"The number one priority isn't the long-term outcome of training an officer, it's the short term of safety," said Brian Higgins, an adjunct professor at the John Jay College of Criminal Justice and the former chief of police and director of public safety for Bergen County, New Jersey.

"Knowing when to step in is a difficult decision sometimes, and I'm sure many times field training officers look back and go "Wow, I should have stepped in sooner."

Potter, who is white, is charged with first- and second-degree manslaughter in the April 11 killing of Wright, who was pulled over in the Minneapolis suburb of Brooklyn Center for having expired license plate tags and an air freshener hanging from his rearview mirror. The jury began deliberating on Monday.

Potter was training a newer officer, Anthony Luckey, that day, and she testified that if she had been alone, she "most likely" wouldn't have pulled over Wright, who was 20 years old. She said the air freshener was trivial and that many people were having difficulty renewing their tags at that stage of the pandemic.

But Potter said Luckey wanted to make the stop and she allowed it because it's important for trainees to have many encounters with the public.

Policing experts agree that it's good for trainees to interact often with the public so that they learn the intangible skills the job requires. But using traffic violations as a way to check for more serious lawbreaking — criticized by some as pretext stops — has come under scrutiny, especially because some of these

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stops have led to the deaths of Black people in recent years.

Carl Lafata, a professor of criminal justice at Minnesota State University in Mankato, said such stops can erode community trust if they're used too aggressively. The Wright stop could have been a chance for Potter to teach Luckey "the art of the job," he said.

"How do you do it in such a way that is safe, that is professional, that leaves that person with a good taste in their mouth?" he asked.

After Potter and Luckey discovered that Wright had an outstanding warrant on a weapons charge, body camera video recorded them making a plan to arrest Wright.

"I'm just going to get him out and then cuff him up. I mean he's got a warrant, so I'm going to get him cuffed up," Luckey said.

That should have been a point at which the officers' level of caution went up, especially in the midst of field-training a new officer, Higgins said. Learning how to correctly handcuff and control someone is a basic but critical process for police officers. If a trainee struggles to the point of risking someone's safety, a field training officer should step in, he said.

"When an officer has made a decision to place someone under arrest, that's when you enter in many cases the real dangerous situation," he said. "And that's why handcuffing and controlling the subject is critical, regardless of what the charge is."

Ryan Getty, a professor at California State University at Sacramento who has specialized in developing police field training, said field training officers usually don't allow trainees to make arrests on their own until the latter half of their training program. Although Luckey had gone through field training programs at other police departments, he was in the second of four phases with the Brooklyn Center police force.

"Usually the (field training officer) takes over if it's a violent arrest or warrant," Getty said.

Luckey, Potter and the third officer who responded to the scene, then-Sgt. Mychal Johnson, all approached Wright's car, with Luckey taking the lead as Wright stood outside his car.

As Luckey struggled to handcuff him, Potter tried to assist, placing her hand on Wright's arm.

That move made sense to the police training experts, who said training officers will usually try to non-verbally take charge of an arrest where police lose control.

"When it's clearly going south, then the (field training officer) needs to step in and take charge," Lafata said.

But then Wright made a break for his car and got behind the wheel.

Potter's former chief, Tim Gannon, testified that he saw no error by Potter in procedure. But he faulted Luckey for not moving Wright away from his open car door.

"What training tells us to do is to move him to the rear of the car away from the open door or close the door behind him," testified Gannon, who resigned two days after the shooting — the same day Potter quit.

Lafata and Higgins highlighted the same error. "You want to avoid any sort of opportunity for the person to get back into the car and flee," said Lafata, who previously served as a state trooper in Michigan.

When prosecutors questioned Potter about why she didn't step in at that point, she testified that she "wouldn't do that to a rookie in front of a suspect."

Gannon agreed in his testimony, calling it an action he would not have addressed until afterward.

Higgins said a general "good rule" is to let a trainee officer "work through his or her actions and afterward try to critique it."

"But if there is any concern having to do with safety, you have a responsibility to train them and keep them safe," he said. "If her concern was that his actions were unsafe because he did not position the individual correctly during the arrest, she has to interject herself."

Field training officers "don't want to be the bad guy or girl," but ensuring someone is trained properly is critical in policing where the health and safety of everyone involved can be at stake, Higgins said.

Once Wright jumped into his car, the situation became chaotic, with Potter pulling her handgun while yelling, "I'll tase you! I'll tase you! Taser! Taser! Taser!"

Getty questioned whether Potter was even qualified to be a field training officer because she made the fatal error of grabbing her handgun instead of a Taser.

"When it comes to panic time, if they don't have that experience, they just go back to how they are trained," he said, adding that field training officers "are supposed to be the best of the best officers."

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

'Summer of Soul,' 'Drive My Car' make Oscars shortlist

By LINDSEY BAHR AP Film Writer

Documentaries about Julia Child, "Black Woodstock," the pandemic and The Velvet Underground and acclaimed international films like Japan's "Drive My Car," Iran's "A Hero" and Norway's "The Worst Person in the World" just got a little closer to scoring Oscar nominations.

The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences on Tuesday Wednesday unveiled its shortlists for several categories, including documentary feature, international feature, original song, original score, visual effects and makeup and hairstyling. Nominations for all categories for the 94th Oscars will be announced on Feb. 8.

Members of the documentary branch of the academy culled from 138 eligible films to pick 15 shortlist selections, including two pandemic-themed films ("In the Same Breath," "The First Wave"), Questlove's "Summer of Soul (...Or, When the Revolution Could Not Be Televised)" about a near-forgotten 1969 music event, Julie Cohen and Betsy West's "Julia" and Todd Haynes' "The Velvet Underground." Other notable selections are "The Rescue," about the Thai soccer team and their rescue for a remote cave, "Procession," "Attica" and "Flee." "Billie Eilish: The World's a Little Blurry" also made the cut.

"Flee," an animated documentary about an Afghan refugee made by Danish filmmaker Jonas Poher Rasmussen was also among the films that advanced in the international feature category. Other strong contenders include Ryusuke Hamaguchi "Drive My Car," which has been a critics group darling, Asghar Farhadi's Iranian drama "A Hero," Italian director Paolo Sorrentino's semi-autobiographical "The Hand of God" and Joachim Trier's dark romantic comedy "The Worst Person in the World," from Norway. France's entry, "Titane," did not make the cut despite having won the top prize at the Cannes Film Festival earlier this year.

Original songs in contention include some from major music stars like Beyoncé's "Be Alive," from "King Richard," Billie Eilish's James Bond song "No Time To Die," Van Morrison's "Down to Joy" from "Belfast," U2's "Sing 2" song, Kid Cudi and JAY-Z's "Guns Go Bang" from "The Harder they Fall," Brian Wilson's "Where I Belong" and Ariana Grande's "Don't Look Up."

Composers Jonny Greenwood ("The Power of the Dog," "Spencer") and Hans Zimmer ("Dune," "No Time To Die") could be in store for double original song nominations come Feb. 8. Blockbusters like "Dune" and "No Time To Die" also advanced in a number of categories including visual effects, sound and makeup and hairstyling.

Winners will be revealed at the ceremony on Sunday, March 27, which will be broadcast live on ABC.

Follow AP Film Writer Lindsey Bahr on Twitter: www.twitter.com/ldbahr

Putin blames West for tensions, demands security guarantees

By DASHA LITVINOVA Associated Press

MOSCOW (AP) — The Russian president on Tuesday reiterated his demand for guarantees from the U.S. and its allies that NATO will not expand eastwards, blaming the West for "tensions that are building up in Europe."

Russian President Vladimir Putin's speech at a meeting with Russia's top military brass came just days after Moscow submitted draft security documents demanding that NATO deny membership to Ukraine and other former Soviet countries and roll back the alliance's military deployments in Central and Eastern Europe.

The demands — contained in a proposed Russia-U.S. security treaty and a security agreement between

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Moscow and NATO — were drafted amid soaring tensions over a Russian troop buildup near Ukraine that has stoked fears of a possible invasion. Russia has denied it has plans to attack its neighbor but pressed for legal guarantees that would rule out NATO expansion and weapons deployment there.

Putin charged Tuesday that if U.S. and NATO missile systems appear in Ukraine, it will take those missiles only minutes to reach Moscow.

“For us, it is the most serious challenge — a challenge to our security,” he said, adding that this is why the Kremlin needs “long-term, legally binding guarantees” from the West, as opposed to “verbal assurances, words and promises” that Moscow can’t trust.

U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken said Washington is working with its European allies to address what he called “Russian aggression” with diplomacy but said President Joe Biden opposes the kind of guarantees sought by Putin.

“The president has been extremely clear for many, many years about some basic principles that no one is moving back on: the principle that one country does not have the right to change by force the borders of another, that one country does not have the right to dictate the policies of another or to tell that that country with whom they may associate,” Blinken told reporters in Washington. “One country does not have the right to exert a sphere of influence. That notion should be relegated to the dustbin of history.”

Putin noted that NATO has expanded eastward since the late 1990s while giving assurances that Russia’s worries were groundless.

“What is happening now, tensions that are building up in Europe, is their (U.S. and NATO’s) fault every step of the way,” the Russian leader said. “Russia has been forced to respond at every step. The situation kept worsening and worsening, deteriorating and deteriorating. And here we are today, in a situation when we’re forced to resolve it somehow.”

Russia’s relations with the U.S. sank to post-Cold War lows after it annexed the Crimean Peninsula from Ukraine in 2014 and backed a separatist insurgency in eastern Ukraine that still controls territory there. Tensions reignited in recent weeks after Moscow massed tens of thousands of troops near Ukraine’s border.

Putin has pressed the West for guarantees that NATO will not expand to Ukraine or deploy its forces there and raised the issue during a video call with U.S. President Joe Biden two weeks ago.

Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu charged Tuesday that more than 120 staff of U.S. private military companies are currently operating in two villages in war-torn eastern Ukraine, training Ukrainian troops and setting up firing positions in residential buildings and different facilities.

Putin said the U.S. “should understand we have nowhere to retreat.”

“What they are now trying to do and plan to do at Ukraine’s territory, it’s not thousands of kilometers away, it’s happening right at the doorstep of our house,” he said.

Putin added that Moscow hopes “constructive, meaningful talks with a visible end result — and within a certain time frame — that would ensure equal security for all.”

“Armed conflicts, bloodshed is not our choice, and we don’t want such developments. We want to resolve issues by political and diplomatic means,” Putin said.

U.S. Assistant Secretary of State Karen Donfried, the top U.S. diplomat for Europe, said at a briefing Tuesday that Washington is “prepared to discuss those proposals that Russia put on the table.”

“There are some things we’re prepared to work on, and we do believe there is merit in having discussion,” Donfried told reporters after a visit to Kyiv, Moscow and Brussels.

“There are other things in those documents that the Russians know will be unacceptable,” she added, without specifying which ones.

Donfried said bilateral U.S.-Russia meetings are likely to happen in January, and talks within NATO-Russia Council, as well as the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, are likely to see movement in January as well.

NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg said Tuesday that he intends to call a new meeting of the NATO-Russia Council as soon as possible in the New Year.

“Any dialogue with Russia needs to be based on the core principles of European security and to address NATO’s concerns about Russia’s actions,” Stoltenberg said.

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On Tuesday evening, Putin talked about Russia's proposals in phone calls with French President Emmanuel Macron and German Chancellor Olaf Scholz. According to the Kremlin, Putin informed Macron about Moscow's "diplomatic efforts on the subject," and gave Scholz "detailed comments" on the drafts Russia-U.S. security treaty and a security agreement between Russia and NATO submitted last week.

In the conversation with Scholz, "hope was expressed that serious negotiations would be organized on all the issues raised by" Moscow, the readout said.

The conflict in eastern Ukraine was also discussed in both phone calls, with Putin claiming that Kyiv was reluctant to implement the Minsk agreements — a peace deal brokered by France and Germany in 2015 that helped end large-scale hostilities in the region.

Efforts to reach a political settlement of the Ukraine conflict, which has killed more than 14,000 people, have failed, however, and sporadic skirmishes have continued along the tense line of contact.

Associated Press writers Angela Charlton in Paris and Lorne Cook in Brussels contributed to this report.

Dubai ruler must pay ex-wife \$700M in divorce settlement

By JILL LAWLESS Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — A British court has ordered the ruler of Dubai to pay his ex-wife and their children close to 550 million pounds (\$730 million), in one of the most expensive divorce settlements in British history.

A High Court judge said Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum must pay 251.5 million pounds to his U.K.-based sixth wife, Princess Haya Bint Al Hussein, and make ongoing payments for their children Jalila, 14, and Zayed, 9, underpinned by a bank guarantee of 290 million pounds.

The total amount the children receive could be more or less than 290 million pounds, depending on factors including how long they live and whether they reconcile with their father.

The settlement includes 11 million pounds a year to cover security costs for Princess Haya and the children while they are minors.

In a November ruling that was made public Tuesday, Judge Philip Moor said the family needed "water-tight security," and that "absolutely uniquely," the main threat to them came from Sheikh Mohammed, rather than outside sources.

Haya, 47, fled to the U.K. in 2019 and sought custody of her two children through the British courts. The princess, who is the daughter of the late King Hussein of Jordan, said she was "terrified" of her husband, who is alleged to have ordered the forced return to the Gulf emirate of two of his daughters.

The long battle in Britain's family courts has disclosed personal and financial details about the powerful but publicity-shy Gulf royals who are among the world's wealthiest people. Sheikh Mohammed, 72, is also the vice president and prime minister of the United Arab Emirates, of which Dubai is a part, and a major horse breeder. The founder of the successful Godolphin horse-racing stable, he is on friendly terms with Queen Elizabeth II.

Haya, a graduate of Oxford University, is also a keen equestrian and competed in show jumping for Jordan at the 2000 Sydney Olympics.

In evidence to the court, Princess Haya said she had paid 6.7 million pounds to four of her security staff who blackmailed her over her affair with a bodyguard, selling jewelry and taking money from her daughter's bank account to get the funds.

After learning of the affair, Sheikh Mohammed published a poem titled "You Lived; You Died," which Princess Haya interpreted as threatening.

A separate British family court judge ruled in October that Sheikh Mohammed had authorized the hacking of Princess Haya's phone during their legal battle.

Judge Andrew McFarlane said the sheikh gave his "express or implied authority" to hack the phones of the princess and her attorneys using Pegasus spyware produced by NSO Group of Israel, the court said. The software is licensed exclusively to nation states for use by their security services.

Sheikh Mohammed denied knowledge of the hacking.

McFarlane earlier ruled that Sheikh Mohammed had conducted a campaign of fear and intimidation against his estranged wife and "ordered and orchestrated" the abduction and forced return to Dubai of two of his adult daughters: Sheikha Shamsa in August 2000 and her sister Sheikha Latifa, in 2002 and again in 2018.

The divorce bill eclipses the 450 million pound settlement awarded Tatiana Akhmedova in her 2016 split from Russian billionaire Farkhad Akhmedov, at the time cited as Britain's most expensive divorce.

The settlement includes a holiday budget of 5.1 million pounds, an annual sum of just over 450,000 pounds for the children's staff and around 275,000 pounds for their animals, including two ponies and a horse. Haya was awarded millions to compensate for property lost when she left Dubai, including 13.5 million pounds for jewelry and what the judge called "the relatively modest sum" of 1 million pounds for clothes.

It is possible, but rare, for financial divorce settlements to be appealed in England.

A spokesman for Sheikh Mohammed said in a statement that the ruler "has always ensured that his children are provided for. The court has now made its ruling on finances and he does not intend to comment further."

Water worries in West force sports teams to get creative

By ERICA HUNZINGER AP Sports Writer

DENVER (AP) — The Arizona Diamondbacks ripped out the grass at Chase Field ahead of the 2019 season, replacing it with synthetic grass. It was a business decision, but it also ended up being a water-conservation measure.

The Phoenix-based major league baseball team thought it would save 2 million gallons a year. In the first season, the savings were closer to 4.5 million gallons, which is roughly the annual water usage of 49 households in the Phoenix area, according to the Arizona Department of Water Resources.

"This challenge has been approaching for years and has been on our radar," said Diamondbacks President and CEO Derrick Hall, whose team has saved 16 million gallons of water since the turf was installed. "We have tremendous relationships with the state's legislators and executives, and have had discussions about water for years."

That's not to say the Diamondbacks don't use water, none of which is recycled or reclaimed. There are hundreds of low-flow toilets, urinals and sinks, plus the outfield pool and the need to hose down seats or wash uniforms.

With scientists predicting that climate change will lead to droughts and possible water shortages throughout the West in the coming years, The Associated Press asked pro teams in the Colorado River Basin who have grass or ice playing surfaces about use and sustainability strategies. Of the four interviewed, three rely mostly on reclaimed, recycled or created water and two have high-tech irrigation sensors. Not one has a detailed plan for current or future drought situations.

Regardless of their strategies, pro teams' usage is "probably negligible or immaterial, in terms of the impact" on water sustainability, said Sarah Porter, director of the Kyl Center for Water Policy at Arizona State University. She's more concerned about sports' "moral leadership."

When "players help take the lead and emphasize the importance of sustainability, that can have an impact," she said, "because that helps move everybody into the kind of new math that we have to move into as we deal with declining Colorado River supplies and changes in the amount of snowpack we get from our other big water sources."

The authors of the 1922 Colorado River Compact couldn't have imagined what the West would look like a century later, when about 40 million people and millions of agricultural acres rely on the 1,450-mile-long waterway. That high demand is running up against a rapidly warming climate, one scientists believe will cause a more unpredictable amount of water that could lead to droughts and lower reservoir levels.

Arizona, Nevada and Mexico must cut back on usage in 2022 because of low water levels at Lake Mead, though the restrictions mostly affect agricultural areas; Las Vegas and Phoenix are spared for now. California had a statewide drought declaration this year, and the State Water Resources Control Board is

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considering new water-use rules for homeowners.

But water is barely mentioned in September's inaugural Sustainable Sport Index benchmarking report from Honeycomb Strategies, which works with venues and stadiums on sustainability. Eight of the 20 pro teams that responded were in the Colorado River Basin, though none spoke with the AP. Seventy-eight percent of respondents said they track water consumption annually and 64% have timed irrigation systems.

The LA Galaxy's home — the 125-acre Dignity Health Sports Park, which opened in 2003 — recently upgraded its irrigation system to better target thirsty spots. The campus uses 90% reclaimed water "to be as responsible as possible from the onset of this building," General Manager Katie Pandolfo said.

That works out to about 15 million gallons of reclaimed water a year used on the Galaxy's grass field, several other grass soccer fields and landscaping. But 90% reclaimed water isn't 100% reclaimed water, and it's "not as regulated as domestic," Pandolfo said, so another 12 million gallons a year in domestic water is used only for irrigation.

Up the coastline, Levi's Stadium, which is home to the San Francisco 49ers, uses mostly recycled water from the city and county of Santa Clara. While not in the Colorado River Basin, the area has its own problems, considering a new study projects the possibility of little or no snow in the Sierra Nevada mountain range in a few decades.

The 49ers said they'd used 8.3 million gallons of recycled water and 12.3 million gallons overall from January through the end of September. Levi's Stadium Executive Vice President and General Manager Jim Mercurio acknowledged the 82,000 square feet of grass doesn't get 100% recycled water but a blend of reclaimed and potable water.

"You never want to compromise the integrity of the field," Mercurio said.

Reclaimed, recycled, whatever you call it, Porter with the Kyl Center said it's a net positive, but "doesn't actually contribute to sustainability in the big picture."

"We have to stop thinking of it as being virtuous for people to use reclaimed water, because that water could be treated up to potable standards and used for anything," she said.

The Los Angeles Kings have an unusual source for water at the Staples Center and the Toyota Sports Performance Center practice facility. Both have an Energetico Climate Processor, which pulls humidity out of the air and turns it into water; the Kings said, combined, that saves a total of 620,500 gallons of city water a year.

It takes about 10,000 gallons to make ice at the beginning of the NHL season. On game days, the Kings use 800 to 1,200 gallons to keep the surface playable, said Kelly Cheeseman, the chief operating officer of the L.A. Kings and AEG Sports.

The first year of the climate processor system at the Staples Center, in 2018, the Kings used the majority of created water for the initial ice and maintenance. But now the 500 to 700 gallons per day goes toward the cooling towers that are part of the heating and air conditioning system (though the towers still need another 4,300 gallons a day of city water).

If teams' overall water usage is a relative drop in the bucket, then the long-term impact relies on star power, Porter said. In other words, teams can't just practice, they must preach.

The 49ers recently announced a new partnership with Save Our Water and the state's Department of Water Resources, which will involve signage at the stadium, a webpage and a PSA campaign that started this month with wide receiver Deebo Samuel.

"It's not like you're going to change (people's usage) overnight because the 49ers are doing it ... (but people might think) if the 49ers are doing it, let's try it," Mercurio said, adding pro teams have "not only an obligation, but an opportunity" to encourage water conservation.

Pandolfo said the Galaxy has "a brand that people love and, quite frankly, listen to, so we have an obligation to make sure that we are putting the message out there ... that this is something important."

Hall with the Diamondbacks said the team understands "our social responsibility when it comes to talking the talk, but more importantly, walking the walk." But Porter said teams need to go beyond the usual fix-your-leaky-faucets talk, and instead raise the idea of permanently reducing outdoor water use — like encouraging residents to get rid of a pool — or share expertise on xeriscaping.

"If one of Arizona's beloved sports teams started to lead a conversation about water use among affinity organizations," she said. "I think it would really ... create momentum."

For all of AP's environmental coverage, visit <https://apnews.com/hub/environment>

New reforms target US military's missing weapons problem

By KRISTIN M. HALL and JUSTIN PRITCHARD Associated Press

The Department of Defense is overhauling how it keeps track of its guns and explosives, and Congress is requiring more accountability from the Pentagon -- responses to an Associated Press investigation that showed lost or stolen military weapons were reaching America's streets.

The missing weaponry includes assault rifles, machine guns, handguns, armor-piercing grenades, artillery shells, mortars, grenade launchers and plastic explosives.

The Pentagon will now have to give lawmakers an annual report on weapons loss and security under the National Defense Authorization Act, which Congress approved this month and President Joe Biden is expected to sign. As AP's AWOL Weapons investigation showed, military officials weren't advising Congress even as guns and explosives continued to disappear.

To meet those reporting requirements, the military is modernizing how it accounts for its millions of firearms and mountains of explosives.

"Clearly the accountability on this issue was stopping at too low of a level," said U.S. Rep. Jason Crow, D-Colorado, a U.S. Army veteran and member of the House Armed Services Committee who supported the reforms. With the new requirements, "if there are hundreds of missing weapons in that report, members of Congress are going to see it and they are going to be asked about it publicly and held accountable for it."

Pentagon officials have said that they can account for more than 99.9% of firearms, and take weapons security very seriously. Still, when AP published its first report on missing firearms in June, Gen. Mark Milley, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said he would consider a "systematic fix."

In response, the Army, the largest branch with the most firearms, took on a major overhaul of how units report missing, lost or stolen weapons. Paper records are giving way to a digital form, and a central logistics operations center is collecting and verifying serious incident reports that — as with other armed services — didn't always go all the way up the chain of command.

The new system uses an existing software system called Vantage to give commanders a real-time look at what is unaccounted for, Scott Forster, an operations research analyst at the Army, said in a briefing with AP.

Other changes will affect how the military responds to law enforcement investigations.

When a gun is recovered or sought during a criminal case, the Defense Department's Small Arms and Light Weapons Registry is supposed to determine the last known location or unit responsible. But the registry's information was inaccurate and responses to law enforcement weren't timely, according to internal Army documents obtained by the AP. (The Army runs the registry for the Pentagon.)

The Army is now developing an app that would search each service's own property record databases, according to Army spokesman Lt. Col. Brandon Kelley.

The new law also requires the Defense Secretary to report confirmed thefts or recovery of weapons to the National Crime Information Center, which the FBI runs. Military regulations had required the services and units to self-report losses; the onus will now be on the highest level of the Pentagon.

The other armed services also are implementing reforms.

The Marine Corps said it is developing internal procedures for improved oversight through increased inspections of units. The Navy required units to notify a higher headquarters when reporting weapons losses. The Air Force has replaced its munitions property book system with a commercial application.

This summer, the Defense Logistics Agency began reporting to the Pentagon losses and thefts of firearms that the military loaned to civilian agencies under the Law Enforcement Support Office program. In its data release to AP, the Pentagon reported that 461 of these firearms had vanished, with 109 later

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recovered. AP's reporting did not include LESO weapons.

After the AP's initial report published in June, Gen. Milley tasked the service branches with scrubbing their data on firearms losses since 2010 -- the time period AP studied.

The Pentagon reluctantly shared the statistics it collected, which Milley's office has provided to Capitol Hill. The official numbers are lower than what AP reported -- but also incomplete, because some services failed to include stolen weapons as documented by the military's own criminal investigators.

The number of missing, lost or stolen firearms was "approximately 1,540" from 2010 through this summer, according to LTC Uriah Orland, a spokesman for the Office of the Secretary of Defense. The majority have been recovered, he said. That total compares to the at least 2,000 firearms that AP had reported for 2010 through 2020, a tally was based on the military's own data, internal memoranda, criminal investigation case files and other sources.

There are several reasons for the discrepancy. In conducting their analyses, each service used different standards and systems. Despite the detailed data search by each service, AP found lost or stolen items that were not in their official accounting.

Relying on its official weapons registry, the Navy data represented that none of its shotguns have been stolen and its only explosives losses during the 2010s were 20 concussion grenades. AP identified several shotguns and dozens of armor-piercing grenades, based on case files from the Naval Criminal Investigative Service.

The Marines decided that any weapon that vanished in a combat zone didn't count -- even in cases, for example, when a rifle fell from a vehicle or aircraft, or disappeared from living quarters on overseas base. Their total of "unaccounted for" firearms since 2010 was 31.

The biggest explanation for the difference between AP's numbers and official numbers is a significant downward revision of Army totals.

In June, AP reported the Army couldn't account for more than 1,500 weapons. Most of that total derived from internal Army memos that said 1,300 rifles and handguns were lost or stolen between 2013 and 2019. The Army had said the memos could include duplications and combat losses, which AP excluded when known.

Responding to Milley's order, personnel hand-searched records. Their conclusion was that, in the 2010s, only 469 firearms were missing.

Army officials didn't detail which weapons they excluded or their criteria for reaching the total, which AP was unable to verify independently.

Hall reported from Nashville, Tennessee; contact her at <https://twitter.com/kmhall>. Pritchard reported from Los Angeles; contact him at <https://twitter.com/JPritchardAP>.

Email AP's Global Investigations Team at investigative@ap.org or via <https://www.ap.org/tips/>. See other work at <https://www.apnews.com/hub/ap-investigations>.

Texas governor's decision: Whether to pardon George Floyd

By PAUL J. WEBER Associated Press

AUSTIN, Texas (AP) — Doling out pardons is a holiday tradition for Texas Gov. Greg Abbott, who around every Christmas grants them to a handful of ordinary citizens, typically for minor offenses committed years or decades ago.

But one name stands out on his desk: George Floyd.

Abbott has not said whether he will posthumously pardon Floyd this year for a 2004 drug arrest in Houston by a former officer whose police work is no longer trusted by prosecutors. Texas' parole board — stacked with Abbott appointees — unanimously recommended a pardon for Floyd in October.

Since then, the two-term Republican governor, who is up for reelection in 2022, has given no indication of whether he will grant what would be only the second posthumous pardon in Texas history. Floyd, who was Black, spent much of his life in Houston before moving to Minnesota, where his death under the knee

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of a white police officer last year led to a U.S. reckoning on race and policing.

"It doesn't matter who you think George Floyd was, or what you think he stood for or didn't stand for," said Allison Mathis, a public defender in Houston who submitted Floyd's pardon application. "What matters is he didn't do this. It's important for the governor to correct the record to show he didn't do this."

A spokeswoman for Abbott did not respond to requests for comment.

Pardons restore the rights of the convicted and forgive them in the eyes of the law. Floyd's family and supporters said a posthumous pardon for him in Texas would show a commitment to accountability.

In February 2004, Floyd was arrested in Houston for selling \$10 worth of crack in a police sting. He pleaded guilty to a drug charge and served 10 months in prison.

His case happened to be among dozens that prosecutors revisited in the fallout over a deadly drug raid in 2019 that resulted in murder charges against an officer, Gerald Goines, who is no longer with the Houston force. Prosecutors say Goines lied to obtain a search warrant in the 2019 raid that left a husband and wife dead, and the office of Harris County District Attorney Kim Ogg has since dismissed more than 160 drug convictions tied to Goines.

Goines has pleaded not guilty and his attorneys accuse Ogg of launching the review for political gain.

Abbott has several primary challengers from the far right, and his ongoing silence about a potential pardon for Floyd has raised questions by Mathis and others over whether political calculations are at play. His office has not responded to those charges.

Abbott attended Floyd's memorial service last year in Houston, where he met with the family and floated the idea of a "George Floyd Act" that would take aim at police brutality. But Abbott never publicly supported such a measure months later when lawmakers returned to the Capitol, where Republicans instead made police funding a priority.

State Sen. Royce West, a Democrat who carried the "George Floyd Act" in the Senate, said he understands the politics if Abbott was waiting until after the GOP primary elections in March. But he said the governor should act on the recommendation.

"As he's always said, he is a law and order governor," West said. "And this would be following the law."

Find AP's full coverage of the death of George Floyd at: <https://apnews.com/hub/death-of-george-floyd>

NFL could become trend-setter for COVID-19 testing policies

By ROB MAADDI AP Pro Football Writer

The NFL's decision to reduce COVID-19 testing for asymptomatic, vaccinated players could signal a trend for pro sports leagues and provide an example for society to follow heading into 2022.

Despite a rising number of positive cases that forced three games to be rescheduled over the weekend, the NFL, in cooperation with the players' union, agreed on Saturday to scale back testing for vaccinated players. The move aligns with guidance from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The CDC recommends "diagnostic testing" only for symptomatic or close-contact vaccinated people, and "screening tests" only for unvaccinated people.

The NFL previously required vaccinated players to get tested weekly before amending the protocols. The NFLPA had advocated for daily testing for vaccinated players but eventually agreed to "target" testing.

The NBA didn't require vaccinated players to get tested during the season but revised its policy to increase testing for a two-week period starting Dec. 26.

The NHL tested players every third day but returned to daily testing through at least Jan. 7.

"I think the NFL is actually going to be a really interesting and I think really safe real-world experiment on what our new normal is likely going to look like," Dr. Vin Gupta, a pulmonologist and professor at the University of Washington, said in an interview with the AP. "And, it's safe to say that the NFL is obviously a large vaccine bubble, sans a few high-profile exceptions.

"We can't continue the status quo, ad infinitum, where we are testing regularly people that are otherwise healthy, asymptomatic, triple-vaccinated, just to detect the asymptomatic individual who might be

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positive ... because then you're going to quarantine that individual who might be asymptomatic or having mild symptoms, who is triple-vaccinated, who might for a small period of time, be infectious to others who presumably are also vaccinated."

Almost 95% of NFL players and nearly all coaching staffs are vaccinated.

Gupta, an informal consultant for the Seattle Seahawks on COVID-19 issues and an adviser for baseball's Seattle Mariners, says the NFL is "ahead of the curve" with target and voluntary testing.

"I think they're able to do things that the rest of the country is unable to do because they have a vaccine bubble, and they can control things to a certain degree that we can't control across the public at large, and so it's an interesting experiment," Gupta said. "We have to build policies and procedures and case management protocols around positive tests that make sense, given our reality."

On Monday, the first day under the NFL's revised protocols, 47 players were placed on the reserve/COVID-19 list, the most in a single day since the pandemic began. Several players were asymptomatic and vaccinated, a person familiar with the results told The Associated Press.

The league says Monday's results are evidence its new "smarter" and more "strategic" testing policy is working. Positive cases were identified and the players were isolated. Players who test positive must quarantine until they're cleared to return. Under the new procedures, vaccinated players can return in fewer than 10 days.

"We want someone to return after they are no longer a risk for themselves or a risk to others," said Dr. Allen Sills, the NFL's chief medical officer. "We've looked at our data very carefully there. We have obviously continued to evolve that definition over time and we believe we can bring a further degree of precision to that process on how people can return by fine-tuning that in a way that fits into the protocols."

But many people have questioned the league's motives for changing testing protocols at a time when the number of positive cases have increased rapidly due to the Omicron variant.

"The other side is that they're going to have more players that are out there that are infected that are potentially transmitting to other players and leading to a greater burden of infections," said Dr. David Hamer, professor of global health and medicine at Boston University. "This change in plan makes me nervous mainly because of Omicron surging."

It's fair to wonder if the NFL is putting its desire to finish the season uninterrupted ahead of health and safety. But the league and its team of doctors point to science and data.

"We are always analyzing our data and particularly our outcomes," Sills said. "We are looking at our protocols, together with our experts, together with the Players' Association. We are looking at them to see how we achieve the safest possible environment for everyone and that causes us to need to constantly respond to adapt the protocols. And so clearly, with the emergence of this new variant, which, as I said, in many ways seems like a new disease, has been an opportunity to reevaluate every aspect of our protocols, and has led to some of the changes.

"We believe what we are doing actually now will mimic what we have been doing in health care for quite a while now. ... We are not routinely testing asymptomatic, vaccinated health care workers, doctors, etc. We are testing those who become symptomatic and meet certain criteria. So, we are really just joining what has been done in health care based on our own experience and the experience in health care up to this point."

Along with new testing policies, the league over the past week has emphasized booster shots for players, mandated the boosters for coaches and other staff, and provided options for virtual meetings. All players are provided home tests and anyone can be tested whenever they want.

"I think there is a lot we have learned from health care and I think it is very relevant to try and use some of the exact same strategies that are routinely used in health care when it comes to the NFL population as well," said Dr. Deverick Anderson, Professor of Medicine at the Duke Center for Antimicrobial Stewardship and Infection Prevention and co-founder and co-owner of Infection Control Education for Major Sports.

Follow Rob Maaddi on Twitter at <https://twitter.com/robmaaddi> and his work can be found at <https://apnews.com/search/robmaaddi>

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More AP NFL coverage: <https://apnews.com/hub/nfl> and https://twitter.com/AP_NFL

Today in History

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Wednesday, Dec. 22, the 356th day of 2021. There are nine days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On Dec. 22, 2010, President Barack Obama signed a law allowing gays for the first time in history to serve openly in America's military, repealing the "don't ask, don't tell" policy.

On this date:

In 1894, French army officer Alfred Dreyfus was convicted of treason in a court-martial that triggered worldwide charges of anti-Semitism. (Dreyfus was eventually vindicated.)

In 1937, the first center tube of the Lincoln Tunnel connecting New York City and New Jersey beneath the Hudson River was opened to traffic. (The second tube opened in 1945, the third in 1957.)

In 1941, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill arrived in Washington for a wartime conference with President Franklin D. Roosevelt.

In 1944, during the World War II Battle of the Bulge, U.S. Brig. Gen. Anthony C. McAuliffe rejected a German demand for surrender, writing "Nuts!" in his official reply.

In 1984, New York City resident Bernhard Goetz (bur-NAHRD' gehts) shot and wounded four youths on a Manhattan subway, claiming they were about to rob him.

In 1989, Romanian President Nicolae Ceausescu (chow-SHES'-koo), the last of Eastern Europe's hard-line Communist rulers, was toppled from power in a popular uprising.

In 1990, Lech Walesa (lek vah-WEN'-sah) took the oath of office as Poland's first popularly elected president.

In 1991, the body of Marine Lt. Col. William R. Higgins, an American hostage slain by his terrorist captors, was recovered after it had been dumped along a highway in Lebanon.

In 1992, a Libyan Boeing 727 jetliner crashed after a midair collision with a MiG fighter, killing all 157 aboard the jetliner, and both crew members of the fighter jet.

In 2001, Richard C. Reid, a passenger on an American Airlines flight from Paris to Miami, tried to ignite explosives in his shoes, but was subdued by flight attendants and fellow passengers. (Reid is serving a life sentence in federal prison.)

In 2003, a federal judge ruled the Pentagon couldn't enforce mandatory anthrax vaccinations for military personnel.

In 2008, five Muslim immigrants accused of scheming to massacre U.S. soldiers at Fort Dix were convicted of conspiracy in Camden, New Jersey. (Four were later sentenced to life in prison; one received a 33-year sentence.)

Ten years ago: A wave of 16 bombings ripped across Baghdad, killing at least 69 people in the worst violence in Iraq in months days after the last American forces left the country, heightening fears of a new round of sectarian bloodshed.

Five years ago: President-elect Donald Trump named close adviser Kellyanne Conway as his White House counselor and former Republican National Committee spokesman Sean Spicer as press secretary. The Syrian government took full control of the city of Aleppo for the first time in four years after the last opposition fighters and civilians were bused out of war-ravaged eastern districts, ending a brutal chapter in Syria's civil war.

One year ago: President Donald Trump unexpectedly released two videos, one falsely declaring that he had won the election in a "landslide," and the other urging lawmakers to increase direct payments for most individuals to \$2,000 in a COVID relief package, a move opposed by most Republicans. The coronavirus pandemic reached every continent on Earth, as Chile announced that 58 people who were

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at military bases in Antarctica or on a navy ship that went to the continent had tested positive. President Donald Trump pardoned four former government contractors who were convicted in a 2007 massacre in Baghdad that left more than a dozen Iraqi civilians dead; others pardoned included former Republican Reps. Duncan Hunter of California and Chris Collins of New York. California Gov. Gavin Newsom appointed Secretary of State Alex Padilla to fill the U.S. Senate seat vacated by Vice President-elect Kamala Harris; Padilla became California's first Latino senator.

Today's Birthdays: Actor Hector Elizondo is 85. Country singer Red Steagall is 83. Former World Bank Group President Paul Wolfowitz is 78. Baseball Hall of Famer Steve Carlton is 77. Former ABC News anchor Diane Sawyer is 76. Rock singer-musician Rick Nielsen (Cheap Trick) is 73. Rock singer-musician Michael Bacon is 73. Baseball All-Star Steve Garvey is 73. Golfer Jan Stephenson is 70. Actor BernNadette Stanis is 68. Rapper Luther "Luke" Campbell is 61. Actor Ralph Fiennes (rayf fynz) is 59. Actor Lauralee Bell is 53. Country singer Lori McKenna is 53. Actor Dina Meyer is 53. Sen. Ted Cruz, R-Texas, is 51. Actor Heather Donahue is 48. Actor Chris Carmack is 41. Actor Harry Ford is 39. Actor Greg Finley is 37. Actor Logan Huffman is 32. R&B singer Jordin Sparks is 32. Pop singer Meghan Trainor is 28.