

Groton Daily Independent

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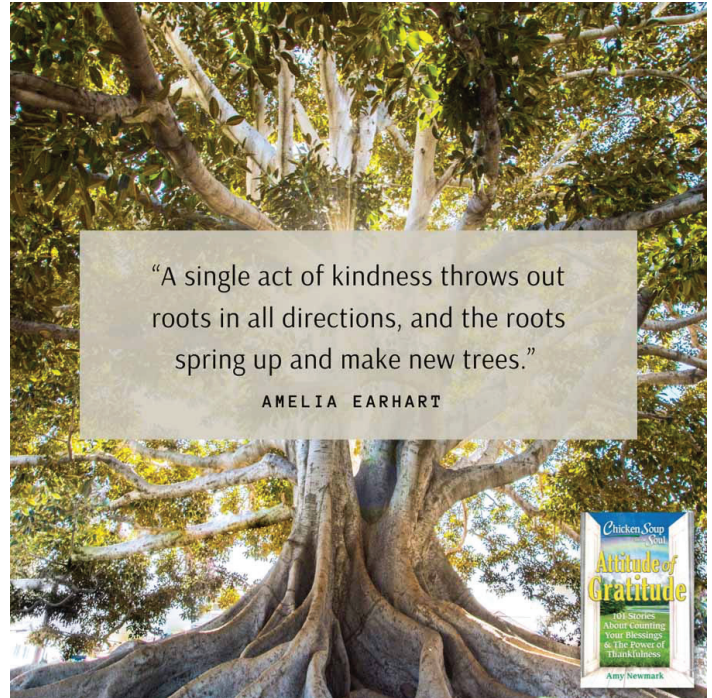
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Groton Community Calendar

Tuesday, March 7

- Senior Menu: Creamed chicken, buttermilk biscuit, glazed carrots, apricots, cookie.
- School Breakfast: Egg and cheese wrap.
- School Lunch: Lasagna hot dish, corn.
- Common Cents Community Thrift Store, 3 p.m. to 6 p.m.
- The Pantry, 4 p.m. to 8 p.m.
- City Council Meeting, 7 p.m.
- Boys Basketball SoDak16 - Groton vs. Sioux Valley at Watertown Civic Center, 7 p.m.
- ACT Practice Test at GHS, 8:30 a.m. (Grades 11 and 12 (optional))
- St. John's Lutheran: Ladies Aid LWML, 1 p.m.
- Emmanuel Lutheran: Lay leader night via zoom, 7 p.m.

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



Wednesday, March 8

- Senior Menu: Baked pork chop, creamy noodles, California blend vegetables, carrot bars, whole wheat bread.
- School Breakfast: Eggs and breakfast potatoes.
- School Lunch: Sloppy joes, sweet potatoes fries.
- Groton CM&A: Kids' Club, Youth Group and Adult Bible Study begins at 7 pm
- ACT Practice Test at GHS, 8:30 a.m. (Grades 11 and 12 (optional))
- St. John's Lutheran: Bible Study, 2:45 p.m.; Confirmation, 3:45 p.m.; Lent Service, 7 p.m.
- Emmanuel Lutheran: Confirmation, 6 p.m.; Soup Supper, 6 p.m. (Sarah Circle serves), worship, 7 p.m.
- United Methodist: Community Coffee Hour, 9:30 a.m.; Book Study with Lindsey Tietz, 4 p.m.; Confirmation, 4 p.m.

Thursday, March 9

- Senior Menu: Meatloaf, baked potato with sour cream, creamed peas, fruit, whole wheat bread.
- School Breakfast: Stuffed bagels.
- School Lunch: Chicken sandwich, chips.
- Girls Basketball State Tournament in Watertown

OPEN: Recycling Trailer in Groton

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

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AmpleHarvest.org helps gardeners provide fresh produce to food pantries

Gary Oppenheimer wants to make a difference for food pantries in the United States that don't offer fresh produce, as well as the 62 million gardeners nationwide who harvest more than they can use – especially those in Indian Country.

After almost 14 years of work through AmpleHarvest.org, Oppenheimer and the award-winning non-profit organization have found a method that works for both the pantries and gardeners.

"While more than 8,000 food pantries nationwide already benefit from the program, we want to get many more pantries spread across more of the landscape in America," said Oppenheimer, AmpleHarvest.org's founder and executive director.

The organization was founded in 2009 after Oppenheimer became the director of a local community garden in late 2008. He learned some of the garden plot holders left large amounts of their garden produce unharvested when they grew more than they could possibly use. Oppenheimer suggested the garden create a committee that would gather the extra food and deliver it to local food pantries. The program was named Ample Harvest. However, food pantries were hard to find. Thus AmpleHarvest.org was created.

Now the program is focusing on helping bring gardeners and food pantries together in Indian Country. "I have watched Gary Oppenheimer and his team grow AmpleHarvest.org since 2009, helping thousands of food pantries get locally grown surplus harvests from nearby gardeners," said Chief Henry Red Cloud (Lakota) of Pine Ridge, a White House Champion of Change winner and key advisor for this program. "When Gary came to me years ago asking for my help and guidance in making sure that this award-winning program could also benefit Indian Country, I was more than happy to help."

America's gardeners grow more than 11 billion pounds of surplus harvests annually. The organization works nationwide, helping America's gardeners donate their surplus bounty.

AmpleHarvest.org connects America's 62 million gardeners with local food pantries enabling them to donate surplus produce through its free food pantry search engine. Food pantries report the days and time they want to receive fresh food making it easy for gardeners to know when to harvest and donate the food.

Oppenheimer said part of the battle is helping America's gardeners know they are allowed to donate the fresh produce they grow. "They are intrinsically altruistic people," he said. "Years ago I said the best fertilizer is a gardener's shadow, and there's some truth to that. They know the value of food, they're growing it to feed and nourish their own family, and they hate seeing that go to waste just as you hate wasting the dollar bills in your pocket."

Chief Red Cloud said he was excited to see the project begin to bring those same benefits to Indian Country. "This past year, Gary and his team have been guided by Tribal elders and Native American food sovereignty experts to adapt AmpleHarvest.org to our specific needs while also bringing in new technology to help address some challenges specific to some reservations," he said. "AmpleHarvest.org is the perfect example of a program that enables people to take ownership of a problem and solve it without needing engagement from outside of their community or Nation."

According to a study conducted by AmpleHarvest.org, more than 80% of gardeners want to donate food once they know they are able to. "We're giving them that opportunity to do it on a sustained basis," Oppenheimer said. The Mercy Brown Bag Program in Oakland, California, said their seniors love the fresh produce. "They always go and grab the fruits and vegetables first before they grab the canned food," they said. The Center for Food Action in northern New Jersey has six locations listed with AmpleHarvest.org. They said their gardeners help provide thousands of their neighbors with healthy produce. "The clients we serve look forward to fresh greens, fresh fruit and fragrant herbs," the center said.

In its success, AmpleHarvest.org continues to grow. Its sights are now set on reaching communities in Indian Country. Oppenheimer said when the partnership launched, he did a year's worth of due diligence

consulting elders, tribal chiefs and more. "The notion of sharing food is intrinsic to all tribal traditions," he said. Oppenheimer said because of the original design of AmpleHarvest.org, the organization had to make changes that will benefit all gardeners and pantries in Indian Country. One such change is technology that will guide gardeners within 10 feet of pantries despite a lack of address, a challenge many tribal nations face.

Oppenheimer said this technology will eventually be retrofitted to legacy AmpleHarvest.org. Any food pantry wishing to receive free fresh local produce simply needs to sign up with AmpleHarvest.org. It is free and doesn't require that the food pantry have an internet connection.

Hungry Native American families that all too often see only commodity food at their food pantry will soon be able to take home garden fresh produce, harvested and donated thanks to a gardener in their own community. And it might just be from a garden down the block or even next door.

Democratic Leadership: Progress on Education and Healthcare, But More Work To Do

By Senate Democratic Leader Reynold Nesiba and
House Democratic Leader Oren Lesmeister

Greetings from Pierre! We just wrapped up the second to last week of the legislative session. As always, Democrats have remained focused on the issues that matter to South Dakotans.

That's why we've been working on addressing education and workforce challenges, making government work better, and supporting South Dakota families.

On education, Sen. Nesiba's Senate Bill 108 has now passed in both chambers of the legislature, which will improve the educational experience around fermentation practices for students at universities and set students up for a career in biotechnology earlier in their college experience. Democrats have continually supported expanding the SD Opportunity scholarship and voted this week to increase it from \$6,500 to \$7,500.

In addition, Democrats have strongly supported addressing our state's healthcare needs this session. Good legislation passed allocating two million dollars for adult day services for Alzheimer's, two million dollars for suicide prevention, and funding Medicaid expansion, which the voters pass in November.

We were particularly disappointed to see Republicans in the House overwhelmingly vote down Senate Bill 191, a bill from Rep. Peri Pourier and Sen. Red Dawn Foster to establish the task force to address the welfare of Indian children in South Dakota. That vote sent an astounding message that the other side apparently does not care about tribal issues in this state. Our tribes asked for this legislation to assist with resources they have, improve the information they have to work with, and integrate with state systems.

Throughout the process, there was very little opposition to this legislation, but Republicans voted it down nonetheless. Republicans were concerned about the costs of passing this bill, which would have been minimal, but we are more concerned about the costs of not passing this bill: Native kids stuck in a system that isn't working and further damage to the broken relationship between the state of South Dakota and our tribal nations. Frankly, we're appalled.

As we near the end of the legislative session, things are heating up in budget discussions. Governor's Noem's proposed 5% pay increase for teachers, providers, and state employees was far too low, and it appears we're on track to see increases above that level. It won't be at the level we'd like to see, but it is progress compared to what Governor Noem proposed.

As always, we have an open caucus. We welcome any visitors to stop by if you're in Pierre and weigh in on the political process.

Finally, we'd like to take a moment to acknowledge the passing of two great South Dakotans: Sen. James Abourezk and former legislator Jack Billion. Both men led lives of service and many South Dakotans' lives are better because of each of their legacies. That is why we do what we do each and every day. We are grateful for all they did for our state.

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The Bulletin

by **Newsweek**

JANUARY 24, 2023

World in Brief

food crisis has increased from 5.5 million to 6.9 million since 2020, according to a new Unicef report.

- Two people died at a rap concert by Grammy-nominated artist GloRilla in Rochester, New York, after rumors of gunfire triggered a stampede.
- North Korean Supreme Leader Kim Jong Un's sister Kim Yo Jong has warned the U.S. that Pyongyang would interpret any attempt to shoot down its test missiles as "a declaration of war."
- The Japanese space agency intentionally destroyed new rocket seconds into its launch after its second stage failed to ignite, marking a major setback for the country's space program.
- In the ongoing war in Ukraine, the country's foreign minister Dmytro Kuleba has called on the International Criminal Court to investigate an unverified video that appears to show a Ukrainian POW being executed by Russian soldiers.

- Donald Trump has called for Jan. 6 Capitol rioters to be released from prison, claiming that new surveillance footage of the incident aired by Fox News anchor Tucker Carlson shows that the prosecution of those involved was a "giant scam."

- The State Department has warned Americans preparing spring break plans against travel to six Mexican states, noting "widespread" violent crime. The advisory comes days after four Americans were kidnapped in Tamaulipas.

- The number of pregnant women suffering from acute malnutrition in the 12 countries hardest hit by the global

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Bates Township Notice of Caucus

Bates Township
BATES TOWNSHIP ANNUAL MEETING NOTICE

Bates Township will hold its annual meeting and election on Tuesday, March 7th, 2023 at the home of the Clerk, 14523 409th Ave, Conde.

Election of officers and business meeting will be held at 6:30 p.m.

We will be receiving bids for road maintenance and gravel. Please mail bids to

Betty Geist, Bates Township Clerk, 14523 409th Ave., Conde, SD 57434 prior to meeting date.

Betty Geist, Township Clerk
Published February 22,
March 1, 2023, at the total approximate cost of \$21.85 and may be viewed free of charge at www.sdpublicnotices.com. 21938

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3X 30" HD

Gear up for the worst of winter weather with the 3X 30" HD powered by a 420cc Cub Cadet OHV engine.

- Heavy-duty 14-gauge steel auger housing and side plates
- LED light bar on auger housing plus dual LED in-dash headlights
- 23" intake height
- Heated hand grips
- OVH crank chute control w/ high-arc steel chute
- Heavy-duty cast aluminum gear box backed by 5-year limited warranty**

MSRP
\$1,999*



3X 26" TRAC

Clear it all with the strength of the 3X 26" Trac featuring a powerful 357cc Cub Cadet OHV engine.

- Track Drive ideal for slopes, inclines and gravel driveways
- Heavy-duty 14-gauge steel auger housing and side plates
- 23" intake height
- Heated hand grips
- OVH crank chute control w/ high-arc steel chute
- LED light bar on auger housing plus dual LED in-dash headlights
- Heavy-duty cast aluminum auger gear box w/ 5-year limited warranty**

MSRP
\$2,099*



2X 30" MAX

Tak on winter with the commercial-grade durability of the 357cc Cub Cadet 2X 30" MAX snow blower

- Heavy-duty 14-gauge steel side plates and auger housing
- 14" augers and impeller
- Sealed ball bearings on auger and wheel shafts
- LED light bar on auger housing
- 23" intake height
- Heated hand grips
- 16"x6.5" X-Trac tires
- High-arc steel chute
- Heavy-duty cast aluminum auger gear box w/ 5-year limited warranty

MSRP
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*Actual retail prices are set by dealer and may vary. Taxes are additional and vary by location. Freight and FDI charges may be additional and vary by dealer.

Models subject to limited availability. Images may not reflect dealer inventory and/or unit specifications.

** See owner's manual for warranty details and information. Certain restrictions apply.

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**SoDak16 at the Watertown Civic Center
Groton Area vs. Sioux Valley
Tuesday, March 7th, 2023, 7 p.m.**

Game sponsored by

Bahr Spray Foam
Bary Keith at Harr Motors
Bierman Farm Service
Blocker Construction
Dacotah Bank
Groton Ag Partners
Groton American Legion
Groton Ford
Harry Implement
John Sieh Agency
Locke Electric
Lori's Pharmacy
Love to Travel
Milbrandt Enterprises, Inc.
S & S Lumber & Hardware Hank
Spanier Harvesting & Trucking
Weber Landscaping
Weismantel Insurance Agency



\$5 ticket to watch can be purchased at GDILIVE.COM.

GDI Subscribers can watch for free

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Groton City Council Meeting Agenda

March 7, 2023 – 7:00pm

City Hall – 120 N Main Street

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

- Public Comments - pursuant to SDCL 1-25-1

(Public Comments will offer the opportunity for anyone not listed on the agenda to speak to the council. Speaking time will be limited to 3 minutes. No action will be taken on questions or items not on the agenda.)

- Department Reports
- Minutes
- Bills
- January Finance Report
- 2nd Reading of Ordinance No. 767 – Amending Rates for Groton Municipal Electric Customers
- 2nd Reading of Ordinance No. 766 – 2023 Summer Salary Ordinance
- Soda Contract Discussion
- Swimming Pool Rates
- Baseball Concessions/Park Bathrooms – LWCF Grant
- Community Center Surplus
- District 6 Annual Meeting – Hecla, SD – March 21, 2023, at 6:00pm
- Reschedule March 21st Council Meeting to March 22, 2023, at 7:00pm
- Select an Equalization Meeting date – March 22, 2023
- Economic Development
- Executive session personnel & legal 1-25-2 (1) & (3)
- Hire Summer Employees
- Adjournment



SOUTH DAKOTA SEARCHLIGHT

<https://southdakotasearchlight.com>

U.S. agriculture secretary unveils initiatives aimed at small and mid-sized operations

BY: ADAM GOLDSTEIN - MARCH 6, 2023 5:15 PM

U.S. Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack on Monday announced new steps the Department of Agriculture is taking to recenter U.S. agriculture and benefit small and mid-sized operations, including a proposed new "Product of USA" labeling rule and an \$89 million expansion of the USDA intermediary lending program.

At the National Farmers Union conference in San Francisco, Vilsack also discussed creating a new "seed liaison" in the department to increase fairness in the commodity biotech industry, and proposed changes to the Packers and Stockyards Act. The Packers and Stockyards Act governs competition in the livestock and poultry industries, and prevents unfair market manipulation or consolidation.

The secretary said these developments mark progress in the Biden administration's approach to transform the existing food system, and increase resilience and profitability.

"I want this audience — and every audience I've been speaking to — to understand that it's not just this 'organic over here, and local original food over here, and processing over here,'" Vilsack said.

"It's part of a concerted effort to create another model. One that doesn't necessarily require us to not produce — we want to produce what the world needs us to produce. But one that creates more revenue opportunities within that same small and midsize farming operation."

The National Farmers Union is a nonprofit organization with the mission to "protect and enhance the quality of life of American family farmers and ranchers and their communities," according to its website.



U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack speaks March 6, 2023, at the National Farmers Union conference in San Francisco.

(Courtesy of National Farmers Union)

Negative farm income

Vilsack, a former governor of Iowa, broke out a whiteboard and marker to illustrate the challenges American farmers are facing with land consolidation and declining returns. He said that despite record

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farm income in 2022, 50% of farms nationwide brought in negative farm income.

The secretary added that while 10% of farms made a net profit, nearly 40% of these profitable farms were owned by investment banks and large landholders who bring in more than \$1 million per year in revenue.

Vilsack attributed this imbalance to the "get big or get out" structure of production-based agriculture, which took hold in the 1970s. He noted that his Trump administration predecessor, former Agriculture Secretary Sonny Perdue, was honest about this reality. Yet Vilsack said the approach is one he refuses to accept.

"That does raise the question of what do we do," Vilsack said. "This is the game, but it's based on production. I think we've got to develop a new game. A game where farmers can not only raise crops and sell them, and raise livestock and sell them, and get government payments, but they can get other ways to make money from the same landmass."

Loan program

To punctuate his vision, Vilsack announced new investments in diversifying local and regional meat processors, including \$89 million in guaranteed loans through the USDA's intermediary lending program.

The loan program will provide credit to independently owned-and-operated meat processing facilities to expand or purchase equipment. The investment comes in addition to the more than \$100 million being invested in grants this year to expand processing supply chain capacity.

"These are resources that didn't exist before, that creates competition to create better value," Vilsack said.

Vilsack also mentioned a USDA rule proposed Monday that would alter the criteria for a product to use a "Product of USA" label. The secretary noted that while producers voluntarily put this label on packages for marketing purposes, prior criteria only required that labeled food products be processed in the United States. As such, the primary agricultural product could be grown, slaughtered, or raised outside the country.

Vilsack said that the new rule would require goods that use a "Product of USA" label to have their whole production cycle based in the United States.

A South Dakota cattle producer, Scott Kolousek, praised the move in a news release from the South Dakota Farmers Union.

"This proposed ruling will allow us to differentiate our product from foreign beef," Kolousek said.

Vilsack also said that the USDA was releasing a "seed report" on Monday, which details agency plans to provide oversight on intellectual property within the plant science sector. He said that the report outlines plans to create a "seed liaison" through the Agricultural Marketing Service, which will address concerns over intellectual property claims in the commodity seed market.

Vilsack said that this individual's responsibility would be to gather input from farmers and breeders on the fairness of a given patent claim during the process of approval.

"They will now have a place and person to go to, to share information and to make sure that information is supplied in the complex formal process of a patent," Vilsack said. "This now gives these folks an opportunity to have input."

Vilsack added that the USDA will also partner with the U.S. Patent and Trade Office on a task force designed to limit unnecessary trait-stacking in genetically modified seeds, and encourage seed market competition.

Packers and Stockyards Act

Vilsack also addressed the USDA's proposed changes to the Packers and Stockyards Act, and efforts to bring increased fairness to the meat industry

The secretary noted that the department expects to push through four new rules related to the act over the next two years, which would drive market competition and open space for small and mid-sized producers to prosper.

The first rule Vilsack discussed would require increased financial disclosures for large-scale processors and integrators in the poultry supply chain. The secretary noted this first rule is in the comment analysis period, and will likely be approved in 2023.

The other rule Vilsack expects the agency to issue this year would prohibit large-scale operations from

retaliating against independent producers if these large commercial farms are reported to a regulatory agency. He said that this rule is currently in the comment gathering stage, and will likely become law in 2023.

The third Packers and Stockyards rule would alter the structure of the tournament system, in which poultry breeders are forced to compete over processor markets. Vilsack said he expected the process of approving this rule to "bleed over into 2024."

"That rule is in the process of being worked on as a kind of a new concept," the secretary said. "When we first started this, we weren't actually thinking about it. But by virtue of the comments that we got, we thought we needed to do that."

Vilsack also touched on a fourth rule which is in the process of being written. The rule will address the scope of harms required to bring an unfair competition or injury claim under the Packers and Stockyards Act.

"It is the most complicated rule," Vilsack said. "That rule is obviously going to attract a lot of attention."

Vilsack said the goal would be to have all four rules in place by 2024.

Adam Goldstein is the D.C. Bureau intern for States Newsroom. Goldstein is a graduate student at the University of Missouri School of Journalism, studying digital reporting. He is originally from San Francisco, and loves swimming, cooking, and the San Francisco 49ers.

House kills spousal lobbyist ban after legislator calls it 'dirty laundry'

BY: MAKENZIE HUBER - MARCH 6, 2023 1:40 PM

PIERRE — A bill that would prohibit a spouse of a legislator from being employed as a lobbyist died on the House floor Monday morning.

Senate Bill 197 would apply to active members of the Senate and House of Representatives, and it would apply to any lobbyist who received benefits from a lobbying firm.

Rep. Linda Doba, D-Sioux Falls, sponsored the bill on the House side to fix what she called a "loophole" in current law. Lobbyists who have such intimate relationships with legislators have greater access to lawmakers and can have "undue influence" on the legislative process, she said.

"This does not limit a spouse's ability from testifying or voicing personal opinions as a private individual," Doba said.

At least one legislator has a spouse that is a registered lobbyist.

Sen. Julie Frye-Mueller, R-Rapid City, has a husband who is a registered lobbyist for the Citizens for Liberty. Frye-Mueller was censured earlier in the session for her verbal harassment of a Legislative Research Council staffer.

The bill to ban lobbying by legislators' spouses was introduced on Feb. 1, the same day the Senate censured Sen. Frye-Mueller.

Rep. Liz May, R-Kyle, described the bill as a reaction to a personnel issue. She added that the House is "above this" type of legislation and that the Legislature shouldn't "be wasting our time with this stuff."

"The Senate is trying to drag their dirty laundry over into this House," May said.

A motion to approve the bill failed on a 24-44 vote.

Makenzie Huber is a lifelong South Dakotan whose work has won national and regional awards. She's spent five years as a journalist with experience reporting on workforce, development and business issues within the state.

What will 'truth in sentencing' mean for South Dakota crime victims?

Prosecutors, judges already work to keep victims informed on parole dates

BY: JOHN HULT - MARCH 6, 2023 5:50 PM

Anyone who listened to last week's debate on Senate Bill 146 – often referred to as "truth in sentencing" – might think victims have no idea how long criminals will stay in prison before they're paroled.

Rep. Jon Hansen, R-Dell Rapids, said when a sentence comes down, "you think, wow, OK, we have some measure of justice for what's been done to me or to my family."

"And then a few years later ... you find out that that person who you thought was going to be in prison for 10 years is now going to be walking your streets again," Hansen said. "It's almost like a re-traumatization."

Hansen wasn't the only one to hit that particular note in the House of Representatives, where SB 146 passed 53-17 on its way to the governor's desk.

"This is a deception on the public, the very people we are supposed to protect," said Rep. Mary Fitzgerald, R-Spearfish.

Parole can be complex and confusing, but the reality isn't quite so dire. The justice system has multiple backstops meant to ensure victims can understand when a defendant is eligible for parole, can check on changes to eligibility as the months and years pass, and are informed when an inmate is about to be released or face a parole board hearing.

Rhetoric vs. reality

"We always work with our victims," said Minnehaha County State's Attorney Daniel Haggar, who helped write SB 146 with its prime sponsor, Sioux Falls GOP Sen. Brent Hoffman.

Haggar and other prosecutors consult with victims as they build cases against defendants. Large offices like Haggar's employ victim-witness assistants who communicate directly with victims at each stage of a case.

During plea agreement negotiations, Lincoln County State's Attorney Tom Wollman said his staff will let victims know approximately how many years of actual prison time a sentence might bring if the defendant takes the deal.

After the sentencing, he said, the victim is once again given a rundown of probable prison time and parole dates. The figures are not exact, but "I think we do our best to describe the actual time a defendant will sit," Wollman said.

"It's tough for us, because it was always a ballpark figure," Wollman said.

That's where SB 146 comes in. Prosecutors like Wollman and Haggar support "truth in sentencing" not because victims are blind to the reality of parole, but because the complexities of the parole system make it all but impossible to offer certainty in conversations with them.

Initial parole dates aren't set until after an inmate lands in prison, for example. The Department of Corrections calculates it based on the crime committed, the inmate's criminal history and individual needs for programming, such as chemical dependency or mental health treatment.

That initial date can be pushed back if an inmate misbehaves. It can also come sooner under some circumstances, based on good behavior and program completion.

As several lawmakers pointed out, inmates who follow the rules needn't see the parole board to walk away from the prison. That's by design – the idea being that inmates who want to avoid a parole hearing will work harder on their rehabilitation programs – but the reality of that moving target can be frustrating for victims and the prosecutors who work with them.

"It starts to get hairy when you get into the good behavior and those earned discharge credits," Haggar said.

Electronic resources

Haggar and Wollman's teams aren't the only source of parole information for victims. The state of South

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Dakota maintains two electronic resources: a State Automated Victim Notification system (SAVIN) that anyone in the state can use to track inmate parole dates, releases, new arrests and the like, and an offender locator on the Department of Corrections website that lists parole status.

Tony Mangan, spokesman for the Attorney General's Office, said there are 3,832 people signed up to track specific cases through the SAVIN system. A total of 8,710 people have registered to SAVIN since its launch a little over nine years ago.

In practice, Haggar said, none of those tools offer the peace of mind that SB 146 does. If Gov. Kristi Noem signs the bill, people convicted of any of 13 major violent crimes would be ineligible for parole. Those convicted of any of 10 others would be required to serve 85% of their sentences before release.

The moving target of the current parole system is a source of anxiety for victims, Haggar said, but the bill will help ease that anxiety.

"That's good for victims, because what they want to know is 'how long will I feel safe?'" Haggar said.

Judges previously calculated parole dates

Prosecutors are legally obligated to keep victims informed if they request information. A voter-passed crime victims bill of rights called Marsy's Law, which passed in 2016, ensures that much.

There were laws in place to help victims keep track of sentences before that, as well. The SAVIN system was built after the Legislature's passage of an adult criminal justice reform package in 2013. And until 2011, judges were required to calculate and announce a defendant's estimated parole date from the bench. Former Gov. Bill Janklow pushed that requirement in the mid-1990s under the banner of "truth in parole."

Lawmakers voted to repeal that law with 2011's House Bill 1020. Rep. Jon Hansen and Sen. Jean Hunhoff, R-Yankton, both voted for that repeal, and they both voted for truth in sentencing this session.

In the House Judiciary Committee in 2011, on which Hansen served, Assistant Attorney General Max Gors told lawmakers that the bench calculations were problematic for judges, inmates and the Department of Corrections, in part because of the myriad considerations that factor into a parole date.

Defendants would bring incorrect estimates from a judge with them to prison, where their actual parole date would be calculated.

"Inmates come in and say, 'Well, the judge said I'd get out in 25% and you say it's 60%,'" said Gors, who has since died. "What would you say? Well, the judge didn't know you had three prior convictions from out of state or this, that or the other thing."

Instead of offering a bill to improve the parole date calculations, Gors asked lawmakers to repeal the rule. Lawmakers sided with Gors, voting unanimously for repeal with no committee debate and scarcely any debate on the House or Senate floor. No lawmaker voted against it in 2011.

Hansen told South Dakota Searchlight last week that he didn't recall the bill, which appeared during his first year as a lawmaker.

The 2023 proposal is an improvement, its supporters say, in part because it sidesteps thorny issues of parole date calculation and victim requests for notification, at least for violent crimes, and focuses only on mandatory sentence lengths. Wollman said that "some of the comments" on the 2023 truth in sentencing bill "missed the point of the bill." The value of SB 146 for victims, he said, is that it delivers a level of certainty that previous efforts have not.

Judges might start imposing lighter sentences to make up for the lack of parole, he said, but at least those sentences will be all but impossible to misinterpret.

"What this does is bring clarity to our sentences and what they mean," Wollman said.

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

Senate revives Noem's grocery tax repeal in session's final week

Three tax relief ideas now in play: governor's proposal, overall sales tax reduction, and property tax credits

BY: MAKENZIE HUBER - MARCH 6, 2023 8:12 PM

PIERRE – The House and Senate are playing tug-of-war on tax cuts, with three days left before legislators leave the Capitol.

After the House of Representatives whittled numerous tax cut proposals down to just one earlier this session, the Senate has revived two major competing proposals – including the Gov. Kristi Noem-backed elimination of the state sales tax on groceries, which was resurrected Monday, and a property tax relief program that took shape last week.

Legislators are attempting to work out their differences by Thursday. After that, the only day left in the current legislative session is March 27, when they'll return to consider any vetoes from Noem.

Whatever they decide, it'll land on the governor's desk. And Noem is adamant the state needs a tax cut that will address the needs of all South Dakotans.

"It's my responsibility to do the right thing for the people of South Dakota, and I take that very seriously," Noem said in a press conference shortly after her bill was revived.

Grocery tax: One vote brings bill back to life

Noem's campaign promise to eliminate the sales tax on groceries was revived and inched out of the Senate chamber by one vote Monday afternoon. A number of senators who previously voiced their distaste for eliminating the grocery tax switched their vote, leading to the 18-17 tally.

Sen. Herman Otten, R-Tea, brought the bill back to life with a "hoghouse" amendment on a "vehicle" bill, which involves wholly rewriting an essentially blank-canvas bill with different language.

"This horse hasn't been allowed to run the race to the end," Otten said on the Senate floor. "This will allow all the options to be on the table."

The tax cut would cost the state and save taxpayers about \$102 million, according to the Governor's Office.

The governor emphasized that her bill would primarily help South Dakota residents who buy groceries in the state year-round rather than tourists, who would share more of the benefit from an across-the-board sales tax reduction. She added that her tax cut would do more to help all residents – including senior citizens, renters and the people "who make this state run" – than the other two tax cuts still alive.

The grocery tax repeal bill, House Bill 1094, now heads back to the House for consideration.

Sales and use tax reduction: To sunset or not to sunset

The House-favored bill is a reduction in the state sales and use tax rate from 4.5% to 4.2%.

However, the Senate amended the bill last week with a sunset clause that would return the tax rate to 4.5% in two years. Additionally, the Senate changed the rate in the bill from 4.2% to 4.3% on Monday, which would reduce the impact by about \$35 million a year, dropping the value of the tax cut from \$104 million to \$69 million.

House Majority Leader Will Mortenson, R-Pierre, called the Senate's approach "scattershot."

"The House has never had more consensus or more clarity on a tax cut," Mortenson said. "We studied the issue for a month. We held numerous committee hearings and decided on a broad-based tax cut that will help every single South Dakotan."

Mortenson added that the sales and use tax reduction would apply to "food, fireworks and fencing supplies" – and a host of other purchases – instead of just grocery store items.

"We want it to be a significant size and we want it to be a permanent tax cut," Mortenson said. "We would not have proposed a \$104 million tax cut if we couldn't afford it this year, next year and 10 years

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from now. We have clarity and consensus on our side and we're looking forward to working with our friends in the Senate to see if they can gain some clarity on their side."

In response to the proposed sunset clause, Mortenson introduced a hoghouse amendment to another vehicle bill, Senate Bill 104, on Monday that is identical to the sales tax reduction the House passed earlier in the session – but without the sunset clause added by the Senate.

Noem showed no sign of warming to that bill or the Senate version. She said the broad-based tax cut would be less impactful for taxpayers.

"I don't think they'll notice that tax cut very much," Noem said. "It'll be minimal compared to repealing the sales tax on groceries."

She added that changing the state sales and use tax by decimal points makes it "easier for them to raise taxes in the future."

"If we eliminate the sales tax on grocery store items, it's gone," Noem said. "We're not bringing that tax back. That's something that'll be very hard to put back in place and that's why I want to pursue it, because it doesn't pick winners and losers."

Property tax relief is other competing proposal

The other tax relief proposal is one that would send \$425 to South Dakota homeowners each year as a way to relieve their property tax burden. The annual cost to the state's general fund is estimated at just over \$100 million. Since the money would come from the state, property tax revenue to local governments would be unaffected.

Noem called the property tax bill a rebate program.

"It's not very Republican. South Dakota doesn't do that and then try to sell it as property tax reform," Noem said. "And I think a more honest discussion would be on really what the people of South Dakota want: They want fairness, they want to be respected, and they want an opportunity to make sure that we're really giving them the benefit of a tax cut that they can see every day in their budget for these hardworking families in our state."

Senate President Pro Tempore Lee Schoenbeck, R-Watertown, voted in favor of the property tax bill. The bill can be revisited each year, he said, which makes it more fiscally responsible than an outright tax cut.

But he'd rather not cut taxes at all, he said.

"I'm not in favor of any of these options," Schoenbeck said. "I think they're fiscally irresponsible, period. With the sunset clause I could tolerate that one, or the property tax because you can relook at it. But to dig a hole? The nursing homes have got problems. We have Medicaid expansion. It's going to increase costs. We've got our K-12 schools. We've got issues out there."

He's worried that a tax cut on groceries will lead to a future proposal to implement an income tax to replace the lost revenue. Noem is worried any other tax cut aside from her own would put the state budget at risk because voters could choose to eliminate the state sales tax on food in the 2024 election anyway. An effort to petition the issue to the ballot is underway.

Schoenbeck characterized Noem's motives as political.

"I get she wants to have a national headline that says she led a tax cut thing," Schoenbeck said. "Me? I just care about fiscal responsibility. I spent a lot of years trying to help this state just be normal. And it does a lot of damage to us when the governor's objectives are national and the rest of us are just trying to stay here and fix problems."

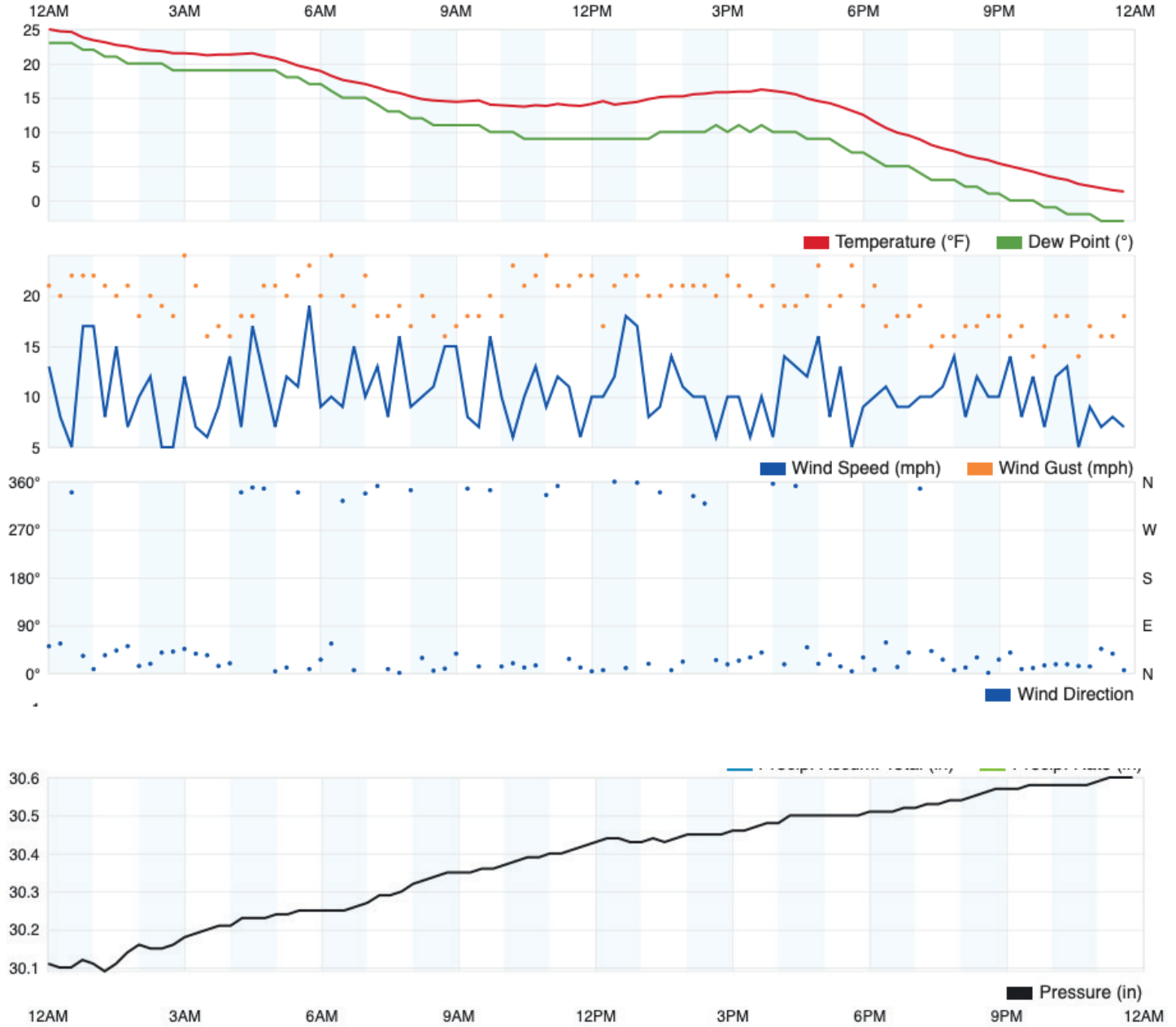
When asked if Noem would sign a budget that includes a property tax credit payment, she said it "seems like a really irresponsible budget."

Makenzie Huber is a lifelong South Dakotan whose work has won national and regional awards. She's spent five years as a journalist with experience reporting on workforce, development and business issues within the state.

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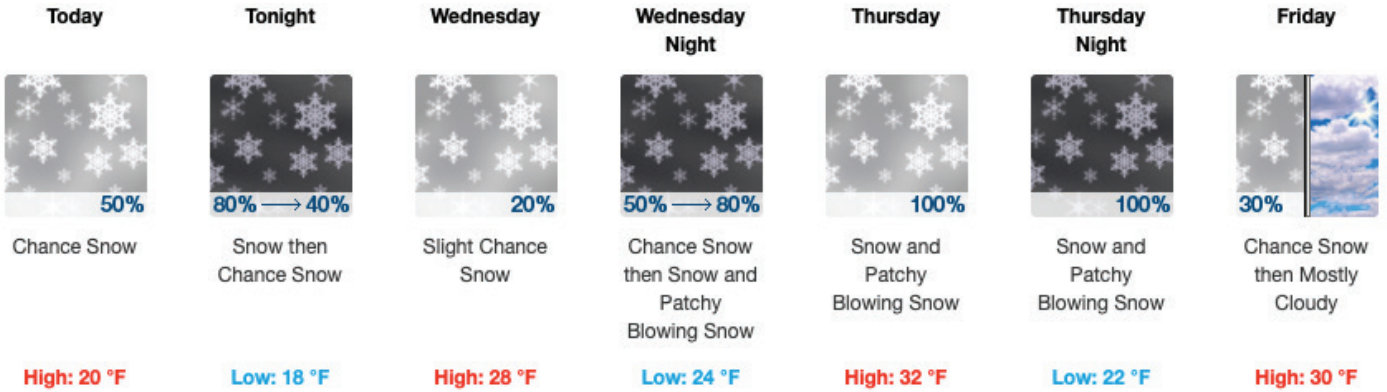
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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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Snow through early Wednesday morning March 7, 2023 3:42 AM

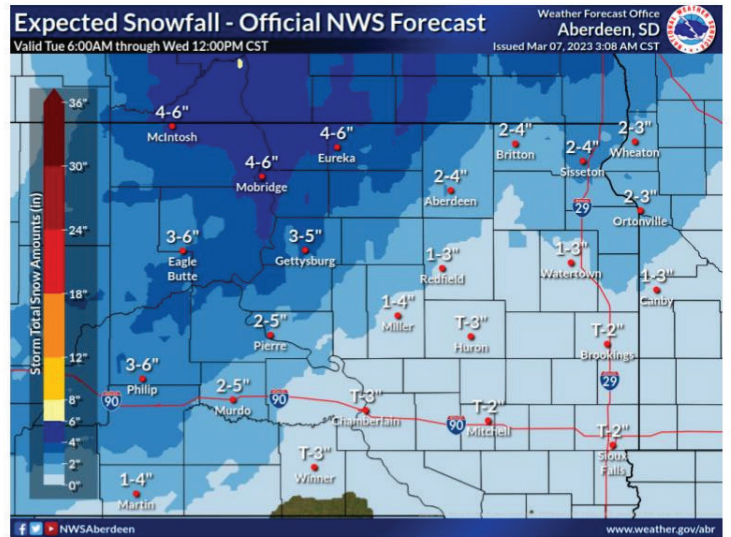
Main focus for moderate to heavy snow over central South Dakota
Snow shifting from central SD today, to eastern SD and west central MN tonight. Light icing possible mainly east of the James Valley ahead of the snow.

National Weather Service
Aberdeen, SD
weather.gov/abr

1-Day 6-hour Snow Forecast

	Tue 6AM	Tue 12PM	Tue 6PM	Wed 12AM	Wed 6AM
Aberdeen	T	☁️	1-2"	T	T
Watertown			☁️	☁️	☁️
Britton		T	☁️	☁️	☁️
Milbank			☁️	☁️	☁️
Redfield		T	☁️		
Pierre	☁️	☁️	☁️		
Eagle Butte	1-2"	1-2"	T		
Kennebec	☁️	T	T		
Gettysburg	1-2"	1-2"	☁️		
Sisseton				1-2"	1-2"
Mobridge	2-3"	1-2"	☁️		
Wheaton			☁️		1-2"

Last updated: 03/07/23 at 02:10 AM CST
6-hour Snow (inches) T: <0.2"



Snow will be possible across the region into early Wednesday morning. The highest snow amounts will be across north central South Dakota, where 3 to over 6 inches of snow could fall. Light icing with freezing drizzle will be possible today, mainly east of the James River Valley before the onset of snow.

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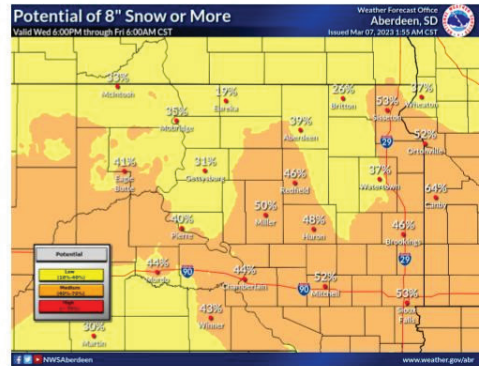
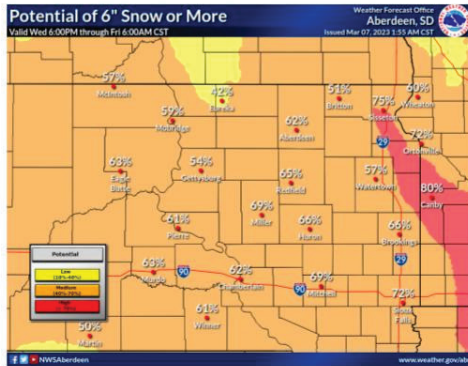
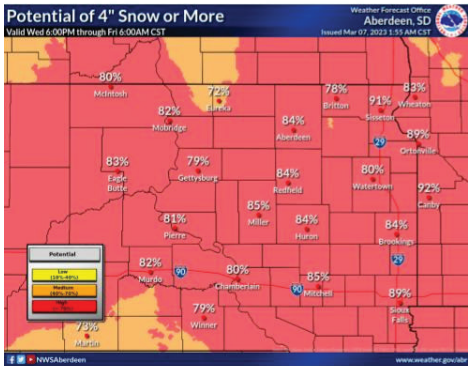


Snow Wednesday night through Thursday night

March 7, 2023
3:45 AM

2nd round Wednesday night-Thursday night:

- Widespread moderate to heavy snow possible, with a 50 to 70% chance of receiving 6" or more snow.
- Most of the snow falling during the daytime hours Thursday.
- Patchy blowing snow mainly during the day Thursday as winds increase out of the northeast.
- Stay up to date on the latest forecasts.
- Start thinking about altering travel plans, if this forecast persists.



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

National Weather Service
Aberdeen, SD



Snow Saturday morning into Sunday morning

March 7, 2023
3:49 AM

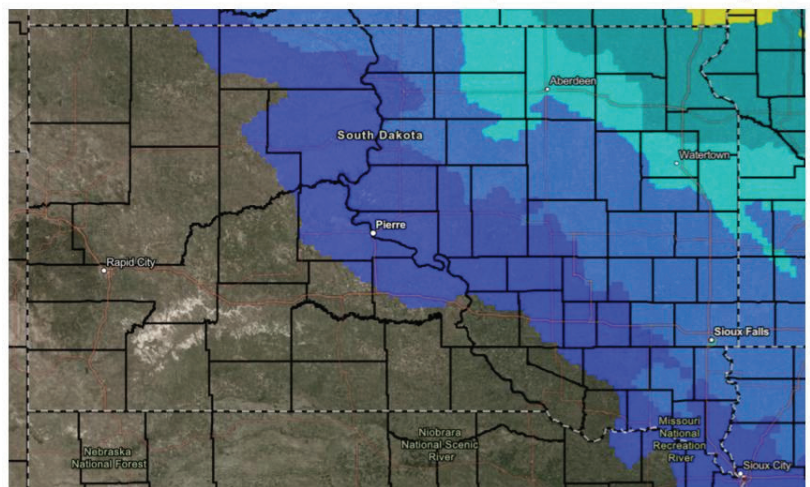
3rd round Saturday morning-Sunday morning:

- Main focus over northeastern SD.
- Light to moderate snow, with 30 to 40% chance of 4" or more snow over far northeastern SD and west central MN.
- Stay tuned to the latest forecast, as there could be several changes.

Minor Impacts

Expect a few inconveniences to daily life.
• Winter driving conditions. Use caution while driving.

Potential for Minor Weather Impacts for Saturday



Likelihood of Impact



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

National Weather Service
Aberdeen, SD

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Wind Gusts through Sunday

March 7, 2023
3:52 AM

Strongest Winds Thursday and Saturday

Gusty winds could
cause blowing snow
Thursday and Saturday.

Maximum Wind Gust Forecast

	3/7 Tue			3/8 Wed			3/9 Thu				3/10 Fri				3/11 Sat				3/12 Sun				
	6am	12pm	6pm	12am	6am	12pm	6pm	12am	6am	12pm	6pm	12am	6am	12pm	6pm	12am	6am	12pm	6pm	12am	5am	11am	5pm
Aberdeen	22	16	16	10	12	16	22	24	31	30	29	22	15	15	18	24	30	30	24	18	21	21	22
Britton	21	16	17	12	8	14	20	25	32	32	29	25	15	15	16	24	31	31	26	20	20	21	22
Eagle Butte	18	15	15	12	12	16	22	25	26	22	20	18	14	20	31	32	32	24	18	20	21	20	18
Eureka	22	22	21	12	9	15	26	35	35	32	26	17	15	18	25	32	35	33	21	22	22	22	21
Gettysburg	23	18	20	13	12	16	24	29	30	26	21	15	14	16	28	33	33	30	18	21	21	22	20
Kennebec	13	15	15	8	10	14	17	21	22	21	20	21	18	16	25	30	32	30	22	18	20	21	20
McIntosh	20	17	14	9	10	15	23	30	30	26	24	17	15	21	31	32	32	25	18	21	21	20	18
Milbank	15	9	13	13	9	12	18	23	31	32	26	25	17	14	13	18	28	29	26	21	21	23	22
Miller	13	12	13	8	9	13	20	21	25	24	20	15	15	15	21	28	32	31	22	20	21	21	20
Mobridge	18	15	15	9	9	14	21	26	28	25	23	14	14	18	28	32	32	26	17	17	18	20	18
Murdo	16	17	17	12	12	15	18	20	20	17	28	28	18	18	28	31	29	25	22	18	17	18	17
Pierre	15	14	17	9	9	13	18	21	21	18	16	15	13	15	26	31	31	28	20	15	17	20	18
Redfield	16	13	16	9	10	15	20	22	30	29	24	17	15	14	18	26	33	33	25	18	20	21	21
Sisseton	14	9	10	9	8	10	18	21	30	31	26	24	15	14	15	22	30	30	29	22	23	23	23
Watertown	18	20	17	14	8	16	20	24	32	33	29	20	16	14	15	22	30	30	26	22	23	23	22
Webster	20	20	20	14	8	15	23	28	37	37	33	25	17	16	17	26	33	35	29	22	23	23	23
Wheaton	13	10	16	16	13	12	16	22	29	29	26	25	17	14	13	20	28	29	26	22	20	22	22

*Table values in mph

Don't see your city? Check out weather.gov/forecastpoints



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

National Weather Service
Aberdeen, SD

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Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 25 °F at 12:01 AM

Low Temp: 2 °F at 11:25 PM

Wind: 24 mph at 2:55 AM

Precip: : 0.00

Day length: 11 hours, 30 minutes

Today's Info

Record High: 70 in 2016

Record Low: -24 in 1995

Average High: 37

Average Low: 15

Average Precip in March.: 0.17

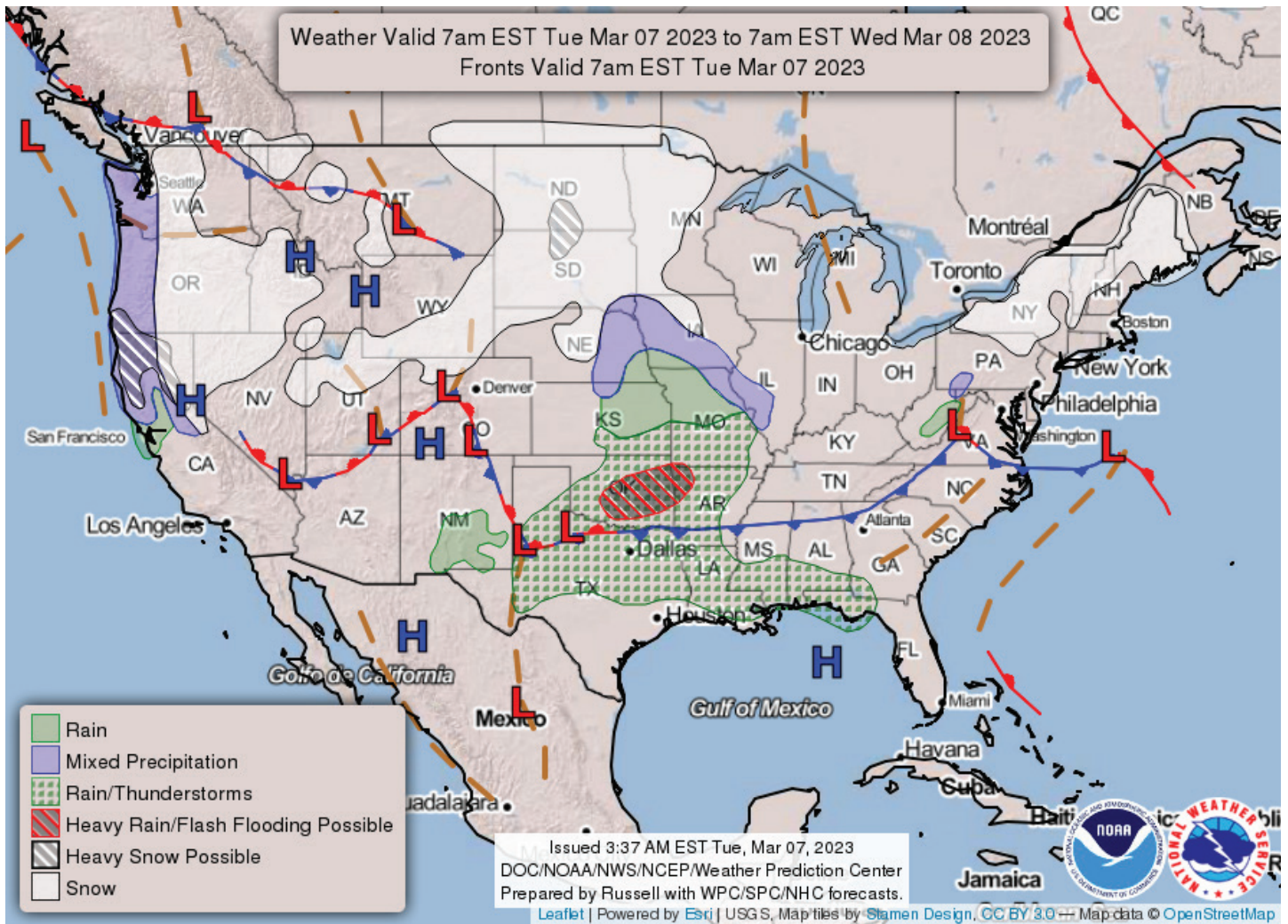
Precip to date in March.: 0.20

Average Precip to date: 1.34

Precip Year to Date: 1.78

Sunset Tonight: 6:28:40 PM

Sunrise Tomorrow: 6:56:16 AM



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Today in Weather History

March 7, 1998: A winter storm tracked across South Dakota, resulting in heavy snow of 6 to 8 inches across most of central South Dakota from the evening of the 6th into the afternoon of the 7th. Some snowfall amounts included 6 inches at Fort Pierre and near Stephan, 7 inches at Blunt, Pierre, and Murdo, and 8 inches across southern Jones and Lyman counties. As a result, many activities were canceled, and travel was significantly disrupted, especially on Interstate 90.

1717 - The Great Snow, a composite of four winter storms to hit the eastern U.S. in nine days, finally came to an end. Snow depths averaged 60 inches following the storm. Up to four feet of snow fell around Boston MA, and snow drifts 25 feet high were reported around Dorchester MA. (David Ludlum) (The Weather Channel)

1932 - A severe coastal storm set barometric pressure records from Virginia to New England. Block Island RI reported a barometric pressure reading of 28.20 inches. (David Ludlum)

1947: On March 7, 1947, not long after the end of World War II and years before Sputnik ushered in the space age, a group of soldiers and scientists in the New Mexico desert saw something new and wonderful in this grainy black-and-white-photos - the first pictures of Earth as seen from an altitude greater than 100 miles in space.

1970: Last near-total eclipse of the sun in Washington, DC, in this century. Sun was 95% eclipsed. A total eclipse passed over NASA's Wallops Station (now Wallops Flight Facility) on the coast of Virginia.

1987 - Forty-five cities in the north central and northeastern U.S. reported record high temperatures for the date. Huron SD hit 80 degrees, and Pickstown SD reached 81 degrees. Rochester MN and Rockford IL smashed their previous record for the date by sixteen degrees. (The National Weather Summary)

1988 - High winds along a sharp cold front ushered snow and arctic cold into the Central Rocky Mountain Region and the Northern Plains. Snowfall totals in Utah ranged up to sixteen inches at Brighton. Winds gusted to 66 mph at Rapid City SD. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1989 - Blustery northwest winds ushered arctic cold into eastern U.S. Burlington VT reported a record low of 14 degrees below zero. Snow and ice over the Carolinas replaced the 80 degree weather of the previous day. High winds and heavy surf caused five million dollars damage along the North Carolina coast. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1990 - A major ice storm left much of Iowa under a thick coat of ice. It was the worst ice storm in at least twenty-five years for Iowa, perhaps the worst of the century. Up to two inches of ice coated much of western and central Iowa, with three inches reported in Crawford County and Carroll County. As much as five inches of ice was reported on some electrical lines. The ice downed 78 towers in a 17-mile stretch of a high voltage feeder near Boone costing three electric utilities fifteen million dollars. Damage to trees was incredible, and clean-up costs alone ran into the millions. Total damage from the storm was more than fifty million dollars. (Storm Data)

1997: The worst was finally over for states hit hard by the flooding Ohio River. The river crested on the 6th at Louisville, Kentucky, 15 feet above flood stage, after topping out at nearly 13 feet at Cincinnati, Ohio, and more than 7 feet at Huntington, West Virginia.

2018: A teacher was struck by lightning outside an Ocean County, New Jersey middle school during a rare weather phenomenon known as thundersnow.

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Daily Devotionals

Seeds of Hope

ONE WAY

The famous entertainer, W. C. Fields, was an agnostic. One day, a friend came to visit him and found him reading the Bible.

"Bill," he exclaimed, "it's so good to see that you are reading the Bible. When did you change and become a Christian?"

"I haven't changed," he replied quickly. "I'm looking for some loopholes."

No matter how hard he searched, he never discover a loophole in God's Word.

There are many who do the same thing. They do not study God's Word to learn of His salvation and grace. They read it looking for errors and contradictions.

Others have difficulty in accepting God's Word as the final authority for truth. They do not want to believe that there is no other name besides the name of Jesus that they can call upon for salvation. They want to believe that there are many paths that lead to heaven and truth. What they want to believe comes from man-originated beliefs - not the Word of God.

God designated Jesus to be the only Redeemer and Savior. There never has been, nor ever will be, any other name for people to call upon for God's salvation. While there are some problems that may have more than one solution, when it comes to being forgiven of our sins, there is only One solution. Salvation and eternal life is by grace through faith in Christ alone

Prayer: Thank You, Father, for Your Son Jesus, in whose Name and through whose life's work we can be saved. May we accept Your salvation through faith in Him. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved." Acts 4:12



We all need the encouragement, comfort, and peace that comes through God's grace. Our daily devotionals, known as Seeds of Hope, have been a means through which thousands of people have experienced this grace. Each devotional comes from God's Word and we pray this good "seed" finds good soil in your heart. Our aim is that the Seeds of Hope will be a great source of daily encouragement to you and that God will use them to draw you near to Him

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2023 Community Events

- 01/29/2023 Groton Robotics Pancake Feed, 10am-1pm, Community Center
- 01/29/2023 85th Carnival of Silver Skates 2pm & 6:30pm (Last Sunday of January)
- 01/31/2023-02/03/2023 Lion's Club Prom & Formal Dress Consignment Drop Off 6-9pm, Community Center
- 02/04/2023-02/05/2023 Lion's Club Prom & Formal Dress Consignment Sale 1-5pm, Community Center
- 02/25/2023 Littles and Me, Art Making 10-11:30am, Wage Memorial Library
- 03/25/2023 Spring Vendor Fair, 10am-3pm, Community Center
- 04/01/2023 Lion's Club Easter Egg Hunt 10am Sharp at the City Park (Saturday a week before Easter)
- 04/01/2023 Dueling Duo Baseball/Softball Fundraiser at the Legion Post #39 6-11:30pm
- 04/06/2023 Groton Career Development Event
- 04/22/2023 Firemen's Spring Social at the Fire Station 7pm-12:30am (Same Saturday as GHS Prom)
- 04/23/2023 Princess Prom 4:30-8pm (Sunday after GHS Prom)
- 05/06/2023 Lion's Club Spring Citywide Rummage Sale 8am-3pm (1st Saturday in May)
- 05/29/2023 Legion Post #39 Memorial Day Services (Memorial Day)
- 06/16/2023 SDSU Alumni and Friends Golf Tournament
- 07/04/2023 Couples Firecracker Golf Tournament
- 07/09/2023 Lion's Club Summer Fest/Car Show at the City Park 9am-4pm (Sunday Mid-July)
- 07/26/2023 GGA Burger Fundraiser Lunch at Olive Grove Golf Course
- 08/04/2023 Wine on Nine 6pm
- 08/11/2023 GHS Basketball Golf Tournament
- 09/09/2023 Lion's Club Fall Citywide Rummage Sale 8am-3pm (1st Saturday after Labor Day)
- 09/10/2023 Couples Sunflower Golf Tournament
- 10/14/2023 Pumpkin Fest at the City Park 10am-3pm
- 10/31/2023 Downtown Trick or Treat 4-6pm (working day on or closest to Halloween)
- 10/31/2023 United Methodist Church Trunk or Treat 5:30-7pm
- 11/23/2023 Community Thanksgiving at the Community Center 11:30am-1pm (Thanksgiving)
- 12/02/2023 Tour of Homes & Holiday Party
- 12/09/2023 Santa Claus Day at Professional Management Services 9-11am

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WINNING NUMBERS

MEGA MILLIONS

WINNING NUMBERS:
03.03.23

8 25 36 39 67 11

MegaPlier: 4x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$188,000,000

NEXT 15 Hrs 31 Mins 4
DRAW: Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LOTTO AMERICA

WINNING NUMBERS:
03.06.23

2 17 25 35 50 6

All Star Bonus: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$39,330,000

NEXT 1 Days 15 Hrs 31
DRAW: Mins 4 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LUCKY FOR LIFE

WINNING NUMBERS:
03.06.23

3 7 24 25 28 4

TOP PRIZE:
\$7,000/week

NEXT 15 Hrs 1 Mins 4
DRAW: Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

DAKOTA CASH

WINNING NUMBERS:
03.04.23

1 2 9 19 21

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$79,000

NEXT 1 Days 15 Hrs 31
DRAW: Mins 4 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

DOUBLE PLAY

WINNING NUMBERS:
03.06.23

10 19 26 47 55 21

TOP PRIZE:
\$10,000,000

NEXT 1 Days 15 Hrs 30
DRAW: Mins 4 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

WINNING NUMBERS:
03.06.23

2 13 29 58 69 4

Power Play: 3x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$31,000,000

NEXT 1 Days 15 Hrs 30
DRAW: Mins 4 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

News from the Associated Press

North Dakota State tops South Dakota State in Summit semi

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — Boden Skunberg scored 24 points, Grant Nelson totaled 20 points and 22 rebounds and North Dakota State defeated South Dakota State 89-79 on Monday night in the semifinal round of the Summit League Tournament.

North Dakota State, the No. 3 seed, will play top-seeded Oral Roberts — winners of 16 in a row — in the championship game on Tuesday.

Skunberg shot 10 for 15 from the floor with four 3-pointers for the Bison (16-16). Damari Wheeler-Thomas scored 17 on 7-of-10 shooting.

The second-seeded Jackrabbits (19-13) were led by Alex Arians' 20 points, six rebounds and five assists. Matthew Mims added 19 points as the Jackrabbits' seven-game win streak came to an end.

North Dakota State led 40-34 at halftime and used 17 points from Skunberg to hold South Dakota State at bay in the second half.

Oklahomans head to polls for one issue: legal marijuana

By SEAN MURPHY Associated Press

OKLAHOMA CITY (AP) — Oklahoma voters will decide Tuesday whether to make the state one of the most conservative to green light cannabis use for adults.

State Question 820, the result of a signature gathering drive last year, is the only item on the statewide ballot. Other conservative states have legalized recreational cannabis use, including Montana in 2020 and Missouri last year, but several have rejected it, including Arkansas, North Dakota and South Dakota.

The plan faces opposition from leaders of several faith groups, along with law enforcement and prosecutors, led by former Republican Gov. Frank Keating, an ex-FBI agent, and Terri White, the former head of the state's Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services.

"We don't want a stoned society," Keating said Monday, flanked by district attorneys and law enforcement officers from across the state.

The proposal, if passed, would allow anyone over the age of 21 to purchase and possess up to 1 ounce of marijuana, plus concentrates and marijuana-infused products. People could also legally grow up to 12 marijuana plants. Recreational sales would be subjected to a 15% excise tax on top of the standard sales tax. The excise tax would be used to help fund local municipalities, the court system, public schools, substance abuse treatment and the state's general revenue fund.

The proposal also outlines a judicial process for people to seek expungement or dismissal of prior marijuana-related convictions.

Oklahoma voters already approved medical marijuana in 2018 by 14 percentage points and the state has one of the most liberal programs in the country, with roughly 10% of the state's adult population having a medical license.

The low barriers for entry into the industry has led to a flood of growers, processors and dispensary operators competing for a limited number of customers. Supporters also say the state's marijuana industry would be buoyed by a rush of out-of-state customers, particularly from Texas, which has close to 8 million people in the Dallas-Fort Worth area just a little more than an hour drive from the Oklahoma border.

"We do have one of the most permissible (medical) programs in the country, but the idea that you have to spend your time and money to go to a doctor and basically buy immunity from criminal prosecution is a pay-to-play system that I just don't like," said Ryan Kiesel, a former state lawmaker and one of the organizers of the Yes on 820 campaign.

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Oral Roberts wins Summit semifinal, runs win streak to 16

ST. THOMAS, S.D. (AP) — Max Abmas scored 23 points to help top-seeded Oral Roberts hold off No. 5 seed St. Thomas (MN) 70-65 on Monday night in the semifinal round of the Summit League Tournament, upping the Golden Eagles' win streak to 16.

Abmas added seven rebounds for Oral Roberts (29-4). Connor Vanover pitched in with 17 points, 11 rebounds, five blocks and three steals. Issac McBride scored 14.

Andrew Rohde led the fifth-seeded Tommies (19-14) with 23 points and three steals. Brooks Allen added 17 points and seven rebounds, while Parker Bjorklund posted a double-double with 15 points and 10 rebounds.

Abmas scored 13 points in the second half and the Golden Eagles used an 11-0 run to overcome a 33-32 halftime deficit.

Oral Roberts will play the winner of the semifinal match-up between No. 3 seed North Dakota State and No. 2 seed South Dakota on Tuesday for the championship.

South Dakota House nixes ban on lawmaker spouse lobbying

By AMANCAI BIRABEN Associated Press

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — A bill that would prohibit the spouses of South Dakota state lawmakers from serving as lobbyists was defeated Monday in the state House.

Backers described the bill as a much-needed ethics measure, while opponents said it targeted Republican Sen. Julie Frye-Mueller, of Rapid City, and went too far.

Just a month ago, Frye-Mueller was suspended and censured over harassing a legislative aide in a discussion on vaccines and breastfeeding. The exchange occurred in the presence of Frye-Mueller's husband, Mike Mueller, who is a private lobbyist with the conservative group South Dakota Citizens for Liberty.

He also testified this session in support of a resolution expressing sympathy for those facing charges for the Jan. 6, 2021, U.S. Capitol riot. That resolution failed to win passage.

Democratic Rep. Linda Duba, who championed the lobbyist measure in the House, said the bill was meant to address "a situation in state government that we need to clean up."

"This is not targeted at one individual as you might think," Duba said. "This can happen ongoing if we do not take this action today."

The measure previously passed the Senate with the backing of Republican Sen. Mike Rohl. He argued legislators are currently not allowed to lobby until several years after leaving office and described the restriction as a common-sense guardrail.

"It would be extremely easy to be able to hire a spouse to lobby on behalf of something for you, and that money be easily transferred to a legislator," Rohl said in an earlier hearing.

Critics, however, said it would have blocked bills that would be good for all citizens, and caused legal action because the bill didn't distinguish between not-for-profit, volunteer lobbyists with paid, registered lobbyists, as the court has.

"This bill is like a shotgun blast where a rifle shot might be appropriate," Republican Rep. Jon Hansen said. Similar bills have been proposed in the past and lawmakers are considering taking it up again.

Kim's sister warns N. Korea ready to act against US, South

By HYUNG-JIN KIM Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea (AP) — The influential sister of North Korea's leader warned Tuesday that her country is ready to take "quick, overwhelming action" against the United States and South Korea, a day after the U.S. flew a nuclear-capable B-52 bomber in a demonstration of strength against the North.

The U.S.-South Korean training on Monday involving the B-52 bomber over the Korean Peninsula was the latest in a series of drills between the allies in recent months. Their militaries are also preparing to revive their largest field exercises later this month.

Kim Yo Jong didn't describe any planned actions in her statement, but North Korea has often test-launched missiles in response to U.S.-South Korean military drills because it views them as an invasion rehearsal.

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"We keep our eye on the restless military moves by the U.S. forces and the South Korean puppet military and are always on standby to take appropriate, quick and overwhelming action at any time according to our judgment," Kim Yo Jong said in the statement carried by state media.

"The demonstrative military moves and all sorts of rhetoric by the U.S. and South Korea, which go so extremely frantic as not to be overlooked, undoubtedly provide (North Korea) with conditions for being forced to do something to cope with them," she said.

Hours after Kim's statement, the General Staff of North Korea's Korean People's Army said it put its front-line artillery units on alert and heightened surveillance activities after it detected a live-fire artillery drill by "the enemy" in the South Korean border town of Paju on Tuesday morning.

The General Staff said about 30 rounds were fired during the South Korean exercise, which it described as a "very grave military provocation" that aggravated tensions, and urged its rival to immediately stop such activities near the border.

South Korea's Joint Chiefs of Staff described the North Korean claim as absurd and denied that the South's military had fired any artillery at the shooting range the North was referring to.

The South Korean Defense Ministry said after Monday's training that the B-52's deployment demonstrated the allies' capability to deter North Korean aggression. The U.S. deployed B-1B bombers to the peninsula a few times earlier this year. Last month, the U.S. and South Korea also held a simulation in Washington aimed at sharpening their response to North Korean nuclear threats.

Last Friday, the South Korean and U.S. militaries announced they would conduct a computer-simulated command post training from March 13-23 and restore their largest springtime field exercises that were last held in 2018.

The allies had canceled or scaled back some of their regular drills since 2018 to support now-dormant diplomacy with North Korea and guard against the COVID-19 pandemic. But they have been restoring their exercises after North Korea last year conducted a record number of missile tests and openly threatened to use its nuclear weapons in potential conflicts with its rivals.

In a separate statement Tuesday, North Korea's Foreign Ministry called the flyover of the U.S. B-52 bomber a reckless provocation that pushed the situation on the peninsula "deeper into the bottomless quagmire." The statement said "there is no guarantee that there will be no violent physical conflict" if U.S.-South Korean military provocations continue.

North Korea often uses fiery rhetoric in times of heightened animosity with the United States and South Korea. Possible steps North Korea could take include a nuclear test or the launch of a new type of inter-continental ballistic missile capable of targeting the mainland U.S., observers say.

Last month, Kim Yo Jong threatened to turn the Pacific into the North's firing range. In her statement Tuesday, she said North Korea would consider a possible U.S. attempt to intercept a North Korean ICBM a declaration of war. She cited a South Korean media report saying the U.S. military plans to shoot down a North Korean ICBM if it is test-launched toward the Pacific.

All known North Korean ICBM tests have been made at steep angles to avoid neighboring countries, and the weapons landed in the waters between the Korean Peninsula and Japan.

South Korea on Monday took a step meant to ease a thorny history dispute with Japan in what was seen as an effort to boost Seoul-Tokyo-Washington security cooperation. The step involves a plan to use local funds to compensate Koreans who performed forced labor during Tokyo's colonial rule, but without requiring Japanese companies to contribute to the reparations.

U.S. Ambassador to Japan Rahm Emanuel on Monday praised the leaders of South Korea and Japan, saying the two came to understand that the "potential of collaboration into the future is more important."

Senate will grill Powell over Fed efforts to tame inflation

By CHRISTOPHER RUGABER AP Economics Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — If measures of the U.S. economy keep coming in hot, as they did in January, the Federal Reserve will likely have to raise interest rates even higher than it has already signaled — and keep them there longer — Chair Jerome Powell will likely warn in testimony to Congress on Tuesday.

Powell's first appearance before Congress in nine months coincides with recent signs that the economy remains resilient and inflation still stubbornly high. In the past year, the Fed has raised its benchmark interest rate at the fastest pace in four decades, to about 4.6%, its highest level in 15 years. But consumer spending, hiring and growth have yet to cool.

Several Fed officials said last week that they would favor raising the Fed's key rate above the 5.1% level they had projected in December if growth and inflation stay elevated. When the Fed raises its key rate, it typically makes mortgages, auto loans, credit card rates and business lending more expensive. It's a trend that can slow spending and inflation but also risks sending the economy into a recession.

In his two days of semi-annual testimony to Congress — Powell will address the House Financial Services Committee on Wednesday — the Fed chair will have to navigate a treacherous path: He will likely be pressed by Democrats concerned that ever-higher borrowing rates will tip the economy into recession and Republicans who have urged the Fed to act aggressively to slow price acceleration.

Inflation, as measured year over year, has slowed from its peak in June of 9.1% to 6.4%. But its progress stalled in January: The Fed's preferred measure of price increases rose from December to January by the most in seven months.

Powell has noted that so far, most of the slowdown in inflation reflects an unraveling of supply chains that have allowed more furniture, clothes, semiconductors and other physical goods to reach U.S. shores. By contrast, inflation pressures remain entrenched in numerous areas of the economy's vast service sector.

Rental and housing costs, for example, remain a significant driver of inflation. At the same time, the cost of a new apartment lease is growing much more slowly, a trend that should reduce housing inflation by mid-year, Powell has said.

But the prices of many services — from dining out to hotel rooms to haircuts — are still rising rapidly, with little sign that the Fed's rate hikes are having an effect. Fed officials say the costs of those services mainly reflect rising wages and salaries, which companies often pass on to their customers in the form of higher prices.

As a result, the Fed's monetary policy report to Congress, which it publishes in conjunction with the chair's testimony, said that quelling inflation will likely require "softer labor market conditions" — a euphemism for fewer job openings and more layoffs.

Israeli military caught up in divide over Netanyahu's plan

By TIA GOLDENBERG Associated Press

TEL AVIV, Israel (AP) — Shraga Tichover is hanging up his fatigues. After more than three decades as a reservist in the Israeli military, the paratrooper says he will no longer put his life on the line for a country slipping toward autocracy.

Tichover is part of a wave of unprecedented opposition from within the ranks of the Israeli military to a contentious government plan to overhaul the judiciary. Like Tichover, some reservists are refusing to show up for duty and former commanders are defending their actions as a natural response to the impending change.

"The values of this country are going to change. I am not able to serve the military of a state that is not a democracy," said Tichover, a 53-year-old volunteer reservist who has served in southern Lebanon, the Gaza Strip and the West Bank.

The typically taboo talk of defying military orders underlines how deeply the overhaul has divided Israel and is now tearing at what Israeli Jews see as their most respected institution, the military. Concerns are growing that the protest could trickle down to young conscripts as well.

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In a declaration that has sent shock waves through the country, three dozen reservist fighter pilots said they wouldn't show up for training this week in protest. The airmen are seen as the cream of the military's personnel and irreplaceable elements of many of Israel's battle plans.

The air force chief, Maj. Gen. Tomer Bar, met with some 50 squadron leaders last week to listen to their concerns. In a letter sent to pilots afterwards, Bar acknowledged the "difficulties and challenges" the country is facing but said the air force must remain committed to its mission of protecting national security.

The military's chief of staff, Lt. Gen. Herzl Halevi, reportedly warned Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu this week that the reservists' protest risks harming the military's capabilities. Halevi was scheduled to meet with Bar and some 20 pilots later on Tuesday, a day before the expected protest.

For Israel's Jewish majority, most of whom must serve in the military, the army is a source of unity and a rite of passage. Military service is an important launching pad into civilian life and the workforce.

After completing three years of mandatory service, many men continue in the reserves until their 40s, when service becomes voluntary. Most of those threatening to halt their service are volunteers, protecting them from potential punishment.

Recognizing the threat to its stability, the military has pleaded to be kept out of the heated public discourse. But it's become central to the debate over what kind of Israel will emerge after the overhaul.

Netanyahu, a former soldier in an elite unit, and his government are pushing forward on a plan to weaken the Supreme Court and limit the independence of the judiciary. His allies say the changes are meant to streamline governance, while critics say the plan will upend Israel's system of checks and balances and slide the country toward authoritarianism. They also say Netanyahu, who is on trial for corruption, is motivated by a personal grudge and has a conflict of interest.

The overhaul, which is moving ahead in parliament, has sparked an outcry from business leaders and legal officials. Tens of thousands of protesters have been taking to the streets each week.

Not everyone identifies with the soldiers. Critics say the military, as the enforcer of Israel's rule over millions of Palestinians in an open-ended occupation, has subjugated another people and eroded the country's democratic ideals. The reserve units now protesting, including pilots and intelligence units, have been behind deadly strikes or surveillance against Palestinians.

Israel's own Palestinian minority has largely stayed on the sidelines of the anti-government protests, in part because of Israel's treatment of their Palestinian brethren in the occupied West Bank and Gaza.

But Jewish Israelis see the military as a pillar of security in the face of myriad threats. Israel is mired in a bloody round of violence with Palestinians and archenemy Iran is blazing ahead with its nuclear program. Israel says Iran is developing a nuclear bomb — a charge that Tehran denies.

Those developments have not stopped the creeping challenge within the military. Israel's pool of reservists are the backbone of the force when security crises erupt.

Ehud Barak, a former military chief of staff, defense minister and prime minister, has said it would be acceptable to defy orders from what he calls a dictatorial regime. Dan Halutz, another former military chief, said soldiers won't agree to become "mercenaries for a dictator."

In addition to the protesting pilots, hundreds of reservists have signed letters promising not to serve if the overhaul passes.

"Hit the emergency brake now," reservists from the 8200 intelligence unit warned the government in a letter last week. Many 8200 graduates join the country's booming tech sector, also a fierce opponent of the overhaul.

A mass protest movement demonstrating against the overhaul has its own reservist contingent. A new group, "Do it Yourself," is calling on secular families to refuse to allow their children to serve in the occupied West Bank. A group of soldiers has asked permission to join the mass protests.

Activists warn that the overhaul is threatening to hurt future morale.

"The generations after us will not follow us," said Eyal Naveh, 47, a reservist from an elite unit and protest leader. "What will a person who halted his reserve duty tell his son? To go to the army or not?"

Naveh said reservists are also concerned the changes will leave soldiers exposed to war crimes charges

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at international courts. One of Israel's defenses against war crimes accusations is that it has an independent legal system capable of investigating any potential wrongdoing.

Debate has emerged in the past over whether soldiers ideologically opposed to an order should refuse to carry it out, particularly over the evacuation of Jews from settlements. But the mere suggestion of insubordination is rare.

Tichover, the volunteer reservist, said he struggled during his service with what he called "irrational" orders that harmed Palestinians, like being told to damage Palestinian cars. He said he found ways to skirt around such orders but never overtly defied them.

Late on Monday, Netanyahu met with members of the paramilitary border police force at a base in the occupied West Bank, telling them there was no room for politics in the military.

"There is no place for refusal now, and there won't be a place in the future," he said.

Reflecting the military's public standing, opposition leaders have also spoken out against the calls to defy orders.

"Do not lend a hand to insubordination," said Benny Gantz, an opposition leader and former military chief.

The looming threat to the military isn't the reservists' protest, said Idit Shafran Gittleman, an expert on the military at the Institute for National Security Studies, a Tel Aviv think tank. She says the overhaul could lead to a constitutional crisis over who is in charge.

"There will be chaos," she said. "The military won't know who it must take orders from."

US defense secretary makes unannounced visit to Baghdad

By QASSIM ABDUL-ZAHRA and BASSEM MROUE Associated Press

BAGHDAD (AP) — U.S. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin made an unannounced visit Tuesday to the Iraqi capital where he vowed to continue the fight against the Islamic State group until the extremists are defeated.

Austin, whose visit came just days before the 20th anniversary of the U.S.-led invasion that ousted Saddam Hussein, said in statement later that he held talks with Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammed Shia al-Sudani and Defense Minister Thabet Muhammad Al-Abbasi.

Austin was greeted on touchdown in Baghdad by Maj. Gen. Matthew McFarlane, the U.S. commander in Iraq, which is home to hundreds of American troops helping in the fight against the militant Islamic State group.

"We'll continue working to accomplish this mission together. Through the global coalition to defeat Daesh, we liberated more than 50,000 square kilometers from Daesh and freed more than 4.5 million Iraqis from their cruel grip," Austin said, using an Arabic name for IS.

Austin also said that U.S. forces are ready to remain in Iraq at the invitation of its government, adding that these forces are operating in a non-combat and advisory role in support of the "Iraqi-led fight against terrorism."

"This is a critical mission and we're proud to support our Iraqi partners," said Austin, one of the most senior Biden administration officials to visit Iraq in recent years.

Since the U.S.-led invasion in 2003 that removed longtime dictator Saddam from power, Iraq has been a point of friction between the United States and Iran. Tehran has widely expanded its influence in Iraq over the past 20 years.

"I'm here to reaffirm the U.S.-Iraq strategic partnership as we move toward a more secure, stable, and sovereign Iraq," Austin tweeted upon arrival.

"We continue to believe that Iraq's greater integration with its Arab partners in the region will deliver increased stability, security and prosperity, and it will pay dividends not only for Iraqi citizens, but for all people of the region," Austin said, referring to Iraq's improving its relations with Arab countries.

Despite their defeat in Iraq in 2017, IS militants and their sleeper cells are still launching attacks in the country, as well as in neighboring Syria. IS has killed and wounded dozens of Iraqi troops over the past months.

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In a related issue, the U.S. has been urging countries around the world to repatriate their citizens from al-Hol camp in northeast Syria, home to tens of thousands of Syrians and Iraqis crowded into tents in the fenced-in camp. Nearly 20,000 of them are children; most of the rest are women, wives and widows of IS fighters.

A separate, heavily guarded section of the camp known as the annex houses an additional 10,000 people — including 2,000 women from 57 other countries, considered the most die-hard IS supporters, along with about 8,000 of their children.

Iraq has repatriated more than 500 women and children from al-Hol over the past few weeks.

"Military action alone won't ensure the enduring defeat of Daesh," Austin added. "So let me recognize the Iraqi government's ongoing repatriations of Iraqi citizens from northeast Syria."

Reading from a statement to gathered reporters, Austin said all countries with citizens in the detention facilities and displaced persons camps in northeast Syria "must take similar steps." He said the U.S. stands ready to continue supporting Iraq and all countries working to repatriate their citizens.

The U.S. defense secretary did not take questions.

"We are focused on the mission of defeating Daesh, and we are here for no other purpose. Any threats or attacks on our forces only undermine that mission," Austin said, apparently referring to Iran-backed fighters who were blamed for attacks on facilities housing U.S. troops in Iraq.

Austin said that he spoke with Iraqi leaders about the long term vision "for our defense partnership with Iraq, which will outlast Daesh."

AP Top 25 teams get last shot to sway NCAA seeds in tourneys

By AARON BEARD AP Basketball Writer

Selection Sunday looms as AP Top 25 teams in major conferences get their final chances to impact where and why they play in the NCAA Tournament.

In the nation's top leagues, there could be significant swings based on early exits or title runs. Here's a look at what's ahead leading up to the biggest day on the sport's calendar on Sunday:

AAC

The American Athletic Conference Tournament begins Thursday in Fort Worth, Texas, and it gives top-ranked Houston the chance to make a final case potentially for the No. 1 overall seed in the NCAAs.

The Cougars (29-2) are the only team in the country to rank in the top 10 of KenPom's adjusted efficiency metrics in both offense and defense.

Houston opens against the East Carolina-South Florida winner on Friday, and the tournament is one of five to end on Sunday shortly before the NCAA field is revealed.

ACC

The Atlantic Coast Conference opens its five-day tournament Tuesday in Greensboro, North Carolina. It's an event lacking a true favorite or team poised to claim a top-tier postseason seed.

Virginia and No. 14 Miami shared the regular-season title, though the Hurricanes are the top seed for the first time since winning the tournament in 2013. But 21st-ranked Duke is the league's hottest team with six straight wins.

All three open play in Thursday's quarterfinals, with the Cavaliers on course for a 4-seed, Miami for a 5 and Duke for a 7, according to BracketMatrix.com's average of 100 mock fields on Monday evening.

BIG 12

Third-ranked Kansas won a national title, overhauled its roster and still finds itself in the chase for the No. 1 overall NCAA seed entering the Big 12 Tournament.

That tournament opens Wednesday in Kansas City, Missouri, with the Jayhawks and other top seeds starting play on Day 2.

Kansas (25-6) has a national-best 15 wins in Quadrant 1 games that top the postseason resume, which had them as the top overall seed in ESPN's Bracketology projection on Monday evening.

Winning a title this week won't come easy in a league regarded as the nation's deepest all year. The

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field includes No. 7 Texas, No. 10 Baylor, No. 12 Kansas State and No. 22 TCU.

BIG EAST

The Big East opens play Wednesday in New York's Madison Square Garden with four ranked teams: No. 6 Marquette, No. 11 Connecticut, No. 15 Xavier and No. 24 Creighton.

The top-seeded Golden Eagles, who open play Thursday, have the highest projected NCAA Tournament seed at No. 3 on both ESPN and BracketMatrix, while BracketMatrix has the Huskies and Musketeers as potential 4-seeds.

The Bluejays, who re-entered the poll for a third time this season on Monday, are projected as a No. 6 seed in the NCAAs.

The tournament wraps up Saturday night.

BIG TEN

The Big Ten opens its tournament Wednesday in Chicago with No. 5 Purdue and No. 19 Indiana as the only ranked teams, though the Boilermakers are in the mix for a No. 1 regional seed in the NCAAs.

The Boilermakers are the top seed for Chicago and BracketMatrix listed them as the fourth of the top seeds.

The Boilermakers and Hoosiers both begin play in Friday's quarterfinals with the title game coming Sunday.

PAC-12

The Pac-12 has two ranked teams in contention for lofty NCAA seeds as the league tournament opens Wednesday in Las Vegas.

Second-ranked UCLA is surging down the stretch and has its highest ranking of the season, putting it in position to contend for a No. 1 regional seed as the top No. 2 seed in BracketMatrix's projections. Eighth-ranked Arizona is also looking likely for a 2-seed.

The Bruins and Wildcats split their regular-season meetings, with UCLA winning Saturday's regular-season finale while holding the top seed for Las Vegas. Both teams open play Thursday.

SEC

Fourth-ranked Alabama is the top seed for the Southeastern Conference Tournament beginning Wednesday in Nashville, Tennessee. And the Crimson Tide could be in contention for the top overall NCAA seed with a title run.

Alabama (26-5) owns the top seed in the SEC and opens play in Friday's quarterfinals, finishing a game ahead of No. 18 Texas A&M in the regular-season race.

The tournament also features No. 17 Tennessee, No. 23 Kentucky and No. 25 Missouri, with the title game set for Sunday.

Chinese minister warns China, US on course for conflict

BEIJING (AP) — Chinese Foreign Minister Qin Gang warned Tuesday that Beijing and Washington are headed for "conflict and confrontation" if the U.S. doesn't change course, striking a combative tone at a moment when relations between the rivals are at a historic low.

In his first news conference since taking office late last year, Qin's harsh language appeared to defy predictions that China might abandon its aggressive "wolf warrior" diplomacy in favor of more moderate rhetoric as the two countries face off over trade and technology, Taiwan, human rights and Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Washington's China policy has "entirely deviated from the rational and sound track," Qin told journalists on the sidelines of the annual meeting of China's rubber-stamp legislature, when leaders lay out their economic and political priorities for the coming year.

"If the United States does not hit the brake, but continues to speed down the wrong path, no amount of guardrails can prevent derailing and there surely will be conflict and confrontation," said Qin, whose new position is junior to the Communist Party's senior foreign policy official, Wang Yi. "Such competition is a reckless gamble, with the stakes being the fundamental interests of the two peoples and even the future of humanity."

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Qin's comments echoed remarks made by leader Xi Jinping in a speech Monday to legislators.

"Western countries led by the United States have implemented all-round containment, blockade and suppression of China, which has brought unprecedented grave challenges to our nation's development," Xi was quoted as saying by the official Xinhua News Agency.

In the face of that, China must "remain calm, maintain concentration, strive for progress while maintaining stability, take active actions, unite as one, and dare to fight," he said.

U.S. officials have grown increasingly worried about China's expansive political and economic goals and the possibility of war over Taiwan — and many officials in Washington have called for the U.S. to make a bigger effort to counter Chinese influence abroad.

In recent weeks, concerns about Chinese spying on the U.S. and Beijing's influence campaigns there have drawn particular concern, and officials from the two countries have frequently traded accusations.

U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken canceled a planned visit to Beijing after Washington shot down a suspected Chinese spy balloon that flew over American territory. The massive balloon and its payload, including electronics and optics, have been recovered from the ocean floor and are being analyzed by the FBI.

Then last week, China responded with indignation when U.S. officials raised the issue again of whether the COVID-19 pandemic began with a lab leak. The Foreign Ministry accused the U.S. of "politicizing the issue" in an attempt to discredit China.

And the two countries have traded angry words over Taiwan as China has stepped up its diplomatic isolation and military harassment of the self-governing island democracy that it claims as its own territory.

Qin — who briefly served as ambassador to Washington and gained a reputation for his cutting condemnations of China's critics when he was Foreign Ministry spokesman — touched on all these topics on Tuesday.

He criticized Washington for shooting down the balloon, repeating claims that its appearance in U.S. skies was an accident.

"In this case the United States' perception and views of China are seriously distorted. It regards China as its primary rival and the most consequential geopolitical challenge," Qin said. "This is like the first button in a shirt being put wrong and the result is that the U.S.-China policy has entirely deviated from the rational and sound track."

On Taiwan, Qin called the issue the first red line that must not be crossed. China and Taiwan split amid civil war in 1949. While the U.S. does not advocate for either unification or Taiwan's formal independence, Washington is obligated by federal law to see that the island has the means to defend itself if attacked.

"The U.S. has unshakable responsibility for causing the Taiwan question," he said, accusing the U.S. of "disrespecting China's sovereignty and territorial integrity," by offering the island political backing and furnishing it with defensive weapons in response to Beijing's threat to use force to bring it under Chinese control.

"Why does the U.S. ask China not to provide weapons to Russia, while it keeps selling arms to Taiwan?" Qin asked.

In Taipei, Taiwan's Defense Minister said the armed forces weren't seeking outright conflict with China's military, but nor would they back away in the event of Chinese aircraft or ships entering Taiwanese coastal seas or airspace.

"It is the nation's armed forces' duty to mount an appropriate response," Chiu Kuo-cheng told legislators.

Beijing has also accused the West of "fanning the flames" by providing Ukraine with weaponry to fend off the Russian invasion. China says it has a neutral stance in the war, but has also said it has a "no-limits friendship" with Russia and has refused to criticize Moscow's invasion — or even refer to it as an invasion.

A Chinese call for a cease-fire in Ukraine that has drawn praise from Russia but dismissals from the West has done nothing to lessen tensions as U.S. officials have repeatedly accused China of considering providing weapons to Moscow for use in the war.

"Efforts for peace talks have been repeatedly undermined. There seems to be an invisible hand pushing

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for the protraction and escalation of the conflict and using the Ukraine crisis to serve a certain geopolitical agenda," Qin said.

Qin's news conference came two days after the opening of the yearly meeting of the National People's Congress, a mostly ceremonial body assembled to approve government reports and, this year, a new slate of top-level appointments. That is expected to include a norm-breaking third five-year term as president for Xi, who has eliminated all term limits to allow him to rule indefinitely.

France on strike: Unions say 'non' to higher pension age

By SYLVIE CORBET, NICOLAS GARRIGA and JADE LE DELEY Associated Press

PARIS (AP) — Garbage collectors, utility workers and train drivers are among people walking off the job on Tuesday across France to show their anger at a bill raising the retirement age to 64, which unions see as a broader threat to the French social model.

More than 250 protests are expected in Paris and around the country in what organizers hope is their biggest show of force yet against President Emmanuel Macron's showcase legislation, after nearly two months of demonstrations. The bill is under debate in the French Senate this week.

Unions threatened to freeze up the French economy with work stoppages across multiple sectors, most visibly an open-ended strike at the SNCF national rail authority.

Philippe Martinez, head of the CGT union, said the protest movement is "entering a new phase," on news broadcaster FranceInfo.

"The goal is that the government withdraw its draft reform. Full stop," he said.

Some unions have called for open-ended strikes in sectors from refineries and oil depots to electricity and gas facilities. Workers in each sector will decide locally in the evening about whether to prolong the movement, Martinez said.

All oil shipments in the country have been halted on Tuesday amid strikes at the refineries of TotalEnergies, Esso-ExxonMobil and Petroineos groups, according to the CGT.

Truckers have sporadically blocked major highway arteries and interchanges in go-slow actions near several cities in French regions.

In Paris, garbage collectors have started an open-ended strike and blocked on Tuesday morning the access to the incineration plant of Ivry-sur-Seine, south of the capital, Europe's biggest such facility.

"The job of a garbage collector is painful. We usually work very early or late ... 365 days per year. We usually have to carry heavy weight or stand up for hours to sweep," said Regis Viceli, a 56-year-old garbage worker.

Some strikers said that such an intense rhythm has a negative impact on their daily life and that the job was so demanding that they often experienced tendinitis and aches. That's why they have a special pension plan. But with the planned changes, they would have to retire at 59 instead of 57.

"A lot of garbage workers die before the retirement age," Viceli said.

"A garbage worker has seven years less life expectancy than a regular employee," said Natacha Pommet, a CGT union activist.

Commuters packed into one of the rare trains heading for Paris from the southern suburbs before dawn. The government encouraged people to work from home if their jobs allow.

A fifth of flights were canceled at Paris' Charles de Gaulle Airport and about a third of flights were scrapped at Orly Airport. Trains to Germany and Spain were expected to come to a halt, and those to and from Britain and Belgium will be reduced by a third, according to the SNCF rail authority.

Most high-speed trains and regional trains have been canceled.

More than 60% of teachers in primary schools were expected to be on strike, as well as public sector workers elsewhere.

Public transportation was disrupted in most French cities.

On the French Riviera, there were no intercity trains, including those linking France to Italy via Monaco, impacting tens of thousands of daily commuters to the principality.

The reform would raise the official pension age from 62 to 64 and require 43 years of work by 2030 to earn a full pension, amid other measures. The government argues the system is expected to dive into deficit within a decade as France's population ages and life expectancy lengthens.

Opinion polls suggest that most French voters oppose the bill.

At the Saint Lazare train station in Paris, Briki Mokrane, a 54-year-old fire safety worker, said "obviously it's very very difficult for workers, but unfortunately in France it's always the same: we have to have strikes or demonstrations to preserve our rights."

Left-wing lawmakers say companies and the wealthy should pitch in more to finance the pension system.

France's eight main unions and five youth organizations will meet on Tuesday evening to decide about the next steps of the mobilization.

Japan launches H3 rocket, destroys it over 2nd-stage failure

By MARI YAMAGUCHI Associated Press

TOKYO (AP) — Japan's space agency intentionally destroyed a new H3 rocket minutes after its launch Tuesday because the ignition failed for the second stage of the country's first new rocket series in more than two decades.

Coming three weeks after an aborted launch due to a separate glitch, the H3's failure was a setback for Japan's space program — and possibly for its missile detection program — and a disappointment for space fans who were rooting for Tuesday's retrial.

The H3 rocket with a white head blasted off and soared into the blue sky from the Tanegashima Space Center in southern Japan as fans and local residents cheered. It followed its planned trajectory and the second stage separated as designed, but the ignition for it failed, the Japan Aerospace Exploration Agency said.

JAXA officials apologized for the failure, and said it sent a command to destroy the rocket about 14 minutes after liftoff as there was no hope for it to complete its mission.

Yasuhiro Funo, JAXA director for launch implementation, said the second stage and its payload fell into the deep sea off the eastern coast of the Philippines. He said the rocket, which was not going to enter the targeted orbit while carrying a lot of fuel, was unsafe and had to be destroyed.

No damages or injuries were reported from the destruction of the rocket or its falling debris.

The rocket was carrying an Advanced Land Observation Satellite, or ALOS-3, tasked primarily with Earth observation and data collection for disaster response and mapmaking, and an experimental infrared sensor developed by the Defense Ministry that can monitor military activity including missile launches.

There is no plan for an alternative satellite launch to replace the earlier generation of ALOS, said Katsuhiko Hara, Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology minister. He did not say if or how the delay could affect disaster and missile detection capability.

The failure is the second in six months since a smaller Epsilon-series solid-fueled rocket designed to launch scientific satellites failed in October.

The H3 launch had also been held up more than two years because of an engine development delay. During a launch attempt in February, an electrical glitch after the main engine ignition aborted the launch just before its liftoff and narrowly saved the rocket.

Further delay is expected, but JAXA officials said analyzing the malfunction and rebuilding trust comes first.

"Our top priority is to do everything we can to find the cause and regain the trust in our rockets," said JAXA President Hiroshi Yamakawa at a joint news conference. "We need to figure out what we should do to successfully achieve the next launch."

Yamakawa said global competitiveness is still important. "Delays and additional costs are both burdens, but we will achieve international overall competitiveness from the perspectives of cost and user friendliness in delivering satellites."

The H3 rocket — Japan's first new series in more than 22 years — was developed at a cost of 200 billion

yen (\$1.47 billion) by JAXA and Mitsubishi Heavy Industries as a successor to Japan's H-2A rocket, which is due to retire after its upcoming 50th launch.

The H3, about 60 meters (196 feet) long, can carry larger payloads than the 53-meter (174-foot) H-2A. But its launch cost has been slashed approximately in half to about 50 million yen (\$368,000) by simplifying its design, manufacturing and operation in an effort to win more commercial launch customers. The hydrogen-fueled main engine is newly developed and uses fewer parts by altering the combustion method.

The space launch business has become increasingly competitive, with major players including SpaceX and Arianespace.

Ex-Raider Derek Carr agrees to 4-year contract with Saints

By BRETT MARTEL AP Sports Writer

NEW ORLEANS (AP) — Derek Carr has proved repeatedly that he can produce as a passer.

What the former Raiders quarterback hasn't done is win in the playoffs, something he aims to change in New Orleans, where he'll be reunited with Dennis Allen — his first NFL coach.

Carr has agreed to a four-year contract with the Saints, and a person familiar with the situation said the deal could be worth up to \$150 million.

The person spoke to The Associated Press about the contract's value on condition of anonymity Monday because financial terms were not released when the Saints announced their agreement with Carr, a four-time Pro Bowler who ranks fourth in the NFL in yards passing since entering the league.

"Derek's experience, leadership and skillset will be an asset to our offense," Saints general manager Mickey Loomis said.

Carr played nine seasons for the Raiders and holds club records for yards passing (35,222) and touchdown passes (217). But after struggling late last season, he was benched with two games remaining.

Carr, who turns 32 on March 28, was released by Las Vegas on Feb. 14 after he declined to waive the no-trade clause in his contract. Las Vegas needed to trade or release him by that date or \$40.4 million of his contract over the next two years would have become fully guaranteed.

The knock on Carr was that his tenure as the Raiders' starting QB produced just two playoff appearances and no postseason victories. Now he will have an opportunity in New Orleans to demonstrate that he can get better results with a different organization.

Allen, meanwhile, urgently needs to win. He went 8-28 in his first head coaching job with the Raiders, but he got a second chance in New Orleans in 2022 after overseeing one of the NFL's best defenses during more than a half-decade as a coordinator under Sean Payton.

While New Orleans again fielded an elite defense last season, the Saints finished 7-10 and out of the playoffs because of an inconsistent and turnover-prone offense.

Allen was the Raiders' coach when the club selected Carr in the second round of the 2014 draft out of Fresno State. Four games into that season, Allen was fired. But he had positive early impressions of Carr that have been largely validated since.

"In addition to his talent, I admired his approach to the game, work ethic and commitment to get better every day in what were the formative stages of his career," Allen said. "From afar and when we played him as an opponent, I saw Derek's development into one of the most productive quarterbacks in the National Football League."

Carr indicated during the week of the Pro Bowl that a talk with Peyton Manning encouraged him to explore free agency. The Indianapolis Colts released Manning in 2012 and he went on to win a Super Bowl with the Denver Broncos after the 2015 season.

"I'm just looking for teams that have made that decision consistently that they'll do whatever it takes to put a winning program out there," Carr said on Feb. 2. "So for me, that's just to win, win a championship. That's at the forefront of the mind. It's not money."

Since 2006, the Saints have made the playoffs nine times and won a Super Bowl, but all of those post-season appearances came with franchise all-time passer Drew Brees at quarterback and Payton as coach.

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Brees retired after the 2020 season and Payton retired the following year before recently resuming his coaching career with the Denver Broncos.

Still, the Carr signing should provide a measure of stability for the Saints at an all-important position that was shrouded in uncertainty following last season.

Jameis Winston is under contract with Saints through 2023, but New Orleans could release him. His contract calls for a base salary of \$12.8 million next season and he played in just three games in 2022 before losing his job — in part because of a back injury — to Andy Dalton.

Winston, who was hurt in Week 1, tried to continue playing in Weeks 2 and 3, when he threw five interceptions and was sacked seven times while passing for just two TDs.

When Winston asserted he was healthy enough to play again and wanted another chance, the Saints stuck with Dalton, who completed 66.7% of his passes for 2,871 yards with 18 touchdowns and nine interceptions in 14 starts.

Dalton, 35 and a 12-year NFL veteran, is due to be a free agent this offseason.

No. 9 Gonzaga pulls away late to beat USF in WCC semifinals

By MARK ANDERSON AP Sports Writer

LAS VEGAS (AP) — The championship matchup that seemed inevitable will take place Tuesday night, but No. 9 Gonzaga had to work to make it happen.

Anton Watson scored 20 points and Drew Timme had 17 to help the Bulldogs beat pesky San Francisco 84-73 on Monday night and advance to yet another West Coast Conference title game.

"I thought Anton was spectacular tonight and it was just big time, especially (that) they chose not to guard him," Gonzaga coach Mark Few said. "I'm not sure why teams are doing that right now because he's playing at an extremely high level, but we're glad to see it. He went out there and delivered in so many ways like he always does."

The Bulldogs (27-5) will face No. 16 Saint Mary's (26-6) for the tournament crown. The teams split two regular-season meetings.

"We kind of have a respected hatred for each other," Timme said. "We all play hard and it brings out the best in all of us, and that's what the game is all about. It's kind of like a controlled rage. It happens between the two programs and there's no love lost, but at the end of the day, we respect each other."

Julian Strawther scored 15 points while playing in his hometown and Ben Gregg had 12 for Gonzaga.

Timme increased his total to 2,192 points and moved within five of passing Frank Burgess for Gonzaga's career record.

Khalil Shabazz led San Francisco (20-14) with 26 points. Tyrell Roberts scored 17 and Marcus Williams 11.

Gonzaga is in the conference championship game for the 26th time in a row. The Zags have won this event 20 times.

They enter on an eight-game winning streak. Gonzaga's last loss? In overtime at Saint Mary's.

Getting to this championship game was anything but easy against San Francisco, which was the sixth seed and beat third-seeded Santa Clara 93-87 on Saturday. Shabazz scored a career-high 38 points in that game, and he was quite a handful for Gonzaga.

Shabazz kept the Dons within striking distance most of the night. San Francisco pulled to 56-54 with 11:59 left, but Gonzaga then eased away to secure the victory.

"We had that game down to a one-possession game," San Francisco coach Chris Gerlufsen said. "Had two possessions where it was a two-point margin and just could not get over the hump in that segment."

BIG PICTURE

San Francisco: There were questions about whether the Dons would take a step forward this season after coach Todd Golden left for Florida after taking San Francisco to the NCAA Tournament for the first time since 1998. Gerlufsen kept the Dons relevant with a 20-win season, but San Francisco is a tough place to win. Whether he can sustain it is the question.

Gonzaga: Few continues to win at a high rate. The Bulldogs have made the WCC final in 24 years under

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his watch, and a victory Tuesday would be his 19th conference tournament championship. Gonzaga is 50-5 under Few in this tournament, including 31-3 since it relocated to Las Vegas in 2009.

UP NEXT

Gonzaga will play for a potential No. 2 seed in the NCAA Tournament when it faces Saint Mary's. San Francisco waits to see if it has a shot at the NIT.

DeSantis to argue US should be like Fla. ahead of 2024 bid

By BRENDAN FARRINGTON and ANTHONY IZAGUIRRE Associated Press

TALLAHASSEE, Fla. (AP) — Gov. Ron DeSantis is poised to position himself on Tuesday as a champion of conservative causes during a State of the State address that will likely be as much about his national ambitions as it is an assessment of Florida's status in the wake of a pandemic and a series of crippling storms.

The address comes at the outset of a 60-day legislative session that has added significance this year because it will likely be used to launch DeSantis into a highly anticipated presidential campaign.

The Republican-dominated Legislature, eager to promote DeSantis' political prospects, is expected to sign off on virtually all of the governor's agenda, which is packed with issues ranging from race to immigration to gender that could prove popular in a GOP presidential primary.

Instead of focusing on rising rents and cost of living, a property insurance market that's in distress and preparing for rising sea levels in the state that's most vulnerable to climate change, DeSantis will kick off a session where the GOP will push issues like telling teachers what pronouns they can use for students, making guns more available to Floridians, keeping immigrants that are in the country illegally out of the state and criminalizing some drag shows, as Tennessee recently did.

Though DeSantis is unlikely to formally announce a presidential campaign until the Legislature wraps its work in May, he's already making big moves toward a White House bid. He participated in a high profile donor retreat last week in Florida before traveling to California, where he delivered a broadside against what he argued were excesses of liberalism. Later this week, he'll travel for the first time this year to Iowa, which will host the nation's first presidential caucuses in 2024.

Even without an official campaign in place, DeSantis is emerging as a leading alternative to former President Donald Trump, a fellow Floridian who has already announced his third White House bid. DeSantis' strength is fueled in part by commanding a nearly 20-point reelection victory last year in a state that's often infamous for close elections.

He's done so by limiting how issues like race and sexuality can be taught in schools, banning transgender girls and women from school sports, rewriting the state's political maps to favor Republicans and dismantle a congressional district that favored Black voters, attacking private businesses that disagree with his ideology and cracking down on Black Lives Matter protests.

DeSantis acknowledges that his decisions as governor are based on what he thinks is right and not necessarily what's popular in the mainstream. He said that's why he was able to turn a 32,000-vote, recount-confirmed victory in 2018 into a 1.5 million vote victory last year — the largest margin a Republican governor has ever won in the state.

"We beat the left day after day after day," DeSantis said Sunday at the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library in California. "Don't worry about the polls, don't worry about the daily news cycle, and for Pete's sake don't worry about the media, what they say. Do what is right and the voters will reward you."

He's also been an almost nightly subject of jokes on late night shows like "Saturday Night Live" and "The Late Show with Stephen Colbert," but the more critics mock DeSantis, especially those he calls the "liberal elite," the more he galvanizes support among his base.

When he shuns mainstream media in favor of friendly conservative outlets, the more mainstream media covers him. And he has the luxury of not having to make a presidential run "official" at this point.

While most candidates who jump into a presidential race two years out spend early campaigning days raising money, traveling the country building support and boosting their name recognition, DeSantis still has \$70 million in a political committee just four months after his re-election.

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And he's already a star de jour at GOP events nationally. Almost as soon as he finishes his State of the State speech, he's heading to Iowa.

"You don't see the flag of Florida standing behind him anymore. They're all American flags," said Democratic state Sen. Jason Pizzo.

DeSantis' State of the State is sure to include some of the same "anti-woke, pro-freedom" messages he's taken around the country. While critics argue that he has taken freedom from marginalized groups, it's become a catch word for the governor.

The book he released last week is titled, "The Courage to be Free," and its subtitle foreshadows his 2024 plans: "Florida's Blueprint for America's Revival." Instead of the Trump slogan of "Make America Great Again," DeSantis is building the case to make the nation look more like Florida and less like states such as California and New York.

"These liberal states have gotten it wrong," DeSantis said. "It all goes back to ideology. I think it goes back to the woke mind virus that's infected the left and all these other institutions."

But Democrats see it as intolerance and misdirected priorities. They point to efforts to build off a new law that critics call "Don't Say Gay" that limits discussion of gender and sexuality in schools. A new GOP proposal would limit how schools can use gender pronouns, while another would criminalize some drag shows.

"The number one cause of death amongst children in our country is gun violence, but again, they're concerned about who goes to what kind of drag show," said Democratic Senate Leader Lauren Book. "You've got 'Don't Say Gay.' Now 2.0, 'Don't Say They.' Let's make sure that people can pay for their light bill and can put food on their table and pay for prescriptions and put gas in the car."

Red Sox infielder Justin Turner hit in face by pitch

FORT MYERS, Fla. (AP) — Boston Red Sox infielder Justin Turner needed 16 stitches after he was hit in the face by a pitch during Monday's spring training game against the Detroit Tigers.

The 38-year-old Turner fell to the ground after getting drilled by right-hander Matt Manning. Medical personnel rushed to the plate, and Turner was bleeding and had a towel on his face as he walked off the field.

Turner's wife, Kourtney, posted to Instagram that the infielder had "16 stitches and a lot of swelling but we are thanking God for no fractures & clear scans."

"He's receiving treatment for soft tissue injuries, and is being monitored for a concussion," the Red Sox said in a statement. "He will undergo further testing, and we'll update as we have more information. Justin is stable, alert, and in good spirits given the circumstances."

The two-time All-Star signed a \$15 million, one-year deal with Red Sox during the offseason after spending the past nine years with the Los Angeles Dodgers. He hit .278 with 13 homers and 81 RBIs in 128 games last season.

Turner was also hit in the face by a pitch while attempting to bunt during the 2003 College World Series with Cal State Fullerton.

With his face bloodied and swollen, Turner left the game against Stanford assisted by trainers. He was later taken to Bergan Mercy Hospital for precautionary X-rays that revealed bruises but no fractures. He also sprained his ankle trying to avoid the pitch.

Plunge in border crossings could blunt GOP attack on Biden

By ELLIOT SPAGAT Associated Press

SAN DIEGO (AP) — A sharp drop in illegal border crossings since December could blunt a Republican point of attack against President Joe Biden as the Democratic leader moves to reshape a broken asylum system that has dogged him and his predecessors.

A new poll by The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research shows some support for changing the number of immigrants and asylum-seekers allowed into the country. About 4 in 10 U.S. adults

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say the level of immigration and asylum-seekers should be lowered, while about 2 in 10 say they should be higher, according to the poll. About a third want the numbers to remain the same.

The decrease in border crossings followed Biden's announcement in early January that Mexico would take back Cubans, Haitians, Nicaraguans and Venezuelans under a pandemic-era rule that denies migrants the right to seek asylum as part of an effort to prevent the spread of COVID-19. At the same time, the U.S. agreed to admit up to 30,000 a month of those four nationalities on humanitarian parole if they apply online, enter at an airport and find a financial sponsor.

The administration has also proposed generally denying asylum to anyone who travels through another country on their way to the U.S. without seeking protection there — effectively all non-Mexicans who appear at the U.S. southern border.

The new rules put forth by Biden could help the president fight back against critics who complain he hasn't done enough to address border security issues. But the moves have also fueled anger among some of his Democratic allies who are concerned that he is furthering a Trump-era policy they view as anti-immigrant and hurting vulnerable migrants who are trying to escape dangerous conditions in their native countries.

And the new changes — and subsequent drop in illegal border crossings — are unlikely to stop the barrage of attacks from conservatives who see border security as a powerful political weapon.

Biden has been on the defensive as Republicans and right-wing media outlets have hammered him over the soaring increase in migrant encounters at the border. The new House GOP leadership has held hearings on what they call the "Biden border crisis" and talked of impeaching Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas.

Agents detained migrants more than 2.5 million times at the southern border in 2022, including more than 250,000 in December, the highest on record. According to a U.S. official who was not authorized to discuss the matter publicly and spoke on condition of anonymity, Border Patrol agents stopped migrants about 130,000 times in February, similar to January.

Among Republicans, the poll shows about two-thirds say there should be fewer immigrants and asylum-seekers, while only about 1 in 10 say there should be more.

Democrats are split: About a quarter say the number of immigrants should increase, a quarter say it should decrease, and about 4 in 10 say it should remain the same. They are slightly more supportive of asylum-seekers specifically, with 37% supporting an increase, 26% backing a decrease, and 36% saying the number should remain the same.

Under U.S. law, numbers are not capped on asylum, which was largely a policy afterthought until about a decade ago. Since 2017, the U.S. has been the world's most popular destination for asylum-seekers, according to U.N. figures. Even those who lose in court can stay for years while their cases wind through a backlogged system.

Omar Reffell, a 38-year-old independent voter in Houston, said that he supports immigration but that news coverage of "caravans of people trying to cross the border" sends the wrong message to migrants.

"People think that they just show up at the border, come across, there is not going to be any repercussions," Reffell said. "I'm not against immigration. I think immigration is good for the country, but it has to happen in a very orderly manner or it puts a lot of stress, especially on the border states being able to provide resources."

More than 100,000 migrants each month were being released in U.S. border cities late last year with notices to appear in immigration court or report to immigration authorities.

Dan Restrepo, a top White House adviser on Latin America during Barack Obama's presidency, believes the American public will accept high levels of immigration — if a systematic process can be followed.

The challenge in managing migration "is the sense of chaos and disorder that can be created by images of overwhelmed processing facilities and the like at the physical border," he said. "It's less the numbers and more the imagery" that bothers voters.

Republicans cast Biden's expansion of humanitarian parole for four nationalities as a political ploy to divert attention from the border and are not likely to let up on their criticism of the president on immigration.

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The Federation of American Immigration Reform, an anti-immigration group, called January's plunge in border numbers "a shell game" to boost Biden's reelection prospects.

Fox News Channel has hit hard on the story over the last year. Reporter Bill Melugin said in a "Battle for the Border" special on Nov. 3 that he had spent more than 200 days on the Texas border.

"We've been shooting the video all day long," Melugin said in a typical report from the Texas town of Eagle Pass. "We keep getting these massive groups of 150 to 200 crossing every single day."

The network's night-vision drone cameras have showed hundreds of migrants walking across the border, each one appearing as a luminous white stick slowly advancing across a dark screen.

The poll found 39% of U.S. adults approve of how Biden is handling immigration, and 38% approve of him on border security — slightly below his overall approval ratings. About two-thirds of Democrats but only about 1 in 10 Republicans say they approve of his handling of either issue.

The poll was taken Feb. 16-20, just before the administration proposed on Feb. 21 that asylum should generally be denied to migrants who pass through another country without applying for protection there if it is deemed safe. The administration is angling to have the new rule take effect before the pandemic-related limits on asylum are expected to end May 11, though legal challenges appear imminent.

Becky Steelsmith, a 70-year-old independent voter from Zachary, Louisiana, is reluctant to heap blame on Biden because solutions also eluded his predecessors, but she notes that the optics are not great.

"The only reason why I disagree with Biden's handling of it is that I think he's a little too soft," said Steelsmith, a retired teacher. "I'm not saying it's his fault that it's happening. I'm saying that as president, he needs to sit down and really focus and come up with some kind of a solution, or the beginning of a solution."

US sees China propaganda efforts becoming more like Russia's

By NOMAAN MERCHANT and MATTHEW LEE Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — China has long been seen by the U.S. as a prolific source of anti-American propaganda but less aggressive in its influence operations than Russia, which has used cyberattacks and covert operations to disrupt U.S. elections and denigrate rivals.

But many in Washington now think China is increasingly adopting tactics associated with Russia — and there's growing concern the U.S. isn't doing enough to respond.

U.S. officials and outside experts cite recent examples of China-linked actors generating false news reports with artificial intelligence and posting large volumes of denigrating social media posts. While many of the discovered efforts are amateurish, experts think they signal an apparent willingness from Beijing to try more influence campaigns as part of a broader embrace of covert operations, according to two people familiar with the matter who spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss sensitive intelligence.

"To us, the attempt is what stands out," one U.S. intelligence official said.

An increasingly pessimistic mood in Washington about Beijing's expansive political and economic goals and the possibility of war over Taiwan is driving calls for the U.S. to make a stronger effort to counter Chinese influence abroad.

Lawmakers and officials are particularly concerned about countries that comprise the "Global South" in Africa, Asia and Latin America, where both the U.S. and China have huge economic and political interests. Many of those countries have populations that support both sides — what an official called "swing states" in the narrative battle.

"This should be a whole of government effort," said Rep. Raja Krishnamoorthi of Illinois, who is the top Democrat on a newly formed House committee focusing on the Chinese Communist Party.

"The CCP is going around the world bad-mouthing the U.S., bad-mouthing our institutions, bad-mouthing our form of government," Krishnamoorthi said in an interview. "We have to counter this because ultimately it's not in the best interests of the United States."

China's embassy in Washington said in a statement that Beijing "opposes the fabrication and dissemination of false information" and blamed the U.S. in turn for making social media "into its tool to manipulate

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international public opinion and its weapon to stigmatize and demonize other countries.”

“On this issue, it is for the U.S. side to reflect on itself and stop shouting ‘catch a thief,’” said embassy spokesman Liu Pengyu.

Chinese state media and affiliated channels, as well as social media influencers with vast followings, routinely spread ideas the U.S. labels exaggerated, false or misleading. In recent weeks, China’s foreign ministry has called attention to the train derailment that released toxic chemicals in Ohio as well as allegations the U.S. may have sabotaged pipelines used to transport Russian gas.

The Biden administration has strongly rejected the allegations about the Nord Stream pipelines and defended its response in Ohio.

China has long been seen as less willing than Russia to take provocative steps that could be exposed and more concerned about being publicly blamed. U.S. intelligence judged that Russia tried to support Donald Trump in the last two presidential elections, while China in 2020 considered but did not try to influence the election.

But some U.S. officials believe China is now undertaking or considering operations it would not have in the past, according to the two people familiar with the matter. That’s partly due to fears in Beijing that they are losing a battle of narratives in many countries, one of the people said.

Officials noted public examples identified in recent weeks by groups that track disinformation and influence.

The research firm Graphika recently identified AI-generated videos that it linked to a pro-Chinese influence operation. One video attacked the U.S. approach to stopping gun violence; another “stressed the importance of China-U.S. cooperation for the recovery of the global economy,” according to Graphika. And threat analysts at Google said they disrupted more than 50,000 instances of posts and other activity last year linked to a pro-China influence operation known as “Dragonbridge.”

The AI-generated videos are clearly fictitious and Graphika said none of them had more than 300 views. Most Dragonbridge posts, Google said, also reached a tiny audience.

The U.S. intelligence official said Chinese tradecraft on social media was “uneven” and less sophisticated than what’s normally associated with the Kremlin. But that tradecraft — both in terms of social media operations and efforts to hide any linkage to Beijing — can be expected to improve over time and with practice, the official said.

And there are longstanding concerns in Washington about TikTok, the viral video-sharing app whose U.S. operations are currently undergoing a national security review. There’s no public evidence that Beijing has used its sweeping powers over businesses in China to direct content on the app or launch government-sanctioned influence operations, but there’s a belief that China could do so quickly enough not to be caught or stopped.

China is increasingly viewed unfavorably in the U.S., much of Europe, Australia, South Korea and Japan, according to Pew Research Center data published last year.

But in other countries in Asia as well as in much of Africa and Latin America, there are more positive attitudes about the Chinese government, often driven by Beijing’s economic investments and offers of infrastructure and security assistance.

Last year’s Africa Youth Survey, which was composed of 4,500 interviews of 18- to 24-year-olds in 15 countries, found that 76% of respondents believed China had a positive influence in their country. Of the U.S., 72% said they believed American influence was positive.

In the event of a war over U.S.-backed Taiwan, experts believe shaping global attitudes and narratives will be key in ensuring military and diplomatic support for either side.

Rep. Mike Gallagher, the Wisconsin Republican who chairs the new congressional committee on China, said in a statement after recently visiting Taiwan that Chinese influence operations are part of a broader strategy of “cognitive warfare.” He added that the committee would “work to expose the truth about the (Chinese Communist Party’s) pattern of aggression against America and our friends.”

The State Department’s Global Engagement Center is charged with countering Chinese messaging outside of both the U.S. and China. Speaking on condition of anonymity under ground rules set by the department, a State Department official responded to concerns that the U.S. doesn’t directly counter many lines

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of attack from Beijing.

"There was a decision made that we were not going to get in the business of playing whack-a-mole with specific lines of Chinese messaging," the official said. "Frankly, there's just too much of it. It would be like trying to put your finger in the dam to stop the leak."

The State Department instead tries to fund programs exposing facts and ideas that China wants to suppress. The Global Engagement Center has funded third-party research of China's crackdown in Xinjiang province against Uyghurs and other mostly Muslim ethnic groups. Beijing has long tried to frame its operations in Xinjiang as countering terrorism and radicalism in the face of international criticism about its network of detention camps and its restrictions on movement and religious expression in the province.

State has also funded trainings for investigative journalists in countries that have received Chinese investment and a project that tracked Chinese dam construction along the Mekong River, which is a key source of water for Southeast Asian countries downstream from China.

The U.S. also uses direct investment as a tool for countering Chinese influence, though critics have questioned whether some funded programs are effective.

In one instance, the U.S. Agency for International Development last year proposed using funding from an annual fund for countering Chinese influence to support bakeries in Tunisia. According to two other people familiar with the matter, officials wanted to buy software for bakery owners to help them determine which of their products were most marketable. The people spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss internal agency deliberations.

In a statement, USAID said the Tunisia program was intended to "create sustainable demand-driven jobs" and promote Western software over Chinese programs that "might be easily accessible" but "less efficient."

"We know that our grants-based assistance can go even further when put together with public and private investments, which far outstrip the resources that the PRC has brought to the table to date," the statement said.

Hope Hicks meets with NY prosecutors investigating Trump

By MICHAEL R. SISAK Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — Donald Trump's former spokesperson Hope Hicks met Monday with Manhattan prosecutors who are investigating hush-money payments made to women on the ex-president's behalf — the latest member of the Republican's inner circle to be questioned in the renewed probe.

Hicks and her lawyer, Robert Trout, spent several hours inside the Manhattan district attorney's office and, afterward, were seen walking to a waiting SUV. They didn't say anything to reporters as they got in the vehicle.

Trout declined comment. The district attorney's office also declined comment and would not confirm prosecutors interviewed Hicks, who was previously questioned in 2018 by federal prosecutors who looked into the same conduct.

Hicks served as Trump's 2016 campaign press secretary and spoke with Trump by phone during a frenzied effort to keep his alleged affairs out of the press in the final weeks before the election, according to court records from the federal probe. Hicks later held various roles in his White House, including communications director.

Last week, prosecutors questioned Trump's former lawyer and fixer Michael Cohen, who arranged payments to two women, and Trump's former political adviser Kellyanne Conway.

After his session last Friday, Cohen told reporters that the probe is "really progressing." He said he expects to testify soon before a grand jury that's been hearing evidence since January.

"The level of specificity to which they are attacking the various issues is extraordinary," said Cohen, adding that he's met with prosecutors 18 times through several iterations of the probe.

Cohen pleaded guilty in 2018 to federal charges including campaign finance violations for arranging the payouts to porn actor Stormy Daniels and model Karen McDougal to keep them from going public. Trump has denied the affairs.

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Cohen paid Daniels \$130,000 through his own company and was then reimbursed by Trump, whose company logged the reimbursements as "legal expenses." McDougal's \$150,000 payment was made through the publisher of the supermarket tabloid the National Enquirer, which squelched her story in a journalistically dubious practice known as "catch-and-kill."

According to court records from the federal investigation, Hicks spoke for several minutes by phone with Trump and Cohen on Oct. 8, 2016, the day after the release of the 2005 "Access Hollywood" tape in which Trump boasted in graphic detail about grabbing women's genitals.

Cohen, concerned that the campaign would be irreparably damaged by stories about Trump's alleged affairs, then spoke with top executives at the National Enquirer before calling Trump, according to the records. Cohen then phoned Trump again at 8:03 p.m. and spoke to him for eight minutes, followed by more calls, and text messages involving Cohen and a National Enquirer executive.

The hush-money payment to McDougal remained secret until days before the election, when The Wall Street Journal published a story about it. Court records show that Cohen and Hicks expressed relief to each other that the story did not receive the attention they feared it would.

"So far I see only 6 stories. Getting little to no traction," Cohen texted, according to the records.

"Same. Keep praying!! It's working!" Hicks responded.

Last year, Hicks was interviewed by the House Jan. 6 committee, telling the panel that Trump told her that no one would care about his legacy if he lost the 2020 election. She told the committee that Trump told her, "The only thing that matters is winning."

Hicks was also a key witness in former special counsel Robert Mueller's Russia investigation and provided important information about Trump's attempts to obstruct that investigation.

As for the hush-money probe, the U.S. attorney's office in Manhattan decided not to prosecute Trump personally over the payments. The Manhattan district attorney's office then began investigating the payments to see if any state laws were broken.

No charges were brought against Trump during the tenure of former Manhattan District Attorney Cyrus Vance Jr., who shifted the probe's focus to the Trump Organization's business practices. The company was convicted in December of tax fraud and fined \$1.6 million.

The current district attorney, Alvin Bragg, has shown renewed interest in pursuing more charges, possibly against Trump himself. Doing so would be unprecedented. No former president has ever been charged with a crime.

Conway's lawyer didn't respond to multiple messages about her meeting last week with prosecutors, which was first reported by The New York Times.

Trump's lawyers have said that the payments to the two women broke no laws. Trump says the investigation is politically motivated.

4 kidnapped Americans crossed into Mexico for health care

By ALFREDO PEÑA and MATTHEW BARAKAT Associated Press

CIUDAD VICTORIA, Mexico (AP) — Four Americans who traveled to Mexico last week to seek health care got caught in a deadly shootout and were kidnapped by heavily armed men who threw them in the back of a pickup truck, officials from both countries said Monday.

The four were traveling Friday in a white minivan with North Carolina license plates. They came under fire shortly after entering the city of Matamoros from Brownsville, at the southernmost tip of Texas near the Gulf coast, the FBI said in a statement Sunday.

"All four Americans were placed in a vehicle and taken from the scene by armed men," the FBI said. The bureau is offering a \$50,000 reward for the victims' return and the arrest of the kidnapers.

Zalandria Brown of Florence, South Carolina, said she has been in contact with the FBI and local officials after learning that her younger brother, Zindell Brown, is one of the four victims.

"This is like a bad dream you wish you could wake up from," she said in a phone interview. "To see a member of your family thrown in the back of a truck and dragged, it is just unbelievable."

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Zalandria Brown said her brother, who lives in Myrtle Beach, and two friends had accompanied a third friend who was going to Mexico for a tummy tuck surgery. A doctor who advertises such surgeries in Matamoros did not answer calls seeking comment.

Brown said the group was extremely close and they all made the trip in part to help split up the driving duties. They were aware of the dangers in Mexico, she added, and her brother had expressed some misgivings.

"Zindell kept saying, 'We shouldn't go down,'" Brown said.

A video posted to social media Friday showed men with assault rifles and tan body armor loading the four people into the bed of a white pickup in broad daylight. One was alive and sitting up, but the others seemed either dead or wounded. At least one person appeared to lift his head from the pavement before being dragged to the truck.

The scene illustrates the terror that has prevailed for years in Matamoros, a city dominated by factions of the powerful Gulf drug cartel who often fight among themselves. Amid the violence, thousands of Mexicans have disappeared in Tamaulipas state alone.

Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador said Monday that "there was a confrontation between groups, and they were detained," without offering details. He originally said the four Americans came to Mexico to buy medications.

Tamaulipas' chief prosecutor, Irving Barrios, told reporters that a Mexican woman died in Friday's shootings. He did not specify whether she was killed in the same gunfight where the kidnapping took place.

A woman driving in Matamoros who asked not to be identified for fear of reprisal said she witnessed what appeared to be the shooting and abduction.

The white minivan was hit by another vehicle near an intersection, then gunfire rang out, the woman said. Another SUV rolled up, and several armed men hopped out.

"All of a sudden they (the gunmen) were in front of us," she said. "I entered a state of shock, nobody honked their horn, nobody moved. Everybody must have been thinking the same thing, 'If we move they will see us, or they might shoot us.'"

She said the gunmen forced a woman, who was able to walk, into the back of a pickup. Another person was carried to the truck but could still move his head.

"The other two they dragged across the pavement, we don't know if they were alive or dead," she said. Mexican authorities arrived minutes later.

Zindell Brown's family asked people to share any relevant information with local authorities. O'dell William Brown, his father, said the family is still searching for answers.

"I don't know which way to go right now," he said. "We don't know what's what."

Shootouts in Matamoros were so bad on Friday that the U.S. Consulate issued an alert about the danger and local authorities warned people to shelter in place. It was not immediately clear how the abductions may have been connected to that violence.

U.S. Ambassador to Mexico Ken Salazar said in a statement Monday the Americans were kidnapped at gunpoint and an "innocent" Mexican citizen died in the attack. He said various U.S. justice agencies were working with their Mexican counterparts to recover the missing persons.

Authorities have provided no other details about the victims.

President Joe Biden had been informed of the situation, White House press secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said Monday. She declined to answer other questions, citing privacy concerns.

Victims of violence in Matamoros and other large border cities of Tamaulipas often go uncounted because the cartels have a history taking bodies of their own with them. Local media often avoid reporting on such episodes out of safety concerns, creating an information vacuum.

The State Department warns U.S. citizens not to travel to Tamaulipas. However U.S. citizens who live in Brownsville or elsewhere in Texas frequently cross to visit family, attend medical appointments or shop. It's also a crossing point for people traveling deeper into Mexico.

As the headquarters of the Gulf cartel, Matamoros was once relatively calm. For years, a night out in the city was part of the "two-nation vacation" for spring breakers flocking to Texas' South Padre Island.

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But increased cartel violence over the past 10 to 15 years frightened away much of that business. Sometimes U.S. citizens are swept up in the fighting.

Three U.S. siblings disappeared near Matamoros in October 2014 while visiting their father and were later found shot to death and burned. Their parents said they had been abducted by men dressed in police gear identifying themselves as "Hercules," a tactical security unit in the city.

Californians still digging out from severe snowfall

LOS ANGELES (AP) — Residents of Southern California mountain towns have continued to struggle to dig out and get necessities in the aftermath of a record-setting blizzard last month that dumped so much snow that roads became impassable and roofs collapsed.

Here's a closer look at the situation:

SURVIVAL

Free food distribution centers have been set up at five locations, including the community of Crestline, which sits at an elevation of about 4,600 feet (1,400 meters).

A line of people waited there Monday to pick up food and necessities, such as toilet paper stacked in a parking lot.

"Imagine not having any food in your house after being trapped for 13 days," resident Michelle Calkins told KTLA-TV.

Pablo Tello, another Crestline resident, picked up a replacement for a broken shovel so he could get back to helping dig snow away from homes, with special attention to buried gas lines that have been linked to several fires.

Tello said his snowshoes used to be placed over his fireplace as a decoration, but now he's using them to help his neighbors and seniors not able to leave their homes.

THE BLIZZARD

Rare blizzard warnings went into effect in late February in the mountain ranges of Southern California as an arctic air mass plunged down the West Coast, plastering California's coast ranges and the Sierra Nevada.

In an extremely unusual event, staggering amounts of snow fell east of Los Angeles in the San Bernardino Mountains and the adjacent San Gabriel Mountains, where thousands of people live or visit communities at high elevations reached by windy, steep highways.

Both mountain ranges routinely have winter snowfalls, but what looked like the foundation for epic downhill ski days instead became a nightmare.

Big Bear City received 80 inches (203 centimeters) of snow over a seven-day period, the most since these records have been tracked, according to meteorologist Alex Tardy, with the National Weather Service in San Diego. Until now, the most snow recorded in a seven-day period there was 58 inches (147 centimeters) in 1979.

Gov. Gavin Newsom declared emergencies in 13 of California's 58 counties beginning March 1.

SNOWED IN

Residents found themselves unable to leave their homes or vacation rentals, much less free their vehicles.

San Bernardino County authorities said the snowfall was so great it exceeded the capability of plows to clear roads, requiring earth-moving equipment and dump trucks to pick up and move snow.

A shortage of tire chains further hampered the response.

Highways were closed to all but emergency vehicles, frustrating residents who had been away when the storm hit and were forbidden to head back up to their homes.

Sections of key mountain roads in the Big Bear area were finally reopened Monday afternoon to residents only. The California Highway Patrol warned people returning home that they may encounter enormous snow drifts, downed power lines and potential gas leaks.

Roof collapses due to the weight of snow were reported, including a grocery store in the community of Crestline.

RECOVERY

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Authorities began bringing in more snow removal equipment, organized convoys of grocery trucks, set up distribution centers and requested donations of nonperishable foods, water and general supplies.

Andrew Braggins told The Associated Press that he's one of the lucky ones. His street in Crestline is plowed and he was able to dig out his driveway. Most of his neighbors' properties are still buried.

Braggins and his wife have been packing their Jeep with boxes of food from the distribution center and delivering them to neighbors. But it's not as simple as just dropping the boxes at the front doors, he said.

"We have to climb over 10-foot (3-meter) snow berms and carry them through deep snow down 60-foot (18-meter) driveways. It is exhausting," Braggins said.

A National Guard unit that normally fight wildfires was called in to use its shovels to help clear snow.

Clearing of state routes has been done by California Department of Transportation equipment.

Highways have intermittently been open to residents as conditions permit, but authorities warn that anyone who goes down may not be allowed back up.

As of Sunday, San Bernardino County estimated that it had made nearly 80% of county-maintained roads in the area passable, meaning that at least one lane was open. But the county noted that state and county plows are not allowed onto private property and residents will have to call in contractors to do those jobs.

FORECAST

Southern California has largely seen a respite since the blizzard, but heavy snow has continue to pile up in the north, including the Sierra, where totals so far this season are being measured in the dozens of feet.

The stormy weather calmed down Monday, but accumulations were forecast to continue through midweek.

The National Weather Service said the next Pacific storm is expected to arrive in California late in the week, and will be associated with a moderately strong atmospheric river, a long plume of moisture stretching back over the ocean.

Heavy rainfall and a mild airmass could cause rapid snowmelt in some areas that have received several feet of snow recently, the service said.

DA stands by prosecutor in Alec Baldwin set-shooting case

By MORGAN LEE Associated Press

SANTA FE, N.M. (AP) — A district attorney in Santa Fe fought back Monday against efforts to disqualify the special prosecutor pursuing manslaughter charges against actor Alec Baldwin in the fatal shooting of a cinematographer on a New Mexico film set.

Baldwin's legal team in February sought to disqualify special prosecutor and Republican state Rep. Andrea Reeb of Clovis based on constitutional provisions that safeguard the separation of powers between distinct branches of government.

Defense attorneys argued that Reeb's role as a state lawmaker and prosecutor are incompatible and could distort legislative and judicial actions, including state spending on the prosecution of Baldwin over the 2021 shooting on the set of the Western movie "Rust."

Santa Fe District Attorney Mary Carmack-Altwies on Monday called the objection a "novel theory that has no support in new Mexico statutes or case law."

She said the state constitution provides a variety of safeguards against legislators interfering with the outcome of ongoing court cases.

"Any attempt by Ms. Reeb as a legislator to influence the outcome of this trial would be completely ineffective," Carmack-Altwies said in a court filing.

Since joining the legislature in January, Reeb has steered clear of voting on public spending to prosecute Baldwin and film-set weapons supervisor Hannah Gutierrez-Reed. She was excused from a House floor vote in February on a proposed state budget that includes \$360,000 for special prosecution expenses in the fatal film-set shooting.

Baldwin and Gutierrez-Reed have pleaded not guilty to charges of involuntary manslaughter in the shooting death of cinematographer Halyna Hutchins. The charges carry a maximum penalty of 18-months in prison and fines.

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Hutchins died shortly after being wounded Oct. 21, 2021, during rehearsals at a ranch on the outskirts of Santa Fe. Baldwin was pointing a pistol at Hutchins when the gun went off, killing her and wounding the director, Joel Souza. A likely preliminary hearing is still months away to decide whether evidence is sufficient to proceed to trial.

Prosecutors say assistant director David Halls, who oversaw safety on set, has signed an agreement to plead guilty in the negligent use of a deadly weapon. A judge is scheduled to consider approval of the plea agreement later this month.

Prosecution in the death of Hutchins is currently underwritten by an emergency state grant, approved in September 2022 by the State Board of Finance that is led by Gov. Michelle Lujan Grisham.

Reeb is listed as a sponsor or cosponsor on several criminal justice initiatives, including enhanced punishments for firearms violations, as legislators explore ways to rein in surging violent crime. She previously served as district attorney for a judicial district on the eastern plains of New Mexico.

Georgia nuclear plant begins splitting atoms for first time

By JEFF AMY Associated Press

ATLANTA (AP) — A nuclear power plant in Georgia has begun splitting atoms in one of its two new reactors, Georgia Power said Monday, a key step toward reaching commercial operation at the first new nuclear reactors built from scratch in decades in the United States.

The unit of Atlanta-based Southern Co. said operators reached self-sustaining nuclear fission inside the reactor at Plant Vogtle, southeast of Augusta. That makes the intense heat that will be used to produce steam and spin turbines to generate electricity.

A third and a fourth reactor were approved for construction at Vogtle by the Georgia Public Service Commission in 2009, and the third reactor was supposed to start generating power in 2016. The company now says Unit 3 could begin commercial operation in May or June.

Unit 4 is projected to begin commercial operation sometime between this November and March 2024.

The cost of the third and fourth reactors was originally supposed to be \$14 billion. The reactors are now supposed to cost more than \$30 billion. That doesn't include \$3.68 billion that original contractor Westinghouse paid to the owners after going bankrupt, which brings total spending to more than \$34 billion.

The latest set of delays at Unit 3 included a pipe part of a critical backup cooling system that was vibrating during startup testing. Construction workers had failed to install supports called for on blueprints. The company has also said it had to repair a slowly dripping valve and diagnose a problem involving water flow through reactor coolant pumps.

Georgia Power said Unit 3 would continue startup testing to show that its cooling system and steam supply system will work at the intense heat and pressure that a nuclear reactor creates. After that, operators are supposed to link the reactor to the electrical grid and gradually raise it to full power.

"We remain focused on safely bringing this unit online, fully addressing any issues and getting it right at every level," Chris Womack, chairman, president and CEO of Georgia Power, said in a written statement. "Reaching initial criticality is one of the final steps in the startup process and has required tremendous diligence and attention to detail from our teams."

Georgia Power owns a minority of the two new reactors. The remaining shares are owned by Oglethorpe Power Corp., the Municipal Electric Authority of Georgia and the city of Dalton. Oglethorpe and MEAG would sell power to cooperatives and municipal utilities across Georgia, as well in Jacksonville, Florida, and parts of Alabama and the Florida Panhandle.

Georgia Power's 2.7 million customers are already paying part of the financing cost, and state regulators have approved a monthly rate increase of \$3.78 a month as soon as the third unit begins generating power. The elected Georgia Public Service Commission will decide later who pays for the remainder of the costs.

Vogtle is the only nuclear plant under construction in the United States. Its costs and delays could deter other utilities from building such plants, even though they generate electricity without releasing climate-changing carbon emissions.

23 charged with terrorism in Atlanta 'Cop City' protest

By JEFF MARTIN and JEFF AMY Associated Press

ATLANTA (AP) — More than 20 people from around the country faced domestic terrorism charges Monday after dozens in black masks attacked the site of a police training center under construction in a wooded area outside Atlanta where one protester was killed in January.

The site has become the flashpoint of ongoing conflict between authorities and left-leaning protesters who have been drawn together, joining forces to protest a variety of causes. Among them: People against the militarization of police; others who aim to protect the environment; and some who oppose corporations who they see as helping to fund the project through donations to a police foundation.

Flaming bottles and rocks were thrown at officers during a protest Sunday at "Cop City," where 26-year-old environmental activist Manuel Esteban Paez Terán, or "Tortuguita," was shot to death by officers during a raid at a protest camp in January. Police have said that Tortuguita attacked them, a version that other activists have questioned.

Almost all of the 23 people arrested are from states across the U.S., while one is from Canada and another from France, police said Monday.

Like many protesters, Tortuguita was dedicated to preserving the environment, friends and family said, ideals that clashed with Atlanta's hopes of building a \$90 million Atlanta Public Safety Training Center meant to boost preparedness and morale after George Floyd's death in 2020.

Now, authorities and young people are embroiled in a clash that appears to have little to do with other high-profile conflicts.

Protesters who oppose what detractors call "Cop City" run the gamut from more traditional environmentalists to young, self-styled anarchists seeking clashes with what they see as an unjust society.

Defend the Atlanta Forest, a social media site used by members of the movement, said Monday on Twitter that those arrested were not violent agitators "but peaceful concert-goers who were nowhere near the demonstration." A representative of a public-relations firm involved in the group's events said that it could not immediately comment.

After "Tortuguita" was killed in January, demonstrations spread to downtown Atlanta. A police cruiser was set ablaze, rocks were thrown and fireworks were launched at a skyscraper that houses the Atlanta Police Foundation. Windows were shattered. The governor declared a state of emergency.

On Sunday, Atlanta Police Chief Darin Schierbaum said at a midnight news conference, pieces of construction equipment were set on fire in what he called "a coordinated attack" at the site for the Atlanta Public Safety Training Center in DeKalb County.

Surveillance video released by police shows a piece of heavy equipment in flames. It was among several destroyed pieces of construction gear, police said.

Protesters also threw rocks, bricks, Molotov cocktails, and fireworks at police, officials said. In addition, demonstrators tried to blind officers by shining green lasers into their eyes, and used tires and debris to block a road, the Georgia Department of Public Safety said Monday.

Officers used nonlethal enforcement methods to disperse the crowd and make arrests, Schierbaum said, causing "some minor discomfort."

Along with classrooms and administrative buildings, the training center would include a shooting range, a driving course to practice chases and a "burn building" for firefighters to work on putting out fires. A "mock village" featuring a fake home, convenience store and nightclub would also be built for rehearsing raids.

Opponents have said that the site would be to practice "urban warfare," and the 85-acre (34-hectare) training center would require cutting so many trees that it would be environmentally damaging.

Many activists also oppose spending millions on a police facility that would be surrounded by poor neighborhoods in a city with one of the nation's highest degrees of inequality.

Color Of Change, a civil rights organization, has been working alongside activists in Atlanta, and leaders have said the facility will only harm Black communities as a result of what they describe as the increased militarization of law enforcement.

"This just takes up a lot of space in a Black community ... and it provides more access, more tools,

and more resources to an institution that actually needs more accountability," Color of Change President Rashad Robinson told the AP by phone Monday.

Atlanta Mayor Andre Dickens has said that the site was cleared decades ago for a former state prison farm. He has said that it is filled with rubble and overgrown with invasive species, not hardwood trees. The mayor also has said that while the facility would be built on 85 acres, about 300 others would be preserved as public green space.

Many of those already accused of violence in connection with the training site protests are being charged with domestic terrorism, a felony that carries up to 35 years in prison. Those charges have prompted criticism from some that the state is being heavy-handed.

Lawmakers are considering classifying domestic terrorism as a serious violent felony. That means anyone convicted must serve their entire sentence, can't be sentenced to probation as a first offender and can't be paroled unless they have served at least 30 years in prison.

Meanwhile, more protests are planned in coming days, police said Monday.

3 GOP states pull out of effort to thwart voter fraud

By CHRISTINA A. CASSIDY and JIM SALTER Associated Press

ST. LOUIS (AP) — Three Republican-led states on Monday pulled out of a bipartisan effort among states to ensure accurate voter lists, undermining a system with a demonstrated record of combating voter fraud.

The moves, encouraged by former President Donald Trump, are the latest indication of how conspiracy theories related to the 2020 presidential outcome continue to ripple throughout the Republican Party and upend long-established traditions in how the country administers elections.

Chief election officials in Florida, Missouri and West Virginia notified the Electronic Registration Information Center, more commonly known as ERIC, that they would depart the voluntary program, which has long been comprised of both Republican-led and Democratic-led states. They join Louisiana, which left last year, and Alabama, which previously announced plans to withdraw this year.

Ohio Secretary of State Frank LaRose, in a letter to member states Monday, also threatened to withdraw. That came just weeks after the Republican defended the system, telling reporters it was "one of the best fraud-fighting tools that we have."

Florida and its 14.4 million registered voters pose a considerable loss for the data-sharing group, which relies heavily on member states to produce reports on voters who may have died or those who have moved to another state. Its reports also help states identify and ultimately prosecute people who vote in multiple states.

The system has been credited in Maryland with identifying some 66,000 potentially deceased voters and 778,000 people who may have moved out of state since 2013. In Georgia, officials said nearly 100,000 voters no longer eligible to vote in the state had been removed based on data provided by ERIC.

Yet the effort to improve election integrity and thwart voter fraud — which Republican lawmakers and local officials commonly cite as priorities — has become a target of suspicion after a series of online posts early last year questioning its funding and purpose. One conspiracy involves billionaire philanthropist George Soros, who has long been a target of conspiracy theories, and claims that he funded the voter data-sharing system.

While the system received initial funding from the nonpartisan Pew Charitable Trusts, that money was separate from funding provided to Pew by a Soros-affiliated organization that went to an unrelated effort, said ERIC's executive director, Shane Hamlin. The effort has since been funded through annual dues by member states.

On Monday, Hamlin said in a statement that ERIC will "continue our work on behalf of our remaining member states in improving the accuracy of America's voter rolls and increasing access to voter registration for all eligible citizens."

Missouri Secretary of State Jay Ashcroft said in an interview that he decided to leave after concluding that changes he had been advocating for would not be made and that it was unlikely more states sur-

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rounding his would join the effort. Among the changes he sought was dropping a requirement for member states to send mailings to eligible but unregistered voters and removing what he described as partisan influences from the program.

"I'm not against working with other states, but it has to be done in a way that is well done and that the people in the state can trust in it," Ashcroft said in an interview with The Associated Press. "I can't imagine ERIC will get to that point."

Florida Secretary of State Cord Byrd, who was appointed by Republican Gov. Ron DeSantis, said state officials had "lost confidence in ERIC." West Virginia Secretary of State Mac Warner expressed similar frustrations, adding he did not expect the departure from the program to affect his state's ability to maintain accurate voter rolls.

Trump also weighed in Monday on his social media platform, calling on all Republican-led states to "immediately pull out of ERIC, the terrible Voter Registration System that 'pumps the rolls' for Democrats and does nothing to clean them up."

With no national voter registration clearinghouse, ERIC is the only data-sharing program among states. It was started in 2012 by seven states and was bipartisan from the beginning, with four of the founding states led by Republicans. After the states officially depart, participation will drop to 28 states and the District of Columbia.

The departures have frustrated state election officials involved in the effort and have demonstrated how deeply election conspiracies have spread throughout the Republican Party.

"Election officials who pull out of ERIC are primarily harming their own state's ability to keep their voter list accurate," Michigan Secretary of State Jocelyn Benson said in a statement Monday to the AP. "It's odd and disturbing to me that any official would choose validating misinformation over being part of a collaborative that has the sole and well-established purpose of improving the integrity of our elections."

Brad Ashwell, Florida director of the advocacy group All Voting is Local, said the governor was "caving to the interests of conspiracy theorists" with the decision to leave ERIC.

"This is supposed to be the party of election integrity, and this is the best tool that they have to do that," Ashwell said.

Not all Republican-led states had been reevaluating their participation in the program. In a recent survey by the AP, election offices in 23 states and the District of Columbia said they had no intention of leaving, including eight led or controlled by Republicans. At the time, that included Ohio.

In response to the survey, Iowa Secretary of State Paul Pate, a Republican, called ERIC an "effective tool for ensuring the integrity" of his state's voter rolls. Gabriel Sterling, a top official in the Georgia secretary of state's office, said he recently appealed to representatives from three other Republican-led states to join the system.

Meanwhile, lawmakers in Texas have introduced legislation that, if passed and signed into law, would require the state to leave the system. In Oklahoma, proposed legislation would prohibit the state from joining.

In California, Kansas and New Hampshire, lawmakers have introduced bills that would enable their states to join it, according to the Voting Rights Lab, which tracks voting legislation in the states. New York is another high-population state that is not currently a member.

Republicans issue subpoenas to former school board officials

By FARNOUSH AMIRI Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — House Republicans issued another series of subpoenas Monday as part of an ongoing investigation into what they contend is the mistreatment of parents who protested "woke" school board policies.

Rep. Jim Jordan, chairman of the House Judiciary Committee, demanded documents and testimony from three individuals, including the former heads of the National School Boards Association, for "requesting federal law enforcement assistance to target parents voicing concerns at local school board meetings."

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The Ohio Republican is flexing his newly appointed subpoena power to probe a September 2021 letter that the nonprofit representing U.S. school boards sent to the Biden administration. The letter warned of rising threats against school board members over coronavirus restrictions and teaching around race.

The letter to the Justice Department, signed by Chip Slaven, then the interim executive director of the NSBA, and Viola Garcia, then the president of the NSBA, outlined more than 20 instances of threats, harassment, disruption and acts of intimidation in California, Florida, Georgia, New Jersey, Ohio and other states.

Jordan, who also chairs a new subcommittee dedicated to what Republicans assert is the "weaponization" of government, has said that as a result of the letter, the Justice Department designated "a specific threat tag" for school board-related threats and opened investigations "into parents simply for speaking out on behalf of their children." Those allegations are outlined in a GOP report released in November.

The NSBA has repeatedly stated that the letter's focus was on the issue of violence and threats, not protests from parents.

Last month, Jordan issued his first subpoenas as chairman to Attorney General Merrick Garland, FBI Director Christopher Wray and Education Secretary Miguel Cardona, accusing them of withholding information about whether the government overreached in scrutinizing parents.

The Justice Department has denied targeting parents and has already begun to turn over documents to the committee. The subpoenas come days after House Speaker Kevin McCarthy helped introduce legislation that would give parents more of a say in school curriculum.

It is all part of the Republican Party's larger effort to turn the issue of "parents' rights" into a rallying cry, harnessing the frustration with schools that reached a boiling point during the pandemic when educators grappled with masking requirements, closures and remote learning for children.

Also subpoenaed Monday was Nina Jankowicz, the former director of the Department of Homeland Security's now-defunct Disinformation Governance Board. Jankowicz stepped down from the role in May after being caught in a political firestorm over the creation of the board, which was meant to coordinate the U.S. government's efforts to treat disinformation as a national security threat.

But the board, which disbanded shortly after she stepped down, was hampered from the start by questions about its purpose, funding and work that Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas struggled to answer even as he appeared in front of lawmakers last spring.

In the subpoena letter, Jordan said the committee is seeking testimony from Jankowicz regarding how the board planned to approach countering misinformation and "how it proposed to protect First Amendment rights."

In response, Jankowicz said that she will "happily testify" about her time on the board but criticized the subpoena, saying Jordan's "abuse of congressional oversight powers is about to get wildly out of control."

"His 'weaponization' committee is the entity that is actually weaponizing our government, and the American people deserve better," Jankowicz said in a statement to The Associated Press. "I am ready to continue to stand up for the truth, as I have done my entire career, and I will not be cowed by conspiracy theories or intimidation."

Fox libel defense at odds with top GOP presidential foes

By DAVID BAUDER AP Media Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Fox News is on an unlikely collision course with two leading contenders for the Republican presidential nomination over the rights of journalists.

In defending itself against a massive defamation lawsuit over how it covered false claims surrounding the 2020 presidential election, the network is relying on a nearly 60-year-old Supreme Court ruling that makes it difficult to successfully sue media organizations for libel.

Former President Donald Trump and Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis, two favorites of many Fox News viewers, have advocated for the court to revisit the standard, which is considered the foundational case in American defamation law.

"It is ironic that Fox is relying on a landmark case that was designed to help the news media play the

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watchdog role in a democracy and is under attack by Gov. DeSantis, Donald Trump and other figures who have been untethered in their attacks on journalists as enemies of the people," said Jane Hall, a communication professor at American University.

Eye-catching evidence has emerged from court filings in recent weeks revealing a split screen between what Fox was portraying to its viewers about the false claims of election fraud and what hosts and executives were saying about them behind the scenes. "Sydney Powell is lying," Fox News host Tucker Carlson said in a text to a producer, referencing one of the attorneys pushing the claims for Trump.

In an email a few weeks after the 2020 election, Fox Corp. Chairman Rupert Murdoch described a news conference featuring Powell and former New York City Mayor Rudy Giuliani, another attorney who pushed the election lies: "Really crazy stuff. And damaging."

Aside from the revelations about Fox's inner workings, the outcome could have broad implications for media organizations because of how they and the courts have come to rely on the libel law Fox is using as a shield.

In its \$1.6 billion lawsuit, voting machine maker Dominion Voting Systems argues that Fox repeatedly aired allegations that the company helped rig the general election against Trump despite many at the news organization privately believing the claims were false.

Fox says the law allows it to air such claims if they are newsworthy.

In a 1964 decision in a case involving The New York Times, the U.S. Supreme Court greatly limited the ability of public officials to sue for defamation. It ruled that news outlets are protected against a libel judgment unless it can be proven that they published with "actual malice" — knowing that something was false or acting with a "reckless disregard" to whether it was true or not.

In one example of how the law was applied, editors at the Times acknowledged last year that an editorial mistakenly linked former Republican vice presidential nominee Sarah Palin's rhetoric to an Arizona mass shooting. Palin lost her libel suit because she couldn't prove the newspaper erred without concern for the truth.

Some advocates for free speech worry that the Dominion-Fox lawsuit ultimately could give a conservative Supreme Court a chance to revisit the standard set in the case, known as *New York Times Co. v. Sullivan*. While the case has been among the court's most durable precedents, the newly empowered conservative majority has indicated a willingness to challenge what had been considered settled law — as it did last year in overturning abortion rights.

Two Supreme Court justices, Clarence Thomas and Neil Gorsuch, have publicly expressed interest in giving the precedent another look.

In dissenting from a 2021 decision not to take up a libel case, Gorsuch wrote that what began in 1964 as a decision to tolerate occasional errors to allow robust reporting "has evolved into an ironclad subsidy for the publication of falsehoods by any means and on a scale previously unimaginable." He said the modern media landscape is much different today, and suggested it was less careful.

"My wish is that the parties would settle and this case would go away," said Jane Kirtley, director of the Silha Center for the Study of Media Ethics and the Law at the University of Minnesota. "I don't see any good coming out of it."

A perceived strength in Dominion's case also worries some supporters of the press.

Dominion says Fox was, in effect, torn between the truth that Joe Biden legitimately won the race and pleasing viewers who wanted to believe Trump's lies. In depositions released last week, Murdoch argued that Fox as a network did not endorse the claims, but that some of its commentators — Maria Bartiromo, Lou Dobbs, Jeanine Pirro and Sean Hannity — at times did.

Murdoch was among several at Fox to say privately they didn't believe the claims made by Trump and his allies that widespread fraud cost him reelection. In his deposition, Murdoch said he could have prevented guests who were spouting conspiracies from going on the air, but didn't.

"One of the defenses is that even false speech about public figures is protected so long as it is believed by the speaker," First Amendment attorney Floyd Abrams said. "But no one at Fox appears ready to say

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that he or she did believe the assertions ... and there now appears to be substantial evidence that no one there at Fox did so. It's a major blow."

Fox's entire prime-time lineup privately disparaged Trump lawyer Sidney Powell, according to court papers. Laura Ingraham, in a text to Carlson, called her a "nut." In a deposition, Hannity said he did not believe her theories "for one second." Nevertheless, Powell was interviewed on Fox 11 times between Nov. 8 and Dec. 10, 2020, according to court papers.

Dominion's lawyers say Fox is arguing that it has no legal responsibility for broadcasting even the most horrible allegations, knowing they are false, as long as they are deemed newsworthy.

Fox said Dominion is presenting an extreme view of defamation, one in which the network had a duty not to report the allegations but to suppress them or denounce them as false.

"Under Dominion's approach, if the president falsely accused the vice president of plotting to assassinate him, the press would be liable for reporting the newsworthy allegations so long as someone in the newsroom thought it was ludicrous," Fox lawyers said in court papers.

"Such a rule would stop the media in its tracks," Fox said.

There's a high bar for proving libel — and that's deliberate, First Amendment attorney Lee Levine said. Dominion has to show that a reasonable audience could conclude that someone at Fox was making these allegations, not just the interview subjects, he said.

Still, Levine said, Dominion has the strongest defamation case he's seen in 40 years of being involved in the topic.

George Freeman, executive director of the Media Law Resource Center, said Fox should cite a lesser-known "neutral reportage" standard that dates back to a court case from the 1970s. It holds that news organizations should not be discouraged from reporting something newsworthy even if there are serious doubts about the truth, as long as that information comes from responsible and prominent sources.

But the U.S. Supreme Court has not weighed in on that argument, and a number of lower courts have rejected it. It's also not clear that the defense would be legally applicable in the Dominion case against Fox.

There is sentiment in Republican circles that the Sullivan standard goes too far in protecting news organizations.

DeSantis last month urged the Supreme Court to revisit libel laws, saying they are used to smear politicians and discourage people from running for office. A bill being considered in the Florida Legislature would significantly weaken standards in the state. Trump said last year that the court should consider his own defamation lawsuit against CNN a "perfect vehicle" for revisiting precedents.

Some media law advocates that the University of Minnesota's Kirtley has talked to privately, people who are usually eager to support the press in libel cases, are queasy about publicly backing Fox in the voting machine lawsuit.

Many see the case as a surrogate to hold Fox and Trump supporters accountable for what happened after the 2020 election, she said.

"I don't think a libel suit is the vehicle to deal with this, and you have to think about what damage could be done to libel law if Dominion wins," she said.

Norfolk Southern announces safety upgrades amid derailments

By RON TODT Associated Press

Norfolk Southern announced plans on Monday to improve the use of detectors placed along railroad tracks to spot overheating bearings and other problems in response to a fiery derailment on the Ohio-Pennsylvania border a month ago.

The announcement came the same day Pennsylvania's governor announced that the company had agreed to pay several million dollars to cover the cost of the response and recovery in that state.

The company said it would evaluate the distance between "hot bearing" detectors — currently 13.9 miles (22 kilometers) on average on its core network — and promised to look at every location where the distance is more than 15 miles (24 kilometers), deploying more detectors if practical.

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Norfolk Southern "anticipates adding approximately 200 hot bearing detectors to its network, with the first installed on the western approach to East Palestine," said the company announcement, which comes amid proposals from President Joe Biden's administration and Congress aimed at improving safety following last month's derailment.

The National Transportation Safety Board has said the crew operating the train that derailed Feb. 3 outside East Palestine, Ohio, near the Pennsylvania border got a warning from such a detector but couldn't stop the train before more than three dozen cars came off the tracks and caught fire.

Half of the town of about 5,000 people had to evacuate for days when responders intentionally burned toxic chemicals in some of the derailed cars to prevent an uncontrolled explosion, leaving residents with lingering health concerns. Government officials say tests haven't found dangerous levels of chemicals in the air or water in the area.

A week ago, a safety advisory from the Federal Railroad Administration urged railroads to reexamine the use of such detectors, making sure that they get inspected often enough by trained employees and that there are safe standards for determining when to stop a train or park a railcar when a warning is triggered. The railroad administration said overheating bearings likely caused at least four other derailments since 2021 and called for ways to analyze temperature trends from the sensors to help identify potential problems sooner.

Norfolk Southern also said it would work with manufacturers to speed up tests and deployment of new "multi-scan" detectors able to scan a greater cross-section of a railcar's bearings and wheels. It also vowed to work with other railroads to review standards and practices, reevaluating the temperature triggering an alarm and the response to such alarms as well as analyzing data for patterns that could warn of safety issues.

Also announced in Norfolk Southern's six-point safety plan Monday was installation of more acoustic bearing detectors, which analyze the acoustic signature of vibration inside the axle to identify potential problems. Norfolk Southern said it has five such detectors in service and will add 13 more on high-traffic routes.

The company also said it is working with Georgia Tech Research Institute to develop more advanced safety inspection technology and will join the railroad administration's "confidential close call reporting system," also citing its own program that "encourages railroaders to speak up if they see something that is unsafe."

Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg has proposed a number of safety improvements, including reviving a rule requiring upgraded, electronically controlled brakes on certain trains filled with flammable liquids that are designated "high-hazardous flammable trains," and possibly expanding which trains are covered by that designation. The industry has been pushing to delay any major changes until after the transportation safety board completes its investigation a year or more from now.

Ohio's two U.S. senators last week introduced legislation that would require railroads to create disaster plans and tell emergency response commissions what hazardous materials are going through their states. Other provisions would maintain a two-person crew size and require regulators to set limits on train size and weight.

U.S. Sen. Bob Casey, who joined the legislation, said Monday that preventing future derailments would require measures "far beyond the steps Norfolk Southern outlined today" and called on the company and other rail firms to "get on board" the Senate proposal.

Professor Allan Zarembski, who leads the University of Delaware's rail engineering and safety program, earlier said that overheating bearings cause only a handful of the more than 1,000 derailments each year, and he doubted the value of any "knee-jerk reaction" amid great political pressure. On Monday, he called Norfolk Southern's plan on hot bearings "a good incremental step forward" to get rid of a problem he reiterated was "very infrequent."

On Saturday afternoon, 28 cars of a Norfolk Southern cargo train derailed in Ohio between Dayton and Columbus and prompted a temporary shelter-in-place order, but officials said the derailment did not

involve any hazardous materials, although the 212-car train also had cars containing liquid propane and ethanol that didn't derail.

In Pennsylvania, Gov. Josh Shapiro said Monday that Norfolk Southern has pledged several million dollars to cover the cost of the response and recovery in Pennsylvania after last month's derailment. The company previously announced more than \$1 million for Ohio to replace fire equipment used in the response to the fiery wreck, plus \$1 million for East Palestine and more than \$1.2 million for evacuation costs for nearly 900 families and businesses.

The company has said it is "committed to coordinating the cleanup project and paying for its associated costs," and wants to ensure that East Palestine's residents and natural environment recover.

Murdaugh testimony only confirmed his guilt, jurors say

By REBECCA REYNOLDS and JEFFREY COLLINS Associated Press

Alex Murdaugh didn't help his defense when he took the stand at his trial for the murder of his wife and son, three jurors said on Monday.

Murdaugh's testimony only managed to cement what they were already thinking — that he easily lied and could turn on and off his tears at will, the jurors said on the NBC Today show.

The key piece of evidence in finding the lawyer guilty, they said, was a video on his son's cellphone that was shot minutes before the killings at the same kennels near where the bodies were found at their sprawling estate in rural South Carolina.

Murdaugh's voice can be heard on the video even though he insisted for 20 months that he hadn't been at the kennels that night. Investigators didn't see the video for more than a year before advances in hacking enabled them to unlock Paul Murdaugh's iPhone. They shared it with the defense ahead of the trial.

When he took the stand, the first thing Murdaugh did was admit he had lied to investigators about being at the kennels, saying he was paranoid of law enforcement because he was addicted to opioids and had pills in his pocket the night of the killings.

"The kennel video, that just kind of sealed the deal," juror Gwen Generette said.

The jury deliberated for less than three hours Thursday before finding Murdaugh guilty of killing his 22-year-old son, Paul, with two shotgun blasts and his 52-year-old wife, Maggie, with four or five rifle shots.

The now-disbarred lawyer maintained his innocence when he was sentenced Friday to spend the rest of his life in prison for the murders.

Murdaugh was convicted in the same court circuit where his father, grandfather and great-grandfather tried cases as the elected prosecutor for more than 80 years. Murdaugh's family founded the area's most powerful law firm a century ago. For decades, that meant that practically anyone who ended up in court on either side of the law in Colleton or Hampton counties would have a Murdaugh watching their back or staring them down.

His background was part of the reason jurors didn't find his testimony believable.

"We already know that he's a lawyer. He's able to be emotional with cases. He's able to be emotional with himself. He knows ... when to turn it on and off. So I think that we were able to read right through that," juror James McDowell said.

Prosecutors decided not to seek the death penalty, and the judge handed down the harshest possible sentence he could — consecutive life sentences without parole.

Murdaugh admitted stealing millions of dollars from the family firm and clients, saying he needed the money to fund his drug habit. Before he was charged with murder, Murdaugh was in jail awaiting trial on about 100 other charges, ranging from insurance fraud to tax evasion.

Defense attorneys said they will base an appeal largely on the judge's decision to allow jurors to hear evidence of crimes Murdaugh has not been convicted of, which they say smeared his reputation.

After six intense weeks at the courthouse in Walterboro, key players returned to their normal lives.

Prosecutor Creighton Waters, whose love of the guitar was a favorite bit of chatter among true crime fans, tweeted a video of himself jamming. Judge Clifton Newman was seen in a courtside seat rooting for

South Carolina to win the Southeastern Conference title in women's basketball.

And defense lawyer Jim Griffin, admonished during the trial for tweeting an opinion piece criticizing the investigation, returned to Twitter with a post that said "Walterboro, you were a gracious host. Happy Trails." He included a photo of his head stuck through the hole of a painting of a cowboy riding a chicken, with "I was at the Murdaugh trial" written at the top.

Florida blogger registration bill 'insane,' Gingrich tweets

By ANTHONY IZAGUIRRE Associated Press

TALLAHASSEE, Fla. (AP) — A Republican lawmaker in Florida wants bloggers who write about elected officials to register with the state, a proposal that's raised First Amendment concerns and the ire of GOP firebrand Newt Gingrich.

The bill, filed by Sen. Jason Brodeur of Lake Mary, would require bloggers to file periodic reports with the state if they are paid for posts about the state's governor, lieutenant governor, cabinet members or legislative officials.

Bloggers would have to disclose who paid them and how much, along with other information such as where the post is located online. They would be fined \$25 per each day the report is late, up to a maximum of \$2,500 for each report. The legislation would not apply to content on "the website of a newspaper or other similar publication."

The proposal quickly came into the crosshairs of Gingrich, a prominent Republican and former U.S. House Speaker, who called it "insane."

"The idea that bloggers criticizing a politician should register with the government is insane," Gingrich wrote on Twitter Sunday. "It is an embarrassment that it is a Republican state legislator in Florida who introduced a bill to that effect. He should withdraw it immediately."

First Amendment groups argue the proposal violates press freedoms.

"The only thing that I can see is that it's an attempt to limit and control free speech," said Bobby Block, executive director of the First Amendment Foundation. "It's an attempt to bring critics to heel and it's an attempt to make sure that people who want to talk about you think real hard before they do so."

It is unclear how far the proposal will go in the GOP-controlled statehouse during the upcoming legislative session, which begins Tuesday. The Associated Press reached out to Brodeur as well as Republican leaders of the House and Senate for comment.

In a Twitter post, Brodeur said the bill is aimed at bringing transparency to blogs that advocate or lobby for specific causes. The text of his bill states that it would apply to any blogger who is paid to write about elected officials in Florida.

"Do you want to know the truth about the so-called "blogger" bill?" Brodeur's post reads. "It brings the current pay-to-play scheme to light and gives voters clarity as to who is influencing their elected officials, JUST LIKE how we treat lobbyists. It's an electioneering issue, not a free speech issue."

Brodeur is also sponsoring a separate bill that would make it easier to sue media for defamation, a proposal pushed by Gov. Ron DeSantis, a Republican.

DeSantis has made criticizing the media a major facet of his national profile as he gears up for an expected 2024 presidential run, employing a tactic popular with Republicans who view news outlets as biased against conservatives.

A spokesman for the governor said their office was not aware of the blogger registration legislation until it was filed. He said the governor will consider the bill in its final form if and when it passes the legislature.

The American Civil Liberties Union of Florida has slammed the proposal as "un-American to its core."

"This is a clear violation of the First Amendment because it strongly discourages bloggers from speaking on politics — one of the most critical types of speech for maintaining a democracy," the group said in a statement.

Zelenskyy vows not to retreat from Ukrainian city of Bakhmut

By MSTYSLAV CHERNOV Associated Press

CHASIV YAR, Ukraine (AP) — Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy vowed Monday not to retreat from Bakhmut as Russian forces encroached on the devastated eastern city they have sought to capture for six months at the cost of thousands of lives.

Less than a week ago, an adviser to Zelenskyy said the defenders might give up on Bakhmut and fall back to nearby positions.

But Zelenskyy on Monday chaired a meeting in which top military brass “spoke in favor of continuing the defense operation and further strengthening our positions in Bakhmut.” Later in his nightly video address, the president reported that his advisers unanimously agreed to press on with the fight, “not to retreat” and to bolster Ukrainian defenses.

His top adviser, Mykhailo Podolyak, told The Associated Press that Ukrainian forces around Bakhmut have been grinding down enemy forces, reinforcing their positions and training tens of thousands of Ukrainian military personnel for a possible counteroffensive.

Intense Russian shelling targeted the city in the Donetsk region and nearby villages as Moscow waged a three-sided assault to try to finish off Bakhmut’s resistance.

The nearby towns of Chasiv Yar and Kostiantynivka came under heavy shelling, damaging cars and homes and sparking a fire. No casualties were immediately reported.

Police and volunteers evacuated people from Chasiv Yar and other front-line towns in an operation made difficult by the loss of bridges and constant artillery fire that has left barely a house standing.

Russian forces have been unable to deliver a knockout blow that would allow them to seize Bakhmut. Analysts say the city does not hold major strategic value and that its capture would be unlikely to serve as a turning point in the conflict.

The Russian push for Bakhmut reflects the Kremlin’s broader struggle to achieve battlefield momentum. Moscow’s full-scale invasion on Feb. 24, 2022, soon stalled, and Ukraine launched a largely successful counteroffensive. Over the bitterly cold winter months, the fighting has largely been deadlocked.

The city’s importance has become mostly symbolic. For Russian President Vladimir Putin, prevailing there would finally deliver some good news from the front. For Kyiv, the display of grit and defiance underscores the message that Ukraine is holding on after a year of brutal attacks, justifying continued support from its Western allies.

U.S. Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin endorsed that view Monday, saying during a visit to Jordan that Bakhmut has “more of a symbolic value than ... strategic and operational value.”

Moscow, he added, continues “to pour in a lot of ill-trained and ill-equipped troops” into Bakhmut, while Ukraine patiently builds “combat power” elsewhere with Western military support ahead of a possible spring offensive.

Even so, some analysts question the wisdom of ordering Ukrainian defenders to hold out much longer. Others suggest that a tactical withdrawal may already be underway.

Michael Kofman, the director of Russia studies at the CAN think tank in Arlington, Virginia, said Ukraine’s defense of Bakhmut has been effective because it has drained the Russian war effort, but that Kyiv should now look ahead.

“The tenacious defense of Bakhmut achieved a great deal, expending Russian manpower and ammunition,” Kofman tweeted late Sunday. “But strategies can reach points of diminishing returns, and given Ukraine is trying to husband resources for an offensive, it could impede the success of a more important operation.”

The Institute for the Study of War, a Washington-based think tank, said Kyiv’s smartest option now may be to withdraw to positions that are easier to defend.

“Ukrainian forces are unlikely to withdraw from Bakhmut all at once and may pursue a gradual fighting withdrawal to exhaust Russian forces through continued urban warfare,” the ISW said in an assessment published late Sunday.

The Bakhmut battle has exposed Russian military shortcomings and bitter divisions.

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Yevgeny Prigozhin, the millionaire owner of the Wagner Group military company that has spearheaded the Bakhmut offensive, has been at loggerheads with the Russian Defense Ministry and repeatedly accused it of failing to provide his forces with ammunition.

On Monday, Prigozhin warned in a Russian social media post that the situation in Bakhmut “will turn out to be a ‘pie’: The filling is the parts of the Armed Forces of Ukraine surrounded by us (in the case, of course, if there is a complete encirclement of Bakhmut), and the shell is, in fact, the Wagner” Group.

Bakhmut has taken on almost mythic importance. It has become like Mariupol — the port city in the same province that Russia captured last year after an 82-day siege that eventually came down to a mammoth steel mill where determined Ukrainian fighters held out along with civilians.

Moscow looked to cement its rule in Mariupol. Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu toured some of the city’s rebuilt infrastructure — a newly built hospital, a rescue center and residential buildings — the Defense Ministry said.

In other developments Monday:

— Russian forces attacked central and eastern regions of Ukraine with Iranian-made Shahed drones, said a spokesman for Ukraine’s Air Forces, Yuriy Ihnat. Of 15 drones Russia launched, 13 were shot down, Ihnat said. It wasn’t immediately clear if the attack caused damage.

— Russian defenders shot down three missiles over Russia’s Belgorod region on the border with Ukraine, its governor, Vyacheslav Gladkov, said on Telegram. Debris injured one person and damaged power lines and façades of residential buildings, according to the official. Gladkov did not specify whether the missiles were fired from Ukraine.

— Ukraine’s chief prosecutor announced a criminal investigation into what appeared to be Russian troops’ execution of an unarmed Ukrainian prisoner of war. A video circulating on social media showed a uniformed Ukrainian soldier standing and smoking. The soldier recites Ukraine’s battle cry, “Glory to Ukraine!” then a volley of gunshots hits him, and he falls into a shallow hole dug into the ground. The AP could not verify the video’s authenticity.

Outrage over the video quickly sparked a flurry of social media posts, including by Zelenskyy, of “Glory to Ukraine!” In his nightly video address, Zelenskyy said: “I want us all together, in unity, to respond to his words: “Glory to the hero! Glory to heroes! Glory to Ukraine!” And we will find the killers.”

— Russia’s Federal Security Service, or FSB, reported thwarting an attempt to assassinate nationalist businessman Konstantin Malofeyev that was allegedly plotted by Ukrainian security services and the Russian Volunteer Corps that claims to be part of Ukraine’s armed forces. According to the FSB, the Russian Volunteer Corps leader Denis Kapustin was the mastermind behind the plan, which was to put a bomb under Malofeyev’s car.

Malofeyev is a media baron and owner of the ultra-conservative Tsargrad TV who has supported Russia-backed separatists in Ukraine and has trumpeted Moscow’s invasion as a “holy war.” He has been sanctioned by the U.S. and last year was charged with trying to evade sanctions.

The Russian Volunteer Corps last week claimed responsibility for an attack on Russian villages on the border with Ukraine. The FSB said Monday that Kapustin organized and spearheaded the raid, which killed two civilians and wounded two others. The FSB’s allegations could not be independently verified. Ukrainian officials have not commented.

Cartoonists criticize ‘Dilbert’ creator over racist remarks

By MARK KENNEDY AP Entertainment Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Cartoonists are pushing back against racist remarks made by “Dilbert” creator Scott Adams, with one artist even using his own strip this week to lampoon the disgraced cartoon now dropped by newspapers nationwide.

Darrin Bell is transforming his strip “Candorville” — which usually features young Black and Latino characters — into a way to address Adams’ racism by mimicking the look and style of “Dilbert,” complete with wayward necktie.

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"The only reason anyone knows who Scott Adams is because of the comics page. So I thought somebody on the comics page should respond to him on the comics page," Bell, the 2019 winner of the Pulitzer Prize for illustrated reporting and commentary, told The Associated Press.

In the strips running Monday to Saturday, Bell paired Dilbert with one of his own characters, Lemont Brown. In one, Dilbert hopes Lemont will side with him in his quest to get a laundry room installed at work.

"You could wash your hoodie," says Dilbert. Responds Lemont: "And you could wash your hood?"

Adams, who is white, was an outspoken — and controversial — presence on social media long before describing Black people as a "hate group" on YouTube last month. Adams repeatedly referred to people who are Black as members of a "hate group" and said he would no longer "help Black Americans." He later said he was being hyperbolic, yet continued to defend his stance.

"When somebody goes too far like Scott Adams did, everyone who knows better should stand up and use their First Amendment to draw a line — to say that this is unacceptable," said Bell, whose new graphic novel "The Talk" explores growing up as a biracial man in white culture.

Other cartoonists have stepped forward to denounce Adams, like Bill Holbrook, the creator of "On the Fastrack," a strip that features an interracial family and — like "Dilbert" — focuses on a modern workplace.

"One of the things I wanted to spotlight with my characters is that people do rise above their differences. It can work," Holbrook said. "That's the spotlight I wanted to focus on and still do. It's all a matter of where you want to put your focus."

Holbrook said the Adams case is not one of so-called cancel culture but of consequences.

"I am in full support with him saying anything he wants to, but then he has to own the consequences of saying them," he said. "He's not being canceled. He's experiencing the consequences of expressing his views."

Individual newspapers have dropped "Dilbert" and Adams' distributor, Andrews McMeel Universal, said it was severing ties with the cartoonist. While some outlets replaced "Dilbert" with another strip, The Sun Chronicle in Attleboro, Massachusetts, decided to keep the space blank through March "as a reminder of the racism that pervades our society."

The "Dilbert" controversy has rocked a community of daily cartoonists who often create work in their homes several months ahead of publication. While reliably pro-free speech, they say they're also orientated toward a better future — or at least a chuckle.

"We believe comics are a powerful medium and that cartoonists should perpetuate laughter, not racism and hate," said Tea Fougner, editor in chief of King Features Syndicate — which distributes such strips as "Candorville," "Zits," "Mutts" and "Dennis the Menace" — in a statement to the AP.

"We are proud of our cartoonists who are using their platforms to denounce the hatred spread by Scott Adams and encourage others to join us as we stand together as a community to keep the world of cartooning a safe and welcoming space for everyone," the statement said.

Bell credited King Features Syndicate and his editors for allowing him to rip up the strips intended for this week and pivot to the "Dilbert" send-ups, an unusual request.

"They apparently thought it was important enough to take a risk and to make sure that it goes out on time," Bell said.

Many comic creators said they'd stopped reading "Dilbert" over the past several years, finding the strip's tone darker and its creator's descent into misogyny, anti-immigration and racism alarming. But Adams still had hundreds of newspaper perches before last week.

"We can't move forward and progress as a culture and as a society if there are still people in these gatekeeping roles that are holding onto these archaic ideas," said artist Bianca Xunise, who co-authors the strip "Six Chix" and is the second Black woman in comics history to be nationally syndicated.

Xunise noted the fallout was much quicker when she drew a strip that commented on both the Black Lives Matter movement and the coronavirus pandemic. More than 120 publications immediately dropped the strip.

She said being Black in the cartooning world seems to always trigger pushback from hateful readers and those fearful of "woke" messages, but is heartened that "Heart of the City" — now authored by the

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Black cartoonist Steenz — replaced “Dilbert” in The Washington Post.

“We don’t want to push so far that it becomes a different form of fascism over censoring everybody’s ideas just out of fear of being offensive,” Xunise said. “But some things do not need to be said, and especially if they are a directly punching down towards those who are marginalized.”

“Macanudo” creator Ricardo Liniers Siri, known professionally as Liniers, said Adams was moving into unfunny territory and that’s a cartoonist’s third rail.

“Grievance generally is not fun. The funniest guy at a party is not the one just complaining about everything. That’s the annoying guy,” he said.

“I don’t do grievance. I’m just trying to focus on whatever is good that we have around,” he added. “Because in the context of a newspaper with so much bad news, I try to have an optimistic space.”

The way we eat could add nearly 1 degree of warming by 2100

BY DREW COSTLEY AP Science Writer

Greenhouse gas emissions from the way humans produce and consume food could add nearly 1 degree of warming to the Earth’s climate by 2100, according to a new study.

Continuing the dietary patterns of today will push the planet past the 1.5 degrees Celsius (2.7 degrees Fahrenheit) limit of warming sought under the Paris climate agreement to avoid the worst effects of climate change, according to the study published Monday in Nature Climate Change, and will approach the agreement’s limit of 2 degrees Celsius (3.6 degrees Fahrenheit).

The modeling study found that the majority of greenhouse gas emissions come from three major sources: meat from animals like cows, sheep and goats; dairy; and rice. Those three sources account for at least 19% each of food’s contribution to a warming planet, according to the study, with meat contributing the most, at 33%.

All emit large amounts of methane, a potent greenhouse gas with more than 80 times the warming power of carbon dioxide, in the way they are currently farmed. The researchers calculated that methane will account for 75% of food’s share of warming by 2030, with carbon dioxide and nitrous oxide accounting for most of the rest.

“I think the biggest takeaway that I would want (policymakers) to have is the fact that methane emissions are really dominating the future warming associated with the food sector,” said Catherine C. Ivanovich, a climate scientist at Columbia University and the study’s lead author.

Ivanovich and colleagues from the University of Florida and Environmental Defense Fund calculated the three major gases produced by each type of food over its lifetime based on current consumption patterns. Then they scaled the annual emissions over time by gas based on five different population projections.

And then they used a climate model frequently used by the United Nations’ panel on climate change to model the effects of those emissions on surface air temperature change.

Stanford University climate scientist Chris Field, who wasn’t involved in the study, said it used well-established methods and datasets “to produce a novel, sobering conclusion.”

“The study highlights that food is absolutely critical to hitting our Paris Agreement climate targets — failure to consider food is failure to meet our climate targets globally,” said Meredith Niles, a food systems scientist at the University of Vermont who was not involved in the study.

The study offered some ways to change global food production and consumption that could limit warming.

Many of these changes are already being called for or adopted. U.S. President Joe Biden touted the climate benefits of planting cover crops that can draw down carbon from the atmosphere in an April 2021 address to Congress. Multiple recent studies and reports have recommended eating less meat in order to reduce greenhouse gas creation by animals raised for consumption. And California started a mandatory food waste recycling program in 2021 to reduce the emissions created by decaying food.

But reducing methane may be the most important goal of all. Although methane is far more potent than carbon, it also is much shorter-lived — meaning cuts in methane emissions can have a quick benefit, Ivanovich said.

“So that’s going to help us stay under the dangerous warming target,” she said, “as well as give us some

time to build up resilience and adaptation to climate change in the meantime.”

A major question that remains is whether food producers and consumers can change their behavior in order to achieve the reductions in greenhouse gases laid out in the study. There’s a roadmap, but will it be followed?

“Changing behavior, especially when we are bombarded with constant media extolling the benefits of everything from Coke to french fries, from pizza to burgers, is pretty damned difficult,” Columbia University plant physiologist Lew Ziska in an email to the AP. “So, overall, while we need to change, whether we can change is problematic.”

Self-taught chefs win coveted stars from Michelin Guide

By ELAINE GANLEY and JEAN-FRANCOIS BADIAS Associated Press

STRASBOURG, France (AP) — If your secret wish is to get a reward, not just family compliments, for your talents in the kitchen, then Georgiana Viou might serve as inspiration.

The self-taught chef from the west African country of Benin, who came to Paris dreaming of becoming an interpreter, was awarded a star on Monday by the Michelin Guide, the bible of gastronomy, for her cuisine at “Rouge,” a restaurant in the southwestern French city of Nimes.

She wasn’t alone. A chef who studied literature, David Degoursy, and pastry chef Jeanne Satori, with a degree in sustainable development, also won a star for their restaurant de:ja in Strasbourg, eastern France, where the annual awards ceremony was held.

Michelin’s 2023 awards for French chefs put the accent on the regions of France, not Paris. The only chef to walk away with three stars — the highest award, reserved for gastronomic luminaries — was Alexandre Couillon for his creations at La Marine, his restaurant on the tip of the Ile de Noirmoutier on the Atlantic Ocean.

Of the 44 new Michelin stars handed out, Viou’s is the only one won by a woman working single-handed. Several other women were honored as part of a team, like Satori, the pastry chef at de:ja.

Viou, 45, has described her cuisine as a mix of French Mediterranean perfumed with notes recalling her home country. She has written several books about Benin’s cooking.

Becoming a chef was a fall-back plan for Viou, who came to France in 1999 to study languages at the Sorbonne, hoping to become an interpreter. Working at a communications agency in the southern port city of Marseille, life’s complications forced her to change directions and, at 33, her second passion, cooking, took over.

In an interview last fall with online publication terrafemina, she said that as a Black African woman who was older than most chefs-in-training in a mostly masculine universe her maturity helped her cope.

But she dislikes being categorized because of her sex or skin color, saying that “it’s completely ridiculous” to be considered “a la mode” for being a Black female chef. She wants to be judged for what’s on the plate she serves.

Viou learned to cook from her mother who had a simple little restaurant in Cotonou, Benin and got a lesson in perseverance from her grandmother. She worked her way up the chef’s ladder step by step in Marseille, eventually getting recognition at restaurants bearing her name. She joined Rouge, in Nimes, at its inception in June 2021.

Last year, Viou was on the jury of the popular TV show MasterChef, years after being a candidate.

Viou’s Michelin star was bestowed for her “singular cuisine ... celebrating her Mediterranean environment and Benin roots.”

“Today is really top,” she said at the awards ceremony, adding that she had been invited and thought, “This is cool. I’ll find myself among lots of chefs, an occasion for encounters,” not for the bestowal of a star.

She was clearly overwhelmed.

At Rouge (Red), “We’re not a team. We’re a family,” she said, her voice trembling and her eyes welling with happy tears. She then shyly took a few dance steps and raised her arms as if in thanks.

Self-taught chefs with Michelin stars are less rare than one might think.

There is Eric Girardin, for instance, at La Maison des Tetes in Colmar, near Strasbourg, who began his working life as an electrical engineer.

The only woman to have won three Michelin stars is Anne-Sophie Pic. The grand-daughter and daughter of chefs, she moved from her native Drome region to Paris to study commerce before returning to her roots. With restaurants in Paris, London and Lausanne, Pic opened another in Singapore in 2019.

Paris: Notre Dame Cathedral set to reopen in December 2024

By JEFFREY SCHAEFFER and SYLVIE CORBET The Associated Press

PARIS (AP) — The reconstruction of Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris is going fast enough to allow its reopening to visitors and faithful at the end of 2024, less than six years after a fire ravaged its roof, French officials said Monday.

The cathedral's iconic spire, which collapsed in the blaze, will gradually start reappearing above the monument this year in a powerful signal of its revival, the army general in charge of the colossal project, Gen. Jean-Louis Georgelin, said.

"The return of the spire in Paris' sky will in my opinion be the symbol that we are winning the battle of Notre Dame," he told the Associated Press.

The reconstruction itself started last year, after more than two years of work to make the monument stable and secure enough for artisans to start rebuilding it.

Authorities have made the choice to rebuild the 12th century monument, a masterpiece of Gothic architecture, the way it was before. That includes recreating the 93-meter-high (315 ft) spire added in the 19th century by architect Eugene Viollet-le-Duc.

Meanwhile, an exhibition called "Notre-Dame de Paris: at the heart of the construction site" is to open to visitors on Tuesday in an underground facility in front of the cathedral. Accessible for free, it highlights ongoing operations on the site and the expertise and skills of workers. It also features some remains from the fire and works of art from the cathedral.

Gen. Georgelin said the cathedral will reopen in December 2024, in line with the goal set by President Emmanuel Macron just after the fire — yet it will be too late for the Paris Olympic Games scheduled in summer next year.

"My job is to be ready to open this cathedral in 2024. And we will do it," Gen. Georgelin said. "We are fighting every day for that and we are on a good path."

This "means that the archbishop of the capital will be in a capacity again to celebrate the Catholic liturgy in his cathedral" and the monument will also "be open for tourists to visit," he said.

Culture Minister Rima Abdul-Malak told the AP that this doesn't mean all the renovation will be finished then. "There will still be some renovation work going on in 2025," she stressed.

Meanwhile, the new exhibition near the cathedral will allow visitors, including those coming for the Olympics, "to live what could be this experience of visiting Notre-Dame in a brand new way," she said. In addition to the free visit, a virtual reality show will allow paying visitors to dive into the history of the cathedral. "That will help also tourism in Paris," she added.

Everyday in the capital and across the country, about 1,000 people work to rebuild Notre Dame, Gen. Georgelin said.

"The biggest challenge is to comply precisely every day to the planning we have done," he stressed. "We have a lot of different works to achieve: the framework, the painting, the stones, the vault, the organ, the stained glass and so on."

Philippe Jost, managing director of the government agency overseeing the reconstruction, noted that the result "will be faithful to the original architecture" both because "we are sticking to the vanished shapes of the cathedral" and because "we are also sticking to the materials and construction methods" of medieval times.

"We don't do concrete vaults that look like stone, we do stone vaults that we rebuild as they were built in the Middle Ages," Jost said, adding that the roof framework will also be made from oak like it initially was.

Toblerone drops iconic design due to rules on 'Swissness'

GENEVA (AP) — The makers of Toblerone are stripping images of Switzerland's famed Matterhorn and the Swiss flag from the packaging of the milk-chocolate treat as they move some production to Slovakia.

Mondelez International of Deerfield, Illinois, which owns the Swiss-born brand, said Monday that it's in the process of adapting the packaging of Toblerone products to conform with strict rules in Switzerland about how products qualify for the coveted "Swissness" moniker — perceived by some as a standard of quality.

"The redesign of the packaging introduces a modernized and streamlined mountain logo that is consistent with the geometric and triangular aesthetic," Mondelez spokeswoman Livia Kolmitz said in an email.

In June, the company announced plans to outsource production of some Toblerone chocolates later this year to Bratislava, the Slovak capital — where wages and the cost of living are far lower than in wealthy, expensive Switzerland.

The packaging change affects 35- and 50-gram (1.2- to 1.8-ounce) bars that will be made in Slovakia: Larger, 100-gram "tablets" will still be produced in Bern, the Swiss capital, the company says.

A law on "Swissness" of products was adopted in 2017 and aims to protect the cachet of Swiss manufacturing. When it comes to foods, two criteria have to be met: At least four-fifths of the raw materials that go into the product have to come from Switzerland, and the processing that gives a product its "essential characteristics" must be carried out in Switzerland.

The chocolate bar, made of honey and almond nougat, is distinctive for its triangular "peak" shape that evokes a mountain range and matching triangular packaging — sold in scores of countries and duty-free shops around the globe.

Toblerone has already been produced in other countries — notably late into the last century. The treat was invented 115 years ago by Swiss confectioner Theodor Tobler, with the brand name a fusion of the family name and the Italian word "torrone" — nougat.

Mondelez has already run into blowback from its changes to Toblerone in the past: A move years ago to widen the gaps between the chocolate peaks — reducing the weight of the bars but keeping the price the same, known as "shrinkflation" — fanned outrage in Britain, where the change mostly took effect.

Norfolk Southern to pay millions for derailment: governor

By MARC LEVY Associated Press

HARRISBURG, Pa. (AP) — Norfolk Southern has pledged several million dollars to cover the cost of the response and recovery in Pennsylvania after last month's derailment of a train carrying toxic chemicals just across the border in Ohio, Gov. Josh Shapiro said Monday.

Shapiro's office said he met with Norfolk Southern CEO Alan Shaw on Thursday and secured an initial commitment for financial aid as the cleanup from the Feb. 3 derailment continues.

Norfolk Southern has made similar pledges to Ohio, and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has ordered the company to cover the costs of cleanup from the derailment that toppled 38 rail cars in East Palestine, Ohio.

No one was hurt, but concerns that the chemicals could explode led state and local officials to approve releasing and burning toxic vinyl chloride from five tanker cars and to evacuate half of East Palestine and the surrounding area near the Pennsylvania border. Shapiro said Norfolk Southern will pay \$5 million to reimburse fire departments for equipment that was contaminated or damaged and \$1 million to Beaver and Lawrence counties to help business owners and residents whose livelihoods were damaged.

Another nearly \$1.4 million will go to state agencies that responded, including for setting up a health clinic for residents, Shapiro said.

Shapiro's office said he will push Norfolk Southern to cover any additional costs that accumulate.

In Ohio, Norfolk Southern previously announced more than \$1 million to replace fire equipment used in the response to the fiery wreck, plus \$1 million for East Palestine and more than \$1.2 million for evacuation costs for nearly 900 families and businesses.

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The company has said it is "committed to coordinating the cleanup project and paying for its associated costs," and wants to ensure that East Palestine's residents and natural environment recover.

Federal and state officials have repeatedly said it's safe for evacuated residents to return to the area and that air testing in the town and inside hundreds of homes hasn't detected any concerning levels of contaminants. However, some residents say they're still suffering from illnesses nearly a month later.

Twitter glitches as links, images fail to load

Associated Press undefined

SAN FRANCISCO (AP) — Twitter experienced a bevy of glitches for over an hour Monday as links stopped working, some users were unable to log in and images were not loading for others.

The company, which has experienced an uptick of instability and bugs in recent months after Elon Musk cut its staff sharply, said "Some parts of Twitter may not be working as expected right now. We made an internal change that had some unintended consequences."

Trying to visit Twitter's help page Monday led to an error message that says "Your current API plan does not include access to this endpoint" and displays a link to a software developer page that also doesn't work.

Musk tweeted Monday: "This platform is so brittle (sigh). Will be fixed shortly."

The company tweeted shortly after 10 a.m. Pacific time on Monday that it had addressed the issue.

According to Downtetector, users began reporting the outages shortly before noon U.S. Eastern time. Internet access watchdog NetBlocks said "Twitter is currently experiencing international slowdowns and outages affecting many users," and noted that it was also affecting image and video content. Some users were not able to see the images that other users were posting.

Twitter engineers and experts have warned that the platform is at an increased risk of fraying since Musk fired most of the people who worked on keeping it running. Last month, a bug left users unable to send tweets.

In November, engineers who left Twitter described for The Associated Press why they expect a bumpy road for Twitter's more than 230 million users now that well over two-thirds of the San Francisco company's pre-Musk core services engineers are gone.

While they don't anticipate near-term collapse, the engineers said Twitter could become very rough at the edges — especially if Musk makes major changes without much off-platform testing.

New this week: Miley Cyrus, 'Luther' and Oscars viewing

By The Associated Press undefined

Here's a collection curated by The Associated Press' entertainment journalists of what's arriving on TV, streaming services and music and video game platforms this week.

MOVIES

— The 95th Academy Awards are Sunday, which means time is running out for catching up on the nominees. The show, itself, can be streamed beginning at 8 pm EST on ABC.com and the ABC app, with authentication of a provider, as well as on Hulu Live TV, YouTubeTV, AT&T TV and FuboTV. Most nominees are streaming or available for digital rental. If you're already caught up on the features, many of the short films are worth catching, including Pamela Ribon's animated nominee, "My Year of Dicks," the Russian Arctic doc "Halout" and João Gonzalez's "Ice Merchants." Over on the Criterion Channel, the film series "Michelle Yeoh Kicks Ass" is streaming to honor the "Everything Everywhere All at Once" star and best-actress nominee. The series collects some of her highlights as an action star in Hong Kong, including "Yes, Madam!" (1985), "Royal Warriors" (1986) and the Ang Lee masterpiece "Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon" (2000).

— Does Idris Elba need James Bond when he's got John Luther? In "Luther: The Fallen Sun," Elba returns as the London homicide detective he's played across nearly a decade in the BBC crime series. "The Fallen Sun," Streaming Friday on Netflix, Luther gets his first feature film treatment. In it, a serial killer (Andy Serkis) terrorizes London while Luther, framed for various crimes, sits behind bars.

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— The long tradition of Disney sports underdog movies gets a new entry in Jingyi Shao's "Chang Can Dunk," premiering Friday on Disney+. Bloom Li stars as an often underestimated 16-year-old high-schooler with one mission: to dunk.

— AP Film Writer Jake Coyle

MUSIC

— Miley Cyrus has earned ALL the flowers. The single "Flowers" from her upcoming album has become the most streamed song in a single week in Spotify history and a chart topper on the Billboard Hot 100. It will be on "Endless Summer Vacation," arriving Friday with contributions from Brandi Carlile and Sia. Recorded in Los Angeles and produced with Kid Harpoon, Greg Kurstin, Mike Will Made-It, and Tyler Johnson, Miley describes the album as her "love letter to LA." The I'm-fine-without-you single "Flowers" has been interpreted as a response song to Bruno Mars' "When I Was Your Man" and it was released on her ex-husband Liam Hemsworth's birthday. Fans can also check out Disney+'s original special event, "Miley Cyrus – Endless Summer Vacation (Backyard Sessions)" premiering on March 10/

— If you really liked "Asphalt Meadows" by Death Cab for Cutie, but think you might like it a little softer, you're in luck: "Asphalt Meadows (Acoustic)" is a new, stripped-down take on their critically acclaimed 10th studio album, which The New York Times praised, saying "the band brings its incisive, anguished writing to a particularly 2022 brand of existential angst." Fans of the band will also find a new song co-written by lead vocalist and guitarist Ben Gibbard as the theme song for Apple TV+ "Shrinking" starring Jason Segel and Harrison Ford.

— AP Entertainment Writer Mark Kennedy

TELEVISION

— Bravo's "Top Chef" is expanding its scope with an all-star edition for its 20th season debuting Thursday. Winners and finalists from different "Top Chef" iterations will compete. Contestants represent Brazil, Saudi Arabia, Thailand and even Kentucky in season 20. Episodes were filmed in London, but the finale moved to Paris. It's the first time an entire "Top Chef" season has taken place abroad.

— The new series "School Spirits" isn't about homecoming floats or high school mascots but instead is a YA mystery. It stars Peyton List ("Cobra Kai") as a teen who is stuck in limbo in the afterlife after her murder. She enlists help from other spirit friends to help track down her killer. The series is based on a graphic novel by siblings Megan and Nate Trinrud, due out in the fall. The eight-episode first season debuts Thursday on Paramount+.

— Kerry Washington returns to TV in a half-hour comedy called "UnPrisoned" on Hulu. Created by author Tracy McMillan and based on her real life, Washington plays a single mom who works as a relationship therapist whose father (played by Delroy Lindo of "The Good Fight") moves in with her and her teenage son after he's released from prison. "UnPrisoned" premieres Friday.

— Alicia Rancilio

VIDEO GAMES

— Some promising games from smaller Japanese studios take the spotlight in the next few days. Paranor-masight: The Seven Mysteries of Honjo lets you investigate some of Tokyo's most enduring urban legends. There are spurned lovers, a burning man and a whispering canal, and then things really get weird: One case involves a giant, bloody foot that smashes through a mansion's ceiling and demands to be washed every night. Embrace the mystery Thursday on Nintendo Switch, PC, iOS and Android.

— Oni: Road to Be the Mightiest Oni digs into more ancient folklore. The protagonist, Kuuta, is a small but spunky imp who's on a mission to overthrow Momotaro, the human who now rules Onigashima Island after destroying most of its demons. It's a welcome twist on the monster-hunter formula, with vibrant animation and a more forgiving approach to combat than you usually find in that genre. Kuuta's quest begins Thursday on PlayStation 5/4, Nintendo Switch and PC.

Many kids are struggling in school. Do their parents know?

By BIANCA VÁZQUEZ TONESS AP Education Writer

BOSTON (AP) — Evena Joseph was unaware how much her 10-year-old son was struggling in school. She found out only with help from somebody who knows the Boston school system better than she does.

Her son, J. Ryan Mathurin, wasn't always comfortable pronouncing words in English. But Joseph, a Haitian immigrant raising him by herself, did not know how far behind he was in reading — in the 30th percentile — until a hospital where her son was receiving treatment connected her with a bilingual advocate.

"I'm sad and disappointed," Joseph said through an interpreter. "It's only because I was assigned an educational advocate that I know this about my son."

It's widely known from test scores that the pandemic set back students across the country. But many parents don't realize that includes their own child.

Schools have long faced criticism for failing to inform certain parents about their kids' academic progress. But after the COVID-19 school closures, the stakes for children have in many ways never been greater. Opportunities to catch up are plentiful in some places, thanks to federal COVID aid, but won't last forever. It will take better communication with parents to help students get the support they need, experts say.

"Parents can't solve a problem that they don't know they have," said Cindi Williams, co-founder of Learning Heroes, a nonprofit dedicated to improving communication between public schools and parents about student academic progress.

A 2022 survey of 1,400 public school parents around the country by Learning Heroes showed 92% believed their children were performing at grade level. But in a federal survey, school officials said half of all U.S. students started this school year behind grade level in at least one subject.

At home, J. Ryan races through multiplication problems at his dining room table. His mother watches as he lingers for several minutes on a paragraph about weather systems and struggles to answer questions about the reading.

"Sometimes I can't understand the writing or the main idea of the text," J. Ryan said after putting away his homework.

The struggles that ultimately brought J. Ryan to the hospital for mental health treatment began in third grade, when he returned to in-person school after nearly a year of studying online. His teacher called frequently, sometimes every day. J. Ryan was getting frustrated, disrupting lessons and leaving the classroom.

J. Ryan displayed these behaviors during English language arts and other classes including Mandarin and gym, according to his special education plan shared with The Associated Press. He happily participated in math class, where he felt more confidence.

Joseph changed her work schedule at a casino to the night shift so she could talk with teachers during the day. The calls continued in fourth grade. But Joseph said teachers never mentioned his problems reading.

Last spring, she sought treatment for what was becoming obvious: Her son was depressed. She was teamed up at the hospital with the parent advocate who speaks English and Haitian Creole.

The advocate, Fabienne Eliacin, pushed to get J. Ryan's scores from the tests given each fall to monitor student learning. She explained to Joseph what it meant to be scored in the 30th percentile. It's not good, Eliacin told her. He can do better.

To Joseph, it suddenly made sense why J. Ryan was acting out in English class. But why, she wondered, were his teachers only focused on her son's behavior if his trouble reading was causing his distress? "They don't really care how much they learn, as long as they stay quiet," Joseph concluded.

Boston Public School officials wouldn't comment on J. Ryan's case. "We are committed to providing families with comprehensive and up-to-date information regarding their student's academic performance," district spokesperson Marcus O'Mard said.

Before this year, it was up to Boston schools to share midyear evaluations with parents, but it's not clear how many were doing it. In the fall, Boston rolled out a communications campaign to help teachers explain testing results to parents as much as three times a year.

J. Ryan's former teachers did not respond to emails seeking comment.

There are many reasons teachers might not talk to parents about a student's academic progress, espe-

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cially when the news is bad, research shows.

"Historically, teachers did not get a lot of training to talk to parents," said Tyler Smith, a school psychology professor at the University of Missouri. School leadership and support for teachers also make a difference, he said.

That's consistent with findings from national teacher surveys conducted by Learning Heroes. At times, Williams said, teachers also "make assumptions" that some low-income parents don't care or shouldn't be burdened, or that parents won't believe them.

Without these conversations, parents have had to rely on report cards. But report cards are notoriously subjective, reflecting how much effort students show in class and whether they turn in homework.

The progress report for Tamela Ensrud's second-grade son in Nashville shows mostly As and a B in English, but she noticed her son was having trouble with reading. She asked to discuss her son's reading test scores at a fall parent-teacher conference, but was only shown samples of her son's work and told, "Your son is doing well."

Her son's afterschool program, which is run by a nonprofit, tested his literacy and math skills this fall and found he was reading below grade level. He qualified for their reading intervention program.

"I don't think the full story is being told," Ensrud said.

Metro Nashville Public Schools said it posts student test scores online for parents to see. "To our knowledge she has not shared any of those concerns with the school administration and if she had, they would be able to share information about these resources," spokesperson Sean Braisted said.

Ensrud has looked at the scores online and found them impossible to interpret.

Many districts have poured their federal pandemic recovery money into summer school offerings, tutoring programs and other interventions to help students regain ground lost during the pandemic. But the uptake hasn't been what educators hoped. If more parents knew their children were behind academically, they might seek help.

Once Joseph and her advocate learned J. Ryan was so far behind in reading, they asked his school for small-group tutoring, an intervention believed by experts to be one of the most effective strategies for struggling students.

But they were told the school didn't offer it. They moved him in November to another school that said it could give this help. J. Ryan says he likes the new school, since they're learning more advanced long-division. "I like challenging math," he said. But he isn't understanding the texts he reads much better.

Joseph isn't getting phone calls from the teacher complaining about his behavior, which she attributes to her son getting adequate treatment for his depression. But she hasn't received a report card this year or the test scores the district says it's now sending to families.

"I'm still concerned about his reading," she said.

Houston, UCLA, Kansas top latest AP Top 25; Duke back in

By AARON BEARD AP Basketball Writer

UCLA is surging, both toward the postseason and in The Associated Press men's college basketball poll.

While Houston was No. 1 for a third straight week in Monday's poll, the Bruins rose two spots to No. 2 for their highest ranking of the season. UCLA (27-4) has won its last 10 games, including a showdown with highly ranked Arizona in the regular-season finale behind star Jamie Jaquez Jr. to complete a perfect home record.

"I will say this, the recipe for success in March usually – I mean, aside from talent – is a great point guard and some senior leadership, like a guy like Jaime Jaquez," UCLA coach Mick Cronin said afterward. "I mean, we've got a chance. But as you know, that tournament's crazy. It isn't 'March Normal.'"

Kelvin Sampson's Cougars remained firmly entrenched at the top in their third stint at No. 1 this season, earning 58 first-place votes with the other three going to UCLA.

Houston hadn't reached No. 1 before this season since 1983 during the "Phi Slama Jama" era, but the Cougars have now spent a total of seven weeks at the top to tie Purdue for the most of any team this

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season.

Houston (29-2) closed out its regular-season schedule by winning at Memphis on a last-second basket Sunday, marking its 11th straight win.

THE TOP TIER

The only change in the top five came with UCLA trading places with No. 4 Alabama, with Kansas remaining at No. 3 despite a loss at Texas in Saturday's regular-season finale and the Boilermakers staying at fifth.

Marquette stayed at No. 6, followed by the Longhorns climbing two spots to No. 7. Arizona, Gonzaga and Baylor rounded out the top 10.

RISING

Texas A&M is the week's biggest climber, leaping six spots to No. 18 after beating Alabama in its regular-season finale. That's part of a strong finish under fourth-year coach Buzz Williams, with the Aggies going 17-3 since mid-December and losing just once since the start of February. Before this season, Texas A&M hadn't been ranked since February 2018.

In all, eight teams climbed from last week's positions.

SLIDING

Tennessee took the week's biggest tumble, falling five spots to No. 17 after losing at Auburn in its regular-season finale and its first full game since losing Zakai Zeigler to a season-ending knee injury. Indiana was next, falling four spots to No. 19 after losing at home to Iowa by 22 points.

In all, six teams slid from their ranking last week.

STATUS QUO

Nearly a third of last week's ranked teams (eight) stayed in their same position, including No. 13 Virginia, No. 22 TCU and No. 23 Kentucky.

WELCOME BACK

The week's three new additions are all returnees to the poll, headlined by No. 21 Duke.

The Blue Devils (23-8) returned to the poll for the first time since falling out in mid-January after opening the year at No. 7. First-year coach Jon Scheyer has led Duke to six straight wins to close out the regular season, including Saturday's win at North Carolina for a rivalry sweep that wounded UNC's iffy NCAA Tournament hopes.

Creighton checked in at No. 24, returning after a one-week absence for a third stint in the poll this season. Next came 25th-ranked Missouri, which won its last four regular-season games to return to the poll after spending two weeks there in the first half of January.

FAREWELL (FOR NOW)

Providence (No. 20), Maryland (No. 21) and Pittsburgh (No. 25) dropped out this week. All three will be playing in their conference tournaments this week.

CONFERENCE WATCH

The Big 12 and Southeastern conferences shared the lead this week with five ranked teams each, though three of the Big 12's group were inside the top 10.

The Big East was next with four ranked teams, including No. 11 Connecticut. The Atlantic Coast Conference had three, followed by the Big Ten, Pac-12 and West Coast conferences with two each.

The American Athletic and Mountain West conferences each had one ranked team.

ONE MORE

Next week's poll marks the final edition for the 2022-23 season.

Made in the USA? Proposed rule clarifies grocery meat labels

By JONEL ALECCIA AP Health Writer

Shoppers could soon find it easier to tell if those grocery store steaks or pork chops were really "Made in the USA."

Federal agriculture officials on Monday released new requirements that would allow labels on meat, poultry or eggs to use that phrase -- or "Product of USA" -- only if they come from animals "born, raised, slaughtered and processed in the United States." That's a sharp change from current policy, which allows

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voluntary use of such labels on products from animals that have been imported from a foreign country and slaughtered in the U.S., but also on meat that's been imported and repackaged or further processed.

Imports of beef from countries including Australia, Canada and Brazil, for instance, account for about 12% of the total consumed in the U.S. Overall, imports of red meat and poultry account for less than 6%, while imports of eggs account for less than half of 1%.

U.S. Department of Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack said the proposed rule would better align the labels with consumers' views. A survey commissioned by the USDA found that nearly two-thirds of shoppers believed that a "Product of USA" label meant that most or all meat production steps occurred in the U.S.

"There's obviously a disconnect between what the consumers' understandings and expectations are and what the label currently is," Vilsack said in an interview.

About 12% of all meat, poultry and egg products sold in the country carry the U.S.-origin labels, USDA officials said.

The label change was first proposed by President Joe Biden in 2021 and was included last year in a series of steps to bolster the U.S. meat and poultry supply chain.

The USDA survey, conducted last summer, included a nationally representative sample of more than 4,800 American adults who do the grocery shopping for their families and who bought beef or pork in the previous six months. More than 40% of the shoppers said they look for the USA label when buying meat.

The rule was praised by consumer advocates and representatives for U.S. ranchers and farmers, including the U.S. Cattlemen's Association, which petitioned the USDA for the label change in 2019.

"The proposed rule finally closes this loophole by accurately defining what these voluntary origin claims mean," said Justin Tupper, the group's president. "If it says 'Made in the USA,' then it should be from cattle that have only known USA soil. Consumers have the right to know where their food comes from, full stop."

Thomas Gremillion, director of food policy for the Consumer Federation of America, said the change is a "small but important step" that should have been made long ago.

Under the current rule, Gremillion noted, a cow can be raised in Mexico under that country's regulations for feed and medications, then shipped across the border and slaughtered that same day to make ground beef and steaks that qualify as "Product of USA."

Carrie Balkcom, executive director of the trade group American Grassfed Association, said the existing rule also penalizes small domestic producers.

"It's expensive to raise grass-raised animals from scratch," Balkcom said. "And these large producers were importing these animals raised elsewhere and just repackaging them and then kind of coasting on the 'Made in the USA' label."

An official with the North American Meat Institute, which represents large firms that process most of the meat and poultry products sold in the U.S., said she hadn't seen details of the new rule. But Sarah Little added, the group "opposes overly prescriptive labeling requirements that will raise prices for consumers."

Another industry group, the National Cattlemen's Beef Association, has called for eliminating the voluntary USA labels entirely and allowing for strict labeling standards verified by the USDA.

The voluntary labeling rules are different from country-of-origin labels, known as COOL, which required companies to disclose where animals supplying beef and pork are born, raised and slaughtered. That requirement was rolled back in 2015, after international trade disputes and a ruling from the World Trade Organization.

Country-of-origin labels are still required for other foods, including fish, shellfish, fresh and frozen fruits and vegetables and more.

Companies won't have to prove that their products are American-made before using the labels, but they will have to file documentation. The proposal applies only to meat, poultry and eggs, products overseen by the USDA's Food Safety and Inspection Service, which can pull the label if companies are found to violate the rule.

The label proposal is open for public comment before it becomes final.

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Thousands of pro-Trump bots are attacking DeSantis, Haley

By DAVID KLEPPER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Over the past 11 months, someone created thousands of fake, automated Twitter accounts — perhaps hundreds of thousands of them — to offer a stream of praise for Donald Trump.

Besides posting adoring words about the former president, the fake accounts ridiculed Trump's critics from both parties and attacked Nikki Haley, the former South Carolina governor and U.N. ambassador who is challenging her onetime boss for the 2024 Republican presidential nomination.

When it came to Ron DeSantis, the bots aggressively suggested that the Florida governor couldn't beat Trump, but would be a great running mate.

As Republican voters size up their candidates for 2024, whoever created the bot network is seeking to put a thumb on the scale, using online manipulation techniques pioneered by the Kremlin to sway the digital platform conversation about candidates while exploiting Twitter's algorithms to maximize their reach.

The sprawling bot network was uncovered by researchers at Cyabra, an Israeli tech firm that shared its findings with The Associated Press. While the identity of those behind the network of fake accounts is unknown, Cyabra's analysts determined that it was likely created within the U.S.

To identify a bot, researchers will look for patterns in an account's profile, its follower list and the content it posts. Human users typically post about a variety of subjects, with a mix of original and reposted material, but bots often post repetitive content about the same topics.

That was true of many of the bots identified by Cyabra.

"One account will say, 'Biden is trying to take our guns; Trump was the best,' and another will say, 'Jan. 6 was a lie and Trump was innocent,'" said Jules Gross, the Cyabra engineer who first discovered the network. "Those voices are not people. For the sake of democracy I want people to know this is happening."

Bots, as they are commonly called, are fake, automated accounts that became notoriously well-known after Russia employed them in an effort to meddle in the 2016 election. While big tech companies have improved their detection of fake accounts, the network identified by Cyabra shows they remain a potent force in shaping online political discussion.

The new pro-Trump network is actually three different networks of Twitter accounts, all created in huge batches in April, October and November 2022. In all, researchers believe hundreds of thousands of accounts could be involved.

The accounts all feature personal photos of the alleged account holder as well as a name. Some of the accounts posted their own content, often in reply to real users, while others reposted content from real users, helping to amplify it further.

"McConnell... Traitor!" wrote one of the accounts, in response to an article in a conservative publication about GOP Senate leader Mitch McConnell, one of several Republican critics of Trump targeted by the network.

One way of gauging the impact of bots is to measure the percentage of posts about any given topic generated by accounts that appear to be fake. The percentage for typical online debates is often in the low single digits. Twitter itself has said that less than 5% of its active daily users are fake or spam accounts.

When Cyabra researchers examined negative posts about specific Trump critics, however, they found far higher levels of inauthenticity. Nearly three-fourths of the negative posts about Haley, for example, were traced back to fake accounts.

The network also helped popularize a call for DeSantis to join Trump as his vice presidential running mate — an outcome that would serve Trump well and allow him to avoid a potentially bitter matchup if DeSantis enters the race.

The same network of accounts shared overwhelmingly positive content about Trump and contributed to an overall false picture of his support online, researchers found.

"Our understanding of what is mainstream Republican sentiment for 2024 is being manipulated by the prevalence of bots online," the Cyabra researchers concluded.

The triple network was discovered after Gross analyzed Tweets about different national political figures and noticed that many of the accounts posting the content were created on the same day. Most of the

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accounts remain active, though they have relatively modest numbers of followers.

A message left with a spokesman for Trump's campaign was not immediately returned.

Most bots aren't designed to persuade people, but to amplify certain content so more people see it, according to Samuel Woolley, a professor and misinformation researcher at the University of Texas whose most recent book focuses on automated propaganda.

When a human user sees a hashtag or piece of content from a bot and reposts it, they're doing the network's job for it, and also sending a signal to Twitter's algorithms to boost the spread of the content further.

Bots can also succeed in convincing people that a candidate or idea is more or less popular than the reality, he said. More pro-Trump bots can lead to people overstating his popularity overall, for example.

"Bots absolutely do impact the flow of information," Woolley said. "They're built to manufacture the illusion of popularity. Repetition is the core weapon of propaganda and bots are really good at repetition. They're really good at getting information in front of people's eyeballs."

Until recently, most bots were easily identified thanks to their clumsy writing or account names that included nonsensical words or long strings of random numbers. As social media platforms got better at detecting these accounts, the bots became more sophisticated.

So-called cyborg accounts are one example: a bot that is periodically taken over by a human user who can post original content and respond to users in human-like ways, making them much harder to sniff out.

Bots could soon get much sneakier thanks to advances in artificial intelligence. New AI programs can create lifelike profile photos and posts that sound much more authentic. Bots that sound like a real person and deploy deepfake video technology may challenge platforms and users alike in new ways, according to Katie Harbath, a fellow at the Bipartisan Policy Center and a former Facebook public policy director.

"The platforms have gotten so much better at combating bots since 2016," Harbath said. "But the types that we're starting to see now, with AI, they can create fake people. Fake videos."

These technological advances likely ensure that bots have a long future in American politics — as digital foot soldiers in online campaigns, and as potential problems for both voters and candidates trying to defend themselves against anonymous online attacks.

"There's never been more noise online," said Tyler Brown, a political consultant and former digital director for the Republican National Committee. "How much of it is malicious or even unintentionally unfactual? It's easy to imagine people being able to manipulate that."

Ashes of Thailand 'cave boy' released on Mekong River

By KAWEEWIT KAEWJINDA Associated Press

CHIANG SAEN, Thailand (AP) — Family members, monks and friends watched from a boat Monday as the ashes of one of the 12 boys rescued from a flooded cave in northern Thailand in 2018 were released into the Mekong River. Seventeen-year-old Duangphet Phromthep died last month while attending a sports academy in England.

Duangphet's ashes floated away in a makeshift vessel, along with soccer balls and some of his prized possessions, in an area of the river in Chiang Rai, the country's northernmost province, where the borders of Laos, Myanmar and Thailand meet known as the Golden Triangle.

His body was cremated in a Buddhist ceremony in England in accordance with his family's wishes.

Phra Khru Prayut Chetiyankarn, abbot of the province's Wat Phra That Doi Wao temple who led the Buddhist funeral procession, said the location is where people often scatter the ashes of their family members. He said the Golden Triangle "is believed to contain a Naga that helps protect and takes care (of the dead) for us."

Nagas are serpent-like mystical creatures that are revered according to Thai Buddhist beliefs. The Mekong River is one of Asia's longest, spanning almost 5,000 kilometers (3,100 miles), and runs through several countries including China, Vietnam, Myanmar, Cambodia, Thailand and Laos.

Duangphet, known as Dom, was found unconscious in his room on Feb. 12 at Brooke House College

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Football Academy in Leicestershire in central England. He died in a hospital two days later.

The cause of death has not been released to the public by coroners, but police said it was not believed to be suspicious.

Buddhist prayer sessions for Duangphet took place over the weekend at Wat Phra That Doi Wao in his hometown of Chiang Rai after his ashes arrived from Britain on Sunday.

The temple is less than 10 kilometers (6 miles) from Tham Luang cave, where Duangphet and 11 of his "Wild Boar" soccer teammates and their coach were trapped for more than two weeks before being safely guided out by expert cave divers in a miraculous effort that captured global interest.

Adul Sam-on, a former teammate who was trapped with him in 2018, arrived in Chiang Rai on Monday from New York, where he is studying, to say his final goodbyes to Duangphet, one of his closest friends.

"Even though today was the last day of the ceremony, I'm happy I made it," Adul said. "We were so close. We were just like brothers."

Duangphet was described by his friends and coaches as a talented and determined soccer player.

"He was so good at football both technically and mentally," said Anucha Ratchacote, 17, a former teammate of Duangphet at Vachiralai Bee School in Chiang Mai. "He wanted to play for the national team and I think he was good enough."

Archaeologists in Egypt unearth Sphinx-like Roman-era statue

CAIRO (AP) — Archaeologists unearthed a Sphinx-like statue and the remains of a shrine in an ancient temple in southern Egypt, antiquities authorities said Monday.

The artifacts were found in the temple of Dendera in Qena Province, 280 miles (450 kilometers) south of the capital of Cairo, the Antiquities Ministry said in a statement.

Archaeologists believe the statue's smiling features may belong to the Roman emperor Claudius, who extended Rome's rule into North Africa between 41 and 54 A.D., the ministry said.

It said archaeologists will conduct more studies on the markings on the stone slab, which could reveal more information to statue's identity and the area. The statue is much smaller than the towering, well-known Sphinx in the Pyramids of Giza complex, which is 66 feet (20 meters) high.

The archaeologists also found a Roman-era stone slab with demotic and hieroglyphic inscriptions.

The limestone shrine includes a two-layer platform and a mud-brick basin from the Byzantine era, the ministry said.

Such discoveries are usually touted by the Egyptian government in hopes of attracting more tourists, a significant source of foreign currency for the cash-strapped North African country.

Hoda Kotb returns to 'Today' show after family health issue

By The Associated Press undefined

NEW YORK (AP) — Hoda Kotb returned to NBC's "Today" show on Monday after spending a few weeks tending to her 3-year-old daughter, Hope.

"My youngest, Hope, was in the ICU for a few days and in the hospital for a little more than a week," Hoda said at the top of the show. "I'm so grateful she's home. She is back home. I was waiting for that day to come. And we are watching her closely. I'm just so happy."

It was not made clear what Hope was suffering from.

"I'm grateful for the doctors at Weill Cornell who were amazing and the nurses. And I'm grateful to my family, and I'm grateful to friends like you who were there every single day. So, I want to say thank you for that. I love you," she said to co-host Savannah Guthrie.

"I love you, too," Savannah replied.

Kotb's absence coincided with Guthrie having to take a break from the show, as well. Guthrie tested positive for COVID-19 on Feb. 28 and left the anchor desk in the middle of that day's broadcast.

Biden reelection bid faces resistance from some Democrats

By STEVE PEOPLES AP National Political Writer

LACONIA, N.H. (AP) — Steve Shurtleff was at Joe Biden's side in 2019 when he filed papers in the New Hampshire State House to run for president.

He repeatedly trekked across the state with Biden to court primary voters. And when Biden ultimately won the presidency, it was Shurtleff, then the Democratic state House speaker, who proudly sealed the envelope that carried New Hampshire's four electoral votes — including his own name — to the U.S. Senate.

But on the eve of a new election season, Shurtleff, like a majority of Democrats across the country, feels that one term is enough.

"In my heart of hearts, no," Shurtleff said when asked if he wants Biden to run again. "I think a lot of people just don't want to say it."

Democrats across New Hampshire are upset with the Democratic president for trying to end the state's status as home to the first-in-the-nation presidential primary. But their concerns about Biden run much deeper, in line with a majority of Democratic voters nationwide, who question the 80-year-old president's plans to soon launch his reelection campaign.

Just 37% of Democrats nationwide want the president to seek a second term, according to a poll released last month by The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research. That was down from 52% in the weeks before last year's midterm elections.

Many worry about Biden's age. Others, like Shurtleff, are upset about the administration's messy withdrawal from Afghanistan. And the party's progressive wing has never been enthusiastic about Biden, who is perceived as a moderate, despite his lengthy list of achievements.

The White House cast Biden's perceived weakness within his own party as an exaggerated narrative that he has repeatedly proven wrong.

"We're aware pundits' attitude toward President Biden is unchanged from before he earned the nomination faster than anyone since 2004, won the most votes in American history, built the strongest legislative record in generations and led the best midterm outcome for a new Democratic president in 60 years," Biden spokesman Andrew Bates said. "Based on comparing the accuracy of our predictions versus theirs, we are happy for this dynamic to continue."

Still, there's a risk of a disconnect between rank-and-file Democrats and the party's establishment. While voters are signaling unease about the prospect of another Biden campaign, Democratic governors, senators and congressional representatives are virtually unanimous in supporting Biden's reelection.

One exception may be New Hampshire, a small swing state whose electoral votes could be critical in a tight general election. The state has challenged Biden before.

Voters here served Biden an embarrassing fifth-place finish in the 2020 Democratic primary. New Hampshire polls were still open when he decamped to South Carolina, where his presidential ambitions were revived by a decisive win. That state is now Biden's pick to lead the 2024 presidential primary calendar.

Interviews with angry New Hampshire Democrats across state government and local Democratic committees suggest there is some appetite for a serious primary challenger in 2024. But top-tier prospects don't seem to be interested.

So far, only Democratic activist and author Marianne Williamson has entered the 2024 primary field. Robert F. Kennedy Jr., the son of the late New York senator and known for railing against vaccines, met with New Hampshire voters on Friday. He's also leaning toward a bid.

But the likes of Vermont Sen. Bernie Sanders, Biden's fiercest primary challenger in 2020, has vowed to back the president in 2024. So has Illinois Gov. J.B. Pritzker, whose appearance at last year's New Hampshire's Democratic convention still comes up in conversation. California Rep. Ro Khanna, a progressive favorite, has also said he would not challenge Biden, although he has been a vocal advocate for New Hampshire's place atop the primary calendar.

In an interview, Khanna said it was "political malpractice" for the Democratic National Committee, under Biden's direction, to threaten New Hampshire's status.

"New Hampshire is a state where retail politics still matter and where voters have an independence that

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can't be controlled by the party establishment in DC," Khanna said. The primary shakeup "could cost us four electoral votes and hurt our chances to win in the 2024 election."

Meanwhile, Biden's allies privately believe the primary dispute will be long forgotten by the time voters cast ballots in November 2024, especially with former President Donald Trump or one of his Republican acolytes on the ballot.

Biden supporters also note that some of the nation's most popular two-term presidents confronted opposition from within their own parties ahead of their reelection.

President Ronald Reagan faced grumbling from dissatisfied Republicans leading up to the 1984 contest, which turned out to be the most lopsided general election victory in U.S. history. Democrats openly encouraged a primary challenge against President Bill Clinton after the disastrous 1994 midterms. He went on to a commanding reelection win in 1996. And President Barack Obama's campaign worried about losing support from his political base — especially Black voters — before he cruised to victory in 2012.

"We had a lot of work to do, but the fundamentals were there," said Stephanie Cutter, who helped managed Obama's 2012 reelection.

Obama's outlook changed as his team worked to remind voters what they liked best about him compared to a Republican opponent.

"Elections are about two people," Cutter said. "Once Republicans start hitting the campaign trail and that craziness begins, the contrast between that crazy train and Joe Biden's steady leadership and even hand fixing some of the nation's biggest problems become clear as day."

Biden has presided over significant accomplishments that could boost a reelection campaign.

He signed into law a sweeping pandemic relief bill, a massive infrastructure package, the first new federal gun safety law in decades and a comprehensive health and environmental plan that allowed Medicare to lower prescription drug prices and dedicated billions of dollars to combating climate change. Job growth and unemployment have also improved during his administration.

But he is grappling with acute challenges related to inflation, illegal immigration, crime and foreign affairs.

North Carolina Gov. Roy Cooper, a Democrat, attributed Biden's political challenges to Democratic leaders who haven't done enough to promote his accomplishments.

"The real disconnect right now is communication," Cooper said in an interview. "President Biden has accomplished in two years what many presidents would only hope to do in eight. His success has meant real wins for working families. People are going to begin to see real improvement in their lives. It's our job to make sure that they know it was President Biden who got it done."

"Democrats came together once before in 2020 to ask him to do a job, and he accomplished it — he beat President Trump," Cooper added. "And now he's gonna do it again."

Despite such optimism, Democrats across New Hampshire believe it will be difficult for Biden to match his 2020 victory of 7 percentage points in the state in 2024. Former Gov. John Lynch, a Democrat, declined to say whether he wanted Biden to seek reelection when asked directly.

Biden's push to change the primary calendar, Lynch said, has created such anti-Biden furor that it puts New Hampshire's four electoral votes at risk in the 2024 general election. He was quick to note that four electoral votes would have tipped the 2000 presidential election in Al Gore's favor.

"It could cost Democrats the presidency," Lynch said. "Republicans won't let voters forget. They'll hammer the Democrats on this."

Indeed, New Hampshire's current governor, Republican Chris Sununu, called the primary calendar shift "a horrible miscalculation" for Biden that exposes him to a legitimate primary challenge.

"He's made it harder to win in November '24 — if he's the nominee," Sununu said in an interview. "But because of what he did here, he very well may not be the nominee."

The Democratic concerns were easy to see inside the monthly meeting of Laconia Democrats on the shores of Lake Winnepesaukee late last week, where just a half-dozen people gathered to discuss party business. Most of the participants, especially older ones, said they favored Biden's reelection, even if they weren't passionate about it.

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Lois Kessin, a 73-year-old Laconia resident, has been volunteering for Biden in New Hampshire since Obama first tapped him as his running mate. She has a picture of herself and Biden hanging in her hallway.

"I am very happy with Joe Biden," she said, acknowledging that some Democrats are worried about his age — a concern she said was offensive. "Perhaps there's somebody as brilliant as he and as compassionate and as knowledgeable out there. But until that person shows up, I'm happy with Joe Biden."

The Laconia committee chairman, 43-year-old Eric Hoffman, was less enthusiastic.

"The party kind of lined up because he was the nominee, but he obviously wasn't our first four choices," Hoffman said, referring to Biden's finish in the 2020 primary. "People would prefer to see a change."

But like many Democrats, he said he would vote for Biden in the 2024 general election to ensure Republicans don't retake the White House.

Just don't expect him to be excited about it.

"I wasn't a big fan of his, but I've been pretty impressed with his abilities and the things he's gotten accomplished," Hoffman said. "So, it's not the worst thing in the world."

Today in History: MARCH 7, 'Bloody Sunday' for civil rights

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Tuesday, March 7, the 66th day of 2023. There are 299 days left in the year.

Today's highlight in history:

On March 7, 1965, a march by civil rights demonstrators was violently broken up at the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama, by state troopers and a sheriff's posse in what came to be known as "Bloody Sunday."

On this date:

In 1876, Alexander Graham Bell received a U.S. patent for his telephone.

In 1911, President William Howard Taft ordered 20,000 troops to patrol the U.S.-Mexico border in response to the Mexican Revolution.

In 1916, Bavarian Motor Works (BMW) had its beginnings in Munich, Germany, as an airplane engine manufacturer.

In 1926, the first successful trans-Atlantic radio-telephone conversations took place between New York and London.

In 1936, Adolf Hitler ordered his troops to march into the Rhineland, thereby breaking the Treaty of Versailles and the Locarno Pact.

In 1945, during World War II, U.S. forces crossed the Rhine at Remagen, Germany, using the damaged but still usable Ludendorff Bridge.

In 1975, the U.S. Senate revised its filibuster rule, allowing 60 senators to limit debate in most cases, instead of the previously required two-thirds of senators present.

In 1994, the U.S. Supreme Court unanimously ruled that a parody that pokes fun at an original work can be considered "fair use." (The ruling concerned a parody of the Roy Orbison song "Oh, Pretty Woman" by the rap group 2 Live Crew.)

In 1999, movie director Stanley Kubrick, whose films included "Dr. Strangelove," "A Clockwork Orange" and "2001: A Space Odyssey," died in Hertfordshire, England, at age 70, having just finished editing "Eyes Wide Shut."

In 2005, President George W. Bush nominated John Bolton to be U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, an appointment that ran into Democratic opposition, prompting Bush to make a recess appointment.

In 2016, Peyton Manning announced his retirement after 18 seasons in the National Football League.

In 2020, health officials in Florida said two people who had tested positive for the new coronavirus had died; the deaths were the first on the East Coast attributed to the outbreak.

Ten years ago: The U.N. Security Council voted unanimously for tough new sanctions to punish North Korea for its latest nuclear test; a furious Pyongyang threatened a nuclear strike against the United States.

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The Senate confirmed John Brennan to be CIA director, 63-34, after the Obama administration bowed to demands from Republicans blocking the nomination and stated explicitly there were limits to the president's power to use drones against U.S. terror suspects on American soil. Sybil Christopher, 83, the wife of Richard Burton left in 1963 to marry Elizabeth Taylor, and who became a theater producer and nightclub founder, died in New York.

Five years ago: The White House said Mexico, Canada and other countries could be spared from President Donald Trump's planned steel and aluminum tariffs under national security "carve-outs." For the second time in less than a week, a storm rolled into the Northeast with as much as two feet of wet, heavy snow that grounded flights, closed schools and knocked out power.

One year ago: The humanitarian crisis in Ukraine deepened as Russian forces intensified their shelling and food, water, heat and medicine grew increasingly scarce in what the country condemned as a medieval-style siege by Moscow to batter it into submission. The Supreme Court says it would not take up the sexual assault case against comedian Bill Cosby, leaving in place a decision by Pennsylvania's highest court to throw out his conviction and set him free from prison.

Today's birthdays: International Motorsports Hall of Famer Janet Guthrie is 85. Actor Daniel J. Travanti is 83. Entertainment executive Michael Eisner is 81. Rock musician Chris White (The Zombies) is 80. Rock singer Peter Wolf is 77. Rock musician Matthew Fisher (Procol Harum) is 77. Pro and College Football Hall of Famer Lynn Swann is 71. R&B singer-musician Ernie Isley (The Isley Brothers) is 71. Rock musician Kenny Aronoff (BoDeans, John Mellencamp) is 70. Actor Bryan Cranston is 67. Actor Donna Murphy is 64. Actor Nick Searcy is 64. Golfer Tom Lehman is 64. International Tennis Hall of Famer Ivan Lendl is 63. Actor Mary Beth Evans is 62. Singer-actor Taylor Dayne is 61. Actor Bill Brochtrup is 60. Author E.L. James is 60. Author Bret Easton Ellis is 59. Opera singer Denyce Graves is 59. Comedian Wanda Sykes is 59. Actor Jonathan Del Arco is 57. Rock musician Randy Guss (Toad the Wet Sprocket) is 56. Actor Rachel Weisz is 53. Actor Peter Sarsgaard is 52. Actor Jay Duplass is 50. Classical singer Sebastien Izambard (Il Divo) is 50. Rock singer Hugo Ferreira (Tantric) is 49. Actor Jenna Fischer is 49. Actor Tobias Menzies is 49. Actor Sarayu Blue is 48. Actor Audrey Marie Anderson is 48. Actor TJ Thyne is 48. Bluegrass singer-musician Frank Solivan is 46. Actor Laura Prepon is 43. Actor Bel Powley is 31. Poet and activist Amanda Gorman is 25. Actor Giselle Eisenberg (TV: "Life in Pieces") is 16.