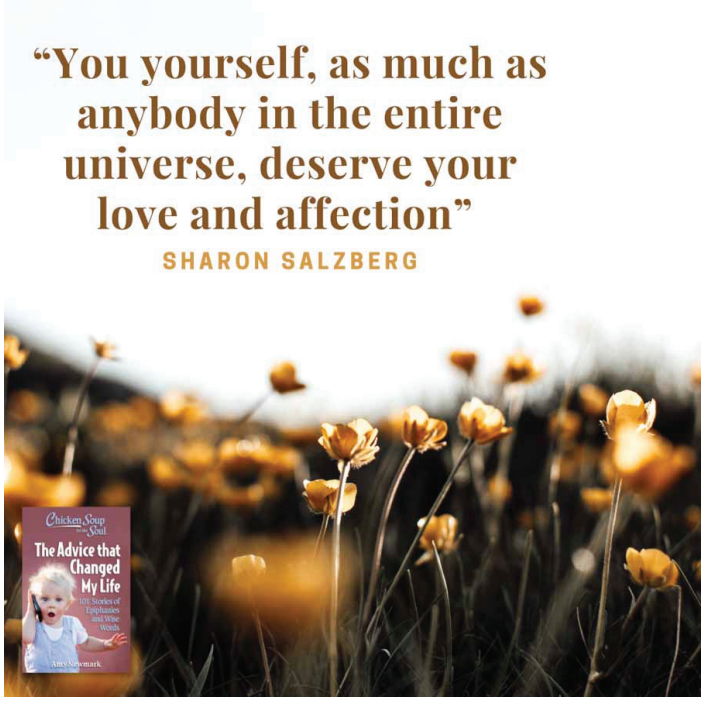
Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, April 20, 2023 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 286 ~ 1 of 87



Groton Community Calendar

Thursday, April 20

Senior Menu: Baked cod, macaroni and cheese, spinach salad, fruit cocktail, whole wheat bread.

School Breakfast: Stuffed bagels.

School Lunch: Hamburgers, fries.

Track: Sully Buttes (Onida) Charger Invite

United Methodist: Newsletter times due.

Friday, April 21

Senior Menu: Bratwurst on bun, sauerkraut, 3 bean salad, chocolate pudding with bananas.

School Breakfast: Biscuits and jelly.

School Lunch: Pizza, green beans.

Baseball: (Oldham/Ramona/Rutland)/Arlington at Ramona, 6 p.m. (V/JV)

Saturday, April 22 - EARTH DAY

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

Catholic: SEAS Confession, 3:45-4:15 p.m.; SEAS Mass, 4:30 p.m.

GHS Prom, 8 p.m.

Firemen's Spring Social, 7 p.m.

Sunday, April 23

Groton CM&A: Sunday School at 9:15 a.m., Worship Service at 10:30 a.m.

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

Emmanuel Lutheran: Worship, 9 a.m.; Sunday school, 10:15 a.m.; Choir, 7 p.m.

St. John's Lutheran: Worship at St. John's, 9 a.m., and at Zion, 11 a.m.; Sunday school, 9:45 a.m.

United Methodist: Conde worship, 8:30 a.m.; Coffee hour, 9:30 a.m.; Groton worship, 10:30 a.m.; Sunday school after children's sermon in worship, 10:30 a.m.

Princess Prom

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

OPEN: Recycling Trailer in Groton

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

The Bulletin by Newsweek

JANUARY 24, 2023

World in Brief

• The Supreme Court extended access to a widely used abortion pill until Friday. Justices are weighing restrictions to mifepristone after a Texas judge ruled to suspend the Food and Drug Administration's approval of the medication.

• Donald Trump may not appear for a civil trial next week brought by columnist E. Jean Carroll due to "logistical burdens associated with his appearance in a courtroom," his attorney Joe Tacopina said.

• Two people were killed after powerful storms, including tornadoes, winds, and hail, ripped through parts of the central U.S. Severe weather caused widespread damage and left thousands without power.

• Andrew Lester, an 84-year-old Kansas City man charged in the shooting of Black teen Ralph Yarl, pleaded not guilty to felony charges during his first court appearance in the case.

• U.S. residents who have had a Facebook account at any time since May 2007 may be eligible for a portion of a $725 million privacy settlement that the site's parent company Meta has agreed to pay.

• A lottery player in Ohio has won an estimated $253 million after matching all six numbers in Wednesday night's Powerball draw.

• Richard Branson's Virgin Orbit Holdings Inc has filed a Chapter 11 bankruptcy plan and is seeking the sale of its assets, having struggled to recover from a costly failed launch in January this year.

• K-pop star Moonbin, a member of the boy band Astro, has died at age 25. He was found unresponsive at his apartment in Seoul, South Korea.

• In the ongoing war in Ukraine, Kyiv's envoy to the U.K. Vadym Prystaiko Vadym Prystaiko told Newsweek that China's "toothless" peace plan presented in February suggested China was not willing to risk its powerful global position for President Vladimir Putin's sake.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, April 20, 2023 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 286 ~ 3 of 87

Walk-Off Seals Win for Howard Against Groton

Groton Area Tigers Varsity fell to Howard Varsity Tigers 4-3 on Wednesday on the final play of the game. Howard Varsity Tigers was down 3-2 in the bottom of the seventh inning when an error scored two runs for Howard Varsity Tigers.

Howard Varsity Tigers got on the board in the first inning when Griffin Clubb doubled on the first pitch of the at bat, scoring one run.

In the top of the third inning, Groton Area Tigers Varsity tied things up at one when Ryan Groeblinghoff hit a solo homer.

Jack Neises led things off on the pitcher's mound for Howard Varsity Tigers. The righthander allowed five hits and three runs over four innings, striking out five and walking zero.

Dillon Abeln was on the hill for Groton Area Tigers Varsity. Abeln went four and two-thirds innings, allowing two runs on five hits, striking out five and walking one. Groeblinghoff threw two innings out of the bullpen.

Groton Area Tigers Varsity socked one home run on the day. Groeblinghoff put one out in the third inning.

Groeblinghoff led Groton Area Tigers Varsity with two hits in three at bats.

Howard Varsity Tigers was sure-handed and didn't commit a single error. Kade Shumaker made the most plays with 11.

Groton Area Tigers Varsity **3 - 4** Howard Varsity Tigers

Away Wednesday April 19, 2023

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	R	H	E
GRTN	0	0	1	2	0	0	0	**3**	**5**	**2**
HWRD	1	0	0	1	0	0	2	**4**	**5**	**0**

BATTING

Groton Area Tigers	AB	R	H	RBI	BB	SO
C Simon (SS)	3	0	1	0	0	1
C Dunker (LF)	3	0	0	0	0	1
B Althoff (1B)	3	1	1	0	0	1
T Larson (3B)	3	1	1	0	0	2
L Ringgenberg (RF)	2	0	0	0	0	1
C Larson (C)	3	0	0	0	0	2
R Groeblinghoff (...	3	1	2	3	0	1
D Abeln (P, 2B)	3	0	0	0	0	1
B Fliehs (CF)	3	0	0	0	0	1
Totals	**26**	**3**	**5**	**3**	**0**	**11**

HR: R Groeblinghoff, **TB:** T Larson, C Simon, R Groeblinghoff 5, B Althoff, **HBP:** L Ringgenberg, **LOB:** 3

Howard Varsity Tig	AB	R	H	RBI	BB	SO
K Feldhaus (2B)	3	1	1	0	1	1
C Claussen (SS)	4	0	0	0	0	4
L Koepsell (RF, P)	3	1	0	0	1	0
G Clubb (CF)	4	0	1	1	0	1
J Neises (P, 3B)	2	0	1	0	0	0
K Shumaker (C)	3	1	1	0	0	1
K Koepsell (1B)	2	0	1	1	1	1
R Erickson (3B, RF)	2	0	0	0	0	2
N Mentele (LF)	2	0	0	0	0	0
#4	0	1	0	0	0	0
Totals	**25**	**4**	**5**	**2**	**3**	**10**

2B: K Koepsell, K Shumaker, G Clubb, **TB:** K Koepsell 2, K Feldhaus, J Neises, K Shumaker 2, G Clubb 2, **CS:** R Erickson, **HBP:** J Neises, N Mentele, R Erickson, **SB:** K Koepsell, K Feldhaus, J Neises, **LOB:** 6

PITCHING

Groton Area T	IP	H	R	ER	BB	SO	HR
D Abeln	4.2	5	2	2	1	5	0
R Groebling...	2.0	0	2	0	2	5	0
Totals	**6.2**	**5**	**4**	**2**	**3**	**10**	**0**

P-S: D Abeln 76-51, R Groeblinghoff 43-28, **WP:** R Groeblinghoff 2, **HBP:** D Abeln, R Groeblinghoff 2, **BF:** D Abeln 20, R Groeblinghoff 11

Howard Varsi	IP	H	R	ER	BB	SO	HR
J Neises	4.0	5	3	3	0	5	1
L Koepsell	3.0	0	0	0	0	6	0
Totals	**7.0**	**5**	**3**	**3**	**0**	**11**	**1**

P-S: J Neises 68-46, L Koepsell 37-26, **HBP:** J Neises, **BF:** J Neises 18, L Koepsell 9

Groton Daily Independent
Thursday, April 20, 2023 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 286 ~ 4 of 87

SOUTH DAKOTA SEARCHLIGHT

https://southdakotasearchlight.com

Open primary push to see opposition from state Republican Party

Group seeks constitutional amendment to 'let all voters vote'

BY: JOHN HULT - APRIL 19, 2023 3:33 PM

SIOUX FALLS — A bipartisan group of activists kicked off a petition drive Wednesday that aims to put open primaries on the South Dakota general election ballot in 2024.

The proposal would enshrine the right to vote for every primary candidate of every political persuasion for all voters in the South Dakota Constitution, regardless of a voter's party affiliation – or lack thereof. In other words, all the candidates for an office would run in one primary open to all voters, and the top two vote-getters would advance to the general election. In races for two offices, such as those for state representatives, the top four candidates would advance to the general election.

The amendment would open up the primaries for governor, U.S. senator and representative, county races and all state legislative races. Democrats currently have open primaries; the state Republican Party does not.

During a kick-off to the petition drive for South Dakota Open Primaries, the group backing the measure, supporters outlined reasons for changing the system.

Joe Kirby, head of South Dakota Open Primaries, signs a petition that aims to allow all voters to cast a vote in the state's primary elections. Kirby is seated next to De Knudson of Sioux Falls, with Tom Dempster of Sioux Falls standing to her left.

(John Hult/South Dakota Searchlight)

Tom Heinz of Dakota Dunes said leaving Democrats, independents and minor party candidates – who add up to more than half of South Dakota's registered voters – out of primaries disenfranchises the people who pick up the tab for primary elections.

Heinz is an independent voter, and he said he and his fellow independents deserve a vote.

"We pay for the primary elections, but as an independent voter, I can't vote in them," Heinz said.

There are ideological impacts to a closed primary system, according to Tom Dempster, who formerly served nine years on the Minnehaha County Commission and eight years in the Legislature.

Dempster, a Republican, argued that partisan primaries push partisan leaders to the top of the ticket regardless of what a majority of the voters want. That poisons the well of public debate, he argued, because it offers no incentive for candidates to listen and learn from the other side.

"Our partisan primary system too often focuses candidates on a very small and ideological view, and over time, the positions become more and more extreme," Dempster said. "That means we don't talk to each other anymore. We don't work together. We just yell and yell and yell."

The lack of challengers in primary races troubles Jason Pieper of Watertown, an independent who said he typically votes Republican. More than 70% of primary races in South Dakota were unopposed in 2022,

he said. In the general election, 40% of races were unopposed.

Candidates with more measured views simply don't bother running, he said. They would if they could trust that all voters had a voice, he said, as they do in open primary states like Texas and Montana.

"Increased competition will make South Dakota stronger," Pieper said. "Too many good candidates declined to run because they will be forced to align with the extremes of their respective parties."

De Knudson, a former Sioux Falls city council member, pointed out that the fiscal note for the amendment suggests that 50,000 more people would vote in primaries if the measure were to pass. That would cost the state an additional $23,000 for printing ballots.

South Dakota Republican Party Chair John Wiik hopes the state doesn't have to spend that money. Wiik hopes the measure doesn't make it onto the ballot at all, and would like to see it defeated handily if it does.

"We are 110% opposed to the idea," Wiik said. "It is our job in the Republican Party to put out the best candidates and decide who's going to represent us on the general election ballot."

That all voters pay for primary elections isn't an issue that ought to preclude the party from walling off its primaries for its own voters, Wiik said.

"A primary is a necessary part of the election. It serves the entire public," Wiik said.

The GOP chair also said there are concerns about population centers moving the needle on the kinds of candidates who make their way onto the general election ballot. Voters deserve to trust that candidates running as Republicans share the party's values, he said, and opening primaries to all voters could muddy the waters.

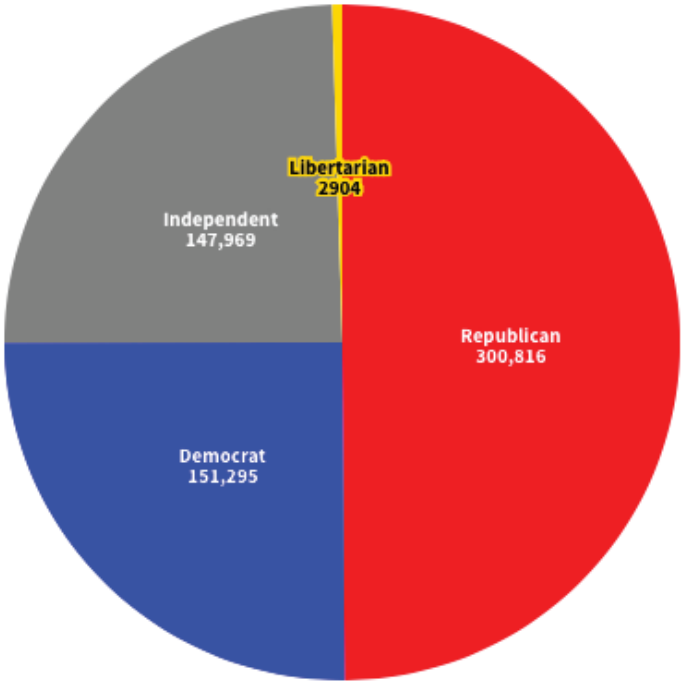
"I don't think downtown Sioux Falls should be deciding who we should have on our general election ballot," Wiik said. "It's an old adage of mine: Pick a side and stick with it. If you run in the middle of the road, you're bound to get run over."

Supporters of the open primaries amendment will need to collect 35,017 signatures from registered voters by May 7, 2024, to appear on the November 2024 ballot. The backers plan to educate and engage the public on the issue at places like the Levitt Shell or Department of Motor Vehicles in Sioux Falls and throughout 2023 as they gather signatures, according to Joe Kirby, chair of South Dakota Open Primaries.

"This is all about fairness and better government," Kirby said. "Our slogan is 'let all voters vote.'"

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.

Registered voters in South Dakota
As of April 3, 2023



Source: South Dakota Secretary of State

Groton Daily Independent
Thursday, April 20, 2023 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 286 ~ 6 of 87

SD sees continued decline in refugee arrivals while Ukrainian sponsorships grow

BY: MAKENZIE HUBER - APRIL 19, 2023 3:08 PM

South Dakota welcomed its lowest number of international refugees in recent memory last year, despite an increase in the number of refugees allowed in the U.S., according to a state report. But resettlement numbers are three times higher in the state when factoring in nontraditional programs, such as Ukrainian resettlements.

The president decides the maximum number of refugees the country will accept before each fiscal year. President Donald Trump slashed the refugee ceiling to 18,000 for fiscal year 2020 and 15,000 for fiscal year 2021, the lowest an administration has ever set. President Joe Biden later increased that year's maximum to 62,500. Despite this increase, both years saw about 11,000 refugees arrive in America.

Biden set a goal of 125,000 for fiscal year 2022, but the number of refugees admitted has been slow to bounce back. About 25,000 arrived in the country and 49 arrived in South Dakota, down from 52 the previous year and a recent high of 439 in 2016.

That's because South Dakota, the federal government and national organizations lack resources, said Lutheran Social Services president Rebecca Kiesow-Knudsen. LSS has overseen refugee resettlement in South Dakota since 2000, providing case management, employment services, interpreter services and English language training. The program is funded at the federal level.

"A lot of this takes manpower," Kiesow-Knudsen said. "Over the course of the last five years, there's been fewer refugees arriving nationally, which means organizations have scaled back staffing to meet the appropriate level of response, so they had less capacity for this increase and it's hard to rebuild capacity."

National organizations were also tied up in new, nontraditional resettlement programs specifically for Ukrainians and Afghans in the last year. Those don't factor into the official resettlement numbers highlighted in the report, Kiesow-Knudsen said.

The state accepted another 68 Ukrainian cases last year through the national sponsorship program — 115 Ukrainians total. Kiesow-Knudsen said South Dakota "didn't see very many arrivals at all" of Afghan cases.

Ukrainians affected by the Russian invasion and Afghans extracted by the United States in 2021 don't have a legal refugee status, but rather a "humanitarian parole status," which is a temporary immigration status used in urgent crises. Traditional refugee status offers a path to permanent U.S. residency, whereas parolees are granted permission to live and work in the U.S. for two years. Refugees are defined as individuals who are unable to return to their home country due to a well-founded fear of persecution.

The Ukrainian sponsorship program, Uniting for Ukraine, is an unprecedented federal policy allowing tens of thousands of Americans to support an unlimited number of refugees. It's also become the largest private refugee sponsorship program in U.S. history, according to CBS News.

Many of the Ukrainians in South Dakota have settled on the western side of the state, Kiesow-Knudsen said, because that's where their sponsors are located — many of whom are Ukrainians themselves. The shift to western South Dakota resettlements has meant more drive time and effort for Sioux Falls-based LSS, including accessing telecommunications and telehealth services.

Of traditional resettlement, Congolese people made up the largest demographic group arriving in South Dakota last year, accounting for 25 of the 49 resettlements. Almost half of the refugees who arrived in the United States in fiscal year 2022 hailed from the Democratic Republic of Congo or Syria. The recent Congolese refugees are fleeing from outbreaks of violence in the eastern side of the country.

While the number of U.S. resettlements more than doubled in the last year, one reason South Dakota experienced fewer resettlements may be because many are "family tie cases," Kiesow-Knudsen said.

"An individual who has been approved might have a family member in another state, so typically that'll be given priority of where they'll be resettled," she said.

Knudsen added that resettlement organizations are "signaling they anticipate there'll be an increase" in traditional refugee resettlement in the coming years. Resettlement can take 18 months to two years, so

it will take time, she said.

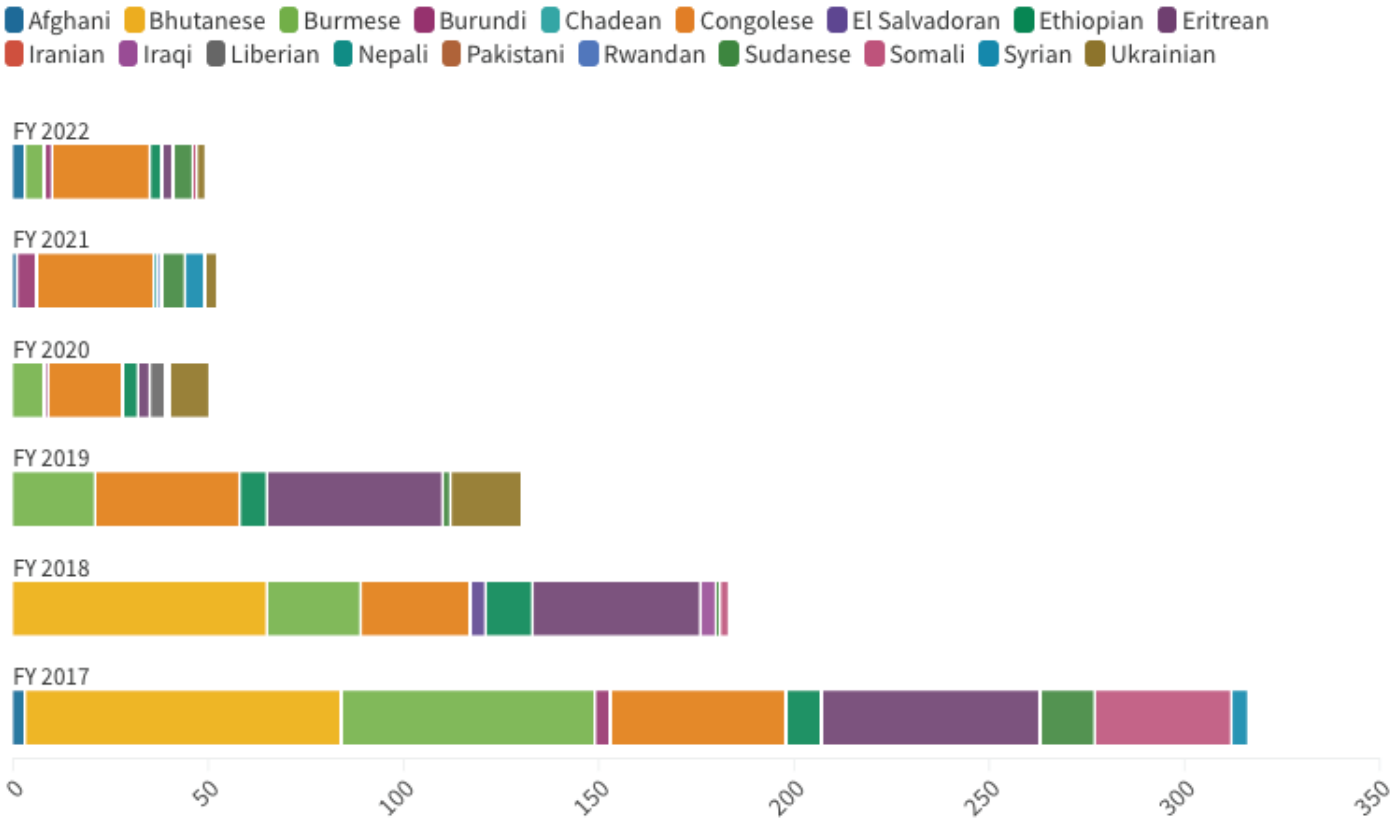
"South Dakota is a very welcoming place for individuals who are fleeing their home not by choice but because of violence in their home country," Kiesow-Knudsen said. "We have a strong track record of providing community for these individuals, and I think that stands."

More than 216,000 Ukrainians were sponsored and entered into America as of February. The Biden administration discontinued parole for Afghan refugees in October 2022, focusing on resettling evacuees who qualify for immigration programs with permanent legal status. The U.S. resettled roughly 86,000 Afghans as of September 2022.

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.

Refugee resettlement in South Dakota

Traditional refugee resettlement in South Dakota has shrunk from 316 cases in fiscal year 2017 to 49 cases in fiscal year 2022. Fiscal year 2016 have 439 arrivals, but demographics are not available online.



Source: Fiscal Year 2022 Report of Refugee Resettlement in South Dakota, Fiscal Year 2021 Report of Refugee Resettlement in South Dakota

Groton Daily Independent
Thursday, April 20, 2023 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 286 ~ 8 of 87

U.S. House GOP unveils plan on debt ceiling, spending cuts; Biden slams 'wacko notions'

BY: JENNIFER SHUTT - APRIL 19, 2023 3:54 PM

WASHINGTON — U.S. House Republicans unveiled a debt limit proposal Wednesday that would lift the nation's borrowing capacity by $1.5 trillion or suspend it through March.

The bill, introduced by Speaker Kevin McCarthy, carries along with it numerous Republican initiatives that are unlikely to get the bipartisan support necessary to clear the divided Congress.

That ensures the legislation doesn't have the Democratic backing necessary to move through the U.S. Senate and avoid a first-ever default on the debt as soon as mid-June.

The debt limit part of the package is somewhat different from the way Congress typically addresses extensions of borrowing authority — either suspending the debt limit through a certain date or raising the debt ceiling to a dollar figure.

Under this proposal, if the Treasury Department borrows an additional $1.5 trillion by, for example, mid-February, the debt limit would be breached at that point. But if that $1.5 trillion of borrowing authority lasts past March 31, then the debt limit suspension would expire on April 1.

The decision to introduce the GOP-only measure is the latest in a series of back-and-forth sniping between Democrats and Republicans over how to address the nation's debt limit.

Now that House Republicans have introduced their 320-page bill, McCarthy said, President Joe Biden has "no more" excuses not to negotiate.

"President Biden has a choice — come to the table and stop playing partisan political games, or cover his ears, refuse to negotiate and risk bumbling his way into the first default in our nation's history," McCarthy said on the House floor, outlining the GOP bill.

Biden and Democratic leaders, however, have repeatedly called on House Republicans to release their budget resolution for the upcoming fiscal year, so they can compare that 10-year tax and spending blueprint to Biden's budget request.

The House GOP hasn't yet done that or given a timeline for when they will, but McCarthy said during his speech that Budget Chair Jodey Arrington of Texas would lead debate on the debt limit bill.

Biden, speaking from the International Union of Operating Engineers Local 77 in Accokeek, Maryland, rebuked Republicans for tying dozens of conservative policy positions to their debt limit bill.

"They say they're going to default unless I agree to all these wacko notions they have," Biden said. "Default would be worse than totally irresponsible."

"America's never defaulted on our debt, which has accumulated over 200 years," Biden added.

Vote seen next week

McCarthy plans to put the bill on the House floor for a vote as soon as next week, though it wasn't immediately clear Wednesday if it would have the votes necessary to pass that chamber. Conservative Republicans have been pushing for additional add-ons that could deter centrist GOP lawmakers from voting for the measure.

- McCarthy said Wednesday from the floor the bill would:
- Set discretionary spending levels during the upcoming fiscal year to last year's levels, leading to at least $130 billion in cuts to federal departments and agencies. That category of funding includes about one-third of the federal budget.
- Cap spending increases to 1% per year.
- "Claw back" unspent COVID-19 funding.
- Repeal the $80 billion funding boost for the Internal Revenue Service that Democrats approved last summer.
- "End green giveaways," which includes eliminating the clean energy tax credits that Democrats approved as part of their signature climate change and health care package last summer.
- Bar the Biden administration from implementing its student loan debt forgiveness plan, which is cur-

rently awaiting a decision by the U.S. Supreme Court.

• Require that "adults without dependents, earn a paycheck, and learn new skills" in order to qualify for federal aid, though he didn't say which programs that work requirement would apply to.

Senate passage prospects dim

If the U.S. House can send the legislation to the Senate, it's unlikely it could gain the 60 votes needed to move past the legislative filibuster and towards final passage in the Democratically controlled chamber.

Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, a New York Democrat, with input from Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, a Kentucky Republican, could put together a bipartisan group of senators to negotiate a path forward for a bill that can pass the Senate.

The two could also continue waiting on Biden and McCarthy to hash out a bipartisan deal.

Biden and McCarthy met on Feb. 1 to discuss the debt limit, though the talks didn't produce a bipartisan compromise.

McCarthy repeatedly criticized Biden during his floor speech Wednesday and on Monday after traveling to the New York Stock Exchange to press for Republicans' approach to addressing the debt limit.

McCarthy and Republicans maintain that any debt limit legislation must include curbs on future spending, while Biden and Democrats say those negotiations should take place within the annual budget and appropriations process.

Schumer said Wednesday morning, before McCarthy released the House GOP debt limit bill, that the speaker was "still short of the support he needs to pass a debt ceiling bill, because the chasm is too big between moderates and the hard right extremists who are glad to see the economy taken hostage in exchange for their priorities."

Schumer called on Republicans to "work with Democrats to avoid default without brinkmanship, without blackmail, without hostage-taking."

"If Republicans drop their hostage-taking and approach Democrats in good faith, the default crisis can be resolved," Schumer said. "But if Speaker McCarthy does not change course, he will be leading America into default of not paying our debts for the first time."

Debt ceiling reached

The federal government reached its $31.385 trillion debt ceiling on Jan. 19.

The Treasury Department has been using accounting maneuvers known as extraordinary measures since then to keep the nation under its borrowing limit, though those moves are limited.

The federal government could exhaust those measures as soon as mid-June, though the default date could be anytime between then and September, according to estimates from the Treasury Department and the Congressional Budget Office.

If the country crosses that so-called x-date, it would be the first time in the nation's history that it's defaulted on its debt.

After that, the Treasury Department would be limited to spending the cash it has on hand, no longer able to borrow money in order to pay for all of the spending Congress has approved.

That would likely lead to delayed payments on all federal programs, including Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid, federal employee paychecks, public lands programs and thousands of other line items that make up the federal budget.

A default would likely lead to an economic downturn as well, possibly pushing the world into a recession depending on how long it lasts.

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

Groton Daily Independent
Thursday, April 20, 2023 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 286 ~ 10 of 87

U.S. Supreme Court holds off on abortion pill ruling until midnight Friday

BY: JENNIFER SHUTT - APRIL 19, 2023 3:45 PM

WASHINGTON — U.S. Supreme Court Justice Samuel Alito postponed a ruling on access to the abortion pill until Friday as the high court continues considering arguments from anti-abortion organizations and the federal government.

Alito's two-day-long pause, issued Wednesday, keeps a ruling from U.S. District Court for the Northern District of Texas Judge Matthew Kacsmaryk on hold. The Supreme Court is considering whether to allow mifepristone to stay on the market amid the appeals process, or implement changes.

This is the second short-term stay from Alito. The first, issued on Friday, April 14, was set to expire Wednesday at midnight.

Kacsmaryk's ruling in early April suspended the U.S. Food and Drug Administration's 2000 approval of mifepristone, the first of two prescriptions used in medication abortions.

The federal government had requested the 5th Circuit place that ruling on pause during the appeal, but that three-judge panel declined.

Instead, the 5th Circuit ruled that while the case advances, doctors would need to prescribe mifepristone under the guidelines that were in place before the FDA made changes during 2016 and 2021.

That ruling would have meant that mifepristone would no longer have been approved for up to 10 weeks gestation, but seven weeks.

Patients would have to attend three in-person doctor visits instead of one, all adverse events would have to be reported to the FDA and prescribing and administration of the medication would have reverted to pre-2016 instructions.

It would have prevented doctors from prescribing mifepristone via telehealth or the medication being sent through the mail.

The generic version of mifepristone would no longer have been approved.

Alito's second, short-term stay of both lower court rulings ensures that access to mifepristone stays exactly as it is now through Friday at 11:59 p.m.

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

Groton Daily Independent
Thursday, April 20, 2023 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 286 ~ 11 of 87

Abortion services to remain available at the VA after close U.S. Senate vote

Thune and Rounds vote to scrap new Biden administration rule

BY: ASHLEY MURRAY - APRIL 19, 2023 8:17 PM

WASHINGTON — The Department of Veterans Affairs can continue providing service members with access to abortion in cases of life-threatening complications, rape or incest, after the U.S. Senate narrowly blocked a measure Wednesday that would have scrapped a new Biden administration rule.

The VA policy, which also includes abortion counseling, was established after the U.S. Supreme Court struck down nearly 40 years of the federally protected right to abortion.

The Senate vote occurred against the backdrop of another looming Supreme Court decision, expected Friday, that could limit access nationwide to mifepristone, a Food and Drug Administration-approved pill used for abortion, and to treat incomplete miscarriages.

The Senate measure was blocked almost entirely along party lines in a 48-51 vote after a day of dueling press conferences and messaging from each side of the aisle.

Sen. Joe Manchin III of West Virginia, the lone Democrat to co-sponsor the bill, voted in favor, as did Republican South Dakota Sens. John Thune and Mike Rounds. GOP Sens. Susan Collins of Maine and Lisa Murkowski of Alaska voted against.

President Joe Biden had promised a veto.

Tuberville leads opposition

The joint resolution — spearheaded by Republican Sen. Tommy Tuberville of Alabama and co-sponsored by three dozen GOP senators and Manchin — aimed to overturn the September 2022 rule issued by the VA following the U.S. Supreme Court's Dobbs decision that revoked the constitutional right to an abortion.

The June 2022 decision overturning Roe v. Wade and Planned Parenthood v. Casey returned to state legislatures the decision to allow or ban abortion.

The Biden administration rule permits VA employees, working in their federal capacity, to offer abortion services with narrow exceptions, regardless of the location of the VA facility. The VA did not previously provide the service.

Tuberville, the retired Auburn University football coach, argues the new rule violates the Veterans Health Care Act of 1992.

Section 106 of the law that states the VA "may provide" for women pap smears, mammograms and general reproductive care, including menopause management, "but not including under this section infertility services, abortions, or pregnancy care (including prenatal and delivery care) except for such care relating to a pregnancy that is complicated or in which the risks of complication are increased by a service-connected condition."

Tuberville introduced the bill under the Congressional Review Act, a tool that Congress can use to overturn some federal actions and rules.

"It's illegal. Congress banned abortion in the VA 30 years ago, and it was unanimous. One of the senators who voted for that bill was President Joe Biden. We have never repealed this law, 30 years, we've never repealed it. It's still on the books, and the administration needs to follow the law," Tuberville said at a Wednesday press conference alongside Sen. Roger Marshall of Kansas and Manchin.

Senators approved the bill on a voice vote in 1992; the White House did not respond when asked if Biden, then a member of the Senate, was present for the vote.

Tuberville also argued that taxpayer dollars should not be used by the VA to pay for the abortions because Congress did not specifically appropriate the funding.

Congress does not appropriate dollar amounts for each specific category of medical procedures or medications.

Hyde amendment

Additionally, government health care programs included under Congress' annual funding bills are subject to the Hyde Amendment, which prohibits taxpayer-funded abortions except in the case of a life-threatening pregnancy complication, or for pregnancies that are a result of rape or incest.

Since 1977, all versions of the Hyde Amendment have included, at minimum, a life-saving exception for the pregnant person.

When asked whether he supports the exceptions outlined in the Hyde Amendment, Tuberville said, "This is not about, not really about abortion as much as it's about the law and the process in which they're taking (at) the VA."

According to a report in Bloomberg Law, the VA has performed 34 abortions since the rule was issued in September.

The VA declined to confirm that number to States Newsroom.

In a statement, the agency said, "VA remains committed to providing Veterans reproductive health services to ensure their health and well-being, including access to abortion counseling (as part of our pregnancy-options counseling) and abortions when the life or health of the pregnant Veteran or VA beneficiary would be endangered if the pregnancy were carried to term or when the pregnancy is the result of rape or incest."

"As VA Secretary Denis McDonough has said, 'Pregnant Veterans and VA beneficiaries deserve to have access to medically necessary world-class reproductive care when they need it most. That's what our nation owes them, and that's what we at VA will deliver,'" continued the statement from VA Press Secretary Terrance Hayes.

Tuberville's resolution comes as he also blocks nearly nearly 200 military promotions, in need of Senate approval, as a protest of the Defense Department's policy that grants service members leave and travel allowances for "non-covered reproductive health care," including abortion procedures.

Outrage from Democrats

Democrats gathered outside the Capitol Wednesday with veterans and reproductive care advocates to speak out against Tuberville's bill.

Led by Majority Leader Chuck Schumer of New York and Sen. Tammy Baldwin of Wisconsin, lawmakers at the press conference characterized the bill as "cruel."

"The Biden administration has taken steps to make sure women who have served our country in uniform can get the basic reproductive care they need when their health is at risk, or in cases of rape or incest. And now Republicans want to overturn that policy and force women to stay pregnant. That is what we are talking about," said Sen. Patty Murray of Washington, who sits on the Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs.

"Women veterans have risked their lives for this country, and they're now being told by Republicans if you need an abortion care to save your life, tough. That is unthinkably cruel," she said.

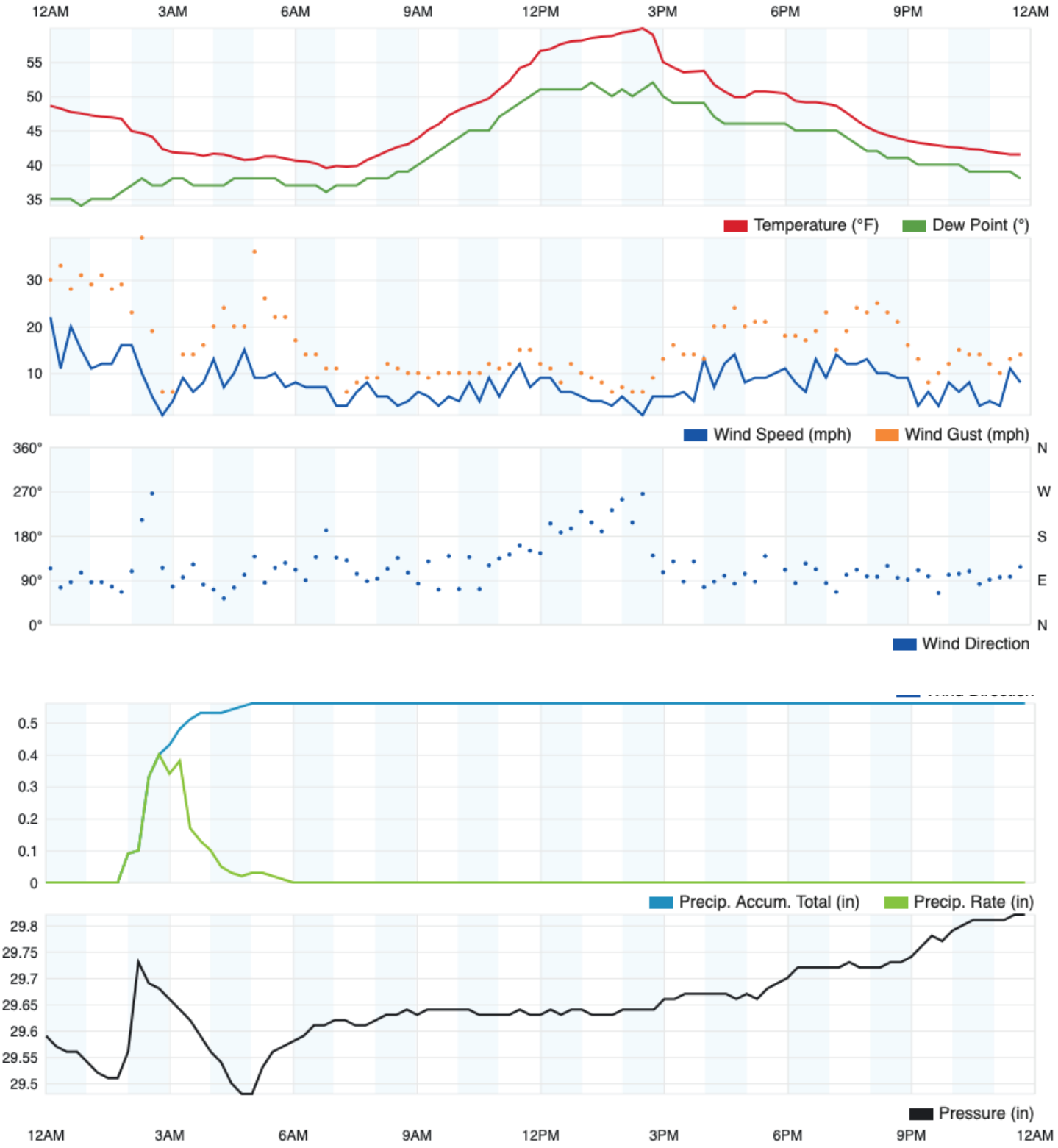
Sen. Tammy Duckworth, an Iraq war veteran who lost her legs and the use of her right arm in combat, said she wants to know "what exactly was the moment that Republicans in the Senate no longer believe that I have the right to bodily autonomy?"

"Here's what I know, this country and those Republicans were certainly all right with me making the choice to use my body as I saw fit when I signed up to fight wars on this country's behalf," continued the Illinois Democrat. "They were just fine for me to decide to use my arms and legs to fly a Black Hawk helicopter into combat, and no one minded, and in fact honored me, when I lost those limbs in defense of this great nation."

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

Groton Daily Independent
Thursday, April 20, 2023 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 286 ~ 13 of 87

Yesterdays Groton's Weather Graphs

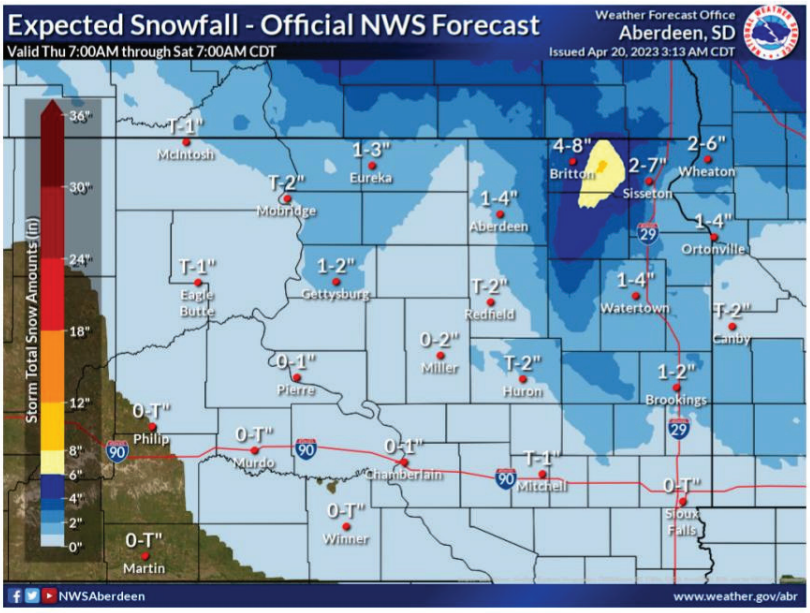


Groton Daily Independent
Thursday, April 20, 2023 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 286 ~ 14 of 87

Today	Tonight	Friday	Friday Night	Saturday	Saturday Night	Sunday
 60%	 50% 50%	 60%	 30%			
Rain/Snow Likely and Patchy Fog	Blustery. Chance Rain/Snow then Chance Snow Showers	Snow Showers Likely and Patchy Blowing Snow	Chance Snow Showers and Patchy Blowing Snow	Mostly Cloudy and Breezy	Mostly Cloudy and Blustery then Partly Cloudy	Mostly Sunny
High: 43 °F	Low: 27 °F	High: 34 °F	Low: 24 °F	High: 37 °F	Low: 18 °F	High: 42 °F

Snowfall Thursday Night-Friday

April 20, 2023
3:24 AM



Timing

- Snow/Rain mix today eastern SD/WC MN
- Occasional Snow tonight through Friday morning.
- Snow showers ending over central SD Friday, and much of eastern SD/WC MN Friday night.

How Much Snow

- Highest amounts over the Prairie Coteau (Sisseton Hills). Confidence in amounts low.

Impacts

- Reduced visibility primarily when snow is falling, due to winds out of the northwest gusting 30 to 45+ mph Thursday night through Friday afternoon.
- Melting will result in low confidence on the exact snowfall amounts

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

National Weather Service
Aberdeen, SD

A Dose of Winter

Groton Daily Independent
Thursday, April 20, 2023 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 286 ~ 15 of 87

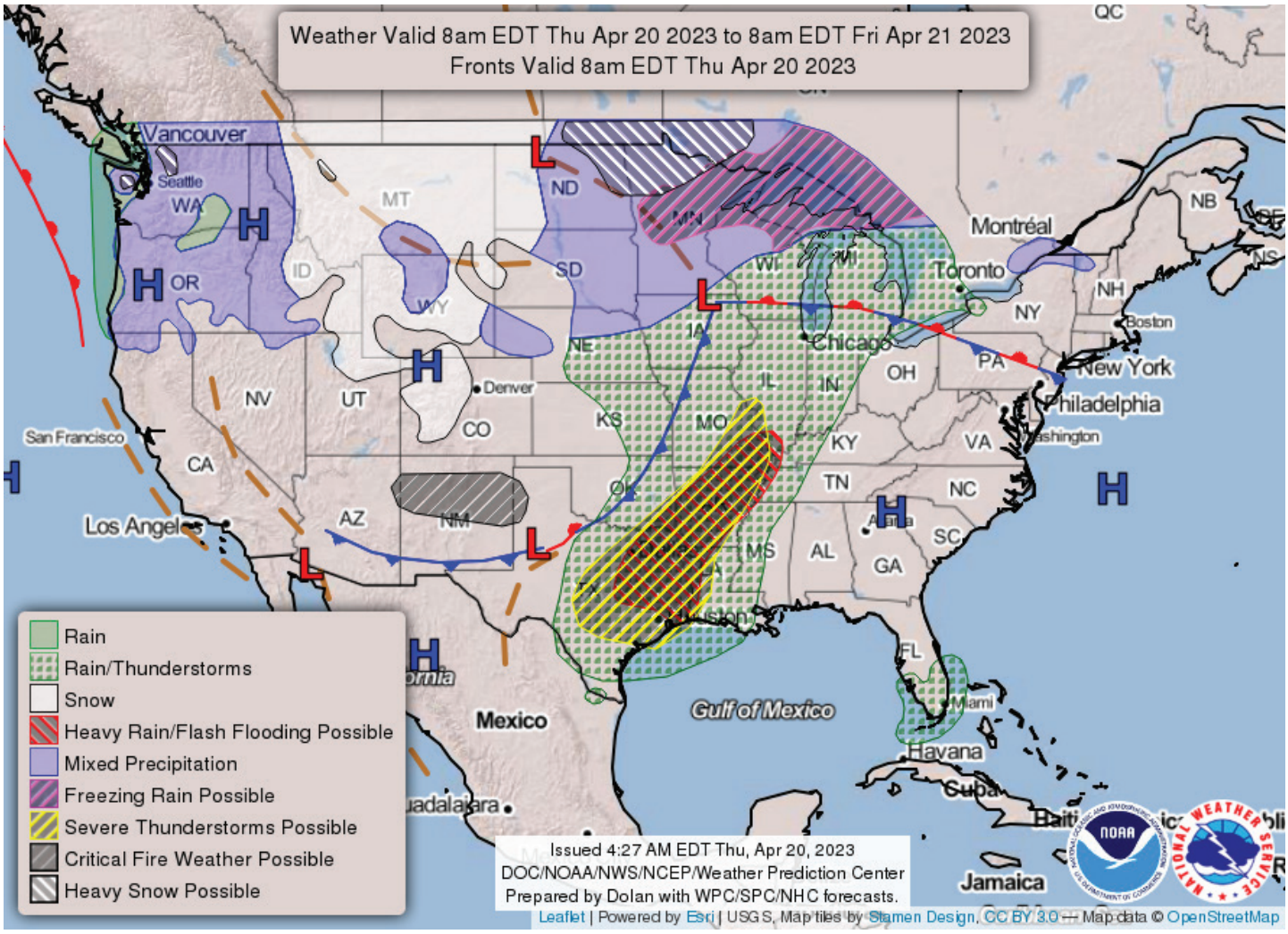
Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 60 °F at 2:31 PM
Low Temp: 39 °F at 6:49 AM
Wind: 39 mph at 2:14 AM
Precip: : 0.00 (Yesterday total: 0.63)

Day length: 13 hours, 49 minutes

Today's Info

Record High: 93 in 1980
Record Low: 11 in 2013
Average High: 60
Average Low: 33
Average Precip in April.: 1.04
Precip to date in April.: 1.39
Average Precip to date: 3.10
Precip Year to Date: 5.32
Sunset Tonight: 8:26:05 PM
Sunrise Tomorrow: 6:34:49 AM



Groton Daily Independent
Thursday, April 20, 2023 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 286 ~ 16 of 87

Today in Weather History

April 20, 1966: Canadian high pressure brought frigid air to the Rockies and northern Plains. Record lows included: 3 below in Scottsbluff, Nebraska, two below in Cheyenne and Casper, Wyoming, two above in Rapid City, 11 above in Fargo, Williston, and Aberdeen, and 15 in Huron.

April 20, 2007: Severe thunderstorms moved through parts of central and northeast South Dakota during the afternoon and evening hours, producing large hail. The most significant hail measured 1.75 inches in diameter and fell 3 miles east of Westport, in Brown County.

1901 - A spring storm produced unusally heavy snow in northeast Ohio. Warren received 35.5 inches in thirty-six hours, and 28 inches fell at Green Hill. Akron OH established April records of 15.6 inches in 24 hours, and 26.6 inches for the month. Pittsburgh PA established April records of 12.7 inches in 24 hours, and 13.5 inches for the month. (David Ludlum) (The Weather Channel)

1912: A tornado moved north-northeast from 5 miles southeast of Rush Center, KS across the east half of Bison, KS. Farms were wiped out near Rush Center. The loss at Bison was $70,000 as half of the town, about 50 homes, were damaged or destroyed. There were 15 injuries in town. A dozen farms were nearly wiped out. Debris from the farmhouses was carried for 8 miles. A senior man who made light of the storm was killed with his granddaughter on a farm 2 miles southwest of Bison.

1920: Tornadoes in Mississippi and Alabama killed 219 persons. Six tornadoes of F4 intensity were reported. Aberdeen, Mississippi was hard hit by an F4 tornado that killed 22 people. This same tornado killed 20 in Marion County, Alabama. Nine people in one family died in Winston County, Alabama.

1952 - The tankers Esso Suez and Esso Greensboro crashed in a thick fog off the coast of Morgan City LA. Only five of the Greensboro's crew survived after the ship bursts into flame. (David Ludlum)

1984: A temperature of 106 degrees at Del Rio, Texas set a new record high for April.

1987 - Fifty-two cities in the central and eastern U.S. reported new record high temperatures for the date. The high of 92 degrees at Memphis TN was a record for April, and the high of 94 at Little Rock AR equalled their April record. (The National Weather Summary)

1988 - A storm in the western U.S. brought heavy rain to parts of California. Mount Wilson was soaked with 4.15 inches of rain in 24 hours. The heavy rain caused some flooding and mudslides in the Los Angeles area, and a chain reaction collision of vehicles along the Pomona Freeway which resulted in 26 injuries. (Storm Data) (The National Weather Summary)

1989 - Hot weather spread from the southwestern U.S. into the Great Plains Region. Twenty-three cities reported new record high temperatures for the date. The afternoon high of 104 degrees at Tucson AZ was an April record, and highs of 87 at Provo UT, 90 at Pueblo CO, and 85 at Salt Lake City UT, equalled April records. (The National Weather Summary)

1990 - A fast moving Pacific storm produced heavy snow in the central mountains and the Upper Arkansas Valley of Colorado, with a foot of snow reported at Leadville. Thunderstorms in the south central U.S. produced wind gusts to 76 mph at Tulsa OK, and heavy rain which caused flooding of Cat Claw Creek in the Abilene TX area. Lightning struck the building housing a fish farm in Scott AR killing 10,000 pounds of fish. Many of the fish died from the heat of the fire. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

2006 - Up to five feet of snow falls in the Dakotas. I-94 and other highways were closed, power was out for thousands and caused at least four deaths.

2004: A strong F3 tornado moved across the town of Utica, near LaSalle-Peru in north-central Illinois. This tornado destroyed several homes, a machinery building, and a tavern. The roof of the tavern collapsed, killing eight people inside; many of these people had come into town from nearby mobile homes, seeking sturdier shelter. The tornado dissipated on a steep bluff on the northeast side of the city. Another tornado developed shortly afterward, crossing I-80 near Ottawa. Several other tornadoes developed across north central and northeast Illinois, affecting areas around Joliet and Kankakee.

Groton Daily Independent
Thursday, April 20, 2023 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 286 ~ 17 of 87

ALL THAT AND MORE?

It was the first Sunday for the new pastor in the little country church. His sermon was short, but his prayer was rather lengthy. After the service was over, two members got together to share their opinions of the new pastor.

"That preacher sure can pray," said one.

"Yes, he can," agreed the other. "He prayed for things that the last preacher didn't even know anything about."

Prayer involves responsibility and accountability. As God's children, we are responsible to go to our heavenly Father in prayer and ask for what we need. As for God our heavenly Father, He is accountable to answer our prayers because we are His children. It is important, however, that we understand the child/heavenly Father relationship. Because we are God's children, we are to go to Him any time and every time we have a need. We are to ask for anything and everything, whenever we have a need and wherever we happen to be, as long as the request is in agreement with His will and for our spiritual growth and wellbeing. All of life comes from God and all of our life is given to us to honor God. So, if what we ask will honor and glorify Him - the needs that we have that are in agreement with His Word, His will, and His way - we know He will grant.

Remember this: If it concerns us, it concerned Him first, and He will do whatever it takes on His part to honor His promises if we are faithful to Him in all our ways.

Prayer: Help us, Father, to rely completely upon You for everything we need, trusting in You always. May our heart's desires agree with what honors You. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: Ask me and I will tell you remarkable secrets you do not know about things to come. Jeremiah 33:3

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

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 Dueling Duo Baseball/Softball Fundraiser at the Legion Post #39 6-11:30pm
04/06/2023 Groton Career Development Event
04/08/2023 Lion's Club Easter Egg Hunt 10am Sharp at the City Park (Saturday a week before Easter)
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
06/17/2023 Groton Triathalon
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

The Groton Independent
Printed & Mailed Weekly Edition

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Groton Daily Independent
Thursday, April 20, 2023 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 286 ~ 20 of 87

WINNING NUMBERS

MEGA MILLIONS

WINNING NUMBERS:
04.18.23

7 9 15 19 25 | 4

MegaPlier: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
$20,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 1 Days 15 Hrs 46 Mins 19 Secs

PREVIOUS RESULTS

LOTTO AMERICA

WINNING NUMBERS:
04.19.23

19 40 41 48 49 | 5

All Star Bonus: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
$2,400,000

NEXT DRAW: 2 Days 15 Hrs 46 Mins 19 Secs

PREVIOUS RESULTS

LUCKY FOR LIFE

WINNING NUMBERS:
04.19.23

2 3 18 23 31 | 10

TOP PRIZE:
$7,000/week

NEXT DRAW: 15 Hrs 16 Mins 19 Secs

PREVIOUS RESULTS

DAKOTA CASH

WINNING NUMBERS:
04.19.23

6 10 11 17 26

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
$32,000

NEXT DRAW: 2 Days 15 Hrs 46 Mins 19 Secs

PREVIOUS RESULTS

POWERBALL

DOUBLE PLAY

WINNING NUMBERS:
04.19.23

9 17 22 24 31 | 5

TOP PRIZE:
$10,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 2 Days 15 Hrs 45 Mins 20 Secs

PREVIOUS RESULTS

POWERBALL

WINNING NUMBERS:
04.19.23

4 11 21 38 64 | 11

Power Play: 3x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
$20,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 2 Days 15 Hrs 45 Mins 20 Secs

PREVIOUS RESULTS

Groton Daily Independent
Thursday, April 20, 2023 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 286 ~ 21 of 87

News from the Associated Press

US plans new forest protections, issues old-growth inventory

By MATTHEW BROWN Associated Press

BILLINGS, Mont. (AP) — The Biden administration has identified more than 175,000 square miles (453,000 square kilometers) of old growth and mature forests on U.S. government land and plans to craft a new rule to better protect the nation's woodlands from fires, insects and other side effects of climate change, federal officials planned to announce Thursday.

Results from the government's first-ever national inventory of mature and old-growth forests on federal land were obtained by The Associated Press in advance of a public release.

U.S. Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management lands combined have more than 50,000 square miles (129,000 square kilometers) of old growth forests and about 125,000 square miles (324,000 square kilometers) of mature forests, according to the inventory.

That's more than half the forested land managed by the two agencies, and it covers an area larger than California. Yet officials say those stands of older trees are under increasing pressure as climate change worsens wildfires, drought, disease and insects — and leaves some forests devastated.

Older forests "are struggling to keep up with the stresses of climate change," said USDA Under Secretary for Natural Resources and the Environment Homer Wilkes. "We must adapt quickly."

Representatives of the timber industry and some members of Congress have been skeptical about President Joe Biden's ambitions to protect older forests, which the Democrat unveiled last year on Earth Day.

They've urged the administration to instead concentrate on lessening wildfire dangers by thinning stands of trees where decades of fire suppression have allowed undergrowth to flourish, which can be a recipe for disaster when fires ignite.

Forest Service Chief Randy Moore appeared this week before a U.S. Senate committee where he was pressured by lawmakers from both sides of the aisle to speed up thinning work on federal forests.

Moore faced pointed questioning from U.S. Sen. John Barrasso of Wyoming, a Republican who warned the administration's conservation efforts could "lock Americans out of the public lands" by putting areas off-limits to timber harvests and other uses.

Most old growth forests in the Lower 48 states were logged during the past two centuries. Previous protections for older trees have come indirectly, such as the "roadless rule" adopted under former President Bill Clinton in 2001 that blocked logging on about a quarter of federal forests.

"There's a significant amount of mature and old growth trees that are already under protected status," said Nick Smith with the American Forest Resource Council, a timber industry group. "We're not calling for active management on environmentally-sensitive landscapes, but at least in areas where we can do thinning and wildfire mitigation fuels reduction. Federal land managers should already be doing that."

Administration officials announced Thursday they will be soliciting comments for a proposed rule that would "adapt current policies to protect, conserve and manage national forests and grasslands for climate resilience."

A formal rulemaking notice was expected to be published in the federal register in coming days. Further details were not immediately released.

Environmental groups had lobbied the administration to pursue new regulations for forests that would limit logging of older trees.

Blaine Miller-McFeeley with Earthjustice said he expects some logging would continue under a new rule, but conservation and recreational uses also would be promoted.

"We are still logging old growth and mature forests here at home," Miller-McFeeley said. "The focus has been largely on the number of board feet (harvested). It has not been focused on which trees are most scientifically smart to bring down for climate, for community protection from wildfires."

The age used to determine what counted as old growth varied widely by tree species – from 80 years

for gambel oaks, to 300 years for bristlecone pines.

Most of the old growth and mature forests are in western states such as Idaho, California, Montana and Oregon. But they're also in New England, around the Great Lakes and in southern states such as Arkansas, Kentucky and West Virginia, according to an online map posted by the Forest Service.

The most extensive old growth forests are dominated by pinyon and juniper trees and cover a combined 14,000 square miles (36,000 square kilometers), according to the inventory.

The inventory excluded federal lands in Alaska where an old growth analysis was ongoing.

Experts say large trees can store significant volumes of carbon dioxide and keep the gas from warming the planet as it enters the atmosphere.

Underlining the urgency of the issue are wildfires in California that killed thousands of giant sequoias in recent years. Lightning-sparked wildfires killed thousands of the trees in 2021, adding to a two-year death toll of up to nearly a fifth of Earth's largest trees. They are concentrated in about 70 groves scattered along the western side of the Sierra Nevada range.

Global wildfires in 2021 emitted the equivalent of about 7.1 billion tons (6.4 billion metric tons) of carbon dioxide, according to the Copernicus Atmosphere Monitoring Service. That's equal to about 18% of global CO2 emissions from coal, oil and other energy sources recorded in 2021 by the International Energy Agency.

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On Twitter follow Matthew Brown @MatthewBrownAP

Editorial Roundup: South Dakota

By The Associated Press undefined

Yankton Press & Dakotan. April 17, 2023.

Editorial: Noem's Executive Order And A Broader Audience

Make no mistake on this: An executive order signed by Gov. Kristi Noem last week to "further protect the 2nd Amendment rights of South Dakotans," as she described it, wasn't really about or for South Dakotans.

Otherwise, the executive order, which would prohibit many state government agencies from dealing with businesses that are determined to discriminate against "a firearm-related entity," would have been signed at the state capitol in Pierre before a group of South Dakota gun enthusiasts and advocates. It would still look like a political stunt — what doesn't these days? — but at least it would be political theater aimed directly at South Dakotans, the very people who elected and reelected Noem as governor.

Instead, this executive order was signed at the National Rifle Association's (NRA) annual forum in Indianapolis. In fact, she signed the order on stage during her speech, where she was joined by NRA CEO (and notable non-South Dakotan) Wayne LaPierre.

"South Dakota is setting the standard for the most Second Amendment-friendly state in the nation," Noem declared.

But she didn't declare it to you, South Dakotans.

The governor made that statement and signed this executive order elsewhere, in a distant national spotlight and in front of a crowd that would make up a portion of her political base should Noem decide to run for president.

Thus, this measure really isn't about South Dakota.

In fact, an NRA-backed measure very similar to this was introduced during the 2022 legislative session, KELO reported, but it was defeated in the Senate Commerce and Energy Committee. It was opposed by the South Dakota Bankers Association, the Independent Community Bankers of South Dakota and other business-advocacy groups — entities that are mostly based here and work for South Dakotans.

So, this executive order could be seen not only as a piece of political calculus but also as an end-around to defy the Legislature. (It does appear state lawmakers may take up the topic of this executive order again during the 2024 session.)

This episode is reminiscent of when the governor pushed through a bill last year banning trans athletes from competing in girls' sports, after which Noem immediately began running a national television ad

touting her leadership. It didn't matter that the issue rarely comes up here and there was already a protocol in place to deal with it. It needed to be politically useful. This action, too, was meant for a broader audience, not really for South Dakota consumption.

This has become Noem's style. It could be called her governing style rather than her campaign style, but it seems there is little difference.

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Madison Daily Leader. April 17, 2023.

Editorial: Could it really happen? Paying high school athletes

There was a time when a good athlete in high school had a chance to earn a scholarship to college, just for playing a sport. Then came O'Bannon vs. NCAA, a lawsuit that resulted in a ruling that the NCAA's long-held practice of barring payments to athletes violated anti-trust laws, thereby allowing college athletes to be paid.

Now it appears it's heading to South Dakota high schools.

Last week, the South Dakota High School Activities Association at its meeting tabled a constitutional amendment describing how athletes could be paid for the use of their name, image and likeness. Currently, the SDHSAA constitution says that an athlete's image or a personal appearance cannot be used to promote a commercial or profit-making event, and the amendment was intended to clarify rules allowing payments.

We believe the SDHSAA should reinforce its current rules to support the ideology that South Dakota high school athletes remain amateurs.

In fairness, the tabled amendment is intended to prevent the inevitable corruption that will come with paying high school athletes as professionals. The proposed amendment would have set standards, for example, that would prevent payment for certain performance, such as how many points are scored, winning or losing games (which could attract gamblers to work with high school athletes to fix games) and students could not endorse alcohol, tobacco, vaping, controlled substances, gambling, banned athletic substances or other illegal substances or activities.

For some people in America, sports have become the most important thing in young people's lives, well above academics, social development, faith lives or other activities. Parents spend tens of thousands of dollars to boost their children's skills in sports, while traveling to locations on weekends and during the summer.

Talented athletes are already raised in the public eye far above students who succeed in the classroom or other activities.We believe the emphasis on youth sports has already passed a reasonable tipping point, and paying high school athletes like professionals will make a bad situation worse.

If the proposal were to pass, schools would be responsible to police violations of the policy. Larger high schools in South Dakota may need to hire a "compliance officer" in the Athletic Department to monitor cash deals. Is that a good use of taxpayer funds intended for education?

We think high school athletes should remain amateurs, and we should prevent them from earning payments for their athletic prowess.

END

AP image of Mariupol hospital attack wins World Press Photo

By MIKE CORDER Associated Press

AMSTERDAM (AP) — Associated Press photographer Evgeniy Maloletka won the World Press Photo of the Year award on Thursday for his harrowing image of emergency workers carrying a pregnant woman through the shattered grounds of a maternity hospital in the Ukrainian city of Mariupol, in the chaotic aftermath of a Russian attack.

The Ukrainian photographer's March 9, 2022, image of the fatally wounded woman, her left hand on her bloodied lower left abdomen, drove home the horror of Russia's brutal onslaught in the eastern port city early in the war.

The 32-year-old woman, Iryna Kalinina, died of her injuries a half-hour after giving birth to the lifeless

body of her baby, named Miron.

"For me, it is a moment that all the time I want to forget, but I cannot. The story will always stay with me," Maloletka said in an interview before the announcement.

"Evgeniy Maloletka captured one of the most defining images of the Russia-Ukraine war amid incredibly challenging circumstances. Without his unflinching courage, little would be known of one of Russia's most brutal attacks. We are enormously proud of him," AP Senior Vice President and Executive Editor Julie Pace said.

AP Director of Photography J. David Ake added: "It's not often that a single image becomes seared into the world's collective memory. Evgeniy Maloletka lived up to the highest standards of photojournalism by capturing the 'decisive moment,' while upholding the tradition of AP journalists worldwide to shine a light on what would have otherwise remained unseen."

FILE- Iryna Kalinina, 32, an injured pregnant woman, is carried from a maternity hospital that was damaged during a Russian airstrike in Mariupol, Ukraine, on 9 March 2022. Associated Press photographer Evgeniy Maloletka won the World Press Photo of the Year award on Thursday, April 20, 2023, for this harrowing image of emergency workers carrying a pregnant woman through the shattered grounds of a maternity hospital in the Ukrainian city of Mariupol in the chaotic aftermath of a Russian attack. (AP Photo/Evgeniy Maloletka, File)

Maloletka, AP video journalist Mystyslav Chernov and AP producer Vasilisa Stepanenko, who are also Ukrainian, arrived in Mariupol just as Russia's full-scale invasion, which began on Feb. 24, 2022, sparked Europe's biggest conflict since World War II. They stayed for more than two weeks, chronicling the Russian military pounding the city and hitting hospitals and other civilian infrastructure. An AP investigation found that as many as 600 people may have been killed when a Mariupol theater being used as a bomb shelter was hit on March 16 last year.

The three were the only international journalists left in the city when they finally managed a risky escape.

World Press Photo Foundation Executive Director Joumana El Zein Khoury told the AP that jury members decided quickly Maloletka's image should win the prestigious prize.

She said it was "apparent from the beginning that it needed to win. All the jury members said it really from the beginning of the judging. And why? Because it really shows how war and especially in this case, the Ukrainian war, affects not only one generation, but multiple generations."

Maloletka said the team believed it was important to remain in Mariupol, despite the danger, "to collect the people's voices and collect their emotions and to show them all around the world."

A series of photos by Maloletka from besieged Mariupol won the European regional World Press Photo Stories award that was announced in March. Maloletka's images from Mariupol also have been honored with awards including the Knight International Journalism Award, the Visa d'or News Award and the Prix Bayeux Calvados-Normandie.

"I think it is really important that specifically a Ukrainian won the contest showing the atrocities against civilians by Russian forces in Ukraine," he said. "It is important that all the pictures we were doing in Mariupol became evidence of a war crime against Ukrainians."

In the three other global categories announced Thursday, two-time World Press Photo winner Mads

Nissen of Denmark won Photo Story of the Year for his series for Politiken and Panos Pictures, titled "The Price of Peace in Afghanistan," about daily life in Afghanistan in 2022.

Anush Babajanyan of Armenia won the Long-Term Project award for "Battered Waters" for VII Photo and National Geographic Society, and Egyptian photographer Mohamed Mahdy won the Open Format award for "Here, The Doors Don't Know Me."

"The four global winners represent the best photos and stories from the most important and urgent topics of 2022," Brent Lewis, global jury chair, and New York Times photo editor said in a statement. "They also help to continue the tradition of what it is possible to do with photography, and how photography helps us to see the universality of the human condition."

The four global winners were selected from more than 60,000 entries submitted by 3,752 entrants from 127 countries.

Regional winners announced earlier included Maya Levin for her image for AP of Israeli police beating mourners carrying the coffin of Al Jazeera journalist Shireen Abu Akleh, who was fatally shot while covering an Israeli military raid in the West Bank. Following international pressure, Israeli defense forces admitted it was likely that one of their soldiers shot the prominent correspondent. The IDF denied that the shooting was intentional and declared the case closed.

Pulitzer Prize-winning AP photographer Emilio Morenatti, who lost a leg while reporting in Afghanistan, was awarded an honorable mention for a series of images of people in Ukraine who have undergone amputations as a result of the Russian invasion.

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Follow AP's coverage of the war in Ukraine at https://apnews.com/hub/russia-ukraine

US invests in alternative solar tech, more solar for renters

By ISABELLA O'MALLEY and JENNIFER MCDERMOTT Associated Press

The Biden administration is set to announce more than $80 million in funding Thursday in a push to produce more solar panels in the U.S., make solar energy available to more people, and pursue superior alternatives to the ubiquitous sparkly panels made with silicon.

The Department of Energy will announce the investments in the morning and Energy Secretary Jennifer Granholm plans to visit a community solar site in Washington in the afternoon. Community solar refers to a variety of arrangements where renters and people who don't control their rooftops can still get their electricity from solar power. Two weeks ago, Vice President Kamala Harris announced what the administration said was the largest community solar effort ever in the United States.

Now it is set to spend $52 million on 19 solar projects across a dozen states, including $10 million from the infrastructure law, as well as $30 million on technologies that will help integrate solar electricity into the grid.

The DOE also selected 25 teams to participate in a $10 million competition designed to fast-track the efforts of solar developers working on community solar projects.

The Inflation Reduction Act already offers incentives to build large solar generation projects, such as renewable energy tax credits. But Ali Zaidi, White House national climate advisor, said the new money focuses on meeting the nation's climate goals in a way that benefits more communities.

"It's lifting up our workers and our communities. And that's, I think, what really excites us about this work," Zaidi said. "It's a chance not just to tackle the climate crisis, but to bring economic opportunity to every zip code of America."

The investments will help people save on their electricity bills and make the electricity grid more reliable, secure, and resilient in the face of a changing climate, said Becca Jones-Albertus, director of the energy department's Solar Energy Technologies Office.

Jones-Albertus said she's particularly excited about the support for community solar projects, since half of Americans don't live in a situation where they can buy their own solar and put in on the roof.

Michael Jung, executive director of the ICF Climate Center agreed. "Community solar can help address

equity concerns, as most current rooftop solar panels benefit owners of single-family homes," he said.

In typical community solar projects, households can invest in or subscribe to part of a larger solar array offsite. "What we're doing here is trying to unlock the community solar market," Jones-Albertus said.

The U.S. has 5.3 gigawatts of installed community solar capacity currently, according to the latest estimates. The goal is that by 2025, five million households will have access to it — about three times as many as today — saving $1 billion on their electricity bills, according to Jones-Albertus.

The new funding also highlights investment in a next generation of solar technologies, intended to wring more electricity out of the same amount of solar panels. Currently only about 20% of the sun's energy is converted to electricity in crystalline silicon solar cells, which is what most solar panels are made of. There has long been hope for higher efficiency, and today's announcement puts some money towards developing two alternatives: perovskite and cadmium telluride (CdTe) solar cells. Zaidi said this will allow the U.S. to be "the innovation engine that tackles the climate crisis."

Joshua Rhodes, a scientist at the University of Texas at Austin said the investment in perovskites is good news. They can be produced more cheaply than silicon and are far more tolerant of defects, he said. They can also be built into textured and curved surfaces, which opens up more applications for their use than traditional rigid panels. Most silicon is produced in China and Russia, Rhodes pointed out.

Cadmium telluride solar can be made quickly and at a low cost, but further research is needed to improve how efficient the material is at converting sunlight to electrons.

Cadmium is also toxic and people shouldn't be exposed to it. Jones-Albertus said that in cadmium telluride solar technology, the compound is encapsulated in glass and additional protective layers.

The new funds will also help recycle solar panels and reuse rare earth elements and materials. "One of the most important ways we can make sure CdTe remains in a safe compound form is ensuring that all solar panels made in the U.S. can be reused or recycled at the end of their life cycle," Jones-Albertus explained.

Recycling solar panels also reduces the need for mining, which damages landscapes and uses a lot of energy, in part to operate the heavy machinery. Eight of the projects in Thursday's announcement focus on improving solar panel recycling, for a total of about $10 million.

Clean energy is a fit for every state in the country, the administration said. One solar project in Shungnak, Alaska was able to eliminate the need to keep making electricity by burning diesel fuel, a method sometimes used in remote communities that is not healthy for people and contributes to climate change.

"Alaska is not a place that folks often think of when they think about solar, but this energy can be an economic and affordable resource in all parts of the country," said Jones-Albertus.

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Associated Press climate and environmental coverage receives support from several private foundations. See more about AP's climate initiative here. The AP is solely responsible for all content.

2 dead as severe storms, tornadoes move through central US

COLE, Okla. (AP) — Strong storms including tornadoes, winds and hail moved through parts of the central U.S., killing at least two people, causing injuries, destroying homes and leaving thousands without power.

The National Weather Service began issuing tornado and severe thunderstorm warnings Wednesday evening in Oklahoma, Kansas and Iowa, with forecasters warning people to find shelter.

Central Oklahoma saw multiple tornadoes, including one that raced through the communities of Shawnee and Cole on Wednesday night.

Authorities said at least two people were killed in the small town of Cole in McClain County, about 25 miles (41 kilometers) south of Oklahoma City. There also were injuries ranging from cuts and bruises to some requiring hospitalization, although the numbers weren't immediately clear as hundreds of people fanned out in search operations.

Power lines also were torn down, trees toppled and homes and other buildings badly damaged or destroyed. Oklahoma Baptist University in Shawnee and an airport received damage before the tornado moved off and weakened.

At the peak of the severe weather, more than 23,000 customers were without electricity throughout Oklahoma, according to poweroutage.us.

KFOR-TV reported that residents south of Oklahoma City reported being trapped in their shelters underground, mailboxes were blown away and emergency crews used GPS to find addresses, according to the McClain County sheriff.

Two people in the town of Cole rode out the storm in a manhole and were not hurt, the television station reported.

Storms this spring have spawned tornadoes in the South, Midwest and Northeast, killing dozens of people.

In this image taken from video, a massive funnel-shaped storm cloud makes its way over a road, as seen from a car, in Cole, Okla., Wednesday night, April 19, 2023. Strong storms, including tornadoes, winds and hail moved through parts of the Central U.S. on Wednesday, causing fatalities and injuries, destroying homes and leaving thousands without power. (KOCO-TV via AP)

The Supreme Court fight over an abortion pill: What's next?

By MARK SHERMAN and JESSICA GRESKO Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Supreme Court initially gave itself a deadline of Wednesday to decide whether women seeking access to a widely used abortion pill would face more restrictions while a court case plays out. But on the day of the highly anticipated decision the justices had only this to say: We need more time.

In a one-sentence order, the court said it now expects to act by Friday evening. There was no explanation of the reason for the delay.

The new abortion controversy comes less than a year after the Supreme Court's conservative majority overturned Roe v. Wade and allowed more than a dozen states to effectively ban abortion outright.

The following is a look at the drug at issue in the new case, how the case got to the nation's highest court and what the delay might say about what's going on.

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WHAT IS MIFEPRISTONE?

Mifepristone was approved for use by the Food and Drug Administration more than two decades ago. It has been used by more than 5 million women to safely end their pregnancies, and today more than half of women who end a pregnancy rely on the drug, the Justice Department said.

Over the years, the FDA has loosened restrictions on the drug's use, extending from seven to 10 weeks of pregnancy when it can be used, reducing the dosage needed to safely end a pregnancy, eliminating the requirement to visit a doctor in person to get it and allowing pills to be obtained by mail. The FDA also approved a generic version of mifepristone that its manufacturer, Las Vegas-based GenBioPro, says makes up two-thirds of the domestic market.

Mifepristone is one of two pills used in medication abortions, along with misoprostol. Health care providers have said they could switch to misoprostol only if mifepristone is no longer available or is too hard to obtain. Misoprostol is somewhat less effective in ending pregnancies.

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HOW DID THE CASE GET STARTED?

A lawsuit over mifepristone was filed in Amarillo, Texas, late last year. Alliance Defending Freedom, a conservative Christian legal group, represents the pill's opponents, who say the FDA's approval of mifepristone was flawed.

Why Amarillo? U.S. District Judge Matthew Kacsmaryk, who was nominated by then-President Donald Trump, is the sole district court judge there, ensuring that all cases filed in the west Texas city land in front of him. Since taking the bench, he has ruled against President Joe Biden's administration on several other issues, including immigration and LGBTQ protections.

On April 7, Kacsmaryk issued a ruling that would revoke the FDA's approval of mifepristone, but he put the decision on hold for a week to allow an appeal.

Complicating matters, however, on the same day Kacsmaryk issued his order, a court in Washington state issued a separate ruling in a lawsuit brought by liberal states seeking to preserve access to mifepristone. The Washington judge, Spokane-based Thomas O. Rice, whom then-President Barack Obama nominated, ordered the FDA not to do anything that might affect the availability of mifepristone in the suing states. The Biden administration has said it is impossible to follow both judges' directives at the same time.

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HOW DID THE CASE GET TO THE SUPREME COURT?

The Biden administration responded to Kacsmaryk's ruling by asking the New Orleans-based 5th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals to prevent it from taking effect for now.

Last week, the appeals court narrowed Kacsmaryk's ruling so that the initial approval of mifepristone in 2000 is not affected, for now. But it agreed with him that changes the FDA made to relax the rules for prescribing and dispensing the drug should be put on hold. Those rules included expanding when the drug could be taken and allowing for the drug's delivery through the mail.

The appeals court acted by a 2-1 vote. The judges in the majority, Kurt Engelhardt and Andrew Oldham, are both Trump picks.

The Biden administration and the maker of mifepristone, New York-based Danco Laboratories, appealed to the Supreme Court, saying that allowing the appeals court's restrictions to take effect would cause chaos. Facing a tight deadline, the Supreme Court gave itself some breathing room and issued an order suggesting it would act by Wednesday evening. That timeline was extended to Friday, the day the justices will hold a previously scheduled private conference.

The justices could talk about the issue further then. The additional time could also be part of an effort to craft an order that has broad support among the nine justices. Or one or more justices might be writing a separate opinion and asked for a couple of extra days.

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WHAT COULD HAPPEN NEXT?

The Supreme Court's delay suggests a maddening reality about an institution that ordinarily adheres to a schedule that hasn't changed much in years: Even experts can be in the dark about when the court will decide things and how.

Cases are argued over seven months from October to April, and the most important decisions typically come right before the justices take a long summer break. The court does not say which cases it plans to hand down on a given day, and the court, in a search for consensus, will sometimes pass on the biggest issues it faces and decide a very small legal point.

But nowhere is the uncertainty as great as a separate category of cases that have come to be known as the shadow docket.

Apart from death row inmates seeking 11th-hour reprieves, shadow docket cases generally involve emergency appeals to the justices before lower courts have reached final decisions. That includes the mifepristone case.

When the justices consider this set of cases, they don't usually have a deadline to act. A few years back, an order concerning an elections case in Texas came in the wee hours of a Saturday morning for no reason other than that's when Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg finished work on her dissenting opinion.

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Follow the AP's coverage of the U.S. Supreme Court at https://apnews.com/hub/us-supreme-court.

Helping out: How American volunteerism is changing — and why

By GLENN GAMBOA AP Business Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Daniela Fernandez has no trouble attracting volunteers to her group Sustainable Ocean Alliance. Last month, she presided over the Our Ocean Youth Leadership Summit in Panama, where 77 participants from 45 countries volunteered their time to develop solutions to protect the oceans.

The summit focused on participants between 18 and 35, the age group many in the philanthropic sector worry are not volunteering enough. It had to turn away more than 900 applicants.

"Young people crave having sustained impact and seeing how their time, their energy and their passion is actually moving the needle," Fernandez said. "The problem is, a lot of organizations don't have the process or the tools or the projects that will deliver on that need — that urgency that young people have."

For decades, volunteerism in America has been declining. But according to a recent U.S. Census Bureau and AmeriCorps survey, it dropped another 7 percentage points between 2019 and 2021. The survey found about 23% of Americans volunteered with a formal nonprofit – including churches, schools, and food banks – at least once in the previous year.

There is a disconnect between organizations and their volunteer pools. And it's not only getting in the way. It's becoming systemic.

A LONG TRADITION

Since Benjamin Franklin organized the emerging nation's first unpaid fire company in Philadelphia in 1736, volunteering has been as definitively American as Girl Scout cookies, blood donation and school bake sales.

But Americans' fraying connection to organized volunteering is a long way from the days when French aristocrat and political scientist Alexis de Tocqueville, a French aristocrat, marveled at how many "Americans make great and real sacrifices to the public welfare" in his 1840 book "Democracy in America."

"They hardly ever failed to lend faithful support to each other," he wrote in his renowned 1840 book "Democracy in America." "Men attend to the interests of the public, first by necessity, afterwards by choice."

That spirit has certainly continued, boosted occasionally by calls to action like President John F. Kennedy's inaugural speech urging, "Ask not what your country can do for you. Ask what you can do for your country." Though American volunteerism has generally declined since the 1950s, there have been bursts of growth to cope with the AIDS crisis and in the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

As recently as 2018, the United Nations Volunteers Program found that Americans donated more of their time than any other nation in the world, even more than in far larger countries like China and India. When measured on a per capita basis, though, residents of Luxembourg and Canada were volunteering more than Americans.

Moira Weir, CEO of the United Way of Greater Cincinnati, says her organization continues to support the American ideals that Tocqueville praised. It recently marked 35 years since it became one of the founding United Way members of the Tocqueville Society, which provides her group more than $13 million in funding annually.

Weir feels lucky to currently have "an abundance" of volunteers at a time when demands for her group's services is increasing. She believes volunteerism runs deep in the community because its importance was passed down from generation to generation the way her parents instilled it in her.

"We didn't have much, but we were still going to give whatever we had to food pantries, and we were volunteering," she said. "My mom always said, 'It's more important to give back than to take.'"

FINDING NEW PATHS

The notion that citizens were responsible for maintaining the social safety net rather than the government became an ideal that Americans exported — often in tandem with democracy — in the late 19th century. It was done through outfits like the United Way, as well as Americanized versions of charities whose histories trace back to the United Kingdom, like the Salvation Army and the YMCA.

Service organizations, including Rotary International, followed in the early 20th century. Now, though, Rotary is seeing its strongest volunteer growth not in the United States but in Asia, Africa and parts of Eastern Europe, said Rotary International CEO John Hewko.

"There's a decline in volunteerism, but at least what we're seeing is certainly stable," he said. What's more, Rotary increased its membership slightly coming out of the pandemic, which Hewko says was good news: "We were obviously concerned."

Americans are on the move more than ever before, and that ripples out into volunteering as well. If people don't live in one place for very long, they tend not to volunteer as much — especially if they are surrounded by other newcomers, says Mark Snyder, director of the Center for the Study of the Individual and Society at the University of Minnesota.

"The residential stability of your ZIP Code is a really good predictor of how much volunteering goes on in your neighborhood," Snyder says. "Generations find their voices in different ways. So the kinds of volunteer engagement that worked for an older, more suburban generation may not work as well now."

Like many organizations, Rotary is working to develop new initiatives that can attract younger American volunteers, including the Rotaract clubs that cater to the group's members under 30.

"It's just different than it used to be," Hewko said. "Our traditional model of going to weekly club meetings and the various rituals around those meetings – that's changing certainly among the younger demographic."

Snyder says his research indicates that volunteering fulfills a wide range of motivations that many organizations do not address — and, at the same time, that the changing demographics of the United States are reconfiguring the volunteer landscape.

"Maybe some groups are seeing a decline because their membership has been dominated by white people and the country is not all white people," Snyder says. "Maybe membership in those organizations is declining because the kind of people attracted to them represent smaller proportions of the population."

VOLUNTEERING FOR TOMORROW

This much seems clear: When it comes to volunteering, organizations simply can't ignore the generational shifts taking place in a 21st-century world where many institutions have been upended.

Top-down management strategies, for example. Those aren't received well by younger volunteers, according to Sustainable Ocean Alliance, which employs a different philiosophy.

"We have youth volunteers in 165 countries because we're asking them, 'What projects are you seeing in your neighborhood that will have the most impact? How can we help you solve your own problems? How can we help amplify your ideas?'," says Fernandez, its leader. "Our approach is bottom-up. We're providing them with funding, with agency, with resources, with mentorship, to make their own ideas come to life."

Those ideas increasingly cross generations and geographic boundaries, says Fernandez, who is unsurprised that volunteerism growth is happening around the world.

"We are definitely moving from a U.S.-centered approach," she says. "We are starting to shift the narrative that we have to wait for politicians to make the right decision. Young people are going to demand that these changes are made because they are aware that if they don't, there's going to be consequences in their lifetimes."

American nonprofits will face big consequences if they don't take immediate steps to attract younger volunteers, says Carl Nassib, an NFL linebacker and volunteerism advocate. "This decline is horrible," says Nassib, who last year launched Rayze, an app to connect volunteers with more nonprofits.

After receiving funding and incubation support in November, Rayze has partnered with platforms to allow users to donate to more nonprofits and find more volunteering opportunities. It has also started holding events to attract young people to volunteering by making it more social and entertaining.

"It should be fun," he says. "You should be able to do it with your friends. It should be easy. Then, that's where you're gonna get recurring volunteers. And that's how we're going to reverse that trend — when there's reasons to come out other than just giving back."

Nassib recognizes that nonprofits face issues beyond their control that impede volunteering. But, he says, "I do feel that some of the most well-known nonprofits in the country have kind of been asleep in the wheel," he says. "They have very little brand recognition among younger generations. They have never

really met them where they are."

"They're still doing mail-outs," added Nassib, laughing. "They're still sending hard mail to millennials and Gen Z."

Nassib is optimistic, though. He believes the disconnect can be fixed — and that American volunteerism can echo through the rising generation and find new ways of expression. "I've been a delusional optimist my entire life," he says. "If you ever ask me if anything was possible, I'm always gonna say, 'Yeah.'" _____

Associated Press coverage of philanthropy and nonprofits receives support through the AP's collaboration with The Conversation US, with funding from Lilly Endowment Inc. The AP is solely responsible for this content. For all of AP's philanthropy coverage, visit https://apnews.com/hub/philanthropy.

'Awesome' solar eclipse wows viewers in Australia, Indonesia

By EDNA TARIGAN and MADDIE BURAKOFF Associated Press

JAKARTA, Indonesia (AP) — Under a cloudless sky, 20,000 eclipse chasers crowded a tiny outpost to watch a rare solar eclipse plunge part of Australia's northwest coast into brief midday darkness Thursday while temporarily cooling the tropical heat.

The remote tourist town of Exmouth, with fewer than 3,000 residents, was promoted as one of the best vantage points in Australia to see the eclipse that also crossed remote parts of Indonesia and East Timor.

An international crowd had been gathering for days, camping in tents and trailers on a red, dusty plain on the edge of town with cameras and other viewing equipment pointed skyward.

NASA astronomer Henry Throop was among those at Exmouth cheering loudly in the darkness.

"Isn't it incredible? This is so fantastic. It was mind-blowing. It was so sharp and it was so bright. You could see the corona around the sun there," the visibly excited Washington resident said.

"It's only a minute long, but it really felt like a long time. There's nothing else you can see which looks like that. It was just awesome. Spectacular. And then you could see Jupiter and Mercury and to be able to see those at the same time during the day — even seeing Mercury at all is pretty rare. So that was just awesome," Throop added.

First-time eclipse chaser Julie Copson, who traveled more than 1,000 kilometers (600 miles) north from the Australian west-coast port city of Fremantle to Exmouth, said the phenomenon left her skin tingling.

"I feel so emotional, like I could cry. The color changed and seeing the corona and sun flares …," Copson said.

"It was very strong and the temperature dropped so much," she added, referring to a sudden 5-degree-Celsius (9-degree-Fahrenheit) fall in temperature from 29 degrees Celsius (84 Fahrenheit) when the moon's shadow enveloped the region.

It was the fifth eclipse for Detroit resident Shane Varrti, who began planning his trip to Exmouth a year ago.

"It's very exciting. All this effort has come to fruition," Varrti said.

In Indonesia's capital, hundreds came to the Jakarta Planetarium to see the partial eclipse that was obscured by clouds.

Azka Azzahra, 21, came with her sister and friends to get a closer look by using the telescopes with hundreds of other visitors.

"I am still happy to come even though it is cloudy. It is happy to see how people with high enthusiasm come here to see the eclipse, because it is rare," Azzahra said.

The call to prayer resounded from the city's mosques when the eclipse phase began as Muslims in the country with the world's largest Muslim population said eclipse prayers as a reminder of God's greatness.

In East Timor, people gathered around the beach in Lautem municipality, waiting to witness the rare solar eclipse through their eclipse glasses. Some of them came from other countries and gathered with locals to have a clear view of the eclipse.

"Timor Leste is one of the unique countries where the experience is less humid, less cloudy, so we are expecting a clear sky, that's why many international astronomers wish to converge here. We are hoping

that there is going to be a clear sky," Zahri Bin Ahmad, astrophile from the South East Asia Astronomy Network of Brunei said as they waited Thursday.

People cheered as the sun and moon reached maximum eclipse.

"This is a very new natural phenomenon for Timor Leste. It is very important for us to be able to watch and experience it firsthand," said Martinho Fatima, a civil protection authority officer.

The hybrid solar eclipse tracked from the Indian Ocean to the Pacific Ocean and was mostly over water. The lucky few people in its path either saw the darkness of a total eclipse or a "ring of fire" as the sun peeked from behind the new moon.

Such celestial events happen about once every decade: The last one was in 2013 and the next one isn't until 2031. They occur when Earth is in the "sweet spot" so the moon and the sun are almost the exact same size in the sky, said NASA solar expert Michael Kirk.

At some points, the moon is a little closer and blocks out the sun in a total eclipse. But when the moon is a little farther away, it lets some of the sun's light peek out in an annular eclipse.

"It's a crazy phenomenon," Kirk said. "You're actually watching the moon get larger in the sky."

Several other upcoming solar eclipses will be easier to catch. An annular eclipse in mid-October and a total eclipse in April 2024 will both cross over millions of people in the Americas.

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Burakoff reported from New York. Associated Press journalist Rod McGuirk in Canberra, Australia, contributed to this report.

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The Associated Press Health and Science Department receives support from the Howard Hughes Medical Institute's Science and Educational Media Group. The AP is solely responsible for all content.

K-pop star Moon Bin found dead at home

Seoul, South Korea (AP) — Moon Bin, a singer from South Korean boyband Astro, was found dead at his home in Seoul, his management agency said Thursday.

The 25-year-old was reportedly found by his manager who went to the singer's home Wednesday evening because he wasn't responding to contacts. Police are investigating his death but have so far found no signs of foul play, according to South Korea's Yonhap news agency. Officials at Seoul's Gangnam district police station did not respond to calls for comment.

Moon Bin's management agency, Fantagio, confirmed his death in a statement, saying that he "suddenly left us and became a star in the sky" and that fellow artists and company officials were mourning him with "very deep sadness and shock."

Fantagio said Moon Bin's funeral will be held "as quietly as possible," with the attendance mostly limited to family, close friends and colleagues, based on the wishes of his relatives.

Moon Bin debuted in 2016 with the six-member boyband Astro, which was launched shortly after the singers appeared in a TV reality show. The group quickly found success in South Korea and Japan and was listed on Billboard's top 10 list of new K-pop groups that year, with the magazine praising them for their "bright, synthpop sound that won over K-pop lovers from around the world."

Moon Bin also performed as a member of the duo Moonbin & Sanha, with the other half being fellow Astro member Yoon San-ha. Indonesian event promoter Lumina Entertainment on Wednesday announced the cancellation of the duo's performance in Jakarta due to "unforeseen circumstances beyond our control."

Several South Korean singers and actors have died by suicide in recent years, which has touched off soul-searching about harsh competition in the fast-growing entertainment industry, an abusive online culture and failure by management to address the mental health problems of their stars.

Last week, 26-year-old actress Jung Chae-yull was found dead at her home. Her agency did not say what caused her sudden death.

Groton Daily Independent
Thursday, April 20, 2023 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 286 ~ 33 of 87

'Devastating' melt of Greenland, Antarctic ice sheets found

By SETH BORENSTEIN AP Science Writer

The Greenland and Antarctic ice sheets are now losing more than three times as much ice a year as they were 30 years ago, according to a new comprehensive international study.

Using 50 different satellite estimates, researchers found that Greenland's melt has gone into hyperdrive in the last few years. Greenland's average annual melt from 2017 to 2020 was 20% more a year than at the beginning of the decade and more than seven times higher than its annual shrinkage in the early 1990s.

The new figures "are pretty disastrous really," said study co-author Ruth Mottram, a climate scientist at the Danish Meteorological Institute. "We're losing more and more ice from Greenland."

Study lead author Ines Otosaka, a glaciologist at the University of Leeds in the United Kingdom, said speeded-up ice sheet loss is clearly caused by human-caused climate change.

From 1992 to 1996, the two ice sheets – which hold 99% of the world's freshwater ice – were shrinking by 116 billion tons (105 billion metric tons) a year, two-thirds of it from Antarctica.

But from 2017 to 2020, the newest data available, the combined melt soared to 410 billion tons (372 billion metric tons) a year, more than two-thirds of it from Greenland, said the study in Thursday's journal Earth System Science Data.

"This is a devastating trajectory," said U.S. National Snow and Ice Center Deputy Lead Scientist Twila Moon, who wasn't part of the study. "These rates of ice loss are unprecedented during modern civilization."

Since 1992, Earth has lost 8.3 trillion tons (7.6 trillion metric tons) of ice from the two ice sheets, the study found. That's enough to flood the entire United States with 33.6 inches (almost 0.9 meters) of water or submerge France in 49 feet (nearly 15 meters).

But because the world's oceans are so huge, the melt just from the ice sheets since 1992 still only adds up to a little less than inch (21 millimeters) of sea level rise, on average. Globally sea level rise is accelerating and melt from ice sheets has gone from contributing 5% of the sea level rise to now accounting for more than one-quarter of it, the study said. The rest of the sea rise comes from warmer water expanding and melt from glaciers.

A team of more than 65 scientists regularly calculates ice sheet loss in research funded by NASA and the European Space Agency with Thursday's study adding three more years of data. They use 17 different satellite missions and examine ice sheet melt in three distinct techniques, Otosaka said, and all the satellites, radar, on the ground observations and computer simulations basically say the same thing -- ice sheet melting is accelerating.

Greenland from 2017 to 2020 averaged about 283 billion tons (257 billion metric tons) of melting a year, compared to just 235 billion tons (213 billion metric tons) annually from 2012 to 2016.

The latest figures also showed what looks like a slowing of melting in parts of Antarctica, which has much more ice than Greenland. That's mostly due to smaller and fleeting weather changes and the overall longer-term trend still shows an acceleration of melting in Antarctica, Mottram said.

Antarctica from 2017 to 2020 is still losing about 127 billion tons (115 billion metric tons) of ice a year, down 23% from earlier in the decade, but overall up 64% from the early 1990s.

"While mass loss from Greenland is outpacing that from Antarctica, there are troublesome wild cards in the south, notably behavior of the Thwaites glacier," which is nicknamed the Doomsday Glacier, said Mark Serreze, director of the U.S. snow and ice center, who wasn't part of the study.

Study authors used changes in gravity and in ice height and measured how much snow fell, how much snow melted, how much ice was lost in icebergs calving and eaten away from underneath by warmer water etching through the ice.

"This matters because rising sea levels will displace and/or financially impact hundreds of millions of people, if not billions, and will likely cost trillions of dollars," said University of Colorado ice researcher and former NASA chief scientist Waleed Abdalati, who wasn't part of the study.

The study "is not so much surprising as it is disturbing," Abdalati said in an email "A few decades ago, it was assumed that these vast reservoirs of ice changed slowly, but with through the use of satellite ob-

servations, field observations and modeling techniques, we have come to learn that ice responds rapidly to our changing climate."

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Follow Seth Borenstein on Twitter at @borenbears

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Associated Press climate and environmental coverage receives support from several private foundations. See more about AP's climate initiative here. The AP is solely responsible for all content.

Cattle raiding by jihadis soars in Mali, fuels conflict

By SAM MEDNICK and BABA AHMED Associated Press

BAMAKO, Mali (AP) — Ayouba Ag Nadroun was at the market in central Mali in March when Islamic extremists attacked his village, killing dozens of people and stealing about $10,000 worth of his cows and camels.

"We lost everything," the 62-year-old told The Associated Press by phone from the Menaka region in the West African nation.

Cattle raiding by Islamic extremists is soaring at unprecedented levels in Mali, with jihadis linked to al-Qaida and the Islamic State group stealing millions of dollars' worth of cattle to buy weapons and vehicles to fund their insurgency across the war-torn West African country and region below the Sahara Desert, known as the Sahel.

As jihadis gain control of more territory, looting is increasing and fueling conflict among already impoverished communities fighting to keep their families fed and alive, according to a recent report by The Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime.

Mali has been battling to contain an Islamic extremist insurgency for more than a decade.

Despite a victory in 2013, when France sent troops in to help its former colony to drive al-Qaida-linked militants from northern areas of the country, violence has not only continued, but spread. Attacks have spilled into neighboring Niger and Burkina Faso, where extremists are exploiting people's grievances against the state to recruit fighters and control land.

While cattle rustling has been at the heart of Mali's war economy for years, the recent surge by Islamic extremists is worrying, according to the global network's report.

In the central Mopti region, one of the hardest hit by more recent violence, some 130,000 cattle were stolen in 2021, about the same amount taken between 2018 and 2020 combined, said the report by the global initiative known as GI-TOC. While the groups have several funding streams, including drug trafficking, hostage taking and gold mining, analysts say livestock raiding is one of the most preferred because of the consistent cash flow, especially in Mali, which is the second biggest cattle exporter in the region after Nigeria. Jihadis loot livestock and then rely on a network to sell it and use the money to buy weapons and vehicles.

"Unlike other criminal markets (such as cocaine or kidnappings), cattle rustling has proven to be a resilient and stable source of income for armed groups, because Mali is a key regional producer and exporter of cattle," said Flore Berger, Sahel analyst at GI-TOC. "It's likely that cattle rustling continues to provide sources of revenue because countries in the region will continue to buy from Mali," she said.

Villagers say jihadis are strategic about their theft, staking out watering holes where they know the cattle will come to drink.

"They set up shop next to the wells for several days and every time the thirsty animals come to get water the terrorists take them," said Mahamad Ag Moustapha, the mayor of Inekar commune in the Menaka region. Last April, the father of nine lost more than $84,000 worth of cattle when jihadists attacked his town. He now lives in a displacement site in Menaka.

"There are no animals within a 186-mile (300-kilometer) radius of the town of Menaka. ... The terrorists are trying to weaken the population economically, so the population does not fund a resistance," he said.

While it is hard to determine how much money jihadis are making from stealing livestock, analysts estimate they are taking cattle worth tens of millions of dollars a year.

Net profits made from stolen livestock from one district in the Mopti region — under jihadi influence — was approximately $730,000 in one year, said the report. In neighboring Burkina Faso, where violence has been raging since 2016, jihadis can earn nearly $50,000 a month from cattle raiding in regions such as the Sahel, North and Center-North, where they operate.

"We are aware that the money generated by the sale of stolen cattle is used to finance activities of the terrorists," Col. Abdoulaye Dembele, spokesman for the Malian army, told AP.

"It is difficult to secure the cattle of Mali from terrorists, the country is vast, and our first concern is to secure the people," he said.

However, in recent months, "we have recovered several hundred head of cattle in Mopti, in the center, and also in the Menaka region. In both cases, we have handed the cattle over to the local authorities who will take charge of finding their owners and returning the animals to them. As long as the stolen cattle are within a radius of our military camps, we can intervene, but if it is far from the military camps it becomes difficult," he added.

Yet despite the increase in cattle theft, conflict experts say it doesn't compare to the highly profitable business of hostage taking.

"We've heard unconfirmed reports that ransoming hostages is (jihadis') most lucrative revenue stream, generating approximately 30% of its income," said William Linder, a retired CIA officer and head of 14 North Strategies, an Africa-focused risk advisory. At least 25 foreigners and untold numbers of locals have been kidnapped in the Sahel since 2015, according to the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project.

French journalist, Olivier Dubois was kidnapped by jihadis from northern Mali in April 2021. He was released last month, however, the conditions of his release, including whether it involved a ransom, have not been disclosed.

Still, the surge in cattle raiding unsettles some residents in the Sahel region more because it cuts into their ability to survive.

Two years ago, villagers in the Gourma region said they noticed a spike in jihadis selling thousands of stolen cattle in villages at a third of the price, making it hard for traders to compete. The jihadis sell cattle in the thousands, generally to beef traders who take it across the border to neighboring Burkina Faso or Niger, said a 34-year-old tea seller at a market in Gossi town who did not want to be named for fear of reprisal.

By controlling the cross-border livestock markets, jihadis are strengthening their legitimacy in the territory they take and diminishing control by the state, said Mucahid Durmaz, senior analyst at Verisk Maplecroft, a global risk intelligence company.

"The consistent flow of income enables them to acquire arms, recruit new members, extend their power, and undermine state authority," he said. To cut revenue, governments in the Sahel region need to establish authority, tighten border controls, regulate cattle markets and gain the trust of local communities, he said.

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Mednick reported from Dakar, Senegal.

Oakland A's purchase land for new stadium in Las Vegas

By JOSH DUBOW AP Sports Writer

OAKLAND, Calif. (AP) — The Oakland Athletics have signed a binding agreement to purchase land for a new retractable roof ballpark in Las Vegas after being unable to build a new venue in the Bay Area.

Team president Dave Kaval said Wednesday night the team finalized a deal last week to buy the 49-acre site where the A's plan to build the stadium close to the Las Vegas Strip with a seating capacity of 30,000 to 35,000.

The A's will work with Nevada and Clark County on a public-private partnership to fund the stadium. Kaval said the A's hope to break ground by next year and would hope to be move to their new home by 2027.

"It's obviously a very big milestone for us," Kaval said. "We spent almost two years working in Las Vegas to try to determine a location that works for a long-term home. To identify a site and have a purchase agreement is a big step."

The A's had been looking for a new home for years to replace the outdated and run-down Oakland Coliseum, where the team has played since arriving from Kansas City for the 1968 season. They had sought to build a stadium in Fremont and San Jose before shifting their attention to the Oakland waterfront.

Las Vegas would be the fourth home for a franchise that started as the Philadelphia Athletics from 1901-54.

"We're turning our full attention to Las Vegas," Kaval said. "We were on parallel paths before. But we're focused really on Las Vegas as our path to find a future home for the A's."

Commissioner Rob Manfred said in December the A's would not have to pay a relocation fee if the team moved to Las Vegas.

"We're past any reasonable timeline for the situation in Oakland to be resolved," Manfred said then.

Oakland Mayor Sheng Thao said in a statement that she was disappointed the A's didn't negotiate with the city as a "true partner."

"The city has gone above and beyond in our attempts to arrive at mutually beneficial terms to keep the A's in Oakland," she said. "In the last three months, we've made significant strides to close the deal. Yet, it is clear to me that the A's have no intention of staying in Oakland and have simply been using this process to try to extract a better deal out of Las Vegas. I am not interested in continuing to play that game — the fans and our residents deserve better.

"I am incredibly proud of what we have accomplished as a City, including securing a fully entitled site and over $375 million in new infrastructure investment that will benefit Oakland and its Port for generations to come. In a time of budget deficits, I refuse to compromise the safety and well-being of our residents. Given these realities, we are ceasing negotiations and moving forward on alternatives for the redevelopment of Howard Terminal."

The A's would be only the second MLB team to change cities in more than a half-century. Since the Washington Senators became the Texas Rangers for 1972, the only team to relocate was the Montreal Expos, who became the Washington Nationals in 2005.

The A's lease at the Coliseum expires after the 2024 season. The A's has struggled to draw fans to the Coliseum in recent years as owner John Fisher has slashed payroll and many of the team's most recognizable stars have been traded away.

Oakland had the lowest opening day payroll in baseball at at $58 million — less than the combined salaries of Mets pitchers Max Scherzer and Justin Verlander, who tied for the major league high of $43.3 million.

The team is 3-16 this season and has been outscored by 86 runs — the worst mark through 19 games since 1899. The average attendance through 12 home games this season is 11,027 for the lowest mark in the majors and less than half of the league average of about 27,800. The A's haven't drawn 2 million fans at home since 2014 -- their only year reaching the mark since 2005.

If the A's leave Oakland, the city with a rich sports tradition would have no major pro sports teams with the NFL's Raiders having moved to Las Vegas in 2020 and the NBA's Warriors moving across the bay to San Francisco in 2019.

"We know it's a difficult message for our folks in Oakland," Kaval said. "Obviously we're grateful for all the hard work that went into the waterfront. But we have been unable to achieve success or make enough progress."

Las Vegas is quickly become a sports mecca after years of being considered a pariah because of ties to the gambling industry. With gambling legalized in much of the country, the city now could have a baseball team to join the NHL's Golden Knights, who began as an expansion team in 2017 and the Raiders.

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AP MLB: https://apnews.com/hub/mlb and https://twitter.com/AP_Sports

Stampede in Yemen at Ramadan charity event kills at least 78

By AHMED AL-HAJ and SAMY MAGDY Associated Press

SANAA, Yemen (AP) — A crowd apparently panicked by gunfire and an electrical explosion stampeded at an event to distribute financial aid during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan in Yemen's capital late Wednesday, killing at least 78 people and injuring at least 73 others, according to witnesses and Houthi rebel officials.

The tragedy was Yemen's deadliest in years that was not related to the country's long-running war, and came ahead of the Muslim holiday of Eid al-Fitr, which marks the end of Ramadan later this week.

Armed Houthis fired into the air in an attempt at crowd control, apparently striking an electrical wire and causing it to explode, according to two witnesses, Abdel-Rahman Ahmed and Yahia Mohsen. That sparked a panic, and people, including many women and children, began stampeding, they said.

Video posted on social media showed dozens of bodies, some motionless, and others screaming as people tried to help. Separate footage of the aftermath released by Houthi officials showed bloodstains, shoes and victims' clothing scattered on the ground. Investigators were seen examining the area.

The crush took place in the Old City in the center of Sanaa, where hundreds of poor people had gathered for a charity event organized by merchants, according to the Houthi-run Interior Ministry.

People had gathered to receive about $10 each from a charity funded by local businessmen, witnesses said. Wealthy people and businessmen often hand out cash and food, especially to the poor, during Ramadan.

Interior Ministry spokesperson Brig. Abdel-Khaleq al-Aghri, blamed the crush on the "random distribution" of funds without coordination with local authorities.

Motaher al-Marouni, a senior health official, said 78 people were killed, according the rebels' Al-Masirah satellite TV channel. At least 73 others were injured and taken to the al-Thowra Hospital in Sanaa, according to hospital deputy director Hamdan Bagheri.

The rebels quickly sealed off a school where the event was being held and barred people, including journalists, from approaching.

The Interior Ministry said it had detained two organizers and an investigation was under way.

The Houthis said they would pay some $2,000 in compensation to each family who lost a relative, while the injured would get around $400.

Yemen's capital has been under the control of the Iranian-backed Houthis since they descended from their northern stronghold in 2014 and removed the internationally recognized government.

That prompted a Saudi-led coalition to intervene in 2015 to try to restore the government.

The conflict has turned in recent years into a proxy war between Saudi Arabia and Iran, killing more than 150,000 people, including fighters and civilians and creating one of the world's worst humanitarian disasters.

More than 21 million people in Yemen, or two-thirds of the country's population, need help and protection, according to the U.N. Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. Among those in need, more than 17 million are considered particularly vulnerable.

In February the United Nations said it had raised only $1.2 billion out of a target of $4.3 billion at a conference aimed at generating funds to ease the humanitarian crisis.

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Magdy reported from Cairo.

'Too much to learn': Schools race to catch up kids' reading

By BIANCA VÁZQUEZ TONESS AP Education Writer

ATLANTA (AP) — Michael Crowder stands nervously at the front of his third grade classroom, his mustard-yellow polo shirt buttoned to the top.

"Give us some vowels," says his teacher, La'Neeka Gilbert-Jackson. His eyes search a chart that lists vowels, consonant pairs and word endings, but he doesn't land on an answer. "Let's help him out," Gilbert-Jackson says.

"A-E-I-O-U," she and the students say in unison.

Michael missed most of first grade, the foundational year for learning to read. It was the first fall of the pandemic, and for months Atlanta only offered school online. Michael's mom had just had a baby, and there was no quiet place to study in their small apartment. He missed a good part of second grade, too. So, like most of his classmates at his Atlanta school, he isn't reading at the level expected for a third grader.

And that poses an urgent problem.

Third grade is the last chance for Michael's class to master reading with help from teachers before they face more rigorous expectations. If Michael and his classmates don't read fluently by the time this school year ends, research shows they're less likely to complete high school. Third grade has always been pivotal in a child's academic life, but pandemic-fueled school interruptions have made it much harder. Nationally, third graders lost more ground in reading than kids in older grades, and they've been slower to catch up.

To address pandemic learning loss, Atlanta has been one of the only cities in the country to add class time — 30 minutes a day for three years. That's more time for Gilbert-Jackson to explain the confusing ways that English words work and to tailor lessons to small groups of students based on their abilities.

She hopes it will be enough. The school year has been a race to prepare her students for future classes, where reading well is a gateway to learning everything else.

"Yes, I work you hard," she says about her students. "Because we have too much to learn."

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SLOW PROGRESS

Right before December vacation, Gilbert-Jackson's class is subdued and visibly tired. A handful of students, anticipating the long break, don't come to school. One girl has been out for weeks; now, back in class, she swings her arm across her desk and tries to go to sleep.

"You gotta wake up, baby girl," Gilbert-Jackson says to her gently. "You need to tell Mama to put you to bed."

The lethargy is palpable, but Gilbert-Jackson moves on with her lessons. There's too much to learn.

She reviews suffixes, how to spell words ending in -ch, -tch, and how to make different words plural. Some students have spellings memorized; for those who don't, Gilbert-Jackson explains the rules that govern spelling. It's a phonics-based program that the district now mandates for all third graders, in line with science-backed curricula gaining momentum across the country.

Last year, the district started mandating the same curriculum for all first and second graders. It can be dry and tedious stuff, replete with obscure jargon like "digraph" and "trigraph." The strong readers nod and respond during these sessions, but the students still learning the basics look lost.

To inject fun into the lesson, Gilbert-Jackson turns it into a quiz game. The students perk up as they race to set up their laptops.

"Teach," Gilbert-Jackson calls out. "How do you spell teach?"

Students have to choose between "teach" and "teatch."

"Yes!" some of the children shout from their desks as their scores pop onto their screens.

Says Gilbert-Jackson: "I don't know why I'm hearing so many yeses when only half got it right."

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LONG-TERM RELATIONSHIPS

As the first semester draws to a close, 14 of her 19 students aren't meeting expectations for reading. That includes Michael.

Gilbert-Jackson has an important advantage: She has known Michael and most of his classmates and their parents since the first fall of the pandemic. She taught them in first grade and second grade, and followed them to third. She knows how much school many of them missed — and why. The strategy was adopted by Boyd Elementary to give students some consistency through the crisis.

It has paid off. The steady relationship has helped her adapt her approach and care for her students at a school where 81% of families receive food stamps or other government assistance. "I know what they know," she says.

The long-term connection — or perhaps just the continuity of attending school every day — has helped

Michael start reading. At the end of first grade he knew two of the so-called "sight words" —"a" and "the." By that point in the year, first graders were expected to have memorized 200 of these high-frequency words that aren't easily decodable by new readers.

Now, midway through third grade, he is reading like a mid-year first grader — two years behind where he's supposed to be. But, says Gilbert-Jackson, it's progress. "You can see the wheels turning," she says. "Sometimes he'll draw a blank, but he's still trying."

When he's not in school, Michael has been dropping by his apartment complex's community center most afternoons to read books to the staff, who encourage the activity with pizza parties. His report cards show improvement. His parents have noticed his growth.

"I see a change in him," says Michael's stepfather, Rico Morton, who works landscaping and manages a pizza delivery store at night. Morton says he sometimes quizzes Michael and his siblings on trivia and multiplication tables. "He's matured. Now he speaks in complete sentences," Morton says. "I feel like he has the potential to be someone."

But Michael's days in Gilbert-Jackson's third grade class are numbered, and he's still far behind what's expected for a third grader.

That's an important inflection point. Until the end of third grade, students generally receive guidance from teachers to perfect their literacy. After that, students are expected to read more challenging texts in all of their subjects and to improve reading skills on their own. Researchers have found students who don't read fluently by third grade are four times more likely to drop out or not finish high school on time. And if a student fails to graduate, the risks increase. For instance, adults without a diploma are more likely to end up in prison.

Michael isn't the only student in this perilous zone. A handful of his classmates are also reading or comprehending at the first grade level.

Some, like Michael, didn't attend Zoom classes. There are two girls who did attend classes, and appeared to be doing well at the time. But Gilbert-Jackson believes their parents were doing some if not all of their work for them, and the girls didn't learn to read and write.

One of those girls is now reading at the second grade level, but her comprehension is more like a mid-year first grader, says Gilbert-Jackson. "The words just bounce off her," Gilbert-Jackson says. "She doesn't internalize what she's reading. For me, that's harder to fix."

The other girl whose mother likely did her schoolwork during online learning is reading at the level of a beginning first grader. Gilbert-Jackson worries about her. "Let's say she does go to fourth grade: Nobody is going to read anything to her," she says. "I don't want to set them up for failure."

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NOT MANY ALTERNATIVES

Good options are few. On paper, Atlanta's district policy is to promote elementary school students who "master" reading, math and other subjects. But how often the district actually holds students back is unclear. Atlanta's school system did not respond to requests for data.

Making students repeat a grade has fallen out of practice across the country, although more students are being held back because of the pandemic. Research before the pandemic showed the practice had mixed academic results, can stigmatize students and causes stress for families. It's also expensive for school districts, because it could require adding classes and teachers.

These students can attend four weeks of summer school, but that likely won't be enough to bring them up to third grade reading levels. And attendance by kids who sign up for summer school is notoriously low nationwide.

When the students start fourth grade, their schools will test their reading and math levels, and they "will be placed in the appropriate interventions," according to the district. Teachers and students will have a daily extra half hour of class next year, the last in Atlanta's three-year plan to address pandemic setbacks.

Before leaving for Christmas vacation, Gilbert-Jackson started reaching out to students' parents to talk about how their children were progressing and "what may or may not happen" with their prospects for

fourth grade. Though it's rare, she tells them she could recommend holding back a student or a parent could request it.

She encourages parents to keep working with their kids, buy workbooks at dollar stores and, in some cases, agree to testing to determine whether their children need more specialized help.

The parents of some of her struggling readers don't return her calls or show up for parent-teacher conferences. In most cases, says Gilbert-Jackson, "I think they mean well."

"But I think some have the attitude, 'I'm sending you to school and you better listen to that lady,'" she says, "but there's not that much support at home."

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NO EASY SOLUTIONS

While Gilbert-Jackson appears to have a plan to move most of her students forward, two new students are testing the veteran teacher. At this stage of the year, their challenges resist easy solutions.

One day in late February, Gilbert-Jackson asks her students to revise a narrative they'd each been writing about a glowing rock. Most get to work quickly.

One new student, a boy with a 100-watt smile and a halo of loose hair twists, had transferred from another Atlanta public school in November. Instead of taking out his narrative, he chooses a book from the class library and starts writing in his notebook. A few minutes later, he presents his notebook to Keione Vance, the teacher's assistant.

"So, did you copy this from a book?" she asks. "I know you just copied it."

She asks him to read to her. He happily starts on the book, an "easy reader" aimed at a first grade reading level. He struggles with words: nice, true, voice, sure, might, outside, and because.

When he arrived in November, it appeared he needed "to learn everything from first, second and third grade," says Gilbert-Jackson. He often puts his head down in class. "I'm getting more work out of him now. But you can tell when he hits his limit. He's like, 'uh-uh.'"

While most of the class works on writing, the other new student, a tall girl with long braids that curl at the end, sits at her desk staring into the distance and humming.

"She's struggling," says Gilbert-Jackson. "There's something I cannot put my finger on."

Gilbert-Jackson worries she isn't serving her two new students as well as she'd like. "What they need would require all of my attention," she says. "This train has been running for three years. I can't start over."

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A LAST CHANCE

As the other students in class keep working, some ask Gilbert-Jackson to read their stories. Some are written in complete sentences with few errors. Others lack punctuation and capitalization and have misspellings throughout.

After a few more students ask Gilbert-Jackson to check their stories, she gets the class's attention.

"Class, class," calls Gilbert-Jackson.

"Yes, yes," replies the class.

"Class, class, class," calls Gilbert-Jackson.

"Yes, yes, yes," replies the class. And then their teacher says words that, for some of them, may be very daunting.

"Mrs. Gilbert-Jackson cannot be the person who says when your final draft is ready," she says. "I'm not going to be there when you are in fourth grade. I'm not going to be there when you take your exams."

Gilbert-Jackson and the other third grade teachers are so concerned about their students' reading and writing abilities, along with math skills, that they decided after Christmas break to cut back on social studies and science to give students extra instruction and practice for the rest of the year. It's her last chance to help them before they move on to another teacher — and to the expectation they will read everything by themselves.

The extra time may have helped some students get across the line. Now only seven of the 19 students are below grade level in reading. Of the students who are still behind, Gilbert-Jackson is the least worried

about one: Michael Crowder. She's confident he'll find a way to navigate the new world ahead of him — a world where he'll have to be more self-sufficient, even if there is too much to learn.

"He wants it," she says. "He'll catch up."

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The Associated Press education team receives support from the Carnegie Corporation of New York. The AP is solely responsible for all content.

Movie theaters and streamers may end up friends, after all

By JAKE COYLE AP Film Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — After Ben Affleck and Matt Damon test screened their Nike drama "Air," the film executives at Amazon Studios threw them a curveball.

"They said, 'What do you guys think about a theatrical release?'" Damon says. "It wasn't what we expected when we first made the deal."

"Air," about Nike's pursuit of a shoe deal with Michael Jordan, went over so well with early audiences that Amazon, despite acquiring the film for its Prime Video streaming service, wanted to launch it in theaters. And in its first two weeks, "Air" has been a hit.

After a strong five-day debut of $20.2 million — especially good for an adult-skewing drama — "Air" dipped only 47% in its second weekend. Reviews have been stellar. When "Air" does arrive on Prime Video, the studio and its filmmakers expect an even better showing than if they hadn't launched in theaters.

"It should function as free advertising to create this halo effect which in turn creates more viewers on the service," says Affleck, who directed and co-stars in "Air." "If that's the case, I think the business will really expand and go back to a broader theatrical model."

Not long ago, some were predicting more and more films would be diverted from theaters and sent straight into homes. Moviegoing was destined to die, they said. Not only has that forecast fallen flat, the opposite is happening in some cases. Companies like Amazon and Apple are sprinting into multiplexes, taking a distinctly different approach to the staunchly streaming-focused Netflix. Launched on 3,507 screens, "Air" was the biggest release ever by a streamer — and it's just the start. Amazon Studios, led by Jennifer Salke, is planning to release 12-15 movies theatrically every year. Apple is set to spend $1 billion a year on movies that will land in cinemas before streaming.

Movie theaters and (most) streaming services are turning out to be fast friends, after all.

"We truly think that by putting it into theaters, you just can't otherwise get that kind of word of mouth and press around it," says Kevin Wilson, Amazon Studios and MGM theatrical distribution executive. "No matter how much you spend, that's a hard thing to replace."

That "halo effect" isn't quite free. It takes a robust marketing blitz to raise awareness for a film. But whether a movie is headed to a streaming platform or video on demand, the splash of a theatrical run can cascade through through every subsequent window. A film dropped straight into a vast digital expanse might go viral or quickly fade into one of a million things you can click on.

Moviegoing still hasn't yet reached pre-pandemic levels, but it's getting close. Movie after movie has overperformed at the box office lately, including "Creed III" (released by MGM, which Amazon owns) and Lionsgate's "John Wick: Chapter 4." With more than $600 million in two weeks, Universal Pictures' "Super Mario Bros." is breaking records for animated films. After a dismal 2020, a trying 2021 and a fitful comeback last year led by "Top Gun: Maverick" and "Avatar: The Way of Water," optimism abounds that movie theaters have weathered the storm.

"It's springtime in the theatrical business," exclaims John Fithian, the soon-departing president and chief executive of the National Association of Theater Owners. On Monday, the trade group will convene exhibitors in Las Vegas for a CinemaCon sure to be triumphant. Expect chest-thumping proclamations of revival.

Last year, Hollywood's theatrical pipeline fell well short of the pre-pandemic rate of wide releases. With 63% of 2019's wide releases, the box office reached 64% of 2019's box office. The problem, exhibitors argued, was not enough supply. This year, around three dozen more wide releases are on the schedule.

"Both Amazon and Apple have signaled that they have $1 billion-plus in forward budgeting for the production and marketing of movies to be released theatrically," Fithian says. "We're going to get to a point in a year or so where we have more movies distributed theatrically than we did pre-pandemic."

Movie theaters aren't totally out of the woods. During the pandemic, the number of screens operating in the U.S. and Canada dropped from 44,283 in 2019 to 40,263, according to NATO. Though those losses are far less than many anticipated, the balance sheets for some theater chains remain strained. Regal's parent company, Cineworld, declared Chapter 11 bankruptcy last year. The financial condition of theater owners, Fithian says, is his greatest concern looking ahead.

Streaming, though, may be departing the role of archrival. During the pandemic, studios took different roads in trying out new methods of release. But while large numbers of films, like Apple's starry action-adventure "Ghosted" this Friday, are still going straight to streaming, some of the biggest movie suppliers have turned away from those pandemic-era experiments.

"Direct-to-streaming movies were providing really no value to us," David Zaslav, chief executive of Warner Bros. Discovery, said earlier this year.

Since taking over the studio last year, Zaslav has dramatically changed course at Warner Bros., which spent 2021 releasing films simultaneously in theaters and on the platform formerly known as HBO Max. Zaslav has so soured on films going straight to their streaming platform that he altogether squashed $70 million "Batgirl" and "Scoob! Holiday Hunt." The data, he has said, is clear: "As films moved from one window to the next, their overall value is elevated, elevated, elevated."

It should be noted that many made much the same argument well before the pandemic. But Wall Street craved subscription growth from streaming services, and studios eagerly chased the reward — rising stock prices — until the bottom fell out last year. As subscription numbers slowed, the signal from Wall Street shifted to: Grow your streaming platforms but make money, too.

"We have been arguing this for years," says Fithian. "But I'm glad that they finally got it."

Later this year, Apple will release wide in theaters two anticipated epics: Martin Scorsese's "Killers of the Flower Moon" and Ridley Scott's "Napoleon." They'll have help. Paramount is distributing "Killers of the Flower Moon" while Sony is handling "Napoleon." Scorsese, one of the most passionate defenders of the big-screen experience, recently said he hope companies like Apple not only release films in theaters but build cinemas, too.

"Maybe these new companies might say: Let's invest in the future of the new generations for creativity," says Scorsese. "Because a young person actually going to see a film in the theater, that person, who knows, five or 10 years later could be a wonderful novelist, painter, musician, composer, filmmaker, whatever. You don't know where that inspiration is going to land when you throw it out there. But it's got to be out there."

Being "out there" has its risks, of course. A theatrical run can give a film the patina of something worth making an effort to see, and differentiating it from the infinite sea of content. It can also mean sinking millions in advertising into an often already expensive movie that audiences, with more competition for their attention than ever, might not flock to. "Air" cost $130 million to make. If it was a dud, it would have been more likely to go straight to streaming.

"It's got to be the right film. This plan won't work on every single film. Amazon is going to pick and choose the ones that make sense," says Wilson. "The Apples of the world and maybe even the Netflixes of the world are seeing: It doesn't have to be every movie and it doesn't have to completely flip our business model upside down."

Amazon notched the first best-picture nomination for a streaming service back in 2017 with "Manchester by the Sea," and Apple won last year with "CODA." But Netflix, the streaming pioneer, has long been the most dominant platform. And it's remained resistant to embracing theaters.

Though Netflix gives many of its films a limited week-long run in theaters and owns two theaters (one in New York and one in Los Angeles), the streamer has typically considered its own platform its biggest marketing driver. Last fall, it gave Rian Johnson's whodunit sequel "Glass Onion: A Knives Out Mystery" the widest release of a Netflix film. But "Glass Onion" still opened only on about 600 screens and played

just five days. Most big films play on more than 3,500 screens for four weeks or more.

"Driving folks to a theater is just not our business," Ted Sarandos, Netflix chief executive, said in an earnings call Tuesday. Netflix's scale and reach, he said, makes them different than other steaming services. A recent popular release like "Murder Mystery 2," with Adam Sandler and Jennifer Aniston, has been watched for 82 million hours in three weeks, according to Netflix.

"Glass Onion," despite the small footprint and modest ad-support, still made an estimated $15 million in ticket sales. Some analysts said Netflix left hundreds of millions on the table. Netflix isn't budging, but they are, at least, no longer the trendsetter.

"I hope that they will see what Amazon and Apple are doing and realize that they can both make money in theaters and drive more subscribers to Netflix," Fithian says. "They're kind of the last ones to the party."

The movie business always looks better when the hits are rolling in; a few big bombs and all the doubts will start over again. Strategies can shift. But right now, theaters and (most) streamers are finding plenty of common ground. And business is booming again.

"All the naysayers who said maybe the theatrical business was dead or was going to be much smaller than it was before, I'm not so sure about that," says Wilson. "I don't think we're there yet to be beating our chests. But there are certainly positive signs happening all over the place to say: There's no reason we can't get back to where we were — and in the next few years possibly exceed that."

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

An end to the reading wars? More US schools embrace phonics

By HEATHER HOLLINGSWORTH Associated Press

Move over "Dick and Jane." A different approach to teaching kids how to read is on the rise.

For decades, two schools of thought have clashed on how to best teach children to read, with passionate backers on each side of the so-called reading wars. The battle has reached into homes via commercials for Hooked on Phonics materials and through shoebox dioramas assigned by teachers seeking to instill a love of literature.

But momentum has shifted lately in favor of the "science of reading." The term refers to decades of research in fields including brain science that point to effective strategies for teaching kids to read.

The science of reading is especially crucial for struggling readers, but school curricula and programs that train teachers have been slow to embrace it. The approach began to catch on before schools went online in spring 2020. But a push to teach all students this way has intensified as schools look for ways to regain ground lost during the pandemic — and as parents of kids who can't read demand swift change.

OK, CLASS. TIME FOR A HISTORY LESSON.

One historical approach to teaching reading was known as "whole language." (Close cousins of this approach are "whole word" and "look-say.") It focused on learning entire words, placing the emphasis on meaning. A famous example is the "Dick and Jane" series, which, like many modern-day books for early readers, repeated words frequently so students could memorize them.

The other approach involved phonics, with supporters arguing students need detailed instruction on the building blocks of reading. That meant lots of time on letter sounds and how to combine them into words.

In 2000, a government-formed National Reading Panel released the findings of its exhaustive examination of the research. It declared phonics instruction was crucial to teaching young readers, along with several related concepts.

Whole language had lost.

What emerged, though, was an informal truce that came to be known as "balanced literacy" and borrowed from both approaches. The goal: Get kids into books they found enjoyable as quickly as possible.

But in practice, phonics elements often got short shrift, said Michael Kamil, professor emeritus of education at Stanford University.

"It wasn't a true compromise," said Kamil, who had sat on the national reading panel. The approach

often led to students learning how to guess words, instead of how to sound them out.

Now, as schools look to address low reading scores, phonics and other elements of the science of reading are getting fresh attention, fueled in part by a series of stories and podcasts by APM Reports. Textbook makers are adding more phonics, and schools have dumped some popular programs that lacked that approach.

WHAT IS THE SCIENCE OF READING?

While the phrase doesn't have a universal definition, it refers broadly to research in a variety of fields that relates to how a child's brain learns to read. Neuroscientists, for instance, have used MRIs to study the brains of struggling readers.

In practice, this science calls for schools to focus on the building blocks of words. Kindergartners might play rhyming games and clap out the individual syllables in a word to learn to manipulate sounds. Experts call this phonemic awareness.

Students later will learn explicitly how to make letter sounds and blend letters. To make sure students aren't just guessing at words, teachers might ask them to sound out so-called nonsense words, like "nant" or "zim."

Gone is rote memorization of word spellings. Instead, students learn the elements that make up a word. In a lesson using the word "unhappy," students would learn how the prefix "un-" changed the meaning of the base word.

WHY DOES IT MATTER?

For some kids, reading happens almost magically. Bedtime stories and perhaps a little "Sesame Street" are enough.

But 30% to 40% of kids will need the more explicit instruction that is part of the science of reading, said Timothy Shanahan, a professor emeritus at the University of Illinois at Chicago.

Other kids fall somewhere in between. "They're going to learn to read," said Shanahan, also one of the members of the 2000 panel and the former director of reading for Chicago Public Schools. "They're just not going to read as well as they could be or should be."

Complicating the situation, colleges of education often have stuck with balanced literacy despite concerns about its effectiveness. That means teachers graduate with little background on research-backed instructional methods.

The upshot: Parents often pick up the slack, paying for tutors or workbooks when their children struggle, Shanahan said. Extra help can be costly, contributing to racial and income-based disparities.

As a result, a growing number of NAACP chapters are pushing for wider adoption of the science of reading, describing literacy as a civil rights issue.

WHAT IS DYSLEXIA'S ROLE IN THE READING DEBATE?

Parents of children with dyslexia have led the push to use the science of reading. For them, the issue has special urgency. Kids with dyslexia can learn to read, but they need systematic instruction. When the wrong approach is used, they often flounder.

"I can't even tell you how many screaming fits we had," recalled Sheila Salmond, whose youngest child has dyslexia. "My daughter would come home and say, 'Mom, I'm not learning.' And then it became, 'Mom, I'm stupid.'"

Salmond found herself testifying before Missouri lawmakers, taking a graduate class so she could tutor her daughter and eventually moving her from a suburban Kansas City district to a parochial school. She now is making progress.

WHAT IS CHANGING?

Just a decade ago, it was rare for a state to have laws that mentioned dyslexia or the science of reading.

Now every state has passed some form of legislation. The laws variously define what dyslexia is, require that students are screened for reading problems and mandate that teachers are trained in the most effective strategies, said Mary Wennersten, of the International Dyslexia Association.

States often look to duplicate what has happened in Mississippi, which has credited reading gains to a curriculum revamp that started a decade ago. The multi-million dollar effort includes training teachers on

the science of reading.

The changes have put some curriculum programs in the crosshairs.

Some Colorado districts, for instance, have ditched instructional materials that didn't pass muster under a state law that requires schools to use scientifically based reading programs. New York City, whose mayor often talks about his personal struggle with dyslexia, is making changes in its schools as well.

WHAT DOES THE SCIENCE OF READING MEAN FOR PARENTS?

Should they be researching the tenets of the science of reading? Do they need to help their children form letters out of Play-Doh? What about drilling their kids on nonsense words? Flashcards?

Only if they want to, said Amelia Malone, director of research and innovation at the National Center for Learning Disabilities.

What parents must do, she said, is read to their kids. Otherwise, she recommends helping teachers when they ask for it and pushing for evidence-based practices in their children's schools.

"Parents can be part of the solution," she said, "if we educate them on why this is kind of the movement we need."

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More say Trump broke law in Ga. case than NY's: AP-NORC poll

By JILL COLVIN and EMILY SWANSON Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Former President Donald Trump has emerged largely unscathed politically from his New York indictment. But a new poll suggests that investigations in Georgia and Washington could prove more problematic.

Only 4 in 10 U.S. adults believe Trump acted illegally in New York, where he has been charged in connection with hush money payments made to women who alleged sexual encounters, according to the new poll by The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research. More — about half — believe he broke the law in Georgia, where he is under investigation for interfering in the 2020 election vote count.

The poll finds about half feel similarly about his role in the storming of the U.S. Capitol on Jan. 6, 2021, and his handling of classified documents found at Mar-a-Lago, which are both under investigation by the Justice Department.

The findings suggest potential future charges in those cases against Trump may resonate more deeply with the American public than his alleged cover-up of payments to porn actor Stormy Daniels and other women at the height of the 2016 campaign — charges that nearly 6 in 10 adults believe were politically motivated. While the case drew intense media coverage and made Trump the first former president in U.S. history to be charged criminally, legal experts have long argued that the other investigations pose far more serious potential risk.

The Georgia case, in particular, concerns even some longtime Trump supporters.

"I just feel like he kind of got himself involved in something that he shouldn't have. I don't know if it's necessarily illegal, but just let the votes be the votes," said Stephanie Trinidad, a Republican who lives in Dracut, Massachusetts, and voted for Trump in 2016 and 2020.

The poll offers further evidence that Trump has faced limited political fallout from the indictment, which instead proved a massive fundraising boon. His campaign has raised more than $15 million since news of the indictment broke — much from new donors — and he has rolled out a list of new endorsements.

While the poll finds only 30% of Americans, including 55% of Republicans, say they want Trump to run for president again in 2024, those numbers have changed little since an AP-NORC poll conducted in January. Trump's favorability has also held constant: 34% of U.S. adults overall and 68% of Republicans say they have a favorable opinion of him, similar to three months ago.

Still, Trump, who remains the undisputed front-runner for the Republican nomination, would face substantial headwinds if he wins the Republican nomination. About half of Americans — 53% — say they will definitely not support him in the general election if he emerges as the GOP nominee, according to the poll.

When it comes to the New York case, the poll found 41% say Trump did something illegal. Thirty-three percent say they believe he did something unethical but not illegal. Only a small minority — 14% — say he did nothing wrong.

A majority of Americans – 57% — say Trump's indictment in the case was justified, the poll shows, but just as many say they believe the charges were politically motivated.

They include Gino Lentine, a loyal Trump supporter from Akron, Ohio, who said he doesn't "give two hoots" about the case.

"If you're going to lock up every guy in the world — and every girl — who cheated on their spouse and paid them off, you're going to have to lock up the whole country," said Lentine, 57.

"In my book, he's innocent — well, maybe guilty, but who cares?" he said. "Who cares if he spent $100,000? Nobody cares. It's costing me $100,000 to put gas in my car. Come on."

The poll's New York findings represents a rosier picture for Trump than in Georgia, where Fulton County District Attorney Fani Willis has been investigating whether Trump and his allies illegally meddled in Georgia's 2020 presidential election. The foreperson of a special grand jury convened to hear evidence in the case said the panel recommended that Willis indict over a dozen people, including possibly Trump, who was recorded asking state election officials to "find 11,780 votes" to help him win. It is now up to Willis to decide whether to pursue charges.

But already in the Georgia case, the poll finds 53% say they think Trump broke the law. Twelve percent say he did something they consider unethical but not illegal, while 17% said he did nothing wrong.

Trinidad, 36, said she sees the flurry of investigations Trump faces as a politically motivated distraction aimed at keeping him from winning the White House again. But when it comes to the Georgia case, she said, "I just feel it is a little bit different."

"Once you start getting into our voting system and counts, then I start to get a little wary because that's literally our right as an American citizen. So once you start to fiddle with that, it sort of becomes a little bit more of an issue for me, personally," she said, adding that she hasn't thought much yet about whom she plans to support in 2024.

In the federal cases, about half of Americans — 47% — believe Trump acted illegally in his handling of classified documents, while 49% say he broke the law in connection with the Jan. 6 Capitol riot. About 2 in 10 say they think he did something unethical but not illegal in those cases, and close to that many say they think he did nothing wrong.

The poll makes clear that Americans' views of the investigations are deeply partisan. In the Georgia case, 86% of Democrats but just 22% of Republicans say they think Trump did something illegal. In the New York case, 68% of Democrats and 13% of Republicans say they think he broke the law.

Meanwhile, 9 in 10 Democrats but only a quarter of Republicans say they think the indictment in the New York case was justified. Nearly 9 in 10 Republicans — but only about a third of Democrats — say they think the charges were politically motivated.

That includes Nicole Sawyer, a registered independent from Middletown, Pennsylvania, who typically backs Democrats and praises President Joe Biden. While she believes Trump has done "a lot of immoral things" that are worth investigating, she also sees the probes as driven by politics.

"I think people are sort of just throwing stuff at him, anything they can," said Sawyer, 45, who views the investigations as a distraction from more important issues, like Social Security and health care. Those issues, she said, are "kind of being overshadowed with all this drama with Trump."

Still, Sawyer said that if Trump is found guilty, "he doesn't deserve to be our president."

"I think that kids should be able to look up to the president of America and not have a whole bunch of drama overshadowing the real things that need to be taken care of," she said.

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Colvin reported from New York.

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The poll of 1,230 adults was conducted April 13-17 using a sample drawn from NORC's probability-based

AmeriSpeak Panel, which is designed to be representative of the U.S. population. The margin of sampling error for all respondents is plus or minus 3.9 percentage points.

SpaceX takes second shot at launching biggest rocket

By MARCIA DUNN AP Aerospace Writer

SOUTH PADRE ISLAND, Texas (AP) — SpaceX prepared to launch the biggest and most powerful rocket Thursday, working nonstop after the first shot at a test flight fizzled earlier in the week.

The nearly 400-foot (120-meter) Starship was poised to blast off from the southern tip of Texas, near the Mexican border. SpaceX's Elon Musk gave 50-50 odds of the spacecraft reaching orbit on its debut.

None of the rocket will be recovered. Instead, if all goes well, the first-stage booster, dubbed Super Heavy, would drop into the Gulf of Mexico. The spacecraft on top would continue eastward, passing over the Atlantic, Indian and Pacific Oceans before ditching near Hawaii. The whole flight, if successful, would last just 1 1/2 hours.

The company plans to use Starship to send people and cargo to the moon and, eventually, Mars. NASA has reserved a Starship for its next moonwalking team, and rich tourists are already booking lunar flybys.

A stuck booster valve scrapped Monday's try. Hundreds of space fans returned to the launch site at Boca Chica Beach on the eve of the second launch attempt, snapping more selfies.

"I've been waiting for this, really, for years," said Bob Drwal, a retired engineer who drove down from Chicago with wife Donna.

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Semi-automatic rifle ban passes Washington state Legislature

By LISA BAUMANN Associated Press

BELLINGHAM, Wash. (AP) — A ban on dozens of semi-automatic rifles cleared the Washington state Legislature on Wednesday and the governor is expected to sign it into law.

The high-powered firearms — once banned nationwide — are now the weapon of choice among young men responsible for most of the country's devastating mass shootings.

The ban comes after multiple failed attempts in the state's Legislature, and amid the most mass shootings during the first 100 days of a calendar year since 2009.

The Washington law would block the sale, distribution, manufacture and importation of more than 50 gun models, including AR-15s, AK-47s and similar style rifles. These guns fire one bullet per trigger pull and automatically reload for a subsequent shot. Some exemptions are included for sales to law enforcement agencies and the military in Washington. The measure does not bar the possession of the weapons by people who already have them.

The law would go into effect immediately once it's signed by Democratic Gov. Jay Inslee, who has long advocated for such a ban. When the bill passed the state House in March, Inslee said he's believed it since 1994 when, as a member of the U.S. Congress, he voted to make the ban a federal law.

After the bill passed, Inslee said the state of Washington "will not accept gun violence as normal."

Inslee said lives will be saved because of the semi-automatic rifle ban and two other measures approved by the Legislature this session: one that introduced a 10-day waiting period for gun purchases and another to hold gunmakers liable for negligent sales.

Republican state lawmakers opposed the ban, with some contending school shootings should be addressed by remodeling buildings to make them less appealing as targets and others saying it infringes on people's rights to defend themselves.

"HB 1240 clearly violates our state and federal constitutions, which is why it will end up in court immediately," Sen. Lynda Wilson of Vancouver said.

The U.S. Congress reinstating a ban on semi-automatic rifles appears far off. But President Joe Biden

and other Democrats have become increasingly emboldened in pushing for stronger gun controls — and doing so with no clear electoral consequences.

Nine states including California, New York and Massachusetts, along with the District of Columbia, have already passed similar bans, and the laws have been upheld as constitutional by the courts, according to Washington's Attorney General Bob Ferguson.

In Colorado, lawmakers debated on Wednesday about similar gun measures, but a sweeping ban on semi-automatic firearms faces stiffer odds.

Lawmakers in the Texas Capitol set aside a slate of proposed new gun restrictions without a vote after hours of emotional appeals from Uvalde families whose children were killed last year. The hearing didn't end until the early morning hours Wednesday.

During debate on the Washington state bill, Democrats spoke of frequent mass shootings that have killed people in churches, nightclubs, grocery stores and schools.

Sen. Liz Lovelett of Anacortes said that kids' concerns about school shootings need to be addressed.

"They are marching in the streets. They are asking for us to take action," Lovelett said. "We have to be able to give our kids reasons to feel hopeful."

Another gun-control bill that passed in Washington this session would allow people whose family members die from gun violence to sue if a manufacturer or seller "is irresponsible in how they handle, store or sell those weapons." Under the state's consumer-protection act, the attorney general could file a lawsuit against manufacturers or sellers for negligently allowing their guns to be sold to minors, or to people buying guns legally in order to sell them to someone who can't lawfully have them.

A second bill would require gun buyers to show they've taken safety training. It would also impose a 10-day waiting period for all gun purchases — something that's already mandatory in Washington when buying a semi-automatic rifle.

Some gun-control legislation in other states has been struck down since last year's landmark U.S. Supreme Court ruling, which set new standards for reviewing the nation's gun laws. The ruling says the government must justify gun control laws by showing they are "consistent with the Nation's historical tradition of firearm regulation."

Homeowner who shot Black teen Ralph Yarl pleads not guilty

By MARGARET STAFFORD and JIM SALTER Associated Press

LIBERTY, Mo. (AP) — The 84-year old man who shot Ralph Yarl when the Black teenager went to his door by mistake pleaded not guilty Wednesday in a case that has shocked the country and renewed national debates about gun policies and race in America.

Andrew Lester walked into the courtroom with a cane and spoke quietly during Wednesday's hearing, his first public appearance since last week's shooting. Authorities say he shot Yarl, a 16-year-old honor student, first in the head, then in the arm after Yarl came to his door because he had confused the address with the home where he was supposed to pick up his younger brothers.

The case is among three in recent days involving young people who were shot after mistakenly showing up in the wrong places. A 20-year-old woman was killed in upstate New York when the car she was in pulled into the wrong driveway. In Texas, two cheerleaders were shot after one of them mistakenly got into a car thinking it was hers.

Yarl was shot at point-blank range in the head but miraculously survived the bullet. Only about 10% to 15% of people who are shot in the head survive, said Dr. Christopher Kang, the president of the American College of Emergency Physicians.

Some civil rights leaders and Yarl's family attorney, Lee Merritt, have urged the Department of Justice to investigate the shooting and for prosecutors to charge Lester with a hate crime, with Merritt noting that Yarl "was armed only with his Black skin."

Justice Department officials have not responded to calls seeking comment.

Clay County prosecutor Zachary Thompson said first-degree assault is a higher-level crime, allowing a

sentence of up to life in prison, which is more than a hate-crime charge would carry.

Lester remains free after posting $20,000 — 10% of his $200,000 bond — and agreeing to relinquish any weapons and have no contact with Yarl or his family. He also agreed to have his cellphone monitored.

Yarl's relatives were not at Wednesday's hearing because they are emotionally exhausted, Merritt said. Lester's attorney, Steve Salmon, did not come out of the courthouse to speak with reporters.

Merritt said Yarl is "completely humbled" by the outpouring of support.

"He says, 'I don't know why everyone's making a big deal out of me,'" Merritt said. "You know, it's it's just me, right? It's not like the president was shot."

But Eliana Brannlund said it has been rough not having her friend and fellow band member around at Staley High School.

"He always brought a lot of positivity and smiles to our band class as well as our rehearsals outside of school," Brannlund said in an interview with The Associated Press. "I hope people are able to hear about who Ralph is as a person and understand that he is loving, kind and sweet."

Yarl was shot at about 10 p.m. last Thursday after his mother asked him to pick up his twin brothers at a home on 115th Terrace, Police Chief Stacey Graves has said.

Yarl, who is all-state band member as well as a top student, mistakenly went to 115th Street — a block away from where he meant to be. When he rang the bell, Lester came to the door and used a .32 caliber Smith and Wesson 1888 revolver to shoot the teenager.

Lester told police he lives alone and was "scared to death" when he saw Yarl on the porch because he thought someone was trying to break in, police said in court documents.

No words were exchanged before the shooting, but afterward, as Yarl got up to run, he heard Lester yell, "Don't come around here," the statement said.

Yarl ran to multiple homes asking for help before finding someone who would call the police, according to court documents.

Legal experts expect Lester to claim self-defense and cite Missouri's "Stand Your Ground" law. The state is one of about 30 with statues that say people don't have to retreat when threatened but instead can respond with physical force.

But Merritt said the law applies only if "someone's on your property and they're looking to do you harm .... We don't have any evidence of that. The Castle Doctrine does not apply to this case."

The shooting outraged many in Kansas City and across the country. President Joe Biden spoke with Yarl on Monday, and on Tuesday invited him to the White House.

"No parent should have to worry that their kid will be shot after ringing the wrong doorbell," Biden tweeted. "We've got to keep up the fight against gun violence."

Republican Gov. Mike Parson, who had remained silent on the shooting until Wednesday, accused Biden of politicizing it.

"I don't want some 16-year-old kid to be getting shot because he went to the wrong house — we just don't want those kinds of things to happen. It's a tragedy," Parson told the Kansas City Star. "When the president of the United States is trying to make a political statement over a very serious tragedy, it is very unfortunate."

Thompson, the prosecutor, said Monday that there was a "racial component" to the shooting but did not elaborate. Merritt said the Yarl family met privately with Thompson. The prosecutor said he was "echoing the words from law enforcement that obviously there's a racial dynamic at play in this case," said Merritt, who called the answer "shallow."

Lester's next court date is June 1.

"From this point forward, the state will be pushing to move this case forward as swiftly as legally permitted," Thompson said in a statement after Wednesday's hearing.

But Merritt said Yarl's family is frustrated that Lester is out on bond and that the next court hearing is not until June.

"We want this process to go as quickly as possible," Merritt said. "And we know that if a defendant is

out on bond, they may feel free to push the date down a little further as opposed to if he was in custody."

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Salter reported from O'Fallon, Missouri. Heather Hollingsworth in Mission, Kansas, and Trisha Ahmed in Minneapolis contributed to this report.

Supreme Court extends access to abortion pill to Friday

By MARK SHERMAN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Supreme Court is leaving women's access to a widely used abortion pill untouched until at least Friday, while the justices consider whether to allow restrictions on the drug mifepristone to take effect.

The court is dealing with a new abortion controversy less than a year after its conservative majority overturned Roe v. Wade and allowed more than a dozen states to effectively ban abortion outright.

At stake now is whether to allow restrictions on mifepristone ordered by a lower court to take effect while a legal challenge to the medication's Food and Drug Administration approval continues.

The justices had at first given themselves a Wednesday evening deadline in a fast-moving case from Texas in which abortion opponents are seeking to roll back FDA approval of mifepristone, which is used in the most common method of abortion in the United States.

But on Wednesday afternoon, Justice Samuel Alito issued a one-sentence order giving the court more time and indicating it expects to act by Friday night. Alito, the justice in charge of handling emergency appeals from Texas, provided no explanation.

The justices are scheduled to meet for a private conference Friday, where they could talk about the issue. The additional time could be part of an effort to craft an order that has broad support among the justices. Or one or more justices might be writing a separate opinion, and asked for a couple of extra days.

The drug first won FDA approval in 2000, and conditions on its use have been loosened in recent years, including making it available by mail in states that allow access.

The Biden administration and New York-based Danco Laboratories, the maker of the drug, want the nation's highest court to reject limits on mifepristone's use imposed by lower courts, at least as long as the legal case makes it way through the courts. They say women who want the drug and providers who dispense it will face chaos if limits on the drug take effect. Depending on what the justices decide, that could include requiring women to take a higher dosage of the drug than the FDA says is necessary.

Alliance Defending Freedom, representing anti-abortion doctors and medical groups in a challenge to the drug, is defending the rulings in calling on the Supreme Court to restrict access now.

Complicating the situation, a federal judge in Washington has ordered the FDA to preserve access to mifepristone under the current rules in 17 Democratic-led states and the District of Columbia that filed a separate lawsuit.

The Biden administration has said the rulings conflict and create an untenable situation for the FDA.

Even as the abortion landscape changed dramatically in several states, abortion opponents set their sights on medication abortions, which make up more than half of all abortions in the United States.

The abortion opponents filed suit in November in Amarillo, Texas. The legal challenge quickly reached the Supreme Court after a federal judge issued a ruling on April 7 that would revoke FDA approval of mifepristone, one of two drugs used in medication abortions.

Less than a week later, a federal appeals court modified the ruling so that mifepristone would remain available while the case continues, but with limits. The appeals court said the drug should only be approved through seven weeks of pregnancy for now, even though the FDA since 2016 has endorsed its use through 10 weeks of pregnancy.

The court also said that the drug can't be mailed or dispensed as a generic and that patients who seek it need to make three in-person visits with a doctor, among other things.

The generic version of mifepristone makes up two-thirds of the supply in the United States, its manufacturer, Las Vegas-based GenBioPro Inc., wrote in a court filing that underscored the perils of allowing

the restrictions to be put into effect.

In the latest legal twist surrounding the case, GenBioPro filed a lawsuit Wednesday to preemptively block the FDA from removing its drug from the market, in the event that the Supreme Court doesn't intervene.

The FDA approved the company's generic pill in 2019, based on data and studies showing it is essentially identical to the original version of mifepristone. Both versions have been studied extensively and deemed safe for women.

If the justices aren't inclined to block the ruling from taking effect for now, the Democratic administration and Danco have a fallback argument, asking the court to take up the challenge to mifepristone, hear arguments and decide the case by early summer.

The court only rarely takes such a step before at least one appeals court has thoroughly examined the legal issues involved.

The 5th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals in New Orleans already has ordered an accelerated schedule for hearing the case, with arguments set for May 17.

Mifepristone has been available for use in medication abortions in the United States since the FDA granted approval in 2000. Since then, more than 5 million women have used it, along with another drug, misoprostol, to induce abortions.

Former House Speaker Nancy Pelosi said in an interview with The Associated Press that for the court to allow restrictions intervening with FDA decisions "would be ludicrous, if it wasn't so serious."

If the justices take such a step, said Pelosi, D-Calif., "they've been too long on Mount Olympus, and it is time for a bright light to be shone."

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AP Health Writer Matthew Perrone and Associated Press writer Jessica Gresko contributed to this report.

'Rust' movie reboots after Alec Baldwin shooting

By MORGAN LEE Associated Press

SANTA FE, N.M. (AP) — Filming on the Western movie "Rust" could resume this week in Montana, the production company said Wednesday, in the aftermath of the fatal shooting of a cinematographer during a rehearsal with actor Alec Baldwin on the original production in New Mexico.

Baldwin will continue his involvement as an actor and coproducer, and Rust Move Productions attorney Melina Spadone said via a representative that filming will restart Thursday at the Yellowstone Film Ranch.

The production company finalized a settlement last month with New Mexico workplace safety regulars over "serious" violations, agreeing to a $100,000 fine to resolve a scathing safety review that detailed unheeded complaints and misfires on set before cinematographer Halyna Hutchins was shot and killed in October 2021.

Plans to resume filming were outlined last year by widower Matthew Hutchins in a proposed settlement to a wrongful death lawsuit that would make him an executive producer on a rebooted "Rust."

Prosecutors in Santa Fe are pressing forward with involuntary manslaughter charges against actor Baldwin and a weapons supervisor Hannah Gutierrez-Reed. Baldwin and Gutierrez-Reed have pleaded not guilty.

Baldwin was pointing a pistol at Hutchins during a rehearsal when the gun when off, killing Hutchins and wounding director Joel Souza.

Baldwin has said the gun went off accidentally and that he did not pull the trigger. An FBI forensic report found the weapon could not have fired unless the trigger was pulled.

New Mexico Gov. Michelle Lujan Grisham this month signed a new $360,000 allowance for prosecution of the case. Evidentiary hearings are scheduled in early May in state District Court to decide whether to proceed toward trial. Baldwin has indicated that he won't attend those hearings.

Santa Fe District Attorney Mary Carmack-Altwies says her office is pursuing justice in the death of Hutchins and wants to show that no one is above the law when it comes to firearms and public safety. She says the Ukrainian-born cinematographer's death was tragic and preventable.

"Rust" safety coordinator and assistant director David Halls pleaded no contest in March to a conviction

for unsafe handling of a firearm and a suspended sentence of six months of probation.

Souza, the director, has said he'll return to the "Rust" production to honor the legacy of Halyna Hutchins.

Parts of a documentary about Hutchins' life will be filmed simultaneously with "Rust."

Montana Republicans want censure while misgendering lawmaker

By AMY BETH HANSON Associated Press

HELENA, Mont. (AP) — A group of conservative Republican lawmakers in Montana deliberately misgendered a transgender colleague in demanding that she be censured for language she used on the floor while speaking against a bill that would ban gender-affirming medical care for children.

The Montana Freedom Caucus posted its demand on Twitter Tuesday evening — on letterhead bearing the names of 21 lawmakers — arguing that Democratic Rep. Zooey Zephyr should be punished "for trying to shame the Montana legislative body and by using inappropriate and uncalled-for language during a floor debate."

The caucus called for a "commitment to civil discourse," while misgendering Zephyr in the same sentence. The caucus also misgendered Zephyr in the Tweet.

"It is disheartening that the Montana Freedom Caucus would stoop so low as to misgender me in their letter, further demonstrating their disregard for the dignity and humanity of transgender individuals," Zephyr said in a statement Wednesday. "Their call for 'civility and respect' is hypocritical given their actions."

Lawmakers were debating Republican Gov. Greg Gianforte's proposed amendments to the transgender medical care bill on Tuesday when Zephyr, referring to the prayer given prior to every floor session, said: "If you vote yes on this bill and yes on these amendments, I hope the next time there's an invocation, when you bow your heads in prayer, you see the blood on your hands."

House Majority Leader Sue Vinton stood and said: "I will note that this is entirely inappropriate, disrespectful and uncalled for. We can debate matters civilly and with respect for each other." Vinton had earlier risen in opposition to Zephyr's statement that lawmakers should be ashamed of themselves if they supported the bill.

"The language used by the so-called Freedom Caucus, including the intentional and repeated misgendering of Rep. Zephyr, is blatantly disrespectful and the farthest thing imaginable from the 'commitment to civil discourse' that these letter writers demand," House Minority Leader Kim Abbott said in a statement. "I find it incredibly ironic that these legislators are making demands of others that they refuse to abide by themselves."

Republican Sen. Theresa Manzella, chair of the Montana Freedom Caucus, did not immediately respond to emailed questions Wednesday.

Madison Atkinson, the spokesperson for the House Republicans, did not say whether House leadership planned to act on the caucus' request.

"House Leadership is focused on maintaining decorum on the House floor, and the integrity of the Montana House of Representatives while serving the people of Montana," she said in a statement.

The exchange on the House floor and the caucus response is an example of the polarization seen in legislatures around the country as they debate bills affecting the transgender community.

Earlier this month in Kansas, House lawmakers overrode Democratic Gov. Laura Kelly's veto of a bill banning transgender female athletes from girls' and women's sports from kindergarten through college. Two LGBTQ+ Democratic lawmakers were upset because they believed Republicans were gloating over the vote.

Rep. Heather Meyer, who also has a transgender son, stood, opened her jacket and displayed a "Protect Trans Youth" T-shirt before making a rude gesture as she left the chamber. Rep. Susan Ruiz yelled at GOP members, briefly cursing at them before being told she was out of order.

In a number of states, transgender people who have testified against legislation that target their rights have been met with demeaning questions and rhetoric from Republican lawmakers.

Zephyr began her comments Tuesday by criticizing a letter from the governor explaining his proposed amendments to the gender-affirming care bill. In it, the governor said he had met with transgender resi-

dents and said Montanans who struggle with gender identity deserve love, compassion and respect.

"That's not what trans Montanans need from you," Zephyr said. "We need access to the medical care that saves our lives."

"I stand by my accurate description of the devastating consequences of banning essential medical care for transgender youth," Zephyr's statement said. The gender-affirming care ban "is part of an alarming trend of anti-trans legislation in our state, which includes over a dozen unconstitutional bills. These bills ban our art forms, our stories, our healthcare, and our very existence in Montana code."

The legislature has considered a bill that sought to ban drag story hours, but it has been amended. It has passed a bill saying it's not illegal discrimination for a school student to misgender or deadname a fellow student, unless it rises to the level of bullying. The legislature also is moving another bill to put a binary definition of male and female into state code.

Zephyr said Tuesday that lawmakers and the governor had received a letter from an emergency room physician who said a transgender teenager cited the legislature's actions as the reason for their suicide attempt. "My state doesn't want me," the doctor reported the patient as having said.

The House and Senate gave final approval to the governor's amendments Wednesday. The bill will now go to the governor for his signature.

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Associated Press writer John Hanna in Topeka, Kansas, contributed to this report.

DEA chief faces probe into 'swampy' hires, no-bid contracts

By JOSHUA GOODMAN and JIM MUSTIAN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — A federal watchdog is investigating whether the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration under chief Anne Milgram improperly awarded millions of dollars in no-bid contracts to hire her past associates, people familiar with the probe told The Associated Press.

Among the spending under scrutiny by the Justice Department's Office of Inspector General is $4.7 million for "strategic planning and communication" and other contracts that were used to hire people Milgram knew from her days as New Jersey's attorney general and as a New York University law professor – at costs far exceeding pay for government officials.

At least a dozen people have been hired under such contracts, including some in Milgram's inner circle handling intelligence, data analytics, community outreach and public relations — work often requiring security clearances and traditionally done by DEA's own 9,000-person workforce.

Also under scrutiny is $1.4 million to a Washington law firm for a recent review of the DEA's scandal-plagued foreign operations that was widely criticized for giving short shrift to agent misconduct and how to prevent it. That review was co-authored by Boyd Johnson, former right-hand man to one of Milgram's closest friends, Preet Bharara, when he was U.S. Attorney in Manhattan. Bharara himself landed at the firm, WilmerHale, even as the review was being conducted.

"Some of these deals look very swampy," said Scott Amey, general counsel of the nonpartisan Project on Government Oversight, noting that federal contracting is not intended to bypass the government hiring process and should be conducted with no preferential treatment and avoiding even the appearance of a conflict of interest. Contractors are also prohibited from performing "inherently governmental functions" such as directing federal employees.

"Contracts should never be awarded based on who you know," Amey said.

WIDENING INQUIRY

Details of the widening inquiry, which began several months ago in response to employee complaints, came from several people interviewed by the Inspector General's office who discussed the ongoing probe and provided contracting documents on the condition of anonymity. If misconduct is found, the Inspector General can recommend anything from administrative sanctions to criminal prosecution.

The probe comes as the DEA is struggling with repeated revelations of agent misconduct that have rocked the federal narcotics agency and a fentanyl crisis claiming more than 100,000 overdose deaths a

year that Milgram has called the "deadliest drug threat our country has ever faced."

The DEA declined to make Milgram available for an interview or to discuss the investigation and specific contracts, instead releasing a statement.

"DEA has acted with urgency to set a new vision, target the global criminal networks responsible for hundreds of thousands of American deaths, raise public awareness about how just one pill can kill, and promote and recruit hundreds of highly talented people," it said. "These changes have been made through an extensive and multi-part process, and we are committed to ensuring that DEA is working relentlessly to protect the national security, safety, and health of the American people."

Anthony Coley, a former Justice Department spokesman who has known Milgram for 15 years, said the investigation may stem from employees who aren't happy with such organizational change and are seeking ways to "push back or undermine it, even if the underlying allegations aren't true."

"But that's what inspectors general are for," he said, "to call balls and strikes."

MANDATE TO CLEAN HOUSE

With a tough New Jersey bravado and data-driven "Moneyball" approach to the war on drugs, the 52-year-old Milgram came to the DEA nearly two years ago with a mandate to clean house.

But the Biden appointee quickly ruffled feathers by pushing out several career DEA officials she viewed as part of a cliquish culture that allowed misconduct to flourish. Instead, she favored the counsel of newly installed attorneys and data crunchers who work with her in an isolated part of the 12th floor of DEA headquarters known as "the bubble."

Milgram has also made a point to show zero tolerance for sexual misconduct and racism in the ranks, warning agents they may now be fired for certain first offenses — a departure from previous administrations.

One of her first actions was ordering an external review of the DEA's sprawling foreign operations, which spans 69 countries. It came in the wake of the high-profile arrest of José Irizarry, a disgraced agent now serving a 12-year federal prison sentence after confessing to laundering money for Colombian drug cartels and skimming millions from asset seizures and informants to fund an international joyride of fine dining, parties and prostitutes.

'STUNNINGLY VAGUE'

But those selected to carry out the review raised eyebrows. One, John "Jack" Lawn, is a DEA legend but the 87-year-old's insights date from his tenure leading the agency in the 1980s. After leaving government, Lawn headed the Century Council, a beverage industry group, which funded research into campus alcohol abuse that was conducted by Milgram's mother, a Rutgers University expert in the field.

Lawn's co-author, Boyd Johnson, worked as a prosecutor on international drug cases before becoming a partner at WilmerHale. Both Johnson and Milgram have close ties to Bharara, who after being fired as U.S. attorney by President Donald Trump joined the NYU faculty alongside Milgram and together hosted the legal issues podcast "Cafe Insider." Last year — as the foreign operations review was being conducted — Bharara joined WilmerHale. And this year, DEA hired away from the firm Milgram's former NYU research assistant to become her deputy chief of staff.

Competitive bidding rules for the review were sidestepped by the DEA's argument of "unusual and compelling urgency," saying the "threat of illicit foreign drugs to the health and safety of the American public has never been greater."

But instead of the projected six months to get the review out, it took nearly three times that long.

"It's a complete waste of taxpayers' money," said Matthew Donahue, who led DEA's foreign operations until he butted heads with Milgram and was transferred to Colombia, a demotion that prompted him to retire.

Donahue said he and several other DEA overseas veterans were never interviewed as part of the review, which scarcely mentioned Irizarry or other scandals, and borrowed heavily from publicly available audits and DEA operating manuals.

"It's something that could've been written in three days," he said.

Iowa Republican Sen. Chuck Grassley, a longtime voice against government waste and member of the Senate Judiciary Committee, ripped WilmerHale's review as "stunningly vague" and recently sent Johnson

a letter requesting a range of records, background on his relationship with Milgram and asking whether she or anyone else at DEA requested edits of the report.

"Though DEA originally billed this report as a 'comprehensive review' of DEA's foreign operations strategy, the report glosses over or ignores serious shortcomings at the agency and spends much of its 49 pages quoting from publicly available documents that one could have pulled off a web site," Grassley wrote in the letter last week.

Neither Lawn, Johnson, Bharara nor WilmerHale responded to requests for comment.

NEW JERSEY TIES

Another no-bid contract under scrutiny went to Jose Cordero, a longtime New York City police official whose ties to Milgram go back to 2007 when as attorney general she named him New Jersey's first statewide director of gangs, guns and violent crime.

Together they overhauled the police department in Camden — then under state control due to soaring crime and corruption — by crunching crime stats and intelligence data in real time to deploy resources as needed. The approach won national praise as the homicide rate in what was then the country's most dangerous city was slashed by nearly half.

"We have a lot of culture to change," Milgram said in a 2014 TED talk on applying statistics to crime fighting. "But the great news about all of it is that we know it works."

Less than three weeks after taking the top job at DEA, Milgram awarded Cordero what has become a nearly $400,000 contract to conduct data analysis of crime stats.

But Donahue said Cordero's expertise in urban policing has less value to the DEA, which processes a flood of intelligence from foreign and domestic wiretaps, as well as informants, to dismantle cross-border criminal networks.

Cordero didn't respond to requests for comment.

THE CLEARING

Several of the hires in question joined DEA through The Clearing, a Washington-based federal contractor that provides outsourced administrative services to the DEA and other federal agencies.

The Clearing's $4.7 million in billings to the DEA for "strategic planning and communication consulting services" over the past two years have accounted for 30% of its federal contracts during that period, records show.

Among those from The Clearing under scrutiny is Lena Hackett, a former Democratic congressional staffer and founder of Community Solutions, an Indianapolis consulting firm focused on public health and criminal justice. Milgram described her as her main partner in a policing reform project she established in Indianapolis while teaching at NYU.

Internal records show Hackett regularly briefs field offices, prepares policy statements and memos for Milgram and meets with families affected by the fentanyl crisis. For her services, the DEA budgeted $257 an hour — more than triple the hourly rate earned by the agency's top civil servants, including the head of community outreach.

Another brought in through The Clearing is Julia Pacetti, a New York City publicist who has led media campaigns for prominent public figures and authors.

According to documents, Pacetti's firm JMP/Verdant collected $11,500 a month plus expenses to write news releases, handle interview requests and arrange news conferences— work some DEA employees viewed as redundant given the agency's existing staff of public relations employees.

Several recent DEA news releases – including those announcing fentanyl busts as part of the agency's "One Pill Can Kill" enforcement surge – came not from the DEA's official email account but from "Julia Pacetti-Verdant."

Neither The Clearing, Hackett nor Pacetti responded to requests for comment.

"This looks terrible to taxpayers," said Don Fox, former acting director and general counsel of the Office of Government Ethics. "The appearance is awful." ___ AP Researcher Rhonda Shafner contributed to this report from New York.

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Contact AP's global investigative team at Investigative@ap.org.

DeSantis appointees begin reshaping Disney World's district

By MIKE SCHNEIDER Associated Press

LAKE BUENA VISTA, Fla. (AP) — The new chair of Disney World's revamped governing body said Wednesday that new supervisors had good intentions about collaborating with the company after they were appointed by Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis, so it was "shameful" when Disney signed agreements with their predecessors stripping them of most of their authority.

"Our board wanted to work with Disney, but Disney decided they didn't want to work with us. It was Disney's way or the highway," Martin Garcia, chair of the Central Florida Tourism Oversight District, said at the start of a board meeting.

In response, he had a warning about what the DeSantis-appointed supervisors who now oversee Disney World's vast Florida holdings might try to achieve in an evolving showdown between the governor and Disney: "Nothing is off the table at this point."

Among the changes board members made Wednesday were eliminating a planning agency and making the board responsible for future planning. They also said that in the future, they might consider acquiring more land under eminent domain, monetizing the district's assets to pay off debt, banning COVID-19 vaccine and mask mandates, asserting the board's "superior authority" over the district and exploring new zoning for the construction of affordable housing for Disney workers on Disney World property.

Disney World required masks and had social distancing protocols in place in 2020 when it reopened after closing for several months in an effort to stop COVID-19's spread. DeSantis has been a fierce opponent of virus mask and vaccine mandates and has petitioned the state Supreme Court to convene a grand jury to investigate "any and all wrongdoing" with respect to the COVID-19 vaccines.

Disney also said last year it would donate almost 80 acres (32 hectares) for the construction of 1,400 affordable housing units by a third-party developer. Hours after the board meeting ended Wednesday, the company announced that groundbreaking would be next year with the first units finished in 2026.

Wednesday's meeting continued a battle pitting prospective presidential candidate DeSantis and Republican state lawmakers against Disney that started last year when the entertainment giant publicly opposed what critics call the state's "Don't Say Gay" legislation barring school instruction on sexual orientation and gender identity in kindergarten through third grade. In retaliation, Florida lawmakers passed, and DeSantis signed, legislation reorganizing Disney World's company-controlled government, allowing the governor to appoint the five members of the Board of Supervisors. Disney previously had controlled the board for its 55-year existence.

Last month, the new DeSantis-appointees claimed their Disney-controlled predecessors pulled a fast one by stripping the new board of most powers and giving Disney control over design and construction at the theme park resort before the new members could take their seats.

At Wednesday's meeting, Garcia said the new supervisors last week discovered another "11th-hour agreement" between Disney and the previous supervisors that allows the company to set its own utility rates.

DeSantis and state lawmakers ratcheted up the pressure on Disney on Monday by proposing upcoming legislation that would require state inspections of Disney rides, which would be an unprecedented move since Florida's largest theme park operators have been able to conduct their own inspections. The lawmakers also plan to consider legislation that would revoke the agreements between the previous board supervisors and Disney.

Republican state Sen. Blaise Ingoglia said he had a message for Disney: "You are not going to win this fight. This governor is."

Disney has said all agreements made with the previous board were legal and approved in a public forum.

Disney CEO Bob Iger earlier this month said that any actions against the company that threaten jobs or expansion at its Florida resort was not only "anti-business" but "anti-Florida."

The new supervisors have hired a team of high-powered lawyers that includes a former Florida Supreme Court justice to possibly challenge the agreements between Disney and the old board. At Wednesday's meeting, the attorneys outlined their arguments for why the deals were illegal, claiming they weren't properly noticed and were self-dealing. They also said a district can't confer governmental powers to a private entity.

"Disney engaged in a caper worthy of Scrooge McDuck," said David Thompson, one of the attorneys.

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Follow Mike Schneider on Twitter at @MikeSchneiderAP

Last minute brinkmanship and overseas assist end Fox case

By DAVID BAUDER AP Media Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Before pulling back from the brink of a trial, Fox News and Dominion Voting systems faced a stern deadline — not from an impatient judge or jury, but from a man on a Danube River cruise with his wife half a world away.

A mediator hired late Sunday pushed the two sides toward a $787 million settlement that brought a stunning end to the most-watched media libel case in decades, one that sought to put a price on lies told about the 2020 presidential election on conservative America's most popular news outlet.

"It's a deadline that I always impose because I know that once a jury is empaneled and opening statements are made, then one or other of the parties will dig into their positions," Jerry Roscoe, of the Washington-based JAMS mediation service, said Wednesday. "It makes negotiations much more difficult."

As the haggling went on, over the phone and in back rooms of a Delaware courthouse, lawyers, journalists and spectators waited as a scheduled 1:30 p.m. start of the trial came and went Tuesday.

Finally, two minutes before 4 p.m., Superior Court Judge Eric Davis emerged with an almost matter-of-fact announcement, given the stakes.

"The parties have resolved their case," he said.

It was a settlement months in the making, since the Colorado-based voting technology firm sued Fox for $1.6 billion, alleging its business was harmed and employees threatened when it was baselessly accused of rigging its voting machines against former President Donald Trump in 2020.

In the two months prior to the scheduled start of the trial, a mountain of evidence — some damning, some merely embarrassing — showed many Fox executives and on-air talent didn't believe allegations aired mostly on shows hosted by Maria Bartiromo, Lou Dobbs and Jeanine Pirro. At the time, they feared angering Trump fans in the audience with the truth.

Davis had ordered the two sides to try to mediate their differences last December, but it was a non-starter for Dominion. The company didn't want the case to end without all of the evidence it had gathered made public. That happened through February and March, with document dumps that essentially outlined the case Dominion would have presented at trial.

"That was something we had committed to from the beginning," Dominion CEO John Poulos said Wednesday on ABC's "Good Morning America." "We had complete support with our partners, and it's something that we owed to our customers."

Fox had argued that it was airing newsworthy allegations made by Trump aides, and that Dominion's case was an attack on press freedom.

Libel is tough to prove — a jury must find journalists knowingly published false information or with a "reckless disregard" for the truth. Yet Fox's path to victory narrowed, both through the evidence presented and rulings by Davis, who said that the allegations against Dominion were unquestionably false, and that newsworthiness was no defense against defamation.

Attorneys for both sides, Justin Nelson for Dominion and Dan Webb for Fox, quietly began to seek a deal before trial. With the two sides far apart, they reached out to mediator Roscoe, then cruising between Budapest and Bucharest with his wife. He agreed to take the case on, using much of Monday to read through the evidence.

"My job is to create options and to give them choices," Roscoe said.

He spoke on the phone constantly from the boat, mostly with lawyers other than Nelson and Webb Tuesday, as they were preparing for opening statements, and principals like Poulos, ensconced in a conference room at the courthouse.

Davis gave the two sides Monday off to talk. On Tuesday morning, a jury was selected that included five Black men, four white women, two Black women and one white man. It was a majority Black jury deciding the financial fate of a network whose audience is 94% white and 1% Black, according to the Nielsen company.

Jury selection can be a key moment in pushing two sides toward a last-minute settlement, said Lee Levine, a veteran First Amendment attorney.

There's a strong possibility that "Fox had decided to wait and see what kind of jury it drew and to see if they had a couple of people on the jury they had good feelings about being holdouts," Levine said.

Fox privately resisted the idea that jury selection was key to a deal, saying instead that there were complicated negotiations that had to play out.

Meanwhile, after a lunch break, people returned to a courtroom cluttered with boxes filled with evidence. Webb spoke on a cellphone and approached Nelson to quietly talk more than once. At one point, Webb was seen walking out of the courtroom with a wide smile on his face.

Levine was walking on a beach in North Carolina with his wife, wearing ear buds to catch the audio feed of opening statements. When court hadn't resumed by 2:30 p.m., his instincts told him that a settlement was near.

When did Roscoe have that feeling?

"When it came together and not a moment before," the mediator said. "The parties had different analyses of the law and the facts and were vigorous advocates for their positions all along the negotiations."

The agreement was reached before 3 p.m. in Delaware, or 10 p.m. on Roscoe's boat.

The negotiations were primarily financial. Fox had issued a public statement Monday saying that Dominion had reduced its estimate of damages by $600 million. Dominion disputed that, but the eventual deal was closer to what Fox said was the adjusted figure.

Some Fox critics were angry about the deal, wanting instead to see a trial with Fox figures forced to testify in public, or at least Fox personalities compelled to apologize to Dominion on the air.

Instead, Fox issued a statement that said it acknowledged Davis' findings that "certain claims about Dominion" were false. "This settlement reflects Fox's continued commitment to the highest journalistic standards," Fox said.

Levine sees it this way: "At the end of the day I think a reasonable reading of what happened was there was a line that Fox wouldn't cross or couldn't cross because of their business model."

"They couldn't have their anchors go on the air and tell (viewers) they lied to them," he said.

"I don't think a forced apology is worth a nickel," said Stephen Shackelford, Dominion's co-lead counsel. He said that following a legal threat in December 2020 by another technology firm, Smartmatic, Fox aired an interview with an election expert debunking fraud claims, and it had little effect on Fox's audience or how Fox operated.

Smartmatic has a pending lawsuit against Fox that is similar to Dominion's.

"You can't change their culture and approach from the outside," Shackelford said. "They have to do it themselves."

Asked for comment, Fox said the company has expanded its newsgathering capabilities both domestically and abroad, and has added other resources to enhance coverage.

"We're confident of the editorial systems we have in place," Fox said.

In making the deal, Poulos said he had to take into account employees and customers who had suffered from harassment following the false claims. He noted that Fox had acknowledged the court's rulings that the allegations were false.

Given the challenges he faced trying to bring Fox and Dominion together with their disputes over the facts and legal theory, Roscoe said it's one of the most meaningful cases he's worked on in his career. His

wife may insist upon another vacation, though.

"She was probably on the Internet looking for another husband," he joked.

Woman shot after wrong turn had hopes, dreams, father says

By MICHAEL HILL Associated Press

FORT EDWARD, N.Y. (AP) — The father whose 20-year-old daughter was fatally shot after she and her friends got lost and drove to the wrong house in rural upstate New York raged Wednesday at the man who pulled the trigger.

"For this man to sit on his porch and fire at a car with no threat is just … it angers me so badly," said Andrew Gillis, whose daughter Kaylin Gillis was killed Saturday. "And I just hope to God that he dies in jail."

The anguished father spoke at the courthouse after a hearing in which the man accused of killing Kaylin Gillis, Kevin Monahan, was denied bail by a judge. Monahan, 65, appeared in court with a jacket, tie and shackles. He answered questions from the judge, but mostly sat quietly.

"My daughter was an honor student. She had hopes and dreams of … becoming a marine biologist or a veterinarian," Andrew Gillis told reporters, his voice cracking with emotion. "She loved animals. And this man took that away from us."

Gillis, her boyfriend Blake Walsh and their friends got lost while going to another friend's nearby house. They were driving two cars and a motorcycle when they turned into Monahan's long, dirt driveway in the town of Hebron, near the Vermont border.

As they realized the mistake and turned around, Monahan fired with a shotgun, authorities said.

Andrew Gillis said Walsh, who wanted to marry his daughter, blamed himself for the tragedy.

"The first time I saw Blake after this happened, he said, 'It's all my fault,'" he said. "And I said, 'No, it's no one's fault except for that man that pulled the trigger. You guys had no idea that something that bad could happen on a backcountry road.'"

Assistant District Attorney Christian Morris described Monahan in court as "confrontational and hot-tempered." He said Monahan recently caused a scene at a local department of motor vehicles office. Monahan also had a 1980 misdemeanor and a 2001 aggravated assault with a weapon charge in Vermont that was later dismissed, the prosecutor said.

Morris said other charges are possible against Monahan, including attempted murder.

Monahan's attorney, Kurt Mausert, told the judge the 1980 misdemeanor was for a driving while intoxicated and that his client had no penal law convictions. He said his client should not be judged on rumor and innuendo.

Mausert has previously called law enforcement's version of the events a "superficial, simplistic" account of what actually happened.

After court, Andrew Gillis said the loss of Kaylin is being felt by his wife and Kaylin's two younger sisters. He also recalled his daughter leaving that day, grabbing her bathing suit with plans to go in the hot tub at her boyfriend's house that night.

"If anything I'm thankful for," he said, "is that I got to tell her that I love her before she walked out the door."

Florida expands 'Don't Say Gay'; House OKs anti-LGBTQ bills

By ANTHONY IZAGUIRRE and BRENDAN FARRINGTON Associated Press

TALLAHASSEE, Fla. (AP) — Republican Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis added more wins to his agenda targeting the LGBTQ+ community as a state board approved an expansion of what critics call the "Don't Say Gay" law Wednesday, and the House passed bills on gender-transition treatments, bathroom use and keeping children out of drag shows.

The Board of Education approved a ban on classroom instruction about sexual orientation and gender identity in all grades, expanding the law that bans those lesson up to grade 3 at the request of DeSantis

as he gears up for an expected presidential run.

The rule change would ban lessons on sexual orientation and gender identity from grades 4-12, unless required by existing state standards or as part of reproductive health instruction that students can choose not to take. That's the time when students are becoming aware of their sexuality.

The proposal will take effect after a procedural notice period that lasts about a month, according to an education department spokesman.

The DeSantis administration put forward the proposal last month as part of the Republican's aggressive conservative agenda, with the governor leaning heavily into cultural divides ahead of his looming White House candidacy.

He previously directed questions to Education Commissioner Manny Diaz Jr., who said it was meant to clarify confusion around the existing law and reinforce that teachers should not deviate from existing curriculums.

"We're not removing anything here," Diaz Jr. said on Wednesday. "All we are doing is we are setting the expectations so our teachers are clear: that they are to teach to the standards."

The prohibition has drawn intense backlash from critics who argue it marginalizes LGBTQ+ people and has vague terms that result in self-censorship from teachers. Democratic President Joe Biden has called it "hateful."

It's not the only issue upsetting LGBTQ+ people in Florida. Also Wednesday, the House passed a bill to make it a felony to provide gender-affirming health care to transgender minors, another DeSantis priority.

"In the image of God, he created them. Male and female, he created them. Folks this is rock solid, irreversible, validated by science and our medical community. Period," said Republican Rep. Chase Tramont. "You are either male or female. This is not subject to one's opinion. It is demonstrable fact."

Democrats argued that ignoring gender dysphoria in children can be psychologically harmful, They said parents and doctors should make decisions on treatment, not government.

"Trans people are already dealing with the feeling of not feeling wanted, not being accepted, not being loved, not belonging. Do we want to treat them like they are worthless?" said Democratic Rep. Marie Paule Woodson. "This is a territory that we have no right of stepping into."

As they debated, a group of protesters shouted against bill sponsor Republican Rep. Randy Fine, chanting, "Racist, sexist, anti-queer, Randy Fine get out of here."

"We know that these are all just part of the governor's agenda to attack our community and to take rights away from people disguised under parents' rights," said Salvatore Vieira, a field manager for Equality Florida, who led the chants. "I fully believe in an equal and a beautiful Florida for everyone."

The House sent DeSantis another bill that bans children from an adult live performance, a proposal aimed at the governor's opposition to drag shows.

The legislation would allow the state to revoke the food and beverage licenses of businesses that admit children to adult performances. The DeSantis administration has moved to pull the liquor licenses of businesses that held drag shows, alleging children were present during lewd displays.

The House also passed a bill that will ban people from entering bathrooms other than their sex assigned at birth. It requires bathrooms in public places to be listed as Men, Women or Unisex.

DeSantis has made culture wars a priority as he gears up to run for the White House. Former President Donald Trump and other Republican presidential hopefuls have been increasingly attacking DeSantis' leadership, including an ongoing feud with Disney, one of the state's largest employers and political donors.

The entertainment giant publicly opposed the "Don't Say Gay" legislation last year, and, as punishment, DeSantis pushed lawmakers to give him control of a self-governing district that Disney oversees in its theme park properties.

Before a set of new DeSantis appointees could assume control of the district, Disney's board passed restrictive covenants that strip the incoming members of most of their powers, blunting the governor's retaliation.

DeSantis has directed the chief inspector general to investigate the Disney board's move and vowed to take additional revenge against the company through legislation.

Groton Daily Independent
Thursday, April 20, 2023 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 286 ~ 61 of 87

Common mistakes, uncommon reactions in 3 separate shootings

By The Associated Press undefined

In the span of six days, four young people across the U.S. have been shot — one fatally — for making one of the most ordinary and unavoidable mistakes in everyday life: showing up at the wrong place.

A man shot and wounded two cheerleaders outside a Texas supermarket early Tuesday after one of them said she mistakenly got into his car thinking it was her own.

A group looking for a friend's house in upstate New York arrived in the wrong driveway only for one of them to be shot to death Saturday night, authorities said.

In Missouri last Thursday, a Kansas City teen was shot twice after going to the wrong home to pick up his younger brothers, raising questions about the state's "stand your ground law" and heightening racial tensions.

This type of gun violence is not rare, said Jonathan Metzl, who directs Vanderbilt University's Department of Medicine, Health and Society. The shootings have drawn attention because they are so extreme and in such quick succession.

But they show how "stand your ground" laws have fueled a belief that people can use guns defensively "anytime they perceive a threat," he said.

Below is a brief glance of each shooting and the ensuing criminal investigations in Missouri, New York and Texas.

THE SHOOTING IN KANSAS CITY

Honors student Ralph Yarl, 16, mixed up the address when he went to pick up his twin brothers on Thursday night. Instead of going to 115th Terrace, he showed up at the home of Andrew Lester, 84.

Lester, who is white, told police he had just gotten in bed when he heard the doorbell. Before answering, he grabbed his revolver. Lester said he then saw Yarl, who is Black, pulling on the storm door handle, something Yarl disputes, according to the probable cause statement.

Lester told police he thought the teen was attempting to break into the home and he was "scared to death," the statement said. Without saying a word, Lester fired twice.

Yarl said the first shot struck him in the head, knocking him to the ground. As he lay there, the second bullet pierced his arm. Yarl told police he fled as the homeowner yelled, "Don't come around here," the statement said.

Lester was charged with first-degree assault Monday and turned himself in Tuesday.

Some civil rights leaders have called for a hate crime charge, but Zachary Thompson, Clay County prosecuting attorney, said first-degree assault is a higher-level crime with a longer sentence — up to life in prison.

The wounded teen is recovering at home, and his mother, Cleo Nagbe, said the trauma is evident. She told "CBS Mornings" co-host Gayle King that her son mostly "just sits there and stares and the buckets of tears just rolls down his eyes."

Legal experts believe Lester's lawyers will claim self-defense under Missouri's "stand your ground" law, which allows for the use of deadly force if a person fears for his or her life. Missouri is one of roughly 30 states with such statutes.

St. Louis defense attorney Nina McDonnell said prosecutors have a strong case but the "stand your ground" defense is a "huge hurdle" to overcome.

But Ari Freilich, an attorney and state policy director with the Giffords Law Center to Prevent Gun Violence, said nothing in the law "allows someone to shoot first and ask questions later when someone innocently rings a doorbell."

THE SHOOTING IN UPSTATE NEW YORK

Kaylin Gillis, 20, was traveling through the rural town of Hebron with three other people Saturday night when the group turned onto a property that was not the friend's house they were looking for, authorities said. They were met with gunfire in the driveway.

The group was trying to turn the car around when the homeowner, Kevin Monahan, 65, came out onto

his porch and fired two shots, according to Washington County Sheriff Jeffrey Murphy.

One round hit Gillis, killing her.

They drove to the neighboring town of Salem, near the Vermont state line, and called 911, said Murphy, who noted the area has limited cell phone service.

Monahan was booked into the Warren County jail on a charge of second-degree murder. It wasn't clear whether he had an attorney who could speak on his behalf.

Murphy said at a news conference Monday that there was "no reason for Mr. Monahan to feel threatened."

New York doesn't have a "stand your ground" law.

THE SHOOTING IN TEXAS

A man shot and wounded two cheerleaders in a supermarket parking lot after one of them said she mistakenly got into his car thinking it was her own.

The shooting in Elgin, east of Austin, happened early Tuesday in an area that serves as a carpool pickup spot for members of the Woodlands Elite Cheer Company, team owner Lynne Shearer said.

Heather Roth said she got out of her friend's car and into a vehicle she thought was hers, but there was a stranger in the passenger seat, KTRK-TV reported. She said she panicked and got back into her friend's car, but the man got out of his vehicle and approached. She said she tried to apologize through her friend's car window, but the man threw up his hands, pulled out a gun and opened fire.

Roth was grazed by a bullet and treated at the scene, police said. Her teammate Payton Washington, 18, was shot in the leg and back. Washington was flown to a hospital in critical condition.

Police arrested a suspect, 25-year-old Pedro Tello Rodriguez Jr., who is charged with engaging in deadly conduct, a third-degree felony. Online court records do not list an attorney for him.

Speaker McCarthy unveils $1.5T debt bill, pushes toward vote

by LISA MASCARO and KEVIN FREKING Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — House Speaker Kevin McCarthy unveiled a sweeping package Wednesday that would raise the nation's debt limit by $1.5 trillion into next year while imposing a long list of Republican priorities, including new spending caps, work requirements for recipients of government aid and others that are sure to be nonstarters for the White House.

McCarthy announced that House Republicans were introducing their legislation just as President Joe Biden was taking the stage at a union hall in Maryland to warn of a looming fiscal crisis if Congress fails to take action to raise the debt ceiling, now at $31 trillion, to keep paying the nation's bills.

The 320-page "Limit, Save, Grow Act" unleashed by House Republicans has almost no chance of becoming law, but McCarthy is using the legislation as a strategic move, a starting point to draw Biden into negotiations that the White House has, so far, been unwilling to have over the debt crisis.

"President Biden is skipping town to deliver a speech in Maryland rather than sitting down to address the debt ceiling," McCarthy, R-Calif., said in a speech on the House floor.

The package was swiftly embraced by leading Republicans as McCarthy has worked intently to unite his often fractious majority. A vote in the House is expected next week, in hopes of pressuring Biden to respond. Democrats in the House and Senate are almost certain to be opposed.

Among the bill's highlights:

— It would raise the debt ceiling by $1.5 trillion into next year, putting the issue squarely into the middle of the next presidential election.

— It would roll back spending to 2022 levels, and impose a 1% cap on future federal spending for the next decade, with likely exceptions for some defense accounts. It claws back unspent COVID-19 funds.

— Republicans want to rescind some of Biden's top policy achievements, including his executive action that provided student loan payment relief for millions of college students, a Democratic party priority.

— The House GOP measure would also roll back elements of Biden's signature Inflation Reduction Act — particularly the provisions that the White House and Democrats put in place to fight climate change — and halt money to the Internal Revenue Service that was designed to conduct audits of potential tax cheats.

Loading the bill up are other Republican priorities, including their marquee H.R. 1, a sweeping energy bill that aims to boost oil, gas and coal production while overhauling permitting regulations to ease such developments.

The package includes a long-sought Republican effort to impose tougher work requirements on recipients of government aid, including people dependent on food stamps, Medicaid for health care and general cash assistance.

Missing from the bill are reductions for the Medicare or Social Security programs used mainly by older Americans. Democrats had warned that Republicans wanted to gut those programs. It also steers clear of rescinding the $35 monthly cap on insulin for Medicare recipients and other provisions for lowering prescription drug prices that Biden signed into law last year.

Overall, the legislation is a designed to be a marker for Republicans, a bill that could unite what McCarthy's team has called the "five families" — the often warring factions of conservatives and hard-right Republicans in the House GOP majority.

What remains to be seen is if McCarthy's effort will satisfy the House Freedom Caucus and others on the speaker's right flank who have pushed for even steeper reductions and revisions in federal spending.

Rep. Dusty Johnson, R-S.D., the chairman of the Republican Main Street Caucus, said the final product included his group's priorities for spending caps, work requirements and other provisions.

With the nation in debt and the deadline looming in six weeks, "we are duty-bound to address both of those crises. Republicans have a reasonable plan to do so," Johnson said.

"We have to take action," said Rep. Don Bacon, a moderate Republican from Nebraska, who said he would vote for the bill.

But Rep. Jim McGovern, D-Mass., said he expects every Democrat will vote against the Republican package.

"It's a bill that screws regular people, plain and simple," said McGovern.

Raising the nation's debt limit, once a routine vote, has become politically treacherous in Congress, often used particularly by Republicans as leverage to extract priorities that they otherwise have been unable to pass into law.

For now, the Treasury Department is taking "extraordinary measures" to allow continued borrowing to pay off already accrued bills, but that will eventually run out, likely this summer.

This week, Goldman Sachs warned that the date when the federal government runs out of maneuvering room on its cash flows could be as early as "the first half of June."

"We must address record spending now," said a joint statement from McCarthy's leadership team, including Majority Leader Steve Scalise, R-La., Whip Tom Emmer, R-Minn., Conference Chair Elise Stefanik, R-N.Y., and Budget Chairman Jodey Arrington, R-Texas.

While the Republican leaders claimed the package would save money, some proposed changes would actually cost taxpayers.

Previously, the nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office had projected that rescinding the extra IRS funding would increase deficits over the coming decade by more than $114 billion.

A full CBO cost analysis of the new package is not expected for some time.

The plan has been in the works for weeks, if not longer, but came together quickly in recent days.

Biden blasts GOP 'wacko notions' amid debt limit standoff

By JOSH BOAK, SEUNG MIN KIM and ZEKE MILLER Associated Press

ACCOKEEK, Md. (AP) — President Joe Biden lambasted Republicans' emerging trade-off plans to raise the nation's debt limit only in exchange for spending cuts and other policy concessions on Wednesday, declaring that GOP lawmakers are threatening a historic default on U.S. obligations "unless I agree to all these wacko notions they have."

His remarks in a union hall speech came as House Speaker Kevin McCarthy, who had for months struggled to unite Republicans around a unified budget proposal, released a sweeping spending-restraint plan to

offer to the White House along with lifting the debt limit by $1.5 trillion.

But it's far from settled whether McCarthy has 218 Republican votes — a House majority — in favor of his proposal, which has no chance of becoming law in the Senate and is meant to kickstart negotiations with the administration. Cruising toward crisis, if Congress and Biden can't agree to raise the limit in coming weeks, the government would be at risk of being unable to pay its bills and facing an economy-ravaging default.

This week's split-screen presentations, which began with McCarthy delivering a speech on Wall Street, vividly displayed how Biden and the speaker are talking to two very different Americas.

Standing in a steel garage and workshop, Biden pointedly noted the contrast, telling the members of International Union of Operating Engineers, Local 77 that while "I'm here in the union hall with you, Speaker McCarthy just got finished speaking to Wall Street two days ago."

Biden emphasized that strictly limiting government spending programs could hurt a middle class that's already struggling to afford basic needs. And demanding concessions in exchange for paying the nation's debts is "worse than totally irresponsible," Biden said, declaring that "America is not a deadbeat nation."

"Folks, that's the MAGA economic agenda: Spending cuts for working- and middle-class folks ... with tax cuts for those at the top of the pile," Biden said, referring to former President Donald Trump's campaign slogan, Make America Great Again. "It's not about fiscal discipline. It's about cutting benefits for folks ... they don't seem to care much about."

Commenting in kind, McCarthy said, "President Biden is skipping town to deliver a speech in Maryland rather than sitting down to address the debt ceiling." He also insisted that House Republicans were the ones acting responsibly by insisting on reining in the federal government's spending habits.

"If you gave your child a credit card and they kept maxing out the limit, you wouldn't blindly raise the limit. You'd change their behavior," McCarthy said. "The same is true with our national debt."

The speaker took to the House floor shortly before Biden spoke Wednesday and detailed the GOP plan. It would, among other provisions, claw back billions of unspent COVID-19 relief funds, rescind money meant to boost staffing at the Internal Revenue Service, and stop Biden's effort to cancel up to $20,000 in student loan debt for millions of borrowers.

The plan would roll back spending to 2022 levels, and impose a 1% cap on most future federal spending for the next decade. The proposed debt limit increase would last until sometime next year, putting the issue back in the spotlight during the presidential campaign.

The California Republican argues excess government spending is driving up inflation, empowers China and threatens the future of Social Security and Medicare.

Biden and McCarthy, who need to come together for the sake of the U.S. economy, are playing out diametrically opposing strategies to different audiences, each wagering he'll win out in the end.

To the extent the two men have engaged each other — with no active negotiations so far — it has been only to provide fodder for attacks.

McCarthy says Biden is "bumbling" into a default by not meeting with him; Biden counters that McCarthy has already "threatened to become the first speaker to default on our national debt" unless he gets what he wants in the budget.

Complicating things for McCarthy, he is facing pressure not to give ground from conservatives in his razor-thin House majority who earlier this year delayed his elevation to the speakership.

But Biden contends that spending cuts would put an unacceptable strain on the government's ability to meet its constitutional responsibility to stand behind its obligations. The GOP's faith in tax cuts has blown up the deficit, he says.

Under the Republican proposal, the debt limit would be extended into next year, McCarthy said. He pressed the White House to negotiate a compromise with GOP lawmakers, noting that voters elected a divided Congress in the November midterms.

So far this year, he said, Biden "has been avoiding the issue for 77 straight days and counting."

Both men are veterans of the nasty debt limit battle of 2011, when Biden was vice president and McCarthy was a relatively new member of the House Republican leadership. They know the risks of even

edging close to the debt limit deadline, such as the first-ever downgrade of the U.S. credit rating that occurred that summer. For all the posturing, the markets generally assume as of now that a deal will be reached as it has in the past.

But as they've talked past each other, they've rarely talked with each other. The president and the new Republican speaker sat down in early February, but have had little substantive communication since. The White House, instead, has pushed McCarthy publicly to release a GOP budget plan that details its proposed cuts — which Democrats say are anathema to voters.

Meanwhile, the White House is standing with Democrats on Capitol Hill who overwhelmingly insist that no concessions be made in exchange for lifting the debt limit.

It's far from clear whether McCarthy's plan can get 218 votes — a House majority —and whether he would have to add on other changes — such as repealing the Democrats' sweeping climate, health care and tax law known as the Inflation Reduction Act — to persuade holdout Republican lawmakers.

Much of the rhetoric now is political posturing ahead of the deadline to raise the debt limit before the U.S. reaches the ceiling, which is a moving target but is expected in the coming months. The White House has only hardened on its no-negotiation stance since Biden hosted McCarthy in the Oval Office, but most lawmakers and economists believe that eventually the two sides will avert a default.

Wall Street firms — looking at tax revenues — are estimating that the day of reckoning is near. Goldman Sachs this week estimated that the "x-date" could be reached in June, at which point the "extraordinary" steps taken by the Treasury Department to keep the government running would be exhausted and bills would start going unpaid.

Both sides could tone down the rhetoric by committing first and foremost to the U.S. government avoiding a default on its payments, said Brian Riedl, a senior fellow at the conservative Manhattan Institute. That could help to build credibility and show good faith in talks.

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AP congressional correspondent Lisa Mascaro and AP writer Kevin Freking contributed to this report.

Ganja glut? With excess weed, growers seek interstate sales

By GENE JOHNSON, ANDREW SELSKY and MICHAEL R. BLOOD Associated Press

TUMWATER, Wash. (AP) — The email went out to legal cannabis growers around Washington state, alerting them that another of their colleagues had gone under.

"Liquidation sale," it said. Attached was a spreadsheet of items up for grabs: LED grow lights for $500 apiece. Rotary evaporators for hash oil, $10,000.

Across the Columbia River in Oregon, where the state's top marijuana regulator recently warned of an "existential crisis" in the industry, it's an open secret some licensed growers have funneled product to the out-of-state black market just to stay afloat.

California's "Apple store of weed," MedMen, is teetering with millions in unpaid bills, while the Canadian cannabis company Curaleaf has shuttered most of its cultivation operations in California, Oregon and Colorado.

Along the West Coast, which dominated U.S. marijuana production long before states began to legalize it, producers face what many call the failed economics of legal pot.

There is vast supply, thanks to great growing conditions and a wealth of expertise, but any surplus remains officially trapped within each state's borders due to the federal ban on marijuana. Prices have plunged and producers have struggled.

"I'm at rock bottom," said Jeremy Moberg, who owns CannaSol Farms in north-central Washington and, like many licensed growers, complains that the state's 37% cannabis tax leaves virtually no profit margin for producers. "I'm tired of running a failing business."

No one in the industry expects a fractured Congress to help out anytime soon by legalizing the drug, allowing pot businesses to deduct expenses or even just easing banking restrictions that frequently cut them off from loans or credit.

Instead, some are pinning their hopes, however faint, on President Joe Biden's administration clearing

the way for marijuana trade among states that have legalized the drug. That would allow the West Coast — with its favorable climate and cheap, clean hydropower for indoor growing — to help supply the rest of the country, they argue.

In Senate testimony last month, Attorney General Merrick Garland said the Justice Department will soon announce a new marijuana policy — one that would hew close to the "Cole Memorandum" of 2013, which made clear the feds would not interfere with state efforts to regulate marijuana as long as certain law enforcement priorities were met.

Drug policy experts say they do not expect the new policy to go as far as permitting interstate commerce.

Nevertheless, lawmakers in Washington state last week approved a "trigger bill" — modeled after ones already passed in Oregon and California — authorizing the governor to enter into interstate cannabis trade agreements should the feds allow it.

Twenty-one states have now legalized the recreational use of cannabis by adults. Sales just began in Missouri, are expected to begin in July in Maryland and totaled $300 million in the first year of New Mexico's program.

How states have set up their markets has implications for how their industries are doing now — and how they might fare should businesses be allowed to sell out of state.

Washington and Colorado were the first states to legalize recreational marijuana in 2012. Many of the early regulations Washington adopted to keep the Justice Department at bay — including restricting the size of growing facilities and banning out-of-state investment — remain in place.

That has helped some smaller growers thrive. But it could hamstring those hoping to compete in an interstate marketplace alongside larger, more efficient producers from Oregon or California, who operate under fewer limits.

In Oregon, where sales began in 2015, large growers have achieved some economy of scale that could give them a leg up in a broader market. But in the meantime, the state's oversupply is considered the nation's worst.

In February, the Oregon Liquor and Cannabis Commission reported marijuana businesses were sitting on about 3 million pounds (1.36 million kilograms) of unused cannabis, as well as 75,000 pounds (34,000 kilograms) of concentrates and extracts.

Steve Marks, then the commission's executive director, said Oregonians already buy as much weed as they can use. Federal inaction poses "an existential crisis" for Oregon's industry, he warned.

"Cannabis in Oregon is like corn in Iowa," said TJ Sheehy, an analyst for the commission. "If you put a box around Iowa and said you can only grow corn in Iowa to sell to Iowans, you'd have exactly the same dynamic."

Contributing to the glut in Oregon and to a lesser degree in Washington is that the states licensed so many growers. The initial idea was to ensure enough supply for the legal market, bringing down prices to compete with the black market. Oregon, with a little over half of Washington's population, has hundreds more licensed growers.

The oversupply has been terrific for cannabis consumers.

When legal sales began in Oregon, a pound of cannabis might have gone for $3,000 wholesale; today, that same pound might be $100 to $150, said Isaac Foster, co-founder of Portland Cannabis Market, a wholesale distributor.

In Washington, which has some of the highest cannabis taxes in the country, the prices consumers pay in pot shops are still cheaper than illicit weed. The state is raking in half a billion dollars a year in taxes, money it devotes to health care and government operations.

Three-quarters or more of cannabis users in Washington, Oregon and Colorado — all among the earliest legalization states — reported they bought marijuana products from legal retail outlets in 2021, according to the International Cannabis Policy Study, based at the University of Waterloo in Ontario, Canada.

With such cheap prices, keeping the industry sustainable is a challenge.

Moberg, of CannaSol Farms, is down to seven employees — a drop from more than 30 in 2014 and 2015 as Washington's pioneering industry launched amid tight supply and high prices.

With the spring planting season arriving, he already has three shipping containers full of weed, he says, including 75% of what he produced last season, and 1,000 pounds (453.6 kilograms) still unsold from the year before that. His revenue last year was down by about half.

East Fork Cultivars, one of Oregon's first licensed growers, has thousands of pounds (kilograms) of marijuana stashed, said co-founder Nathan Howard.

"We hope we can sell most of it to keep the lights on," Howard said. "It's a miracle that we're still in existence."

Oregon regulators know growers are suffering, but say they'll be in a good position should the feds allow interstate commerce.

In one meeting with producers in southern Oregon, Paul Rosenbaum, then chair of the state's cannabis commission, told them to hang on.

"You're all staying in this game for one reason: that the federal government, whether it's this term or next term, they are going to recognize marijuana on a 50-state basis," he recalled telling them. "And southern Oregon is to marijuana what Bordeaux is to France."

Industry insiders say legal growers generally want to supply the legal market, rather than risk their businesses and freedom should they get caught selling out the back door. But some have only hung on by getting product to the black market.

"They were either going to die or get creative," said Tanner Mariani, head of sales for Portland Cannabis Market. "And a lot of people chose to get creative and ... found a way to get it from this market into the other side and then out of the state."

Authorities have also contended with illegal farms operating under the guise of legality — notably in Oregon, where many have been financed by foreign cartels.

The arrival of legal, adult-use sales in 2018 in California — the nation's largest pot producer and the world's fourth-largest economy — was seen as a breakthrough that would help open the way for federal legalization.

But about two-thirds of California communities don't allow legal marijuana activity, which helps the tax-free illegal market flourish.

A post-pandemic economy ushered in layoffs in a sector that already was strained. Hefty taxes, inflation and regulatory costs weigh on bottom lines, and a glut pushed wholesale prices to fire-sale levels. As in Oregon, it's no secret some California growers have pushed legal product into illicit sales.

An analysis by cannabis investor Aaron Edelheit determined California's legal market lost nearly one-quarter of its total growing area after the start of 2022 — "a wipeout," he called it. With so many producers going under, wholesale prices have started to recover in California.

One of the state's first licensees was Erik Hultstrom, who envisioned thriving in a green rush economy and began nurturing boutique buds in a steel-gated warehouse on the fringes of Los Angeles.

Five years later, he's sold his license and hopes to contract with a large grower to sell bud under Hultstrom's brand.

"I don't know any companies that are really making money," he said.

L.A. dispensary owner Gregory Meguerian said he folded a cultivation project: "You've got to know when you cut your losses."

There have been predictions of an industry-wide collapse, but not everyone is concerned. Rob Sechrist, of the cannabis-only lender Pelorus Equity Group, described the market tumult as normal for an emerging industry.

"Every time somebody fails, market share goes to somebody else," Sechrist said. "We have borrowers throughout the country and California that are doing extremely well."

Indeed, cannabis distributor Nabis is opening a massive warehouse southeast of Fresno this month.

Some growers have found a happy medium.

Indoor grower Doc & Yeti Urban Farms, in Tumwater, Washington, produces about 1,200 pounds (544 kilograms) of flower every year, which it sells to regular retail-store customers, said co-founder Joseph DuPuis. Brand loyalty has helped his team of 13 survive and profit, but he'd like to see Washington better

prepare itself for a national market.

"If you can withstand the storm, you have a chance to come out to calmer seas and survive in this market," DuPuis said.

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Selsky reported from Salem, Oregon. Blood reported from Los Angeles. Thomas Peipert in Denver and Gillian Flaccus in Portland, Oregon, contributed.

Major leagues, broadcasters pledge responsible betting ads

By WAYNE PARRY Associated Press

ATLANTIC CITY, N.J. (AP) — Most of the nation's major professional sports leagues, plus the media companies Fox and NBCUniversal are creating an alliance to ensure that sports betting advertising is done responsibly and does not target minors.

The Coalition for Responsible Sports Betting Advertising was created Wednesday, consisting of the National Football League; Major League Baseball; the men's and women's leagues of the National Basketball Association; the National Hockey League; NASCAR, Major League Soccer, Fox and NBCUniversal.

They described the group as a voluntary alliance to control how sports betting advertising, which is ever-present on the airwaves, in print and online, is presented to consumers.

It includes a recommendation that "excessive" advertising be avoided.

Formation of the group follows a move last month by the commercial casino industry through its national trade association, the American Gaming Association, to adopt a new responsible sports betting marketing code.

Both efforts recognize the proliferation of sports betting advertising in the five years since the U.S. Supreme Court cleared the way for any state to offer legal sports wagering.

They also have a clear, if unstated goal: to regulate their own advertising before the government might step in and do it for them. One New York congressman has introduced legislation that would ban all online and digital sports betting advertising, and others have called for government-imposed regulation of sports betting ads.

"As the legalization of sports betting spreads nationwide, we feel it is critical to establish guardrails around how sports betting should be advertised to consumers across the United States," the group said in a joint statement. "Each member of the coalition feels a responsibility to ensure sports betting advertising is not only targeted to an appropriate audience, but also that the message is thoughtfully crafted and carefully delivered."

David Schwartz, a gambling historian at the University of Nevada Las Vegas, said the prosects for government control of sports betting ads are uncertain.

"I can see how it would be in the leagues' and operators' best interests to avoid formal federal oversight," he said. "Advertising is an area that touches not just customers, but the public at large. As such, it may have more visibility than even the actual business of taking bets. It is understandable that those involved want to get out in front of this."

Speaking Wednesday at a gambling industry forum in Atlantic City, West Virginia state Delegate Shawn Fluharty said there is definitely concern among state lawmakers over the frequency of sports betting advertising.

"If you're talking to any people out there, they're probably a little tired of seeing Jamie Foxx on TV," he said, referring to the actor's widely broadcast ads for BetMGM's sportsbook.

He said the coalition is a good idea that also shows that the leagues recognize there is cause for concern about the possibility of government intervention regarding sports betting advertising.

The group has several core principles, including that sports betting should be marketed only to adults of legal betting age; that the ads should not promote irresponsible or excessive gambling; they should be in good taste and not be misleading; and that publishers of sports betting advertising should have strong internal reviews and should take seriously complaints from consumers about such advertising.

Kenny Gersh, executive vice president of media and business development for Major League Baseball, called the group "another important step for our industry as legal sports betting continues to grow."

Sports betting is currently legal in 33 U.S. states, plus Washington D.C.

"While providing new fan engagement opportunities to enjoy our sport in more ways, we have to continue to be mindful and deliberate with how these sports betting options are presented and to whom they're directed," Gersh said. "Layering this coalition's work in the advertising arena on top of our efforts to promote responsible gambling and address problem gambling challenges will lead to more thoughtful planning and implementation across the board."

David Highhill, general manager of sports betting for the NFL, said the leagues recognize advertising as an important component of responsible conduct.

"Legalized sports betting offers fans another way to engage with their favorite sports, but just as we must support problem gambling prevention and resourcing, we must also remain mindful of how sports betting is presented and advertised to consumers, and this coalition should greatly aid in that cause," he said.

Mike Mulvihill, an executive vice president with Fox Sports, said, "We are committed to providing fans a responsible and ethical engagement with sports betting, keeping the integrity of the games and our broadcasts at the forefront at all times."

Keith Whyte, executive director of the National Council on Problem Gambling, praised the group for "taking steps to lead the industry in proactive change to protect consumers."

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Oklahoma official who discussed killing reporters resigns

By SEAN MURPHY Associated Press Writer

OKLAHOMA CITY (AP) — A county commissioner in far southeast Oklahoma who was identified by a local newspaper as one of several officials caught on tape discussing killing reporters and lynching Black people has resigned from office, Gov. Kevin Stitt's office confirmed Wednesday.

Stitt spokesperson Carly Atchison said the office received a handwritten resignation letter from McCurtain County Commissioner Mark Jennings. In it, Jennings says he is resigning immediately and that he plans to release a formal statement "in the near future regarding the recent events in our county."

The threatening comments by Jennings and officials with the McCurtain County Sheriff's Office were obtained following a March 6 meeting and reported by the McCurtain Gazette-News earlier this week in its weekend edition. They have sparked outrage and protests in the city of Idabel, the county seat.

In a post on the sheriff's office Facebook page on Tuesday, officials did not address the recorded discussion but claimed the recording was illegally obtained.

Also on Wednesday, the Oklahoma State Bureau of Investigation confirmed it has launched an investigation into the matter at the request of the governor.

The recorded conversation included Sheriff Kevin Clardy, sheriff's Capt. Alicia Manning, Jennings and Jail Administrator Larry Hendrix. During that conversation, Clardy, Manning and Jennings appear to discuss Bruce Willingham — the longtime publisher of the Gazette-News — and his son Chris Willingham, a reporter.

Jennings tells Clardy and Manning "I know where two deep holes are dug if you ever need them," and the sheriff responds, "I've got an excavator."

Jennings also says he's known "two or three hit men" in Louisiana, adding "they're very quiet guys."

In the recording, Jennings also appears to complain about not being able to hang Black people, saying: "They got more rights than we got."

The Associated Press is working to verify the authenticity of the recording. None of the four officials returned telephone calls or emails from The Associated Press seeking comment.

Bruce Willingham told the AP the recording was made when he left a voice-activated recorder inside the

room after a county commissioner's meeting because he suspected the group was continuing to conduct county business after the meeting had ended, in violation of the state's Open Meeting Act.

Willingham said he twice spoke with his attorneys to be sure he was doing nothing illegal.

Joey Senat, a journalism professor at Oklahoma State University, said under Oklahoma law, the recording would be legal if it were obtained in a place where the officials being recorded did not have a reasonable expectation of privacy.

Bruce Willingham said he believes the local officials were upset about "stories we've run that cast the sheriff's office in an unfavorable light," including the death of Bobby Barrick — a Broken Bow, Oklahoma, man who died at a hospital in March 2022 after McCurtain County deputies shot him with a stun gun. The newspaper has filed a lawsuit against the sheriff's office seeking body camera footage and other records connected to Barrick's death.

Separately, Chris Willingham has filed a federal lawsuit against the sheriff's office, Clardy, Manning and the Board of County Commissioners alleging Manning slandered him after he wrote an eight-part series of articles detailing problems inside the sheriff's office. The lawsuit claims after the first few articles were published, Clardy and Manning began investigating which office employees were speaking to the newspaper and were attempting to get a search warrant for Willingham's phone.

The lawsuit, which was filed on the same day the recording was made, alleges that after the series was published, Manning told a third party during a teleconference that Chris Willingham exchanged marijuana for sexually explicit images of children from a man who had been arrested on child sex abuse image charges.

"Manning made these (and other) false statements about Willingham in retaliation for articles he wrote about the (sheriff's office) as a reporter for the McCurtain Gazette and to destroy his credibility as a reporter and journalist," the lawsuit states.

More than 100 people gathered outside the McCurtain County Courthouse in Idabel earlier this week, with many of them calling for the sheriff and other county officials to resign.

On Tuesday, the Oklahoma Sheriff's Association, a voluntary membership organization and not a regulatory agency, held an emergency meeting of its board. It voted unanimously to suspend Clardy, Manning and Hendrix from the association.

Are you a Facebook user? You could get some settlement cash

By BARBARA ORTUTAY AP Technology Writer

Anyone in the U.S. who has had a Facebook account at any time since May 24, 2007, can now apply for their share of a $725 million privacy settlement that parent company Meta has agreed to pay.

Meta is paying to settle a lawsuit alleging the world's largest social media platform allowed millions of its users' personal information to be fed to Cambridge Analytica, a firm that supported Donald Trump's 2016 presidential campaign.

It's not clear how much money individual users will receive. The larger the number of people submitting valid claims, the smaller each payment will be since the money has to be divided among them.

To apply for the settlement, users can fill out a form and submit it online, or print it out and mail it.

The case sprang from 2018 revelations that Cambridge Analytica, a firm with ties to Trump political strategist Steve Bannon, had paid a Facebook app developer for access to the personal information of about 87 million users of the platform. That data was then used to target U.S. voters during the 2016 campaign that culminated in Trump's election as the 45th president.

Uproar over the revelations led to a contrite Zuckerberg being grilled by U.S. lawmakers and spurred calls for people to delete their Facebook accounts.

Facebook's growth has stalled as more people connect and entertain themselves on rival services such as TikTok, but the social network still boasts more than 2 billion users worldwide, including an estimated 250 million in the U.S.

Groton Daily Independent
Thursday, April 20, 2023 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 286 ~ 71 of 87

Q&A: Aster, Phoenix try to discuss 'Beau is Afraid'

By LINDSEY BAHR AP Film Writer

In Ari Aster's new film " Beau is Afraid," Joaquin Phoenix plays an anxious man in a rotten world who goes on a wildly weird journey, both Homeric and Oedipal, to his mother's home.

It's theatrical and depraved and perhaps best left largely unexplained, at least until audiences get a chance to enter the debate. But on the eve of the film's wide release Friday, Aster and Phoenix attempt to shed some light on "whatever this is," male pattern baldness and things better left unsaid.

Remarks have been edited for clarity and brevity.

AP: What gave you the confidence to make "Beau" now?

ASTER: I've wanted to make it for a long time. I think I just felt that maybe I might actually be granted the green light now. And I was, which is still a surprise. I also just wanted to make something funny and sad.

AP: Joaquin, your schedule was already quite busy with Todd Phillips' "Joker" sequel and Ridley Scott's "Napoleon" — why did you want to make time for this?

PHOENIX: That's what I do. You always work it out. And I didn't know what it would be, but in having conversations with Ari, I kept just being curious and I enjoyed talking to him. At some point it was like let's just start shooting and see what happens. But I didn't really have any expectations other than I thought that it would be challenging.

AP: I'm always reticent to ask about process, especially in a movie like this where maybe it's better not to know.

PHOENIX: I don't know the f——-g process either. It's a mystery to me, but you just start. I mean, one of the first things that Ari and I did, we talked a great length about the hair. That was just our way in for whatever reason. So months in advance, like, like six months or something, Ari was in L.A. and we worked with someone in the hair department and we kind of just started playing with what look might work. Then we get into costumes and Ari had this great idea that Beau should have oversize clothing. And I just thought that was a great idea. I love things that are tactile that I can feel and put on. That starts having an effect on things. And then, I don't know, we just talk endlessly. I don't even remember what we talked about. Probably a lot about balding.

ASTER: Yeah.

PHOENIX. And testicles.

ASTER: Well, yeah … We knew there was male pattern baldness. We just didn't know to what extent. Like, is he, totally bald? What was the color of the hair, you know, if there is any.

AP: Who is Beau to you?

PHOENIX: He's somebody who's constantly being tested. It's really about identifying his nature, like who he was because everything about the world is trying to get him to react. And there's something so good about him in some way, and it's something that's not jaded. But he also doesn't realize how absurd this world is. And what was really important to us is that I played it as straight as possible. These things, this danger really does exist. And he doesn't ever really stop and say, hold on a sec, this is f——-g crazy. Something is going on, right? I just think that was really important in getting to what his true nature is, which is kind of what (his mother) Mona is trying to do. She kind of fears that genetically he has something … or, should I not?

ASTER: I guess maybe?

PHOENIX: I'll just stop.

ASTER: No, no, no. Well, maybe.

PHOENIX: You're right, never mind.

ASTER: It was very important that Beau be very, very real and whatever he is experiencing be very, very real. It's a very heightened performance, but it's also very grounded. That was really necessary because the world is so arch and almost cartoonishly malign. The world of Beau is supposed to be a mirror of this world, like it's horrible in all the same ways but with the dial turned up. I think that would have been unbearable, especially at this length, if you didn't have somebody that you could kind of hold onto

somebody who is a very effective surrogate whoever the audience is. A lot of the conversations were about just making this guy real enough. How do we have this guy be of this world and at the same time be (five-second pause) uh, real and authentic.

PHOENIX: You see what I'm saying? This is what it was for a month leading up to shooting.

ASTER: Only, you know, mercifully no cameras for posterity.

AP: The world around Beau is wild, especially in the nightmarish city where he lives full of incredible vulgarity and depravity, from the graffiti to the store signs. I read Ari was the architect of a lot of those details.

PHOENIX: It's very easy for him.

ASTER: That was just happening on automatic. Just bring a notepad, you know what I mean?

PHOENIX: Just talking, giving direction and then just, like, writing the most putrid thoughts.

ASTER: Because the world was invented, it gave me license to throw in things that make me laugh.

AP: People have made a big deal about this being the most expensive film A24 has made, which makes it seem like it's some $200 million superhero movie when it's really much more modest than that according to the reported numbers.

ASTER: What are the reported numbers?

AP: I read $35 million.

ASTER: That is right. It was my biggest budget. "Midsommar" was $10 million and "Hereditary" was $5 million. But this was a much, much bigger film. In some ways it kind of felt like we had the same kinds of resources for what we were trying to do, which means that, you know, we had to stretch every dollar. And if ever we fell behind on one day, it was very, very stressful because we would have to make up for another day, which was already packed with stuff we had to do. There were a lot of limitations. But those can be good. It puts you into problem solving mode. It's hardest on the crew.

PHOENIX: You work on weekends, you work through lunches. There's something in some way that's great about it because it forces you to constantly focus on work. There's no fat. There is no time to just relax. It probably creates an energy that the film captures.

AP: Before "Hereditary." you said were feeling a little cynical about Hollywood. Has your perspective changed after your successes?

ASTER: I'm not sure what I said about Hollywood. Hollywood is ...

PHOENIX: Hollywood is great.

ASTER: Yeah. Wait, Hollywood is hell on earth, what are we talking about? It's the worst place in the world. But no, I love it. I've been very fortunate in that right out of the gate I had this relationship with A24. That's been a really wonderful thing in my life. The fact that I was able to make whatever this thing is right now is pretty wonderful. I have no complaints. Was that a good answer?

PHOENIX: It was interesting.

ASTER: Thanks.

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

Keri Russell evolves from silky spy to sweaty 'Diplomat'

By JOCELYN NOVECK AP National Writer

The first sign is the hair. Not exactly a total mess. But definitely not neat, either.

Keri Russell's hair on "The Diplomat," her new Netflix series set in the world of high-stakes global diplomacy, is the hair of a woman — in this case, the U.S. ambassador to Britain — who simply had more urgent things on the morning to-do list than a blow-out. Like briefing the White House or huddling with the CIA station chief.

Russell's Kate Wyler also sweats — a lot. Which, like the messy hair, is something you never saw from Elizabeth Jennings, the Soviet spy Russell played with impeccable, delicious cool for six seasons on "The Americans." Indeed, fans of that FX show will surely gasp at the sight of Russell's Kate raising her arm so

her husband can take a whiff and advise if she needs a shower. Just SO not Elizabeth.

Russell laughs as she confirms that indeed, sweat was foreign to Elizabeth, whose blood ran cold while Kate's runs decidedly hot.

"I always used to think of (Elizabeth) as like a panther," she said in an interview ahead of the first season of "The Diplomat," created by Debora Cahn, which drops Thursday. "Very little movement. And I always wore this really cool eyeliner, and my hair was perfect – all very smooth and panthery. This character, Kate, is not that! I'm constantly sweating, the hair is a mess, and it's probably a lot more like most of us in life."

It's been five years since we saw Elizabeth in that searing "Americans" finale, standing next to husband Philip (real-life partner Matthew Rhys) and gazing out at Moscow, their covers blown, contemplating a future (spoiler alert!) without their kids. "We'll get used to it" was her last line, delivered in Russian.

But for some avid fans, it wasn't so easy to "get used to it," and they still wonder obsessively what Elizabeth and Philip might be doing these days. The actors were asked that question once again at a 10th-anniversary reunion panel last week at the Paley Center for Media. Russell had a pantherlike response, saying the ending was so perfectly written (by Joel Fields and Joe Weisberg) that she simply preferred to leave it there.

It was also great writing, Russell says, that has brought her back to TV. Busy with three kids, she was definitely not looking for a new show. But then "The Diplomat" came calling. Series creator Cahn is a veteran of both "The West Wing" and "Homeland," and "The Diplomat" can credibly be seen as a mashup of the two — with some spicy "Veep" humor thrown in — just for starters.

"For me, it's always about the writing," Russell says, and "this is so smart and acerbic and full of all this political jargon, but it's funny, too. (Cahn) has this real take on the minutiae of life and relationships."

And when Russell says the new show is "just lighter," she doesn't mean simply that she isn't killing people and stuffing them in suitcases. "I mean, this character is nervous and sweaty and awkward and messy, and it's fun to get to do that, you know?"

Like many, Cahn was a fan of "The Americans," and says Russell was the dream choice for Kate — "the moon shot" — an actor with the rare ability to portray power and gravitas, but then turn on a dime to display expert physical comedy.

"From the hair to everything else — falling down and dropping things — and just having an air about her of being on the verge of falling apart all the time," Cahn says, "that takes a tremendous amount of skill and sense of comedy. And that's what the role needed."

Not that Kate isn't competent. A career diplomat, she's about to become ambassador in Kabul when we meet her, a role that would tap her wealth of experience in the region. But then a British aircraft carrier is bombed — by whom, we don't know — and there's no envoy in London. The U.S. president himself (Michael McKean, part of a superbly cast ensemble) asks Kate to take the job, traditionally a political appointment with little substantive responsibility.

Suddenly Kate is living in a palatial English home, and aides are bringing racks of cocktail dresses. Kate does not like dresses. She likes pantsuits, and only black ones, so that when you use your water bottle before a briefing in the Oval to clean the yogurt stain from breakfast, it doesn't show.

"She is frazzled — a lot," Russell says of Kate. "But she's the behind-the-scenes person who will get things done. She's messy, in a great way."

Then there's the marriage. Just as "The Americans" centered on a marriage, "The Diplomat" revolves around Kate's complex relationship with husband Hal (Rufus Sewell.) An experienced former ambassador himself, Hal isn't used to being "the spouse."

It's the layered dynamic of this volatile union (just wait until you see them fighting in the garden) that drives the show, despite its broad global themes. "That's what you care about," Russell says. "You want to know how people feel and what's stressing them out and how they're living life." Adds Sewell: "What is the whole globe except billions and billions of little couples, of people? When we both read it, it was that human dynamic, and the humor … that really cracked it open."

For cast and crew, the experience was also a deep dive into world diplomacy, a subject Cahn first en-

countered during her "Homeland" research. "Nobody knows these stories because you don't hear about it," Cahn says. "If (diplomacy) is done right, nobody ever knows it happened."

David Gyasi, who plays the British foreign secretary, thought he knew something about diplomacy when he started, but this script was so dense and detailed, he says, that "there were moments where I had to go, 'Why is this important?'" And then the creative team would launch into a history lesson. "It just opened us all up to another level of diplomacy that was fascinating," he says.

"What I didn't realize," notes Ato Essandoh, who plays Kate's top aide, "is how human the interactions are, from the microscopic level of two humans trying to get together and understand each other...to two countries trying to relate to each other." Adds Ali Ahn, who plays the CIA station chief: "It's all about, do I trust you? Do I like you? Those are the basic building blocks."

Russell, for research, read "The Ambassadors" by Paul Richter, sharing it with co-star Sewell, who listened to the audiobook on weekend drives. They also watched "The Human Factor," a documentary about the diplomats involved in Mideast peace negotiations.

"Those guys who were orchestrating those meetings before (Bill) Clinton comes in or before (Yitzhak) Rabin comes — they're unsung and they're sort of mysterious," Russell says. "We don't know about this whole world, and it's really interesting."

And so, Russell is relishing her shift to the "good" side.

"By the way, I loved 'The Americans', too — it was so fun to play this character who was so much more cool than I was, and wore silk shirts and jewelry," she says. "But this is lighter and snappier, and I'm really enjoying it."

Twitter removes policy against deadnaming transgender people

By BARBARA ORTUTAY AP Technology Writer

SAN FRANCISCO (AP) — Twitter has quietly removed a policy against the "targeted misgendering or deadnaming of transgender individuals," raising concerns that the Elon Musk-owned platform is becoming less safe for marginalized groups.

Twitter enacted the policy against deadnaming, or using a transgender person's name before they transitioned, as well as purposefully using the wrong gender for someone as a form of harassment, in 2018.

On Monday, Twitter also said it will only put warning labels on some tweets that are "potentially" in violation of its rules against hateful conduct. Previously, the tweets were removed.

It was in this policy update that Twitter appears to have deleted the line against deadnaming from its rules.

"Twitter's decision to covertly roll back its longtime policy is the latest example of just how unsafe the company is for users and advertisers alike," said Sarah Kate Ellis, the president and CEO of the advocacy group GLAAD. "This decision to roll back LGBTQ safety pulls Twitter even more out of step with TikTok, Pinterest, and Meta, which all maintain similar policies to protect their transgender users at a time when anti-transgender rhetoric online is leading to real world discrimination and violence."

Twitter did not immediately respond to a message for comment Tuesday.

Air National Guardsman age not key in Pentagon leaks: Austin

By LOLITA C. BALDOR and TARA COPP Associated Press

MUSKO NAVAL BASE, Sweden (AP) — The age of the airman charged in one of the most significant U.S. intelligence leaks in recent memory — just 21 — has been the focus of a growing question: Why would the nation give someone so young access to some of its most important secrets?

But the airman's age has not come up as a focus of the Pentagon's investigation into how the documents were leaked. That investigation instead is targeting what security lapses took place that allowed Airman 1st Class Jack Teixeira to allegedly remove the top secret level documents from the Massachusetts National Guard base where he worked.

For the Pentagon's leaders, who have seen 17- and 18-year-olds serve, age isn't the issue.

"The vast majority of our military is young," Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin told reporters traveling with him in Sweden on Wednesday. "It's not exceptional that young people are doing important things in our military. That's that's really not the issue."

Teixeira was charged Friday in the U.S. District Court in Boston with unauthorized removal and retention of classified and national defense information. He has not entered a plea, and his lawyer didn't speak to reporters at the courthouse after his initial appearance. He was supposed to appear in court Wednesday for a detention hearing, but it was delayed, with no new date set.

The leaked documents exposed to the world unvarnished secret assessments on Russia's war in Ukraine, the capabilities and geopolitical interests of other nations and other national security issues.

In Sweden, where Austin met with Swedish Defense Minister Pål Jonson in a show of support for that country's NATO bid, Jonson said the issue of the leaks did not come up.

"I can just say that we have good intelligence cooperation between Sweden and the United States," Jonson said. "We feel completely sure of the U.S. commitment of handling the situation."

The Air Force is investigating how a lone airman could access and distribute possibly hundreds of highly classified documents, and in the meantime it has taken away the intelligence mission from the unit where the leaks took place, Air Force leaders said Tuesday.

Air Force Secretary Frank Kendall told Congress he has directed the Air Force inspector general to look at the Air National Guard 102nd Intelligence Wing, where Teixeira served, and at "anything associated with this leak that could have gone wrong."

For top secret information across the military, there's supposed to be accountable control officers who are responsible for recording active top secret documents and ensuring they have been either properly secured or disposed of, such as through a shredder or by burning them.

In addition, the Air Force is conducting a service-wide review of how each command handles classified information, Air Force Chief of Staff Gen. C.Q. Brown told a Congress subcommittee Tuesday.

The Air Force's own reviews are on top of a military-wide review directed on Monday by Austin. Austin has ordered that all military facilities that handle classified information report to him within 45 days on how they access, share, store and destroy the nation's secrets following the leaks.

Teixeira is accused of posting the highly classified material in a geopolitical chat room on Discord, a social media platform that started as a hangout for gamers. He was arrested by heavily armed tactical agents at his Massachusetts home last week and charged under the Espionage Act.

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Copp reported from Washington.

Fox settlement part of flurry of lawsuits over election lies

By NICHOLAS RICCARDI Associated Press

DENVER (AP) — Fox News' nearly $800 million settlement of a voting machine company's defamation lawsuit marks the first milestone in a larger legal strategy designed to combat the false claims and conspiracy theories about elections that have rippled through the United States for nearly three years.

Several similar lawsuits are teed up against those who have spread election lies, including another against Fox. The plaintiffs range from a different voting technology company to Georgia election workers who were falsely accused of tampering with the vote count in that state. The defendants include close advisers to former President Donald Trump and a conservative group that funded a film last year alleging widespread voter fraud during the 2020 presidential election won by Democrat Joe Biden.

Lawyers involved in the effort describe it as an attempt to strike back against those whose lies about fraud in that election helped inspire the Jan. 6, 2021, attack on the U.S. Capitol and continue to circulate in conservative circles.

"Lies like these, that inflict serious harms on our democracy, have been costless," said Rachel Goodman, a lawyer with the group Protect Democracy who is representing the Georgia election workers along with

plaintiffs in other libel claims against election conspiracists. "This litigation creates accountability and makes clear that there are steep costs to recklessly or intentionally spreading fiction for political or personal profit."

Yet even if the legal challenges keep generating eye-popping settlements or damage awards, it's not clear they will change behavior or counter the attacks on democratic institutions.

"I personally do not regard a libel suit to be a good mechanism to deal with the disinformation problem," said Jane Kirtley, a professor of media ethics and law at the University of Minnesota. "I keep coming back to this fear that we're trying to put a square peg in a round hole here."

The lawsuit against Fox News and its parent company, Fox Corp., from Dominion Voting Systems was one of the first defamation claims filed after Trump and his allies spent weeks falsely claiming the 2020 election was stolen. One of the initial conspiracy theories they floated was that the Denver-based voting machine company was part of an international cabal that threw the election to Biden.

Dominion sued Trump adviser and former New York Mayor Rudolph Giuliani, Trump lawyer Sidney Powell, MyPillow founder Mike Lindell and others who helped spread the false theory. Dominion also sued the right-leaning news networks that repeatedly featured the theory in their coverage — two insurgent, pro-Trump channels, Newsmax and One America News Network, and the nation's most-watched cable news network, Fox.

The Fox News case has generated the most attention. That's because the litigation moved faster than others and also because it unearthed a trove of internal documents that showed Fox's executives and prominent personalities were privately dismissive of Trump's election claims but aired them anyway. Star hosts such as Tucker Carlson also expressed disdain for Trump in texts with colleagues.

Shortly after a Delaware jury was empaneled to hear the case Tuesday, Fox and Dominion agreed to settle the lawsuit for $787.5 million, which is more than half the profits Fox reported last year.

There is no requirement in the settlement that Fox admit airing inaccurate information. The network itself made a brief reference to "the Court's rulings finding certain claims about Dominion to be false," but made no apologies or other marks of contrition in its statement. That statement also said: "This settlement reflects FOX's continued commitment to the highest journalistic standards."

Some Fox critics were upset that the settlement didn't include an admission of wrongdoing from the network.

"What's most frustrating — it's downright infuriating — about this outcome is how little accountability it demands from Fox News," tweeted Andy Kroll, a journalist who wrote a book about conservative conspiracy theories surrounding the 2017 killing of a Democratic National Committee staffer, whose parents sued Fox.

Kathy Boockvar, Pennsylvania's former top voting official, in an interview hours after the settlement, recalled crying during her deposition in the Dominion-Fox case when she recounted the death threats she received after the 2020 election. She said those threats spiked after Fox aired segments amplifying false accusations of mass fraud.

Boockvar said she was cheered by the settlement, even if it didn't include an admission of wrongdoing.

"It would ideally be better to have part of the settlement include admissions of their knowingly broadcasting lies," Boockvar said. "However, the very substantial amount of this settlement and the strong language from the judge last week speak volumes, and I believe it will help deter future flagrant disregard of the truth of this severity."

In his ruling allowing the lawsuit to go to trial, Delaware Superior Court Judge Eric Davis said it was "CRYSTAL clear" that none of the allegations Fox aired about Dominion were true. Dominion CEO John Poulos said that while the settlement did not require an apology from Fox, the company felt the court system forced accountability on the network.

"For us, it was never really about Fox, per se. It was about telling the truth and the media telling the truth," Poulos told ABC's "Good Morning America" on Wednesday. "And I think that what was important for us, is for people to be held to account for when they recklessly and knowingly tell lies that have such devastating consequences."

Justin A. Nelson, Dominion's lead attorney, said the size of the settlement will matter.

"There's a long way still to make my client right," Nelson said in an interview with The Associated Press. "We still have six more suits to go out there. But this was, as I say, just a tremendous victory. And when they're paying nearly $800 million, three quarters of a billion dollars, that speaks to it."

Still, Fox has continued to air misleading segments about the 2020 election and the threat to democracy posed by election lies, even as the Dominion case hurtled towards its conclusion. Last month, Carlson aired a segment playing down the severity of the Jan. 6 attack, drawing condemnation even from some Republican senators.

Fox faces more legal peril from a similar defamation claim filed by the voting company Smartmatic, which was briefly conflated with Dominion during the lies spread by Trump's allies after the 2020 election. Additional lawsuits target other players in the conservative media world: The Georgia election workers filed a claim against Gateway Pundit, a popular right-wing website that has spread numerous conspiracy theories about 2020.

Goodman and Protect Democracy also are representing a Georgia man suing the conservative group True The Vote for including a video image in their film "2000 Mules" that shows the man legally dropping off ballots in 2020. That film falsely alleges widespread fraud by people illegally stuffing drop boxes.

Kirtley, however, noted that some of the other targets may not have the same internal documentation and standards of Fox, which retains a robust stable of reporters and positions itself as a straightforward, objective news organization.

Speaking about some of the other defendants in libel lawsuits, Kirtley said, "They don't even have the veneer of being a journalistic enterprise."

She also said she doubted that the lawsuits, even if they resulted in enormous settlements, would convince those who have fallen for Trump's election lies that the entire narrative is false.

"It's going to take a lot more than a secret settlement to dissuade their loyal viewers that they're a credible news source," Kirtley said of Fox.

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Associated Press writer Randall Chase in Wilmington, Delaware, contributed to this report.

Long after heyday, soda fountain pharmacies still got fizz

By JOHN RABY Associated Press

KENOVA, W.Va. (AP) — The jukebox plays Chubby Checker's "The Twist" as Malli Jarrett and Nathaniel Fornash take turns at the Griffith & Feil Drug food counter preparing old-fashioned, soda-fountain phosphate drinks.

Soda fountains like this were hugely popular a century ago. Often located in pharmacies, they were a gathering spot during Prohibition when bars shut down. But over the past half century, their numbers fizzled, relegating soda fountains to the scrapbooks of U.S. history.

In West Virginia, Ric Griffith is keeping the tradition going. His 131-year-old business is a Norman Rockwell scene and time-travel tourism all wrapped into one.

"When you had a soda fountain, people would stay longer, they'd sit down and they'd share stories," Griffith said. "It would not become the place where you grabbed lunch. It was a place where you had an experience."

Griffith and his daughter, Heidi, are pharmacists whose pharmacy staff works in the back. Up front, the restaurant offers daily lunch and dinner specials. Customers soak in the ambience: the jukebox, neon-pink signs, black-and-white photos of local landmarks, marbled counters, retro padded stools and a metal-tiled ceiling.

And, of course, those tart-and-sweet phosphate drinks.

Griffith leaves the dispensing to soda jerks like Jarrett and Fornash (they're not really jerks — the term describes the motion used to pull the handle of the soda water dispenser).

"It's fun working at a place like this, watching all the customers come in, looking around, taking a step back in time and telling me about how a lot of them used to work here when they were younger," Jarrett

said.

The first U.S. patent for dispensing carbonated water through a soda fountain spigot dates to the early 1800s. Acid phosphate drinks were developed decades later as pharmacists mixed tonics for customers who sought cures for ailments. As soda fountain manufacturing and efficiency improved, so did the recipes and flavors. The drinks were given names like Green River or Black Cow.

Food menus were added, and customers ate while waiting for prescriptions to be filled.

In Oregon, the Grants Pass Pharmacy has served phosphate drinks since opening in 1933. Those were the years when soda-fountain pharmacies skyrocketed; under Prohibition, the manufacture and sale of alcohol was banned from 1920 to 1933.

Pharmacist-owner Michele Belcher was a soda jerk starting in middle school after her parents bought the Grants Pass Pharmacy from the original owner in 1973. Part of the challenge, she said, is updating old equipment while preserving some of the character of the original soda fountain.

"Many times people will make the effort to come back and touch base with me or leave a note that they appreciated that it was still here in our community," Belcher said.

By the late 1950s, pharmacists were reviewing their business models to make the most of tight spaces, including replacing the soda fountain with shelves stocked with home staples. Mom-and-pop drug stores eventually couldn't keep up with tightening government regulations or competition from mall food courts, chain pharmacies and fast-food restaurants.

Some stayed open but closed either the pharmacy or soda fountain sides. Others morphed into side businesses such as gift shops and ice cream parlors.

The past decade has been especially rough. The Highland Park Soda Fountain in Dallas, which celebrated its 100th anniversary in 2012, shut down in 2018. The Central Drug Store in Bessemer City, North Carolina, open 94 years, closed in 2021. Borroum's Drug Store in Corinth, Mississippi, also closed its pharmacy that year after more than 150 years in business, but keeps its soda fountain going.

Now, a new generation of owners is emerging — literally out of the ashes in the case of the Phoenix Pharmacy and Fountain in Knoxville, Tennessee. It opened in 2016 in a century-old building that had seen two devastating fires.

The Phoenix "is not about resurrecting your grandfather's neighborhood pharmacy; it is about reintroducing the attitude of it," its website says.

Also in 2016, Rhode Island pharmacist Christina Procaccianti founded the Green Line Apothecary, a full-service pharmacy and soda fountain in two locations.

At Griffith & Feil, in West Virginia, Ric Griffith, 74, is proud of his collection of 41 presidential signatures and other memorabilia and is always ready to explain them on cue.

What he can't share are memories of the soda fountain as a child. His father removed it in 1957. Griffith reinstalled one in 2004 after three years of painstaking prep work. "I always yearned for that myself," he said.

After the reopening, Griffith recalled, a man sitting in a booth with his granddaughter was sharing stories of his youth. Decades before, the man said, he would arrive in the same booths after school and order a cherry Coke. Griffith listened to the conversation, "and the look on his granddaughter's face was wonderful," he said. "She'd never thought of her grandfather as ever having been young. He was always her grandfather."

It solidified Griffith's hope that people can still partake in what once was a common tradition in little towns across America: sharing meals and stories rather than choosing the easy route of a fast-food drive-thru.

"And so when we preserve history, we're not just preserving actifacts," Griffith said. "We're preserving a style of living, a way of interacting. That soda fountain has blessed me in many ways."

Groton Daily Independent
Thursday, April 20, 2023 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 286 ~ 79 of 87

Wreckage of submarine found by divers in Long Island Sound

By PAT EATON-ROBB Associated Press

HARTFORD, Conn. (AP) — Connecticut divers have discovered the wreckage of an experimental submarine that was built in 1907 and later scuttled in Long Island Sound.

The Defender, a 92-foot-long (28-meter-long) boat, was found Sunday by a team led by Richard Simon, a commercial diver from Coventry, Connecticut.

Simon said he had been interested in the story of the Defender for years. He spent months going over known sonar and underwater mapping surveys of the bottom of the sound, as well as government documents obtained under the Freedom of Information Act, to identify any anomaly that fit the size of the sub.

"A submarine has a very distinct shape," he said. "It needs to be 100 feet long and 13 feet in diameter. So I made a list of everything that was that long and there was one target on that list."

Simon then assembled a group of top wreck divers to determine if the Defender was in the location he had identified.

Poor tidal conditions forced them to abandon an attempt last Friday. They returned on Sunday and discovered the Defender lying on the bottom, more than 150 feet (45 meters) beneath the water's surface, off the coast of Old Saybrook.

"It was legitimately hiding in plain sight," he said. "It's on the charts. It's known about in Long Island Sound, just no one knew what it was."

Simon described the agony of waiting on the deck of his research vessel, staring at a dive buoy in the fog and waiting for his two divers to surface. Once they did and confirmed they had found a sub, the team erupted in "pure joy," he said.

Simon said he didn't want to give the exact depth, because he said that could give away the sub's location.

The submarine, originally named the Lake, was built by millionaire Simon Lake and his Bridgeport-based Lake Torpedo Boat Company in hopes of winning a competition for a U.S. Navy contract, according to NavSource Online, a website dedicated to preserving naval history.

It was experimental vessel, with wheels to move along the sea bottom and a door that allowed divers to be released underwater, Simon said.

The company lost that competition and Lake then tried refitting the boat for minesweeping, salvage and rescue work, renaming it the Defender. But he never found a buyer. It was a well-known sub and was even visited by aviator Amelia Earhart in 1929, Simon said.

But the submarine spent many years unused, docked in New London before eventually being abandoned on a mud flat near Old Saybrook. It was scuttled by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers in 1946, but the corps never disclosed where, Simon said.

Simon said it was clear when his team found the wreckage that it was indeed the Defender. The length, the size and shape of protrusions on the submarine's distinct keel, and the shape and location of diving planes characteristic of Lake-built vessels, all helped identify it, he said.

Simon and his team plan to spend the summer diving on the sub, filming it and taking photographs. He said he and the company he and his wife own, Shoreline Diving, put up the money for the search. He said he hasn't figured out how to monetize the find, but said that wasn't the goal in looking for it.

He has already contacted the Navy to see if it would be interested in helping preserve the wreckage.

The ship has some protections under what is known as the Abandoned Shipwreck Act, a 1988 law that would allow it to be treated as an archaeological or historical site instead of a commercial property to be salvaged, he said..

"So, as a wreck diver, I can go visit history; I can touch it; I can experience it," he said. "It's just a different connection to history, to the past that we don't have in any other activity."

Groton Daily Independent
Thursday, April 20, 2023 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 286 ~ 80 of 87

Charges put focus on Jehovah's Witnesses' handling of abuse

By MARK SCOLFORO and PETER SMITH Associated Press

YORK HAVEN, Pa. (AP) — A Pennsylvania grand jury in recent months accused nine men with connections to the Jehovah's Witnesses of child sexual abuse in what some consider the nation's most comprehensive investigation yet into abuse within the faith.

The sets of charges filed in October and February have fueled speculation the jury may make public more about what it has uncovered from a four-year investigation.

A similar grand jury investigation into child sexual abuse by Catholic priests culminated in a lengthy 2018 report that concluded hundreds of priests had abused children in Pennsylvania over seven decades and church officials had covered it up, and more recently a similar report was issued in Maryland.

But documents made public so far include nothing about what critics have long maintained has been a systemic cover-up and mishandling of child molestation within the Jehovah's Witnesses.

Pennsylvania Attorney General Michelle Henry, at a news conference in February announcing charges, said some of the defendants "even used their faith communities to prey upon the victims."

Asked whether her office was looking into the Jehovah's Witnesses as an organization, Henry replied it was an ongoing investigation.

Critics say church elders have treated child sexual abuse as a sin rather than a crime, carefully documenting cases in internal files but not reporting allegations to authorities and sometimes letting the accused remain active in their congregations with access to children from unsuspecting families. Critics also say the church has often required a second witness for complaints, a standard that can be impossible to meet in cases of molestation.

Church spokesman Jarrod Lopes said otherwise — that the church does recognize abuse as a crime and that members have the right to report sexual assault to authorities. He said the second-witness rule applies only to internal church discipline and that elders comply with reporting laws, even when there is not a second witness.

The grand jury probe began with a referral from a county district attorney who believed the state's greater resources were needed. Dozens of witnesses have testified before the secret grand jury in Harrisburg or provided information to the attorney general's office, and some report that investigators have exhibited keen interest in how the church has responded to molestation allegations.

"They were very interested in not only individual cases but in systemic concerns regarding the reporting of child abuse," said Mark O'Donnell of Parkville, Maryland, a former church member who said he appeared twice before the grand jury.

Martin Haugh of York Haven, Pennsylvania, a former elder who left the church in 2016, said he has spoken for hours to investigators, both inside and outside of the grand jury proceedings, about the structure of the denomination and how it handles cases of child abuse.

Haugh said he also testified about how his daughter was molested at his congregation in 2005 — and that he later learned that elders knew the perpetrator had a history of abuse when he joined the congregation but didn't warn parents. He said he didn't report the abuse to authorities. Haugh said elders told him he could report it but asked, "Do you really want to bring reproach on Jehovah's name?" When Haugh became an elder, he said, he learned of four other cases in his congregation that members weren't alerted about.

Haugh said to his knowledge, this is the first time an investigation of Jehovah's Witnesses has been done on this scale in any U.S. state. Haugh said he's been in regular contact with investigators from Henry's office, most recently in March.

Attorney Matt Haverstick confirmed recently that his law firm is representing Jehovah's Witnesses congregations around Pennsylvania on unspecified matters that are "very active right now."

"I would say if the only place you're looking for records of child sexual abuse is with one organization, then of course all the prosecutions that come are going to be about that one organization," Haverstick said.

"There's nothing unique or particular about this faith that makes it prone to any kind of misconduct," he said.

The international Christian denomination, founded in the Pittsburgh area more than a century ago and headquartered in New York state, claims 8.7 million members worldwide, including 1.2 million in the United States.

Members will not bear arms, salute a national flag or participate in secular politics. Believers are known for their evangelistic efforts, including knocking on doors and distributing literature in public spaces.

In the Pennsylvania cases, court records state all nine defendants have ties to the Jehovah's Witnesses faith, although in some cases it's unclear how that might relate to the criminal allegations.

Defense lawyer Dan Kiss of Altoona, Pennsylvania, said his client, Robert Ostrander, 57, of Windsor, New York, knew nothing about the investigation before he was charged in October with indecent assault, corruption of minors and other offenses. The grand jury presentment accused him of abusing two girls in the Johnstown, Pennsylvania, area, by groping them, sometimes in the guise of wrestling. He spent more than a month in jail before making bail.

Kiss said Ostrander denies all the allegations.

"Honestly, this appears to be some sort of attack on their religion," Kiss said. "You have all these Jehovah's Witnesses getting charged with some sort of inappropriate behavior. I'm hoping that this is not the attorney general's office piling on due to their religious beliefs."

In response, Brett Hambright, a spokesperson for the state attorney general's office, said the charging documents "articulate incidents where defendants used their positions of authority within Jehovah's Witnesses congregations to build trust with children who they later abused."

Current Pennsylvania law mandates that clergy and other spiritual leaders report suspicions of child abuse that arise in the course of their work. But the law also provides for exceptions when spiritual leaders learn about abuse through confidential communications, such as confession to a Catholic priest. Defining when such exceptions apply has been a matter of dispute, particularly when more than one spiritual leader is involved.

Under the structure of the Jehovah's Witnesses faith, all baptized members are considered "ordained ministers." Groups of a half-dozen or more elders make many decisions, and elders field confessions of sin at the local congregation level.

Jehovah's Witnesses have long expressed concerns about the evolving legal standards for reporting child abuse in Pennsylvania. In 1998, a lawyer with the church's national headquarters wrote the Pennsylvania attorney general's office, asking if there was legal duty to report if the victim is a mentally incompetent adult, an adult who was a child when abuse took place, a minor who was married at the time of the abuse or a now-married minor who was not married when victimized.

The church's lawyer also wanted to know if ministers have to report if a victim comes to them in confidence, when a relative of the abuser or victim confides to the minister or when the person telling a minister about abuse is not related to the victim or abuser. A lawyer in the attorney general's office wrote back to say it can only give legal advice to the governor or an agency head.

More recently, after an Amish bishop in Lancaster County was charged with misdemeanor counts of failing to properly report suspected abuse — allegations for which he subsequently entered a program for first-time, nonviolent offenders — a Jehovah's Witnesses congregation in Philadelphia hired Haverstick's law firm to seek clarity about its elders' legal obligations.

The 140-member Ivy Hill congregation sued Pennsylvania's Department of Human Services, asking Commonwealth Court to clarify whether elders are mandated reporters if they learn of child abuse through a confidential confession. Human Services runs the state's ChildLine abuse hotline.

Only elders can hear confessions of serious sins, and breaking the secrecy of a confession could result in their removal as an elder and undermine their relationship with God and credibility within the congregation, the Ivy Hill congregation argued in appealing the case's dismissal to the state Supreme Court. Haverstick said Ivy Hill's concerns were not prompted by any unreported abuse within the congregation.

"In all 50 states, the Jehovah's Witnesses have gone to their relevant attorney general's offices to ask for clarification for the reporting obligations for ministers of the faith, their elders," Haverstick said. "For

the most part, like in Pennsylvania, they can't get a straight answer."

One of the nine Pennsylvania suspects accused by the grand jury, a man accused of sexually molesting his daughter as a form of of discipline when she was a child, killed himself when police sought to arrest him on rape and other charges in October. Charges remain pending against the other eight.

The prospect that Pennsylvania's grand jury investigation may have uncovered secret church documents about how child sexual abuse matters have been handled has arisen as some lawyers for those harmed years ago are hoping they may soon be able to file new cases. That depends on whether state lawmakers establish a special two-year period to allow otherwise outdated child sexual abuse lawsuits.

The church has faced multiple lawsuits around the country in the past two decades, alleging cover-ups of abuse.

"There's no doubt in my mind that a grand jury is fully needed," said Marci Hamilton, chief executive of the Philadelphia-based advocacy group Child USA.

Barbara Anderson of Tennessee worked for a decade at the denomination's central offices in New York and spoke with investigators with the Pennsylvania attorney general's office after calling for an investigation into the organization's handling of abuse. She said she was gratified to see the state taking action. Anderson was excommunicated from the church in 2002 after speaking out on the subject on a Dateline NBC broadcast.

A 2016 governmental report in Australia — part of a wider review of religious and other organizations serving children — concluded that children were not "adequately protected from the risk of child sexual abuse" in the Jehovah's Witnesses. It found the church's case files in Australia contained abuse allegations against 1,006 members dating back to 1950.

Church spokesman Lopes said the Australia report "unfairly conflated institutional and familial abuse" in its criticism of the church and failed to note evolving legal standards for mandated reporting over the decades.

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Smith reported from Pittsburgh. Associated Press researcher Jennifer Farrar in New York and video journalist Jessie Wardarski contributed.

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Associated Press religion coverage receives support through the AP's collaboration with The Conversation US, with funding from Lilly Endowment Inc. The AP is solely responsible for this content.

Cloud seeding catching on amid Rocky Mountain drought

By MEAD GRUVER and BRITTANY PETERSON Associated Press

LYONS, Colo. (AP) — Garrett Cammans and his brothers sometimes don't talk about their toughest moments on the job in the cloud seeding business, like the time when one of them got stuck in deep mountain snow and had to hike out alone in the dark.

"They're going out into some pretty remote and rural areas," Cammans said. "And there have been a few close encounters with wildlife we don't like to discuss at the family dinner table."

But snow — as much as possible — is at the heart of the Cammans family business, Utah-based North American Weather Consultants, which holds cloud seeding contracts throughout the U.S. West, centered in the Rocky Mountains.

Lately, business is up. Amid two decades of drought, cloud seeding — using airplanes or ground equipment to waft rain-and-snow-making particles into clouds — is on the rise in the Rockies.

Colorado has added three new programs in the last five years. Wyoming, which began seeding in 2014, added an aerial program in 2018. Utah has steadily increased its fleet of cloud seeding equipment, and the state legislature just approved record funding to further expand programs and research.

No small part of the growth is due to intense pressure drought is placing on the Colorado River and its tributaries that supply water to millions of people from Wyoming to Los Angeles.

Not everybody believes cloud seeding is a worthwhile remedy. Some experts say conserving water is a better, more down-to-earth way to ensure enough water to go around. Juicing clouds to produce margin-

ally more precipitation, they say, is an iffy alternative.

"It's always easier to talk about how to get more water than to talk about how to use less," said Kathryn Sorensen with the Kyl Center for Water Policy at Arizona State University in Tempe. "When you look at the problem of over-allocation on the Colorado River, the numbers are so large that really the solutions lie in using less, particularly in the agricultural sector. Politically that's really painful to confront."

But in the Rockies, cloud seeding these days has a full embrace from local and state officials eager for a not-too-expensive way to put more water in streams, rivers and especially the big Colorado River system reservoirs that hit record lows last year.

Their approach: shoot silver iodide into clouds, where moisture binds to the particles, forms ice and falls as snow. That snowpack high in the mountains serves as year-round cold storage for water that's released as it melts.

In Wyoming, cloud seeding by plane attempts to increase snowpack on the west side of the Wind River Mountains, so snowmelt flows into the Green River and to communities downstream — eventually reaching the Colorado River and its reservoirs including Lake Powell and Lake Mead.

"Cloud seeding generates water that wouldn't have been there before," said Bryan Seppie, general manager of the Joint Powers Water Board providing water to southwestern Wyoming communities. "That's just a benefit to the entire system."

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When the weather's dry and water's scarce in the West — where the saying goes that whisky's for drinking and water is for fighting over — those with water rights established long ago get preference. And divvying up increasingly limited water has pitted states against each other.

Yet cloud seeding has emerged as a partial solution they can agree on.

Water providers in the Lower Colorado River Basin contribute about $1.5 million annually to cloud seeding in the Upper Basin, where snowmelt feeds the river. Recently, the federal government announced a $2.4 million contribution to the effort, a nod to the desperate times.

Despite the renewed attention, cloud seeding has been used around the world and in the Rockies for more than 50 years.

Cloud seeding in the U.S. got "oversold" and federal funding dried up in the 1990s and early 2000s, said Frank McDonough, a scientist at the Desert Research Institute in Reno, Nevada.

"Water folks at the local level knew it worked so they continued to fund it with states," McDonnough said. "Now there's new evidence that shows it does work."

A study of Idaho aerial seeding in 2017 revealed a clear snowfall pattern on a radar that mirrored the seeding and offered evidence the method works.

Utah has calculated the amount of additional water cloud seeding created there. It added 186,000 acre-feet of water, or nearly a 12% increase, to the state's supply in 2018, according to an analysis by the Division of Water Resources. The agency says the cost was $2.18 per acre-foot — a fraction of the $20 California farmers pay for that amount of water.

"That cost per acre-foot was so low, it's kind of a no brainer," said Jake Serago, water resources engineer with the division.

But Sarah Tessendorf of the National Center for Atmospheric Research said more research is needed to conclusively show how much additional water is created by cloud seeding.

"It's really common for people to want to know what extra percent of precipitation formed," said Tessendorf, a co-author of the Idaho cloud seeding study.

Silver iodide can have a minimal impact in some clouds and a high impact in others, so how much is created over an entire winter season is what matters most, she said. "We don't have answers on that yet, but we hope to have them in the next few years with our new computer model results."

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In foothills north of Boulder, the first cloud seeding project of the rapidly growing Rocky Mountain Front Range urban corridor north and south of Denver is underway. This winter, two ground-based generators

have been pumping silver iodide into the air for the St. Vrain and Left Hand Water Conservancy District.

Each is a two-wheeled trailer containing a tank of silver iodide released by a roaring, propane-fueled flame atop a metal mast. There's a communications antenna for signals to turn the generator on and off, depending on conditions.

The right conditions — wet weather headed upslope, from the east — have occurred a couple times a month, said Scott Griebling, a water resources engineer with the district.

Lately in the Rockies, the problem isn't too little snow. Amid a wet spring, some cloud seeding generators have been shut down due to fears the heavy snowfall already is enough to cause flooding.

Among those idled are generators in southern Wyoming's Sierra Madre Range, where snowpack is rivaling the deepest on record, said Jonathan Bowler with the Savery-Little Snake River Water Conservancy District that monitors runoff.

"You kind of live and die by the moisture here," Bowler said. "Too dry is one extreme and too wet is another. But kind of regardless of what it's going to give you, you just kind of have to make do."

For the Wyoming Water Development Commission in charge of the state's cloud seeding program, the long-term averages are what's important, Chairman Ron Kailey Jr. said. "You have to take in the good years, the bad years and everything in between to determine how successful the program is," said Kailey.

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North American Weather Consultants has been cloud seeding for over 40 years. Cammans, who has a background in physics, chemistry and computer software, bought the company four years ago.

After expanding locations, including to the Colorado Front Range for the Boulder-area pilot program, North American Weather Consultants now has about 250 ground-based sites and two planes in use across the Western U.S. Cammans now has about 20 employees including meteorologists and his brothers.

"Once seedable conditions do occur, then we spring into operation," he said. "We've got a pilot that will go up and fly if conditions are favorable for aerial seeding. We've got remotely operated equipment that meteorologists can operate from their home offices."

Many of the company's ground-based generators are turned on and off manually by about 150 paid contractors, some on their own land.

Cammans often reserves those toughest jobs for his brothers Parker and Carver, who drive trucks with knobby, 35-inch (1-meter) tires suited for snow and mud.

"They get to do some of our most exciting and more precarious work," he said.

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On Twitter follow Brittany Peterson: @BrittanyKPeters and Mead Gruver: @meadgruver

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1 city, 2 people — and India's widening religious divide

By SHEIKH SAALIQ Associated Press

AYODHYA, India (AP) — Syed Mohammad Munir Abidi says India is a changed country, one he doesn't recognize anymore.

It's a country, the 68-year-old says, where Muslims are ignored, where rising attacks against them are encouraged, and where an emboldened Hindu majoritarian government is seizing its chance to put the minority community in its place.

Swami Ram Das thinks otherwise, echoing a belief system central to Hindu nationalism.

The 48-year-old Hindu priest says India is on a quest to redeem its religious past and that the country is fundamentally a Hindu nation where minorities, especially Muslims, must subscribe to Hindu primacy.

Abidi and Das are two ordinary citizens living in one city in a country of more than 1.4 billion people that is on the cusp of becoming the world's most populated nation. Together they embody the opposing

sides of a deeply entrenched religious divide that presents India with one of its biggest challenges: to safeguard freedoms for its Muslim minority at a time when a rising tide of Hindu nationalism is eroding the country's secular underpinnings.

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EDITOR'S NOTE: This story is part of an ongoing series exploring what it means for the 1.4 billion inhabitants of India to live in what will be the world's most populated country.

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India will have an estimated 1.4286 billion people against China's 1.4257 billion by mid-2023, according to United Nations projections. It is home to some 200 million Muslims who make up the predominantly Hindu country's largest minority group. They are scattered across almost every part of India, where a systemic anti-Muslim fury has descended since Prime Minister Narendra Modi first assumed power in 2014.

Though India's communal fractures date back to its bloody partition in 1947, most Indians trace the roots of the latest religious fault lines to a small temple city in northern India, where the Hindu nationalist movement was galvanized in 1992 after Hindu mobs demolished a historic mosque to make way for a temple.

Since then, the city of Ayodhya has, in many ways, become a religious microcosm of India, where a diverse, multicultural past has gradually been overrun by ruptured relationships between Hindus and Muslims.

It's also a city Abidi and Das call home.

They have meandered through its narrow, winding streets overrun by temple monkeys and Hindu monks who ask passersby for alms in exchange for blessings. They have walked past its brimming bazaars where miniature idols of Ram are sold to pilgrims visiting from India's vast hinterlands. They have begun their mornings with calls for prayers spilling out of mosque loudspeakers and Vedic hymns chant in the temples.

Beyond these shared experiences lie stark differences.

For Das, a broad-shouldered man with a stout frame, Ayodhya is the birthplace of Ram, Hinduism's most revered deity. The city also hosts one of Hinduism's most sacred sites — Ram's grand temple — which will open to pilgrims next year. It is imperative that the city clings to its Hindu character, Das says.

"Our forefathers have fought for this temple and sacrificed lives for it. Today their dream is getting fulfilled," he says, circled by a group of devotees.

The temple is being constructed where the 16th-century Babri mosque was demolished by Hindu hardliners who claim Muslim rulers built it at the exact spot where Ram was born. When it was razed on Dec. 6, 1992, Das was there, watching a frenzied Hindu mob climb its rounded domes and tear it down with pickaxes and crowbars.

"There was so much excitement to destroy that disgraced structure that no one cared about the falling debris," he recounts, prompting his disciples to chant "Jai Sri Ram," or "Hail Lord Ram," a slogan that has become a battle cry for Hindu nationalists.

The 30-year campaign to build the temple saw subsequent religious violence and a bitter legal battle over the site that Hindus won in 2019. Muslims were given alternate land on the city outskirts to build a new mosque. A year later, Modi attended the temple's groundbreaking ceremony.

For Abidi, a tall man in clothes that hang off his frame, it marked a sad chapter for India's Muslims.

"The hearts of Muslims are broken. No Muslim opposes the construction of Ram temple, but such unilateral changes are impacting India's culture," he says, arguing the former mosque was essential to the city's Muslim identity.

As for his city, it has already gone through major changes.

For decades Ayodhya city was part of Uttar Pradesh state's Faizabad district. But in 2018, authorities changed the entire district's name from Faizabad to Ayodhya, a move that reflected the Modi government's pattern of replacing prominent Muslim geographic names with Hindu ones.

For Abidi it indicates a worrying trend: "To erase everything that remotely reflects Muslim culture."

Today, Ayodhya is taken over by frenetic construction of hotels, bringing in tens of thousands of Hindu pilgrims. Construction workers are busy making way for wider highways. All that is expected to boost the city's economy. But at what cost, Abidi reckons.

"The relationship Hindus and Muslims used to share is barely visible anymore," he says.

India's religious fault lines have become pronounced under Modi. Scores of Muslims have been lynched by Hindu mobs over allegations of eating beef or smuggling cow, an animal considered holy to Hindus. Muslim businesses have been boycotted, their localities have been bulldozed and places of worship set on fire. Sometimes open calls have been made for their genocide.

Critics say Modi's conspicuous silence over such attacks has emboldened some of his most extreme supporters and enabled more hate speech against Muslims.

Muslims have been falsely accused of manipulating Hindu women into marriages and producing more children to establish domination. The government data shows otherwise: India's religious composition has been largely stable since 1947 and the fertility rate of Muslims has declined from 4.4 in 1992 to 2.3 in 2020.

"It is never going to be possible if you look at the data. We should forget and ignore this rhetoric," says Poonam Muttreja, director at the Population Foundation of India.

Muslims also have the lowest literacy among all major Indian religious communities. They have faced discrimination in employment and housing and hold a little less than 5% of seats in the parliament, their lowest share ever.

For Abidi, all this represents a grim future, one where India's secular character lives only in people's memories.

"Every Muslim in today's India finds himself unsafe," he says.

Das disagrees, arguing that Muslims are still free to pray and practice their religion. "But we will correct the mistakes made by your ancestors."

Das is referring to the Mughals who ruled India before the British made it their colony.

Scorn for Mughal rulers, who are not ancestors of Indian Muslims and only shared a similar faith, is distinctive to India's Hindu nationalists, who claim Mughals destroyed Hindu culture. It has prompted Hindu nationalists to seek ownership of hundreds of historic mosques they say are built over demolished temples.

In Ayodhya, longtime Muslim locals have made compromises to avoid tension with Hindu neighbors.

Last year when the Muharram procession overlapped with a Hindu festival, Muslim leaders changed the timing of their march to avoid confrontation. This year, Muslims in the city had to forgo selling and consumption of meat during another Hindu festival that coincided with the beginning days of Ramadan.

In such an atmosphere, Abidi says, only religious tolerance can stop India's communal fractures from worsening.

"India will only survive if we mend hearts and not break them," he says.

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Today in History: April 20, Columbine High School shooting

By The Associated Press undefined

Today is Thursday, April 20, the 110th day of 2023. There are 255 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On April 20, 2010, an explosion on the Deepwater Horizon oil platform, leased by BP, killed 11 workers and caused a blow-out that began spewing an estimated 200 million gallons of crude into the Gulf of Mexico. (The well was finally capped nearly three months later.)

On this date:

In 1812, the fourth vice president of the United States, George Clinton, died in Washington at age 72, becoming the first vice president to die while in office.

In 1861, Col. Robert E. Lee resigned his commission in the United States Army. (Lee went on to command the Army of Northern Virginia, and eventually became general-in-chief of the Confederate forces.)

In 1912, Boston's Fenway Park hosted its first professional baseball game while Navin (NAY'-vihn) Field (Tiger Stadium) opened in Detroit. (The Red Sox defeated the New York Highlanders 7-6 in 11 innings; the Tigers beat the Cleveland Naps 6-5 in 11 innings.)

In 1916, the Chicago Cubs played their first game at Wrigley Field (then known as Weeghman Park); the Cubs defeated the Cincinnati Reds 7-6.

In 1971, the Supreme Court unanimously upheld the use of busing to achieve racial desegregation in schools.

In 1972, Apollo 16's lunar module, carrying astronauts John W. Young and Charles M. Duke Jr., landed on the moon.

In 1986, following an absence of six decades, Russian-born pianist Vladimir Horowitz performed in the Soviet Union to a packed audience at the Grand Hall of the Tchaikovsky Conservatory in Moscow.

In 1999, the Columbine High School massacre took place in Colorado as two students shot and killed 12 classmates and one teacher before taking their own lives.

In 2003, U.S. Army forces took control of Baghdad from the Marines in a changing of the guard that thinned the military presence in the capital.

In 2008, Pope Benedict XVI celebrated his final Mass in the United States before a full house in Yankee Stadium, blessing his enormous U.S. flock and telling Americans to use their freedoms wisely.

In 2016, five former New Orleans police officers pleaded guilty to lesser charges in the deadly shootings on a bridge in the days following Hurricane Katrina in 2005.

In 2020, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said reports of accidental poisonings from cleaners and disinfectants were up about 20 percent in the first three months of the year; researchers believed it was related to the coronavirus epidemic.

Ten years ago: A magnitude-7.0 earthquake struck the steep hills of China's southwestern Sichuan province, leaving nearly 200 people dead. Five snowboarders were killed in a backcountry avalanche on Colorado's Loveland Pass. Search and rescue crews recovered the bodies several hours after the slide, which was about 600 feet wide and eight feet deep. It was among the deadliest U.S. avalanches in decades. Deanna Durbin, an actor who was among the biggest box office draws of Hollywood's Golden Age, died on or around this date in a village outside Paris where she had lived out of public view for more than six decades. She was 91.

Five years ago: U.S. health officials told consumers to throw away any store-bought romaine lettuce and warned restaurants not to serve it amid an E. coli outbreak that had sickened more than 50 people in several states. Wells Fargo agreed to pay $1 billion to federal regulators to settle charges stemming from misconduct at its mortgage and auto lending businesses; it was the latest punishment levied against the banking giant for widespread customer abuses. The Democratic Party filed a lawsuit accusing the Donald Trump presidential campaign, Russia, WikiLeaks and Trump's son and son-in-law of conspiring to undercut Democrats in the 2016 election by stealing tens of thousands of emails and documents.

One year ago: Russian forces tightened the noose around die-hard Ukrainian defenders holed up at a Mariupol steel plant amid desperate new efforts to open an evacuation corridor for trapped civilians in the ruined city, a key battleground in Moscow's drive to seize the country's industrial east. An unexpected drop in subscribers sent Netflix shares into freefall, forcing the company to consider experimenting with ads and cracking down on millions of freeloaders who use passwords shared by friends or family. New Mexico workplace safety regulators imposed the maximum possible fine against a film production company for firearms safety failures on the set where actor Alec Baldwin fatally shot a cinematographer.

Today's Birthdays: Former Sen. Pat Roberts, R-Kan., is 87. Actor George Takei is 86. Singer Johnny Tillotson is 85. Actor Ryan O'Neal is 82. Bluegrass singer-musician Doyle Lawson (Quicksilver) is 79. Actor Judith O'Dea is 78. Rock musician Craig Frost (Grand Funk Railroad, Bob Seger & the Silver Bullet Band) is 75. Actor Jessica Lange is 74. Actor Veronica Cartwright is 74. Actor Clint Howard is 64. Actor Crispin Glover is 59. Actor Andy Serkis is 59. Olympic silver medal figure skater Rosalynn Sumners is 59. Actor William deVry is 55. Country singer Wade Hayes is 54. Actor Shemar Moore is 53. Actor Carmen Electra is 51. Reggae singer Stephen Marley is 51. Rock musician Marty Crandall (The Shins) is 48. Actor Joey Lawrence is 47. Country musician Clay Cook (Zac Brown Band) is 45. Actor Clayne Crawford is 45. Actor Tim Jo is 39. Actor Carlos Valdes (TV: "The Flash") is 34.