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Friday, Sept. 1

Senior Menu: Bratwurst on bun, mashed potatoes, sauerkraut, fruit, 3 bean salad.

No School

Soccer at Dakota Valley: Boys at 4 p.m., girls at 5 p.m.

Football vs Dakota Hills Coop at Waubay, 7 p.m.

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

OPEN: Recycling Trailer in Groton
The recycling trailer is located west of the city shop. It takes cardboard, papers and aluminum cans.



Saturday, Sept. 2

CLOSED: Common Cents Community Thrift Store

Sunday, Sept. 3

St. John's Lutheran/Zion worship with communion. St. John's at 9 a.m., Zion at 11 a.m.

Emmanuel Lutheran: Worship with communion, 9 a.m.

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.

First Presbyterian Church: Bible Study, 9:30 a.m.; Worship, 11 a.m.

United Methodist: Worship with communion. Conde at 8:30 a.m., Coffee Hour at 9:30 a.m., Groton at 10:30a .m.

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The Bulletin by Newsweek

World in Brief

Biggs to 17 years in prison for serving as an "instigator and leader" in the Jan. 6 Capitol riot and his co-defendant Zachary Rehl to 15 years.

The Biden Administration proposed a new rule that would require all gun dealers, regardless of whether they sell online, at gun shows, or outside brick-and-mortar stores, to run background checks on customers in a move to combat rising gun violence.

The Texas Supreme Court allowed a new law to go into effect Friday that bans gender-affirming care for minors within the state.

A 34-year-old convicted murderer has escaped from a prison near Philadelphia one week after he was sentenced to life for stabbing a former girlfriend to death. Authorities have said the escapee is "considered extremely dangerous."

China's new national map continues to anger its neighbors, with the Philippines now joining India and Malaysia to "reject" the new version and accusing Beijing of claiming their territory. Russia is silent about China's map claiming part of its territory.

In the ongoing war in Ukraine, Kyiv says its forces have broken through the "first line" of Russia's defense in the Zaporizhzhia region as Ukraine's counteroffensive takes them closer to Moscow's strongholds in the south of the country.

TALKING POINTS

"In Georgia, we will not be engaging in political theater that only inflames the emotions of the moment. We will do what is right. We will uphold our oaths as public servants. And it's my belief that our state will be better off for it," Georgia Gov. Brian Kemp said after rejecting requests for a special legislative session to consider removing Fulton County District Attorney Fani Willis.

"Why is it that a distribution company, a smaller distribution company like Neon and STX International, can meet the dream demands of what SAG is asking for—and this is pre-negotiation, the dream version of SAG's wish list—but a big company like Netflix and Amazon can't? And every time people from SAG go and support a movie that has agreed to these terms, the interim agreement, it just makes it more obvious that these people are willing to support the people that they collaborate with, and the others are not," actor Adam Driver said of the ongoing actors strike at the Venice Film Festival.

"The Japanese side has failed to give a sincere reply and address our concerns. Instead, it has made groundless accusations against its neighbors over their legitimate concerns and eventually forcibly started the discharge of nuclear-contaminated water into the sea. This is not the right attitude or approach to solve the problem," Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Wang Wenbin said..

What to Watch in the Days Ahead

Former Proud Boys chapter leader Ethan Nordean is expected to be sentenced following his conviction on seditious conspiracy charges. Prosecutors have asked for Nordean to be sentenced to 27 years in prison.

Nonfarm payrolls, S&P and ISM manufacturing PMIs, and construction spending are due from 8:30 a.m. Nonfarm payrolls are expected to rise 170,000 in August, a decline from the 187,000 increase recorded in July, in a further sign that the labor market is slowing down.

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Netters have total clean sweep over Sisseton

Groton Area's volleyball teams did not lose a single set to Sisseton in volleyball action played Thursday in Groton.

Groton won the seventh grade match, 25-12 and 25-21, the eight grade match, 25-16 and 25-20, the C match 25-14 and 25-14, the junior varsity match 25-17 and 25-19, and the varsity match 25-22, 25-18 and 25-20.

In the varsity match, Sisseton controlled most of the first set up until it was 20-14 when Groton Area then scored seven straight points to take the lead, 21-20. The Tigers scored the last two points including the game winning block by Anna Fjeldheim and Faith Traphagen. Sisseton jumped out to a 5-0 lead in the second set when Groton Area had to play catch up once again. The Redmen had an 11-8 lead when Groton Area scored four straight points to take the lead, 12-11. The Tigers continued to keep the upper hand for the rest of the set and Carly Guthmiller put the game away for Groton with her ace serve. Groton Area had the momentum on their side going into the third set and took a 3-0 lead and never trailed for the 25-20 win.

Sydney Leight had 11 kills, four ace serves and 14 digs to lead Groton Area. Anna Fjeldheim had 10 kills, two ace serves, two assists an assisted block and 11 digs. Rylee Dunker had five kills, an ace serve and two solo blocks. Faith Traphagen had five kills and an assisted block. Lydia Meier had six kills while Carly Guthmiller had three ace serves, Jerica Locke had an ace serve and Laila Roberts had 10 digs.

Sisseton was led by Krista Langager with seven kills and a block, Rylie Huff had five kills, Ruby Rice had four kills, an ace and a block, Chloe Langager had two kills and a block, Alexia Quinn had a kill and an ace, Emmalee Nielsen had a kill and Tara Nelson had an ace serve.

The match was broadcast live on GDILIVE.COM, sponsored by Bary Keith at Harr Motors, BK Custom Ts & More, Bierman Farm Service, Blocker Construction, Dacotah Bank, Full Circle Ag, Groton Ag Partners, Groton Chamber, Groton Ford, John Sieh Agency and Locke Electric.

Weber Landscaping was the sponsor of the junior varsity match as Emma Kutter finished the match with six kills and three ace serves, Chesney Weber had eight ace serves and three kills, Kella Tracy had four kills, Talli Wright two kills, Jerica Locke had a kill and an ace serve, Taryn Traphagen, Emerlee Jones and Sydney Locke each had a kill.

Jim and Mindy Jones sponsored the C match on GDILIVE.COM with Emerlee Jones leading the way with eight kills, Taryn Traphagen had three kills and an ace serve, Avery Crank had three ace serves and a kill, McKenna Tietz had three kills, Hannah Sandness three ace serves, Brenna Imrie had a kill and two ace serves, Leah Jones and Liby Althoff had two kills and Teagan Hanten had a kill.

Groton Area will be at Webster on Tuesday and at Aberdeen Roncalli on Thursday.

- Paul Kosel

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Groton Community Transit

P.O. Box 693
205 E. 2nd Ave.
Groton, SD 57445

Dear Groton family,

Thank you, Thank you, for your loyalty and support through all of these years! We appreciate everyone of you!!

Although we have tried our best to keep the expenses low, our operating costs have increased significantly due to global factors in recent times. After carefully reviewing the finances, we have made a tough decision of increasing our transportation prices.

The change will take effect on Oct. 1, 2023 our rides within the town of Groton will be \$2 per ride, \$4 roundtrip. And, medical rides to Aberdeen from Groton will be \$20 roundtrip. Until then, you can take benefit of the old prices. We will honor old prices till Sept. 30, 2023!

We also offer a discounted pass for \$30 which includes 22 one way rides within Groton area!

We are a non-profit transportation service for the needs of all age groups of people!

As always, thank you for your loyalty and we thank you for your understanding and continued support!

Sincerely,

Dam Hansen & Eugenia Strom

Groton Transit

Steve Smith, Sherry Koehler, Topper Tostad, Dick Kolker

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GHS Homecoming Candidates

Front Row left to right: Hannah Monson, Anna Fjeldheim, Sydney Leicht, Carly Guthmiller, Emma Schinkel

Back Row left to right: Layne Hanson, Dillon Abeln, Logan Ringgenberg, Colby Dunker, Holden Sippel

Coronation will be held at 7:30pm on September 11, 2023, in the Groton Area High School Gym.

(Photo courtesy Brenda Madsen)

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Northern Drops 2023 Season Opener to No. 11 Bemidji State

Aberdeen, S.D. – 2023 opened for the Northern State University football team on the road at No. 11 Bemidji State Thursday evening, with the Wolves falling 49-13. The Beavers scored in each of the four quarters, while the Wolves tallied touchdowns in the first and third.

THE QUICK DETAILS

Final Score: NSU 13, BSU 49

Records: NSU 0-1, BSU 1-0

Attendance: N/A

HOW IT HAPPENED

Bemidji State scored two touchdowns early in the first via rushes by Ali Mohamed

Anthony Vespo connected with Dewaylon Ingram for the Wolves first touchdown of the season a 59-yard reception at 4:51 in the first

The Beavers responded within the 4-minute mark, scoring their third touchdown of the evening, a 35-yard pass

BSU added 15 more points in the second quarter, taking a 36-6 halftime lead

Ingram and Colton Hackel opened the second half scoring for either team with a 7-yard receiving touchdown at 5:17 in the third

It was all Bemidji State from there on out, as the Beavers added two field goals in the fourth, closing out the 49-13 victory

The Wolves recorded a game high 306 yards passing, while the Beavers led in rushing yards, total offense, and first downs

The Northern quarterbacks threw four interceptions in the loss and suffered three sacks

NSU converted on just 5-of-18 third downs and 3-of-5 fourth downs, scoring once in two chances in the red-zone

Ingram led the contest with 187 receiving yards, averaging 20.8 yards per reception with two touchdowns

Charlie Larson led the Northern State defense with a game high 12 tackles and recorded 2.5 of the teams four tackles for a loss

In the return game, Dakota Larson notched 26 yards on kick returns and Brett Brenton added 14 yards on punt returns

Ethan Barnett averaged 33.3 yards per punt with a 64-yard long and Wade James hit 1-of-2 point after attempts

NORTHERN STATE STATISTICAL STANDOUTS

Anthony Vespo: 170 yards, 1 touchdown, 59-yard long

Colton Hackel: 136 yards, 1 touchdown, 35-yard long

Dewaylon Ingram: 187 yards, 20.8 yards per reception, 2 touchdowns

Charlie Larson: 12 tackles, 2.5 tackles for a loss

Trevor Johnson: 1 interception, 2 tackles

UP NEXT

Northern State hosts Minnesota Duluth from Dacotah Bank Stadium next Saturday in their 2023 home opener. Kick-off is set for 6 p.m. between the Wolves and Bulldogs.

BLOOD-SUCKING BUGS: BE AWARE OF THE RISKS

Take every precaution to avoid ticks and tick bites.

Some of them are difficult to detect, some might have fed and left the host undetected, so the only evidence of a tick bite may be a resulting rash or illness. But be aware that anyone spending time out of doors is likely to encounter ticks at some point.

Jody Green, University of Nebraska-Lincoln Extension Educator/Entomologist, says reports of ticks discovered in the region are on the increase, which means the public is becoming more aware of the dangers posed by these disease carrying vectors.

"People are bringing in ticks to be identified instead of pulling them off in a panic and disposing of them," Green says. "Reports show it could be 3 to 30 days after a tick bite before symptoms of illness show up. Knowing which ticks you've been exposed to may help physicians in narrowing down the tickborne diseases and help with a quick diagnosis."

Common symptoms of tick-related illnesses include:

Fever/chills – all tickborne diseases can cause fever.

Aches and pains. Tickborne diseases can cause headache, fatigue and muscle aches. People with Lyme disease may also experience joint pain.

Rash. A distinctive rash is a symptom common in Lyme disease, Southern tick-associated rash illness (STARI), Rocky Mountain spotted fever (RMSF), ehrlichiosis, and tularemia.

Health care providers should consider symptoms and the geographic region where a tick bite did or may have occurred. Laboratory tests recommended by the doctor can confirm the diagnosis and determine the course of treatment.

Tick paralysis is a symptom that authorities believe to be caused by a toxin in the saliva of an attached tick. Persons affected with tick paralysis can experience weakness or paralysis that gradually moves up the body. The symptoms sometimes resemble other neurologic conditions (i.e. Guillain-Barre syndrome or botulism). Movement is generally regained within 24 hours of removing the tick.

When removing a tick, Green recommends using a set of pointy tweezers that allows for grasping the mouthparts of the tick as close as possible to the host's skin.

"Using a steady movement, not twisting or jerking, pull the tick out," she says. "Afterward, disinfect the area around the bite and treat it as necessary to prevent infection. Sometimes the mouthparts will break off when trying to remove an embedded tick. Don't freak out about that. That body part is similar to a wood splinter. Your body will reject it on its own. The most important thing is to remove the tick's body."

In some cases, people seek a physician to remove the tick's mouthparts, which can be done, but isn't necessary in preventing disease.

"A tick's mouth works like a two-sided saw, and it's barbed to enable it to hold on," Green says. "Don't rely on home remedies that call for coating the tick with something like peppermint oil or dish soap. Attempting to force the tick to back out on its own could cause it to expel its digestive contents or saliva under the skin, which increases the potential for contracting a tickborne disease."

Capturing a photo of the tick while its attached can be helpful in identifying the tick in case it gets damaged during removal. If it is in good condition after removal, take another photo and save the tick in a plastic bag in the freezer. This way, if a physician's care is required, there is documentation of the species,



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date and time. Consider where you were, especially take note if you were traveling out of state or out of the country. Different ticks exist in different geographic regions.

"Black-legged ticks carry the bacteria that causes Lyme disease," Green says. "If you can identify that the tick attached to you isn't this species, you can know that Lyme disease will not be an issue. Anytime a physician is needed to treat an unidentified illness, having a photo of a tick that was recently discovered on you or on your property will allow the doctor to narrow down the focus on tickborne illness rather than starting from scratch. Many symptoms are flu-like and often people don't think about ticks first."

Among the steps that help prevent tick bites are:

Applying repellants which contain 20-30% DEET on exposed skin and clothing prior to spending time outdoors.

Treating clothing and gear with repellants containing 0.5% permethrin.

Avoiding wooded and brushy areas with high grass and leaf litter and walking in the center of trails if you are in a wooded or grassy area.

Examining your entire body, as well as gear and pets, after returning indoors. Promptly removing any attached ticks.

Additional steps include:

Showering as soon as possible.

Looking for ticks on the body and in bedding for three days. Some ticks are only the size of a poppy seed and can be anywhere on the body.

Looking in armpits, hairline, behind ears and knees, in the belly-button area, and in the groin area. Family members can assist with checking areas that a person cannot easily see.

Put clothes that were worn outside in the dryer on high for 30 minutes to kill any ticks that may be on the clothes. Just washing clothes may not kill ticks.

Check pets for ticks, too after they come in from being outside. Place them on a tick control medicine as recommended by your veterinarian.

In Nebraska, ticks may be active all year round. Nebraska DHHS staff use "tick dragging or flagging" methods to search for ticks and help monitor tick species in the state. Information obtained through these activities is used to help understand when and where ticks are active in Nebraska and what types of pathogens they may be carrying.

When people are aware of the types of ticks and tick-borne diseases potentially circulating in their area, they can better protect themselves and healthcare providers can identify appropriate testing and treatment for illnesses.

Known tick species in Nebraska that are of medical concern include the American Dog Tick, which poses a high risk of bites during spring and summer. Sometimes called wood ticks, this species is found in the eastern half of the United States and is known to transmit tularemia and Rocky Mountain spotted fever. The adult females of this species are the ones most likely to bite humans.

The Brown Dog Tick is also found in Nebraska and across the United States. Dogs are the primary host for this species, but the tick may also bite humans or other mammals. It transmits Rocky Mountain spotted fever. One strange thing about this tick is that it can complete its life cycle indoors.

The Lone Star tick, described as a "very aggressive feeder," emits saliva that can irritate the skin, causing redness and discomfort at a bite site. The redness doesn't necessarily indicate infection. This species transmits ehrlichiosis, tularemia, Heartland virus, Bourbon virus, and STARI. Growing evidence suggests the bite of this tick may also trigger Alpha-Gal Syndrome, which is an allergy to red meat.

The Rocky Mountain Wood Tick and Blacklegged Tick are also found in Nebraska, though not as frequently. Details about these species is found on the DHHS site mentioned here.

"Take every opportunity to avoid ticks tick bites and be aware of the risks they pose," Green says. "Ticks can be active anytime temperatures rise above 45 degrees when there is no snow cover. Be informed and take action to protect yourself, your family, and your pets."

Funding for this educational article comes from the Central States Center for Agricultural Safety and Health and the University of Nebraska Medical Center.

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Goldbacks: The New South Dakota Money

Coming September 19, 2023

There is a new kind of money coming to South Dakota and hundreds of South Dakotans are hoping it becomes the Gold Standard for our local economy. The Goldback looks like a golden ticket, which acts as a thin gold coin that fits in your wallet just like paper bills. While the Goldback will not challenge the primacy of the Greenback, its use is growing fast. It is an innovation that allows people to use gold for even the smallest daily transactions, and that is propelling a niche local currency into a movement. Starting on September 19th these sleek gold notes will be available to the public and could soon be seen on your local main street.

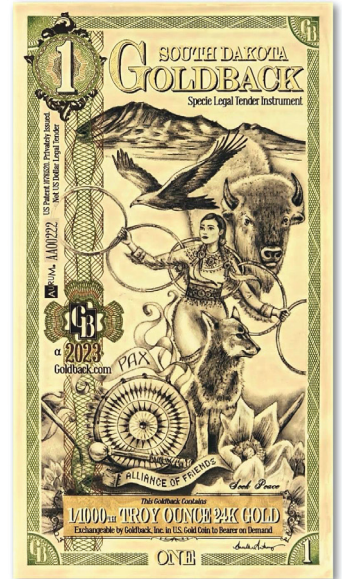
The Goldback started in Utah at the end of 2019 and the project grew to include four states: Utah, Nevada, Wyoming and New Hampshire. South Dakota will be the fifth state to have this local currency in circulation. With tens of millions of dollars' worth of Goldbacks already in circulation worldwide, hundreds of thousands of people, and hundreds of businesses using them, more businesses are asking if it's time to go back to the gold standard with Goldbacks. Over five hundred businesses in Utah are participating in accepting and using this new money, and South Dakota businesses can now join a growing list of local businesses that use it too. There is a currency conversion calculator with live exchange rates posted daily on Goldback.com.

Gold has some historical advantages over other kinds of money. It resists inflation and has a long history of remaining stable even when other economic conditions aren't going as well. At one time, American Dollars were on a gold standard, meaning that every dollar in circulation was backed up by physical gold the federal government held. In the 1930s, that system began to be abandoned, and the U.S. ended the last remnants of the system in the 1970s. According to U.S. government data, the dollar has lost 86% of its purchasing power since 1971. This inflation is really putting a pinch on Utah families and businesses. According to some estimates, inflation is the largest tax on the American People.

The problem is that regular Gold coins are just too valuable to use, and you can't make change with them. One U.S. minted gold eagle coin costs you almost \$2,000.00 today. Even if a business wanted to accept the coin, they'd have to give you change in regular dollars; probably a lot of change! So, in spite of the benefits of using gold money it was just impractical.

One South Dakota Goldback is a thousandth of a troy ounce of pure gold. Made in five beautiful interchangeable denominations, the 1, 5, 10, 25, and 50. Goldbacks are like any other kind of cash, they can be easily spent at local businesses or used for private transactions. With an exchange rate today of about 4 dollars per Goldback, it is cheap enough for any regular purchase from groceries and hardware to large purchases like a car or a home. Tougher than most currencies, Goldbacks survive circulation well, especially when handled with any degree of care. They are waterproof, tear resistant, and the gold inside is fully recoverable.

Unlike other gold products, Goldbacks are made using cutting edge technology, the Goldback brings the security and stability of the gold-standard out of the past and into your wallet. Goldbacks cannot be counterfeited! Each Goldback bears a unique serial number, coupled with six other anti-counterfeiting security features. Goldbacks can be used for transactions of any size, anywhere that gold is valued. When you have Goldbacks you hold the gold right in your hands! No need to trust the Fed, a bank, or worry about a power outage. Businesses that want to participate can be listed on the website Goldback.com.





SOUTH DAKOTA SEARCHLIGHT

<https://southdakotasearchlight.com>

Drug dealer asks Supreme Court to overturn conviction tied to former roommate's testimony

Jury should've been warned of woman's status as an 'accomplice,' defendant says

BY: JOHN HULT - AUGUST 31, 2023 3:44 PM

A failure to inform jurors about a key witness' immunity from prosecution unfairly tainted a drug dealer's chance for a fair trial, his defense attorney told the South Dakota Supreme Court on Thursday in Pierre.

A jury found Todd W. Stevens, of Brookings, guilty of six drug-related counts at his trial one year ago. Stevens admitted to possession of methamphetamine and marijuana, and keeping a place where drugs are used or sold. He contends he was more of a helpful meth-using friend than a drug dealer.

Stevens argues that his drug distribution charges don't hold water because the state's prime witness was a former roommate who testified to protect herself from prosecution, and that a jury deserved to know that.

Witness Ashley Burgers lived with Stevens, used meth and marijuana with him and occasionally helped him connect his friends with methamphetamine, according to her own testimony. She moved out in August of 2021, just as the investigation against Stevens began to pick up steam, defense attorney Don McCarty told the state Supreme Court justices Thursday, and she signed an agreement guaranteeing immunity from prosecution three days before Stevens' trial began last summer.

"I would say to this court that the state knew it had no case on August 15th. That's why they had to go get the immunity agreement from Ashley Burgers," McCarty said.

Investigation, defense faulty

The investigation began with a tip from an informant, and included months of surveillance on Stevens' home by a Brookings detective. That surveillance was mostly fruitless, McCarty said, at least in terms of providing proof of drug dealing.

"He does visual surveillance, electronic surveillance, captures cell phone information, trash pulls, and stops people after they leave this residence," Stevens said. "None of those things lead to any leads. They lead to circumstantial evidence that there may be drug use going on."

The Brookings detective was, however, able to glean from all that work that future witness Ashley Burgers lived with Stevens.

When she moved out of Stevens' home that August, she was "immediately arrested for parole violations," McCarty said.

Near the end of September 2021, a Highway Patrol trooper found methamphetamine in the vehicle of a man who'd been at Stevens' house. That led to a search of Stevens' home, which turned up small amounts of methamphetamine and marijuana, and to a traffic stop of Stevens in which law enforcement found methamphetamine in the vehicle. Stevens was charged with distributing drugs to the man caught with meth in September, and the case was in motion.

But in the months that followed, prosecutors were unable to secure enough evidence or testimony to prove that Stevens was a drug dealer.

That's why Burgers' immunity deal just before the trial matters, McCarty said.

Stevens' lawyer at trial never asked the judge to include two jury instructions directing jurors not to convict solely on the basis of accomplice testimony. That, McCarty said, unfairly bolstered Burgers' credibility and proves that his client's prior lawyer was ineffective enough to warrant overturning Stevens' conviction.

"You folks may prove me wrong, but I find no case in the state of South Dakota where those two instruc-

tions are not given when an accomplice testifies, and where that case is appealed to this court, where that conviction has not been reversed.”

Justice Mark Salter pushed back, however. There is a law in South Dakota that says a person cannot be convicted by testimony from an accomplice unless that witness’ testimony is backed by other evidence.

“The statute doesn’t say, ‘Judge, you’ve got to give a cautionary instruction and you’ve got to give an accomplice instruction.’ It says the conviction can’t be sustained if there’s not corroboration.”

Prosecutor: Defendant guilty regardless of witness

Assistant Attorney General Stephen Gemar told the justices that Burgers wouldn’t qualify as an “accomplice” because Stevens argued at trial that she, not he, was the one distributing drugs from the home.

Burgers testified that Stevens had distributed meth to her, Gemar said, and she couldn’t be both buyer and seller at once. She also said she’d witnessed Stevens distributing meth to others.

But Burgers was accused of distributing meth to the man whose 2021 traffic stop led to the issuance of a search warrant, Justice Janine Kern said. Gemar said that man’s name was not listed as a customer on Stevens’ indictment.

Chief Justice Steven Jensen asked Gemar how Burgers could avoid accomplice status in spite of her admission to fetching meth and delivering it to others.

“That was a separate and distinct act from what Todd Stevens was doing,” Gemar said.

Justice Salter pushed further, pointing to a note found in the home’s trash bin on which Burgers had written that she planned to “get rid of” methamphetamine for Stevens.

“That is what the note said, but the fact remains that Stevens did not know it,” Gemar said. “At trial, his counsel accused Burgers of stealing that meth from Todd Stevens. So to me, that doesn’t sound like they were working together.”

He also said that the existence of similar conduct, in this case drug dealing, is not enough to tag a person as an “accomplice” under the law. Even if she were an accomplice and had been identified as such to jurors, he said, there was enough evidence to convict Stevens.

Gemar read a text message from Stevens to his son to show that the defendant had been a distributor.

“As much as I bought meth,” Todd Stevens wrote, “I also helped other friends, and we just paid each other back the cost. If that is considered being a distributor, then I guess I and all the past friends are dealers then. But I will say it’s BS to tag me or any other as a dealer, when the real ones have pounds or more available.”

Gemar also pointed to visits Stevens made to known drug dealers in Sioux Falls, a scale and spoon found in the home and a handful of other facts.

Without Burgers’ testimony, Gemar said, there was “more than sufficient evidence in the record to sustain a conviction.”

The court will issue a decision at a later date.

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.

COMMENTARY

Death of Fairview-Sanford merger was right outcome for patients and communities

PAT GAROFALO

Editor’s note: The author is not the same person as Minnesota Rep. Pat Garofalo, R-Farmington.

Late last month, the Minnesota-based hospital system Fairview Health Services announced that it was pulling the plug on a proposed merger with South Dakota-based Sanford Health. This marked the second time these two health care systems had failed to consummate a merger, the first occurring back in 2013.

This time, they cited a lack of support from “certain stakeholders” as the motivating factor. Indeed, the

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merger had caused quite a bit of concern across Minnesota from labor unions, elected officials, antitrust enforcers, and most importantly, everyday residents worried about the increasing price and growing inaccessibility of health care services.

And they were absolutely right to be worried: Hospital mergers in general, and these merging partners in particular, have a history of prioritizing dollars before patients and communities. The effort to scrutinize the Fairview-Sanford merger — and the steps elected lawmakers in Minnesota took to ensure that patients and workers would not see their livelihoods or health care access negatively affected — is a model other states and policymakers should follow.

The United States has the highest health care prices in the developed world, and hospital prices play a large role in that. Consolidation is a key factor in those high prices: The Federal Trade Commission's Bureau of Economic Analysis has said that consolidated hospitals charge as much as 40-50% more than hospitals in more competitive markets. Other studies have found similar results: Hospitals in markets with fewer competitors charge patients more; markets with one hospital are more expensive than those with two, which are more expensive than those with three, and on and on.

But that's far from the only downside of consolidated hospital power. In concentrated hospital markets, wages paid to health care workers are lower, access is limited, and ultimately, health outcomes for patients are worse.

The proposed Fairview-Sanford merger also brought two distinct wrinkles that had local leaders rightfully concerned. First, Fairview's relationship with the University of Minnesota meant the merger could have brought the main Minnesota teaching hospital under the purview of an out-of-state corporation.

Indeed, the whole transaction reeked of an effort to bring Fairview under the regulatory regime of South Dakota, getting Fairview out of the crosshairs of Minnesota regulators who were not happy with, for example, the hiring of goonish debt collectors to threaten patients. These "cross market mergers," as they're known, are increasingly popular as a form of regulatory forum shopping, allowing hospital executives to essentially pick which state's regulatory system they'd prefer to operate under — a recipe for less oversight, laxer rules and harm to patients.

To their credit, Minnesota lawmakers did yeoman's work to protect the health of their constituents. Attorney General Keith Ellison, whose office has the power to investigate proposed mergers, launched a listening tour across the state to give residents and health care workers the space to voice their concerns.

The Legislature held a series of hearings, as well, which resulted in one of the most important pieces of legislation to become law anywhere in the country this year. Chiefly authored by Sen. Melissa Wiklund, DFL-Bloomington, and Rep. Robert Bierman, DFL-Apple Valley, the law gives the Minnesota attorney general the power to reject a proposed health care merger if it would result in decreased quality of care or reduced access for patients, or if it would have negative effects on the health care workforce in the state, such as decreased wages or degraded working conditions.

These new rules gave Minnesota officials the authority to properly scrutinize the merger — which the hospitals' executives clearly felt their deal couldn't survive — and they set Minnesota up to be a national leader in addressing the harms of hospital consolidation writ large. And the new rules acknowledge — unlike much of federal and state antitrust law and precedent — that those harms go beyond prices to wages, working conditions and access to both general and specialized health care services.

In addition to adopting similar rules to Minnesota to govern hospital mergers, state legislators could consider several other ideas to address hospital consolidation in order to better protect patients and workers. These include: Requiring more merging parties to file with state antitrust enforcers; repealing state rules that protect hospitals from federal merger scrutiny; and limiting their ability to demand anticompetitive contracts with insurers.

Policies like these could help ensure that hospital consolidation is reined in and that communities don't see the health care facilities upon which they depend gouge them on care or simply disappear.

Pat Garofalo is the director of state and local policy at the American Economic Liberties Project and the author of "The Billionaire Boondoggle: How Our Politicians Let Corporations and Bigwigs Steal Our Money and Jobs." (He has no relation to Farmington, Minnesota, Rep. Pat Garofalo.)

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Commission moves to close loophole in armed school sentinel program

Current rules don't disqualify people who are barred from possessing firearms

BY: MAKENZIE HUBER - AUGUST 30, 2023 5:24 PM

Current eligibility rules for the state's armed school sentinel program don't disqualify people who are barred from possessing firearms, according to Hank Prim, executive secretary for the Law Enforcement Officers Standards and Training Commission.

But the commission endorsed a rule change Wednesday in Pierre that would close that "loophole," as Prim called it.

The Legislature created the sentinel program in 2013. It allows school boards to arm school employees, security guards or volunteers with guns to defend the school against an attack.

The commission became aware of the loophole recently when it received a school sentinel application from someone who falsified information on the application.

The applicant was deemed ineligible to meet minimum standards to become a school sentinel, Attorney General Marty Jackley told South Dakota Searchlight.

Information about what was falsified, who submitted the application and what school district received the application is confidential, Jackley said.

Under the rule change, which needs final approval by a legislative rules committee later this year, applications could be rejected on "good cause" grounds, which includes a failure to meet minimum standards, falsifying or omitting information, and being barred from possessing firearms based on state or federal laws.

The new rule adds that a school board can resubmit a rejected application after a year has passed.

The state commission endorsed several other rule changes at its meeting, including a rule to allow adults younger than 21 to be hired by law enforcement agencies across the state.

As the rules currently stand, someone younger than 21 cannot be a law enforcement officer in the state of South Dakota. Jackley told commissioners that the issue was brought up during the latest legislative session.

"If we don't do this, the Legislature will likely do it for us," Jackley said during the meeting.

The rule change allows the committee to waive the minimum age requirement for select candidates who've completed a law enforcement program at a state technical college and want to be hired by an agency.

The commission also reviewed 30 complaint forms and investigations into law enforcement officer behavior. Nearly all of them were dismissed by the commission. However, Commissioner Steve Allender, former Rapid City mayor and former Rapid City police chief, suggested further investigation into an allegation of a county law enforcement officer using county and federal resources to further his private investigation company.

Complaints against law enforcement officers are confidential during investigations.

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.

Trump pleads not guilty, waives arraignment in Georgia 2020 election interference case

BY: STANLEY DUNLAP - AUGUST 31, 2023 4:43 PM

Former President Donald Trump entered a not guilty plea on Thursday in Fulton County Superior Court on 13 felony counts that charge him with racketeering for attempts to overturn the 2020 presidential election in Georgia.

In the court filing on Thursday, Trump also voluntarily waived his right to an arraignment hearing scheduled for Wednesday in which a judge was set to formally read the charges against the ex-president in open court. Additionally, Trump's lawyers requested that his case be tried separately from that of his co-defendants who request a speedy trial in the case being prosecuted under the Racketeer Influenced Corrupt Organizations Act, or RICO, a broad law used to prosecute criminal organizations.

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Former Trump lawyer and defendant Kenneth Chesebro's trial is now scheduled for Oct. 23. Attorney Sidney Powell, who made appearances in Georgia after the 2020 election to spread false claims of widespread voter fraud, has also requested a speedy trial.

Trump's newest lawyer Steven Sadow wrote in Thursday's motion that allowing him only two months to prepare a defense would be unfair in a case involving 19 other defendants and 41 different criminal charges.

A grand jury on Aug. 14 indicted 19 defendants on multiple felony counts, including Trump and his former personal attorneys Rudy Giuliani and John Eastman, as well as ex-White House Chief of Staff Mark Meadows and several false electoral college voters, including freshman Georgia state Sen. Shawn Still, a Norcross Republican, and David Shafer, a former Georgia Republican Party chairman and state legislator.

Trump has continued to complain that Fulton County District Attorney Fani Willis is politically motivated, accusing the elected-Democratic prosecutor of grandstanding and unfairly targeting him and his supporters for claiming the presidential election was rigged in Georgia and several other states.

Willis has defended her decisions in the case as an unbiased prosecution of concerted efforts to disrupt the election processes in Georgia, Michigan, Pennsylvania and five other states.

According to the Fulton indictment, Trump and a number of other co-defendants were involved in a coordinated effort to appoint illegitimate Republican electors in Georgia to sign false Electoral College certificates in his favor to overturn President Joe Biden's narrow win in the state in 2020. The indictment also alleges Trump and others attempted to influence government officials to overturn election results that were confirmed by multiple recounts and by state and federal election and law enforcement agencies.

In the 98-page indictment, Fulton prosecutors also accuse Trump and supporters of spreading unfounded allegations of massive voter fraud, which led to a breach of the state's electronic voting system in Coffee County in January 2021.

Election interference case to be live-streamed

A court order was filed by Fulton County Judge Scott McAfee on Thursday allowing the county's YouTube channel to live stream the case's hearings and trials.

A high-profile case against the leading Republican presidential candidate and a number of Trump's allies is expected to attract a large number of viewers online in the coming weeks and months.

McAfee's order also allows for the media to have electronic devices in the courtroom, such as cell phones and laptops as long as they are not used to record the proceedings. Those devices were banned from a federal courtroom where Meadows appeared earlier this week in a bid to move his case from Fulton County's jurisdiction.

Stanley Dunlap, senior reporter for the Georgia Recorder, has covered government and politics for news outlets in Georgia and Tennessee for the past decade. The Georgia Associated Press Managing Editors named Stanley a finalist for best deadline reporting. The Tennessee Press Association honored him for his reporting on the disappearance of Holly Bobo.

Was that chicken cutlet grown in a lab? These states (including SD) want you to know.

BY: MADYSON FITZGERALD - AUGUST 31, 2023 12:32 PM

Select U.S. restaurants have begun serving laboratory-grown chicken, spurring long wait times for reservations by diners curious to taste it.

In June, the U.S. Department of Agriculture gave final approval for a few California-based companies to begin selling lab-produced chicken across the country.

While it may be years before lab-grown meat is available at grocery stores, a handful of states are tightening rules on labeling the new food, which is produced by growing cells acquired from living animals into muscle tissue.

Consumers interested in sustainable foods that avoid the slaughter of animals are driving the growing industry. But, pushed by the cattle and poultry industries, more states are defining what can be sold to

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consumers as “meat” and are requiring prominent labels on products cultured in labs.

Under a USDA agreement, UPSIDE Foods and GOOD Meat, as well as the latter’s manufacturing partner JOINN Biologics, will sell their products with the label “cell-cultivated chicken,” while the department develops further labeling rules.

But some states are imposing their own additional requirements.

Texas passed the most recent bill, signed into law by Republican Gov. Greg Abbott in May. Starting Sept. 1, cultivated products in Texas must include the term “cell-cultured,” “lab-grown” or similar wording on packaging near the name of the product, in type at least the same size as the text around it.

The Texas Farm Bureau, an advocacy group of farmers and ranchers, had listed the bill as one of its legislative priorities this year.

In 2018, Missouri became the first state to pass legislation requiring different labeling for traditional meat versus products not derived from livestock or poultry.

Such products marketed in Missouri as meat without the words “plant-based,” “veggie,” “lab-grown,” “lab-created” or a similar phrase before or after the product’s name may be referred to a county prosecutor and the attorney general for potential violations, according to a memorandum from the state. The products also must state that they are “made from plants,” “grown in a lab” or a comparable disclosure.

Arkansas, Kentucky, Mississippi, Montana, North Dakota, South Carolina, South Dakota and Wyoming enacted similar legislation the following year.

In 2020, Oklahoma enacted a law giving state officials the authority to enforce meat labeling practices.

This year, Iowa considered a bill to prohibit lab-grown proteins in public schools, but it didn’t pass. A Michigan labeling measure remains in committee.

Kentucky’s 2019 law deems a food misbranded if it is labeled as meat but contains cultured animal tissue.

The cattle industry in Kentucky is extremely important to the economy, said state Rep. Michael Meredith, a Republican who sponsored the measure. People are interested in knowing about the origin and makeup of their food now more than ever before, he said, and legislators wanted to ensure labels are clear.

“I think the public is very skeptical of the product,” Meredith said. “I have talked with people — and I come from a fairly rural area — and folks are just appalled, and it’s not even funny.”

He added, “I think it’s going to be really, really hard to push something like this in rural America as a market.”

But the cell-cultured meat industry has made significant strides in recent years. As of 2022, the global number of cultivated meat companies rose to 156, with headquarters in 26 countries, according to the Good Food Institute’s State of the Industry report. The nonprofit, which advocates in favor of protein alternatives and prefers the term “cultivated” meat, found that all-time investments in the industry had reached \$2.8 billion globally last year.

The institute argues that U.S. state legislatures are taking steps to undermine the market through “label censorship,” which it calls unconstitutional and unnecessary.

“It’s always been our position that state label censorship through legislative efforts were kind of a ‘solution in search of a problem,’” said Laura Braden, associate director of regulatory affairs and an attorney at the Good Food Institute. “Consumer choice rather than label censorship should determine winners and losers in the marketplace.”

Still, legislators in states such as Wyoming, where the law requires labels on lab-grown meat to include “containing cell cultured product” or similar wording, say they want labels clearly understood by the public.

“It never hurts to have our Department of Agriculture, doing this work alongside the USDA,” Wyoming Republican state Sen. Brian Boner said. “We’re just going to have a more robust system where folks will know exactly what they’re purchasing when it comes to meat products.”

But such measures have met resistance.

The Missouri law prompted a lawsuit arguing the state made “a brazen attempt to stifle the growing grocery category of plant-based meats,” according to a statement from the ACLU of Missouri, which is part of the lawsuit. Including the Animal Legal Defense Fund, the Good Food Institute and Tofurky, a plant-based protein company, a coalition of organizations challenged the law for violating the First Amendment.

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"I don't think this was about consumer confusion," said Amanda Howell, a managing attorney at Animal Legal Defense Fund. "I don't think this is about ensuring clear and non-misleading labels. I think this was about taking First Amendment rights away from companies and making them call themselves things that you know would be unintelligible to consumers. And if a consumer can't tell what a product is, they're not going to buy it."

Howell said states are acting now because they sense the growing market possibilities.

"These are very animal agriculture-heavy states, their GDP relies on those animal producers, and they feel beholden to their constituents to pass these laws designed to attack plant and cell-cultured meats."

Mike Badger, executive director of the American Pastured Poultry Producers Association, said poultry producers have long been expecting the approval of cell-cultivated chicken.

The association represents independent farms that market directly to consumers, unlike poultry giants like Tyson Foods, which has been investing in lab-grown meat companies for a few years. While the traditional poultry farm community isn't overly concerned about the possibility of competition, Badger said, there are still ethical concerns for consumers choosing cell-cultivated chicken.

"I think the really big question here is this: What's driving the demand to create this new lab-grown protein?" Badger asked. "Is it only the fact that people think it's more ethical than having a living chicken that dies for your table? And if that's the case, how are the ethics of all the other stuff coming into it?"

Backers of cultivated meat argue it is better for the environment. Traditional meat is one of the top contributors to the average U.S. household's carbon footprint, according to the latest report from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. In 2019, a sizable portion of the Earth's greenhouse gas emissions came from the global agriculture industry.

A 2021 article by university researchers in India published in the Journal of Animal Science and Technology suggests lab-grown meat could fulfill the increasing demand for meat using fewer natural resources.

But Badger cited an April preprint by researchers at the University of California, Davis that found lab-grown meat's environmental impact could be higher than retail beef based on current production methods.

"It's very early in the whole process," Badger said, "and there's a lot of questions to be sorted out."

Madyson Fitzgerald is the newsletter producer and breaking news reporter for Stateline.

New federal water pollution rule draws mixed reaction

BY: JACOB FISCHLER - AUGUST 30, 2023 5:38 PM

A federal rule limiting agencies' power to regulate water pollution will severely restrict protections for waters and wetlands throughout the country, but could also be subject to challenges from conservative groups that maintain the new rule exerts more federal jurisdiction than the U.S. Supreme Court intended in a May decision.

With the rule published Tuesday to redefine which "waters of the United States," or WOTUS, are covered under the Clean Water Act, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and Army Corps of Engineers aimed to bring the federal definition in line with the Supreme Court's ruling this year narrowing the scope of federal power.

In a 5-4 decision, the court held the federal government can only regulate waters with "a continuous surface connection" to the types of navigable waters indisputably covered by the Clean Water Act.

The revised rule, which will take effect when it is published in the Federal Register in the coming days, removes the "significant nexus" standard that the court invalidated in the Sackett v. EPA case in May.

It also removes federal jurisdiction from wetlands that cross state lines and revised the definition of "adjacent" to mean "having a continuous surface connection," which is consistent with Justice Samuel Alito's majority opinion.

The new definition is broader than some expected, said Ashley Peck, an attorney with Holland and Hart LLP's water practice, because the Sackett case was only about wetlands, but the agencies removed the significant nexus test for all waters. The EPA likely determined it would reduce future court battles by applying the ruling beyond wetlands, she added.

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"EPA is reading the tea leaves to some extent based on the court's broader holding," she said. "I think this probably was a good middle ground ... You're never going to please everybody. But I think this is an effort by EPA to head off more litigation."

Split reaction

Environmental groups and Democrats in Congress described the updated rule as a faithful execution of the court ruling – even as they said the policy would remove protections from millions of acres across the country.

But key congressional Republicans and conservative legal groups said Tuesday and Wednesday the update resulted from a rushed process and overlooks major criteria the court outlined.

The new definition could impact millions of stream-miles and undermine the main goal of the Clean Water Act, Tannis Fox, a senior attorney with the legal group Western Environmental Law Center, said in a Wednesday interview.

"That purpose has been undermined by the Sackett decision because the federal government is no longer able to protect the biological, physical integrity of these waters," she said.

Rick Larsen, a Washington Democrat who is the ranking minority member on the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee, said in a Tuesday statement he applauded the agencies' work but disagreed with the court's decision.

"Ultimately Congress needs to step in and correct the egregious misreading of the Clean Water Act by the Supreme Court to ensure communities continue to have access to clean and safe water," he said.

Meanwhile, conservative legal activists and leading Republicans on key congressional committees called the rule an attempt to do the bare minimum required under the Sackett decision.

In a Tuesday statement, House Transportation and Infrastructure Chairman Sam Graves, a Missouri Republican, and Water Resources and Environment Subcommittee Chairman Dave Rouzer, a North Carolina Republican, said the revised rule "barely pays lip service" to the court's decision. They implied the agencies should have started from scratch with a new rule, rather than merely adjusting a definition.

"The Administration is now trying to make Sackett fit with a rule that never should have been issued in the first place," they said. "This revised rule ignores fundamental concerns laid out in Sackett and is a missed opportunity to finally end longstanding confusion over what constitutes a WOTUS."

Rule eschews public comment

The agencies said they skipped a more thorough rulemaking process because they were only doing as the court instructed.

"Because the sole purpose of this rule is to amend these specific provisions of the 2023 Rule to conform with Sackett, and such conforming amendments do not involve the exercise of the agencies' discretion, providing advance public notice and seeking comment is unnecessary," the rule's preamble reads.

The expedited process was appropriate, Peck said, because the court decision that invalidated existing agency regulations put "jurisdictional determinations at a standstill," she said. Developers and others who need federal approvals are still waiting, she said.

The agencies "felt compelled to get this rule out so that decisional determinations for industry could continue," Fox, the environmental attorney, said.

The agencies "tried to hew closely to the decision," she added.

But Damien Schiff, who successfully led the challenge to the WOTUS rule in the Sackett case as a senior attorney at the conservative Pacific Legal Foundation, said the revised definition missed basic parts of court decision. Holding a normal public comment period would have prevented the agencies from advancing a flawed rule, he said.

Conservatives take issue with rule's scope, process

Schiff said the agencies correctly disregarded the significant nexus test.

"That's the end of where I would say the agencies did a good job," he said.

The EPA and Army Corps "failed to accurately articulate" new criteria to replace the discarded significant nexus test, Schiff said.

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The thrust of the majority opinion in the Sackett case was that only natural water features that could be reasonably described as streams, creeks or rivers could be considered waters of the United States, but the new definition doesn't fully exclude things like human made ditches, he said.

And despite the rule's preamble specifically noting that Sackett requires a surface connection between a wetland and a covered water for the wetland itself to be covered, the court actually went beyond that, Schiff said. Alito's opinion would have required wetlands to be indistinguishable from covered waters, he said.

Such flaws could have been fixed in a normal rulemaking process, he added.

"I guarantee you that if they had offered a comment period that we and many, many other groups would have pulled this out and said, 'Hey, you're ignoring half the test,'" Schiff said.

Uncertainty remains

While congressional Republicans and others have for years criticized WOTUS rules, which have changed with considerable frequency in the past decade with changing presidential administrations and court decisions. The changes leave interested parties unsure of how to plan for building projects that can take years.

The rule does not provide the regulatory certainty Republicans sought, they said.

"The administration continues to take an unserious approach to issuing a durable rule that provides stability to millions of Americans," Senate Environment and Public Works ranking Republican Shelley Moore Capito, of West Virginia, said in a statement.

Peck disagreed, saying though the updated rule will require more agency guidance, it appears to be a step toward a firmer regulatory landscape.

"You're never going to get exact certainty and an exact bright line with this issue," Peck said. "And if you're looking for that, it's an impossible dream."

The new standard will likely be challenged in court, Schiff said, if not in new cases than in existing lawsuits against the larger Biden administration WOTUS rule.

More uncertainty will come from a lack of federal jurisdiction over more than half of the nation's water features, Peck and Fox said.

The Sackett decision and regulatory update puts more pressure on states that want to maintain strong protections for waters and wetlands no longer covered by federal agencies. Other states may seek to dilute protections.

That will mean that the rules will differ state by state, creating more confusion, Peck said.

"It's up to the states to fill in the gap," Fox said. "And that's going to look like a patchwork throughout the nation, depending on the politics in a particular state."

Jacob covers federal policy as a senior reporter for States Newsroom. Based in Oregon, he focuses on Western issues. His coverage areas include climate, energy development, public lands and infrastructure.

South Dakotans can now sign up for consumer alerts, attorney general says

BY: SEARCHLIGHT STAFF - AUGUST 30, 2023 4:39 PM

South Dakota Attorney General Marty Jackley announced Wednesday that the public can now receive consumer alerts via email from the Attorney General's Consumer Protection Division.

The alert system will provide subscribers with information about consumer scams and tips on how to protect against scams, Jackley said in a news release.

People can register for the alerts at the Consumer Protection Division's website, www.consumer.sd.gov, or by stopping at the division's booth in the Expo Building at the State Fair this week in Huron. No email addresses will be shared or sold to a third party, the office said.

People are reminded to contact the Attorney General's Consumer Protection Division at 1-800-300-1986 or consumerhelp@state.sd.us if they have any information about a possible consumer scam or fraud.

Former lawyer with felony conviction asks Supreme Court for reinstatement

Kenneth Orrock served as Bennett County state's attorney

BY: JOHN HULT - AUGUST 30, 2023 4:12 PM

A Rapid City attorney who admitted to felony tax evasion in 2017 wants the South Dakota Supreme Court to reinstate him as a member of the State Bar.

Kenneth Orrock was Bennett County state's attorney before being charged in federal court for failing to collect and remit payroll taxes from 2011 through 2015. The charges didn't relate to his practice of law, but to his security company, called Black Hills Patrol. He was given a five-year probation sentence and ordered to pay \$280,000 in restitution after pleading guilty. He was released from probation after three years.

On Wednesday, Orrock appeared before the state Supreme Court in Pierre to ask for limited readmission to the bar. The bar's disciplinary board heard from Orrock earlier this year and recommended readmission on several conditions, among them limiting Orrock's practice to criminal law and requiring him to retake and pass the bar exam.

Longtime Fall River County attorney Jim Sword backed Orrock during the hearing, testifying to the quality of his work as an assistant and his growth as a person since the 2017 case commenced.

He's an active member of his church and works with veterans, for example, in spite of being ostracized by many of his fellow veterans and attorneys after his felony crimes came to light.

"This is a story of resilience," said Sword, who has agreed to act as Orrock's supervisory lawyer, should the Supreme Court agree to the disciplinary board's terms.

Orrock testified on his own behalf, as well.

"As a newly minted attorney in 2008, I never thought my first appearance before this court would be for something like this," Orrock said. "I'm ashamed of myself that it is."

He told the court he has a support system in place to keep him in check if he is readmitted, and told the justices he's worked to stay current with Supreme Court decisions and other changes to the law since he resigned as a bar member.

Chief Justice Steven Jensen said it was clear to him that Orrock had done a great deal of work on himself since his conviction, but also asked about complaints from before the charges appeared in 2017. Orrock had seven complaints lodged against him, some of which were later expunged, with others leading to reprimand. That's more than usual, Jensen said.

Orrock explained that a possible client had been upset with him over his failure to do work on a case after accepting a retainer, which is a payment made to secure a lawyer's services. He said the retainer was repaid. Another case involved a contentious divorce with "a very uncooperative and contemptuous client," and another involved working to secure pension benefits for the elderly widow of a veteran. He and the widow had a hard time communicating, he said, and that was the basis of the complaint. Orrock would not handle divorces or civil cases under the terms of his readmission.

His ability to act as a court-appointed attorney, however, could help relieve the burden caused in the Rapid City area by a dearth of criminal lawyers.

"Many of the court appointed attorneys that I've been able to speak to in the last several months have just been overwhelmed," Orrock said. "As a matter of fact, one told me last week he's stopping to take them because he can't do it any more."

Jensen also asked Orrock about his restitution. He's paid around \$80,000 through \$1,000 monthly payments, he said.

Tom Frieberg of the State Bar told the justices that restitution was a concern of the disciplinary board, though the board felt Orrock had done much to earn a chance at readmission. Orrock told the board he was about to sell his security guard business and pay off the remainder of his debt.

Sword addressed that issue with his final rebuttal. There was a pending sale that fell through at the last minute "through no fault of Mr. Orrock."

Sword said Orrock knows he'd be expected to devote more of his salary to restitution.

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"If he was to start practicing law, he would dedicate, I think it was like 25% of his income from the practice a lot to pay off that restitution," Sword said.

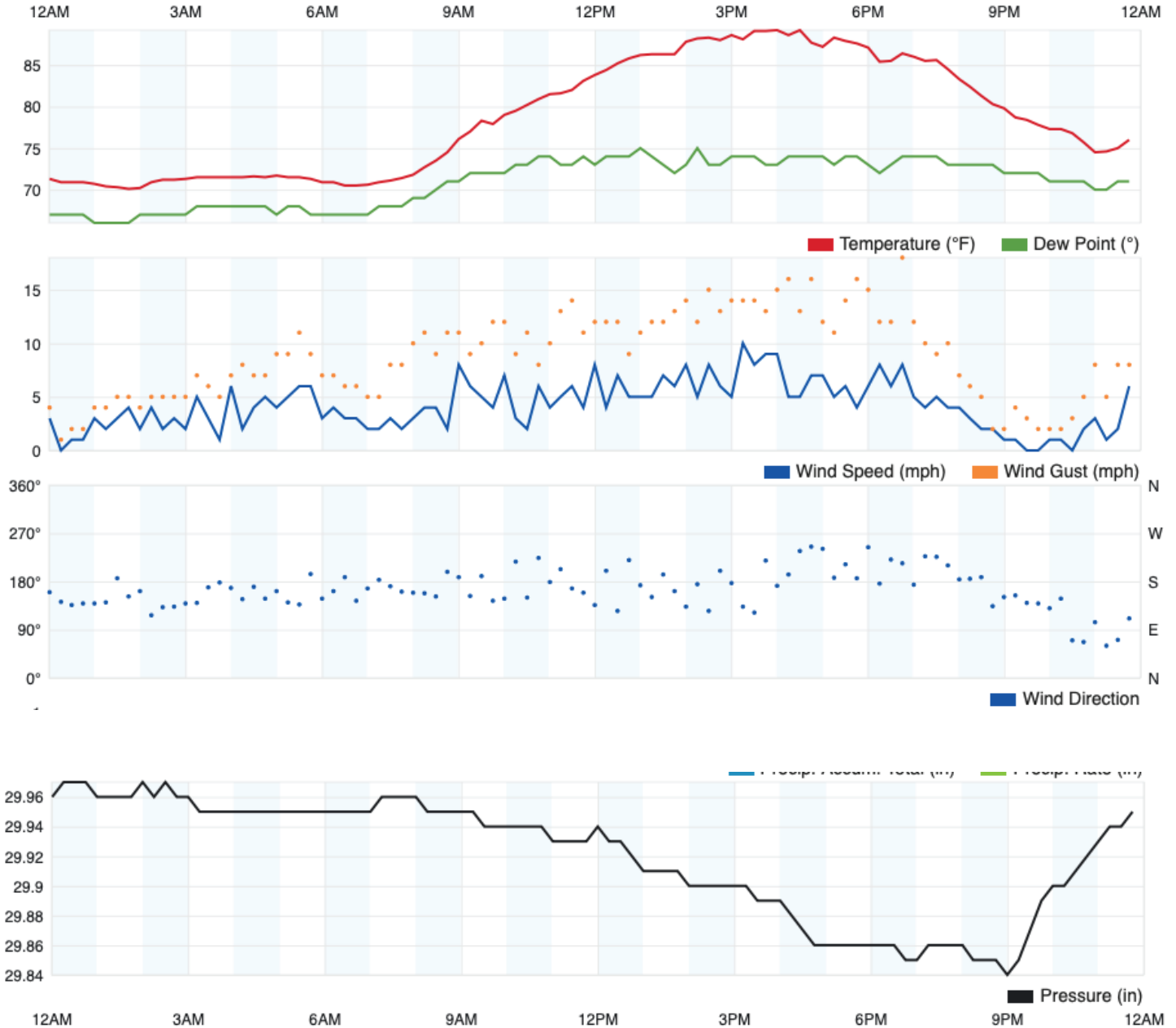
The court will issue a decision at a later date.

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.

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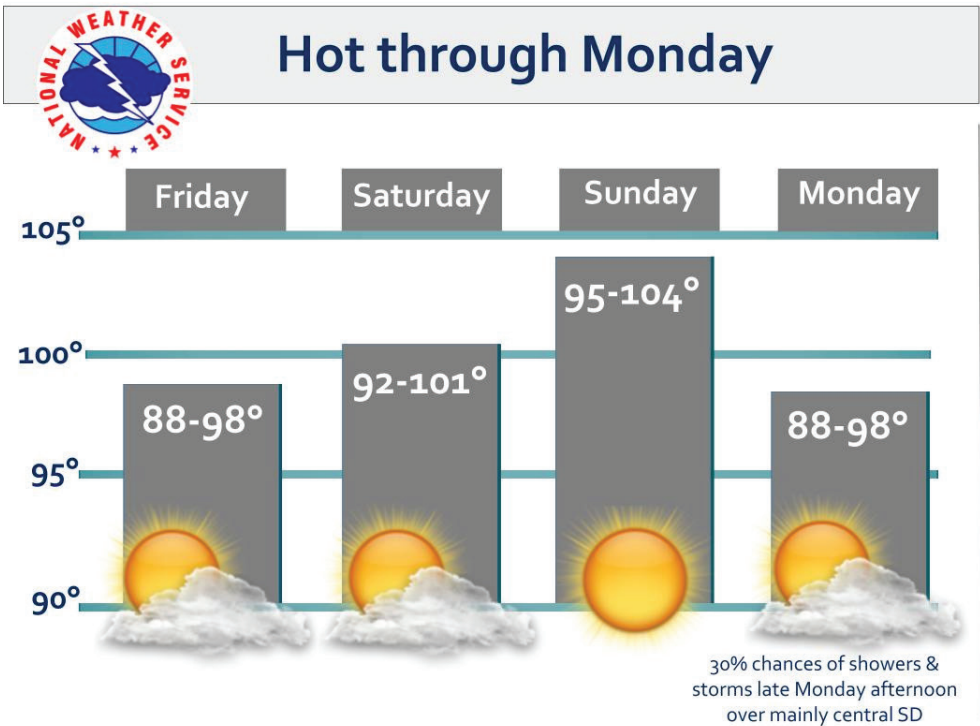
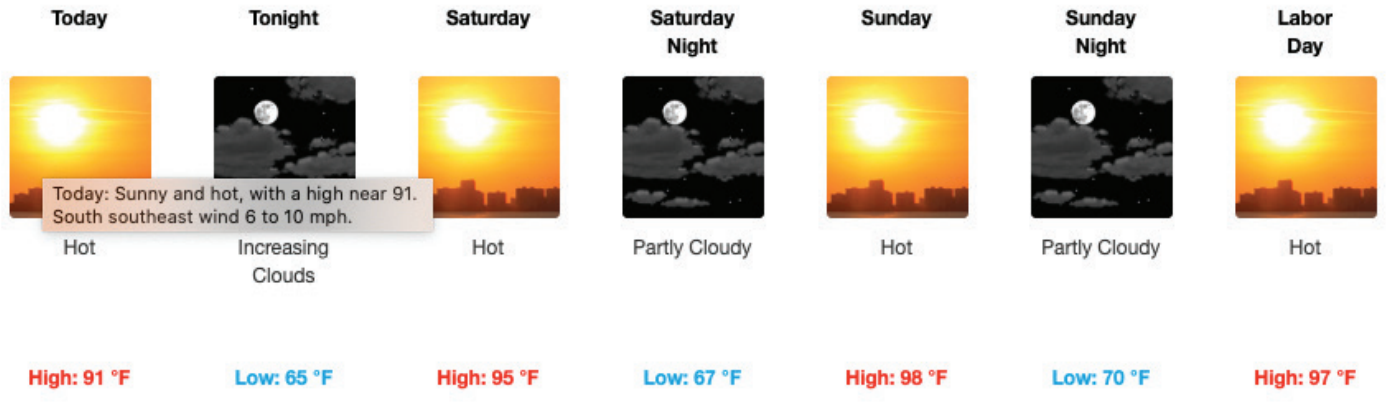
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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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Maximum Temperature Forecast

	9/1 Fri	9/2 Sat	9/3 Sun	9/4 Mon
Aberdeen	91	95	99	96
Britton	88	92	96	94
Brookings	91	95	99	96
Chamberlain	99	101	104	97
Clark	90	95	97	94
Eagle Butte	91	96	98	90
Ellendale	89	93	95	93
Eureka	88	92	95	90
Gettysburg	90	93	96	90
Huron	94	98	102	98
Kennebec	98	100	102	97
McIntosh	88	93	95	86
Milbank	92	96	100	98
Miller	91	96	98	94
Mobridge	91	93	97	88
Murdo	98	100	102	94
Pierre	98	101	104	97
Redfield	91	96	99	96
Sisseton	91	93	98	96
Watertown	91	97	99	96
Webster	88	92	95	93
Wheaton	91	93	98	96

*Table values in °F



Temperatures will top out mainly in the 90s Friday through Monday, with a few 100 degree readings possible. While mainly dry weather will continue, there is a 30 percent chance of shower or storms later Monday into Monday night over mainly central South Dakota. These temperatures are 10 to nearly 20 degrees above average for this time of year.

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Today in Weather History

September 1, 1990: Several severe thunderstorms in northwest South Dakota dropped from penny to softball size hail during the afternoon and early evening hours. The hail caused a good deal of structural damage to houses and farm buildings. The largest hailstone of 4 inches in diameter was reported at Sorum in Perkins County. There was also a wind gust to 86 mph measured at Buffalo during a severe thunderstorm.

September 1, 2010: A couple of weak tornadoes touched down briefly in the late evening west of Tulare with no damage occurring.

1859: One of the largest geomagnetic storms on record occurred on this day in 1859.

1862: The Battle of Ox Hill (or Chantilly) is also known as the only major Civil War battle to have been fought during a storm. "A severe thunderstorm erupted, resulting in limited visibility and an increased dependence on the bayonet, as the rain soaked the ammunition of the infantry and made it useless." From Taylor, Paul. He Hath Loosed the Fateful Lightning: The Battle of Ox Hill (Chantilly), September 1, 1862.

1869: Cleveland Abbe issued the first Weather Bulletin for the city of Cincinnati, Ohio. It contained a few observations telegraphed from distant observers and the "probabilities" for the next day. The bulletin was written by hand.

1894: The Great Hinckley Fire, which burned an area of at least 200,000 acres or perhaps more than 250,000 acres including the town of Hinckley, Minnesota occurred on this day. The official death count was 418 though the actual number of fatalities was likely higher.

1897 - Hailstone drifts six feet deep were reported in Washington County, IA. (The Weather Channel)

1914 - The town of Bloomington, MI, was deluged with 9.78 inches of rain in 24 hours to establish a state record. (31st-1st) (The Weather Channel)

1928: Leslie Gray from the Weather Bureau in San Francisco was the first weather forecaster to be deployed to a wildfire.

1952: A cold front brought damaging winds to Fort Worth, Texas, including the Carswell Air Force Base where thirty-five B-36 planes received damage. The anemometer indicated 90 mph winds before being smashed by debris.

1955 - The temperature at Los Angeles, CA, soared to an all-time high of 110 degrees during an eight day string of 100 degree weather. (David Ludlum)

1961: An F4 tornado traveled through parts of Butler and Bremer Counties in Iowa. Unfortunately, there is limited information in the Storm Data entry about this event. Per Thomas Grazulis in Significant Tornadoes, the tornado began NW of Dumont and ended NE of Horton. Several farms along the path were "leveled". It was reported at one farm that fruit jars were "sucked out of the basement" after the house was swept away. There were 7 injuries reported with this event and zero fatalities.

1974: Lt. Judy Neuffer became the first female to fly a Hurricane Hunter aircraft through the eye of a hurricane.

1979 - A home in Centerville TN was hit by lightning and totally destroyed. It marked the third time that the house had been hit by lightning since being built in 1970. (The Weather Channel)

1988 - Thunderstorms produced heavy rain in the Upper Mississippi Valley. Ely, MN, was drenched with three inches of rain in two hours, and pelted with one inch hail. The heavy rain flooded streets and basements, and the high water pressure which resulted blew the covers off manholes. (The National Weather Summary)(Storm Data)

1989 - Thunderstorms developing ahead of a cold front produced severe weather in Oklahoma during the late afternoon and evening hours. Thunderstorms produced hail two inches in diameter west of Arapahoe, and wind gusts to 70 mph at Luther and south of Harrah. Early morning thunderstorms over Indiana drenched Kokomo with five to eight inches of rain, and spawned a tornado which injured three persons at Bruce Lake. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

2017: The temperature at Downtown San Francisco reached 106° setting their all-time record high. The previous record was 103° on June 14th, 2000.

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Daily Devotionals

Seeds of Hope

GOD AND THE CAFETERIA

After church one Sunday, the head usher decided to take his family to the local cafeteria to eat. After they went through the line and selected their food, they sat at a table near a window. Little Margie unfolded her napkin, folded her hands, bowed her head and waited for the prayer of thanksgiving. After a moment or two, she opened her eyes to see what the others were doing. To her surprise, her father had started to eat.

"Mom," she whispered quietly, "Dad has started to eat and we haven't thanked Jesus for the food. What's going on?"

"Hush," said her father. "People don't give thanks in a place like this."

"Why?" asked Margie. "Doesn't God go to cafeterias?"

Our thankfulness should not fluctuate with where we are or what is going on in our lives. Though our circumstances change and feelings fluctuate, we must never forget that God is in all things doing what is in our best interest. Remember: He is always at work in our lives shaping us into the person He wants us to be.

When life's trials turn to triumphs, we can rejoice with Paul and say, "Thanks be to God who gave us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ!" He always protects us and provides for us and is worthy of our thanks. And remember, what may be a tragedy today will be a triumph tomorrow. So, in everything, give thanks.

Prayer: We often forget, Father, that You love us with an everlasting love and that You are with us even though others forget us. May our gratitude equal Your blessings! In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: But thank God! He gives us victory over sin and death through our Lord Jesus Christ. 1 Corinthians 15:57



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

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2023 Community Events

- 01/29/2023 Groton Robotics Pancake Feed, 10am-1pm, Community Center
- 01/29/2023 85th Carnival of Silver Skates 2pm & 6:30pm (Last Sunday of January)
- 01/31/2023-02/03/2023 Lion's Club Prom & Formal Dress Consignment Drop Off 6-9pm, Community Center
- 02/04/2023-02/05/2023 Lion's Club Prom & Formal Dress Consignment Sale 1-5pm, Community Center
- 02/25/2023 Littles and Me, Art Making 10-11:30am, Wage Memorial Library
- 03/25/2023 Spring Vendor Fair, 10am-3pm, Community Center
- 04/01/2023 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 Triathlon
- 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
- 08/10/2023 Family Fun Fest, 5:30 p.m. to 7:30 p.m.
- 08/11/2023 GHS Basketball Golf Tournament
- 09/08/2023 Family Fun Fest 3:30-5:30pm
- 09/09/2023 Lion's Club Fall Citywide Rummage Sale 8am-3pm
- 09/09-10/2023 Groton Airport Fly-In/Drive-In, Groton Municipal Airport
- 09/10/2023 Couples Sunflower Tourney at Olive Grove Golf Course 10am
- 09/10/2023 Emmanuel Lutheran Church Sunday School Rally 9:00am
- 09/10/2023 7th Annual Doggie Day at the Swimming Pool 4-6pm
- 09/15/2023 Homecoming Parade
- 10/13/2023 Lake Region Marching Band Festival 10am
- 10/14/2023 Pumpkin Fest at the City Park 10am-3pm
- 10/31/2023 Downtown Trick or Treat 4-6pm
- 10/31/2023 United Methodist Church Trunk or Treat 5:30-7pm
- 11/23/2023 Community Thanksgiving at the Community Center 11:30am-1pm
- 12/02/2023 Tour of Homes, Live & Silent Auctions at Olive Grove Golf Course 4pm-close
- 12/09/2023 Santa Claus Day at Professional Management Services 9-11am

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WINNING NUMBERS

MEGA MILLIONS

WINNING NUMBERS:

08.29.23

9 39 52 61 63 25

MegaPlier: 3x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$85,000,000

NEXT 17 Hrs 20 Mins 47

DRAW: Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LOTTO AMERICA

WINNING NUMBERS:

08.30.23

8 15 30 44 46 8

All Star Bonus: 3x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$9,300,000

NEXT 1 Days 16 Hrs 35

DRAW: Mins 47 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LUCKY FOR LIFE

WINNING NUMBERS:

08.31.23

1 27 30 39 41 6

TOP PRIZE:

\$7,000/week

NEXT 16 Hrs 50 Mins

DRAW: 47 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

DAKOTA CASH

WINNING NUMBERS:

08.30.23

1 5 9 15 23

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$29,000

NEXT 1 Days 16 Hrs 50

DRAW: Mins 47 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

DOUBLE PLAY

WINNING NUMBERS:

08.30.23

2 10 45 46 59 2

TOP PRIZE:

\$10,000,000

NEXT 1 Days 17 Hrs 19

DRAW: Mins 46 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

WINNING NUMBERS:

08.30.23

4 13 35 61 69 4

Power Play: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$420,000,000

NEXT 1 Days 17 Hrs 19

DRAW: Mins 46 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

News from the Associated Press

Missouri dominates first half, struggles in second in 35-10 win over South Dakota

By DAVE SKRETTA AP Sports Writer

COLUMBIA, Mo. (AP) — Missouri coach Eli Drinkwitz's plan for his quarterbacks in the season opener against South Dakota on Thursday night was to play returning starter Brady Cook in the first half and give redshirt freshman Sam Horn the second half.

The plan next week? Drinkwitz wasn't sure after a 35-10 win over the Coyotes.

Cook threw for 172 yards and a touchdown while running for another score in his half, leading the Tigers to a 28-3 lead. Horn threw for 54 yards with a touchdown pass and an interception in a sluggish second half, though one the young QB was able to salvage with his scoring toss to dynamic wide receiver Luther Burden III in the closing minutes.

"Brady played a more consistent half," Drinkwitz admitted. "We'll go back and evaluate the tape. I'm not going to make a rush judgment there on that decision. I do think Brady was very efficient. Sam had his moments as well."

The two QBs, who competed for the top job throughout the fall, got plenty of help from their ground game. Cody Schrader ran for 148 yards and a touchdown, and Nathaniel Peat also scored for the Tigers, who finished with 211 yards rushing.

"Everybody wants there to be a one-guy, a two-guy, but we're buying into being a duo," Schrader said. "There's no selfishness between us. I think that's the best thing when you're competing against each other every day."

The Coyotes' Aidan Bouman had 156 yards passing with a fourth-quarter touchdown toss to Mike Mansaray.

The Tigers were inconsistent for new offensive coordinator Kirby Moore, who also called plays after Drinkwitz gave up the job midway through last season. They punted on fourth-and-short on their initial drive, then proceeded to score on four of their next five, capping an efficient 2-minute drill with Cook's touchdown run for a 28-3 halftime advantage.

Cook was efficient in his own right, though. After coming off a shoulder injury that bothered him most of last season, Cook completed his first 11 passes with a TD throw to Mekhi Miller that staked Missouri to an early lead.

"We could put anybody out there to play quarterback. At the end of the day, Brady just wants to win," Drinkwitz said. "That guy has so much character, so much grit, so much determination."

The Tigers' ground game got going after Cook's touchdown throw. Peat pounded into the end zone from 1 yard out to make it 14-0, and Schrader added a short TD plunge of his own — his sixth consecutive carry on the drive — to make it 21-3.

It didn't help the Coyotes that they played most of the game without safety Dennis Shorter, one of their leading tacklers a year ago. He was ejected for targeting on a helmet-to-helmet blow to Burden after a catch over the middle.

South Dakota's new-look offense of coordinator Josh Davis finally showed signs of life in the second half.

The Coyotes went three-and-out on their first three possessions, totaled five yards of offense in the first quarter and had one sustained first-half drive that ended in a field goal. But they put together a 17-play drive to begin the second — it ended with a failed fourth down — and then took advantage of an interception to score their lone touchdown with 12:14 to go.

"Not a good first half, you know? We gave them some soft yards and offensively we just couldn't get anything going," South Dakota coach Bob Nielson said. "We played better in the third period. I was really proud of the way our guys hung in there."

THE TAKEAWAY

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South Dakota: There were some building blocks against the toughest competition the Coyotes will face all season. Bouman made a couple of nice second-half throws and the Coyotes' defense nearly pitched a second-half shutout. "Saw some good things in the second half that we've got to build on," Nielson said, "and we have a week and a little bit more to build on them."

Missouri: It was a tough night for the Tigers on special teams. Their only big return was called back by a penalty and Harrison Mevis, who had been 85% for his career on field-goal attempts, missed both of his tries against the Coyotes. "Disappointed with leaving some points out there," Drinkwitz said. "That's something that has to get corrected in a hurry."

UP NEXT

South Dakota: Plays its home opener Sept. 9 against St. Thomas.

Missouri: Takes on Middle Tennessee on Sept. 9 at Faurot Field.

Thursday's Scores

The Associated Press

PREP VOLLEYBALL=

Aberdeen Roncalli def. Tiospa Zina Tribal, 25-8, 25-14, 25-16
Alcester-Hudson def. Gayville-Volin High School, 26-24, 27-25, 25-18
Avon def. Andes Central/Dakota Christian, 25-7, 25-11, 25-20
Baltic def. Garretson, 25-8, 25-18, 24-26, 25-17
Burke def. Kimball/White Lake, 20-25, 25-10, 25-12, 25-21
Canistota def. Scotland, 25-12, 25-23, 25-18
Castlewood def. Deubrook, 25-17, 23-25, 25-20, 25-18
Colman-Egan def. DeSmet, 25-19, 25-17, 23-25, 25-11
Custer def. Newell, 25-19, 17-25, 26-18, 26-18
Dakota Valley def. Elk Point-Jefferson, 25-17, 25-15, 19-25, 25-20
Elkton-Lake Benton def. Oldham-Ramona/Rutland, 25-20, 25-11, 25-11
Estelline/Hendricks def. Wilmot, 25-9, 25-10, 25-8
Ethan def. Sanborn Central/Woonsocket, 25-12, 25-7, 25-11
Faulkton def. North Central Co-Op, 25-22, 25-11, 25-14
Flandreau def. Hamlin, 25-20, 25-17, 25-21
Freeman def. Howard, 25-16, 25-27, 25-20, 21-25, 15-13
Great Plains Lutheran def. Tri-State, N.D., 25-12, 25-21, 25-14
Gregory def. Lyman, 25-23, 25-20, 23-25, 25-17
Groton Area def. Sisseton, 25-22, 25-18, 25-20
Harrisburg def. Tea Area, 25-15, 25-19, 25-9
Herreid/Selby Area def. McLaughlin, 25-11, 25-14, 25-15
Huron def. Aberdeen Central, 25-12, 25-23, 22-25, 16-25, 15-10
Ipswich def. Waubay/Summit, 26-24, 25-19, 25-22
Kadoka Area def. Philip, 25-21, 25-18, 25-21
Lemmon High School def. Harding County, 27-25, 14-25, 25-22, 25-21
Lennox def. Tri-Valley, 25-21, 25-17, 25-20
Madison def. West Central, 25-13, 25-9, 25-23
McCook Central/Montrose def. Parker, 27-29, 25-20, 24-26, 25-19, 15-6
Menno def. Freeman Academy/Marion, 25-15, 25-23, 25-15
Milbank def. Clark/Willow Lake, 21-25, 25-19, 25-22, 25-19
Miller def. Sully Buttes, 25-18, 25-8, 25-16
Mobridge-Pollock def. Potter County, 25-13, 25-23, 25-23
Mt. Vernon def. Bon Homme, 25-19, 17-25, 26-24, 25-22
Northwestern def. Langford, 25-16, 25-16, 25-19

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Oelrichs def. Takini, 2-0
Pierre T F Riggs High School def. Douglas, 25-18, 25-14, 25-15
Platte-Geddes def. Colome, 25-17, 25-13, 25-12
Redfield def. Deuel, 25-20, 25-20, 25-13
Sioux Falls Christian def. Dell Rapids, 22-25, 25-17, 25-20, 25-22
Sioux Falls Lincoln def. Sioux Falls Roosevelt, 25-19, 25-10, 25-21
Sioux Falls Washington def. Mitchell, 25-11, 25-21, 25-13
Sioux Valley def. Beresford, 25-10, 25-15, 25-19
Timber Lake def. Bison, 25-15, 25-15, 25-17
Wagner def. Chamberlain, 25-11, 25-7, 25-20
Wall def. Lead-Deadwood, 25-15, 25-16, 25-10
Warner def. Leola/Frederick, 25-14, 25-12, 25-11
Watertown def. Brookings, 22-25, 25-21, 25-14, 25-21
Waverly-South Shore def. Flandreau Indian, 25-9, 25-14, 25-13
Webster def. Britton-Hecla, 25-17, 25-17, 25-14

PREP FOOTBALL=

Lower Brule 24, Tiospa Zina Tribal 22
Omaha Nation, Neb. 56, Crazy Horse 24
Pine Ridge 36, Winnebago, Neb. 32

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

Defending FCS champion South Dakota State gives new head coach Jimmy Rogers 45-7 win in opener

BROOKINGS, S.D. (AP) — Mark Gronowski threw for one touchdown and passed for another as defending FCS champion South Dakota State defeated Western Oregon 45-7 on Thursday night in a season opener that gave Jimmy Rogers his first head coaching victory.

The victory was the 15th in a row — a school record — for the top-ranked Jackrabbits, who return 18 starters.

It was 42-0 at halftime with Gronowski compiling all his offense in the first half, hitting Griffin Wilde with a 31-yard pass and rushing for a 6-yard score. Colby Herter and Tucker Large returned interceptions 54 and 64 yards, respectively, for scores. The Jackrabbits had three interceptions.

The Jackrabbits won their first FCS national championship last season in John Stiegelmeier's 26th and final year season as head coach. He was replaced by Rogers, a former Jackrabbits player and assistant, who was promoted from defensive coordinator.

The Division II Wolves got their touchdown with under four minutes remaining on Jordan McCarty's 9-yard run.

The Jackrabbits are hosts to Montana State on Sept. 9.

AP college football: <https://apnews.com/hub/college-football> and <https://apnews.com/hub/ap-top-25-college-football-poll>

North Dakota lawmakers take stock of the boom in electronic pull tabs gambling

By JACK DURA Associated Press

BISMARCK, N.D. (AP) — Electronic pull tabs have boomed in North Dakota, prompting questions about the future of charitable gambling in the state and how to best regulate the Las Vegas-style machines.

The flashy devices have raised key questions about where they can be located, such as gas stations and convenience stores, and what organizations can conduct the gambling. E-tabs function like slot machines. They appeared in 2018 after approval by the Republican-controlled Legislature.

"I think we've seen certain things go astray a little bit, where the cattle have gotten out of the corral, and it's beyond what the intent of our laws are," said Republican state Sen. Janne Myrdal, who chairs an interim legislative panel that on Thursday began a yearlong study of North Dakota's charitable gambling issues, part of a bill that sought to address e-tab concerns.

Myrdal told The Associated Press she'd like the study to produce "palatable answers" for the next legislative session in 2025, including where the machines can be located.

Lawmakers in this year's session raised concerns about specific establishments, such as gas stations, having the machines and minors accessing e-tabs. The machines' proliferation — 4,700 of them state-wide — also has brought concerns related to tribal nations, whose casinos are economic drivers, as well as regulating the devices and even the potential for money laundering.

North Dakota's top gambling regulator sees the study as an opportunity to educate lawmakers.

"This has become huge, and they need to understand how it works," state Gaming Division Director Deb McDaniel told the AP.

E-tabs in the fiscal year that ended June 30 generated nearly \$2 billion of gross proceeds from cash and replayed winnings, capturing \$205 million for charities, including just over \$72 million specifically for charitable purposes. Players put more than \$687 million of cash into e-tabs in fiscal 2023.

State law does not dictate where charitable gambling takes place, but traditionally it's been in bars. In recent years, a loose interpretation of "alcoholic beverage establishment" led to the machines appearing in a handful of gas stations and convenience stores.

The bill mandating the study also redefined that term, specifically excluding gas stations, convenience stores, grocery stores and liquor stores, but grandfathered the four gas stations and c-stores with e-tabs.

But that new definition doesn't address other establishments that wouldn't be considered a traditional bar but can serve and dispense alcohol, such as hair salons and indoor golf centers, according to McDaniel.

Brett Narloch has been frustrated about how his truck stop near Grassy Butte has drawn attention in Bismarck for having e-tabs.

"We jumped through all the hoops to get the licenses, to get the gaming site approval. We've not broken any of the rules. We've been great. We've not had any complaints, and so it's like, 'OK, why is there a target on our back now?'" Narloch told the AP.

The oil field truck stop, which has a bar and restaurant, has 10 machines in an enclosed area with one entrance and signs noting only people 21 and older are allowed in, he said.

Narloch said he hopes lawmakers strive for clarity for businesses and understand the benefits of charitable gambling. He cites over \$100,000 generated from his truck stop's machines that have gone toward local charitable purposes, such as equipment for firefighters and emergency responders, and park improvements — items "property tax dollars don't have to fund," he added.

North Dakota's constitution gives nonprofits the privilege to conduct charitable gambling. McDaniel said the activity is "not supposed to be a gaming industry."

Her office has licensed more than 320 charitable organizations to conduct the gambling, such as public safety, fraternal and veterans groups, and also "public-spirited organizations." But the legal definition of a "public-spirited organization" is broad, McDaniel said.

Recent license applicants have included organizations that put on community events and seem more business-oriented than charitable in nature, McDaniel said.

The gambling landscape is evolving, with North Dakota on “this cusp” as electronics boom and online formats loom, she said. In recent years, efforts to legalize sports betting in the state have failed in the Legislature.

“I think it would help the state tremendously in understanding where do we want to go from here, because it’s not just bingo and raffles anymore,” McDaniel said.

Minnesota regulators vote to proceed with environmental review of disputed carbon capture pipeline

By STEVE KARNOWSKI Associated Press

MINNEAPOLIS (AP) — Minnesota regulators voted Thursday to proceed with an environmental review for part of a proposed but disputed pipeline network that would carry planet-warming carbon dioxide from Midwest ethanol plants to a permanent underground storage site.

Iowa-based Summit Carbon Solutions wants to build a \$5.5 billion, 2,000-mile (3,200 kilometer) pipeline network across five states so that carbon dioxide from more than 30 ethanol plants could be permanently locked underground in central North Dakota instead of being released into the atmosphere as it is now.

But the project has run into resistance.

North Dakota regulators on Aug. 5 denied Summit’s application for key permits. Landowners in South Dakota concerned about the risks of a pipeline rupture and property rights have objected to the company’s use of eminent domain along the route. Iowa regulators recently opened a several-week hearing, while South Dakota regulators will open a hearing next month. The network would also cross parts of Nebraska, where counties will be the regulators.

Other similar projects are proposed around the country as industries try to reduce their carbon footprints. Supporters say carbon capture will combat climate change. Governments and companies are making big investments in it. But opponents say the technology isn’t proven at scale and could require huge investments at the expense of alternative energy sources such as solar and wind power.

The question before the Minnesota Public Utilities Commission on Thursday was narrow: whether to approve a draft plan laying out the scope of a formal environmental review for one small part of the proposed project, a 28-mile segment in Minnesota that would connect an ethanol plant in Fergus Falls to the North Dakota border, where it would connect with Summit’s network. Commissioners approved it unanimously.

The Minnesota-based rural environmental advocacy group CURE had asked the PUC to defer any decision indefinitely because of the decision by the North Dakota Public Service Commission to reject a certificate of need and route permit for the project. North Dakota regulators cited several issues that they said Summit didn’t appropriately address, such as cultural resource impacts, geologic instability and landowner concerns.

CURE said proceeding with the environmental review in Minnesota would be a waste of state resources – that the project would be a “pipeline to nowhere” without the crucial North Dakota approvals.

But Summit recently petitioned North Dakota regulators to reconsider. Company attorney Christina Brusven told the Minnesota regulators that Summit expects it will be able to address North Dakota’s concerns in the coming months, so Minnesota should not wait to start its review process.

PUC staff told commissioners ahead of Thursday’s hearing that they expected the review would lead to completion of a draft environmental impact this winter, followed by a public comment process. If the commission determines that the final review meets the legal requirements, the PUC could decide whether to issue a route permit for the project as early as next summer.

Summit is planning to file additional permit applications in the coming months for a longer and physically separate part of its proposed network that would connect several ethanol plants in southern Minnesota with its proposed main line in Iowa.

No injuries reported in train derailment, partial rail bridge collapse in South Dakota town

NORTH SIOUX CITY, S.D. (AP) — No injuries or hazardous spills have been reported in a train derailment in a southeastern South Dakota town that also saw a rail bridge partially collapse.

The derailment happened shortly before 4 p.m. Wednesday in North Sioux City, the Union County Emergency Management office said in social media posts. Nineteen cars derailed as the train traveled over the rail bridge, which partially collapsed. It's unclear whether the collapse caused the derailment or happened because of the derailment.

Of the derailed cars, 14 were empty hopper cars and five were loaded with ethanol, officials said. None of the derailed ethanol cars were leaking following the derailment, officials said.

North Sioux City is a town of about 3,000 people that lies just across the state border from Sioux City, Iowa.

Television station KTIV reported that the derailed train was operated by D & I Railroad, based in Sioux Falls, South Dakota. A message left Thursday for the railroad by The Associated Press seeking comment was not immediately returned.

Railroad safety has been a key concern nationwide for years, but especially so since a Norfolk Southern train derailed in East Palestine, Ohio, on Feb. 3.

Editorial Roundup: South Dakota

By The Associated Press undefined

Yankton Press & Dakotan. August 28, 2023.

Editorial: South Dakota Skips Out On Summer Lunch Funds

A report last week that South Dakota turned down \$7.5 million in federal money to help feed low-income children this summer — at a time when, according to Feeding South Dakota, an estimated 25,000 South Dakota children are battling hunger — is one of those stories that, in part, appears to fall into a familiar pattern of state self-promotion at the expense of its residents.

South Dakota News Watch reported that the state refused to apply for the funds issued through Pandemic Electronic Benefits Transfer (P-EBT) program. The funding would have helped feed approximately 63,000 South Dakota children this summer.

P-EBT was started during the COVID-19 pandemic, with the funding coming from the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Congress recently made the program permanent.

This program would be especially helpful during the summer months because many kids may struggle to get adequate meals when schools aren't in session and school lunch programs aren't offered.

However, South Dakota was one of seven states to pass on even applying for this funding. According to the office of Gov. Kristi Noem, this state didn't pursue the money because there are already summer meal programs around the state, and it's also too challenging to administer the program.

However, this would seem like a contradiction. Yes, there ARE summer meal programs in areas — Yankton is one such place — but they don't cover everything or serve everyone, and they don't necessarily run the entire summer. Nevertheless, there is experience in implementing those existing programs and others like it, so the know-how in administering it may well be in place already.

Noem spokesman Ian Fury added another explanation for not seeking the funding.

"Federal money often comes with strings attached, and more of it is often not a good thing," he told News Watch in an email. "Because of South Dakota's record low unemployment rate, our robust existing food programs and the administrative burden associated with running this program, we declined these particular federal dollars."

Economic factors are fine things to tout, which the state frequently does, but the statistic regarding hungry children at the top of this piece suggests there are some real gaps, comprised of real people, in that logic.

Sioux Falls anti-hunger advocate Cathy Brechtelsbauer was stunned by the state's explanations for not

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applying for funding.

"That just blows my mind," she said. "How can we think like that when we're talking about kids needing food? Why can't we handle things as well as 43 other states?"

"Our kids in South Dakota are missing out on \$7.5 million worth of food, and it's not like they're necessarily getting it someplace else. This is like taking food away from kids, and I hope we don't want to be that kind of state."

Using the excuses of a strong economy and administrative headaches to turn down an opportunity to help feed children in need this summer would seem to suggest we are that kind of state. And that specter is tough to swallow.

END

Thailand's king reduces prison term of former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra to a single year

BANGKOK (AP) — Thailand's king on Friday reduced the prison term of former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra from eight years to a single year following the divisive politician's return from 15 years of self-imposed exile.

The decision by King Maha Vajiralongkorn was published in the Royal Gazette, making it effective immediately. Thailand is a constitutional monarchy, giving the king the final word on pardons of convicted criminals.

The decree granting Thaksin, 74, royal clemency said the action was taken so he could use his knowledge and abilities to help the nation and its people.

Deputy Prime Minister Wissanu Krea-ngam, who is also acting justice minister, said on Thursday he had received a letter from Thaksin requesting a royal pardon, mainly on medical grounds.

Thaksin was ousted as prime minister in a military coup in 2006 and accused of corruption, abuse of power and disrespecting the monarchy. He fled Thailand in 2008 when he faced prison time on charges he described as politically motivated.

By promoting populist policies and using his telecommunications fortune to build his own political party, he had been elected prime minister in 2001 and was easily reelected in 2005.

Thailand's traditional royalist ruling class felt threatened by his popularity. His ouster set off years of sometimes violent confrontations between his supporters and opponents. Political parties with his backing continued to win elections, but were forced from power several times by the courts and the army, both bulwarks of royalism.

He returned to Thailand last week and was immediately sent to prison, but was quickly transferred to a state hospital because of what was described as his frail health. The prison said Thaksin had high blood pressure and low oxygen, could not sleep well and felt tightness in his chest.

It is widely believed that Thaksin returned out of hope that a new government friendly to him would reduce his sentence, and that he may have made a deal with authorities. Hours after Thaksin's return, Srettha Thavisin of the Pheu Thai party won enough votes in Parliament to become prime minister, ending more than three months of uncertainty after May's general election. Pheu Thai is the latest in a string of parties affiliated with Thaksin.

Video of police fatally shooting a pregnant Black woman set to be released, Ohio department says

By SAMANTHA HENDRICKSON Associated Press/Report For America

COLUMBUS, Ohio (AP) — Body camera footage showing the final moments of a pregnant Black woman who was shot and killed by police in an Ohio parking lot last week is expected to be released to the public on Friday.

Ta'Kiya Young, a 21-year-old from Columbus, was pronounced dead shortly after the Aug. 24 shooting

outside a grocery store in the suburb of Blendon Township. Her unborn daughter did not survive.

Suspected of shoplifting, police say Young was killed after she accelerated her car toward an officer.

The family's lawyer, Sean Walton, claims the police department has waited to release the bodycam video to minimize media attention on potentially damaging footage. Walton did not immediately respond to phone messages from The Associated Press seeking additional comment.

Blendon Township Police Chief John Belford said the delay resulted from a small staff trying to process the video and properly redact certain footage in accordance with Ohio law. The family will be able to review the video before it's made public, he said.

The police chief gave a brief account of the shooting in an Aug. 25 video statement in which he said two officers were helping someone get into a locked car when a supermarket employee told them several people were leaving with stolen items.

Young was among them, according to the employee who pointed her out sitting in her car in the parking lot. She allegedly took bottles of alcohol without paying. One officer went to the driver's side of Young's car and told her to stop and get out multiple times, Belford said, while the other officer moved to the front of the vehicle.

Young then put the car in gear and accelerated, Belford said.

"The officer who was directly in the path of the oncoming car fired one shot through the front windshield," the chief said. "The body camera footage I've reviewed also confirms the officer was directly in the path of the car."

Police have not provided further details on the moments when Young was shot.

Her car continued about 50 feet (15 meters) before stopping on the sidewalk outside the grocery store. Officers broke the car window, pulled her out and began medical assistance with the help of an emergency room doctor who happened to be there, Belford said.

The two officers' names, ages and races were not immediately released. They are on paid administrative leave while the Ohio Bureau of Criminal Investigation examines the shooting, which is standard in cases of police use of deadly force.

Young was expected to give birth to a daughter in November. She also was the mother of two young sons, ages 6 and 3. An online effort to pay her funeral expenses has raised nearly \$7,000.

Family and friends held a private vigil a day after Young was killed, releasing balloons and lighting candles spelling out "RIP Kiya."

Her grandmother, Nadine Young, described her granddaughter as a family-oriented prankster who was a loving older sister and mother.

"She was so excited to have this little girl," Nadine Young said at a press conference Wednesday. "She has her two little boys, but she was so fired up to have this girl. She is going to be so missed."

"I'm a mess because it's just tragic," she said, "but it should have never ever ever happened."

Hawaii investigates unsolicited land offers as the state tries to keep Lahaina in local hands

By AUDREY McAVOY and JENNIFER SINCO KELLEHER Associated Press

HONOLULU (AP) — Hawaii Gov. Josh Green said Thursday his administration has opened several investigations into people who have allegedly made unsolicited offers for property in the fire-stricken Maui town of Lahaina in violation of a new emergency order.

Green prohibited such offers by signing an emergency proclamation on Aug. 19 aimed at preventing land in the historic coastal community from flowing into the hands of outside buyers. The order aims to give residents some "breathing room" as they decide what to do next, Green said in an interview with The Associated Press.

Even before the Aug. 8 fire, Lahaina was a rapidly gentrifying town and there's been widespread concern since that Native Hawaiians and local-born residents who have owned properties in their families for generations might feel pressured to sell.

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The fear is they would leave Lahaina, or Maui or the state, take their culture and traditions with them and contribute to the ongoing exodus of Hawaii's people to less expensive places to live.

"We've seen that in a lot of different places in our country and in our world where people have lost everything but their land and someone swoops in and buys properties for pennies on the dollar," Green said. "We want to keep this land in the hands of local people, and we want to give them at least a chance to decide whether they'd like to build back."

Authorities say 115 people died in the fire, which tore through Lahaina in a matter of hours. About 1,800 to 1,900 homes were destroyed. The town of 12,000 people was home to many who worked in hotels and restaurants in nearby Kaanapali and Lahaina itself.

About 6,000 people are staying in hotels and vacation rentals while waiting for the toxic waste left by the fire to be cleaned up and rebuilding to begin.

Earlier this month Green, a Democrat, said he wanted to impose a moratorium on land sales in Lahaina to prevent people from being displaced. But the governor said a blanket ban "may not be doable" and he didn't want to prevent people who are considering property sales from initiating those conversations.

The prohibition on unsolicited offers for property was a "de facto" moratorium, he said.

Green said people have reported unwanted offers to his attorney general, although he did not reveal how many investigations have been opened. Those found guilty of a violation may be imprisoned for up to one year and fined up to \$5,000.

Lahaina resident Melody Lukela-Singh said she was disappointed the governor didn't impose an outright ban as he initially said.

"Outsiders should not have the opportunity to grab land or properties. Because emotions are running high, so everyone is vulnerable," Lukela-Singh said.

She spoke near her temporary lodgings a few miles from the site of her Front Street home, which burned in the fire. Lukela-Singh said she would not sell her land if any offers were made.

"You know, it's the only thing that we have left," said Lukela-Singh, who is Native Hawaiian. She knows of three families, all Filipino, who are selling their homes and want to move away because they can't handle the stress of seeing Lahaina burned to the ground.

State Rep. Troy Hashimoto, a Democrat who chairs the House housing committee and represents the central Maui community of Wailuku, said the prohibition on unsolicited offers was a "nuanced" approach.

"You don't really want to be bothering a lot of landowners, especially when they're not in that frame of mind or ready to discuss it," Hashimoto said. "But I wouldn't want to stop a landowner if they are proactively wanting to make a move, right?"

The situation presents two competing interests, said Robert Thomas, the director of property rights litigation at California-based Pacific Legal Foundation. One is the U.S. Supreme Court has found people have a right to decide what to do with their property. The other is the government has an interest in making sure people aren't preyed upon.

"It seems to me, and that's just me observing this, that someone took a deep breath and said: 'We can accomplish our goals of protecting the property owners here from predatory behavior without taking the drastic and perhaps unconstitutional route of just throwing this blanket ban,'" said Thomas, who practiced property and land law in Hawaii for 35 years.

Green earlier floated the idea of the state acquiring land in Lahaina to ensure local people weren't priced out of the rebuilt community, but said Thursday the state would not do this unless the community asked.

One possibility would be the state forming a land trust to buy properties from families who could repurchase them later.

"Any option to prevent sales to someone who's just swooping in to take advantage of one of our people, we're open to," Green said.

He also was open to hearing from Lahaina residents about what they want the state government to do with existing state lands in their town.

"The state's not going to make any move or take any initiative to build anything unless it's what is asked

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for by the community," Green said.

Green said he was considering setting up a "victim assistance fund" similar to the Sept. 11 Victim Compensation Fund, which would make payments to those who suffered losses. The objective would be to compensate people without the need for large payouts to "middlemen" such as attorneys who often take 30% to 40% of legal settlements, he said.

It was too early to say who would put money into the project, but such funds often receive money from private, philanthropic and government sources, said Green, who planned to announce details during an address scheduled for Sept. 8.

US jobs report for August could point to a moderating pace of hiring as economy gradually slows

By PAUL WISEMAN AP Economics Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — Slowly and steadily, an overheated American job market is returning to room temperature.

The Labor Department is expected to report Friday that U.S. employers — companies, nonprofits and government agencies combined — added 170,000 jobs last month, according to a survey of forecasters by the data firm FactSet. That would be down from the 187,000 jobs that were added in July and would be the lowest monthly gain since December 2020.

"We are beginning to see this slow glide into a cooler labor market," said Becky Frankiewicz, chief commercial officer at the employment firm ManpowerGroup. "Make no mistake: Demand is cooling off. ... But it's not a freefall."

The latest sign that the pace of hiring is losing some momentum — without going into a nosedive — would be welcomed by the Federal Reserve, which has been trying to tame inflation with a series of 11 interest rate hikes. The Fed is hoping to achieve a rare "soft landing," in which it would manage to slow hiring and growth enough to cool price increases without tipping the world's largest economy into a recession. Economists have long been skeptical that the Fed's policymakers would succeed.

But optimism has been growing. Since peaking at 9.1% in June 2022, year-over-year inflation has dropped more or less steadily. It was 3.2% in July. But the economy, though growing more slowly than it did during the boom that followed the pandemic recession of 2020, has defied the squeeze of increasingly high borrowing costs. The gross domestic product — the economy's total output of goods and services — rose at a respectable 2.1% annual rate from April to June. Consumers continued to spend, and businesses increased their investments.

The Fed wants to see hiring decelerate because strong demand for workers tends to inflate wages and feed inflation.

So far, the job market has been cooling in the least painful way possible — with few layoffs. The unemployment rate is expected to have stayed at 3.5% in August, barely above a 50-year low. And the Labor Department reported Thursday that the number of Americans applying for unemployment benefits — a proxy for job cuts — fell for a third straight week.

"Employers aren't wanting to let their existing talent go," Frankiewicz said.

Instead of slashing jobs, companies are posting fewer openings — 8.8 million in July, the fewest since March 2021. And American workers are less likely to leave their jobs in search of better pay, benefits and working conditions elsewhere: 3.5 million people quit their jobs in July, the fewest since February 2021. A lower pace of quits tends to ease pressure on companies to raise pay to keep their existing employees or to attract new ones.

Average hourly earnings aren't growing as fast as they did last year, either: In March 2022, average wages were up 5.9% from a year earlier. In August, they're expected to be up just 4.4%, the same as in July. Nancy Vanden Houten, lead U.S. economist at Oxford Economics, noted, though, that annual average pay increases need to slow to around 3.5% to be consistent with the Fed's 2% inflation target.

Still, economists and financial market analysts increasingly think the Fed may be done raising interest

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rates: Nearly nine in 10 analysts surveyed by the CME Group expect the Fed to leave rates unchanged at its next meeting, Sept. 19-20.

Despite what appears to be a clear trend toward slower hiring, Friday's jobs report could get complicated. The reopening of school can cause problems for the Labor Department's attempts to adjust hiring numbers for seasonal fluctuations: Many teachers are leaving temporary summer jobs to return to the classroom.

And the shutdown of the big trucking firm Yellow and the strike by Hollywood actors and writers are thought to have kept a lid on August job growth.

Russia reports more drone attacks as satellite photos indicate earlier barrage destroyed 2 aircraft

Russian officials said Friday that air defenses intercepted drones heading toward three of the country's western regions, while satellite images indicated that a major drone barrage earlier in the week destroyed at least two Ilyushin Il-76 military transport planes at a Russian air base.

Regional governors said defense systems stopped three drones in the Kursk, Belgorod and Moscow regions.

Moscow airports briefly halted flights but no major damage or injuries were reported, according to Russian authorities.

Drones aimed at targets inside Russia — and blamed by Moscow on Ukraine — have become almost a daily occurrence as the war has entered its 19th month and Kyiv's forces pursue a counteroffensive. Recently, the drones have reached deeper into Russia.

Kyiv officials normally neither claim nor deny responsibility for attacks on Russian soil.

The apparent Ukrainian strategy is to unnerve Russia and pile pressure on Russian President Vladimir Putin.

The Associated Press was unable to determine whether the drones are launched from Ukraine or inside Russia.

Meanwhile, satellite images analyzed by AP show that suspected Ukrainian drone attacks late Tuesday destroyed at least two Ilyushin Il-76 military transport planes at a Russian air base.

The images taken Thursday show Princess Olga Pskov International Airport, which is a dual military-civilian airport about 700 kilometers (400 miles) north of the Ukrainian border and near Estonia and Latvia.

The four-engine Il-76 is the workhorse of the Russian military's airlift capacity, able to land and take off in rugged conditions. The Russian military is believed to have over 100 of them in its fleet.

The AP analysis, conducted Friday, showed what appeared to be the blackened hulks of two Il-76s on separate parking pads on the air base's apron. One included the plane's tail, the other appeared to show pieces of another aircraft. Fire damage could be seen around the pad.

Eleven other Il-76s had been moved off their parking pads into different positions on the airport's taxiways, possibly in an attempt to make it more difficult for them to be struck again. One was on the runway itself. Another Il-76 remained on the pad, though it wasn't clear why.

Local reports said Ukrainian drone attacks on the air base had damaged four Il-76s.

The satellite image was taken at 1303 GMT Thursday. Videos on social media Thursday night showed anti-aircraft fire going around the air base again, though it remained unclear whether it was another attack.

The air base at Pskov was initially targeted Tuesday night, but cloud cover prevented satellites from getting an unobstructed picture.

On Thursday, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said his country had developed a weapon that hit a target 700 kilometers (400 miles) away, apparently referencing the air base attack. He described the weapon as being produced by Ukraine's Ministry of Strategic Industries but gave no other details.

The Kremlin's forces have targeted Ukraine with numerous salvos of Iranian-made exploding drones in the war over the past year.

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in Mongolia," the Rev. Sanjaajav Tserenkhand, a Mongolian priest, said outside the cathedral. He said he hoped that Francis' visit would also show Mongolians that Christianity isn't a "foreign religion," but is also rooted in the country.

The Argentine pontiff has long prioritized visiting Catholic communities in what he calls the peripheries, staying away from the global centers of Catholicism to minister instead to small churches where Catholics are often a minority. He has made cardinals out of their leaders to show the universal reach of the 1.3-billion strong Catholic Church, including the head of the Mongolian church, Cardinal Giorgio Marengo.

"His heart burns with love for the universal church, and especially the church where she lives in a minority context," Marengo told journalists during a recent visit to Rome. "And that is the wonderful meaning of his coming all the way to Mongolia."

The other main focus of Francis' four-day visit is to highlight Mongolia's long tradition of interfaith coexistence. The Mongol Empire under its famed founder Genghis Khan was known for tolerating people of different faiths among those it conquered, and Francis will likely emphasize that tradition when he presides over an interfaith meeting Sunday.

Invited are Mongolian Buddhists, who are the majority in the nation of 3.3 million, as well as Jewish, Muslim and Shinto representatives and members of Christian churches that have established a presence in Mongolia in the last 30 years, including the Russian Orthodox Church.

That encounter could enable Francis to once again offer greetings to the Moscow patriarchate, which has strongly supported the Kremlin's war in Ukraine. Francis has tried to steer a diplomatic tightrope in not antagonizing Moscow, consistent with the Vatican's tradition of diplomatic neutrality in conflicts.

Days before his visit, he sparked outrage in Ukraine over his praise of Russia's imperial past, comments that the Vatican insisted were by no means an endorsement of Moscow's current war of aggression in Ukraine.

While the Vatican has insisted Francis is going to Mongolia — not China or Russia — the China question will be ever-present: A group of Chinese Catholics, as well as Russian Catholics, are expected to attend Francis' Mass on Sunday in the Steppe Arena, but Beijing's crackdown on religious minorities remains the backdrop to the trip.

In addition, China's opposition to the Dalai Lama could come to the fore as Mongolian Buddhism is closely tied to Tibet's strain and traditionally reveres the Dalai Lama. Francis has made a hallmark of meeting with religious leaders from around the world, but he has so far refrained from meeting the exiled Tibetan Buddhist leader, for fear of antagonizing Beijing.

Communist Party leader Xi has demanded that Catholicism and all other religions adhere strictly to party directives and undergo "Sinicization." In the vast Xinjiang region, that has led to the demolition of an unknown number of mosques, but in most cases it has meant the removal of domes, minarets and exterior crosses from churches.

At the same time, Xi has shown no more desire to reconcile with the Vatican than his predecessors, while his administration continues to insist the Holy See cut all ties with Taiwan, the self-governing island democracy China claims as its own territory.

The Vatican and China did sign an accord in 2018 over the thorny issue of bishop nominations, but Beijing has violated it. Most recently Francis was forced to accept the unilateral appointment of a new bishop of Shanghai, whose predecessor disappeared into a monastery almost immediately after announcing his withdrawal from the party-controlled Patriotic Catholic Association.

That said, Hong Kong's newly appointed Bishop Stephen Sau-yan Chow visited Beijing in April, the first visit to the Chinese capital by the city's bishop in nearly three decades.

Chow, who is to be made a cardinal by Francis in September, said he invited the state-appointed archbishop of Beijing Joseph Li to visit Hong Kong in a symbolic gesture that experts said could strengthen the fragile relationship between China and the Vatican.

Rainbows, drag shows, movies: Lebanon's leaders go after

perceived symbols of the LGBTQ+ community

By BASSEM MROUE and KAREEM CHEHAYEB Associated Press

BEIRUT (AP) — Rainbows, school books, movies and drag shows have all been targeted in Lebanon in recent weeks as politicians, religious leaders and vigilante groups step up a campaign against the LGBTQ+ community in a country that has long shown relative tolerance.

At a time when Lebanon is in the grips of one of the world's worst economic meltdowns in more than a century, the country and its leaders have been deeply split on how to deal with the crisis. Political factions have been so divided they haven't been able to choose a new president for 10 months.

But in recent weeks they united to fight the LGBTQ+ community. Politicians and religious leaders have intensified a campaign that in many ways mirrors the culture wars in the United States, raising alarm over symbols and trends that might normalize queerness as an existential threat to society.

It comes at a time when an escalating crackdown on the LGBTQ+ community is also underway elsewhere in the region.

In some cases, the targeting comes after a spate of recent Quran burnings in Europe, which sparked angry protests in Iraq and other Muslim-majority countries. Local religious and political leaders have painted the LGBTQ+ community as part of Western attacks on Islamic values. In these demonstrations, many protesters burned rainbow flags.

In Iraq, some lawmakers are pushing a proposal that would expand a 1988 law on prostitution to include a paragraph imposing life in prison or the death penalty on those who have same-sex relations.

Lebanon was once seen as a place of relative tolerance in the region when it comes to LGBTQ+ rights. That has changed in recent years, as crackdowns on free speech and expression have surged.

In recent months, both rhetoric by politicians and harassment by individuals have increased.

Last week, several dozen men from a Christian extremist group dubbing itself the Soldiers of God trashed a Beirut club hosting a drag show. They beat up several people, driving some patrons to hide in a bathroom.

"This is the venue of Satan!" one member yelled while filming on his mobile phone. "Promoting homosexuality is not allowed! This is just the beginning!"

The education minister also recently banned a game of Chutes and Ladders that was distributed to schools as part of a USAID project because it was decorated with a rainbow, Lebanese media reported. A video circulated online showing a man in the northern city of Tripoli using black paint to cross out a rainbow on the side of a van distributing books.

In early August, Culture Minister Mohammed Murtada requested for the General Security Directorate to ban the movie "Barbie," saying it "promotes homosexuality and transgenders." The Directorate, however, ruled that the movie is permitted, and it is reportedly expected to start showing in early September.

The Islamic Cultural Center submitted a request to the public prosecutor's office to shut down Helem, the first LGBTQ+ rights organization in Lebanon and the Arab World, founded in 2004. The prosecutor's office referred the case to the Interior Ministry, which has not yet acted on it.

Some shops have removed rainbow-decorated cakes or T-shirts from display. In June, the Interior Ministry restricted events connected to Pride month.

The anti-LGBTQ+ campaign is being spearheaded by religious figures from Lebanon's multiple of Christian and Muslim sects, as well as political officials.

In a meeting earlier this month, caretaker Prime Minister Najib Mikati, several government ministers and the head of the Maronite Church Cardinal Beshara Rai discussed homosexuality. Afterward, the premier told reporters that "there is unanimity to abide by moral Lebanese and family values."

Hassan Nasrallah, the leader of the Shiite militant group Hezbollah, called in a recent speech for the death penalty on people engaged in same-sex acts, calling homosexuality "a clear and present danger." He accused NGOs of circulating books for school children that promote homosexuality and called for the books to be banned.

The group Soldiers of God was formed in 2019 as a sort of Christian self-defense group. Its young men would tour Beirut's predominantly Christian eastern neighborhoods acting as guards against strangers coming in — at a time when frictions with rival supporters of Hezbollah often broke out.

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Lebanon does not have a law that clearly bans same-sex acts. But Article 534 of the penal code prohibits sexual relations that "contradict the laws of nature" and has been used to penalize homosexuality, although some judges have held that consensual same-sex relations do not fall under the law.

In July, a handful of legislators called for abolishing Article 534. One of them, independent lawmaker Mark Daou, accused Hezbollah of using LGBTQ+ "to create a diversion" and to "terrorize a group within society."

The attempt sparked a backlash. The spiritual leader of Lebanon's minority Druze community, Sheikh Sami Abou el-Mouna, said eliminating the article would promote "vice and permitting what is prohibited." Some lawmakers took back comments backing the abolishment.

The backlash made some strange political allies.

In response to the call to repeal Article 534, Ashraf Rifi, a staunchly anti-Hezbollah Sunni legislator, said he is working on a draft law that criminalizes any attempt to legalize homosexuality.

Meanwhile, the Union Center for Research and Development, a reportedly pro-Hezbollah think tank, put forward a study titled "Resisting Homosexuality in Lebanon," which calls for criminalizing homosexuality.

Hussein Ayoub, an official at the center, said he hopes a parliament member will adopt the study's proposals to put into law. He denied that his center did the study on behalf of Hezbollah.

Khaldoun Oraymet, a senior Sunni cleric religious judge, called homosexuality "satanic" and "a very dangerous phenomenon." He said mosques, churches, schools and families should fight it.

Many LGBTQ+ people are laying low, even in areas where they once could freely mingle and express themselves.

Tarek Zeidan, who heads Helem, told The Associated Press that political leaders are scapegoating a vulnerable group to distract from their failure to solve the country's economic and political breakdown and infrastructure collapse.

"Do any of these people have solutions for water, electricity, and health care? They have nothing," Zeidan said. "And when they have nothing to offer, they create an enemy."

Car bomb explosions and hostage-taking inside prisons underscore Ecuador's fragile security

QUITO, Ecuador (AP) — Ecuador's fragile security situation was underscored Thursday by a series of car bombings and the hostage-taking of more than 50 law enforcement officers inside various prisons, just weeks after the country was shaken by the assassination of a presidential candidate.

Ecuador's National Police reported no injuries resulting from the four explosions in Quito, the capital, and in a province that borders Peru, while Interior Minister Juan Zapata said none of the law enforcement officers taken hostage in six different prisons had been injured.

Authorities said the brazen actions were the response of criminal groups to the relocation of various inmates and other measures taken by the country's corrections system. The crimes happened three weeks after the slaying of presidential candidate Fernando Villavicencio.

The corrections system, known as the National Service for Attention to Persons Deprived of Liberty, in recent years lost control of large prisons, which have been the site of violent riots resulting in dozens of deaths. It has taken to transferring inmates to manage gang-related disputes.

In Quito, the first bomb went off Wednesday night in an area where an office of the country's corrections system was previously located. The second explosion in the capital happened early Thursday outside the agency's current location.

Ecuador National Police Gen. Pablo Ramírez, the national director of anti-drug investigations, told reporters on Thursday that police found gas cylinders, fuel, fuses and blocks of dynamite among the debris of the crime scenes in Quito, where the first vehicle to explode was a small car and the second was a pickup truck.

Authorities said gas tanks were used in the explosions in the El Oro communities of Casacay and Bella India.

The fire department in the city of Cuenca, where one of the prisons in which law enforcement officers

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are being held hostage is located, reported that an explosive device went off Thursday night. The department did not provide additional details beyond saying the explosion damaged a car.

Zapata said seven of prison hostages are police officers and the rest are prison guards. In a video shared on social media, which Zapata identified as authentic, a police officer who identifies himself as Lt. Alonso Quintana asks authorities "not to make decisions that violate the rights of persons deprived of their liberty." He can be seen surrounded by a group of police and corrections officers and says that about 30 people are being held by the inmates.

Ecuadorian authorities attribute the country's spike in violence over the past three years to a power vacuum triggered by the killing in 2020 of Jorge Zambrano, alias "Rasquiña" or "JL," the leader of the local Los Choneros gang. Members carry out contract killings, run extortion operations, move and sell drugs, and rule prisons.

Los Choneros and similar groups linked to Mexican and Colombian cartels are fighting over drug-trafficking routes and control of territory, including within detention facilities, where at least 400 inmates have died since 2021.

Villavicencio, the presidential candidate, had a famously tough stance on organized crime and corruption. He was killed Aug. 9 at the end of a political rally in Quito despite having a security detail that included police and bodyguards.

He had accused Los Choneros and its imprisoned current leader Adolfo Macías, alias "Fito," whom he linked to Mexico's Sinaloa cartel, of threatening him and his campaign team days before the assassination.

Ecuador's Security Secretary, Wagner Bravo, told FMundo radio station that six prisoners who were relocated may have been involved in Villavicencio's slaying.

The mayor of Quito, Pabel Muñoz, told the Teleamazonas television station that he was hoping "for justice to act quickly, honestly and forcefully."

"We are not going to give up. May peace, calm and security prevail among the citizens," Muñoz said.

The country's National Police tallied 3,568 violent deaths in the first six months of this year, far more than the 2,042 reported during the same period in 2022. That year ended with 4,600 violent deaths, the country's highest in history and double the total in 2021.

The port city of Guayaquil has been the epicenter of violence, but Esmeraldas, a Pacific coastal city, is also considered one of the country's most dangerous. There, six government vehicles were set on fire earlier this week, according to authorities.

Hong Kong, other parts of south China grind to near standstill as Super Typhoon Saola edges closer

By KANIS LEUNG Associated Press

HONG KONG (AP) — Most of Hong Kong and other parts of southern China ground to a near standstill Friday with classes and flights canceled as Super Typhoon Saola edged closer.

The typhoon could make a landfall in southern China and many workers stayed at home. Students in various cities saw the start of their school year postponed to next week. Hong Kong's stock market trading was suspended and more than 400 flights were canceled or delayed in the key center for regional business and travel.

Mainland Chinese rail authorities ordered all trains entering or leaving Guangdong province to be suspended from Friday night to early evening Saturday, state media CCTV reported.

The Hong Kong Observatory raised a No. 8 typhoon signal, the third-highest warning under the city's weather system, early Friday. Its forecast said Saola — with maximum sustained winds of 210 kilometers (130 miles) per hour — would be closest to the financial hub on Friday night and Saturday morning, skirting within about 50 kilometers (30 miles) south of the city's shopping district Tsim Sha Tsui.

The observatory's director, Chan Pak-wai, said Thursday the alert might be upgraded to a No. 10 signal if the strength of the winds reached hurricane levels. The No. 10 hurricane signal is the highest warning

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under its system and was last hoisted when Super Typhoon Mangkhut hit Hong Kong in 2018.

Chan expected the winds would gradually weaken Saturday as the typhoon moves away from Hong Kong.

The observatory warned serious flooding might occur in low-lying coastal areas and that the maximum water level might be similar to that when Mangkhut felled trees and tore scaffolding off buildings under construction in the city.

As the city braced for heavy rains and strong winds Friday morning, about 190 people sought refuge at temporary shelters, with some ferry and bus services halted. Residents living in low-lying areas had placed sand bags at their doors to prevent their homes being flooded. The government received two reports of fallen trees and three flooding cases. One man was injured during the typhoon period and sought treatment at a public hospital.

Weather authorities in the nearby casino hub of Macao also warned of flooding, forecasting that the water level might reach up to 1.5 meters (5 feet) in low-lying areas Saturday morning. The cross-border bridge connecting Hong Kong, Macao and Zhuhai city would be closed in mid-afternoon.

In the technology and finance hub Shenzhen, its emergency management bureau ordered to suspend work and businesses starting from late afternoon, as the typhoon was expected to make landfall in the city or its nearby areas on Friday night. All entries to highways in the city would be banned starting from 7 p.m. until further notice, except for rescue crews.

China's National Meteorological Center said Saola could make landfall from Huidong County to Taishan city in Guangdong province, neighboring Hong Kong, between Friday night and Saturday morning. But it also did not rule out it would move west near the shore of central Guangdong.

Another storm, Haikui, was gradually moving toward the coastal areas of eastern China. Coupled with the influence of Saola, parts of Guangdong, Fujian and Zhejiang provinces would see strong winds and heavy rains, according to a website run by China Meteorological Administration. By Thursday night, some 100,000 people living in dangerous areas in Fujian were relocated to other safer places.

Saola passed just south of Taiwan on Wednesday before turning to mainland China, with the storm's outer bands hitting the island's southern cities with torrential rain. The typhoon also lashed the Philippines earlier this week, displacing tens of thousands of people in the northern part of the islands because of flooding.

In recent months, China had some of the heaviest rains and deadliest flooding in years across various regions, with scores killed, including in outlying mountainous parts of the capital Beijing.

Smugglers are steering migrants into the remote Arizona desert, posing new Border Patrol challenges

By ANITA SNOW Associated Press

ORGAN PIPE CACTUS NATIONAL MONUMENT, Ariz. (AP) — Border Patrol agents ordered the young Senegalese men to wait in the scant shade of desert scrub brush while they loaded a more vulnerable group of migrants — a family with three young children from India — into a white van for the short trip in triple-degree heat to a canopied field intake center.

The migrants were among hundreds who have been trudging this summer in the scorching sun and through open storm gates in the border wall to U.S. soil, following a remote corridor in the sprawling Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument that's among the most desolate and dangerous areas in the Arizona borderlands. Temperatures hit 118 degrees Fahrenheit (47.7 degrees Celsius) just as smugglers abruptly began steering migrants from Africa and Asia here to request asylum.

Suddenly, the Border Patrol's Tucson Sector, which oversees the area, in July became the busiest sector along the U.S-Mexico border for the first time since 2008. It's seen migrants from faraway countries like Pakistan, China and Mauritania, where social media is drawing young people to the new route to the border that begins in Nicaragua. There are large numbers from Ecuador, Bangladesh and Egypt, as well as more traditional border crossers from Mexico and Central America.

"Right now we are encountering people from all over the world," said Border Patrol Deputy Chief Justin De La Torre, of the Tucson Sector. "It has been a real emergency here, a real trying situation."

Pope arrives on first visit to Mongolia as Vatican relations with Russia and China remain strained

By NICOLE WINFIELD and SARUUL ENKHBOLD Associated Press

ULAANBAATAR, Mongolia (AP) — Pope Francis arrived in Mongolia on Friday morning to encourage one of the world's smallest and newest Catholic communities.

It's the first time a pope has visited the landlocked Asian country and comes at a time when the Vatican's relations with Mongolia's two powerful neighbors, Russia and China, are once again strained.

Francis arrived in the Mongolian capital Ulaanbaatar after an overnight flight passing through Chinese airspace, affording the pontiff a rare opportunity to send a note of greetings to President Xi Jinping. Vatican protocol calls for the pope to send such greetings whenever he flies over a foreign country.

In his message to Xi, Francis expressed "greetings of good wishes to your excellency and the people of China."

"Assuring you of my prayers for the wellbeing of the nation, I invoke upon all of you the divine blessings of unity and peace," Francis said.

Despite strains in the relationship, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Wang Wenbin said the greeting showed "friendliness and goodwill."

"China is willing to continue to walk in the same direction with the Vatican, conduct constructive dialogues, enhance understanding, accumulate mutual trust, and promote the process of improving the relationship of the two sides," Wang said at a daily briefing.

Upon arrival, Francis, who uses a wheelchair, was met on the tarmac by helmeted honor guards along with Mongolia's foreign minister and was offered a taste of dried yoghurt from a woman in traditional dress, in a sign of welcome. He made no public comments. Along with priests and others gathered on the tarmac, several dozen watched his arrival from the airport terminal.

Speaking to reporters en route to Mongolia late Thursday, Francis said he was looking forward to visiting a country that has just a few people, but with a culture that you need your senses to understand.

"There are only a few inhabitants — a small people, but a big culture," he said aboard the ITA charter plane. "I think it will do us good to try to understand this long, big silence, understand what it means but not intellectually, but with senses." He added: "Mongolia, you understand with your senses."

On tap are official meetings with the Mongolian president and prime minister and a speech before Mongolian government, cultural and business leaders, followed by Francis' first encounter with the bishops, priests and nuns who form the backbone of a tiny Catholic community of 1,450 that has only been in existence for a generation.

While Christianity has been present in the region for hundreds of years, the Catholic Church has only had a sanctioned presence in Mongolia since 1992, after the country shrugged off its Soviet-allied communist government and enshrined religious freedom in its constitution.

The Holy See and Mongolia have had diplomatic relations ever since, and a handful of missionary religious orders including Mother Teresa's Missionaries of Charity have nurtured the tiny community through its first three decades of life.

Four Missionaries of Charity sisters — Jeanne Francoise from Rwanda; Chanmi from South Korea; Viera from Slovakia and Suder from India — run a nursing home on the northern outskirts of Ulaanbaatar with a capacity of 30 beds. There, they provide care for elderly people with mental or physical disabilities, or who are homeless, undocumented, or otherwise ostracized by their families.

Sister Jeanne Francoise said it was an honor that Francis was coming to Mongolia, saying she had seen him once before when she was living in Rome but that it was never as "close" as it would be in Mongolia.

Francis has long praised the work of missionaries and has tried to reinvigorate the missionary focus of the church at large by visiting them and encouraging their work. One of his first events in Mongolia is to preside over an encounter with missionaries Saturday afternoon at the capital's St. Peter and Paul cathedral, and he ends his visit by inaugurating a new church-run charity house to tend to Mongolia's poorest.

"I want people to know that the Catholic religion, the Catholic Church, and Catholic believers also exist

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The patrol is calling on other agencies, including Immigration and Customs Enforcement and the Transportation Security Administration, for help in getting migrants "out of the elements and into our processing centers as quickly as possible," De La Torre said.

During a recent visit, Associated Press journalists saw close to 100 migrants arrive in just four hours at the border wall near Lukeville, Arizona, inside Organ Pipe, as temperatures hit 110 degrees Fahrenheit (43.3 degrees Celsius). The next morning, several hundred more migrants lined up along the wall to turn themselves in.

"Welcome to America, that's good person," a young Senegalese man said in his limited English, beaming as he crunched across the desert floor after Tom Wingo, a humanitarian aid volunteer, gave him some water and snacks. "I am very, very happy for you."

The storm gates in the towering steel wall have been open since mid-June because of rains during the monsoon season. Rushing water from heavy downpours can damage closed gates, the wall, a rocky border road, and flora and fauna. But migrants get in even when the gates are closed, sometimes by breaking locks or slipping through gaps in the wall.

Agents from the Border Patrol's small Ajo Station a half hour's drive north of the border encountered several large groups the first weekend of August, including one of 533 people from 17 countries in the area that includes the national monument, an expanse of rugged desert scattered with cactus, creosote and whip-like ocotillo. The Tucson Sector registered 39,215 arrests in July, up 60% from June. Officials attribute the sudden influx to false advertising by smugglers who tell migrants it's easier to cross here and get released into the United States.

Migrants are taken first to the intake center, where agents collect people's names, countries of origin and other information before they are moved to the Ajo Station some 30 miles (48 kilometers) up a two-lane state highway.

Arrests for illegally crossing anywhere along the nearly 2,000-mile (3,200-kilometer) U.S.-Mexico border soared 33% from June to July, according to U.S. government figures, reversing a plunge after new asylum restrictions were introduced in May. President Joe Biden's administration notes illegal crossings were still down 27% that month from July 2022 and credits the carrot-and-stick approach that expands legal pathways while punishing migrants who enter illegally.

De La Torre said most migrants in the area request asylum, something far from guaranteed with the recent restrictions.

The Ajo Station's area of responsibility is currently the busiest inside the Tucson Sector, De La Torre said. It includes the border areas of Organ Pipe and the Cabeza Prieta Wildlife Refuge, isolated areas with rough roads and scarce water and shade. They include the Devil's Highway region, where 14 border crossers in a group of 26 died in 2001 after smugglers abandoned them.

CBP rescues by air and land along the border are soaring this year, with 28,537 counted during the 10-month period ending July 31. That compares with 22,075 for the 12-month period ending Sept. 30, 2022, the agency said. There were 2,776 migrant rescues in July.

The rescues continued in August, including one especially busy day when a Black Hawk helicopter hoisted a 15-year-old Guatemalan boy from a remote southern Arizona mountain to safety. A short time later, the chopper rescued a Guatemalan man who called 911 from the vast Tohono O'odham Nation just east of Organ Pipe.

Some activists recently protested outside the Ajo Station, saying migrants kept in an outdoor enclosure there didn't have enough shade. Patrol officials say that only adult men waiting to be transported to bigger facilities for processing are kept outside for a few hours, and under a large canopy with fans. Women, children and vulnerable people stay inside. The average wait time the facility is 15 hours.

The influx has also presented challenges for humanitarian groups.

Wingo, a retired schoolteacher working with Samaritanos Sin Fronteras, or Samaritans Without Borders, travels to the border several times a week to fill bright blue plastic barrels at six water stations. He and other volunteers distribute hats, bandanas, snacks and ice-cold bottled water to migrants they encounter.

"A lot of these people go out into the desert not knowing the trouble they are getting themselves into,"

said Wingo.

During a recent border visit, Wingo handed bottled water to people from India waiting for help by the wall after a woman they were traveling twisted her ankle. He gave water and granola bars to a Guatemalan couple with three young children who were traveling with a Peruvian man.

Wingo said he pays especially close attention to those who may be more susceptible to the torrid heat, such as pregnant and nursing women and the elderly. He recently encountered an 89-year-old diabetic woman from India about to go into shock. When he called Border Patrol agents on that especially busy day, he said, they asked him to bring the woman himself to their intake center for medical care. The woman is recovering in a Phoenix hospital.

Many others don't survive.

The remains of 43 suspected border crossers were found in southern Arizona in July, about half of them recently dead, according to the non-profit organization Human Borders, which works with the Pima County Medical Examiner's Office to track and map the numbers.

They included two found in Organ Pipe: Hilda Veliz Maas de Mijangos, 36, from Guatemala City, dead about a day; and Ignacio Munoz Loza, 22, of the Mexican state of Jalisco, dead for about a week. Both succumbed to heat exposure.

Texas wanted armed officers at every school after Uvalde. Many can't meet that standard

By PAUL J. WEBER, ACACIA CORONADO and KENDRIA LaFLEUR Associated Press

AUSTIN, Texas (AP) — A vision of armed officers at every school in Texas is crashing into the reality of not enough money or police as a new mandate took effect Friday, showing how a goal more states are embracing in response to America's cycle of mass killings is proving unworkable in many communities.

Dozens of Texas' largest school districts, which educate many of the state's 5 million students, are re-opening classrooms without meeting the state's new requirements of armed officers on every campus. The mandate is a pillar of a safety bill signed by Republican Gov. Greg Abbott, who rejected calls this year for gun control despite angry pleas from parents of children killed in the Uvalde school massacre.

Texas has nearly 9,000 public school campuses, second only to California, making the requirement the largest of its kind in the U.S.

"We all support the idea," said Stephanie Elizalde, superintendent of the Dallas Independent School District, which has more than 140,000 students. "The biggest challenge for all superintendents is that this is yet again an unfunded mandate."

The difficulties lay bare limits of calls to put armed guards at every school, more than a decade after the National Rifle Association championed the idea in the face of an intense push for stronger gun laws following the Sandy Hook Elementary massacre in 2012.

The new Texas law allows exceptions but also does not require districts to report compliance, making it unclear how many schools are meeting the standard.

But by all accounts, many are not.

The Associated Press contacted 60 of Texas' largest school districts about whether they were able to start the school year in compliance. The districts, which cut across a wide swath of Texas, from rapidly growing suburbs to the U.S.-Mexico border, enroll more than 2.7 million students combined.

Not all districts responded and some declined to discuss staffing levels, citing security concerns. But statements to the AP, along with a review of school board meeting actions and statements made to local media, show at least half have been unable to comply with the law's highest standard.

A major struggle is staffing elementary schools, where officers are traditionally less common. But those campuses came under calls for more protection after a gunman killed 19 fourth-graders and two teachers last year at Robb Elementary School — a tragedy in which the failures were not over a lack of police, who were on the scene within minutes, but the inaction of hundreds of officers once they arrived.

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Spokesperson for Abbott did not respond to questions about the rollout of the law. The Texas Education Agency did not address questions about concerns raised by schools and instead provided criteria for districts to seek an exception.

"How these exceptions look locally is determined by the school district's board, and they must develop an alternative safety standard with which the district is able to comply," spokesman Jake Kobersky said.

But local school officials say the additional funding Texas gave districts under the new law, about \$15,000 per campus, is hardly sufficient. In Dallas, Elizalde said an extra \$75,000 is needed for each additional officer in Texas' second-largest district.

In the scramble to comply with Texas' new standards, options some districts previously never considered are now on the table: Some are turning to private security firms or arming more staff and teachers.

"This is probably new to everybody at this stage of the game. It's expensive," said Charles Hollis, director of operations at L&P Global Security in Dallas, which until this year had not put guards at public schools. The company now has contracts with four booming districts and is in talks with four others.

The combination of not enough money for officers, and not enough of them to fill thousands of openings across the U.S., is an ongoing struggle in cities nationwide. Last month, a small Minnesota town lost its police department altogether after officers resigned over low pay and pursued better opportunities elsewhere.

The national shortfall of officers has hampered other states' attempts to patrol all schools. Florida struggled in 2018 when the state became the nation's first to require an armed officer on every campus following the shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School.

In Tennessee, following an elementary school shooting in March, the state offered police departments extra funding to staff every school. But police in Nashville, Tennessee's largest city, rejected most of the money.

"With the level of our staffing, we can't pull 70 officers from the streets of Nashville," Metro Nashville Police Chief John Drake told reporters in July.

Joy Baskin, education counsel for the Texas Association of School Boards, said all mandates come with a price tag. "But I think this is the biggest one I can remember in more than 25 years of talking to districts," she said.

In San Antonio, the Southside Independent School District was able to start the year with enough officers, who make between \$23 and \$30 an hour. Don Tijerina, the district's police chief, said it wouldn't take any of them long to find jobs elsewhere.

"Bottom line: The demand is so high right now," he said.

In final hours before landfall, Hurricane Idalia stopped intensifying and turned from Tallahassee

By JEFF MARTIN and ISABELLA O'MALLEY Associated Press

ATLANTA (AP) — In the final hours before Hurricane Idalia struck Florida the storm had grown into a Category 4 beast lurking off the state's west coast, and the forecast called for it to continue intensifying up until landfall.

An Air Force Reserve Hurricane Hunter aircraft had recorded winds up to 130 mph (215 kph), the National Hurricane Center said in an ominous bulletin at 6 a.m. Wednesday.

As the sun rose an hour later, however, there was evidence the hurricane began replacing the wall around its eye — a phenomenon that experts say kept it from further intensifying. Maximum winds had dropped to near 125 mph (205 kph), the Hurricane Center said in a 7 a.m. update.

Then came another surprising twist: A last-minute turn sparing the state's capital city of Tallahassee from far more serious damage.

"Eyewall replacement cycles are common in major hurricanes, and so when you see that, it does lead to some temporary weakening," said Kelly Godsey, one of the meteorologists tracking the storm at the

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National Weather Service in Tallahassee, where his colleagues slept inside the weather office so they could be at work in case the city was devastated.

The eyewall essentially begins collapsing, and that "was beneficial from a timing perspective," said Donald Jones, a National Weather Service meteorologist in Lake Charles, Louisiana. Several hours after the process begins, a new eyewall forms and the hurricane can then quickly intensify — which didn't happen to Idalia as there wasn't enough time before landfall, Jones said.

"Like a figure skater pulling in her arms versus holding her arms out, the hurricane spins with a lot more energy, power, and ferocity when it has a tighter eye," said Ryan Maue, a meteorologist and former chief scientist with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

After a successful completion of an eyewall replacement cycle, the hurricane has a larger eye and overall expanded wind field, extending the potential for damage over a larger area. Instead, Idalia tracked over land where friction immediately reduced the wind speeds near the surface.

Then, after the eyewall replacement had begun, the hurricane took a last-minute turn away from Tallahassee, home to about 200,000 people, Florida State University and thousands more people in the metro area. Instead of striking the capital city, it wobbled to the north-northeast and made landfall near Keaton Beach, Florida, the Hurricane Center announced at 7:45 a.m.

"Had that turn not occurred, there would have been much more devastating impacts here in Tallahassee," Godsey said.

Despite the eyewall replacement cycle's effects, Idalia was still a major hurricane threatening storm surges of up to 15 feet (4.6 meters) along some parts of Florida's coast.

"All of that energy has already been transferred to the water surface and the devastating storm surge is already on its way," Godsey said.

A hurricane undergoing an eyewall replacement cycle can also see an expansion of its wind field, meaning that a larger area could be struck with hurricane-force winds, said Allison Michaelis, an assistant professor in the Department of Earth, Atmosphere, and Environment at Northern Illinois University.

During the eyewall replacement, there isn't much difference in the amount of thunderstorms or tornadoes the hurricane generates because that type of weather occurs in the outer bands of the storm hundreds of miles from the eye, Maue said.

Farther south in Tampa, the mood was intense as forecasters tracked the storm while it moved up the coast and took aim at the Big Bend region, said Christianne Pearce, a meteorologist at the National Weather Service office in Tampa.

"The stress level is definitely elevated, but everyone is very alert and very attentive," she said. "You know, what you're putting out there is about making decisions to help people save lives."

Once the storm made landfall, it was moving fast with a forward speed of around 18 mph (30 kph), the National Hurricane Center said.

The fast forward speed "was good and bad at the same time," Pearce said. It didn't linger long enough to drop copious amounts of rain on the region, but it was fast enough that it could maintain much of its intensity and remained a hurricane as it moved across south Georgia.

Idalia's inland track was fairly straightforward for a storm moving near the coast across the Southeast U.S., said Bob Henson, a meteorologist and journalist with Yale Climate Connections.

"The most unusual aspect was the especially high water recorded at Charleston, South Carolina, and other places along the Southeast coast," he said. "These high waters were a combination of a 'supermoon' high tide, the storm-surge effects of Idalia, and a long-term component from sea level rise associated with human-produced climate change."

There are several aspects of Idalia that have weather experts intrigued, Michaelis noted.

"It's interesting that we had a drought of major hurricanes making landfall from 2006 to 2016, but since the 2017 season, we've had six major hurricanes make landfall across the Gulf Coast," said Michaelis, who added that the location where Idalia made landfall in Big Bend Coast, Florida, rarely sees a direct hit from hurricanes.

"To me, this underscores the main message we try to communicate before and during every hurricane

season: It only takes one," he said. "Aside from how quiet or active a season is, aside from how quiet or active previous seasons have been, and aside from where we traditionally see major landfalls, it only takes one storm to make an impact."

After outrage over Taylor Swift tickets, reform has been slow across the US

By ADAM BEAM Associated Press

SACRAMENTO, Calif. (AP) — When thousands of fans couldn't get tickets for megastar Taylor Swift's summer stadium tour, some diehards paid upwards of 70 times face value to see their favorite artist in person — an outrage that prompted Congressional hearings and bills in state legislatures to better protect consumers.

After 10 months, Swift's U.S. tour is finished, but so are most of the meaningful reforms consumer advocates and industry groups had hoped to pass this year. A proposal has so far failed to advance in the U.S. Senate. Legislation in Colorado was vetoed by the Democratic governor at the urging of some consumer groups.

In California, home to iconic recording studios like Capitol Records and influential clubs like the Whiskey A Go Go and Hollywood Bowl, what started as a robust array of legislation has been watered down to a single bill banning hidden fees, something New York and Connecticut have done and most major industry players have already committed to do on their own.

"That's it? That's all that California, the leading state in the nation on so many consumer protection issues, that's all we're going to do?" said Robert Herrell, executive director of the Consumer Federation of California. "That's an embarrassment. It's not enough."

The slow progress over changing how tickets should be sold and resold highlights not just the strength of industry opposition, but the regulatory difficulties in a market upended by technology. Gone are the days of standing in line at a box office to find out what seats were available and how much they cost.

Today, nearly all tickets are sold online and downloaded to phones or other devices. Consumers often don't know how much they will pay until just before they click the purchase button and fees and charges, which can sometimes be almost as much as the ticket price, are applied.

Venues often don't say how many seats are available for a specific event, according to consumer groups, but instead release tickets in batches, making consumers spend more out of the mistaken fear they'll miss out.

Some bad actors use software to quickly bulk-buy tickets for resale at much higher prices. They will even sell tickets before they have them, a practice known as "speculative ticketing" that consumer groups say is dangerous and does not guarantee the ticket. Some go so far as to mimic venue websites so consumers believe they are buying tickets directly.

Sharp disagreements among venues, ticket sellers, consumer groups and artists have muddied what may seemingly straightforward consumer rights issues.

Artists and venues want to restrict how fans can resell tickets, an attempt to crack down on "the secondary market to sweep the inventory, inflate the price and price gouge our fans," said Jordan Bromley, who sits on the board of the Music Artist Coalition, an advocacy group representing artists.

Consumer groups argue buyers can do what they want with their tickets, including upselling. That disagreement is partly why Colorado Democratic Gov. Jared Polis vetoed a bill earlier this year, despite the bill also containing consumer-friendly policies like banning hidden fees, price increases and speculative ticket sales.

In California, consumer groups have mostly focused their ire on Live Nation Entertainment, the company that owns Ticketmaster and controls the bulk of ticket sales and venues in the U.S. for touring music artists. But the debate is spreading to artists, major men's professional sports teams like the Los Angeles Dodgers and San Francisco 49ers, and independent venues with capacity for 1,000 people or fewer, including more than 600 in California alone.

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Most people are being vocal about "how this is an attempt to shoot at Ticketmaster and Live Nation," said Julia Heath, president of the California chapter of the National Independent Venue Association. "What's actually happening is they are aiming at them, but they are hitting everybody else, too."

The biggest disagreement was over whether to allow teams, venues and artists to restrict how fans could resell tickets they purchased.

A bill to allow teams, venues and artists restrict how fans can resell tickets passed the Senate but failed to pass the Assembly this year after drawing concerns from consumer groups. State Sen. Anna Caballero, the bill's author, promised to hold a hearing on the issue once the Legislature adjourns.

A bill by Assemblymember Laura Friedman would ban venues and artists from restricting resales. The measure also would have required venues to disclose how many tickets were available for an event to prevent "holdbacks." Ultimately, the bill was changed to remove both of those provisions after attracting strong industry opposition.

"It's been very difficult. It had a very strong and concerted effort from the very beginning lobby against this bill," said Friedman, who added she was disappointed the bill was not stronger.

Industry groups also are disappointed. Heath, who represents independent venues, called it a "do-nothing bill."

"A lot of the things we took issue with are gone, but we also see it as a missed opportunity," she said. "There are issues in the ticketing world right now that need to be addressed."

Not everyone is disappointed. Jenn Engstrom, state director for the California Public Interest Research Group, said while it would be great to solve all of those problems, banning hidden fees is still a win for consumers.

"I'm just all about incremental change," she said. "This is a good first step."

Justice Clarence Thomas reports he took 3 trips on Republican donor's plane last year

By MARK SHERMAN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas acknowledged Thursday that he took three trips last year aboard a private plane owned by Republican megadonor Harlan Crow even as he rejected criticism over his failure to report trips in previous years.

It's the first time in years that Thomas has reported receiving hospitality from Crow. In a filing posted on the federal judiciary's website, the 75-year-old justice said he was complying with new guidelines from the federal judiciary for reporting travel, but did not include any earlier travel at Crow's expense, including a 2019 trip in Indonesia aboard the yacht owned by the wealthy businessman and benefactor of conservative causes.

The report comes amid a heightened focus on ethics at the high court that stems from a series of reports revealing that Thomas has for years received undisclosed expensive gifts, including international travel, from Crow.

Crow also purchased the house in Georgia where Thomas's mother continues to live and paid for two years of private school tuition for a child raised by Thomas and his wife, Ginni.

The reporting by the investigative news site ProPublica also revealed that Justice Samuel Alito failed to disclose a private trip to Alaska he took in 2008 that was paid for by two wealthy Republican donors, one of whom repeatedly had interests before the court.

The Associated Press also reported in July that Justice Sonia Sotomayor, aided by her staff, has advanced sales of her books through college visits over the past decade.

Supreme Court justices do not have a binding code of ethics and have resisted the idea that they adopt one or have one imposed on them by Congress. In the spring, all nine justices signed a statement of ethics that Chief Justice John Roberts provided to the Senate Judiciary Committee. Roberts has acknowledged that the justices can do more to address ethical concerns.

But neither the statement nor Roberts' comments assuaged Senate Democrats. The Democratic-controlled

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committee approved an ethics code for the court in July on a party-line vote. The legislation has little chance of passing the Senate — it would need at least nine GOP votes, and Republicans have strongly opposed it — or the Republican-controlled House of Representatives.

Elliot Berke, a lawyer representing Thomas, issued a blistering statement defending the justice's conduct and taking aim at his critics.

"The attacks on Justice Thomas are nothing less than ridiculous and dangerous, and they set a terrible precedent for political blood sport through federal ethics filings," Berke said. "Justice Thomas's amended report answers — and utterly refutes— the charges trumped up in this partisan feeding frenzy."

But two ethics experts who have advised justices or nominees to the high court said it has been clear to them for years that travel on private planes must be reported.

"You report the free trips on the jets, the private jets, if you take them. I don't get this idea that, 'Gee, the rules changed on us.' That's just a lot of hogwash," said Richard Painter, who was the White House's chief ethics lawyer when Alito and Chief Justice John Roberts were nominated to the Supreme Court. Painter now believes the court needs its own ethics lawyer as well as an inspector general to investigate possible judicial misconduct.

Stephen Gillers, whose advice has been sought by now-retired Justice Stephen Breyer, said in an email, "The failure to report private plane travel paid by a corporate donor has always been a glaring omission in the Thomas filings."

One trip Thomas reported was to Crow's lodge in the Adirondack Mountains in upstate New York. ProPublica has reported that Thomas visits there every year.

The other two trips were to Dallas, where he spoke at conferences sponsored by the American Enterprise Institute, a conservative think tank.

Thomas noted that court officials recommended that he avoid commercial travel for one of the trips, in mid-May, because of concerns about the justices' security following the leak of the court's draft abortion opinion that overturned *Roe v. Wade*.

The justice also belatedly acknowledged that Crow had purchased the home in Savannah, Georgia. Thomas and other family members owned the house, along with two neighboring properties. The sale was completed in 2014, but Thomas said he erroneously thought he didn't have to report it because "this sale resulted in a capital loss."

In reporting that he and his wife have assets worth \$1.2 million to \$2.7 million, Thomas also corrected several other mistakes from earlier reports. These include the omission of accounts at a credit union that last year were worth \$100,000 to \$250,000 and a life insurance policy in his wife's name that was valued at less than \$100,000.

Thomas is considering whether to amend prior reports, he noted.

The annual financial reports for Thomas and Alito were released Thursday, nearly three months after those of the other seven justices. Thomas and Alito were granted 90-day extensions.

Alito reported assets worth \$2.8 million to \$7.4 million. While most of his holdings are in mutual funds, Alito retains shares of stocks in energy and other companies that sometimes force his withdrawal from Supreme Court cases.

Alito, in an unusual column in the *Wall Street Journal*, said he was under no obligation to report the Alaska trip or step aside from any cases involving the benefactor.

A look inside Donald Trump's deposition: Defiance, deflection and the 'hottest brand in the world'

By MICHAEL R. SISAK Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — In newly public testimony, Donald Trump boasts about building a multibillion-dollar brand and saving "millions of lives" as president.

He spars with the New York attorney general suing him for fraud, telling Letitia James "the whole case is crazy" and accusing her staff of trying to trip him up like TV lawyer Perry Mason did to witnesses.

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Trump gave seven hours of sworn testimony in April as part of James' lawsuit, which accused the Republican and his company of defrauding banks, insurers and others with annual financial statements that inflated the value of assets and boosted his net worth by more than \$2 billion in some years.

Trump's lawyers posted a transcript of his deposition in a flurry of court filings Wednesday, ahead of a possible October trial.

Here are the highlights:

A 'TERRIBLE THING'

Trump decried James' lawsuit as a "terrible thing," telling her and her staff "you don't have a case."

He insisted the banks she alleges were snookered with lofty valuations suffered no harm, got paid in his deals and "to this day have no complaints."

"Do you know the banks made a lot of money?" Trump asked. "Do you know I don't believe I ever got even a default notice and, even during COVID, the banks were all paid. And yet you're suing on behalf of banks, I guess. It's crazy. The whole case is crazy."

Banks "want to do business with me because I'm rich," Trump told James. "But, you know what, they're petrified to do business because of you."

Trump complained New York authorities "spend all their time investigating me, instead of stopping violent crime in the streets."

He said they'd put his recently jailed ex-finance chief Allen Weisselberg "through hell and back" for dodging taxes on company-paid perks.

"Now I have to come and justify myself to you," Trump grouched.

DON'T TAKE MY WORD FOR IT

Trump said he never felt his financial statements "would be taken very seriously," and that people who did business with him were given ample warning not to trust them.

Trump described the statements as "a fairly good compilation of properties" rather than a true representation of their value. Some numbers, he noted, were "guesstimates."

Trump claimed the statements were mainly for his use, though he conceded financial institutions sometimes asked for them.

Even then, he insisted it didn't matter legally if they were accurate or not, because they came with a disclaimer.

"I have a clause in there that says, 'Don't believe the statement. Go out and do your own work,'" Trump testified. "You're supposed to pay no credence to what we say whatsoever."

WHAT'S IN A NAME? \$10 BILLION

Trump estimated that his "brand" alone is worth "maybe \$10 billion."

He called it "the most valuable asset I have" and attributed his political success to the ubiquity of his name and persona.

"I became president because of the brand, OK," Trump said. "I became president. I think it's the hottest brand in the world."

'MOST IMPORTANT JOB IN THE WORLD'

After Trump was elected, he put the Trump Organization into a trust overseen by his eldest son, Donald Trump Jr., and longtime finance chief, Weisselberg.

Trump claimed he did so not because it was required but because he wanted to be a "legitimate president" and avoid appearance of a conflict of interest.

Plus, Trump said, he was busy solving the world's problems — like preventing North Korean dictator Kim Jong Un from launching a nuclear attack.

"I considered this the most important job in the world, saving millions of lives," Trump testified. "I think you would have nuclear holocaust if I didn't deal with North Korea. I think you would have a nuclear war, if I weren't elected. And I think you might have a nuclear war now, if you want to know the truth."

NOW WE'RE TALKING

Trump's often garrulous testimony was a 180-degree turn from the approach he took when James sum-

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moned him for questioning in August 2022 — before her lawsuit or any of the four criminal cases against him were filed.

At that first deposition, Trump invoked his Fifth Amendment privilege against self-incrimination and refused to answer questions more than 400 times. Trump said he did so because he was certain politically motivated prosecutors would use his answers as a basis for criminal charges.

By April, Trump changed his mind and responded to even simple questions at such length that his interrogator, James' deputy Kevin Wallace, suggested he was trying to run out the clock.

"Chris, we're going to be here until midnight if your client answers every question with an eight-minute speech," he said to one of Trump's lawyers, Christopher Kise.

Trump, though, seemed aware there was a risk in going on and on.

In the middle of one of his protracted answers, expounding on the greatness of one of his golf courses, Trump said: "You are going to let me go on, hoping that I make a mistake. And that's OK. That's the way it is. Perry Mason. Perry Mason."

OBSTRUCTED VIEW

Trump testified at the attorney general's Manhattan office, across the street from 40 Wall Street — a skyscraper labeled "The Trump Building" in big, gold letters.

Asked how the building was doing, financially, Trump answered: "Good. It's right here. Would you like to see it?"

"I don't think we're allowed to open the windows," Wallace said.

"Open the curtain," Trump suggested.

"No," Wallace said.

"Open the curtain, go ahead," Trump said. "It's right here. I just looked out the window."

"Can't open it?" Trump lawyer Clifford Robert asked, after a beat.

"I wouldn't," Wallace said.

'BEAUTIFUL' AND 'INCREDIBLE'

Trump showed off his knack for superlatives, uttering the words "beautiful" and "incredible" 15 times each and "phenomenal" six times as he described his properties.

Trump called his Turnberry, Scotland, golf course "one of the most iconic places in the world," and the renovated villas at his Doral golf resort near Miami "the most beautiful rooms you've ever seen."

Trump described his 213-acre Seven Springs estate north of New York City as "the greatest house in New York State."

His golf courses in Aberdeen, Scotland? "Really incredible." Jupiter, Florida? "An incredible facility." Just outside Los Angeles? "An incredible property ... an unbelievable property ... a phenomenal property that fronts on the ocean."

"I don't want to sell any of them," Trump testified. "But if I ever sold them — if I ever put some of these things up for sale — I would get numbers that were staggering."

He said he could get \$1.5 billion for his Mar-a-Lago estate in Florida and maybe \$2.5 billion for Doral.

Trump suggested he could get "a fortune" from the Saudi Arabia-backed LIV golf league for the Turnberry course, a former British Open site.

"There would be people that would do anything to own Doral. There are people that would do anything to own Turnberry or Mar-a-Lago or ... Trump Tower or 40 Wall Street."

'Walking Dead' spinoffs, 'Interview With the Vampire' can resume with actors' union approval

By ANDREW DALTON AP Entertainment Writer

LOS ANGELES (AP) — A pair of spinoffs of "The Walking Dead" and the next season of "Interview With the Vampire" can resume production despite the ongoing Hollywood strikes after reaching an agreement with the actors' union.

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The three AMC series are the highest-profile television productions yet to get what's known as an interim agreement from the Screen Actors Guild-American Federation of Television and Radio Artists.

The approval was granted Wednesday because the cable channel AMC and production company Stalwart Films are not part of the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers — the coalition of studios the actors are striking against — though they are what's known as "authorized companies" that abide by the contracts reached by the AMPTP.

"The Walking Dead: Daryl Dixon" and "Interview With the Vampire" will now resume shooting their second seasons. And the deal will allow actors to do post-production work on the first season of "The Walking Dead: Those Who Live."

No new writing will be allowed on the series because the Writers Guild of America, in perhaps the most significant divergence in strategy with the actors union, has opted not to grant any such agreements.

SAG-AFTRA's tactic of granting interim agreements — which have been given to hundreds of films and shows produced outside the major studios so long as they grant actors the terms the union asked for in their last offer before the strike began July 12 — has drawn objections from many union members who feel they're undermining their objectives.

Union leaders, while conceding that they did an insufficient job of explaining the strategy at first, have consistently defended it and touted its effectiveness in recent weeks. They say the productions show that their demands are not unreasonable, and they allow others in Hollywood to work.

"I think that there's a greater understanding of the interim agreements, and a realization that actually helping journeyman performers and crew have opportunities for work is going to maintain our resolve" SAG-AFTRA president Fran Drescher told The Associated Press last week. "We don't want to get caught in a place where we feel like we have to compromise our principles because people are desperate to get back to work."

Election workers have gotten death threats and warnings they will be lynched, the US government says

By LINDSAY WHITEHURST and CHRISTINA A. CASSIDY Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — More than a dozen people nationally have been charged with threatening election workers by a Justice Department unit trying to stem the tide of violent and graphic threats against people who count and secure the vote.

Government employees are being bombarded with threats even in normally quiet periods between elections, secretaries of state and experts warn. Some point to former President Donald Trump and his allies repeatedly and falsely claiming the 2020 election was stolen and spreading conspiracy theories about election workers. Experts fear the 2024 election could be worse and want the federal government to do more to protect election workers.

The Justice Department created the Election Threats Task Force in 2021 led by its public integrity section, which investigates election crimes. John Keller, the unit's second in command, said in an interview with The Associated Press that the department hoped its prosecutions would deter others from threatening election workers.

"This isn't going to be taken lightly. It's not going to be trivialized," he said. "Federal judges, the courts are taking misconduct seriously and the punishments are going to be commensurate with the seriousness of the conduct."

Two more men pleaded guilty Thursday to threatening election workers in Arizona and Georgia in separate cases. Attorney General Merrick Garland said the Justice Department would keep up the investigations, adding, "A functioning democracy requires that the public servants who administer our elections are able to do their jobs without fearing for their lives."

The unit has filed 14 cases and two have resulted in yearslong prison sentences, including a 2 1/2-year sentence Monday for Mark Rissi, an Iowa man charged with leaving a message threatening to "lynch" and "hang" an Arizona election official. He had been "inundated with misinformation" and now "feels horrible"

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about the messages he left, his lawyer Anthony Knowles said.

A Texas man was given 3 1/2 years earlier this month after suggesting a "mass shooting of poll workers and election officials" last year, charges stated. In one message, the Justice Department said, the man wrote: "Someone needs to get these people AND their children. The children are the most important message to send." His lawyer did not return a message seeking comment.

One indictment unveiled in August was against a man accused of leaving an expletive-filled voicemail after the 2020 election for Tina Barton, a Republican who formerly was the clerk in Rochester Hills, Michigan, outside Detroit. According to the indictment, the person vowed that "a million plus patriots will surround you when you least expect it" and "we'll ... kill you."

Barton said it was just one of many threats that left her feeling deeply anxious.

"I'm really hopeful the charges will send a strong message, and we won't find ourselves in the same position after the next election," she said.

Normally, the periods between elections are quiet for the workers who run voting systems around the U.S. But for many, that's no longer true, said Colorado Secretary of State Jena Griswold, a Democrat who has pushed back against conspiracy theories surrounding elections.

"I anticipate it will get worse as we end this year and go into the presidential election next year," Griswold said.

Griswold said the threats come in "waves," usually following social media posts by prominent figures about false claims the 2020 election was stolen or blog posts on far-right websites. While the nation is more informed about the threats to election workers, she worries that there haven't been enough prosecutions and states haven't taken enough action to protect workers.

"Do we have the best tools to get through the next period of time? Absolutely not," Griswold said.

Election officials note that there have been thousands of threats nationwide yet relatively few prosecutions. They say they understand the high bar to actually prosecute a case but that more could be done.

Liz Howard, a former Virginia election official now at the Brennan Center for Justice's elections and government program, called on the Justice Department to hire a senior adviser with existing relationships with election officials to improve outreach.

About 1 in 5 election workers know someone who left their election job for safety reasons and 73% of local election officials said harassment has increased, according to a Brennan Center survey published in April.

The task force has reviewed more than 2,000 reports of threats and harassment across the country since its inception, though most of those cases haven't brought charges from prosecutors who point to the high legal bar set by the Supreme Court for criminal prosecution. Communication must be considered a "true threat," one that crosses a line to a serious intent to hurt someone, in order to be a potential crime rather than free speech, Keller said.

"We are not criminalizing or frankly discouraging free speech by actions that we're taking from a law enforcement perspective," he said.

The task force's work is unfolding at a time when Trump and other Republicans have accused the Biden administration of using the Justice Department to target political opponents, although the task force itself hasn't been targeted publicly by Republicans.

Many GOP leaders have sharply criticized the federal prosecutions of Trump and of rioters who stormed the Capitol on Jan. 6, 2021, and Trump himself faces a federal indictment in Washington, D.C., and a state indictment in Georgia over his efforts to overturn 2020 election results. He has denied wrongdoing and said he was acting within the law. A series of federal and state investigations and dozens of lawsuits have not uncovered any evidence the election was rigged.

Trump is the front-runner for the GOP nomination for president in 2024 and continues in his speeches and online posts to argue the 2020 election was rigged.

For many election workers, the threats have been a major driving factor to leave the job, hollowing out the ranks of experience ahead of 2024, said Dokhi Fassihian, the deputy chief of strategy and program at

Issue One, a nonpartisan reform group representing election officials.

About 1 in 5 election officials in 2024 will have begun service after the 2020 election, the Brennan Center survey found.

"Many are deciding it's just not worth it to stay," Fasshian said.

Trump pleads not guilty in Georgia election subversion case, seeks to sever his case from others

By KATE BRUMBACK Associated Press

ATLANTA (AP) — Former President Donald Trump pleaded not guilty on Thursday and sought to sever his case from some other defendants who are accused along with him of illegally trying to overturn the results of the 2020 election in Georgia.

Fulton County Superior Court Judge Scott McAfee had set arraignment hearings on Sept. 6 for Trump and the 18 others charged in the case. Trump's court filing entering a not guilty plea also waived arraignment, meaning he won't have to show up for that.

The decision to skip an in-person appearance averts the dramatic arraignments that have accompanied the three other criminal cases Trump faces, in which the Republican former president has been forced amid tight security into a courtroom and entered "not guilty" pleas before crowds of spectators. Georgia courts have fairly permissive rules on news cameras in the courtroom, and this means Trump won't have to enter a plea on television.

McAfee said Thursday that he planned to allow live-streaming of the trial on a Fulton County-provided YouTube channel. He said he would also allow video and photographs to be shot by press pool members.

Trump and 18 others were charged earlier this month in a 41-count indictment that outlines an alleged scheme to subvert the will of Georgia voters who had chosen Democrat Joe Biden over the Republican incumbent in the presidential election.

An attorney for Trump also asked McAfee on Thursday to separate his case from those of defendants who have asked for an expedited trial. The judge has already set an Oct. 23 trial date for one of those defendants. Giving the former president less than two months to prepare a defense against a 98-page indictment would "violate President Trump's federal and state constitutional rights to a fair trial and due process of law," attorney Steve Sadow said in a court filing.

Fulton County District Attorney Fani Willis has said she wants all of the defendants tried together. After one defendant filed a demand for a speedy trial, she asked the judge to set an Oct. 23 trial date for everyone.

Thursday's developments add to the pre-trial legal jousting that has dominated the two weeks since the indictment was brought, underscoring the complexities inherent in attempting to bring 19 defendants to trial at once — including an ex-president — and foreshadowing the delays ahead as judges sift through competing arguments from the defendants.

Jenna Ellis, an attorney who prosecutors say was involved in efforts to persuade state lawmakers to unlawfully appoint presidential electors, also pleaded not guilty and waived arraignment Thursday.

Three other people charged in the indictment had already waived arraignment in filings with the court, saving them a repeat trip to Atlanta after they all turned themselves in at the Fulton County Jail last week. Trump surrendered at the jail on Aug. 24, where he became the first former president to have a mug shot taken.

The case, filed under Georgia's Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations Act, or RICO, is sprawling, and the logistics of bringing it to trial are likely to be complicated.

At least two defendants have filed demands for a speedy trial and have asked to be tried separately from others in the case. The judge set an Oct. 23 trial date for one of them, Kenneth Chesebro, a lawyer who worked on the coordination and execution of a plan to have 16 Georgia Republicans sign a certificate falsely stating that Trump won the state and declaring themselves the state's "duly elected and qualified" electors.

Some of the others charged are trying to move their cases to federal court. A judge on Monday heard

arguments on such a request by former White House chief of staff Mark Meadows, but the judge did not immediately rule.

Trump, the front-runner in the 2024 Republican presidential primary, has criticized the cases against him as part of a politically motivated attempt to keep him from winning back the White House.

White man will stand trial for shooting Black teen Ralph Yarl, who went to wrong house, judge rules

By HEATHER HOLLINGSWORTH Associated Press

KANSAS CITY, Mo. (AP) — A Missouri judge ruled Thursday that the 84-year-old white homeowner who shot a Black teenager after he mistakenly went to the man's house must stand trial.

Clay County Judge Louis Angles issued the ruling after a dozen witnesses spoke at a preliminary hearing, including Ralph Yarl, the teenager who was shot by Andrew Lester on April 13 when Yarl went to the wrong house to pick up his younger brothers.

Lester, a retired aircraft mechanic, is charged with first-degree assault and armed criminal action. He previously pleaded not guilty in the shooting that shocked the country and renewed national debates about gun policies and race in America. His next court date is an arraignment, scheduled for Sept. 20.

Yarl spoke softly as he testified that he was sent to pick up his twin siblings but had no phone — he'd lost it at school. The house he intended to go to was just blocks from his own home, but he had the street wrong.

Yarl said he rang the bell and the wait for someone to answer for what seemed "longer than normal."

As the inner door opened, Yarl said he reached out to grab the storm door.

"I assume these are my brothers' friends' parents," he said.

Instead, it was Lester, who told him, "Don't come here ever again," Yarl recalled. He said he was shot in the head, the impact knocking him to the ground, and was then shot in the arm.

Lester's attorney, Steve Salmon, said in closing arguments that Lester was acting in self-defense, terrified by the stranger who knocked on his door as he settled into bed for the night.

"With his age and physical infirmity, he is unable to defend himself," Salmon said, describing Lester as distraught after the shooting.

"A terrible event occurred, but it is not criminal," Salmon said.

To make the self-defense case, Salmon focused heavily on the teen grabbing for the storm door, questioning the fact that Yarl initially said he hadn't. Yarl responded that the first interview with law enforcement happened on the same day he underwent neurological surgery.

The shot to his head left a bullet embedded in his skull, testified Dr. Jo Ling Goh, a pediatric neurosurgeon who treated Yarl. It did not penetrate his brain, however.

District Attorney Zachary Thompson said although Missouri law offers protections for people defending themselves, "You do not have the right to shoot an unarmed kid through a door."

Kansas City Officer Larry Dunaway described Lester as "an elderly guy who was scared" after the shooting. Another officer, James Gale, said Lester was clearly worried.

"He said he hoped he didn't kill anybody," Gale testified.

He said surveillance cameras would have allowed Lester to see Yarl pull up to his house. Crime scene workers testified surveillance cameras broadcast views from the front door and driveway onto monitors in Lester's bedroom, although the footage wasn't recorded.

Salmon told reporters after the hearing that he doesn't think Lester watched the monitors, although he said he never asked him.

A handful of people wearing shirts that said "Justice for Ralph" were in the courtroom. Others wore shirts that read: "Ringling a doorbell is not a crime."

Yarl continues to heal from the traumatic brain injury he suffered but was able to complete an engineering internship this summer and just started his senior year in high school. The 17-year-old is planning to major in engineering when he graduates, with several college visits planned for the fall.

Lester told authorities he shot Yarl through the door without warning because he was "scared to death" he was about to be robbed.

Initially turned away while seeking help at neighboring homes, Yarl stumbled to the street. Neighbor Carol Conrad testified that she was offering words of comfort through her window — a dispatcher had warned neighbors should stay inside. At one point, he yelled, "I've been shot."

When Yarl crumpled to the ground, three neighbors rushed to help. Jodi Dovel testified there was a trail of blood, which pooled under his head. But Yarl was able to talk, telling her he went to ring the doorbell and was shot.

"I thought, 'Oh no, he went to the wrong house,'" Dovel said.

Lester also called 911. On the recording played in court, he could be heard telling a dispatcher, "I shot him. He was at my door trying to get in and I shot him."

Missouri is one of about 30 states with "stand your ground" laws that allow people to respond with physical force when they are threatened.

Salmon has said Lester's home was egged and spray-painted after the shooting. He said Lester has sought law enforcement assistance when traveling, and his wife had to be moved from her nursing home.

Yarl's father, Paul Yarl, said during a break that he was moved hearing the neighbors testify. Some of the details were new to him. He said his son has mainly recovered physically but still struggles psychologically. He relives the night and has bad dreams.

"It was horrible. Blood. Shooting. Nobody wanted to come until police arrived," he said.

He said he was not frustrated with the bystanders.

"I'm more frustrated with the shooter," Paul Yarl said. "He started it. He didn't want to talk to the boy. He just shot the boy. And now he tries to play the fear card and he's afraid. He should be afraid, he is going to kill somebody. Come on, now."

Race was discussed little at the hearing, other than one neighbor saying Yarl didn't have a history of making racist remarks. Thompson, the prosecutor, said simply that he is focused on proving what is required by the law and that doesn't involve a racial component.

But Faith Spoonmore, Yarl's aunt, looked into the afternoon sun when asked if race was an element of the shooting. "Is it sunny outside?" she asked.

Support for Yarl and his family poured in over the past few months. A GoFundMe set up on the family's behalf raised nearly \$3.5 million.

Residents pick through the rubble of lost homes and scattered belongings in Hurricane Idalia's wake

By REBECCA BLACKWELL and LAURA BARGFELD Associated Press

HORSESHOE BEACH, Fla. (AP) — Florida and Georgia residents living along Hurricane Idalia's path of destruction on Thursday picked through piles of rubble where homes once stood, threw tarps over ripped-apart roofs and gingerly navigated streets left underwater or clogged with fallen trees and dangerous electric wires.

"My plan today is to go around and find anything that's in the debris that is salvageable and clean out my storage shed," said Aimee Firestine of Cedar Key, an island located in the remote Big Bend area where Idalia roared ashore with 125 mph (201 kph) winds Wednesday.

Firestine rode out Idalia about 40 minutes inland. When she drove back onto the island hours after the storm passed, her heart sank. The gas station was gone. Trees were toppled. Power lines were on the ground. An entire building belonging to the 12-unit Faraway Inn her family owns had been wiped away. Another building lost a wall.

"It was a little heart-wrenching and depressing," Firestine said.

At Horseshoe Beach in central Big Bend, James Nobles returned to find his home had survived the storm, though many his neighbors weren't as lucky.

"The town, I mean, it's devastated," Nobles said. "It's probably 50 or 60 homes here, totally destroyed."

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I'm a lucky one, a few limbs on my house. But we're going to build back. We're going to be strong."

Residents of the tiny town, most of whom evacuated inland during the storm, helped each other clear debris or collect belongings — high school trophies, photos, records, china. They frequently stopped to hug amid tears. Six-foot-high watermarks stained walls still standing, marking the extent of the storm surge.

Florida officials said there was one hurricane-related death in the Gainesville area, but didn't release any details. The state's highway patrol reported earlier that two people were killed in separate weather-related crashes just hours before Idalia made landfall.

A man in Valdosta, Georgia, died when a tree fell on him as he tried to clear another tree out of the road, Lowndes County Sheriff Ashley Paulk said.

As many as a half-million customers were without power at one point in Florida and Georgia as the storm ripped down utility poles.

The storm had 90 mph (145 kph) winds when it made a direct hit on Valdosta on Wednesday, Georgia Gov. Brian Kemp said.

"We're fortunate this storm was a narrow one, and it was fast moving and didn't sit on us," Kemp told a news conference Thursday in Atlanta. "But if you were in the path, it was devastating. And we're responding that way."

Desmond Roberson of Valdosta was shocked when he took a drive through the city of 55,000 with a friend to check out the damage. On one street, he said, a tree had fallen on nearly every house. Roads remained blocked by tree trunks and downed powerlines and traffic lights were still blacked out at major intersections.

"It's a maze. ... I had to turn around three times, just because roads were blocked off," Roberson said.

Chris Exum, a farmer in the south Georgia town of Quitman, estimates that he lost half or more of his pecan crop from Idalia, which he said left "a wall of green" with downed trees and limbs.

Some of the trees are 40 to 50 years old, he noted. "It takes a long time to get back to that point."

Rescue and repair efforts were in full force Thursday in Florida's Big Bend area, where Idalia shredded homes, ripped off roofs, snapped tall trees, and turned streets into rivers.

Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis toured the area with his wife, Casey, and federal emergency officials.

"I've seen a lot of really heartbreaking damage," he said, noting a church that had been swamped by more than 4 feet (1.2 meters) of water. "When you have your whole life's work into, say, a business that ends up under 5 feet (of water) — that's a lot of work that you've got to do going forward."

Tammy Bryan, a member of the severely damaged First Baptist Church, said Horseshoe Beach residents consider themselves a family, one largely anchored by the church.

"It's a breath of fresh air here," Bryan said. "It's beautiful sunsets, beautiful sunrises. We have all of old Florida right here. And today we feel like it's been taken away."

Marina worker Kerry Ford said he was glad so many people in Horseshoe Beach ultimately decided to evacuate. He said he had to convince several people to go.

"I have seen these storms and I told them, look, this is not one you want to stay for because I knew it was going to be catastrophic," Ford said. "It wasn't going to be much left. And if you stayed, your first thing, I ask them, can you all tread water for a couple of hours? Because that's pretty much what it's going to be."

Despite the widespread destruction in the Big Bend, where Florida's Panhandle curves into the peninsula, it provided only glancing blows to Tampa Bay and other more populated areas, DeSantis noted. In contrast, Hurricane Ian last year hit the heavily populated Fort Myers area, leaving 149 dead in the state.

President Joe Biden spoke to DeSantis and promised whatever federal aid is available. Biden also announced that he will go to Florida on Saturday to see the damage himself.

The president used a news conference at the Federal Emergency Management Agency's headquarters to send a message to Congress, especially those lawmakers who are balking at his request for \$12 billion in emergency funding to respond to natural disasters.

"We need this disaster relief request met and we need it in September" after Congress returns from

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recess, said Biden, who had pizza delivered to FEMA employees who have been working around the clock on Idalia and the devastating wildfires on Maui, Hawaii.

Before heading out into the Atlantic Thursday, Idalia swung east, flooding many of South Carolina's beaches and leaving some in the state and North Carolina without power. Forecasters said the weakened storm should continue heading away from the U.S. for several days, although officials in Bermuda warned that Idalia could hit the island early next week as a tropical storm.

In South Carolina, the storm coupled with already really high tides to send seawater flowing over sand dunes in nearly every beach town. In Charleston, Idalia's surge topped part of the seawall that protects the downtown, sending ocean water into the streets and neighborhoods where horse-drawn carriages pass million-dollar homes and the famous open-air market.

Preliminary data showed the Wednesday evening high tide reached just over 9.2 feet (2.8 meters), more than 3 feet (0.9 meters) above normal and the fifth-highest reading in Charleston Harbor since records were first kept in 1899.

Bands from Idalia also brought short-lived tornadoes. One flipped a car in suburban Goose Creek, South Carolina, causing minor injuries, authorities said. No major damage was reported.

In southeastern North Carolina, more than 9 inches (23 centimeters) of rain fell in Whiteville, flooding downtown buildings. The downpour swelled creeks and rivers and forecasters warned places downstream on the Pee Dee and Lumber rivers could flood, although it will be well below the historic crests that devastated entire towns after Hurricanes Florence and Matthew.

Two ex-Proud Boys leaders get some of longest sentences in Jan. 6 Capitol attack

By MICHAEL KUNZELMAN and LINDSAY WHITEHURST Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Two former leaders of the far-right Proud Boys extremist group were sentenced to more than a decade each in prison Thursday for spearheading an attack on the U.S. Capitol to try to prevent the peaceful transfer of power from Donald Trump to Joe Biden after the 2020 presidential election.

The 17-year prison term for organizer Joseph Biggs and 15-year sentence for leader Zachary Rehl were the second and third longest sentences handed down yet in the Jan. 6, 2021, attack.

They were the first Proud Boys to be sentenced by U.S. District Judge Timothy Kelly, who will separately preside over similar hearings of three others who were convicted by a jury in May after a four-month trial in Washington that laid bare far-right extremists' embrace of lies by Trump, a Republican, that the 2020 election was stolen from him.

Enrique Tarrío, a Miami resident who was the Proud Boys' national chairman and top leader, is scheduled to be sentenced Tuesday. His sentencing was moved from Wednesday to next week because U.S. District Judge Kelly was sick.

Tarrío wasn't in Washington on Jan. 6. He had been arrested two days before the Capitol riot on charges that he defaced a Black Lives Matter banner during an earlier rally in the nation's capital, and he complied with a judge's order to leave the city after his arrest. He picked Biggs and Proud Boys chapter president Ethan Nordean to be the group's leaders on the ground in his absence, prosecutors said.

Rehl, Biggs, Tarrío and Nordean were convicted of charges including seditious conspiracy, a rarely brought Civil War-era offense. A fifth Proud Boys member, Dominic Pezzola, was acquitted of seditious conspiracy but convicted of other serious charges.

Federal prosecutors had recommended a 33-year prison sentence for Biggs, who helped lead dozens of Proud Boys members and associates in marching to the U.S. Capitol on Jan. 6. Biggs and other Proud Boys joined the mob that broke through police lines and forced lawmakers to flee, disrupting the joint session of Congress for certifying the electoral victory by Biden, a Democrat.

Kelly said the Jan. 6 attack trampled on an "important American custom," certifying the Electoral College vote.

"That day broke our tradition of peacefully transferring power, which is among the most precious things

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that we had as Americans," the judge said, emphasizing that he was using the past tense in light of how Jan. 6 affected the process.

Defense attorneys argued that the Justice Department was unfairly holding their clients responsible for the violent actions of others in the crowd of Trump supporters at the Capitol.

Biggs, of Ormond Beach, Florida, acknowledged that he "messed up" on Jan. 6, but he blamed being "seduced by the crowd" of Trump supporters outside the Capitol and said he's not a violent person or "a terrorist."

"My curiosity got the better of me, and I'll have to live with that for the rest of my life," he said, claiming he didn't have "hate in my heart" and didn't want to hurt people.

During the trial, jurors saw a trove of messages that Proud Boys leaders privately exchanged in the weeks leading up to the Capitol riot, including Biggs encouraging Tarrío to "get radical and get real men" after Trump announced plans for a rally on Jan. 6.

That day, dozens of Proud Boys leaders, members and associates were among the first rioters to breach the Capitol. Before the first breach, Biggs used a megaphone to lead rioters in chants of "Whose Capitol? Our Capitol!"

Biggs "acted as the tip of the spear" during the attack, prosecutors said in a court filing. He tore down a fence and charged up scaffolding before entering the Capitol. He left the Capitol but reentered the building and went to the Senate chamber.

"There is a reason why we will hold our collective breath as we approach future elections," prosecutor Jason McCullough said. "We never gave it a second thought before January 6th."

For Rehl, who also helped lead Proud Boys, prosecutors asked for a 30-year prison sentence. He was seen on video spraying a chemical irritant at law enforcement officers outside the Capitol on Jan. 6, but he repeatedly lied about that assault while he testified at his trial, said prosecutor Erik Kenerson. "He tried to craft a narrative to fit the evidence and he was caught," Kenerson said.

Rehl also led at least three other men into the Capitol and into a senator's office, where he smoked and posed for pictures while flashing the Proud Boys' hand gesture, prosecutors said in court documents.

"Rehl led an army to attempt to stop the certification proceeding, was proud that they got as close as they did, and his only regret in the immediate aftermath was that they did not go further," they wrote in a court filing.

Kelly read from some of the "chilling" messages Rehl sent after Jan. 6, including one, the judge said, that read, "Everyone should have showed up armed and taken the country back the right way." The judge shook his head and said, "I mean, my God."

Rehl sobbed as he told the judge he deeply regretted being at the Capitol that day. "I'm done with all of it, done peddling lies for other people who don't care about me," Rehl said. "Politicians started spreading lies about the election, and I fell for it hook, line and sinker."

Defense attorney Norman Pattis, who represents Biggs and Rehl, said they are "misguided patriots," not terrorists, and said long sentences would fuel division.

Rehl and others who rioted at the Capitol that day were following Trump's urging, and genuinely believed that something was fundamentally wrong with the election when they took to the streets, he said. "What they're guilty of is believing the president who said the election was stolen from him," Pattis said.

Kelly acknowledged that was a factor, but a "very modest one."

Prosecutors have also recommended prison sentences of 33 years for Tarrío, 27 years for Nordean and 20 years for Pezzola. Nordean and Pezzola are scheduled to be sentenced Friday.

More than 1,100 people have been charged with Capitol riot-related federal crimes. Over 600 of them have been convicted and sentenced.

The 18-year prison sentence for Oath Keepers founder Stewart Rhodes is the harshest punishment for a Jan. 6 so far. Six members of the anti-government Oath Keepers also were convicted of seditious conspiracy after a separate trial last year.

The National Shooting Sports Foundation, an industry trade group, said it has "significant concerns" about the proposed rule, arguing it appears to go beyond what the bipartisan legislation allows and could require "ordinary citizens" to become licensed. It warned of a court challenge if the rule is finalized as written.

The proposed rule will be open for public comment for 90 days. It was not immediately clear when it might become final.

US regulators might change how they classify marijuana. Here's what that would mean

By JENNIFER PELTZ Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — The news lit up the world of weed: U.S. health regulators are suggesting that the federal government loosen restrictions on marijuana.

Specifically, the federal Health and Human Services Department has recommended taking marijuana out of a category of drugs deemed to have "no currently accepted medical use and a high potential for abuse." The agency advised moving pot from that "Schedule I" group to the less tightly regulated "Schedule III."

So what does that mean, and what are the implications? Read on.

FIRST OF ALL, WHAT HAS ACTUALLY CHANGED? WHAT HAPPENS NEXT?

Technically, nothing yet. Any decision on reclassifying — or "rescheduling," in government lingo — is up to the Drug Enforcement Administration, which says it will take up the issue. The review process is lengthy and involves taking public comment.

Still, the HHS recommendation is "paradigm-shifting, and it's very exciting," said Vince Sliwoski, a Portland, Oregon-based cannabis and psychedelics attorney who runs well-known legal blogs on those topics. "I can't emphasize enough how big of news it is," he said.

It came after President Joe Biden asked both HHS and the attorney general, who oversees the DEA, last year to review how marijuana was classified. Schedule I put it on par, legally, with heroin, LSD, quaaludes and ecstasy, among others.

Biden, a Democrat, supports legalizing medical marijuana for use "where appropriate, consistent with medical and scientific evidence," White House press secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said Thursday. "That is why it is important for this independent review to go through."

SO IF MARIJUANA GETS RECLASSIFIED, WOULD IT LEGALIZE RECREATIONAL POT NATIONWIDE?

No. Schedule III drugs — which include ketamine, anabolic steroids and some acetaminophen-codeine combinations — are still controlled substances.

They're subject to various rules that allow for some medical uses, and for federal criminal prosecution of anyone who traffics in the drugs without permission. (Even under marijuana's current Schedule I status, federal prosecutions for simply possessing it are few: There were 145 federal sentencing in fiscal year 2021 for that crime, and as of 2022, no defendants were in prison for it.)

It's unlikely that the medical marijuana programs now licensed in 38 states — to say nothing of the legal recreational pot markets in 23 states — would meet the production, record-keeping, prescribing and other requirements for Schedule III drugs.

But rescheduling in itself would have some impact, particularly on research and on pot business taxes.

WHAT WOULD THIS MEAN FOR RESEARCH?

Because marijuana is on Schedule I, it's been very difficult to conduct authorized clinical studies that involve administering the drug. That has created something of a Catch-22: calls for more research, but barriers to doing it. (Scientists sometimes rely instead on people's own reports of their marijuana use.)

Schedule III drugs are easier to study.

In the meantime, a 2022 federal law aimed to ease marijuana research.

WHAT ABOUT TAXES (AND BANKING)?

Under the federal tax code, businesses involved in "trafficking" in marijuana or any other Schedule I or II drug can't deduct rent, payroll or various other expenses that other businesses can write off. (Yes, at least some cannabis businesses, particularly state-licensed ones, do pay taxes to the federal government,

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despite its prohibition on marijuana.) Industry groups say the tax rate often ends up at 70% or more.

The deduction rule doesn't apply to Schedule III drugs, so the proposed change would cut pot companies' taxes substantially.

They say it would treat them like other industries and help them compete against illegal competitors that are frustrating licensees and officials in places such as New York.

"You're going to make these state-legal programs stronger," says Adam Goers, an executive at medical and recreational pot giant Columbia Care. He co-chairs a coalition of corporate and other players that's pushing for rescheduling.

Rescheduling wouldn't directly affect another pot business problem: difficulty accessing banks, particularly for loans, because the federally regulated institutions are wary of the drug's legal status. The industry has been looking instead to a measure called the SAFE Banking Act. It has repeatedly passed the House but stalled in the Senate.

ARE THERE CRITICS? WHAT DO THEY SAY?

Indeed, there are, including the national anti-legalization group Smart Approaches to Marijuana. President Kevin Sabet, a former Obama administration drug policy official, said the HHS recommendation "flies in the face of science, reeks of politics" and gives a regrettable nod to an industry "desperately looking for legitimacy."

Some legalization advocates say rescheduling weed is too incremental. They want to keep focus on removing it completely from the controlled substances list, which doesn't include such items as alcohol or tobacco (they're regulated, but that's not the same).

National Organization for the Reform of Marijuana Laws Deputy Director Paul Armentano said that simply reclassifying marijuana would be "perpetuating the existing divide between state and federal marijuana policies." Minority Cannabis Business Association President Kaliko Castille said rescheduling just "re-brands prohibition," rather than giving an all-clear to state licensees and putting a definitive close to decades of arrests that disproportionately pulled in people of color.

"Schedule III is going to leave it in this kind of amorphous, mucky middle where people are not going to understand the danger of it still being federally illegal," he said.

A judge has blocked, for now, a Texas law drag show performers fear will shut them down

By JUAN A. LOZANO Associated Press

HOUSTON (AP) — A federal judge on Thursday temporarily blocked a new Texas law that drag show artists fear will be used to shut them down or put them in jail.

The law, approved by the Republican-controlled Legislature, would expand the legal definition in the Texas criminal code of what is considered to be an illegal public performance of sexual conduct in front of children. It is part of a broader effort in Texas and other conservative states to crack down on drag shows and limit LGBTQ rights.

Critics argued that the definition is so broad, it could include the Dallas Cowboys cheerleaders.

U.S. District Judge David Hittner in Houston issued the temporary restraining order after a group of drag performers and LGBTQ+ rights advocates sought to keep the law from taking effect on Friday. During a two-day court hearing earlier this week, drag performers and advocates said the new law threatened their livelihoods and would censor their freedom of expression.

In his order, Hittner agreed with those who filed the lawsuit that the new law is likely unconstitutional because it violates their First Amendment rights. Hittner said he issued the temporary restraining order to immediately stop the law while he prepares a more permanent order in the case.

"This temporary order is a much-needed reprieve for all Texans, especially our LGBTQIA+ and transgender community, who have been relentlessly targeted by our state legislature," said Brian Klosterboer, an attorney with the American Civil Liberties Union of Texas, which filed the lawsuit on behalf of the plaintiffs.

The Texas Attorney General's Office, which represented the state in the lawsuit, said the law was passed "to protect children and uphold public decency."

Biden administration proposes rule that would require more firearms dealers to run background checks

By LINDSAY WHITEHURST Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Biden administration is proposing a rule that would require thousands more firearms dealers to run background checks, in an effort to combat rising gun violence nationwide.

The proposal comes after a mandate from President Joe Biden to find ways to strengthen background checks following the passage of bipartisan legislation on guns last year.

People who sell firearms online, at gun shows or other places outside brick-and-mortar stores would be required to be licensed and run background checks on the buyers before the sales under the rule proposed by the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives.

A firearm-industry trade group swiftly raised concerns about the proposal, though, and said it could face a court challenge if finalized in its current form.

The bureau estimates that the rule would affect anywhere from 24,500 to 328,000 sellers. It is aimed at those who are in the business of gun sales, rather than those with personal collections.

Background checks help prevent guns from being sold to people convicted of crimes, teenagers and others who are legally blocked from owning them, said the agency's director, Steve Dettelbach. Federally licensed firearm dealers are also required to keep records and sell guns with serial numbers, both of which help law enforcement trace weapons used in crimes.

"Unlicensed dealers sell guns without running background checks, without keeping records, without observing the other crucial public safety requirements by which the (federally licensed firearm dealer) community abides," he said.

Attorney General Merrick Garland said Congress passed the gun legislation to reduce gun violence, including by expanding background checks, and said the new rule implements that mandate.

Overall, stricter gun laws are desired by a majority of Americans and in particular background checks, regardless of what the current gun laws are in their state, according to a recent AP-NORC poll on guns. That desire could be tied to some Americans' perceived impact of what fewer guns could mean for the country — namely, fewer mass shootings. As of Monday, there have been at least 33 mass killings in the U.S. so far in 2023, leaving at least 163 people dead, not including shooters who died, according to a database maintained by the AP and USA Today in partnership with Northeastern University.

Over the weekend, three Black people were shot to death by a white man wearing a mask and firing a weapon emblazoned with a swastika in Jacksonville, Florida. The shooter, who had purchased the weapons legally despite previously being involuntarily committed for a mental health exam, killed himself.

The legislation last year Congress passed was the most comprehensive gun control in 30 years and it followed a deadly mass shooting in a Uvalde, Texas, elementary school.

The 2022 law toughened background checks for the youngest gun buyers, sought to keep firearms from domestic violence offenders and aimed to help states put in place red flag laws that make it easier to take weapons away from people judged to be dangerous.

Biden has said the law doesn't go far enough. White House Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said Thursday the administration would continue to push for more gun control.

"This administration will do everything it can to combat the epidemic of gun violence that is tearing up our families, our communities and also our country apart," she said.

The Giffords Center to Prevent Gun Violence applauded the proposed rule change, saying it closes a "gaping loophole." Executive Director Peter Ambler said the Biden administration had taken a "giant step forward towards our goal of universal background checks."

Kris Brown, president of the gun control group Brady, said more than 1 in 5 gun sales in the U.S. are conducted without a background check.

Gun rights groups, on the other hand, have argued it would do little to stop the gun violence problem. Those advocates have previously quickly sued over other ATF rule changes that they argue infringe on gun rights.

"The people of Texas were appalled to learn of an increasing trend of obscene, sexually explicit so-called 'drag' performances being marketed to families with children. The Office of the Attorney General will pursue all legal remedies possible to aggressively defend" the law, said Paige Willey, a spokeswoman for the attorney general's office.

Gavyn Hardegree, president of Abilene Pride Alliance, one of the lawsuit's plaintiffs, said Gov. Greg Abbott and his political allies want to use "scare tactics and bigotry to erase LGBTQIA+ identities, especially Black and Brown nonbinary and trans Texans."

"Our organization works to create a safe space where every person has the freedom to express themselves free from government censorship, no matter our race and gender," Hardegree said.

The Texas order follows similar rulings against drag performance bans in states including Florida and Tennessee.

On Wednesday, another lawsuit was filed in Tennessee after a local district attorney warned he intended to enforce the state's law limiting drag shows despite a federal judge's earlier ruling that the ban was unconstitutional.

The new Texas law on sexual content in performances was promoted as a way of protecting children from seeing drag shows. Republican lawmakers amended it in response to criticism to remove some specific references to drag performances, but the sponsor's "statement of intent" still cites a need to protect children from seeing drag shows, and the final text broadened the scope of what's illegal in ways that would also cover many other performances done in front of children.

For example, it defines sexual conduct to include sexual gestures that use "accessories or prosthetics that exaggerate male or female sexual characteristics." The law also criminalizes real or simulated groping, real or simulated arousal, and the display of a sex toy if done in a "prurient" manner in front of a minor or on public property at a time and place where the performance could reasonably be expected to be viewed by a child.

Violators could face up to a year in jail, and businesses hosting performances deemed illegal could be fined \$10,000 for each violation.

Like Texas, Arkansas has a new law regulating adult-oriented performance that doesn't mention drag specifically but has raised concerns that it would be applied to drag performances. And Montana has a ban in effect that targets drag queen story hours, specifically.

The law's sponsor wrote that "the bill is not intended to stop theatrical or other similar exhibitions," even though it explicitly prohibits local governments from authorizing a "sexually oriented performance," according to its new definition, in the presence of people under 18 years old.

The lawsuit argues that the new law could ensnare television, movies and websites as well as all kinds of performances in addition to drag shows, including touring Broadway plays, karaoke nights, and restaurants staffed by scantily clad servers.

Aaron Rodgers' quest to turn Jets into contenders is NFL's top storyline entering the season

By ROB MAADDI AP Pro Football Writer

One No. 12 started the clock on the countdown to his gold jacket and another switched numbers, conferences and shades of green.

The biggest storyline in the first NFL season this century without Tom Brady centers on Aaron Rodgers' quest to turn the New York Jets into a championship contender. The 39-year-old, four-time NFL MVP left Green Bay for a team that hasn't reached the playoffs since the 2010 season and hasn't won a Super Bowl since Broadway Joe Namath guaranteed one more than 50 years ago.

Rodgers has plenty of talent surrounding him but the Jets play in one of the toughest divisions in the league and a conference loaded with contenders, including the defending Super Bowl champions.

Patrick Mahomes and the Kansas City Chiefs are aiming to become the first team to win consecutive titles

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since Brady led the New England Patriots to back-to-back rings in 2003-04. The Chiefs have dominated the AFC West under coach Andy Reid, capturing seven straight division crowns and hosting five consecutive conference championships.

Plenty of teams are standing in Kansas City's path to another deep run in January.

Joe Burrow and the Cincinnati Bengals are primed to return to the Super Bowl after falling short two years ago. Josh Allen and the Buffalo Bills are under pressure to get there after losing in the divisional round the past two seasons.

Sean Payton joined the Denver Broncos, hoping to help Russell Wilson regain his Pro Bowl form and turn the Denver Broncos into winners.

Doug Pederson, who won a Super Bowl in his second season in Philadelphia, will try to guide Jacksonville to make a similar leap after quickly rebuilding Urban Meyer's mess and leading the Jaguars to a playoff victory.

Then there's Justin Herbert and the Los Angeles Chargers, Lamar Jackson and the Baltimore Ravens, Tua Tagovailoa and the Miami Dolphins.

And that's just the AFC contenders.

Fewer teams enter the season with a legitimate chance to win it all, though it seems there's always a surprise team. Last year, it was the Philadelphia Eagles. Jalen Hurts and the stacked Eagles are hungry to hoist the Vince Lombardi trophy after wasting a late lead in a 38-35 loss to Mahomes and the Chiefs.

Dak Prescott, Mike McCarthy and the Dallas Cowboys are feeling pressure to lead America's Team back to glory for the first time in more than 25 years.

The San Francisco 49ers have a dominant defense, versatile offense and quarterback Brock Purdy is healthy again.

Dan Campbell's Detroit Lions are getting plenty of hype. Perhaps they can overtake the Minnesota Vikings and make a strong playoff push.

Five teams have first-year head coaches, including the Broncos who convinced Payton to end his one-year broadcasting stint and return to the sideline. Payton won a Super Bowl with Drew Brees in New Orleans and knows what it takes to get Wilson and the Broncos back to prominence.

The Carolina Panthers hired former Colts coach Frank Reich to lead a rebuild behind No. 1 overall pick Bryce Young. They've got a shot to compete in a weak NFC South.

AP Assistant Coach of the Year DeMeco Ryans took over in Houston. The Texans made bold moves to get QB C.J. Stroud and edge rusher Will Anderson with picks Nos. 2-3 in the draft.

A pair of former Eagles coordinators got the top job with teams that need a new direction. Shane Steichen landed in Indianapolis, which starts the season with rookie QB Anthony Richardson and without disgruntled star running back Jonathan Taylor. Jonathan Gannon went to Arizona, which is looking toward the future and collecting draft capital.

While Rodgers was the biggest name to change teams, a few more accomplished QBs got a fresh start.

Derek Carr traded the silver and black for gold and black in New Orleans. The Saints are the front-runner in a division that didn't have a winning team in 2022.

Baker Mayfield joins Carr in the NFC South, taking over for Brady in Tampa Bay. He has a chance to resurrect his career with the Buccaneers, who still have playmakers on offense and defense.

Jimmy Garoppolo ended up in Las Vegas, reuniting with Josh McDaniels. All Garoppolo does is win. He's 44-19, including playoffs. Getting the Raiders over .500 might be his toughest task yet.

The NFL is coming off a record-setting season filled with close games and dramatic finishes. Among the records set in 2022 were most games decided by six or fewer points (122), by seven or fewer points (141) and eight or fewer points (156); most games in which team overcame deficit of 10 or more points to win or tie (52); most games in which teams came back to win after trailing in fourth quarter (85).

The marathon starts Sept. 7 when the Lions visit the Chiefs in the first of 544 NFL games.

Get ready for some football.

Visual artists fight back against AI companies for repurposing their work

By JOCELYN NOVECK and MATT O'BRIEN Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — Kelly McKernan's acrylic and watercolor paintings are bold and vibrant, often featuring feminine figures rendered in bright greens, blues, pinks and purples. The style, in the artist's words, is "surreal, ethereal ... dealing with discomfort in the human journey."

The word "human" has a special resonance for McKernan these days. Although it's always been a challenge to eke out a living as a visual artist — and the pandemic made it worse — McKernan now sees an existential threat from a medium that's decidedly not human: artificial intelligence.

It's been about a year since McKernan, who uses the pronoun they, began noticing online images eerily similar to their own distinctive style that were apparently generated by entering their name into an AI engine.

The Nashville-based McKernan, 37, who creates both fine art and digital illustrations, soon learned that companies were feeding artwork into AI systems used to "train" image-generators — something that once sounded like a weird sci-fi movie but now threatens the livelihood of artists worldwide.

"People were tagging me on Twitter, and I would respond, 'Hey, this makes me uncomfortable. I didn't give my consent for my name or work to be used this way,'" the artist said in a recent interview, their bright blue-green hair mirroring their artwork. "I even reached out to some of these companies to say 'Hey, little artist here, I know you're not thinking of me at all, but it would be really cool if you didn't use my work like this.' And, crickets, absolutely nothing."

McKernan is now one of three artists who are seeking to protect their copyrights and careers by suing makers of AI tools that can generate new imagery on command.

The case awaits a decision from a San Francisco federal judge, who has voiced some doubt about whether AI companies are infringing on copyrights when they analyze billions of images and spit out something different.

"We're David against Goliath here," McKernan says. "At the end of the day, someone's profiting from my work. I had rent due yesterday, and I'm \$200 short. That's how desperate things are right now. And it just doesn't feel right."

The lawsuit may serve as an early bellwether of how hard it will be for all kinds of creators — Hollywood actors, novelists, musicians and computer programmers — to stop AI developers from profiting off what humans have made.

The case was filed in January by McKernan and fellow artists Karla Ortiz and Sarah Andersen, on behalf of others like them, against Stability AI, the London-based maker of text-to-image generator Stable Diffusion. The complaint also named another popular image-generator, Midjourney, and the online gallery DeviantArt.

The suit alleges that the AI image-generators violate the rights of millions of artists by ingesting huge troves of digital images and then producing derivative works that compete against the originals.

The artists say they are not inherently opposed to AI, but they don't want to be exploited by it. They are seeking class-action damages and a court order to stop companies from exploiting artistic works without consent.

Stability AI declined to comment. In a court filing, the company said it creates "entirely new and unique images" using simple word prompts, and that its images don't or rarely resemble the images in the training data.

"Stability AI enables creation; it is not a copyright infringer," it said.

Midjourney and DeviantArt didn't return emailed requests for comment.

Much of the sudden proliferation of image-generators can be traced to a single, enormous research database, known as the Large-scale Artificial Intelligence Open Network, or LAION, run by a schoolteacher in Hamburg, Germany.

The teacher, Christoph Schuhmann, said he has no regrets about the nonprofit project, which is not a

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defendant in the lawsuit and has largely escaped copyright challenges by creating an index of links to publicly accessible images without storing them. But the educator said he understands why artists are concerned.

"In a few years, everyone can generate anything — video, images, text. Anything that you can describe, you can generate it in such a way that no human can tell the difference between AI-generated content and professional human-generated content," Schuhmann said in an interview.

The idea that such a development is inevitable — that it is, essentially, the future — was at the heart of a U.S. Senate hearing in July in which Ben Brooks, head of public policy for Stability AI, acknowledged that artists are not paid for their images.

"There is no arrangement in place," Brooks said, at which point Hawaii Democratic Sen. Mazie Hirono asked Ortiz whether she had ever been compensated by AI makers.

"I have never been asked. I have never been credited. I have never been compensated one penny, and that's for the use of almost the entirety of my work, both personal and commercial, senator," she replied.

You could hear the fury in the voice of Ortiz, also 37, of San Francisco, a concept artist and illustrator in the entertainment industry. Her work has been used in movies including "Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 3," "Loki," "Rogue One: A Star Wars Story," "Jurassic World" and "Doctor Strange." In the latter, she was responsible for the design of Doctor Strange's costume.

"We're kind of the blue-collar workers within the art world," Ortiz said in an interview. "We provide visuals for movies or games. We're the first people to take a stab at, what does a visual look like? And that provides a blueprint for the rest of the production."

But it's easy to see how AI-generated images can compete, Ortiz says. And it's not merely a hypothetical possibility. She said she has personally been part of several productions that have used AI imagery.

"It's overnight an almost billion-dollar industry. They just took our work, and suddenly we're seeing our names being used thousands of times, even hundreds of thousands of times."

In at least a temporary win for human artists, another federal judge in August upheld a decision by the U.S. Copyright Office to deny someone's attempt to copyright an AI-generated artwork.

But Ortiz fears that artists will soon be deemed too expensive. Why, she asks, would employers pay artists' salaries if they can buy "a subscription for a month for \$30" and generate anything?

And if the technology is this good now, she adds, what will it be like in a few years?

"My fear is that our industry will be diminished to such a point that very few of us can make a living," Ortiz says, anticipating that artists will be tasked with simply editing AI-generated images, rather than creating. "The fun parts of my job, the things that make artists live and breathe — all of that is outsourced to a machine."

McKernan, too, fears what is yet to come: "Will I even have work a year from now?"

For now, both artists are throwing themselves into the legal fight — a fight that centers on preserving what makes people human, says McKernan, whose Instagram profile reads: "Advocating for human artists."

"I mean, that's what makes me want to be alive," says the artist, referring to the process of artistic creation. The battle is worth fighting "because that's what being human is to me."

Biden administration proposes rule that would require more firearms dealers to run background checks

By LINDSAY WHITEHURST Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Biden administration is proposing a rule that would require thousands more firearms dealers to run background checks, in an effort to combat rising gun violence nationwide.

The proposal comes after a mandate from President Joe Biden to find ways to strengthen background checks following the passage of bipartisan legislation on guns last year.

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A firearm-industry trade group swiftly raised concerns about the proposal, though, and said it could face a court challenge if finalized in its current form.

The bureau estimates that the rule would affect anywhere from 24,500 to 328,000 sellers. It is aimed at those who are in the business of gun sales, rather than those with personal collections.

Background checks help prevent guns from being sold to people convicted of crimes, teenagers and others who are legally blocked from owning them, said the agency's director, Steve Dettelbach. Federally licensed firearm dealers are also required to keep records and sell guns with serial numbers, both of which help law enforcement trace weapons used in crimes.

"Unlicensed dealers sell guns without running background checks, without keeping records, without observing the other crucial public safety requirements by which the (federally licensed firearm dealer) community abides," he said.

Attorney General Merrick Garland said Congress passed the gun legislation to reduce gun violence, including by expanding background checks, and said the new rule implements that mandate.

Overall, stricter gun laws are desired by a majority of Americans and in particular background checks, regardless of what the current gun laws are in their state, according to a recent AP-NORC poll on guns. That desire could be tied to some Americans' perceived impact of what fewer guns could mean for the country — namely, fewer mass shootings. As of Monday, there have been at least 33 mass killings in the U.S. so far in 2023, leaving at least 163 people dead, not including shooters who died, according to a database maintained by the AP and USA Today in partnership with Northeastern University.

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Biden has said the law doesn't go far enough. White House Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said Thursday the administration would continue to push for more gun control.

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Gun rights groups, on the other hand, have argued it would do little to stop the gun violence problem. Those advocates have previously quickly sued over other ATF rule changes that they argue infringe on gun rights.

The National Shooting Sports Foundation, an industry trade group, said it has "significant concerns" about the proposed rule, arguing it appears to go beyond what the bipartisan legislation allows and could require "ordinary citizens" to become licensed. It warned of a court challenge if the rule is finalized as written.

The proposed rule will be open for public comment for 90 days. It was not immediately clear when it might become final.

Delaware judge orders status report on felony gun charge against Hunter Biden

By RANDALL CHASE Associated Press

DOVER, Del. (AP) — A federal judge in Delaware ordered prosecutors and defense attorneys on Thursday to provide a status report regarding a felony gun charge against Hunter Biden.

Judge Maryellen Noreika directed lawyers to provide the report by next Wednesday, including any steps they believe the court needs to take.

Attorneys for Biden have argued that a “diversion agreement” sparing him from prosecution on the gun charge is still in place, even though it was inextricably linked to a plea deal on misdemeanor tax offenses that imploded during a court appearance in July.

Noreika dismissed the tax case, and prosecutors have indicated they plan to pursue tax charges against President Joe Biden’s son in another district, perhaps California or Washington, D.C.

Meanwhile, prosecutors maintain that the agreement on the gun charge, which contains unprecedented immunity provisions against federal prosecutions for other potential crimes, never took effect and is no longer valid.

The two-part deal on tax and gun charges was supposed to have largely wrapped up a years-long investigation overseen by Delaware U.S. Attorney David Weiss. The deal fell apart after Noreika raised questions about its terms during a hearing in July. Among other issues, prosecutors were unable to resolve the judge’s concerns about offering Biden immunity for certain crimes as part of the diversion agreement, instead of in the plea deal.

Typically, a non-prosecution agreement is not presented to a judge and requires no court input. A plea deal, on the other hand, must be presented to a judge, but prosecutors tried to structure Biden’s tax plea deal in a way that left Noreika with no discretion to accept or reject it. The judge expressed concern that attorneys were asking her to simply “rubber stamp” the deal, which she refused to do.

Pressed by Noreika, prosecutor Leo Wise said he could find no precedent for agreeing not to prosecute Biden for crimes that have nothing to do with the gun case or the charges being diverted. Wise also acknowledged that he had never seen a diversion agreement in which the agreement not to prosecute is so broad that it encompasses crimes in a different case. Nor could he offer any precedent for requiring prosecutors to first obtain court approval before prosecuting Biden for certain crimes in the future.

“These agreements are not straightforward and they contain some atypical provisions,” Noreika noted.

Prior to the hearing, Republicans denounced Biden’s plea agreement as a “sweetheart deal.” The deal called for Biden to be sentenced to probation in exchange for pleading guilty to failing to pay taxes on more than \$1.5 million in income in both 2017 and 2018. According to prosecutors, Biden’s income during those two years included roughly \$4 million in business and consulting fees from a company he formed with the CEO of a Chinese business conglomerate, and from the Ukrainian energy company Burisma.

The diversion agreement, meanwhile, was aimed at sparing Biden from prosecution on the felony crime of being a drug user in possession of a gun in 2018 if he kept out of trouble for two years. Hunter Biden’s history of drug use and financial dealings have trailed the political career of his father.

Following the collapse of the plea deal, Attorney General Merrick Garland named Weiss as special counsel, a status that confers broad powers to investigate and report out his findings.

At least 74 are dead, many of them homeless, as fire rips through a rundown building in South Africa

By GERALD IMRAY and MOGOMOTSI MAGOME Associated Press

JOHANNESBURG (AP) — A nighttime fire ripped through a rundown apartment building mainly occupied by homeless people and squatters in Johannesburg early Thursday, leaving at least 74 dead, officials said. Some people threw babies out of third-story windows to others waiting below in the desperate scramble to evacuate, witnesses said.

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At least 12 of those killed were children, the youngest a 1-year-old, according to city and medical officials. They said at a news conference that an undetermined number of people were still missing and many bodies recovered were burned beyond recognition.

More than 50 people were injured, six of whom were in a serious condition in the hospital. Emergency services officials had earlier warned that the death toll could rise as they continued to search the scene more than 12 hours after the blaze broke out at around 1 a.m.

Dozens of bodies recovered by firefighters were laid out on a side road outside the apartment block, some in body bags, others covered in silver sheets or blankets after the body bags ran out. They were eventually taken away in pathology department vehicles.

"Over 20 years in the service, I've never come across something like this," Johannesburg Emergency Services Management spokesperson Robert Mulaudzi said.

Authorities hadn't established the cause of the fire but Mgcini Tshwaku, a local government official, said initial evidence suggested it started with a candle. Inhabitants used candles and fires for light and to keep warm in the winter cold, he said.

Firefighters were still making their way through the remnants of shacks and other informal structures that littered the inside of the derelict five-story building in the heart of Johannesburg's central business district hours after the fire was extinguished. Smoke seeped out of the blackened building even though the fire was out, while twisted blankets and sheets hung like ropes out of shattered windows to show how people had used them to try and escape the flames.

Some of the survivors described how they jumped out of windows, but only after tossing their children to others below.

"Everything happened so fast and I only had time to throw the baby out," said Adam Taiwo, who managed to save his 1-year-old son and himself. "I also followed him after they caught him downstairs." Taiwo said he did not know where his wife, Joyce, was.

A witness who lives in a building across the road said he saw others also throw babies out of the burning building and that at least one man died when he jumped from the third floor and hit the concrete sidewalk "head first."

Another witness who didn't give his name told television news channel eNCA that he lived in a building next door and heard people screaming for help and shouting "We're dying in here."

As the fire raged, some occupants got trapped behind locked gates at the exits and there were no proper fire escape routes, local official Tshwaku said.

"People couldn't get out," he said, adding that some of the victims may have died after jumping out of the building.

More than 200 people were living in the building, witnesses said, including in the basement, which should have been used as a parking garage. Others estimated an even higher number of occupants.

Johannesburg mayor Kabelo Gwamanda said 141 families were affected by the tragedy but could not say exactly how many people were in the building when the fire started. Many of the people inside were foreign nationals, he said. That could make identifying victims and tracing the missing hard as many were likely in South Africa illegally, other officials said.

A woman who asked not to be identified said she lived in the building and escaped with her grown son and a 2-year-old child. She stood outside holding the toddler for hours and said she didn't know what happened to two other children from her family.

"I just saw smoke everywhere and I just ran out with this baby only," the woman said. "I don't have any home, and I don't know what to do anymore."

In a statement, South African President Cyril Ramaphosa said, "this is a great tragedy felt by families whose loved ones perished in this awful manner, and our hearts go out to every person affected by this event."

A spokesperson for Ramaphosa said he had offered the assistance of the national disaster management agency if needed, and the president later visited the scene having canceled a Thursday evening television address on the BRICS economic summit held in Johannesburg last week.

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Ramaphosa called the fire devastating and a “wake-up call” for South Africa’s economic hub to address its inner-city housing crisis.

“We are not here to blame anyone,” Ramaphosa said outside the burned building. “This is a difficult lesson for all of us.”

Johannesburg is rated as Africa’s richest city but its center is run down and often neglected. Abandoned and broken-down buildings are common, and people desperate for some form of accommodation use them for shelter. City authorities refer to the structures as “hijacked buildings” and they have been a problem for years, if not decades.

While city authorities were catching much of the blame for the deaths, they said it was often difficult to get courts to issue orders to evict the homeless from such buildings.

The building in question was reportedly owned by the city of Johannesburg and is considered a heritage site, but was not being managed by the city. It was once the site of South Africa’s notorious “pass” office, which controlled the movement of Black people under the racist system of apartheid, according to a blue historical plaque hanging at the entrance.

“Denied a place in the city, many were ordered to leave Johannesburg,” the plaque reads.

Decades later, the deadly fire made the building a modern emblem of the exclusion of poor people in Johannesburg.

Speaking at the scene, the Gauteng province’s police commissioner, Lt. Gen. Elias Mawela, said the police were aware of approximately 700 buildings in central Johannesburg that were derelict and abandoned. He urged city authorities to act, and to bar squatters from the burned building in the future.

“Shut it down. That building.” Mawela said.

Meanwhile, Mulaudzi, the emergency services spokesperson, said the fire took three hours to contain and firefighters then needed a long time to work through all five floors. He said there were “obstructions” everywhere that would have made it very difficult for residents to escape the deadly blaze and which hindered emergency crews trying to search the site.

The chance of anyone else being found alive hours after the fire broke out was “very slim,” Mulaudzi said.

Gabon election results were a ‘smokescreen’ for soldiers to oust unpopular president, analysts say

By SAM MEDNICK Associated Press

DAKAR, Senegal (AP) — The ouster of Gabon’s president by mutinous soldiers appears to have been well organized and capitalized on the population’s grievances against the government as an excuse to seize power, analysts said.

Soldiers on Wednesday ousted President Ali Bongo Ondimba, whose family has ruled the oil-rich country in Central Africa for more than five decades. The coup leaders accused Bongo of irresponsible governance that risked leading the country into chaos and said they put him under house arrest and detained several Cabinet members.

Meanwhile, the African Union Peace and Security Council met Thursday and announced the immediate suspension of Gabon from “all activities of the AU, its organs and institutions” until the country restores constitutional order.

The head of Gabon’s elite republican guard, Gen. Brice Clotaire Oligui Nguema, was announced on state TV as the nation’s new leader hours after Bongo was declared the winner of a weekend presidential election that observers said was marred with irregularities and a lack of transparency.

While there were legitimate grievances about the vote and Bongo’s rule, his ousting is just a pretext for the junta to claim power for themselves, Gabon experts say.

“The timing of the coup, following the announcement of the implausible electoral results, and the speed with which the junta is moving suggests this was planned in advance,” Joseph Siegle, director of research at the Africa Center for Strategic Studies, said. “While there are many legitimate grievances about the vote and Bongo’s rule, that has little to do with the coup attempt in Gabon. Raising those grievances is

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just a smokescreen.”

In an announcement on state TV Thursday a spokesman for the junta said Oligui would be sworn into office on Monday September 4 before the constitutional court. It encouraged people to go back work and said it would restore domestic flights.

Also on Thursday, Gabon’s political opposition called for elections to resume “under the supervision” of the armed forces, “to allow the main opposition candidate, Albert Ondo Ossa, to assume the presidency, said his campaign manager Mike Jocktane.

Gabon’s coup is the eighth military takeover in Central and West Africa in three years and comes roughly a month after Niger’s democratically elected president was ousted. Unlike Niger and neighboring Burkina Faso and Mali, which have each had two coups apiece since 2020 and are being overrun by extremist violence, Gabon was seen as relatively stable.

However, Bongo’s family has been accused of endemic corruption and not letting the country’s oil wealth trickle down to the population of some 2 million people.

Bongo, 64, has served two terms since coming to power in 2009 after the death of his father, who ruled the country for 41 years, and there has been widespread discontent with his reign. Another group of mutinous soldiers attempted a coup in 2019 but was quickly overpowered.

The former French colony is a member of OPEC, but its oil wealth is concentrated in the hands of a few — and nearly 40% of Gabonese aged 15 to 24 were out of work in 2020, according to the World Bank. Its oil export revenue was \$6 billion in 2022, according to the U.S. Energy Information Administration.

Gabon’s coup and the overturning of a dynastic leader, such as Bongo, appeared to have struck a nerve across the continent that coups in more remote, volatile West Africa previously hadn’t.

Hours after soldiers in Gabon announced the new leader, the president of neighboring Cameroon, Paul Biya, who’s been in power for 40 years, shuffled his military leadership, and Rwandan President Paul Kagame “accepted the resignation” of a dozen generals and more than 80 other senior military officers. Even Djibouti’s Ismail Omar Guelleh, in power in the tiny former French colony in the Horn of Africa since 1999, condemned the coup in Gabon and denounced the recent trend of military takeovers.

Still, on Wednesday, White House National Security Council spokesman John Kirby said it was too early to call the attempted coup in Gabon a trend.

“It’s just too soon to do a table slap here and say, ‘yep, we’ve got a trend here going’ or ‘yep, we’ve got a domino effect,’” he said.

In a statement, the Commission of the Economic Community of Central African States, a Central African regional bloc, said it “firmly condemns” the use of force for resolving political conflicts and gaining access to power. It called for a return to constitutional order.

Since Bongo was toppled, the streets of Gabon’s capital, Libreville, have been jubilant with people celebrating alongside the army.

“Today we can only be happy,” said John Nze, a resident. “The country’s past situation handicapped everyone. There were no jobs. If the Gabonese are happy, it’s because they were hurting under the Bongos”.

Liberal groups seek to use the Constitution’s insurrection clause to block Trump from 2024 ballots

By NICHOLAS RICCARDI Associated Press

As former President Donald Trump dominates the Republican presidential primary, some liberal groups and legal experts contend that a rarely used clause of the Constitution prevents him from being president after the Jan. 6, 2021, attack on the U.S. Capitol.

The 14th Amendment bars from office anyone who once took an oath to uphold the Constitution but then “engaged” in “insurrection or rebellion” against it. A growing number of legal scholars say the post-Civil War clause applies to Trump after his role in trying to overturn the 2020 presidential election and encouraging his backers to storm the U.S. Capitol.

Two liberal nonprofits pledge court challenges should states’ election officers place Trump on the ballot

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despite those objections.

The effort is likely to trigger a chain of lawsuits and appeals across several states that ultimately would lead to the U.S. Supreme Court, possibly in the midst of the 2024 primary season. The matter adds even more potential legal chaos to a nomination process already roiled by the front-runner facing four criminal trials.

Now Trump's very ability to run could be litigated as Republicans are scheduled to start choosing their nominee, starting with the Iowa caucuses on Jan. 15.

"There's a very real prospect these cases will be active during the primaries," said Gerard Magliocca, a law professor at Indiana University, warning that there could be different outcomes in different states before the Supreme Court makes a final decision. "Imagine you have an opinion that says he's not eligible and then there's another primary where he's on the ballot."

Though most litigation is unlikely to begin until October, when states begin to set their ballots for the upcoming primary, the issue has gotten a boost from a recently released law review article written by two prominent conservative law professors, William Baude and Michael Paulsen. They concluded that Trump must be barred from the ballot due to the clause in the third section of the 14th Amendment.

That section bars anyone from Congress, the military, and federal and state offices if they previously took an oath to support the Constitution and "have engaged in insurrection or rebellion against the same, or given aid or comfort to the enemies thereof."

In their article, scheduled to be published in the University of Pennsylvania Law Review, Baude and Paulsen said they believe the meaning is clear.

"Taking Section Three seriously means excluding from present or future office those who sought to subvert lawful government authority under the Constitution in the aftermath of the 2020 election," they write.

The issue came up during last week's Republican presidential debate in Milwaukee, when former Arkansas Gov. Asa Hutchinson warned that "this is something that could disqualify him under our rules and under the Constitution."

In 2021, the nonprofit Free Speech For People sent letters to the top election official in all 50 states requesting Trump's removal if he were to run again for the presidency. The group's legal director, Ron Fein, noted that after years of silence, officials are beginning to discuss the matter.

"The framers of the 14th Amendment learned the bloody lesson that, once an oath-breaking insurrectionist engages in insurrection, they can't be trusted to return to power," Fein said.

Ahead of the 2022 midterms, the group sued to remove U.S. Rep. Marjorie Taylor-Greene and then-Rep. Madison Cawthorn, both Republicans, from the ballot over their support for the Jan. 6 protest. The judge overseeing Greene's case ruled in her favor, while Cawthorn's case became moot after he was defeated in his primary.

The complex legal issues were highlighted on Wednesday when the Arizona Republic reported that Secretary of State Adrian Fontes said his hands are tied because of a ruling by that state's high court that only Congress can disqualify someone on Arizona's presidential ballot. Fontes, a Democrat, called the ruling "dead, flat wrong" in an interview with the Republic but said he would abide by it.

If Trump appears on the Arizona ballot, those who believe he's not qualified can still sue in federal court to remove him.

Other secretaries of state are warily navigating the legal minefield.

In a radio interview earlier this week, Michigan Secretary of State Jocelyn Benson, a Democrat, said "there are valid legal arguments being made" for keeping Trump off the ballot and that it's something she is discussing with other secretaries of state, including those in presidential battlegrounds.

Brad Raffensperger, the Republican secretary of state in Georgia who withstood pressure from Trump when he sought to overturn the 2020 results in the state, suggested the issue should be up to voters.

"As Georgia's Secretary of State, I have been clear that voters are smart and deserve the right to decide elections," he said in an emailed statement.

Trump argues that any effort to prevent him from appearing on a state's ballot amounts to "election interference" — the same way he is characterizing the criminal charges filed against him in New York and

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Atlanta and by federal prosecutors in Washington, D.C., and Florida.

"And I think what's happening is there's really been a backlash against it," Trump told the conservative channel Newsmax.

Indeed, the New Hampshire secretary of state's office was flooded with messages about the issue on Monday, said Anna Sventek, a spokeswoman. Earlier in the day, a conservative personality had falsely claimed the state was about to strike Trump from the ballot.

On Wednesday, a long-shot Republican presidential candidate, John Anthony Castro, of Texas, filed a complaint in a New Hampshire court contending the 14th Amendment barred Trump from that state's ballot.

The eventual, bigger court challenges are expected to draw greater legal fire power. But Michael McConnell, a conservative law professor at Stanford University who is not a Trump supporter, said the case is no slam dunk.

McConnell questions whether the provision even applies to the presidency because it is not one of the offices specifically listed in the 14th Amendment — which instead refers to "elector of president and vice president." He also said it's unclear whether the Jan. 6 attack constitutes an "insurrection" under the law or simply a less legally fraught incident such as a riot.

But McConnell also worries about the political precedent if Trump is ultimately removed from any state ballot.

"It's not just about Trump. Every election where someone says something supportive of a riot that interferes with the enforcement of laws, their opponents are going to run in and try to get them disqualified," he said.

Ratified in 1868, the 14th Amendment helped ensure civil rights for freed slaves — and eventually for all people in the U.S. — but also was used to prevent former Confederate officials from becoming members of Congress and taking over the government they had just rebelled against.

The clause allows Congress to lift the ban, which it did in 1872 as the political will to continue to bar former Confederates dwindled. The provision was almost never used after that. In 1919, Congress refused to seat a socialist in Congress, contending he gave aid and comfort to the country's enemies during World War I. Last year, in the provision's first use since then, a New Mexico judge barred a rural county commissioner who had entered the Capitol on Jan. 6 from office under the clause.

If any state bars Trump from running, his reelection campaign is expected to sue, possibly taking the case directly to the U.S. Supreme Court. If no state bans him, Free Speech For People and another nonprofit, Citizens for Responsibility and Ethics in Washington, would likely challenge his presence on the ballot.

It's critical that the high court settle the issue before the general election, said Edward Foley, a law professor at The Ohio State University. His fear is that if Trump's qualifications are not resolved and he wins, Democrats could try to block his ascension to the White House on Jan. 6, 2025, triggering another democratic crisis.

Those pushing to invoke the amendment agree and say they think the case is clear.

"This isn't a punishment. It's like saying a president needs to be 35 years old and a natural born citizen," said Noah Bookbinder, president of Citizens for Responsibility and Ethics in Washington. "You also need not to have helped organize an uprising against the government."

Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton pursued perks beyond impeachment allegations, ex-staffers say

By JAKE BLEIBERG and PAUL J. WEBER Associated Press

AUSTIN, Texas (AP) — Unexplained Caribbean and European trips that cost taxpayers more than \$90,000. A \$600 sports coat paid for by an event organizer. A \$45 office Christmas cake taken as his own.

These are among the perks that Republican Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton's former employees say he reveled in while using his office in ways that now have him facing a federal criminal investigation and potential ouster over allegations of corruption.

Paxton's impeachment trial that starts Tuesday covers years of highly publicized scandal, criminal charges

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and whistleblower accounts from his inner circle.

But records obtained by The Associated Press, interviews with former aides and a review of thousands of legal filings reveal other ways in which Paxton allegedly reaped the benefits of being one of Texas' most powerful figures. Together, they show how conviction and removal from office could cost Paxton not just a job but a lifestyle.

Last year, that lifestyle included more international trips than Texas' governor and lieutenant governor made combined, and a previously unreported visit to Qatar to watch the World Cup. There are also accusations of behavior that raised eyebrows among employees at all levels of Paxton' office, including requesting special license plates but never paying the \$12.50 to acquire them.

"He always cared about what trip he was going on, who was taking him to dinner," James Blake Brickman, one of Paxton's former deputies, told investigators leading the impeachment in March, according to a transcript.

"He likes the perks of the office," Brickman said.

Spokespersons for Paxton and the attorney general's office did not respond to questions about the accusations made by Paxton's former staff. Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick, who will act as judge during the impeachment trial, issued a sweeping gag order.

First elected in 2014, Paxton has built a national profile, using his office to try to overturn the 2020 presidential election, challenge Biden administration policies, and to fight for conservative social causes. He won reelection twice despite the clouds of a securities fraud indictment and an ongoing FBI investigation.

The federal investigation and impeachment focus on allegations by eight of Paxton's former top deputies that he helped a wealthy donor fend off an FBI investigation. In return, Austin real estate developer Nate Paul allegedly employed a woman with whom Paxton had an extramarital affair and bankrolled the renovations of his million-dollar Austin home. Both men have denied wrongdoing.

Beyond friendly audiences and conservative-leaning television news networks, Paxton seldom makes public appearances. Bill Miller, a veteran Austin lobbyist, said the accusations that have engulfed Paxton for years "color the perception of him" but don't resemble the man he's long called a friend.

"He's a genuinely nice guy and a cool customer," Miller said. "He's really good at making you like him."

As attorney general, Paxton is paid around \$153,000 annually, a salary lower than many of his top aides. His wife, state Sen. Angela Paxton, has worked as an educator and receives \$7,200 for serving in the Texas Legislature, which meets for six months every two years.

The full extent of the couple's wealth is unknown. Their required financial disclosures offer a blurry picture. For instance, the most recent filings value their blind trust at "\$47,220 or more."

Last year, Paxton's travels were extensive. Records show that after winning a Republican primary runoff against George P. Bush — who cast Paxton as unfit for office — Paxton spent two months flying to cities in the Caribbean and Europe. It's unclear who paid for Paxton's travel, but the trips cost taxpayers a combined \$91,000 for his security detail.

The purpose of the travel, which was first reported by The Dallas Morning News, is also unclear. Spokespersons for Paxton and the attorney general's office did not respond to questions about the trips, which Paxton did not publicize.

A few months later, Paxton was in Qatar for the 2022 World Cup — a trip that does not appear in his filings or security records. Another Republican state attorney general, Sean Reyes of Utah, also attended and disclosed through a spokesman that Qatar's government paid his expenses without saying how much they were.

In a statement, Qatar's embassy in Washington said it invited four state attorneys generals as part of "wider efforts in combatting transnational crime, including human trafficking." Jeff Norwood, a Paxton spokesman, said Paxton paid his own way to the tournament and attended without state police security.

Former employees say Paxton sometimes seized smaller opportunities to gain from office.

David Maxwell, the attorney general's former head of law enforcement and one of eight deputies who reported him to the FBI, told investigators that Paxton once bought a \$600 sports coat from a hotel store while at a conference and billed it to the event's organizer. According to transcripts, Maxwell also said

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Paxton asked for specialty license plates available to state officials but never paid the nominal fee to pick them up.

"He was all about money," said Maxwell, who is also a former Texas Ranger, the state's elite law enforcement division. "He always had his hand out."

Other former staff point to an even smaller gift.

Around Christmas for years, Texas grocery giant H-E-B sent a coconut-dusted cake to the attorney general's office, which staff shared.

That changed after Paxton was elected, according to three former employees of his executive office who spoke on condition of anonymity out of fear of retaliation.

One said Paxton once told staff not to touch the cake because it was for his birthday, which is on Dec. 23. Another said Paxton once had the cake brought to a Tex-Mex restaurant for a staff lunch but never served it. The third recalled watching Paxton and an aide walk out of the office carrying the cake box.

According to required gift logs kept by Paxton's office, the cake was worth \$45.

Fed's preferred inflation gauge shows a modest rise in latest sign of slowing price increases

By CHRISTOPHER RUGABER AP Economics Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — An inflation gauge closely tracked by the Federal Reserve remained low last month, adding to signs of cooling price increases and raising the likelihood that the Fed will leave interest rates unchanged when it next meets in late September.

Thursday's report from the Commerce Department showed that prices rose just 0.2% from June to July, the third straight modest increase. Compared with a year earlier, prices rose 3.3% in July, up from a 3% annual increase in June. The year-over-year figure, though, is down sharply from the 7% peak it reached a year ago, though still above the Fed's 2% inflation target. It rose partly because of much smaller price increases a year ago.

Among individual items, the cost of groceries rose just 0.2% from June to July, though they're up 3.5% over the past year. Gas prices increased 0.3% in July but remain 22.3% lower than they were a year earlier.

Among autos, new-car prices edged down 0.1%; they're still up 3.6% from July of last year. Used car prices fell 1.4% from June to July and are down 5.5% compared with 12 months earlier.

The latest data follows other recent reports that suggest the economy and the job market may be slowing enough to cool inflation pressures. The number of advertised job openings, for example, tumbled in July, and fewer Americans are quitting their jobs to seek better opportunities. Both trends ease the pressure on companies to raise pay to find and keep workers — a move that tends to perpetuate inflation as employers raise prices to offset their higher labor costs.

Excluding volatile food and energy prices, "core" inflation ticked up just 0.2% from June to July, the same as from May to June. Compared with a year earlier, core prices rose 4.2%, up slightly from 4.1% the previous month. The Fed's policymakers closely monitor core prices as a telltale signal of where inflation might be headed.

"It is becoming harder to dismiss the improvement in the inflation numbers as mere noise," said Ian Shepherdson, chief economist at Pantheon Macroeconomics. Annualized core inflation in the past three months, compared with the previous three months, increased at the slowest pace since March 2021, Shepherdson said.

Economists and Wall Street traders increasingly believe the Fed will leave its benchmark interest rate unchanged when it next meets Sept. 19-20. If inflation and the economy continue to moderate, it might not raise rates at its subsequent meeting in November, either. If so, that would leave the central bank's July rate increase — the 11th since March 2022 — as the final one.

Some economists noted that the increase in year-over-year inflation rates underscored Fed Chair Jerome Powell's message in a high-profile speech last week at an annual conference of central bankers in Jackson Hole, Wyoming: That inflation remained too high and the central bank had to remain vigilant. Still,

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policymakers typically pay closer attention to monthly and quarterly inflation data than to yearly figures, which can be lagging indicators.

The inflation gauge that was issued Thursday, called the personal consumption expenditures price index, is separate from the better-known consumer price index. Earlier this month, the government reported that the CPI rose 3.2% in July from a year earlier, down from a peak of 9.1% in June 2022.

Thursday's report also showed that Americans spent more in July, with consumer spending rising a healthy 0.8% from June to July, up from a 0.5% gain from May to June. The increase suggests that the U.S. economy is growing at a solid pace in the current July-September quarter.

Though consumer spending drives most of the U.S. economy, the Fed is seeking to slow it down as a way to restrain inflation. Too fast an acceleration of spending could lead the central bank to raise rates even further. At the same time, the Fed is trying to avoid slowing the economy so much as to cause a deep recession.

Powell referred to the tricky dynamics surrounding the economy and inflation in his Jackson Hole speech. He stressed that the Fed would "proceed carefully" as it considers its next moves.

"Two months of good data," Powell said, "are only the beginning of what it will take to build confidence that inflation is moving down sustainably toward our goal. We can't yet know the extent to which these lower readings will continue."

In Europe, inflation largely held steady in July at a time when the European Central Bank, like the Fed, is grappling with whether to raise its key interest rate at its next meeting in September. The consumer price index for the 20 countries that use the euro currency rose 5.3% in July from a year earlier, the same as for June, the EU statistics agency Eurostat said. Core inflation eased from 5.5% to 5.3%.

In the United States, spending in July jumped around the July 4th holiday, according to data from the Bank of America Institute, which tracks consumer activity through its credit and debit cards. And a pickup in online spending occurred in mid-month, likely because of Amazon's "prime" shopping day, the institute said.

Later in the month, entertainment spending surged, probably reflecting the popularity of the "Barbie" and "Oppenheimer" movie releases, the Institute said.

Those trends might have pulled some spending away from major retailers, some of which reported sharp sales declines in the spring and early summer, including Macy's, Foot Locker and Kohl's. Yet many discount retailers, including Walmart, TJ Maxx and Dollar Tree, reported growing sales. That suggested that lower- and middle-income shoppers, feeling squeezed by inflation and higher borrowing costs, are seeking out bargains and focusing more on necessities.

Economists said last month's jump in consumer spending was driven mainly by one-time factors, that are unlikely to be repeated. Utility spending leapt as hot weather led many Americans to crank up air conditioning. Back-to-school shopping also likely fueled some spending.

Clergy dish up meatball sundaes, pickle ice pops and a little faith at the Minnesota State Fair

By GIOVANNA DELL'ORTO Associated Press

FALCON HEIGHTS, Minn. (AP) — As the sun rose on an unusually steamy opening day of the Minnesota State Fair, Jeff Knott and his two daughters joined the already long breakfast line outside the Hamline Church Dining Hall.

The Lutheran family, at the fair to show the teen girls' pigs Billy and Lil' Red, favor this Methodist all-volunteer diner for its early opening, variety of foods including the signature "hamloaf" sandwich, and religious mission.

"They use their proceeds for mission work, which I think is important," Knott said before the family bowed their heads to say grace at the hall's bustling tables. "Can't get deep fried Oreos, though," quipped Elsie Knott, 13.

Faith offerings are plentiful and deep-rooted at the late-summer agricultural fairs that, nationwide, bring

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together 4-H children parading their prize animals and political candidates unleashing their ambitions.

Here in the middle of the Twin Cities, in addition to two church dining halls that have served up hot meals for a combined 200 years, there are fairgrounds Sunday services, booths handing out free Bibles or Qurans, and a stage for Christian bands beside the rides.

With pre-pandemic attendance surpassing two million — in a state with 5.7 million residents — the fair gives religious leaders a unique opportunity to showcase their hospitality and offer a rapidly disappearing slice of Americana to an increasingly diverse crowd.

“Service is my love language,” said Stephanie Engebrecht, a first-time dining hall volunteer and staff member at Hamline United Methodist Church in St. Paul.

“Any time you work hard at something, you can’t help bonding with people,” Engebrecht added, refilling coffee cups for a couple who first came to the fair together on their honeymoon 62 years ago.

This dining hall, founded in 1897, and the smaller one run by Minneapolis’ Salem Lutheran Church, are the sole survivors of what a century ago was a thriving scene catering to farmers who came to display the cream of their crops, livestock and crafts.

“There was very spirited bidding by Twin Cities churches to be at the fair. Churches were built on state fair dining hall money,” said Jane McClure, Hamline Church’s historian. Fair fundraising remains important, helping finance homeless and food ministries in the churches’ neighborhoods.

The dining halls also preserve that fast-disappearing agrarian atmosphere, said Chris Gehrz, a history professor at nearby Bethel University who regularly attends the fair with his family.

“It’s something quasi-religious, having this ritual,” Gehrz said, adding that outright proselytizing has been tightly regulated since a 1981 U.S. Supreme Court ruling found the fair could restrict the Hare Krishna society from distributing literature about their faith.

At the dining halls, the religious touch is light — a few prayer signs on the walls, “pastor” name tags worn by leaders as they serve Swedish meatballs or dill pickle lemonade paletas, a Midwestern take on Mexican popsicles.

“You’re not overt about Christianity because this is just what you do,” said McClure, who takes vacation to volunteer all 12 days at the Hamline dining hall, as she’s done for 20 years.

But sometimes the faith mission is worn on one’s sleeves — or rather aprons and vests. On Saturday, members of several Methodist congregations that support LGBTQ inclusion, part of a larger rift within the denomination, wore purple aprons volunteering at the Hamline dining hall.

Just behind it at Crossroads Chapel, volunteers wore bright red vests emblazoned “prayer team.” For seven decades, a network of evangelical churches has operated the combined Christian bookstore, chapel and tent offering free Bibles, including Spanish-language and a comic book-style geared toward children.

Aliza Lamprecht, 7, grabbed a copy of the latter after running up to the tent en route to volunteering at the cattle barn.

“It’s the largest mission field in Minnesota,” said Crossroads board member Terry Schuveiller, adding the prayer teams gave away 5,000 Bibles at last year’s fair.

Such evangelization is what drove fellow board member and musician Doug Peterson to set up the chapel’s outdoor stage with live entertainment.

“We have to be relevant to the culture, but true to the word of God,” said Peterson. “I’m a farmer. I’m just planting different kinds of seeds at the fair.”

Despite being tucked away inside the education building instead of by the swing rides, the Building Blocks of Islam booth also had a steady flow of visitors getting free Qurans from volunteers in hijabs.

“There’s no other place with so many Minnesotans together,” said Mashood Yunus, who helped found the group to combat misinformation about Islam. “This is election year now, so we really want to make sure we don’t let misinformation spread.”

Volunteers are trained to maintain civil engagement even in the rare occasions over the last ten years when they’ve encountered hostility, and the fair has designated a large upstairs room where volunteers can perform daily prayers, Yunus added.

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Catholic Mass is also celebrated both Sundays of the fair with hundreds in attendance, said the Rev. Robert Fitzpatrick. The retired priest jokingly calls it "Mass on a stick" — a nod to iconic fair foods.

"It's a tool of evangelization too," Fitzpatrick said.

There used to be a bigger Catholic presence, including a Q & A with a priest. About a decade ago, the fair also had chaplains visiting 4-H children on the day their animals go to market, said former chaplain Sally Johnson, who now volunteers at the Methodist dining hall.

Today, all these organizations are struggling to find enough volunteers, a widespread problem for charities across the country after the COVID-19 pandemic.

"Closing does come up," said the Rev. Mariah Furness Tollgaard of Hamline Church. To serve approximately 30,000 meals at the fair, 600 volunteer shifts are needed. That's a big ask even in a 500-member congregation where some have volunteered for 50 years, let alone for smaller and cash-strapped Salem Lutheran.

"It really is a walk of faith," said Salem volunteer coordinator Rachel Carmichael as she coached half a dozen teens for whom the fair is also a job training program. "You just provide the opportunity and God can be there."

Salem's signature item is Swedish egg coffee. For the last three decades, volunteer Jim Zieba has started brewing it at 4:30 a.m. every day of the fair. Now in his mid-70s, on opening day he figured he had boiled 48 pots — each serving 40 cups — before people started lining up for a lunch of "Swedish meatball sundae."

"I don't want to leave these guys in a lurch. I'm the last of the everyday workers," Zieba said.

Snapping a picture of the egg coffee recipe — yes, an egg is mixed in, shell and all — Bonnie Birnstengel said she gets a cup first thing on her annual fair visit.

"You bet I always do, even when it's hot out," she said, though it's not quite as good as the egg coffee her mother-in-law brewed.

The Methodist dining hall is the first annual stop for Lane Christianson, who 15 minutes after the fair gates opened was eating the "holey hamloaf breakfast sandwich."

"It's a little slice of America here," he said.

As Israel pushes punitive demolitions, family of 13-year-old Palestinian attacker to lose its home

By ISABEL DEBRE Associated Press

JERUSALEM (AP) — With the walls stripped bare and furniture dismantled, the east Jerusalem apartment is a far cry from the vividly-hued haven it was in early February, when members of the Zalabani family played cards on the cobalt couch and feasted on stewed chicken with richly spiced rice.

That February dinner — a day before 13-year-old Mohammed Zalabani boarded a bus at an Israeli army checkpoint in the Shuafat refugee camp and lunged at an Israeli police officer with a kitchen knife — was the last time the Palestinian family gathered in their home that will soon be blown up. Last week, Israel's Supreme Court dismissed the family's appeal and decided to destroy the new, third-floor apartment where they've lived for almost three years.

Demolition crews arrived Thursday to inform the family the explosion would take place within days.

The family's case — which rights groups describe as uniquely problematic from a legal prospective — has drawn attention to Israel's controversial practice of demolishing the family homes of Palestinian assailants. As violence surges in east Jerusalem and the occupied West Bank, Israel's far-right government is more aggressively pursuing the policy. The government defends the practice as a deterrent against attacks.

"This is no solution," said Mohammed's mother, Fida Zalabani, her eyes wet as she recalled the effort that went into decorating a house that Israeli security forces ransacked and boarded up, drilling holes into the walls for explosives. "All my children, an entire community, will witness this and not forget it."

On Feb. 13, two weeks after seeing Israeli police mistakenly shoot and kill his teenage friend for brandishing what turned out to be a fake gun, Mohammed tried to stab an Israeli police officer before being

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wrestled to the floor. A private guard protecting the officer fired toward the young assailant but accidentally hit and killed his own colleague.

Mohammed remains in juvenile detention, awaiting trial on murder charges.

Rights watchdogs — like legal aid group HaMoked, which filed the petition on behalf of the Zalabanis — describe such demolitions as collective punishment, leaving uninvolved parents, siblings and spouses homeless. The Zalabanis, a family of seven, have temporarily rented a cramped basement apartment.

"Home demolitions intentionally harm innocent people in the hopes that they deter other people from committing attacks," said Jessica Montell, HaMoked's director. "This is what makes them so blatantly illegal and immoral."

Condemned by Western governments and the United Nations, the tactic also has sown divisions in the Israeli establishment, with some generals and judicial officials expressing concern that rather than containing attacks, the tactic may have the opposite effect.

The recent rise in fighting has sharpened scrutiny of Israel's logic of deterrence, as the stepped-up demolitions and deadly military raids into Palestinian towns have failed to stop the wave of attacks.

"When Palestinians see that we destroy houses, their level of fear and frustration and hatred increases," said Ami Ayalon, former director of Israel's Shin Bet security service. "Those are the reasons that people join terrorist organizations."

The practice is based on regulations imposed by the British Mandate in 1945, which authorized commanders to destroy insurgents' homes. Israel made use of it after capturing east Jerusalem, the West Bank and Gaza in the 1967 Mideast war. During the first and second Palestinian uprisings, Israel demolished hundreds of homes belonging to militants. Some security officials credit the demolitions — among other harsh tactics — with curbing attacks.

Yaakov Amidror, former national security adviser to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, described cases in which Palestinian fathers turned in their sons to prevent them from carrying out attacks that would have resulted in Israel's demolition of their homes. "It is not a silver bullet to stop terrorism," he said. "It helps."

But in 2005, the Israeli army itself recommended a halt to such demolitions after a military panel determined the policy had no effect beyond inflaming hostility. Udi Shani, the now retired general who headed the army panel, said they couldn't find a single case of deterrence.

"It caused revenge," he said. "It was merely a way for us to look aggressive in the public eye."

After almost a decade in which the army hardly blew up any homes, the punitive measure was resumed in 2014 during a spate of attacks in Jerusalem. The revival stirred a new debate over the policy's effectiveness, legitimacy and legality.

"I consider home demolitions to be immoral," Menachem Mazuz, a former attorney general and retired Supreme Court justice, recently told the Israeli daily Haaretz. "History will not judge us well."

Now Netanyahu's government — whose supporters accuse the previous government of weakness in the face of increased Palestinian attacks — have vowed to accelerate the demolitions. "We want to send a clear message of deterrence," said hard-line National Security Minister Itamar Ben-Gvir, who has been convicted in the past of incitement and support for a terrorist group.

In the first half of 2023, Israeli forces demolished a dozen homes for punitive reasons, leaving nearly 60 Palestinians homeless, according to Israeli rights group B'Tselem — the highest number in seven years.

"It's a security measure," the Israeli military said. "It's not a punishment tool."

In an unprecedented move, Ben-Gvir ordered the immediate sealing of two homes belonging to assailants' families before homeowners could appeal. For the past decade, the military has given advance notice of its intention to seal a home.

"They surrounded our house and we grabbed whatever we could carry before I understood what was happening," said Jamal al-Qam, the uncle of a Palestinian gunman who killed seven people in east Jerusalem last February.

Last week's decision on the Zalabani case marks the latest escalation under Netanyahu's government,

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HaMoked said.

Israel has never before destroyed the family home of an assailant so young, it said, and in the past applied the policy selectively to those accused of perpetuating more serious attacks. Israeli authorities determined the police officer died due to the bullet fired by his colleague, not a stab wound. Further complicating the case, the demolition also affects an unwitting landlord, as the Zalabanis are still paying off their loan on the home.

The outcome of court appeals depends on the makeup of Supreme Court justices who remain divided over the tactic, Montell said, and typically rule based on whether they determine families had prior knowledge of the attack. Rewatching footage of her son bursting with youthful exuberance as he pranced on a soccer field, Fida Zalabani refuses to believe he tried to kill anyone.

The latest ruling comes as justices face intensified pressure from Netanyahu's government, which includes ultranationalist Jewish settler leaders. The government is plowing ahead with contentious plans to weaken a Supreme Court that it has branded as liberal and overly interventionist.

As the High Court prepares to face off with the government over its own fate, justices have increasingly taken into account right-wing frustration and privileged state interests when it comes to the Palestinians, legal experts say.

"Because everything is so political now, the court is trying to avoid clashing with the government," said David Kretzmer, expert in international law at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. "(Justices) are on the firing line, attacked by a government of settlers."

Liberal groups seek to use the Constitution's insurrection clause to block Trump from 2024 ballots

By NICHOLAS RICCARDI Associated Press

As former President Donald Trump dominates the Republican presidential primary, some liberal groups and legal experts contend that a rarely used clause of the Constitution prevents him from being president after the Jan. 6, 2021, attack on the U.S. Capitol.

The 14th Amendment bars from office anyone who once took an oath to uphold the Constitution but then "engaged" in "insurrection or rebellion" against it. A growing number of legal scholars say the post-Civil War clause applies to Trump after his role in trying to overturn the 2020 presidential election and encouraging his backers to storm the U.S. Capitol.

Two liberal nonprofits pledge court challenges should states' election officers place Trump on the ballot despite those objections.

The effort is likely to trigger a chain of lawsuits and appeals across several states that ultimately would lead to the U.S. Supreme Court, possibly in the midst of the 2024 primary season. The matter adds even more potential legal chaos to a nomination process already roiled by the front-runner facing four criminal trials.

Now Trump's very ability to run could be litigated as Republicans are scheduled to start choosing their nominee, starting with the Iowa caucuses on Jan. 15.

"There's a very real prospect these cases will be active during the primaries," said Gerard Magliocca, a law professor at Indiana University, warning that there could be different outcomes in different states before the Supreme Court makes a final decision. "Imagine you have an opinion that says he's not eligible and then there's another primary where he's on the ballot."

Though most litigation is unlikely to begin until October, when states begin to set their ballots for the upcoming primary, the issue has gotten a boost from a recently released law review article written by two prominent conservative law professors, William Baude and Michael Paulsen. They concluded that Trump must be barred from the ballot due to the clause in the third section of the 14th Amendment.

That section bars anyone from Congress, the military, and federal and state offices if they previously took an oath to support the Constitution and "have engaged in insurrection or rebellion against the same,

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or given aid or comfort to the enemies thereof.”

In their article, scheduled to be published in the University of Pennsylvania Law Review, Baude and Paulsen said they believe the meaning is clear.

“Taking Section Three seriously means excluding from present or future office those who sought to subvert lawful government authority under the Constitution in the aftermath of the 2020 election,” they write.

The issue came up during last week’s Republican presidential debate in Milwaukee, when former Arkansas Gov. Asa Hutchinson warned that “this is something that could disqualify him under our rules and under the Constitution.”

In 2021, the nonprofit Free Speech For People sent letters to the top election official in all 50 states requesting Trump’s removal if he were to run again for the presidency. The group’s legal director, Ron Fein, noted that after years of silence, officials are beginning to discuss the matter.

“The framers of the 14th Amendment learned the bloody lesson that, once an oath-breaking insurrectionist engages in insurrection, they can’t be trusted to return to power,” Fein said.

Ahead of the 2022 midterms, the group sued to remove U.S. Rep. Marjorie Taylor-Greene and then-Rep. Madison Cawthorn, both Republicans, from the ballot over their support for the Jan. 6 protest. The judge overseeing Greene’s case ruled in her favor, while Cawthorn’s case became moot after he was defeated in his primary.

The complex legal issues were highlighted on Wednesday when the Arizona Republic reported that Secretary of State Adrian Fontes said his hands are tied because of a ruling by that state’s high court that only Congress can disqualify someone on Arizona’s presidential ballot. Fontes, a Democrat, called the ruling “dead, flat wrong” in an interview with the Republic but said he would abide by it.

If Trump appears on the Arizona ballot, those who believe he’s not qualified can still sue in federal court to remove him.

Other secretaries of state are warily navigating the legal minefield.

In a radio interview earlier this week, Michigan Secretary of State Jocelyn Benson, a Democrat, said “there are valid legal arguments being made” for keeping Trump off the ballot and that it’s something she is discussing with other secretaries of state, including those in presidential battlegrounds.

Brad Raffensperger, the Republican secretary of state in Georgia who withstood pressure from Trump when he sought to overturn the 2020 results in the state, suggested the issue should be up to voters.

“As Georgia’s Secretary of State, I have been clear that voters are smart and deserve the right to decide elections,” he said in an emailed statement.

Trump argues that any effort to prevent him from appearing on a state’s ballot amounts to “election interference” — the same way he is characterizing the criminal charges filed against him in New York and Atlanta and by federal prosecutors in Washington, D.C., and Florida.

“And I think what’s happening is there’s really been a backlash against it,” Trump told the conservative channel Newsmax.

Indeed, the New Hampshire secretary of state’s office was flooded with messages about the issue on Monday, said Anna Sventek, a spokeswoman. Earlier in the day, a conservative personality had falsely claimed the state was about to strike Trump from the ballot.

On Wednesday, a long-shot Republican presidential candidate, John Anthony Castro, of Texas, filed a complaint in a New Hampshire court contending the 14th Amendment barred Trump from that state’s ballot.

The eventual, bigger court challenges are expected to draw greater legal fire power. But Michael McConnell, a conservative law professor at Stanford University who is not a Trump supporter, said the case is no slam dunk.

McConnell questions whether the provision even applies to the presidency because it is not one of the offices specifically listed in the 14th Amendment — which instead refers to “elector of president and vice president.” He also said it’s unclear whether the Jan. 6 attack constitutes an “insurrection” under the law or simply a less legally fraught incident such as a riot.

But McConnell also worries about the political precedent if Trump is ultimately removed from any state

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ballot.

"It's not just about Trump. Every election where someone says something supportive of a riot that interferes with the enforcement of laws, their opponents are going to run in and try to get them disqualified," he said.

Ratified in 1868, the 14th Amendment helped ensure civil rights for freed slaves — and eventually for all people in the U.S. — but also was used to prevent former Confederate officials from becoming members of Congress and taking over the government they had just rebelled against.

The clause allows Congress to lift the ban, which it did in 1872 as the political will to continue to bar former Confederates dwindled. The provision was almost never used after that. In 1919, Congress refused to seat a socialist in Congress, contending he gave aid and comfort to the country's enemies during World War I. Last year, in the provision's first use since then, a New Mexico judge barred a rural county commissioner who had entered the Capitol on Jan. 6 from office under the clause.

If any state bars Trump from running, his reelection campaign is expected to sue, possibly taking the case directly to the U.S. Supreme Court. If no state bans him, Free Speech For People and another nonprofit, Citizens for Responsibility and Ethics in Washington, would likely challenge his presence on the ballot.

It's critical that the high court settle the issue before the general election, said Edward Foley, a law professor at The Ohio State University. His fear is that if Trump's qualifications are not resolved and he wins, Democrats could try to block his ascension to the White House on Jan. 6, 2025, triggering another democratic crisis.

Those pushing to invoke the amendment agree and say they think the case is clear.

"This isn't a punishment. It's like saying a president needs to be 35 years old and a natural born citizen," said Noah Bookbinder, president of Citizens for Responsibility and Ethics in Washington. "You also need not to have helped organize an uprising against the government."

Today in History: September 1, Titanic wreckage is found

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Friday, Sept. 1, the 244th day of 2023. There are 121 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On Sept. 1, 1983, 269 people were killed when a Korean Air Lines Boeing 747 was shot down by a Soviet jet fighter after the airliner entered Soviet airspace.

On this date:

In 1715, following a reign of 72 years, King Louis XIV of France died four days before his 77th birthday.

In 1897, the first section of Boston's new subway system was opened.

In 1923, the Japanese cities of Tokyo and Yokohama were devastated by an earthquake that claimed some 140,000 lives.

In 1939, Nazi Germany invaded Poland, an event regarded as the start of World War II.

In 1969, a coup in Libya brought Moammar Gadhafi to power.

In 1972, American Bobby Fischer won the international chess crown in Reykjavik, Iceland, as Boris Spassky of the Soviet Union resigned before the resumption of Game 21.

In 1985, a U.S.-French expedition located the wreckage of the Titanic on the floor of the Atlantic Ocean roughly 400 miles off Newfoundland.

In 2005, New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin issued a "desperate SOS" as his city descended into anarchy amid the flooding left by Hurricane Katrina.

In 2009, Vermont's law allowing same-sex marriage went into effect.

In 2015, invoking "God's authority," Rowan County, Kentucky, Clerk Kim Davis denied marriage licenses to gay couples again in direct defiance of the federal courts, and vowed not to resign, even under the pressure of steep fines or jail.

Ten years ago: Syria derided President Barack Obama's decision to hold off on punitive military strikes,

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while the Obama administration countered that its case for military action against the regime of President Bashar Assad was getting stronger, saying it had evidence that the nerve agent sarin was used in a deadly August attack. Former South African President Nelson Mandela left a hospital after nearly three months of treatment. Former heavyweight boxing champion Tommy Morrison, 44, died at a Nebraska hospital.

Five years ago: At a nearly three-hour memorial service for the late Arizona Republican Sen. John McCain in Washington, McCain's daughter and two former presidents led a public rebuke of President Donald Trump's divisive politics and called for a return to civility among the nation's leaders. Human rights watch said an airstrike by the Saudi-led coalition fighting Yemen's Iran-aligned Houthi rebels that hit a school bus, killing dozens of people including 40 children, was an "apparent war crime."

One year ago: A United Nations inspection team entered Ukraine's Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant on a mission to safeguard it against catastrophe, reaching the site amid fighting between Russian and Ukrainian forces that prompted the shutdown of one reactor and underscored the urgency of the task. Singer R. Kelly told a federal judge that he would not testify at his ongoing trial in Chicago on charges that accused him of child pornography and enticement of minors for sex. (Kelly would be convicted and sentenced to 20 years in prison.)

Today's Birthdays: Conductor Seiji Ozawa (SAY'-jee oh-ZAH'-wah) is 88. Attorney and law professor Alan Dershowitz is 85. Comedian-actor Lily Tomlin is 84. Actor Don Stroud is 80. Conductor Leonard Slatkin is 79. Singer Archie Bell is 79. Singer Barry Gibb is 77. Rock musician Greg Errico is 75. Talk show host Dr. Phil McGraw is 73. Singer Gloria Estefan is 66. Jazz musician Boney James is 62. Singer-musician Grant Lee Phillips (Grant Lee Buffalo) is 60. Country singer-songwriter Charlie Robison is 59. Retired NBA All-Star Tim Hardaway is 57. Actor Ricardo Antonio Chavira is 52. Actor Maury Sterling is 52. Rock singer JD Fortune is 50. Actor Scott Speedman is 48. Country singer Angaleena Presley (Pistol Annies) is 47. Actor Boyd Holbrook is 42. Actor Zoe Lister-Jones is 41. Rock musician Joe Trohman is 39. Actor Aisling (ASH'-ling) Loftus is 33.