

Groton Daily Independent

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“Christmas is not as much about opening our presents as opening our hearts.”

JANICE MAEDITERE

Wednesday, Dec. 20

Senior Menu: Goulash, corn, apple crisp, whole wheat bread.

School Breakfast: French toast.

School Lunch: Chef salad.

Emmanuel Lutheran: Confirmation, 6 p.m.; League, 6:30 p.m.; Longest Night Service, 7 p.m.

St. John's Lutheran: Confirmation, 3:45 p.m.; Pre-school Christmas Program at 7:00 pm

United Methodist: Community Coffee hour, 9:30 a.m.

Groton CM&A: Christmas caroling and game night, 6 pm.

Thursday, Dec. 21

FIRST DAY OF WINTER!

End of Second Quarter, early dismissal at 2 p.m.

Senior Menu: Roast beef, mashed potatoes and gravy, steamed cabbage, rainbow sherbet.

School Breakfast: Muffins.

School Lunch: Chicken nuggets, tri taters.

Elementary School Christmas Program, 1 p.m., GHS Gym.

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

Boys Basketball hosts Aberdeen Roncalli: C game at 5 p.m. with JV and Varsity to follow.

Boys Wrestling at Sisseton, 5 p.m.

Girls Wrestling at McCook Central/Montrose (Salem), 4 p.m.

Friday, Dec. 22

Senior Menu: Tater tot hot dish, green beans, grape juice, pineapple tidbits, whole wheat bread.

No School - Christmas Break

Saturday, Dec. 23

Thrift Store open 10 a.m. to 1 p.m.

Catholic: SEAS Mass, 4 p.m.; St. Joseph, Turton, Mass, 6 p.m.

OPEN: Recycling Trailer in Groton

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

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1440

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Yemen's Iran-allied Houthi rebels, who support Hamas, vowed yesterday to continue targeting commercial ships passing through the Red Sea, a key global trade route bookended by the Suez Canal in the north and the Bab el-Mandeb (Gate of Tears) Strait in the south (see map). The militant group's comments came hours after the US announced it would lead an international initiative to protect ships on the route.

The death toll from China's 6.2 magnitude earthquake has risen to more than 130 people with about 700 more injured, marking the country's deadliest earthquake since 2014. The quake struck China's mountainous northwestern region just before midnight local time Monday near the Gansu-Qinghai border at a depth of 6.2 miles. Despite being only a moderately strong seismic event—more than 100 earthquakes between 6.0 and 7.0 occur globally each year—shallow quakes tend to be more damaging than deeper ones.

Google will pay \$700M to settle a 2021 lawsuit brought by a coalition of state attorneys general and millions of customers alleging its app store violates antitrust laws. More than 70 million customers are expected to be eligible for immediate payment under the settlement, pending final court approval (see eligibility). The penalty is 7% of the initial states' demand of \$10.5B.

Sports, Entertainment, & Culture

Singer Celine Dion has reportedly lost control over her muscles amid battle with stiff-person syndrome.

New York Jets superstar QB Aaron Rodgers, 40, won't return from injury this season, intends to play in 2024 and beyond. Former Super Bowl champ Derrick Ward arrested for allegedly robbing at least five Los Angeles businesses.

Madonna, 65, reveals she was in an induced coma for 48 hours during June hospitalization stemming from a bacterial infection.

Science & Technology

Jeff Bezos-owned Blue Origin launches first spacecraft since September 2022; both the first stage and uncrewed rockets landed successfully.

Great apes and chimpanzees can remember faces of friends and relatives for more than two decades, study finds; sets record for longest nonhuman memory.

Artifact analysis suggests ancient Scythian fighters used human skin to make leather; findings support contemporary accounts from the ancient Greek historian Herodotus.

Business & Markets

US stock markets close higher (S&P 500 +0.6%, Dow +0.7%, Nasdaq +0.7%), with S&P 500 0.6% away from surpassing its record close in January 2022.

US court orders cryptocurrency trading giant Binance and former CEO Changpeng Zhao to pay \$2.7B and \$150M, respectively, to the US Commodity Futures Trading Commission to settle money-laundering probe. Bankrupt cryptocurrency exchange FTX agrees to settle dispute with Bahamian liquidators.

Construction of new homes in the US rose 14.8% in November compared to the previous month, marking the highest monthly growth rate since May.

Politics & World Affairs

Colorado Supreme Court disqualifies former President Donald Trump from state's GOP primary ballot, citing 14th Amendment clause barring those supporting government uprising; decision stayed until Jan. 4 to allow US Supreme Court appeal.

Lava flows from a Monday night eruption on Iceland's Reykjanes peninsula currently moving away from nearby town, smoke plumes unlikely to disrupt air traffic.

Senate negotiators say package combining Ukraine aid with US-Mexico border security measures unlikely to pass before end of year. Immigration groups, El Paso county sue Texas over new law allowing local police to arrest and deport migrants accused of entering the country illegally.

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Groton Community Transit
205 E 2nd Ave., Downtown Groton
invites you to its
Holiday Bake Sale

Thursday, Dec. 21, 9 a.m. to 3 p.m.
Coffee, cider and Christmas goodies will be served.

Groton Transit wishes you all a Merry Christmas and a Blessed Year!

If you would like to donate baked goods, please contact
the Groton Transit dispatch office at 605-397-8661.

Any and all donations are welcome!

**2024 DOG LICENSES DUE BY
12/29/2023**

Fines start January 1, 2024



Spayed/Neutered
dogs are \$5 per dog,
otherwise \$10 per dog

Proof of rabies shot
information is RE-
QUIRED!!

Email proof to city.
kellie@nvc.net, fax to
(605) 397-4498 or bring a copy to City Hall!!

Please contact City Hall as soon as possible if you no longer have a dog(s) that were previously licensed!

Questions call (605) 397-8422

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GHS Girls' Basketball

Cavaliers score 15 straight to stop Groton Area at the end

It was a close game until the end of the third quarter when a lid was put on the basket and the Tigers went scoreless for the rest of the game. Aberdeen Roncalli defeated Groton Area in girls basketball action played Tuesday in Aberdeen, 33-20.

The Cavaliers held a 6-3 lead after the first quarter and it was tied at 16 at halftime. The Tigers held a 20-18 lead late in the third quarter before the Cavaliers scored 15 straight points and the Tigers were scoreless for the rest of the game.

Rylee Dunker led the Tigers with eight points, all of them in the first quarter, and she had eight rebounds. Kennedy Hansen had five points three rebounds, one assist and two steals. Jerica Locke had three points, two rebounds, one assist, three steals and one block. Faith Traphagen had two points and one steal. Jaedyn Penning had two points, six rebounds and one steal. Sydney Leicht had two rebounds and one steal. Brooklyn Hansen and Mia Crank each had one rebound.

Ava Hanson led Roncalli with 10 points with four of them being free throws. Camryn Bain and Claire Crawford each had eight points, McKenna O'Keefe had four points, Maddie Huber two and Morgan Helms had one free throw.

Groton Area made eight of 24 two-pointers for 33 percent, one of 16 three-pointers for 6 percent, made one of three free throws for 33 percent, had 23 rebounds, 19 turnovers, two assists, eight steals, 10 team fouls and one block.

Roncalli made 10 of 36 field goals for 28 percent, eight of 10 free throws for 80 percent, had 13 turnovers and 14 team fouls.

The varsity game was broadcast live on GDILIVE.COM, sponsored by Agtegra, Avantara Groton, 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, Krueger Brothers, Locke Electric, Rix Farms/R&M Farms and Spanier Harvesting and Trucking.

Groton Area won the junior varsity game, 24-20. Roncalli led, 4-2, after the first quarter, the game was tied at nine at halftime and the Tigers took a 19-11 lead into the fourth quarter.

Taryn Traphagen led Groton Area with nine points followed by Laila Roberts and Talli Weight with five each, Rylee Dunker had three and Faith Trapahagen two points.

Elyana Roach led the Cavaliers with six points while Olivia Dix and Ava Danielson each had five points and Gabby Thomas had four points.

The Groton Chiropractic Clinic sponsored the broadcast of the junior varsity game on GDILIVE.COM.

Roncalli won the C game, 34-29. The Cavaliers held a 14-2 lead after the first quarter, but Groton Area scored 10 straight points in the second period to take an 18-16 lead at halftime. The Cavaliers battled back to take a 26-24 lead into the fourth quarter.

McKenna Tietz led Groton Area with 10 points while Kelly Tracy had six, Brenna Imrie five, Emerlee Jones three, Ashlynn Warrington and Estella Sanchez each had two points and Teagan Hanten added a free throw.

Kadince Glynn led Roncalli with 10 points while Addison Cassidy had seven, Grace Cogley six, Olivia Dix five, and Sophie Siefken, Eliana Roach and Karsyn Davis each had two points.

Dorene Nelson sponsored the broadcast of this game on GDILIVE.COM.

- Paul Kosel

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WE'RE HIRING

GLOBAL COMPANY. COMMUNITY CENTERED.



HORTON

APPLY TODAY

www.hortonww.com/britton



Coming up on GDILIVE.COM

G Groton Area
Tigers

T

R



7 p.m., Tuesday, Dec. 19
City Council Meeting
7 p.m., Wed., Dec. 20
St. John's Lutheran
Christmas Program
1 p.m., Thurs., Dec. 21
Elementary
Christmas Program

Aberdeen Roncalli Cavaliers

Tuesday, Dec. 19: Girls at Aberdeen Roncalli

C game at 5 p.m., JV at 6 p.m., Varsity game to follow

Thursday, Dec. 21: Boys hosting Aberdeen Roncalli

C game at 5 p.m., JV at 6 p.m., Varsity game to follow

If you are not a GDI subscriber, purchase your \$5 ticket at GDILIVE.COM

Future of Groton airport discussed during City Council's tour of shop

What can the airport in Groton become?

It's a discussion City Council members had during a tour of Brett Anderson's shop at the end of Tuesday's council meeting.

Three fixed wing single-engine aircrafts sat in the shop: a 1954 Piper Super Cub, a 2008 American Champion Aircraft Scout and a 1959 Cessna 182C. Council members got up close to the planes and learned some of the history behind the crafts.

Darrell Hillestad went through different opportunities that could come with improvements at the airport north of town.

"I just wanted them to see what aviation can be in Groton," he said. "Airplanes are not just about giving rides in. There's business behind it."

Hillestad and Anderson discussed possible opportunities to build a hangar at the airport that could serve as a place to repair planes. There are also opportunities to do technical mechanic training and flight lessons at the airport in the future.

There's a void in aircraft mechanics in the industry, Anderson told the council.

"There's a lot of demand for it," he said. "And Groton would be a great place to do it."

There is still a lot left to do before that type of technical training could start, Hillestad said. While a lot of work has been done over the past few years to improve the airport site, there are still plenty of projects that could help improve it.

"There's a lot of work left to do," he said. "We're just scratching the surface."

Gordon Nelson's death sets somber note

Earlier in the meeting, the City Council was set to accept the resignation of Gordon Nelson from the Planning and Zoning Board during its Tuesday meeting. The Council had reappointed Nelson to the board at the Dec. 5 meeting.

However, Nelson died Dec. 16.

Council members discussed Nelson's passing.

"I would like to send out condolences from me and the City Hall, everyone from planning and zoning," Hanlon said. "Gordie was a good guy. He did a lot of good things for the community."



From left: Groton Mayor Scott Hanlon, pilot Brett Anderson and Councilman Brian Bahr look over a American Champion Aircraft Scout fixed wing single-engine plane Tuesday evening at Anderson's building west of Groton. (Photo by Elizabeth Varin)



Groton City Council members Kevin Nehls, Karyn Babcock, Shirley Wells, Scott Hanlon and Brian Bahr, along with City Attorney Drew Johnson and Groton pilot Brett Anderson surround Darrell Hillestad to see video of a Cessna landing in a field near Groton. (Photo by

Elizabeth Varin)

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From left: Groton Councilman Brian Bahr, Mayor Scott Hanlon, Councilwoman Karyn Babcock, Councilman Kevin Nehls, City Attorney Drew Johnson, Councilman Jon Cutler and Councilwoman Shirley Wells stand near a 1959 Cessna 182C with a 1954 Piper Super Cub in back on the left and a 2008 American Champion Aircraft Scout on the right in pilot Brett Anderson's shop west of Groton on Tuesday evening. (Photo by Elizabeth Varin)

Nelson served on the Groton City Council for several terms, drove the Groton Community Transit bus and volunteered on the Brown County Fair Board for six years.

Hanlon appointed Cody Lindgren as planning and zoning board representative.

- City offices will be closed Monday, Dec. 25 and Tuesday, Dec. 26 for Christmas.
- Dog licenses for 2024 are due Dec. 29.
- Anna Fjeldheim was promoted to skating rink manager. Wages were set at \$11.95 per hour along with \$250 a month.
- The council will discuss a new fee schedule for 2024 during its first meeting in January. The fees were set to be discussed Tuesday, but city officials are still reviewing some numbers.
- Discussion about creating a building inspector position was tabled until February. City Attorney Drew Johnson said he would speak to representatives from Aberdeen about how they structure their inspector positions and bring the information back to the City Council.

- Elizabeth Varin



SOUTH DAKOTA SEARCHLIGHT

<https://southdakotasearchlight.com>

Is it hunting? 'Wild' game increasingly raised in captivity for profit

Preserve owners push back on 'purists,' say private land operations maintain habitat

BY: JOSHUA HAIAR - DECEMBER 19, 2023 4:36 PM

When Jeff Olson saw a photo of a massive buck deer recently – along with a message suggesting it was a record breaker – he was immediately skeptical.

Olson is a Black Hills Sportsmen Club board member and a former state Game, Fish and Parks commissioner.

"Any real hunter knows wild deer don't look like that," Olson said, pointing to the thick antlers and massive body, traits developed when a deer is fed a diet unattainable in the wild.

The photo was evidence of an open secret in South Dakota hunting circles: Not all game shot in the state is "wildlife" in the strictest sense of the word. Some are private livestock, raised behind high fences and sometimes even fed a tailored diet. The private deer, elk or bison – and the often guided trips to shoot them – are sold to customers across the globe for thousands or even tens of thousands of dollars.

The photo of the beastly buck was shared in the sportsmen club's newsletter, where it became fodder in the longstanding debate over the implications of shooting pen-raised animals.

A fenced-off deer operator confirmed that the buck was raised in captivity, but requested to not have his name in this story. That's because these operations are controversial in some hunting circles, who allege the practice is unethical and a disease risk to wild populations.

Hunting vs shooting

The state Department of Game, Fish, and Parks does not manage deer, elk or other game raised behind fencing. That's because South Dakota law recognizes those fenced-in animals as private property, rather than wildlife.

The state Animal Industry Board regulates which animals landowners can import and raise, how to raise and keep them, and how (in the case of pheasants) they can be released into the wild.

Only after pen-raised pheasants are released to be shot by customers do they legally become "wildlife" managed by Game, Fish and Parks.

"They're shooting a farmers' chickens," said Zach Hunke with the South Dakota Wildlife Federation. "And I'm fine with that; make your money. However, it's not the same as hunting, and I don't think we should pretend it is."

Les Lindskov owns multiple shooting preserves in western South Dakota, including pheasant preserves and an 8,000-acre, high-fenced deer, elk and bison operation. He also served on the Game, Fish, and Parks Commission under former Governor Bill Janklow.

Large swaths of habitat are far from free, Lindskov said, and shooting preserves and high-fenced deer and elk operations are the best way for many landowners to pay their bills and keep the land wild.

"I have no time for these people," he said, referring to those critical of high-fence operations and shooting preserves. "[They] have no idea how much land I've enhanced to produce wildlife."

Lindskov said few motivations remain for private landowners to maintain habitat beyond government programs that subsidize the practice, and "there aren't a lot of people calling for more government spending."

The GF&P licenses and fees associated with big game hunting are not required when shooting a private deer or elk, and it can occur any time of the year rather than during a specific hunting season.

Customers shooting pen-raised pheasants on a preserve do need a license, but are not required to

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pay for a Habitat Stamp, a public habitat and hunting fee collected by GF&P. Meanwhile, other pheasant hunters do.

The Boone and Crockett Club keeps the state record for South Dakota's biggest deer. The club's Kyle Lehr said the organization would not accept a captive deer as a submission and would work with state partners to investigate if there was any suspicion.

Captive deer are disqualified because the animals are private property, Lehr said, and the group views shooting them for sport as "undermining fair chase."

"Fair chase" refers to the taking of wildlife in a manner that does not give the hunter an improper advantage over the animal.

Former state GF&P Secretary and Commissioner John Cooper has spent his life in wildlife work on the state and federal levels. He said pen-raised animals, unfamiliar with wild threats, often lack the necessary skills to evade predators and hunters, compromising that principle.

"These people are not hunting," Cooper said. "Hunting is the pursuit of wild game raised in wild places. Shooting is what you do when a hunt is successful."

Lindskov does not disagree that what's happening is not fair chase.

"No, it's not fair chase," he said. "It's a bucket list item for our clients. Where else can you take a Vietnam veteran with no legs to shoot a six-point bull elk?"

Farming wildlife

Captive deer and elk are used for more than hunting; they're also farmed for meat and other purposes. The practice has burgeoned into a multimillion-dollar industry in rural America with over 10,000 operations across the U.S., according to GF&P.

A management report by the department says the industry, which aims to produce breeding stock, trophy game, and products like venison and hides, is reshaping wildlife management and challenging regulatory frameworks. Permitted facilities have grown from 19 to 45 in South Dakota since they were permitted in 1993, predominantly housing elk.

Regulation of captive cervids (the deer and elk family) requires an annual permit from the Animal Industry Board, ranging from \$10 to \$100. The board oversees facility inspections and management, including disease surveillance, in cooperation with the GF&P.

South Dakota State Veterinarian Beth Thompson, said the high-fence cervid operations in South Dakota range from caribou used during Christmas parades to elk raised for jerky and velvet.

"They all have different business plans when farming these animals," said Thompson, who leads the Animal Industry Board.

Disease transmission between captive and wild cervids is a concern, according to Thompson and GF&P — chronic wasting disease in particular.

"If CWD is on either side of the fence, the first people we call is GF&P," Thompson said.

Origins of a deadly disease

Chronic wasting disease affects the brains of deer, elk, caribou, and moose. It was first identified in captive mule deer in Colorado in the 1960s.

"It's just been devastating," said former GF&P biologist George Vandell. "And every early case we'd seen traced it back to a high-fence operation."

In South Dakota, GF&P first detected the disease in seven captive elk facilities in Custer, McPherson, and Pennington counties in 1997. The disease could have spread between captive operations through practices like sharing breeding stock, Vandell said. Raising any animals in a close, captive environment increases the likelihood of disease, he said.

Subsequent research in partnership with South Dakota State University found no incidents of the disease in sampled free-ranging deer and elk from 1997 to 1999.

The first case in the wild was confirmed in a white-tailed deer in Fall River County during the 2001 hunt-

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ing season, and the first wild elk case was detected in 2002.

The state has since conducted over 18,000 tests since 2001, primarily on animals submitted by hunters, and has confirmed cases in 297 white-tailed deer, 142 mule deer, and 282 elk in the wild population.

GF&P conducts testing in coordination with SDSU's Animal Disease Research and Diagnostic Laboratory, with confirmatory analysis by the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

Results are usually available within seven to 10 days, and updates can be found on GF&P's interactive online map.

GF&P's management report says that testing used to be mandatory on all captive deer and elk that died in South Dakota. In 2012, "following 15 years of mandatory CWD testing," the Animal Industry Board now administers a voluntary program.

Since 1997, there have been 6,676 captive cervids (deer, elk, moose) tested in South Dakota and 130 tested positive (125 elk, five white-tailed deer).

"I don't know that there is a whole lot you can do," said Lindskov, the preserve owner.

Operations are incentivized to take disease mitigation seriously, Lindskov said. Businesses depend on healthy stock.

"Nobody is more concerned about diseases than me," Lindskov said. "We make sure to get them tested, and if there ever was a detection, we'd put them all down right away."

Private and public interests

Cooper, the Former GF&P Secretary, said hunting in South Dakota helps manage the public's wildlife with science-based harvest limits. The practice also funds conservation efforts through license fees and taxes on gear and ammunition.

Operations that exist to generate profit can result in science taking a backseat to revenue, he said, pointing to pheasants as an example.

The pheasant population used to be decided "by mother nature." Weather and the quality of habitat all but determined the year's population, he said, not "how many pheasants I want to raise and release out on this ground out here."

Cooper said after the state began treating "the shooting of private, pen-raised pheasants as hunting," that industry began to influence wildlife management decisions in the state.

The state ended its count of wild pheasants "to ensure that South Dakota is not unintentionally deterring hunters from coming to our state based on the media headlines reporting of low bird numbers." GF&P staff used to drive the same rural routes every year, counting the broods or hens they saw and then extrapolating a population estimate from that.

"Decades of science out the window," Cooper said.

Lindskov said the count "was never accurate in the first place." The license fees required to shoot pheasants on a private preserve go back to GF&P, as well, "helping to improve wildlife habitat for everybody."

"Get a life," he said, referring to "hunting purists" who see the private operations as problematic. "They're doing justice for everything from tourism revenue to habitat improvements on private lands. There was never one wild pheasant out on this land before I started introducing them."

There were no wild pheasants anywhere in South Dakota before they were introduced in 1908. The species originates in China.

Thompson, the state veterinarian, said there are no known diseases transmitted by pen-raised pheasants into the wild population.

"Unless we're talking about bird flu, and we know the source of that is wild birds," Thompson said. "So no, there's nothing I'm aware of that's concerning in the way CWD is to cervids."

This year, bird flu was detected on a pen-raised pheasant preserve in Iowa. The disease has not been detected on a preserve in South Dakota, Thompson said.

Joshua Haiar is a reporter based in Sioux Falls. Born and raised in Mitchell, he joined the Navy as a public affairs specialist after high school and then earned a degree from the University of South Dakota. Prior to joining

South Dakota Searchlight, Joshua worked for five years as a multimedia specialist and journalist with South Dakota Public Broadcasting.

Building transmission takes forever. The Biden administration is pushing to change that.

BY: ROBERT ZULLO - DECEMBER 19, 2023 5:04 PM

The SOO Green electric transmission project, a 350-mile high-voltage line between Mason City, Iowa, and Plano, Illinois, was proposed in 2018 to deliver renewable power and to better connect the nation's two largest power markets. The project won approval from Iowa regulators this fall.

The developers of the line, which will link wind and solar power produced in the area overseen by the Midcontinent Independent System Operator with 65 million customers in PJM, the largest U.S. electric market, are using mostly existing rail rights of way and burying the wire underground to sidestep fights over land acquisition, visual aesthetics and other issues that have bedeviled other transmission projects.

That's why Raj Rajan, vice president of project development for SOO Green, which is still waiting for interconnection agreements from MISO and PJM and Army Corps of Engineers permits, chuckled when he was asked why that novel approach intended to shave time has still taken more than five years to get off the ground.

"Five years can be considered rapid speed in transmission development," he said.

Indeed, even for a nation that has struggled to bring aging roads, bridges, rail lines and other infrastructure up to par, electric transmission lines take a long time to build.

However, the Biden administration's Department of Energy is keenly aware of how crucial the pace of transmission expansion is to a reliable grid increasingly beset by severe weather, alleviating pockets of high prices and congestion and achieving federal and states' decarbonization goals. Energy Secretary Jennifer Granholm says the nation's grid needs to double to achieve 100% clean electricity by 2035.

And, armed with billions in dollars of loans, grants and other funding to improve siting and permitting and help get projects up and running, the agency is making what experts call a historic push to invest in American transmission.

"We have to vastly expand the transmission network across the country and fortunately the Department of Energy has a number of tools to help private industry, states and tribes to move forward in getting the transmission they need," said Dylan Reed, a senior adviser at the DOE's Grid Deployment Office, which was launched in 2022 in part to expand the transmission system.

Why they take so long

A poster child is the SunZia project, a wind farm and 550-mile high-voltage line between central New Mexico and south-central Arizona. SunZia, which crosses 11 counties in two states, including federal, state and private lands, got a crucial federal Bureau of Land Management approval late last spring, 17 years after it was proposed. Fourteen state and federal agencies or military bases were involved in the project.

"Navigating and completing permitting, land negotiations and commercial structuring was a very complex and challenging process that led to the extended timeline from conceptualization to construction," said Kevin Wetzel, a vice president at Pattern Energy, which acquired the SunZia project in 2022.

Generally, it can take 10 years or more to build new high voltage transmission lines in the U.S. In June, federal officials were on hand for the Wyoming groundbreaking of the TransWest Express project, a 732-mile line that was "mired in bureaucratic delays for nearly two decades," Politico's E&E News reported.

Generally, the problems plaguing transmission construction come down to what Rob Gramlich, president of Grid Strategies, a Washington consulting firm focused on the electric grid and power markets, calls the "three P's": planning, permitting and paying.

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How larger transmission projects are planned can vary significantly across the country, depending on whether a given area is part of a regional transmission organization, large, generally (though not always) multistate organizations that coordinate the flow of electricity and plan transmission upgrades, or whether they're outside of an RTO.

Improving regional planning and cost allocation based on broader benefits of transmission expansion are the main thrusts of a proposed Federal Energy Regulatory Commission rule that many groups and state lawmakers are urging the agency to finalize. It's intended in part to "address concerns that current regional transmission planning may be resulting in piecemeal and inefficient development" of new regional transmission lines.

"Despite FERC's various attempts to encourage regional transmission planning, the results have been lackluster," the nonprofit advocacy group Americans for a Clean Electric Grid, which is pushing to expand and modernize the nation's grid, wrote in a report last summer grading transmission planning across the country. Generally, transmission buildout has followed the process of interconnecting new resources to the grid and hasn't been sufficiently forward looking, failing to account for the big shifts happening in power generation and projected demand growth, critics contend.

"The generator interconnection process is reactive and does not holistically plan for future needs or evaluate the most efficient transmission solutions to maximize transmission's economic and reliability benefits," the ACEG report says. "It is not achieving economies of scale and is failing to maintain just and reasonable rates."

Most of the Southeast, for example, which is dominated by a handful of large utility companies, is not part of a regional transmission organization and got the worst grade for transmission planning in the ACEG report. There, the report found, "a key issue for regional transmission planning is the lack of access to information and transparency, limiting the effectiveness of transmission planning and stakeholder engagement." The planning entities that do exist "largely aggregate their utilities' plans and periodically brief stakeholders without seeking significant input and often not sharing sufficient data, methods, or assumptions to enable an assessment of the projects."

There can be competing interests, with existing utilities often lacking incentives to cooperate on regional projects that could have broader benefits to reliability and cost. Some states or communities may be unwilling to host or pay for transmission that is seen as benefiting someone else or furthering a policy agenda leaders don't endorse.

How costs are allocated, in particular, is both a "source of delay and a reason it doesn't happen," Gramlich said of transmission projects, adding that "nobody starts proposing a line if they're never going to get paid back for it."

Then there's the permitting

Unlike natural gas pipelines, there's no similar federal permitting regime for electric transmission, Gramlich noted. Rather, an assemblage of state, local and federal agencies might be involved in issuing permits for an electric transmission project, with no entity coordinating all the federal agencies that might be involved, as FERC does for interstate gas pipeline projects.

The Department of Energy is changing that by proposing to use existing authority under the Federal Power Act to act as the lead agency for coordinating permitting to "expedite the siting, permitting and construction of electric transmission infrastructure." The program sets a two-year deadline for agency action.

The DOE is also pushing to use the secretary of energy's existing powers to designate "national interest electric transmission corridors" if capacity constraints or congestion are negatively affecting electric consumers. The designation can unlock more than \$4 billion in federal financing programs and allows FERC to grant permits if state authorities fail to act on an application for more than a year, deny an application or lack the authority to site the line.

That's in addition to efforts in Congress to reform environmental permitting and federal grants for state, local and tribal governments to "accelerate and strengthen electric transmission siting and permitting

processes." All told, there's \$760 million from the Inflation Reduction Act that can be used for studies, modeling, environmental planning and analysis on alternatives, the DOE said in a news release.

"Permitting transmission takes too long and there are a number of tools the federal government can use to make that process more efficient," said Reed, the DOE official.

'Getting transmission policies implemented'

The Department of Energy is also trying to juice transmission construction directly, through billions of dollars in grants and loans, such as the Transmission Facilitation Program, a revolving fund in which the DOE will serve as the "anchor customer," buying up to 50% of a planned line's capacity rating for up to 40 years, then sell the contract to recover the costs.

The program increases investor confidence, reduces risk for developers and prompts other customers to buy capacity, the agency said in a news release.

In October, the administration announced that it had made a \$1.3 billion commitment to three transmission lines in six states (Nevada, Utah, Arizona, New Mexico, New Hampshire and Vermont).

"This administration is getting transmission policies implemented," Gramlich said. "They've got a very effective Grid Deployment Office created and staffed and running and they are getting important policies implemented.

But even with the federal action, there's a lot of work left for states, particularly those with ambitious clean energy goals.

"I don't think we can count on DOE to keep pushing everything along," said Christina Hayes, a former FERC attorney and executive director of Americans for a Clean Energy Grid. "There's tremendous value in states collaborating with their neighbors." States that are in regional transmission organizations already have formal working groups, like the Organization of MISO States and the Organization of PJM States.

And in non-RTO areas, state regulators are increasingly focusing on transmission in resource planning, when utilities present plans for how they'll meet customer demand, Gramlich said. "It tends to be cheaper to build transmission than to build all the generation locally," he said.

Some states, like New Mexico and Colorado, have established their own transmission authorities, Gramlich added. And many East Coast states are exploring how to cooperate on the transmission upgrades needed to bring all the offshore wind power they plan to build ashore.

"Electrons don't recognize state boundaries," Hayes said. "When you're thinking about what's good for folks in your state it's helpful to think about what's good for folks in your region."

Robert Zullo is a national energy reporter based in southern Illinois focusing on renewable power and the electric grid. Robert joined States Newsroom in 2018 as the founding editor of the Virginia Mercury. Before that, he spent 13 years as a reporter and editor at newspapers in Virginia, New Jersey, Pennsylvania and Louisiana. He has a bachelor's degree from the College of William and Mary in Williamsburg, Va. He grew up in Miami, Fla., and central New Jersey.

GOP presidential field generally opposes eminent domain for carbon pipelines

BY: JARED STRONG - DECEMBER 19, 2023 12:58 PM

Republican presidential contenders are generally against using eminent domain to build carbon dioxide pipelines, according to their public statements in recent months and information their campaigns have provided to the Iowa Capital Dispatch.

The issue is a regional dispute that has gained wider attention as the candidates seek Iowans' votes in the upcoming first-in-the-nation caucuses.

Three such pipeline have been proposed in Iowa in recent years. One of the projects failed amid regula-

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tory setbacks but two others are pending.

Summit Carbon Solutions is the furthest along in its permitting process in Iowa. Final arguments about its permit are due next month, after which the Iowa Utilities Board will decide whether to approve the project and the company's use of eminent domain to obtain land easements for about a quarter of its nearly 700-mile route in the state.

Many of those who oppose the project argue that eminent domain is improper because the pipeline system doesn't serve a sufficient public benefit. There are also those who are ambivalent about the pipeline projects themselves but who still oppose their use of eminent domain.

Nearly 80% of Iowans oppose the use of eminent domain for the pipelines, according to a Des Moines Register/Mediacom Iowa Poll in March, and it's an issue that is being raised at presidential campaign events.

"Well, you know, we're working on that," Trump said. "And you know, we had a plan to totally — it's such a ridiculous situation isn't it? But we had a plan, and we would have instituted that plan. It was all ready, but we will get it right away. If we win, that's going to be taken care of. That will be one of the easy things we do."

His campaign did not respond to a request to comment further about the issue.

Trump has a commanding lead among Iowa's likely Republican caucusgoers, according to a recent Iowa Poll. About 51% say he is their top pick.

His closest contenders — Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis and former U.N. ambassador Nikki Haley, who are the top picks of 19% and 16% of likely voters — have said the use of eminent domain should be avoided for the projects.

"There is a narrow role for eminent domain for things that are of really significant public use," DeSantis said in Garner in August, according to Radio Iowa. "I mean, it has been used for highways. I would use it for the border wall down south if need be, but that would be kind of last resort."

In September, Haley told Radio Iowa she supports the pipeline concepts for their potential to help the ethanol industry but that eminent domain should not be used to build them.

"I want us to be energy dominant, and I think we do that by having an all-of-the-above energy approach, but we have to always be respectful of the rights and freedoms of hardworking Americans," Haley said.

Summit's pipeline system would span five states and would transport captured carbon dioxide from ethanol plants to North Dakota for underground storage. The project would enable the company and ethanol producers to also capture generous federal tax credits for sequestering the greenhouse gas and for producing low-carbon fuels.

Ethanol producers would further benefit from the ability to sell their fuels in low-carbon markets.

Opposition to the pipelines and the state rules that regulate them has grown over time. The Republican-controlled Iowa House of Representatives approved legislation to restrict the use of eminent domain for the projects in its last legislative session. And despite recent federal court rulings that said Iowa counties do not have the power regulate the pipeline routes, more counties are considering pipeline ordinances and are prepared for a legal fight. Kossuth County adopted such an ordinance last week.

Presidential candidate Ryan Binkley, a Texas pastor and businessman, announced his opposition to the pipeline projects in September. He called Summit's project "a controversial approach to fight climate change with technology that has produced inconsistent results."

"I've met with hundreds of people on this issue," Binkley said. "Only one person I met with has been in favor of it, and they work for an ethanol company. A few companies stand to make a lot of money from this pipeline."

His opposition to the projects appears to have had little effect on his support among caucusgoers. About 0% of Des Moines Register/NBC News/Mediacom Iowa Poll respondents listed Binkley as their top pick.

Vivek Ramaswamy, a biotech entrepreneur, is polling at 5% and recently took up the pipeline issue in opposition of eminent domain. He insinuated that the candidates he trails in the polls are reluctant to speak strongly against the projects — which he said serve no legitimate purpose — because of donations they have received from pro-pipeline groups. Similar accusations have been leveled against some of the

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state's elected officials.

"Every politician dances to the tune of their biggest donor," Ramaswamy said at an event early this month with the Free Soil Coalition.

He called for the Iowa Utilities Board to deny eminent domain for Summit's \$5.5 billion project and said the board's ruling should be challenged in court if it doesn't. Ramaswamy further said that, as president, he would bar the federal tax credits for companies that use eminent domain.

"These projects are illegal and unconstitutional under settled law," he said.

The Iowa Renewable Fuels Association — which advocates for the ethanol industry and supports the pipeline projects — released a lengthy rebuttal to Ramaswamy's position on the pipeline projects, which it said is "driven by politics" and is "just an attempt at clickbait for his campaign."

The association said Ramaswamy's disdain for carbon dioxide pipelines is at odds with his support for the Keystone XL oil pipeline, which was blocked by President Joe Biden.

"Keystone is a private, foreign-owned, for-profit entity that is using eminent domain to secure its route," said Monte Shaw, the association's executive director. "Any politician who touts support for the Keystone XL pipeline while attacking carbon pipelines in Iowa on the basis of protecting property rights is nothing more than a hypocrite."

Candidate Asa Hutchinson, the former governor of Arkansas, also said eminent domain isn't appropriate for the projects.

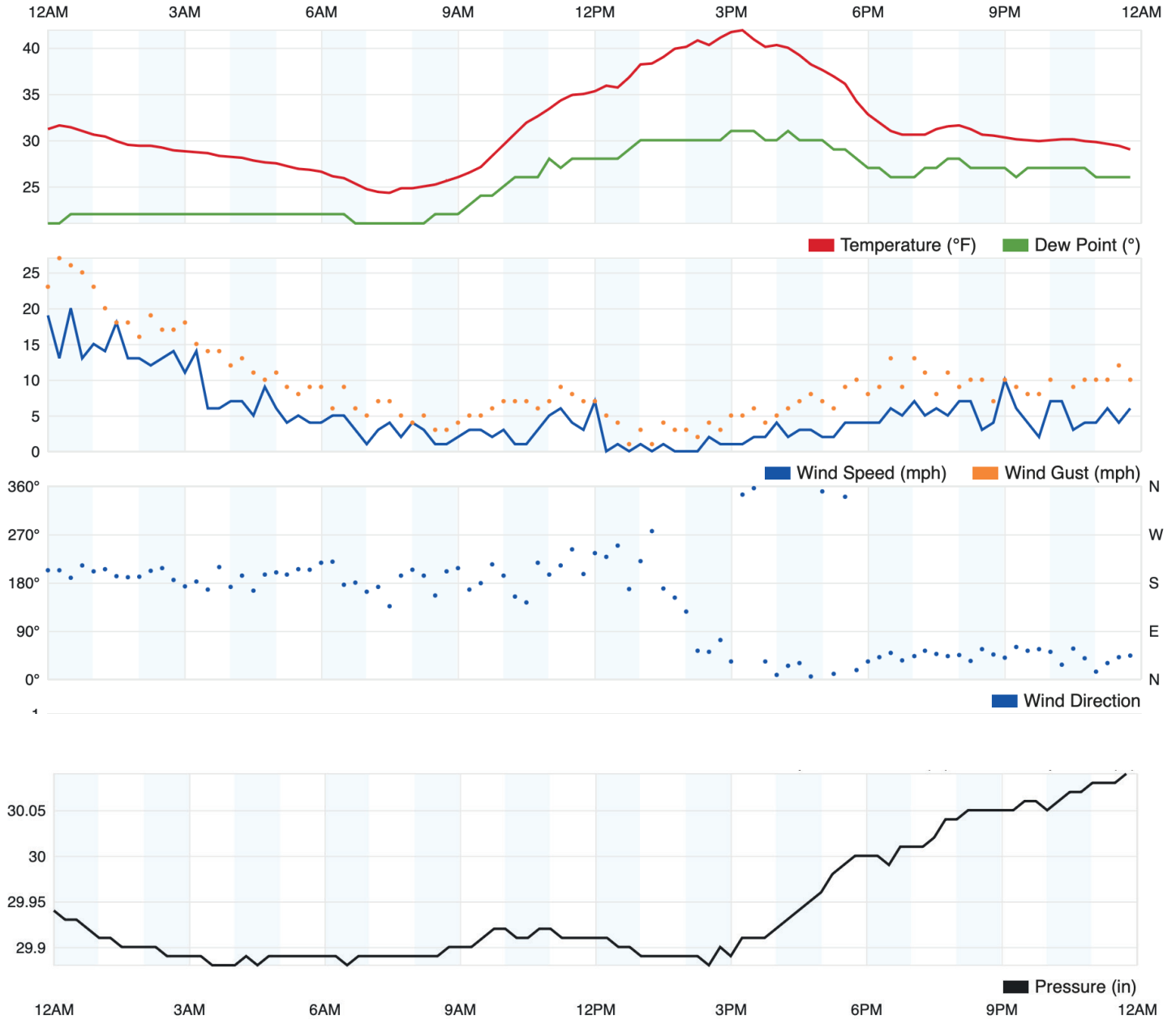
Instead, a fair negotiation process should be employed, and if landowners do not agree, pipeline builders should seek alternative routes," Hutchinson told Iowa Capital Dispatch.

Jared Strong is the senior reporter for the Iowa Capital Dispatch. He has written about Iowans and the important issues that affect them for more than 15 years, previously for the Carroll Times Herald and the Des Moines Register. His investigative work exposing police misconduct has notched several state and national awards. He is a longtime trustee of the Iowa Freedom of Information Council, which fights for open records and open government. He is a lifelong Iowan and has lived mostly in rural western parts of the state.

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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat	Sun	Mon	Tue
Dec 20	Dec 21	Dec 22	Dec 23	Dec 24	Dec 25	Dec 26
42°F	43°F	43°F	49°F	44°F	34°F	33°F
27°F	27°F	28°F	38°F	27°F	22°F	18°F
NE	SE	SSW	SSE	SE	N	N
9 MPH	11 MPH	5 MPH	12 MPH	16 MPH	16 MPH	17 MPH
				70%	50%	



Warm And Dry Through Friday

December 19, 2023

1:54 PM

Fog is a distinct possibility by Thursday night, off and on through Saturday morning

Forecast:

- Tonight: Partly to Mostly Cloudy. Lows: 16-24°
- Wednesday: Partly to Mostly Sunny. Highs: 33-45°
- Thursday: Partly to Mostly Cloudy. Highs: 37-45°
- Friday: Continued Warm. Highs: 42-52°
- Saturday: Increasing Clouds. Highs: 45-54°



Extended Outlook: Next (20-80%) chance of precipitation arriving Sunday morning to continue through Christmas Day, & diminish Tuesday. While rain is most likely, a wintry mix will be possible over central SD late Sunday afternoon through Sunday night, extending to portions of eastern SD on Monday.

Stay tuned if you have travel plans, particularly to WY or the western Dakotas.



National Weather Service
Aberdeen, SD

Continued warm and dry conditions are expected this week. It's tough to nail down, 'cause it's more than a couple of days away, but there could be some fog or low clouds around by Thursday night. Right now, there is still a weather system looming on the time horizon for early next week. Rain eventually changes to snow, but not much for accumulation is expected at this time.

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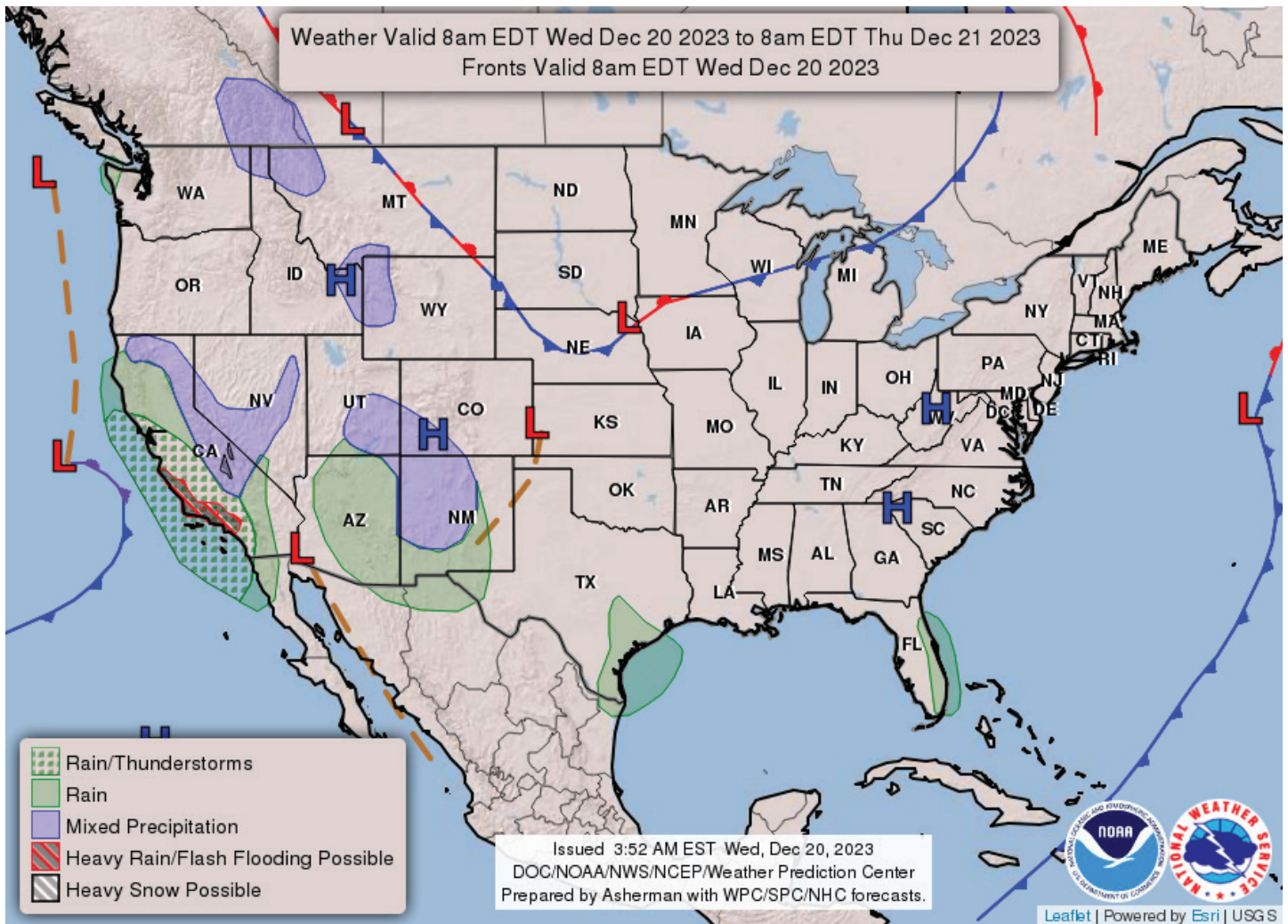
Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 42 °F at 3:13 PM
Low Temp: 24 °F at 7:18 AM
Wind: 27 mph at 12:14 AM
Precip: : 0.00

Day length: 8 hours, 46 minutes

Today's Info

Record High: 60 in 1893
Record Low: -29 in 1916
Average High: 27
Average Low: 7
Average Precip in Dec.: 0.38
Precip to date in Dec.: 0.00
Average Precip to date: 21.59
Precip Year to Date: 23.17
Sunset Tonight: 4:53:05 pm
Sunrise Tomorrow: 8:07:22 am



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Today in Weather History

December 20, 1991: Light freezing drizzle and freezing rain developed over northern South Dakota from Timber Lake to Webster. Numerous car accidents were attributed to slippery conditions. The Aberdeen Police Department reported 24 accidents in Aberdeen, but only one resulted in an injury. Numerous businesses closed and schools were canceled.

December 20, 2008: Arctic air combined with blustery northwest winds brought extreme wind chills to the central and northeast South Dakota and west-central Minnesota from the late afternoon of the 20th until the afternoon of the 21st. Wind chills of 35 below to 45 below zero were common across the area.

1836: A famous "sudden freeze" occurred in central Illinois. A cold front with 70 mph winds swept through around Noon, dropping the temperature from 40 degrees to near zero in a matter of minutes. Many settlers froze to death. Folklore told of chickens frozen in their tracks and men frozen to saddles. Ice in streams reportedly froze to six inches in a few hours.

1929: An exceptional storm produced snow from the Middle Rio Grande Valley of Texas to southern Arkansas on December 20 - 21st, 1929. The storm produced 26 inches of snow near Hillsboro, Texas, and 24 inches in 24 hours in Clifton.

1942 - An early cold wave sent the temperature plunging to 3 degrees below zero at Nantucket, MA, and to 11 degrees below zero at Boston MA. (The Weather Channel)

1977: A "Once in a Lifetime" wind and dust storm struck the south end of the San Joaquin Valley in California. Winds reached 88 mph at Arvin before the anemometer broke, and gusts were estimated at 192 mph at Arvin by a U.S. Geological Survey. Meadows Field in Bakersfield recorded sustained 46 mph winds with a gust of 63 mph. The strong winds generated a wall of dust resembling a tidal wave that was 5,000 feet high over Arvin. Blowing sand stripped painted surfaces to bare metal and trapped people in vehicles for several hours. 70% of homes received structural damage in Arvin, Edison, and East Bakersfield. 120,000 Kern County customers lost power. Agriculture was impacted as 25 million tons of soil was loosened from grazing lands. Five people died, and damages totaled \$34 million.

These strong winds also spread a large fire through the Honda Canyon on Vandenberg Air Force Base in southern California. This fire, which started from a power pole on Tranquillon Ridge being blown over, claimed the lives of Base Commander Colonel Joseph Turner, Fire Chief Billy Bell, and Assistant Fire Chief Eugene Cooper. Additionally, severe burns were experienced by Heavy Equipment Operator Clarence McCauley. He later died due to complications from the burns.

1984: Lili, a rare December hurricane, was officially declared a tropical system in the central Atlantic as a distinct eye type feature was apparent on satellite imagery. The hurricane peaked at sustained 80 mph winds and a pressure of 980 millibars or 28.94 inches of mercury, a very respectable Category 1 Hurricane in December.

1987 - Heavy snow fell in the northern mountains of Colorado, with 15 inches reported in the Mary Jane ski area. Strong and gusty winds prevailed from the Northern High Plains to the Great Lakes. Winds gusted to 54 mph at Buffalo NY, and reached 66 mph at Livingston MT. Rain, freezing rain, sleet and snow fell across New England, with up to seven inches of snow in Maine. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1988 - Strong southerly winds ahead of a cold front in the central U.S. gusted to 70 mph at Indianapolis IN. The high winds toppled a masonry wall killing a construction worker. Low pressure and a trailing cold front brought rain and snow and high winds to the western U.S. Winds gusted to 90 mph at the Callahan Ranch south of Reno NV. Soda Springs, in the Sierra Nevada Range of California, received 17 inches of snow in less than 24 hours. (Storm Data) (The National Weather Summary)

1989 - Brutal northwest winds ushered bitter cold arctic air into the north central U.S. International Falls, MN, and Warroad, MN, tied for honors as the cold spot in the nation with morning lows of 34 degrees below zero. Minot ND reported a wind chill reading of 81 degrees below zero. Squalls produced more heavy snow in the Great Lakes Region. Erie PA received 21 inches of snow, including four inches in one hour, to bring their total snow cover to 39 inches, an all-time record for that location. (Storm Data) (The National Weather Summary)

2006 - A major winter storm affected Colorado, dumping several feet of snow on areas of the Rocky Mountains. The snowstorm temporarily closed the Denver International Airport.

Daily Devotionals

Seeds of Hope

NO MISTAKE

Walter came home from Sunday school with a question all over his face. "Mom," he asked, "did the shepherds have washing machines where they kept their sheep?"

"Shepherds? Washing machines?" After a moment she said, "No, darling, they did not have washing machines. Why do you ask?"

"Well, Mrs. Mathis was reading the story of the birth of Jesus and she said, 'While shepherds washed their socks that night...' and I didn't understand what was going on."

While we often think of the shepherds in the field that night, the glory that appeared with the angel and the fear that gripped them, we seldom connect the shepherds in that field with the Good Shepherd.

Jesus said, "I am the Good Shepherd" twice in John's Gospel. In those statements, he summarized all of the prophetic images of His role as prophet in the Old Testament. This declaration is a claim to His divinity as revealed in the Old Testament and focuses on His love, protection, and guidance of us – His lambs – in the New Testament.

But there is more. Not only is He our Shepherd but He chose to identify Himself as the "good shepherd" – and good is a term that carries with it nobility. It stands in sharp contrast to shepherds who were hired hands who worked and cared only for their own self-interests.

Prayer: We thank You, Lord, for loving us, for being our Good Shepherd and for laying down Your life for us. May we always follow You, our "Good Shepherd!" In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: Luke 2:8 And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night.



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
- 11/05/2023 St. Elizabeth Ann Seton Catholic Church Fall Dinner, 5 p.m. to 7 p.m.
- 11/11/2023 Groton American Legion Annual Turkey Party 6:30 pm.
- 11/23/2023 Community Thanksgiving at the Community Center 11:30am-1pm
- 11/26/2023 Snow Queen Contest, 4 p.m.
- 12/02/2023 Live & Silent Auctions at Olive Grove Golf Course 4pm-close

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The Groton Independent Printed & Mailed Weekly Edition

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WINNING NUMBERS

MEGA MILLIONS

WINNING NUMBERS: 12.19.23

17 26 50 58 61 11

MegaPlier: 3x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$57,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 2 Days 17 Hrs 24 Mins 3 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LOTTO AMERICA

WINNING NUMBERS: 12.18.23

2 3 12 33 40 6

All Star Bonus: 4x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$2,950,000

NEXT DRAW: 16 Hrs 39 Mins 3 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LUCKY FOR LIFE

WINNING NUMBERS: 12.19.23

7 10 23 31 32 14

TOP PRIZE:

\$7,000/week

NEXT DRAW: 16 Hrs 54 Mins 4 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

DAKOTA CASH

WINNING NUMBERS: 12.16.23

2 7 9 13 34

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$97,000

NEXT DRAW: 16 Hrs 54 Mins 4 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

DOUBLE PLAY

WINNING NUMBERS: 12.18.23

2 8 11 25 51 9

TOP PRIZE:

\$10,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 17 Hrs 23 Mins 3 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

WINNING NUMBERS: 12.18.23

5 8 19 34 39 26

Power Play: 3x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$572,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 17 Hrs 23 Mins 3 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

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News from the  Associated Press

Tuesday's Scores

The Associated Press

GIRLS PREP BASKETBALL

Aberdeen Roncalli 33, Groton Area 20
Beresford 58, Sioux Valley 47
Burke 52, Scotland 10
Canton 63, Alcester-Hudson 33
Centerville 55, Gayville-Volin High School 34
Chamberlain 54, Kimball/White Lake 24
Colman-Egan 52, Howard 44
Dakota Valley 61, Hartington Cedar Catholic, Neb. 54
DeSmet 53, Deuel 31
Elk Point-Jefferson 55, Viborg-Hurley 45
Elkton-Lake Benton 45, Baltic 32
Faulkton 47, Wessington Springs 37
Faulkton 47, Wolsey-Wessington 37
Florence-Henry 50, Clark-Willow Lake 31
Garretson 56, Dell Rapids 45
Harding County 60, Hettinger-Scranton, N.D. 36
Hill City 44, St. Thomas More 34
Hot Springs 40, New Underwood 31
Jones County 39, Stanley County 30
Langford 50, Wilmot 36
Lemmon High School 66, New England, N.D. 26
Lyman 58, Colome 7
McCook Central-Montrose 52, Chester 38
Mobridge-Pollock 65, Aberdeen Christian 16
Mt. Vernon/Plankinton 61, Sanborn Central-Woonsocket 21
Parkston 70, Parker 43
Pierre T F Riggs High School 57, Watertown 33
Potter County 49, Leola-Frederick High School 31
Sisseton 76, Redfield 25
Tea Area 75, Brookings 37
Tripp-Delmont/Armour 41, Freeman Academy-Marion 20
Vermillion 61, Tri-Valley 27
Waubay/Summit 60, Ipswich 41
Wessington Springs 55, Highmore-Harold 36
Winner 58, Bon Homme 35
Wynot, Neb. 76, Irene-Wakonda 39

BOYS PREP BASKETBALL

Baltic 54, Elkton-Lake Benton 34
Burke 65, Scotland 54
Canistota 59, Bridgewater-Emery 43
Canton 63, Alcester-Hudson 50
Castlewood 62, Flandreau 57

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Centerville 64, Gayville-Volin High School 38
Chester 74, McCook Central-Montrose 51
Clark-Willow Lake 72, Florence-Henry 57
DeSmet 54, Deuel 39
Elk Point-Jefferson 57, Viborg-Hurley 55, OT
Estelline-Hendricks 67, Iroquois-Lake Preston 62
Gregory 62, North Central, Neb. 39
Harrisburg 69, Le Mars, Iowa 39
Howard 70, Colman-Egan 38
Jones County 82, Stanley County 79
Kimball/White Lake 68, Chamberlain 53
Lemmon High School 41, Hettinger-Scranton, N.D. 34
Leola-Frederick High School 72, Potter County 41
Lyman 66, Colome 55
Madison 73, Deubrook 41
Mobridge-Pollock 77, Aberdeen Christian 61
Mt. Vernon/Plankinton 46, Sanborn Central-Woonsocket 43
Parkston 74, Parker 62
Sioux Falls Jefferson 67, Sioux Falls Lincoln High School 63
Sioux Valley 74, Beresford 41
Sisseton 53, Redfield 20
South Border, N.D. 60, Eureka 38
South Border, N.D. 60, North Central Co-Op 38
Tea Area 56, Brookings 43
Timber Lake 61, Herreid/Selby Area 47
Tripp-Delmont/Armour 65, Freeman Academy-Marion 52
Vermillion 67, Tri-Valley 57
Wagner 60, Menno 28
Watertown 43, Pierre T F Riggs High School 40
Waubay/Summit 46, Ipswich 39
Waverly-South Shore 51, Tri-State, N.D. 34
Wessington Springs 73, Highmore-Harold 44
Wilmot 59, Langford 35
Winner 55, Bon Homme 34
Wolsey-Wessington 57, Faulkton 40
Wynot, Neb. 78, Irene-Wakonda 33

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

Higgins scores 28 in CSU Bakersfield's 96-76 win over South Dakota

By The Associated Press undefined

BAKERSFIELD, Calif. (AP) — Kaleb Higgins' 28 points helped CSU Bakersfield defeat South Dakota 96-76 on Tuesday.

Higgins also contributed five assists for the Roadrunners (5-6). Modestas Kancleris scored 17 points and added seven rebounds and three steals. Jaden Alexander had 11 points and shot 5 for 10, including 1 for 3 from beyond the arc.

The Coyotes (7-5) were led by Kaleb Stewart, who recorded 16 points. Lahat Thioune added 15 points and eight rebounds for South Dakota. In addition, Paul Bruns had 11 points and two steals.

Biden administration moves to protect old-growth forests as climate change brings fires, pests

By MATTHEW BROWN Associated Press

BILLINGS, Mont. (AP) — The Biden administration moved on Tuesday to conserve groves of old-growth trees on national forests across the U.S. and limit logging as climate change amplifies the threats they face from wildfires, insects and disease.

Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack said the agency was adopting an “ecologically-driven” approach to older forests — an arena where timber industry interests have historically predominated. That will include the first nationwide amendment to U.S. Forest Service management plans in the agency’s 118-year history, he said.

The proposal follows longstanding calls from environmentalists to preserve older forests that offer crucial wildlife habitat and other environmental benefits. Timber companies have fought against logging restrictions on government-owned lands.

President Joseph Biden’s administration appears to be aiming for a middle ground: It would sharply limit commercial timber harvests in old-growth forests while allowing logging to continue in “mature forests” that have not yet reached old-growth stage.

“This creates a commitment to resiliency, a commitment to restore and protect the existing old growth that we have from the threats that we see,” Vilsack said in an interview.

Timber industry representatives said Tuesday’s proposal would give its opponents new leverage to file legal challenges against logging projects that are intended to reduce wildfire risks for communities near forests. But environmental groups called for logging restrictions to be extended even further and include mature forests, which cover more than 100,000 square miles (275,000 square km) of forest service land, about three times the area of old growth.

Old-growth forests, such as the storied giant sequoia stands of northern California, have layer upon layer of undisturbed trees and vegetation. There’s wide consensus on the importance of preserving them — both symbolically as marvels of nature, and more practically because their trunks and branches store large amounts of carbon that can be released when forests burn, adding to climate change.

Underlining the urgency of the issue are wildfires that killed thousands of giant sequoias in recent years. The towering giants are concentrated in about 70 groves scattered along the western side of the Sierra Nevada range.

Many old-growth forests fell during the second half of the 20th century during aggressive logging on national forests. Others were cut earlier as the U.S. developed.

Logging volumes dropped sharply over the past several decades, but the demise of older trees due to fire, insects and disease accelerated. More than 5,100 square miles (13,300 square kilometers) of old-growth and mature forests burned since 2000.

About 350 square miles (900 square kilometers) of older forests were logged on federal lands during that time, according to a recent government analysis.

There’s no simple formula to determine what’s old. Growth rates among different tree types vary greatly — and even within species, depending on their access to water and sunlight, and soil conditions. Groves of aspen can mature within a half-century. Douglas fir stands can take 100 years. Wildfire frequency also factors in: Ponderosa pine forests are adapted to withstand blazes as often as once a decade, compared to lodgepole pine stands that might burn every few hundred years.

Past protections for older trees have come indirectly, such as the 2001 “roadless rule” adopted under former President Bill Clinton that effectively blocked logging on about one quarter of all federal forests.

Chris Wood, president of Trout Unlimited and a former Forest Service policy chief who worked on the roadless rule, said the Biden administration proposal was a “step in the right direction” to protect the remaining old growth.

“This is the first time the Forest Service has said its national policy will be to protect old growth,” he said.

Timber companies and some members of Congress have been skeptical about Biden’s ambitions to pro-

tect older forests, which the Democrat launched in 2021 on Earth Day. They've urged the administration to instead concentrate on lessening wildfire dangers by thinning stands of trees where decades of wildfire suppression allowed undergrowth to flourish, which can be a recipe for disaster when fires ignite.

"Let's be real about who the groups asking for this are: They have always opposed commercial timber harvests on the national forest system," said Bill Imbergamo Executive Director Federal Forest Resource Coalition. "Is that the correct emphasis right now when most of the old growth losses are coming from insects, fire and climate change stressors working in tandem?"

The results earlier this year from the government's first-ever national inventory of mature and old-growth forests on federal land revealed more expanses of older trees than outside researchers had recently estimated. The Forest Service and federal Bureau of Land Management combined oversee more than 50,000 square miles (129,000 square kilometers) of old growth forests and about 125,000 square miles (324,000 square kilometers) of mature forests, according to the inventory.

Most are in Western states such as Idaho, California, Montana and Oregon. They're also in New England, around the Great Lakes and in Southern states such as Arkansas, Kentucky and West Virginia, according to the Forest Service.

The proposal to revise management plans for 128 national forests and national grasslands is expected to be completed by early 2025. However, it's uncertain if the change would survive if Biden loses his 2024 re-election bid.

Under former President Donald Trump, federal officials sought to open up millions of acres of West Coast forests to potential logging. Federal wildlife officials reversed the move in 2021 after determining political appointees under Trump relied on faulty science to justify drastically shrinking areas of forest that are considered crucial habitats for the imperiled northern spotted owl.

Asked about the durability of Tuesday's proposal, Vilsack it would be "a serious mistake for the country to take a step backwards now that we've taken significant steps forward."

Sioux Falls to spend \$55K to evaluate arsenic-contaminated taxidermy display at state's largest zoo

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — The city of Sioux Falls has decided to spend \$55,000 to evaluate a menagerie of taxidermy animals contaminated by arsenic that fill a now-closed natural history museum at the state's largest zoo.

The contract was approved Monday by a working group that was created after a backlash to the Delbridge Museum's closure, The Argus Leader reports.

Issues arose in August when nearly 80% of the museum's specimens tested positive for detectable levels of arsenic.

Community and museum taxidermy experts argued that the arsenic risk was overblown. Older taxidermy specimens are frequently displayed, experts say, with museums taking precautions like using special vacuums to clean them — or encasing them in glass. But Sioux Falls officials have expressed concerns about the cost.

The situation is complicated by a morass of state and federal laws that limit what can be done with the mounts. One issue is that the collection includes 53 endangered species, according to zoo officials, and under federal law and international laws they are protected — even in death.

The contract with A.M. Art Conservation will bring a project team of five people, described by Great Plains Zoo CEO Becky Dewitz as "experts from the natural history museum world," to Sioux Falls for five days to assess the condition of the museum and its specimens.

They would inspect the mounts and speak with staff before issuing a report that would outline the condition of the mounts, the techniques used to care for them, which ones need more treatment, how much that treatment could cost, and overall recommendations for restoring or replacing them.

But that's going to take a while, Dewitz said. The earliest the team could visit Sioux Falls is sometime in late January, with a report expected 60 days after their visit.

The group also discussed a \$1 million estimate for removing the mounts, storing them for 6-12 months, working on mitigating the arsenic and creating new dioramas for the pieces — which they said would come to a little under \$1 million. That's assuming a considerable chunk of the mounts, at least 25%, are beyond saving.

Costs from putting the specimens behind glass were not included, Dewitz added. Previously, she's said the price of that, plus improved ventilation in whichever space the mounts are displayed, could be upward of \$3 million.

The group also discussed the viability of donating the collection, or parts of it, to a new owner — a plan that faces some hurdles in state law.

Currently, county or municipal museum collections can be given to certain nonprofit organizations — but they must remain within South Dakota and the new caretaker could not themselves dispose of the collection.

Councilor Alex Jensen said he's had conversations with state legislators about working on a legislative amendment that could allow for the donation of the collection.

As for the mounts themselves, consulting attorney James Moore is working on a legal opinion about whether they are able to put them in storage while these various options get sorted out — something Dewitz seemed eager to do, citing the increased space for indoor recreation she'd have if the animals were not all sitting unused inside the museum.

Washington's Kalen DeBoer is the AP coach of the year after leading undefeated Huskies to the CFP

By TIM BOOTH AP Sports Writer

SEATTLE (AP) — Kalen DeBoer landing the job at Washington two years ago seemed to be an unheralded transaction at the time.

It has turned out to be a shrewd decision by the Huskies. One might say it's been perfect.

DeBoer was named The Associated Press coach of the year on Tuesday after leading the Huskies to a 13-0 record, the Pac-12 championship and a spot in the College Football Playoff in just his second year in charge at Washington. The Huskies will face Texas in the Sugar Bowl on Jan. 1 with a spot in the CFP championship game on the line.

In his two seasons, the Huskies are 24-2, leaving behind the bitter memory of a 4-8 record in 2021 that led to a change and brought DeBoer to Washington.

"It's all about the people around me. This is a team award," DeBoer said. "When you win, I tell the players this, you win football games, you're going to get recognized and more awards are going to get shared. I'm fortunate enough to kind of be the figurehead of our team and receive these cool awards. Just really blessed."

DeBoer received 30 of 52 first-place votes and had 113 points overall from AP Top 25 poll voters to easily outpace Florida State's Mike Norvell (57 points). Missouri's Eli Drinkwitz (38) and Arizona's Jedd Fisch (28) were the only other coaches to receive multiple first-place votes.

DeBoer is the first Washington coach ever to be named the AP coach of the year and just the third Pac-12 coach to win the award in the last 25 years, joining Mike MacIntyre (Colorado, 2016) and Chip Kelly (Oregon, 2010).

"I think when dealing with the team, I think I'm the same. I think there's job responsibilities that come along with this level that you continue to adjust to and learn from — the good, bad and ugly, whatever it was that had happened," DeBoer said. "But I think when it comes to building the team, the foundation of it is the same, the same priorities."

DeBoer is in just his fourth season as a head coach in the Bowl Subdivision. He was 67-3 at his alma mater, Sioux Falls, from 2005-09 and won three NAIA championships. At Fresno State, he went 12-6 in two seasons, including 9-3 the final year.

When the Washington job came open, DeBoer knew he was ready for the challenge of a Power Five

program. But he was inheriting a team that went through a tumultuous season that included the firing of coach Jimmy Lake with two games still on the schedule.

While DeBoer won at nearly every stop, he still needed to prove to his new team that his methods would work.

"We were open ears to what he had to say, and he was so persistent in his genuineness and his commitment to take this program to the top that at the end of the day, it was unstoppable to be able to trust him," first-team AP All-American wide receiver Rome Odunze said.

While it certainly helped to have talent like Odunze and Heisman Trophy runner up Michael Penix Jr., a significant amount of Washington's success this season came because DeBoer and the Huskies were great in close games.

Each of Washington's final eight games were decided by 10 points or fewer and all of them were in question into the fourth quarter. Washington's final four wins – Utah, Oregon State, Washington State and Oregon – were decided by a total of 15 points.

That speaks to coaching. And belief.

"We've gotten here because he's carried through with everything he said he was going to do with all his effort," Odunze said.

Top Hamas leader arrives in Cairo for talks on the war in Gaza in another sign of group's resilience

By WAFAA SHURAFU and SAMY MAGDY Associated Press

DEIR AL-BALAH, Gaza Strip (AP) — Hamas' top leader arrived in Cairo on Wednesday for talks on the war in Gaza, where the militant group is putting up stiff resistance after more than 10 weeks of heavy Israeli bombardment and fierce urban combat that has killed nearly 20,000 Palestinians.

The visit by Ismail Haniyeh came a day after Hamas fired rockets that set off air raid sirens in central Israel, a show of strength during a war that has devastated much of northern Gaza and driven some 1.9 million Palestinians — nearly 85% of the population — from their homes.

Israel has called on the rest of the world to blacklist Hamas as a terrorist organization, saying it must be eradicated in the wake of its Oct. 7 rampage across southern Israel that triggered the war. But the sides have recently relaunched indirect talks, mediated by Egypt and Qatar, aimed at instituting another cease-fire and freeing more hostages captured in that attack in exchange for Palestinians imprisoned by Israel.

Despite a flurry of activity by high-level officials in recent days, the two sides appeared to be far from an agreement. Hamas said in a statement that Haniyeh would discuss the war with Egyptian officials, without providing more details.

Egypt, along with Qatar — where Haniyeh is believed to be based — helped mediate a weeklong cease-fire in November in which Hamas freed over 100 hostages in exchange for Israel's release of 240 Palestinian prisoners.

ISRAEL SAYS 'FINAL CLEARING' UNDERWAY IN THE NORTH

Defense Minister Yoav Gallant said Tuesday that Israeli forces were entering Hamas' tunnel network in northern Gaza as part of a "final clearing" of militants from the region. The densely built urban north — including Gaza City, the territory's largest — has seen ferocious fighting, with Palestinian health officials reporting dozens of people killed in bombardment in recent days.

Gallant said that in southern Gaza, operations will take "months," including the military's assault on Khan Younis, the enclave's second-largest city. "We will not stop until we reach our goals," he said.

The Health Ministry in Hamas-run Gaza said Tuesday the death toll since the start of the war had risen to more than 19,600. It does not distinguish between civilian and combatant deaths.

Hamas and other militants abducted some 240 people in the Oct. 7 attack. They are still holding an estimated 129 captives after most of the rest, mainly women and children, were released last month.

Israel's military says 131 of its soldiers have been killed in the Gaza ground offensive. Israel says it has killed some 7,000 militants, without providing evidence, and blames civilian deaths on Hamas, saying it

uses them as human shields when it fights in residential areas.

UN MEMBERS STILL PUSHING US ON AID RESOLUTION

U.N. Security Council members are negotiating an Arab-sponsored resolution to halt the fighting in some way to allow for an increase in desperately needed humanitarian aid deliveries to Gaza. A vote on the resolution, first scheduled for Monday, was pushed back again until Wednesday as talks continued in the hopes of getting the U.S. to abstain or vote "yes" on the resolution after it vetoed an earlier cease-fire call.

France, the United Kingdom and Germany — some of Israel's closest allies — joined global calls for a cease-fire over the weekend. In Israel, protesters have called for negotiations with Hamas to facilitate the release of scores of hostages still held by the group.

Israel says it will keep fighting until it has removed Hamas from power, dismantled its armed wing and returned all the hostages. U.S. President Joe Biden's administration has called on Israel to take greater steps to spare civilians but has continued to provide diplomatic and military support for the offensive.

Congo votes for president as conflict and smudged ballots lead to fears election won't be credible

By SAM MEDNICK Associated Press

KINSHASA, Congo (AP) — Congo headed to the polls Wednesday to vote for president as authorities scrambled to finalize preparations in an election facing steep logistical and security challenges, with voting starting nearly 2 1/2 hours late in the capital.

Some 44 million people — almost half the population — were expected to vote, but many, including several million who were displaced by conflict in the vast country's east, could struggle to cast their ballots. The fighting has prevented 1.5 million people from registering to vote.

Voter Raymond Yuma in the capital of Kinshasa said he's voting for hope. "When you wake up in the morning you're hoping for good things, good work, and I want security," said Yuma. He sat beside three other people on a bench waiting in line for the doors to open. None of their voting cards were legible.

In eastern Congo, people said they weren't finding their names on voting lists.

"The voters displayed on lists at the polling station are fewer than those who are lining up. I can't find my name on the list and this could cause scuffles here because I also want to vote," said Jules Kambale at a polling station in Goma.

Waiting for polls to open during the more than two-hour delay, people grew agitated and began arguing, particularly in the capital.

Both outside observers and locals have warned of challenges that could affect the credibility of the vote in one of Africa's largest nations and one whose mineral resources are increasingly crucial to the global economy.

On the eve of the vote, some polling stations in Kinshasa told Associated Press journalists they were still waiting for materials. Thousands of stations, particularly in remote areas, might still not have what they need on Wednesday.

A major concern is that ink on voting cards has smudged, making many illegible. That means people could be turned away from polling stations. In addition, the voter registration list hasn't been properly audited.

"The organization of the elections raises lots of doubt regarding the credibility, the transparency and the reliability of the results," said Bienvenu Matumo, a member of LUCHA, a local rights group.

A candidate needs a majority of votes in the first round to win.

President Felix Tshisekedi seeks his second and final five-year term, running against about 20 other candidates. His main rival appeared to be Moise Katumbi, the former governor of Katanga province and a millionaire businessperson whose campaign in 2018 was thwarted by the previous regime of former President Joseph Kabila.

But the opposition remains fractured, making Tshisekedi the likely favorite.

The son of a late, popular opposition figure, he has spent much of his presidency trying to consolidate power over state institutions and working to overcome a crisis of legitimacy after a contested election

five years ago.

Some voters didn't want to disclose who they were backing, but Kinshasa is a Tshisekedi stronghold.

"He's someone who's done a lot of things for the country ... he's fought for democracy," said business owner Joseph Tshibadi. Even though Tshisekedi hasn't succeeded in quelling violence in the east, Tshibadi is willing to give him more time.

"The beginning is always hard," he said.

After waiting for nearly three and a half hours, Tshibadi was the first person to vote at a school in the capital. He said voting was easy, and he voted for Tshisekedi because he wants to give him another five years to try and improve the security situation.

"I feel very happy, because I voted for my candidate, and I think he's going to win with 90%," he said.

In the eastern city of Bunia, displaced people vandalized a voting center over a dispute between the electoral commission and voters, said Jean-Marcus Loika, a local journalist who saw the attack.

The voting machines and the ballots were vandalized and the police stepped in, he said. Gunshots were heard in the area, which have prevented people from voting, he said.

Locals and analysts said the vote is likely to be extended past Wednesday.

Nicolas Teindas, the director for the international observation mission for the Carter Center, said the sooner the voting is finished the better because it becomes challenging to manage people's expectations. "In the end people want to know who is their president," he said.

The election commission says it has made changes in the process to make it more credible, spending more than \$1 billion on the vote since planning began two years ago. A key change from 2018 is that results from each of the 75,000 voting stations will be released one at a time, rather than being announced in bulk.

The results should be the manual ones rather than the electronic count, said Rev. Eric Nsenga, a coordinator for the joint electoral observation mission between the Church of Christ for Congo and the Congolese National Episcopal Conference. He also warned against publicly releasing partial results as they are compiled in case it inflames tensions.

Already, some observers have alleged that the process has been far from transparent.

On Monday, the East African Community said its election observer mission was not granted access to Congo by authorities. Last month, the European Union canceled its observation mission after Congolese authorities did not authorize the use of satellite equipment for its deployment.

The vote is taking place as violence surges in eastern Congo, where more than 120 armed groups are fighting for power and resources or to protect their communities. They include the resurgence of M23 rebels, allegedly backed by neighboring Rwanda, which denies it.

China's earthquake survivors endure frigid temperatures and mourn the dead

By NG HAN GUAN and KEN MORITSUGU Associated Press

YANGWA, China (AP) — Surrounded by destruction, survivors of an earthquake mourned the dead and endured a frigid cold in temporary shelters Wednesday, unsure how to rebuild their lives in the remote mountains of northwest China.

"Look at this," said Han Zhongmin, retrieving some belongings with his wife from the ruins of their house, built six years ago in Yangwa village. "My house turned into this overnight."

Houses caved in and crumbled in a Monday night earthquake that killed at least 131 people and injured more than 900 others. Most of the casualties were in Gansu province and the rest in the neighboring province of Qinghai.

In the predawn darkness, Ma Lianqiang stood next to the body of his deceased wife wrapped in blankets in a tent-like temporary shelter lit by a single overhead light. His wife was hit and buried by debris in her mother's house, where she had gone to stay because she was ill.

Ma and other members of his extended family survived despite extensive damage to their house in Yangwa, which is in Gansu province. His father pulled Ma's son, whose back was slightly injured, out of

the rubble. His uncle said they heard the earthquake and then the house started collapsing.

"We crawled out in fear," the uncle, Ma Chengming, said.

Nearly 15,000 homes collapsed in Gansu and more than 87,000 people have been resettled, provincial officials said at a Wednesday news conference. Many spent the night in shelters set up in the area as temperatures plunged well below freezing.

To the north, searchers in Qinghai were looking for 16 people missing in an area where landslides inundated two villages, partially burying homes. Excavators dug at the sea of soil, and rescue workers tried to break into some buried houses from the rooftops.

The number missing was down from 20 on Tuesday. The death toll in the province ticked up by four to 18, but there was no immediate confirmation if the four no longer missing had been found dead.

Gansu officials said their search and rescue effort had basically been completed by mid-afternoon Tuesday. The province's death toll remained at 113 and the number of injured rose to 782. Together with 198 in Qinghai, that brought the total injured close to 1,000.

Villagers in Yangwa bundled up against the cold and ate instant noodle soup being served in a tent of translucent green plastic sheeting. Han Fujun said more immediate concerns were on his mind than what to do about his destroyed home.

"It's still a problem to get enough to eat and stay warm," he said inside the makeshift shelter.

The earthquake struck in a poor, rural area that is on the the eastern edge of the Tibetan Plateau and populated by several predominantly Muslim ethnic groups. It is about 1,300 kilometers (800 miles) southwest of Beijing, the Chinese capital.

People wept as the body of Ma Lianqiang's wife, covered with a carpet, was carried away on what looked like a metal bed frame after Muslim funeral rites held outdoors.

The death toll was the highest from an earthquake in China in nine years. Experts blamed the high toll on several factors, including the shallow depth of the quake and the lower quality construction in the poor region.

"Now our lives are what matters a lot," Yangwa resident Ma Bajin said. "If we are not here, then there's no such thing as survival."

Tesla's Swedish labor dispute pits anti-union Musk against Scandinavian worker ideals

By KELVIN CHAN AP Business Writer

Tesla has found itself locked in an increasingly bitter dispute with union workers in Sweden and neighboring countries. The showdown pits the electric car maker's CEO Elon Musk, who's staunchly anti-union, against the strongly held labor ideals of Scandinavian countries.

None of Tesla's workers anywhere in the world are unionized, raising questions about whether strikes could spread to other parts of Europe where employees commonly have collective bargaining rights — notably in Germany, Tesla's most important market.

Here are key things to know about the union fight:

HOW DID THE TESLA STRIKE GAIN STEAM?

About 130 mechanics at 10 Tesla garages across Sweden walked off the job on Oct. 27 over the company's refusal to sign a collective bargaining agreement. Tesla doesn't have a factory in Sweden, but does have a network of service centers.

Since the mechanics with the powerful Swedish metalworkers' union IF Metall went on strike, other workers around the country have joined in sympathy, withholding their services to pressure the company.

Members of the country's transport union say they'll stop collecting waste from Tesla service centers starting Sunday. Employees with supplier Hydro Extrusions, which makes aluminum profiles, are refusing to make a component for Tesla cars.

Other unions say their members won't paint Tesla cars, clean the company's offices or service electrical

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systems at its workshops or any of its 70 charging stations in Sweden.

Postal workers have stopped delivering license plates for new Tesla vehicles, prompting Tesla to sue the Swedish Transport Agency, demanding that it be allowed to retrieve the plates, and PostNord, the company that delivers the registration numbers. Tesla lost an early battle in the case, which is still working through the courts.

The boycott has escalated by spreading to neighboring Nordic countries. Like in Sweden, dockworkers in Denmark won't unload Tesla vehicles arriving at ports. Unions in Finland and those in Norway have warned that workers at ports and workshops will join the strike, if the dispute isn't resolved by Wednesday.

WHO ELSE IS PRESSURING MUSK?

A group of 16 institutional investors including KLP, Norway's biggest pension fund, and PensionDanmark, have written to Tesla board chair Robyn Denholm. They have urged the company to reconsider its approach to unions and asked for a meeting to discuss it further.

PensionDanmark has sold its 476 million kroner (\$70 million) stake in the carmaker, saying it's putting Tesla on its blacklist "in the light of the conflict spreading to Denmark and Tesla's latest and very categorical denial to reach collective agreements in any country."

Paedagoernes Pension, Denmark's teachers' pension fund, sold its 242 million kroner (\$35 million) stake in Tesla because it "cannot compromise" on its core values, CEO Sune Schackenfeldt said in a statement.

The fund discussed workers' rights with Tesla in March, but Musk's "hard course against the Nordic trade union movement" makes continued investment unsustainable, it said.

WHY ARE UNIONS SO IMPORTANT IN NORDIC COUNTRIES?

Sweden is one of the most highly unionized countries in Europe, with nine in 10 workers covered by collective agreements.

Across Scandinavia, trade unions and employers negotiate deals on wages and working conditions, with almost no involvement from the state. It's a system that originated in the 1930s and is widely acknowledged as the backbone of a labor market model that has helped workers benefit from decades of economic prosperity.

The system results in fewer strikes than in other countries like France and Germany, because negotiations are the first avenue to resolve disputes.

Tesla's attempts to secure a quick win in the license plate clash through Swedish courts "appears to be having precisely the opposite impact, making unions more steadfast and creating sympathetic actions across the country," said Matthias Schmidt, an independent auto analyst.

Collective agreements allow "for companies to operate on a level playing field, while avoiding the risk of any one employer distorting competition in the sector by imposing poor conditions on their employees," the IF Metall union says.

In a famous example of this model's success, the Toys R Us toy chain started up in Sweden in 1995 and hired only nonunion workers. The chain refused to sign such collective agreements. It resulted in a three-month strike by the retail employees union that snowballed into an all-out boycott as other Swedish unions joined in sympathy strikes. The company eventually agreed to sign collective deals.

WHAT HAS MUSK SAID?

He's never hidden his disdain for unions, writing, "this is insane," on his social media platform X, formerly known as Twitter, in response to a tweet about Swedish postal workers refusing to deliver license plates.

In the U.S., Musk has picked online fights with the United Auto Workers and vehemently battled union legal challenges to his company's actions.

"I disagree with the idea of unions," Musk said in a November onstage interview with The New York Times. "I just don't like anything which creates kind of a lords and peasants sort of thing."

Musk, the world's wealthiest person, said that unions try to create negativity in a company, denying that Tesla has a wealth hierarchy largely because the company awards everyone stock options.

"Everyone eats at the same table. Everyone parks in the same parking lot," he said.

Musk has accused the UAW of driving General Motors and Chrysler into bankruptcy, costing many workers their jobs. He said that if Tesla becomes unionized, "it will be because we deserve it and we've failed

in some way.”

Tesla didn't respond to a request for comment.

WHAT COULD HAPPEN NEXT?

Watching from the sidelines are labor organizers in Germany, where Tesla opened its first European gigafactory in 2022. The plant in Grunheide, southeast of Berlin, employs 11,000 people. It makes both batteries and Model Y SUVs.

Germany is the company's biggest market, selling 55,000 vehicles so far this year, three times as many as in Sweden, according to data from Schmidt.

Labor organizers are on a union drive to sign up Tesla workers and say the numbers are rising quickly.

Workers and unions in Germany are banned from joining sympathy strikes, but that might “act as a catalyst to German Tesla production line workers to join local unions that can strike a good deal for them,” Schmidt said.

Germany's IG Metall union says it's concerned about occupational safety at the plant and has fielded reports from “numerous employees” about accidents and health problems that resulted in high staff sickness rates.

Christiane Benner, the union's newly elected chairwoman, has Tesla in her sights.

“We don't allow union-free zones! Not even on Mars, Elon Musk!” she said in her inaugural speech in October.

Cocoa grown illegally in a Nigerian rainforest heads to companies that supply major chocolate makers

By TAIWO ADEBAYO Associated Press

OMO FOREST RESERVE, Nigeria (AP) — Men in dusty workwear trudge through a thicket, making their way up a hill where sprawling plantations lay tucked in a Nigerian rainforest whose trees have been hacked away to make room for cocoa bound for places like Europe and the U.S.

Kehinde Kumayon and his assistant clear low bushes that compete for sunlight with their cocoa trees, which have replaced the lush and dense natural foliage. The farmers swing their machetes, careful to avoid the ripening yellow pods containing beans that will help create chocolate, the treat shoppers are snapping up for Christmas.

Over the course of two visits and several days, The Associated Press repeatedly documented farmers harvesting cocoa beans where that work is banned in conservation areas of Omo Forest Reserve, a protected tropical rainforest 135 kilometers (84 miles) northeast of the coastal city of Lagos in southwestern Nigeria.

Trees here rustle as dwindling herds of critically endangered African forest elephants rumble through. Threatened pangolins, known as armored anteaters, scramble along branches. White-throated monkeys, once thought to be extinct, leap from one tree to the next. Omo also is believed to have the highest concentration of butterflies in Africa and is one of the continent's largest and oldest UNESCO Biosphere Reserves.

Cocoa from the conservation zone is purchased by some of the world's largest cocoa traders, according to company and trade documents and AP interviews with more than 20 farmers, five licensed buying agents and two brokers all operating within the reserve.

They say those traders include Singapore-based food supplier Olam Group and Nigeria's Starlink Global and Ideal Limited, the latter of which acknowledged using cocoa supplies from the forest. A fewer number of those working in the forest also mentioned Tulip Cocoa Processing Ltd., a subsidiary of Dutch cocoa trader and producer Theobroma.

Those companies supply Nigerian cocoa to some of the world's largest chocolate manufacturers including Mars Inc. and Ferrero, but because the chocolate supply chain is so complex and opaque, it's not clear if cocoa from deforested parts of Omo Forest Reserve makes it into the sweets that they make, such as Snickers, M&Ms, Butterfinger and Nutella. Mars and Ferrero list farming sources on their websites that are

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close to or overlap with the forest but do not provide specific locations.

Government officials, rangers and the growers themselves say cocoa plantations are spreading illegally into protected areas of the reserve. Farmers say they move there because their cocoa trees in other parts of the West African country are aging and not producing as much.

"We know this is a forest reserve, but if you are hungry, you go to where there is food, and this is very fertile land," Kumayon told the AP, acknowledging that he's growing cocoa at an illegal plantation at the Eseke farming settlement, separated only by a muddy footpath from critical habitat for what UNESCO estimates is the remaining 100 elephants deep in the conservation zone.

Conservationists also point to the world's increasing demand for chocolate. The global cocoa and chocolate market is expected to grow from a value of \$48 billion in 2022 to nearly \$68 billion by 2029, according to analysts at Fortune Business Insights.

The chocolate supply chain has long been fraught with human rights abuses, exploitative labor and environmental damage, leading to lawsuits, U.S. trade complaints and court rulings. In response, the chocolate industry has made wide-ranging pledges and campaigns to ensure they are sourcing cocoa that is traceable, sustainable and free of abuse.

Companies say they have adopted supply chain tracing from primary sources using GPS mapping and satellite technology as well as partnered with outside organizations and third-party auditors that certify farms' compliance with sustainability standards.

But those working in the forest say checks that some companies rely on are not done, while one certifying agency, Rainforest Alliance, points to a lack of regulations and incomplete data and mapping in Nigeria.

AP followed a load of cocoa that farmers had harvested in the conservation zone to the warehouses of buying agents in the reserve and then delivered to an Olam facility outside the entrance of the forest.

Staffers at Olam's and Tulip's facilities just outside the reserve, who spoke on condition of anonymity because they're not authorized to discuss their companies' supplies, confirmed that they source cocoa from farmers in the conservation zone.

AP also photographed cocoa bags labeled with the names and logos of Olam and Tulip in farmers' warehouses inside the conservation zone.

'THEY BUY EVERYTHING'

The Omo reserve consists of a highly protected conservation zone ringed by a larger, partially protected outer region. Loggers, who are also a major source of deforestation, can get government licenses to chop down trees in the outer areas, but no licenses are given anywhere for cocoa farming. Agriculture is banned from the conservation area, except for defined areas where up to 10 indigenous communities can farm for their own food.

Nigeria is one of Africa's biggest oil suppliers and largest economy; after petroleum, one of its top exports is cocoa. It's the world's fourth-largest producer of cocoa, accounting for more than 5% of global supply, according to the International Cocoa Organization. Yet it's far behind the world's largest producers, Ivory Coast and Ghana, which together supply more than half of the world's demand and are often singled out in companies' sustainability programs.

According to World Bank trade data and Nigeria's export council, more than 60% of Nigeria's cocoa heads to Europe and about 8% to the United States and Canada.

It passes through many hands to get there: Farmers grow the cocoa beans, then brokers scout farms to buy them. Licensed buying agents purchase the cocoa from brokers and sell it to big commodity trading companies like Olam and Tulip, which export it to chocolate makers.

In October, AP followed a blue- and white-striped van loaded with bags of cocoa beans along a road pitted with deep mud holes within the conservation zone to an Olam warehouse just outside the entrance of the forest. At the warehouse, which Olam confirmed was theirs, AP photographed the cocoa being unloaded from the van, whose registration number matched the one filmed in the forest.

Farmer Rasaq Kolawole and licensed buying agent Muraina Nasir followed the van to sell the cocoa, and neither expressed misgivings about the deforestation.

"We are illegal occupants of the forest," said farmer Kolawole, a college graduate and former salesperson.

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AP also visited four cocoa warehouses in the forest belonging to licensed buying agents: Kadet Agro Allied Investments Ltd., Bolnif Agro-allied Farms Nigeria Ltd., Almatem and Askmana. Managers or owners all told AP that they buy from farmers growing cocoa in protected areas of the forest and that they sell that cocoa to Olam. Three of the warehouse managers told AP that they also sell to Tulip and Starlink.

"They do not differentiate between cocoa from local — that is farms outside the forest — and the reserve," said Waheed Azeez, proprietor of Bolnif, describing how "big buyers like Olam, Tulip and Starlink" buy cocoa sourced from deforested lands. "They buy everything, and most of the cocoa is from the reserve."

Despite AP's findings, Olam insists that it "forbids" members of its "Ore Agbe Ijebu" farmer group from "sourcing from protected areas and important natural ecosystems like forests." That Ijebu farmer group is listed as a sustainable supplier on Olam's website and is said to be in Ijebu Ife, a community near the reserve.

"Any farmers found not complying with the code and illegally encroaching on forest boundaries are removed from our supply chain and expelled from the OAIJ farmer group," the company said in a statement emailed to AP.

However, Askmana manager Sunday Awoke said, "Olam does not know the farmers. We buy from the farmers and sell directly to Olam, and no assessment against deforestation takes place."

Speaking to AP as a convoy of motorcycles brought bags of cocoa from the conservation area to his warehouse within the reserve, Awoke said he used to be a conservation worker who fought deforestation by farmers.

"But I am on the other side now. I wish to go back, but survival first, and this pays more," he said.

Others agreed.

"The place is not meant for cocoa farming, but elephants," said Ewulola Bolarinwa, who is both a broker and a leader of those who farm at the Eseke settlement inside the conservation zone. "We have a lot of big buyers who supply the companies in the West, including Olam, Tulip and many more."

COCOA TO CHOCOLATE

Ferrero, which makes Ferrero Rocher hazelnut balls, Nutella chocolate hazelnut spread and popular Baby Ruth, Butterfinger and Crunch candy bars, lists a farming group in a community near the forest as the source of its cocoa supplied by Olam, the Italian company says on its website.

McLean, Virginia-based Mars Inc., one of the world's largest end users of cocoa with brands from Snickers to M&Ms, Dove, Twix and Milky Way, uses Nigerian cocoa from both Olam and Tulip, according to online company documents.

Ferrero, Mars and Tulip say they're committed to their anti-deforestation policies, use GPS mapping of farms, and their suppliers are certified through independent standards.

Ferrero also says it relies on satellite monitoring to show that its "cocoa sourcing from Nigeria does not come from protected forest areas." Mars says its preliminary findings show that none of the farms it's mapped overlap with the reserve.

Tulip's managing director, Johan van der Merwe, said in an email that the company's cocoa bags, which AP photographed in farmers' warehouses inside the conservation zone, are reused and distributed widely so it's possible they're seen across Nigeria. He also said "field operatives" complete digital questionnaires about sourcing with all farmers and suppliers.

On the ground, however, farmers and licensed buying agents who said they supply Tulip told AP that they were not required to complete any questionnaire before their cocoa is purchased.

"Though we know they depend on our cocoa, we don't directly sell cocoa to the exporters like Olam and Tulip, middlemen do, and there are no questions about deforestation," said farmer Saheed Arisekola, 43, also a college graduate who said he turned to farming because he could not get a job.

As farmers, brokers and buying agents say cocoa from the conservation area flows into Olam's export supply, U.S. customs records show a slice of where it might be going.

Olam's American arm, Olam Americas Inc., received 18,790 bags of Nigerian cocoa shipped by its Nigerian subsidiary, Outspan Nigeria Limited, between March and April 2022, according to trade data from

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ImportGenius.

Olam and Tulip are both licensed to trade Nigerian cocoa certified by the Rainforest Alliance. However, Olam told AP that its license does not cover the Ijebu area, where it sources the cocoa it sends to Ferrero and is near Omo Forest Reserve. Ferrero says Olam's sustainability standard in the area is verified by a third-party body.

Farmers who told AP that their cocoa heads to Olam and Tulip said they are not Rainforest Alliance certified. Tulip has only one farm with active certification in Nigeria, the nonprofit's database shows.

The Rainforest Alliance says it certifies that farms operate with methods that prohibit deforestation and other anti-sustainability practices. It says farmers must provide GPS coordinates and geographic boundaries for their plantations, which are checked against public forest maps and satellite data.

The Rainforest Alliance told AP that Nigeria has "unique forest regulation challenges," including incomplete or outdated data and maps that can "lead to discrepancies when comparing forest data with real on-ground conditions."

It said it is working to get updated data from Nigerian authorities and would decertify any farms found to be operating illegally in conservation areas following a review. The organization also says companies it licenses can buy cocoa certified by other agencies or that isn't certified at all.

Starlink Global and Ideal Limited — the Nigerian cocoa exporter that the farmers and buying agents said they sell to — doesn't have its own farmland in the reserve, "only suppliers from there," spokesman Sambo Abubakar told AP.

Starlink does not make sustainable sourcing claims on its website, but it supplies at least one company that does — New York-based General Cocoa Co., U.S. trade data shows.

Between March and April 2023, Starlink shipped 70 containers, each loading 4,000 bags of dried cocoa beans, to General Cocoa, according to ImportGenius trade data.

General Cocoa, which is owned by Paris-headquartered Sucden Group, supplies Mars, according to online company documents.

Jean-Baptiste Lescop, secretary general of Sucden Group, says the company manages risks to forest conservation by sourcing Rainforest Alliance cocoa, mapping farms and using satellite images but that it's a "continuous process" because most farmers in Nigeria don't have official land ownership documents.

Sucden investigates reports of problems and is working on a response to AP's findings about Starlink, Lescop said.

WHERE'S THE ENFORCEMENT?

The conservation zone, which spans about 650 square kilometers (250 square miles), is the only remaining vital rainforest in Nigeria's southwest, conservation officials say. Such forests help absorb carbon from the atmosphere and are crucial for Nigeria to meet its pledges under the Paris climate agreement.

Besides helping fight climate change, the forest is designated an Important Bird and Biodiversity Area by BirdLife International, with significant populations of at least 75 bird species.

"There are now more than 100 illegal settlements of cocoa farmers, who came from other states because the land here is very fertile," said Emmanuel Olabode, a conservation manager who supervises the reserve's rangers in the protected areas. "But after some years, the land becomes unproductive."

The farmers know this.

"We'll then find another land somewhere else or go back to our original homes to start new businesses," said Kaseem Olaniyi, who acknowledges that he farms illegally in the conservation zone after moving in 2014 from a neighboring state.

The government in Ogun state, which owns the forest, said in a statement to AP that the "menace of cocoa farming" in the reserve dates back decades and that "all the illegal farmers were forcefully evicted" in 2007 before they found their way back.

"Arrangements are in the pipeline to engage the services of the Nigerian Police Force and the military to evict them from the Forest Reserve," the government statement said.

However, Omolola Odutola, spokeswoman for the federally controlled police, said they do not have

records of such a plan.

The farmers have been ordered not to start new farms, and those who spoke with AP said they are complying. But forest guards said new farms are sprouting up in remote areas that are difficult to detect.

Rangers — who work for the government's conservation partner, the nonprofit Nigerian Conservation Foundation — and forest guards who are employed by the state government both told AP that lax government enforcement has made combating cocoa expansion a challenge.

They told AP that previous arrests have done little to stop the farmers from returning and that has led to a sense of futility when they encounter illegal farming.

The state government said it "has never compromised regulations" but acknowledged that farmers are in the forest despite its efforts. Homes and other buildings at farming settlements visited by AP have been marked for removal, including warehouses like that of licensed buying agent Kadet, one of the biggest there.

Farmers' homes lack running water and toilets, forcing women and children to collect water from narrow streams to use while the men work.

The removals have not taken place because officials make money from the cocoa business in the forest, according to farmers and buying agents, who lament the difficult living conditions, with mud roads filled with holes creating high transportation costs that eat away their already meager profits.

The state government declined to comment about making money from illegal cocoa farming in the forest.

The agents have formed a lobby group that has "rapport with government officials" to ensure farmers remain in the conservation zone despite threats to evict them, said Azeez, the owner of buying agent Bolnif who is also chairman of a committee that monitors risks against cocoa business in the forest.

The European Union, the largest destination of cocoa from West Africa, has enacted a new regulation on deforestation-free products that requires companies selling commodities like cocoa to prove they have not caused deforestation. Big companies must ensure they're following the rules by the end of 2024.

Experts at the Cocoa Research Institute of Nigeria are launching a "Trace Project" in six southern states — though it doesn't include Ogun state where Omo Forest Reserve is located — to advance efforts against deforestation in cocoa production and ensure Nigeria's cocoa is not rejected in Europe.

"From the preliminary data collected, major exporters are implicated in deforestation, and it is their responsibility to ensure compliance with standards," said Rasheed Adedeji, who leads the institute's research outreach.

But farmers say they'll keep finding places to work.

"The world needs cocoa, and the government also gets taxes because the cocoa is exported," said Olaniyi, one of the farmers.

Some state abortion bans stir confusion, and it's uncertain if lawmakers will clarify them

By KIMBERLEE KRUESI and GEOFF MULVIHILL Associated Press

Ever since the nation's highest court ended abortion rights more than a year ago, vaguely worded bans enacted in some Republican-controlled states have caused bewilderment over how exceptions should be applied.

Supporters have touted these exemptions, tucked inside statutes restricting abortion, as sufficient enough to protect the life of the woman. Yet repeatedly, when applied in heart-wrenching situations, the results are much murkier.

"We have black and white laws on something that is almost always multiple shades of gray," said Kaitlyn Kash, one of 20 Texas women denied abortion who are suing the state seeking clarification of the laws — one of a handful of similar lawsuits playing out across the country.

State lawmakers there and elsewhere face growing pressure to answer these questions by amending laws in legislative sessions that start in most states next month. But it's not certain how — or whether — they will.

Before the Supreme Court overturned the 1973 Roe v. Wade decision in June 2022, nearly every state

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allowed abortion at least until a fetus would be viable outside the womb — around 24 weeks' gestational age, or about 22 weeks after conception.

Yet the new ruling cleared the way for states to impose tighter restrictions or bans; several had such laws already on the books in anticipation of the decision.

Currently, 14 states are enforcing bans on abortion throughout pregnancy. Two more have such bans on hold due to court rulings. And another two have bans that take effect when cardiac activity can be detected, about six weeks into pregnancy — often before women know they're pregnant.

Each state ban has a provision that allows abortion under at least some circumstances to save the life of the mother. At least 11 — including three with the strictest bans — allow abortion because of fatal fetal anomalies, and some do when the pregnancy was the result of rape or incest.

But a provision included in a law enacted by Congress in 1986 and signed by Republican President Ronald Reagan said abortion must be available when a pregnant woman's life is at risk during a medical emergency.

But a lack of clarity over how to apply that rule and other exceptions in state laws has escalated the trauma and heartache some women experience while facing serious medical issues but unable to access abortion in their home states.

The case of Katie Cox, a Texas woman who sued for immediate access to abortion amid a fraught pregnancy and was denied by the state's top court, received broad attention this month.

Meanwhile, Jaci Statton filed a complaint in Oklahoma claiming the state violated the federal rule. She said in court documents that because her own life wasn't found to be in immediate peril when doctors deemed her pregnancy nonviable, she was told to wait in a hospital parking lot until her condition worsened enough to qualify for life-saving care.

In Tennessee, Nicole Blackmon told reporters that a 15-week ultrasound showed that several of her baby's major organs were growing outside its stomach and it would likely not survive. Even so, her medical team told her she didn't have the option to have an abortion. She eventually delivered a stillborn baby because she could not afford to travel out of state for an abortion.

The vagueness surrounding the Volunteer State's abortion ban has prompted Republican state Sen. Richard Briggs' push to tweak the law during the upcoming 2024 legislative session. However, it's unclear how far the measure will advance inside the GOP-controlled statehouse where many members are running for reelection.

Republicans carved out an extremely narrow exception earlier this year, but Briggs, who is a doctor, said the statute still fails to properly help women and doctors. He wants the law to include a list diagnoses when abortion could be appropriate and protect women with pregnancy complications who may end up infertile if they don't receive an abortion.

Other states took steps in 2023 to address the confusion, but advocates say they didn't fully accomplish the task.

In Texas, lawmakers this year added a provision that offers doctors some legal protection when they end pregnancies in cases of premature rupture of membranes, commonly referred to as water breaking, or ectopic pregnancies, which can lead to dangerous internal bleeding.

Across the country, advocates on both sides anticipate more legislatures will consider adding or clarifying abortion ban exceptions and definitions in 2024, though few, if any, such measures have been filed so far.

"What is and is not an abortion, what is an abortion emergency?" said Denise Burke, senior counsel with Alliance Defending Freedom, a conservative Christian legal advocacy group that has been behind many anti-abortion lawsuits. "That may need some clarification in some areas."

Meanwhile, in states where Democrats are in control, lawmakers are expected to push to loosen abortion restrictions and expand access.

This year, Maine became the seventh state to have no specific limit on when during pregnancy an abortion can be obtained.

Greer Donley, an associate professor at the University of Pittsburgh School of Law, who is an expert on abortion law, said there could be a push for more changes like that: "Many people are questioning whether a line should exist at all right now."

The line is stark in Texas, where changes are unlikely in 2024 because lawmakers aren't scheduled to meet.

In Texas, Kash and 19 other women who were denied abortions, plus two physicians, have a lawsuit before the state's Supreme Court seeking to clarify when abortions should be allowed.

Kash, who already had one child, was overjoyed at the thought of telling family and friends that she was expecting. But after a routine ultrasound 13 weeks into pregnancy, she learned that the baby had severe skeletal dysplasia – a condition affecting bone and cartilage growth. Her baby was unlikely to survive birth or likely to suffocate soon after being born.

"Is this where we talk about termination?" Kash asked her doctor.

"He told me to get a second opinion out of state," she recalled.

Her health wasn't immediately at risk of failing, so she didn't qualify for any of the narrow exceptions to allow her doctor to provide her abortion services. Instead, she went to another state to terminate her pregnancy legally.

In the arguments on the case last month, a lawyer for the patients told the justices about the confusion.

"While there is technically a medical exception to the ban," Molly Duane, a Center for Reproductive Rights lawyer said, "no one knows what it means and the state won't tell us."

Beth Klusmann, an assistant state attorney general, said that the law does include guidance: Doctors must use "reasonable medical judgment" when deciding whether a pregnant woman's life is at risk.

She added that "there are always going to be harder calls at the edge" of the lines of any abortion ban.

Marc Hearron, a lawyer at the Center for Reproductive Rights who is leading the Texas case, said he does not have a lot of confidence in lawmakers across the U.S. to do it right generally.

"Legislatures do not have a track record of listening to doctors," he said. "We're certainly not waiting on legislatures to do the right thing."

Native American translations are being added to more US road signs to promote language and awareness

By MICHAEL CASEY Associated Press

CAMBRIDGE, Mass. (AP) — A few years back, Sage Brook Carbone was attending a powwow at the Mashantucket Western Pequot reservation in Connecticut when she noticed signs in the Pequot language.

Carbone, a citizen of the Northern Narragansett Indian Tribe of Rhode Island, thought back to Cambridge, Massachusetts, where she has lived for much of her life. She never saw any street signs honoring Native Americans, nor any featuring Indigenous languages.

She submitted to city officials the idea of adding Native American translations to city street signs. Residents approved her plan and will install about 70 signs featuring the language of the Massachusetts Tribe, which English settlers encountered upon their arrival.

"What a great, universal way of teaching language," she said of the project done in consultation with a member of the Massachusetts Tribe and other Native Americans.

"We see multiple languages written almost everywhere, but not on municipal signage," she said. "Living on a numbered street, I thought this is a great opportunity to include Native language with these basic terms that we're all familiar with around the city."

Carbone has joined a growing push around the country to use Indigenous translations on signs to raise awareness about Native American communities. It also is way to revive some Native American languages, highlight a tribe's sovereignty as well as open the door for wider debates on land rights, discrimination and Indigenous representation in the political process.

"We have a moment where there is a search for some reconciliation and justice around Indigenous issues," said Darren Ranco, chair of Native American Programs at the University of Maine and a citizen of the Penobscot Nation. "The signs represent that, but by no means is that the end point around these issues. My concern is that people will think that putting up signs solves the problem, when in fact, it's the beginning point to addressing deeper histories."

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At least six states have followed suit, including Iowa, New York, Minnesota and Wisconsin.

Signs along U.S. Highway 30 in Iowa include the Meskwaki Nation's own spelling of the tribe, Meskwaki-inaki, near its settlement. In upstate New York, bilingual highway signs in the languages of the Seneca, Onondaga and Tuscarora tribes border highways and their reservations.

In Wisconsin, six of the 11 federally recognized tribes in the state have installed dual language signs. Wisconsin is derived from the Menominee word *Wēskōhsaeh*, meaning "a good place" and the word *Meskousing*, which means "where it lies red" in Algonquian.

"Our partnerships with Wisconsin's Native Nations are deeper than putting up highway signs," WisDOT Secretary Craig Thompson said in a statement. "We are proud of the longstanding commitment to foster meaningful partnerships focused on our future by providing great care and consideration to our past."

Minnesota has put up signs in English and the Dakota or Ojibwe languages on roads and highways that traverse tribal lands, while the southeast Alaska community of Haines this summer erected stop, yield, 'Children at Play' and street name signs in both English and Tlingit.

Douglas Olerud, the mayor at the time, told the Juneau Empire it was healing for him after hearing for years from Tlingit elders that they were not allowed to use their language when sent to boarding schools.

"This is a great way to honor some of those people that have been working really hard to keep their traditions and keep the language alive, and hopefully they can have some small amount of healing from when they were robbed of the culture," he said.

In New Mexico, the state transportation department has been working with tribes for years to include traditional names and artwork along highway overpasses. Travelers heading north from Santa Fe pass under multiple bridges with references to Pojoaque Pueblo in the community's native language of Tewa.

There have also been local efforts in places like Bemidji, Minnesota, where Michael Meuers, a non-Native resident, started the Bemidji Ojibwe Language Project. Since 2009, more than 300 signs in English and Ojibwe have been put up across northern Minnesota, mostly on buildings, including schools. The signs can also be found in hospitals and businesses and are used broadly to spell out names of places and animals, identify things such as elevators, hospital departments, bear crossings — "MAKWA XING" — and food within a grocery store, and include translations for welcome, thank you and other phrases.

"Maybe it's going to open up conversations so that we understand that we are all one people," said Meuers, who worked for the Red Lake Nation for 29 years and started the project after seeing signs in Hawaii on a visit to the state.

The University of Maine put up dual language signs around its main campus. The Native American Programs, in partnership with the Penobscot Nation, also launched a website where visitors can hear the words spoken by language master Gabe Paul, a Penobscot pronunciation guide.

"For me, and for many of our tribal citizens and descendants, it is a daily reminder that we are in our homeland and we should be "at home" at the university, even though it has felt for generations like it can be an unwelcome place," Ranco said.

But not all efforts to provide dual language signs have gone well.

In New Zealand, the election of a conservative government in October has thrown into doubt efforts by transportation officials to start using road signs written in both English and the Indigenous Māori language.

Waka Kotahi, the New Zealand Transport Agency, earlier this year proposed making 94 road signs bilingual to promote the revitalization of the language.

But many conservatives have been irked by the increased use of Māori words by government agencies. Thousands wrote form submissions opposing the road sign plan, saying it could confuse or distract drivers.

The effort in Cambridge has been welcomed as part of what is called the participatory budgeting process, which allows residents to propose ideas on spending part of the budget. Carbone proposed the sign project and, together with a plan to make improvements to the African American Heritage Trail, it was approved by residents.

"I am so excited to see the final products and the initial run of these signs," Carbone said. "When people traveling around Cambridge see them, they will feel the same way. It will be just different enough to be noticeable but not different enough that it would cause a stir."

Carbone and others also hope the signs open a broader discussion of Native American concerns in the city, including representation in the city government, funding for Native American programs as well as efforts to ensure historical markers offer an accurate portrayal of Indigenous people.

When she first heard about the proposal, Sarah Burks, preservation planner at the Cambridge Historical Commission, acknowledged there were questions. Which signs would get the translations? How would translation be handled? Would this involve extensive research?

The translation on streets signs will be relatively easy for people to understand, she said, and inspire residents to "stop and think" about the Massachusetts Tribe and to "recognize the diversity of people in our community."

"It will be attention-grabbing in a good way," she said of the signs, which are expected to go up early next year.

What we know so far about the volcano eruption in Iceland

By SYLVIA HUI Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — Scientists anticipated the eruption of a volcano in southwestern Iceland for weeks, so when it happened on Monday night, it was no surprise. The region had been active for more than two years and thousands of small earthquakes rattled the area in recent weeks.

Here is a look at what happened and what may be ahead:

HOW THE ERUPTION UNFOLDED

It started at about 10:20 p.m. local time on Monday north of Grindavik, a fishing town of 3,400 people on the Reykjanes Peninsula. The town is about 50 kilometers (31 miles) southwest of Iceland's capital, Reykjavik, in an area known broadly as Fagradalsfjall volcano.

First there was a series of small earthquakes. Then lava that's some 1,200 degrees Celsius (2,192 degrees Fahrenheit) began pouring out of a fissure about 4 kilometers (2.5 miles) long. The Icelandic Meteorological Office estimated that hundreds of cubic meters of lava per second flowed out in the first two hours of the eruption, though the activity had significantly subsided by Tuesday afternoon.

WAS IT UNEXPECTED?

In short, no — scientists had expected the eruption for several weeks and in November, authorities evacuated Grindavik after thousands of small earthquakes shook the area for more than two weeks. Scientists said their monitors showed that a corridor of magma, or semi-molten rock, was spreading toward the town and could reach the surface imminently.

The nearby Blue Lagoon geothermal resort, one of Iceland's best-known tourist attractions, had to close temporarily as a precaution after a magnitude 4.8 earthquake hit the area last month.

Fagradalsfjall had been dormant for some 6,000 years but it flared to life in March 2021, when hundreds of people flocked to the Reykjanes Peninsula to see spectacular lava flows that lasted for months. The red glow from the lava could be seen from the outskirts of the capital.

WILL THIS ERUPTION AFFECT FLIGHTS?

None of the recent eruptions on the Reykjanes Peninsula caused damage or disruptions to flights, despite the area's proximity to the country's main Keflavik Airport. And though Monday's eruption appears to be larger and more powerful than those in recent years, forecasters and scientists say it's unlikely to impact air travel.

Many still recall the huge disruptions to international aviation in 2010, when a different Icelandic volcano, the Eyjafjallajokull, spewed giant clouds of ash high into the atmosphere over Europe. Some 100,000 flights were grounded, millions of international travelers stranded and air travel was halted for days because of concerns the fine ash could damage jet engines.

Experts say the location and features of this eruption mean it isn't expected to produce much ash or cause a similar scale of disruption. AccuWeather, a U.S.-based weather forecasting firm, said Tuesday that initial information shows no ash cloud has yet been observed.

Sam Mitchell, a volcanologist at the University of Bristol, says Monday's eruption is very different to Eyjafjallajokull's in 2010, when "a large explosive eruption under a glacier produced a very large cloud and

very fine ash in the atmosphere when the wind direction was pointing towards mainland Europe.”

WHAT OTHER IMPACTS COULD THIS ERUPTION HAVE?

Scientists say that there is no current threat that the lava will reach the town of Grindavik or key structures like nearby power plants. The residents from the area have been evacuated and most surrounding roads remain closed.

But the scientists warn the situation could change and that it's too early to say how long the eruption will last or when local residents could move back into their homes.

“Even though the lava did not erupt into the town of Grindavik or at the nearby power plant and popular tourist destination, the Blue Lagoon, the lava flows are still only a few kilometers away and there is still concern of lavas reaching these key locations,” Mitchell said.

The molten lava flowing above ground can also heighten the risk of poor air quality in the region because of the increased sulfur dioxide content in the air, AccuWeather said. Iceland's Met Office forecast that gas pollution may be detected in the area of Reykjavik later Tuesday or Wednesday.

One volcanologist, Ármann Höskuldsson, told Iceland's state broadcaster RUV that he expected the eruption could last from a week to 10 days. “If everything is normal, this will subside in the afternoon tomorrow,” he said.

HOW COMMON ARE VOLCANIC ERUPTIONS IN ICELAND?

Iceland is one of Earth's most volcanically active areas, with 32 active volcanic sites. It averages an eruption every four to five years — though the frequency has increased closer to every 12 months since 2021.

The country sits on top of a volcanic hotspot and what's called the mid-Atlantic ridge, a huge crack in the ocean floor caused by the separation of the North American and Eurasian tectonic plates. As the plates pull apart, new magma rises up to fill the gaps, triggering earthquakes and volcanic activity.

One of the country's largest active volcanoes is Katla, which is closely watched because it lies under thick glacial ice, meaning that any eruption could melt the ice and trigger widespread flooding. Katla last erupted in 1918, and that eruption lasted almost a month, starving crops of sunlight and killing some livestock.

States trashing troves of masks and pandemic gear as huge, costly stockpiles linger and expire

By JENNIFER PELTZ and DAVID A. LIEB Associated Press

When the coronavirus pandemic took hold in an unprepared U.S., states scrambled for masks and other protective gear.

Three years later, as the grips of the pandemic have loosened, many states are now trying to deal with an excess of protective gear, ditching their supplies in droves.

With expiration dates passing and few requests to tap into its stockpile, Ohio auctioned off 393,000 gowns for just \$2,451 and ended up throwing away another 7.2 million, along with expired masks, gloves and other materials. The now expiring supplies had cost about \$29 million in federal money.

A similar reckoning is happening around the country. Items are aging, and as a deadline to allocate federal COVID-19 cash approaches next year, states must decide how much to invest in maintaining warehouses and supply stockpiles.

An Associated Press investigation found that at least 15 states, from Alaska to Vermont, have tossed some of their trove of PPE because of expiration, surpluses and a lack of willing takers.

Into the trash went more than 18 million masks, 22 million gowns, 500,000 gloves, and more. That's not counting states that didn't give the AP exact figures or responded in cases or other measures. Rhode Island said it got rid of 829 tons of PPE; Maryland disposed of over \$93 million in supplies.

“What a real waste. That's what happens when you don't prepare, when you have a bust-and-boom public health system,” where a lack of planning leads to panicked over-purchasing in emergencies, said Dr. Georges Benjamin, executive director of the American Public Health Association. “It shows that we really have to do a better job of managing our stockpiles.”

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The AP sent inquiries about PPE stockpiles to all 50 states over the past several months. About half responded.

States emphasize that they distributed far more gear than they discarded and have gone to great lengths to donate the leftovers. Washington state sent hundreds of thousands of supplies to the Marshall Islands last year, yet ended up throwing out millions more items after they expired.

Many states are keeping at least a portion, and sometimes all, of their remaining protective gear. Some even plan to update their stockpiles.

But others say the vagaries of the pandemic and the PPE supply left no choice but to acquire the items, and now to throw them out, however reluctantly. Expiration dates are set to ensure the protection works as intended, and the Federal Emergency Management Agency has set the fair market value of expired supplies at zero dollars.

"Anytime you're involved in a situation where you're recalling how difficult it was to get something in the first place, and then having to watch that go or not be used in the way it was intended to be used, certainly, there's some frustration in that," said Louis Eubank, who runs the South Carolina health department's COVID-19 coordination office. The state has discarded over 650,000 expired masks.

When the virus struck, demand skyrocketed for N95 masks, gloves and gowns. The U.S. government's Strategic National Stockpile was underequipped, and states plunged into global bidding wars.

The AP found in 2020 that states spent over \$7 billion in a few months on PPE, ventilators and some other high-demand medical devices in a seller's market. Ultimately, the federal government paid for many of the supplies.

"There was no way to know, at the time of purchase, how long the supply deficit would last or what quantities would be needed," Ohio Department of Health spokesperson Ken Gordon said.

Ohio distributed more than 227 million pieces of protective equipment during the pandemic. But as the supply crunch and the health crisis eased, demand faded, especially for gowns.

Now, "states, hospitals, manufacturers – everybody in the whole system -- has extra product," said Linda Rouse O'Neill of the Health Industry Distributors Association.

Given the glut, stockpiled items are selling for bargain prices, if at all. Vermont got \$82.50 for 105,000 boot covers and 29 cents apiece for thousands of safety goggles.

Striking a balance between preparedness and surpluses is "a major dilemma" for governments, said Scott Amey of the Project on Government Oversight, a Washington, D.C.-based watchdog group. And while politicians vowed in 2020 never to be caught off guard again, "memories are short, budgets are tight," Amey noted.

In Wisconsin, a legislative committee axed from the budget \$17.2 million that would have funded a warehouse with an ongoing 60-day supply of PPE for two years.

The state Department of Health Services said it is now "demobilizing the warehouse" and trying to donate the supplies. Already, Wisconsin has tossed nearly 1.7 million masks and almost 1 million gowns.

Minnesota's Department of Health was allocated some money this year for retaining and restocking PPE and is strategizing. For now, emergency response official Deb Radi says the agency expects to dispose of a few expiring gowns.

The Health Industry Distributors Association recommends that product distributors maintain a 60-to-90-day supply to guard against demand spikes. But the group says it's probably unnecessary for everyone in the system — from manufacturers to doctors' offices — to have such a large cushion.

Missouri's health department has maintained a 90-day supply, keeping even expired materials on the presumption that the federal government will OK their use in an emergency. That happened during COVID-19.

"If you don't make the investment – and perhaps the investment that is never used – then you may not be prepared to assist the public when it's needed," Missouri health director Paula Nickelson said.

Pennsylvania officials, by contrast, are aiming for a 15-day stockpile after frank conversations about what they can afford not only to keep, but to keep replacing as items expire, said Andy Pickett, the Health Department's emergency preparedness and response director.

And Nevada can't give its aging PPE away fast enough.

Department of Administration Director Jack Robb said the state is endeavoring to shed the supplies safely and without wasting money but already has discarded some.

But Robb said officials "made the best decisions that they could" when confronted with a disease that has killed nearly 7 million people worldwide, including some of his close friends.

"And I hope we never see anything like that again in our lifetime," he said.

What we know about Texas' new law that lets police arrest migrants who enter the US illegally

By VALERIE GONZALEZ Associated Press

McALLEN, Texas (AP) — How far can a state go to keep migrants out of the U.S.?

The answer may soon come out of Texas, where a new law signed by Republican Gov. Greg Abbott this week will allow police to arrest migrants who cross the U.S.-Mexico border illegally and give local judges the authority to order them to leave the country.

Acting quickly, civil rights groups and a Texas border county filed a lawsuit Tuesday that seeks to stop the measure from taking effect in March, calling it unconstitutional. White House press secretary Karine Jean-Pierre also blasted the Texas law but wouldn't say whether the Justice Department would challenge it.

Here are some things to know:

WHO CAN BE ARRESTED?

The measure allows any Texas law enforcement officer to arrest people who are suspected of entering the country illegally. Once in custody, migrants could either agree to a Texas judge's order to leave the U.S. or be prosecuted on misdemeanor charges of illegal entry. Migrants who don't leave could face arrest again under more serious felony charges.

Arresting officers must have probable cause, which could include witnessing the illegal entry themselves or seeing it on video.

The law cannot be enforced against people lawfully present in the U.S., including those who were granted asylum or who are enrolled in the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program.

"The goal of these laws is to make sure that when they see somebody crossing over the border, as the National Guard see, as the Texas Department of Public Safety see, they know they're not profiling. They are seeing with their own eyes people who are violating the law," Abbott said Monday.

However, critics, including Mexico President Andrés Manuel López Obrador, worry the law could lead to racial profiling and family separation. American Civil Liberties Union affiliates in Texas and some neighboring states issued a travel advisory this week warning people of a possible threat their civil and constitutional rights violations when passing through Texas.

During a news briefing Tuesday, López Obrador said Abbott was looking to score political points with people's lives.

"The Texas governor acts that way because he wants to be the Republican vice-presidential candidate and wants to win popularity with these measures," López Obrador said. "He's not going to win anything. On the contrary, he is going to lose support because there are a lot of Mexicans in Texas, a lot of migrants."

WHERE WILL THE LAW BE ENFORCED?

It can be enforced anywhere in Texas.

Republican state Rep. David Spiller, who carried the bill in the Texas House, says he expects the vast majority of arrests will occur within 50 miles (80 kilometers) of the U.S.-Mexico border.

Some places are off-limits. Arrests can't be made in public and private schools; churches, synagogues or other established places of worship; hospitals and other health care facilities, including those where sexual assault forensic examinations are conducted.

Under the Texas law, migrants ordered to leave would be sent to ports of entry along the border with Mexico, even if they are not Mexican citizens.

IS THE LAW CONSTITUTIONAL?

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Legal experts and immigrant rights group have said the measure is a clear conflict with the U.S. government's authority to regulate immigration.

A key claim in Tuesday's lawsuit filed by the ACLU and other groups is that it violates the U.S. Constitution's supremacy clause. The suit accuses Texas of trying "to create a new state system to regulate immigration that completely bypasses and conflicts with the federal system."

Opponents have called the measure the most dramatic attempt by a state to police immigration since a 2010 Arizona law — denounced by critics as the "Show Me Your Papers" bill — that was largely struck down by the U.S. Supreme Court. The court's 2012 decision on the Arizona law stated the federal government has exclusive power over immigration.

Abbott and other Republicans have said President Joe Biden is not doing enough to control the 1,950-mile (3,149-kilometer) southern border.

"In his absence, Texas has the constitutional authority to secure our border through historic laws like SB 4," Abbott said in a statement.

The U.S. government has not said whether it will challenge the Texas law, as it did with Arizona's measure.

Mexico's president has indicated his country will intervene.

WHAT IS HAPPENING ON THE BORDER?

Abbott signed the law Monday amid an increase in border crossings that has stretched U.S. Customs and Border Protection resources. Troy Miller, the agency's acting commissioner, has called the number of daily arrivals "unprecedented," with illegal crossings topping 10,000 some days across the border in December.

Thousands of asylum-seekers who have crossed are sleeping outside along the border overnight as they wait for federal agents to process them. Most are released with notices to appear in immigration courts, which are backlogged with more than 3 million cases.

Many are crossing at the Texas cities of Eagle Pass and El Paso, where federal officials suspended cross-border rail traffic in response to migrants riding freight trains through Mexico, hopping off just before entering the U.S.

The U.S. government also recently shut down the nearby international crossing between Lukeville, Arizona, and Sonoyta, Mexico, to free Customs and Border Protection officers assigned to the port of entry to help with transportation and other support. The agency also has partially closed a few other border ports of entry in recent months, including a pedestrian crossing in San Diego.

Argentina's president warned of a tough response to protests. He's about to face the first one

By DÉBORA REY and ALMUDENA CALATRAVA Associated Press

BUENOS AIRES, Argentina (AP) — Just days after taking office, Argentine President Javier Milei's government announced drastic economic measures that angered some social and labor groups, and warned it would crack down on any protests blocking streets.

The right-wing populist on Wednesday will face the first test of how his administration responds to demonstrations after those groups called on people to turn out to protest the economic shock measures, which Milei has said are needed to address Argentina's severe crisis.

The shocks include a 50% devaluation of Argentine peso, cuts to energy and transportation subsidies and the closure of some government ministries. They come amid soaring inflation and rising poverty.

Milei's security minister, Patricia Bullrich, presented a new "protocol" to maintain public order that allows federal forces to clear people blocking streets without a judicial order and authorizes the police to identify — through video or digital means — people protesting and obstructing public thoroughfares. It can bill them for the cost of mobilizing security forces.

The new protocol is aimed at preventing blockades, especially in Buenos Aires, where regular protests often block street for hours in what are commonly known as "piquetes."

Some groups are saying the protocol goes too far and criminalizes the right to protest.

On Tuesday, Argentine labor, social and human rights groups signed a petition asking the United Nations

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and the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights to intercede against the new security protocol. In the petition, they say it is "incompatible with the rights to free assembly and association, freedom of expression and social protest" recognized in the country's constitution.

Argentina's government went farther this week, and on Monday announced that people who block streets could be removed from the public assistance benefit lists if they are on one.

"To the beneficiaries of social plans: know that no one can force you to go to a march under threat of taking away your plan," said Sandra Pettovello, head of the newly created Human Capital Ministry, which combines what were the ministries of Labor, Education and Social Development.

"Protesting is a right, but so is the right of people to move freely through Argentine territory to go to their workplace," she said.

In Argentina, some people receive social support directly from the government, but others get support through social organizations with direct links to federal offices. Milei's administration says that many of these groups use this as way to force people to go out to protests in exchange for support.

Polo Obrero, which represents the unemployed, is one of the social groups calling for the protests on Wednesday. Its leader, Eduardo Belliboni, said Milei's government is planning to go "against the right to protest."

People were called to protest in Buenos Aires, marching from Congress to the historic Plaza de Mayo. The march will coincide with the 22nd anniversary of a protest against the government's handling of an economic crisis that left dozens dead and led to the resignation of then-President Fernando de la Rúa

A recent poll by the University of Buenos Aires' Observatory of Applied Social Psychology indicated that 65% of those surveyed agree with banning the blockades.

Milei, a 53-year-old economist who rose to fame on television with profanity-laden tirades against what he called the political caste, became president with the support of Argentines disillusioned with the economic crisis.

Argentina has an annual inflation rate of 161%, and four out of every 10 people are poor. The South American country also faces a \$45 billion debt owed to the International Monetary Fund.

Putin ratchets up military pressure on Ukraine as he expects Western support for Kyiv to dwindle

By The Associated Press undefined

After blunting Ukraine's counteroffensive from the summer, Russia is building up its resources for a new stage of the war over the winter, which could involve trying to extend its gains in the east and deal significant blows to the country's vital infrastructure.

Russian President Vladimir Putin seems to be hoping that relentless military pressure, combined with changing Western political dynamics and a global focus on the Israeli-Hamas war, will drain support for Ukraine in the nearly 2-year-old war and force Kyiv to yield to Moscow's demands.

"As far as the Russian leadership is concerned, the confrontation with the West has reached a turning point: The Ukrainian counteroffensive has failed, Russia is more confident than ever, and the cracks in Western solidarity are spreading," said Tatiana Stanovaya, senior fellow with Carnegie Russia Eurasia Center, in a recent analysis.

An aid package for Ukraine has stalled in the U.S. Congress as Republicans insist on linking any more money to U.S.-Mexico border security changes opposed by Democrats. The European Union last week failed to agree on a \$54 billion package in financial help that Ukraine desperately needs.

Amid these signs of fraying Western support, Russia has ramped up its pressure on Ukrainian forces on several parts of the more than 1,000-kilometer (620-mile) front line.

"The Russian military since October has been trying to seize initiative across the front in a couple of areas," said Michael Kofman, a military expert with the Carnegie Endowment.

Ukraine's military needs to reconstitute and regenerate its combat effectiveness after a grueling five-month counteroffensive, he said.

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"Ukrainian forces, while motivated, are exhausted," Kofman said in a recent podcast. "They've lost a lot of units of action. They've lost a lot of assault capable troops."

One area where Russia has maintained steady pressure is the northeastern city of Kupiansk, a strategically important rail hub that Moscow captured early in the war and then lost in a Ukrainian counteroffensive in September 2022. While Russian forces have failed to make any significant gains in the area, Ukraine has had to maintain a significant force to protect the city.

Starting in early October, Russian troops also have launched an offensive around Avdiivka, a town near Donetsk, the center of the region that was seized by Moscow-backed rebels in 2014 and illegally annexed by Russia in 2022 with three other Ukrainian regions.

Ukraine has built multiple defenses in Avdiivka, complete with concrete fortifications and a web of underground tunnels, allowing them to repel fierce Russian attacks. Despite massive losses, Russian troops have inched forward steadily, seeking to envelop Avdiivka and cut Ukrainian supply lines.

That battle has evolved into a gruesome grind for both parties and has been compared to the fighting for Bakhmut, the war's longest and bloodiest battle that ended with Russia capturing it in May.

The Kremlin and the Russian Defense Ministry are silent about specific plans, but some Russian war bloggers say Moscow could launch a massive offensive of its own to forge deep into Ukrainian territory.

Others warn, however, that the Russian military lacks resources for any such big push, saying that would require many more troops and weapons, exposing it to the same risks that doomed initial Russian attempts to capture Kyiv and other cities in the northeast at the start of the war.

In that botched attack, Russian armored convoys stretched along highways leading to the capital, becoming easy prey for Ukrainian drones and artillery. Such setbacks forced the Kremlin to switch to a defensive strategy along the front line.

Putin is eager to show battlefield gains as he faces reelection in March. He said last week that Russia has 617,000 fighters in Ukraine, a number that many war bloggers see as far short of the kind of massive force needed to strike deep into Ukraine. President Volodymyr Zelenskyy says his ground forces number about 600,000.

Western observers are emphasizing the need for Ukraine to build fortified defenses like Russia has done to counter any potential big offensive by Moscow.

"Ukrainians have painfully few reserves," warned Mark Galeotti, head of Mayak Intelligence consultancy and a senior associate fellow at Royal United Services Institute in London.

If Moscow manages to break through Ukraine's defensive lines, "Russian forces could then really wreak havoc on lines of communication, lines of supply, rear supply bases," he said.

"In that context, it does make sense to allow fortification to make up for the lack of reserves," Galeotti said in a recent podcast.

In recent months, the Russian military has reduced the use of its long-range air- and sea-launched cruise missiles in what has been widely interpreted as a sign of Moscow's effort to build up stockpiles of such weapons to strike Ukraine's power grid and other key infrastructure in winter, when it is most vulnerable due to high consumption.

At the same time, Russia has stepped up attacks on Kyiv and other regions with waves of Iranian-made Shahed exploding drones, in an apparent effort to deplete Ukrainian air defenses.

Last winter, Russian relentlessly pounded Ukraine's energy grid, causing long blackouts but failing to knock out the electricity network that showed a high degree of resilience. Ukrainian officials have warned, however, that this winter could be even harder due to Russian strikes.

While the West has provided air defense systems to protect Kyiv and other key areas, it could be challenging for Ukraine to cope with massive missile attacks from different directions. Ukraine's allies also promised it a few dozen U.S.-made F-16 fighter jets, and Ukrainian pilots are training in Romania, but it's unclear when the warplanes will arrive.

NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg has said the F-16s will strengthen Ukraine's air defenses but noted, "There is not a silver bullet, not a single system that by itself will change fundamentally the situ-

ation on the battlefield.”

“We must not underestimate Russia,” he said. “Russia’s economy is on a war footing.”

While the West faced problems in maintaining the tempo of weapons supplies, with military aid hitting snags in Washington and Brussels, Russia has been increasingly boosting production of missiles, tanks and other weapons. The U.S. has said that Moscow also has started getting munitions under a deal struck with North Korea in September.

The Russian military has fixed many of its weaknesses and deficiencies that plagued it early in the war, and it has developed new weapons and tactics that helped derail Ukraine’s counteroffensive. A key factor that effectively paralyzed attempts by Kyiv to attack with a big mechanized force during the campaign was the sprawling minefields and other fortifications that Russia had built in the south.

One deadly novelty that significantly strengthened Russia’s military was converting Soviet-made dumb bombs into smart, gliding weapons equipped with winglets and a GPS system that allowed them to strike targets with precision far from the front.

While Ukraine held a strong edge in drones at the start of the war, Russian forces since then have matched and even overwhelmed Ukrainian troops in using short-range small drones, which are now so prolific that Moscow is even them against individual troops.

Kofman said that while Ukraine pioneered the use of drones, “Russia now has more of them and has an advantage in them.”

“Russia will be materially advantaged in 2024 in artillery ammunition, in production of drones and likely long-range drones and cruise missiles, too,” Kofman said. “If the West just assumes that it’s a stalemate and can reduce its commitment to Ukraine, Russian advantages will compound because Russia doesn’t accept the stalemate.”

UN resolution on Gaza hampered by issues important to US: cessation of hostilities and aid monitors

By EDITH M. LEDERER Associated Press

UNITED NATIONS (AP) — The Security Council’s adoption of a new U.N. resolution to spur desperately needed aid to Gaza has been bogged down by two issues important to the United States: a reference to a cessation of hostilities and putting the U.N. in charge of inspecting trucks to ensure they are actually carrying humanitarian goods.

A vote on the Arab-sponsored resolution, first postponed from Monday, was pushed back again until Wednesday as council members continued intense negotiations to avoid another veto by the United States.

“We’re still working through the modalities of the resolution,” U.S. National Security Council spokesperson John Kirby said Tuesday afternoon when the vote was still set for 5 p.m. “It’s important for us that the rest of the world understand what’s at stake here and what Hamas did on the 7th of October and how Israel has a right to defend itself against those threats.”

It was canceled as the U.S. asked for more time and is now scheduled to take place after an open council briefing followed by closed consultations on the U.N. political mission in Afghanistan on Wednesday morning.

The draft resolution on the table Monday morning called for an “urgent and sustainable cessation of hostilities,” but this language was watered down in a new draft circulated early Tuesday.

It now “calls for the urgent suspension of hostilities to allow safe and unhindered humanitarian access, and for urgent steps towards a sustainable cessation of hostilities.”

The United States in the past has opposed language on a cessation of hostilities, and diplomats speaking on condition of anonymity because discussions have been private said this remains an issue for the Americans.

The resolution also calls for U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres to establish a mechanism for monitoring aid deliveries to Gaza. The diplomats said this is also an issue because it bypasses the current Israeli inspection of aid entering the territory.

The U.S. on Dec. 8 vetoed a Security Council resolution backed by almost all other council members

and dozens of other nations demanding an immediate humanitarian cease-fire in Gaza. The 193-member General Assembly overwhelmingly approved a similar resolution on Dec. 12 by a vote of 153-10, with 23 abstentions.

In its first unified action on Nov. 15, with the U.S. abstaining, the Security Council adopted a resolution calling for "urgent and extended humanitarian pauses" in the fighting, unhindered aid deliveries to civilians and the unconditional release of all hostages.

The United States has repeatedly called for condemnation of Hamas' Oct. 7 surprise attacks into southern Israel, and recognition of Israel's right to self-defense, which have not been included in any of the resolutions that have been adopted – or the latest draft before the council.

Israeli President Isaac Herzog said during a briefing with ambassadors Tuesday that Israel is "ready for another humanitarian pause and additional humanitarian aid in order to enable the release of hostages."

But Ambassador Lana Nusseibeh of the United Arab Emirates, the Arab representative on the 15-member council, said Tuesday a new resolution had to go "a little bit further" than the Nov. 15 resolution.

Security Council resolutions are important because they are legally binding, but in practice many parties choose to ignore the council's requests for action. General Assembly resolutions are not legally binding, though they are a significant barometer of world opinion.

Nearly 20,000 Palestinians have been killed, according to the Gaza Health Ministry since Israel declared war on Hamas following its surprise attacks on Oct. 7 that killed about 1,200 people — mostly civilians. The militants took about 240 hostages back to Gaza.

Hamas controls the Gaza Strip, and its Health Ministry does not differentiate between civilian and combatant deaths. Thousands more Palestinians lie buried under the rubble of Gaza, the U.N. estimates.

Trump defends controversial comments about immigrants poisoning the nation's blood at Iowa rally

By HANNAH FINGERHUT and ALI SWENSON Associated Press

WATERLOO, Iowa (AP) — Former President Donald Trump on Tuesday defended his comments about migrants crossing the southern border "poisoning the blood" of America, and he reinforced the message while denying any similarities to fascist writings others had noted.

"I never read 'Mein Kampf,'" Trump said at a campaign rally in Waterloo, Iowa, referencing Adolf Hitler's fascist manifesto.

Immigrants in the U.S. illegally, Trump said Tuesday, are "destroying the blood of our country, they're destroying the fabric of our country."

In the speech to more than 1,000 supporters from a podium flanked by Christmas trees in red MAGA hats, Trump responded to mounting criticism about his anti-immigrant "blood" purity rhetoric over the weekend. Several politicians and extremism experts have noted his language echoed writings from Hitler about the "purity" of Aryan blood, which underpinned Nazi Germany's systematic murder of millions of Jews and other "undesirables" before and during World War II.

As illegal border crossings surge, topping 10,000 some days in December, Trump continued to blast Biden for allowing migrants to "pour into our country." He alleged, without offering evidence, that they bring crime and potentially disease with them.

"They come from Africa, they come from Asia, they come from South America," he said, lamenting what he said was a "border catastrophe."

Trump made no mention of the Colorado Supreme Court's decision Tuesday to disqualify him from the state's ballot under the U.S. Constitution's insurrection clause, though his campaign blasted out a fundraising email about it during his speech.

The former president has long used inflammatory language about immigrants coming to the U.S., dating back to his campaign launch in 2015, when he said immigrants from Mexico are "bringing drugs, they're bringing crime, they're rapists."

But Trump has espoused increasingly authoritarian messages in his third campaign, vowing to renew

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and add to his effort to bar citizens from certain Muslim-majority countries, and to expand "ideological screening" for people immigrating to the U.S. He said he would be a dictator on "day one" only, in order to close the border and increase drilling.

In Waterloo on Tuesday, Trump's supporters in the crowd said his border policies were effective and necessary, even if he doesn't always say the right thing.

"I don't know if he says the right words all of the time," said 63-year-old Marylee Geist, adding that just because "you're not fortunate enough to be born in this country," doesn't mean "you don't get to come here."

"But it should all be done legally," she added.

It's about the volume of border crossings and national security, said her husband, John Geist, 68.

"America is the land of opportunity, however, the influx — it needs to be kept to a certain level," he said. "The amount of undocumented immigrants that come through and you don't know what you're getting, things aren't regulated properly."

Alex Litterer and her dad, Tom, of Charles City said they were concerned about migrants crossing the southern border, especially because the U.S. doesn't have the resources to support that influx. But the 22-year-old said she didn't agree with Trump's comments, adding that immigrants who come to the country legally contribute to the country's character and bring different perspectives.

Polling shows most Americans agree, with two-thirds saying the country's diverse population makes the U.S. stronger.

But Trump's "blood" purity message might resonate with some voters.

About a third of Americans overall worry that more immigration is causing U.S.-born Americans to lose their economic, political and cultural influence, according to a late 2021 poll by The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research.

Jackie Malecek, 50, of Waterloo said she likes Trump for the reasons that many people don't — how outspoken he is and "that he's a little bit of a loose cannon." But she thought Trump saying immigrants are "poisoning the blood" took it a little too far.

"I'm very much for cutting off what's happening at the border now. There's too many people pouring in here right now, I watch it every single day," Malecek said. "But that wording is not what I would have chosen to say."

Malecek supports allowing legal immigration and accepting refugees, but she is concerned about the waves of migrants crossing the border who are not being vetted.

Sen. JD Vance, a Republican from Ohio, lashed out at a reporter asking about Trump's "poisoning the blood" comments, defending them as a reference to overdoses from fentanyl smuggled over the border.

"You just framed your question implicitly assuming that Donald Trump is talking about Adolf Hitler. It's absurd," Vance said. "It is obvious that he was talking about the very clear fact that the blood of Americans is being poisoned by a drug epidemic."

At a congressional hearing July 12, James Mandryck, a Customs and Border Protection deputy assistant commissioner, said 73% of fentanyl seizures at the border since the previous October were smuggling attempts carried out by U.S. citizens, with the rest being done by Mexican citizens.

Extremism experts say Trump's rhetoric resembles the language that white supremacist shooters have used to justify mass killings.

Jon Lewis, a research fellow at George Washington University's Program on Extremism, pointed to the 2018 Pittsburgh synagogue shooter and the 2019 El Paso Walmart shooter, who he said used similar language in writings before their attacks.

"Call it what it is," said Lewis. "This is fascism. This is white supremacy. This is dehumanizing language that would not be out of place in a white supremacist Signal or Telegram chat."

Asked about Trump's "poisoning the blood" comments, Senate Republican leader Mitch McConnell replied with a quip about his own wife, an immigrant, who was an appointee in Trump's administration.

"Well, it strikes me that didn't bother him when he appointed Elaine Chao Secretary of Transportation," McConnell said.

Trump currently leads other candidates, by far, in polls of likely Republican voters in Iowa and nationwide. Trump's campaign is hoping for a knockout performance in the caucuses that will deny his rivals momentum and allow him to quickly lock up the nomination. Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis has staked his campaign on Iowa, raising expectations for him there.

"I will not guarantee it," Trump said of winning Iowa next month, "but I pretty much guarantee it."

Thailand's LGBTQ+ community hopeful as marriage equality bill is set to be discussed in Parliament

By JERRY HARMER and JINTAMAS SAKSORNCHAI Associated Press

BANGKOK (AP) — Naphat Krutthai and Rasithaya Jindasri have been in a committed relationship for eight years, but only now can they consider getting married.

In a clothing shop in Siam Square, a commercial hub in Thailand's capital, the happy couple excitedly eyed multi-colored garments as they discussed their potential wedding. Naphat, a transgender man, and Rasithaya, a woman, want to formalize their union, as Parliament is set to debate Thursday a final Cabinet-endorsed draft bill to pass landmark legislation allowing members of the LGBTQ+ community to get married.

The bill seeks to amend the Civil and Commercial Code, changing the words "men and women" and "husband and wife" to "individuals" and "marriage partners."

Prime Minister Srettha Thavisin told reporters Tuesday after the Cabinet meeting that it will grant LGBTQ+ couples the "exact same equal rights" as heterosexual couples. This would make Thailand the first country in Southeast Asia to pass such a law and the third in Asia, after Taiwan and Nepal.

Naphat — or "Jim" as he's known — said he and Rasithaya planned to register their marriage as soon as the law allowed it. As an advocate for trans rights himself, Naphat told The Associated Press, the anticipated change was not just a formality. A marriage certificate would allow LGBTQ+ couples a range of benefits, including healthcare and inheritance rights, that they have long been denied.

"It means a lot. This is the eighth year of our relationship. But our status isn't legally recognized," he said. "When either of us gets sick or has an emergency, we can't take care of each other properly. So it really matters to us."

Thailand has a global reputation for acceptance and inclusivity. In June, downtown Bangkok staged its annual Pride Parade. It drew tens of thousands in a joyous, hourslong party. Srettha, the premier, has said after he took office in August that he supported Thailand's bid to be a host of World Pride in 2028.

But once the crowds disappeared and the music stopped, the reality of being LGBTQ+ in Thailand may be less rosy than it might look.

"I think what foreigners see isn't the reality," said Nattipong Boonpuang, a 32-year-old fortune-teller and model. "People aren't actually as open to gender diversity as they may think," he said, adding they sometimes receive negative comments in both real life and online.

Nattipong is also a member of the Bangkok Gay Men's Chorus which was founded about a year ago.

What bound the chorus together, beyond their love of music, was a mission to advocate for more acceptance of LGBTQ+ people in Thailand, according to the chorus leader Vitaya Saeng-Aroon.

Vitaya said attitudes toward the LGBTQ+ community in Thailand have definitely improved in recent years, but there was still a long way to go for misconceptions and legal discrimination remained.

"We don't want privileges. People misunderstand that we are calling for special treatment. Our community just wants fair treatment, on a daily basis," he said.

Thailand has struggled to pass a marriage equality law.

Last year, members of Parliament debated several legal amendments to allow either marriage equality or civil unions, which did not give LGBTQ+ couples all of the same rights as heterosexual couples. None of the proposed bills passed before Parliament was dissolved for election.

However, this year, Vitaya said things look more promising with the new draft bill being "very progressive." He hoped it would be approved so the rights of the LGBTQ+ community be finally recognized by law.

In May's general election, marriage equality was a hot topic for both the ruling party Pheu Thai and the

opposition's Move Forward.

The latest bill appeared to have general support. But it still needs to be debated several times in Parliament before approval. Once passed, the country's King Maha Vajiralongkorn would endorse it to become a law.

The government said the next step may be an amendment to the pension fund law to recognize all couples.

The change might mean a lot to those affected, but it would barely shake Thai society, according to one analyst. Attitudes toward marriage have changed, said Khemthong Tonsakulrungruang, a law lecturer at Bangkok's Chulalongkorn University, and the law was simply catching up.

"There's already cultural marriage — it's not legal — but there's cultural ceremonies, religious ceremonies between LGBTs," he said. "It makes headlines sometimes, but it's become more and more common for two persons, regardless of gender, to get married. So, it would reflect the change that has already been here ... for years."

Immigration fuels uptick in US population growth

By MIKE SCHNEIDER Associated Press

ORLANDO, Fla. (AP) — The number of immigrants to the U.S. jumped to the highest level in two decades this year, driving the nation's overall population growth, according to estimates released Tuesday by the U.S. Census Bureau.

The United States added 1.6 million people, more than two-thirds of which came from international migration, bringing the nation's population total to 334.9 million. It marks the second year in a row that immigration powered population gains.

A decline in the number of deaths since the depths of the COVID-19 pandemic also contributed to the U.S. growth rate.

Population gains stem from immigration and births outpacing deaths.

After immigration declined in the latter half of last decade and dropped even lower amid pandemic-era restrictions, the number of immigrants last year bounced back to almost 1 million people. The trend continued this year as the nation added 1.1 million people.

The last time immigration surpassed 1.1 million people was in 2001, according to Census Bureau figures compiled by William Frey, a demographer at The Brookings Institution.

It is a sign of things to come. Without immigration, the U.S. population is projected to decline as deaths are forecast to outpace births by the late 2030s.

"The immigration piece is going to be the main source of growth in the future," Frey said.

The census determines how many U.S. congressional seats each state gets. If trends continue through the 2030 count, California could lose four U.S. House seats and New York three. Texas could gain four seats and Florida could add three, according to an analysis by the Brennan Center for Justice.

While low by historical standards, 2023's half-percent growth rate was a slight uptick from the 0.4% rate last year and the less than 0.2% increase in 2021.

There were about 300,000 fewer deaths this year compared with a year earlier. That helped double the natural increase to more than 500,000 people in 2023, contributing to the largest U.S. population gain since 2018, according to estimates that measure change from mid-2022 to mid-2023. The population increased in 42 states, up from last year's 31 states.

The vast majority of growth, 87%, came from the South, a region the Census Bureau defines as stretching from Texas to Maryland and Delaware. But the concentration of growth seen during the height of the pandemic in Texas, Florida, North Carolina and Georgia diminished in 2023.

"We peaked in the movement of people to those Sun Belt hotshots," Frey said. "It's tapering off a little bit."

South Carolina's 1.7% growth rate topped all other states, and its population rose by more than 90,000 residents. More than 90% of the growth came from domestic migration, or people moving from another U.S. state to South Carolina. Without domestic and international migration, the Palmetto State would have lost population in 2023 with almost 1,300 more deaths than births.

Florida had the next-highest growth rate at 1.6%, adding more than 365,000 residents. That was also

the second-highest growth in terms of raw numbers. Only Texas surpassed it, gaining more than 473,000 people. More people moved to Florida than any other's U.S. state this year, with the almost 373,000 movers about evenly split between domestic and international. Significantly fewer residents died in Florida compared to last year, leading to a natural decrease of only around 7,600 people.

Of the 50 states, New York had the biggest rate of population decline, losing 0.5%. It also recorded the largest decline in pure numbers, with a drop of almost 102,000 residents, although it marks a much smaller decline than last year's 180,000-person drop. The almost 74,000 international arrivals and the state's natural increase of more than 41,000 residents couldn't offset the almost 217,000 New Yorkers who departed the state from mid-2022 to mid-2023.

California was still the nation's most populous state, with 38.9 million residents, though it lost more than 75,000 residents this year. The decline was an improvement from the more than 113,000-person drop last year. Texas was the second most populous state with 30.5 million residents.

For the first time, Georgia surpassed 11 million people in 2023, joining only seven other states above that population threshold.

"Barring something completely unforeseen, the 2020s are shaping up to be the South's decade," the Brennan Center for Justice said in a report on Tuesday.

An earthquake in northwestern China kills at least 131 people and is the deadliest in 9 years

By KEN MORITSUGU Associated Press

BEIJING (AP) — A strong overnight earthquake rattled a mountainous region of northwestern China, authorities said Tuesday, reducing homes to rubble, leaving residents outside in a below-freezing winter night and killing 131 people in the nation's deadliest quake in nine years.

The magnitude 6.2 earthquake struck just before midnight on Monday, injuring more than 700 people, damaging roads and knocking out power and communication lines in Gansu and Qinghai provinces, officials and Chinese media reports said.

As emergency workers searched for the missing in collapsed buildings and at least one landslide, people who lost their homes spent a cold winter night in tents at hastily erected evacuation sites.

"I just feel anxious, what other feelings could there be?" said Ma Dongdong, who noted in a phone interview that three bedrooms in his house had been destroyed and a part of his milk tea shop was cracked wide open.

Afraid to return home because of aftershocks, he spent the first night in a field with his wife, two children and some neighbors, where they made a fire to stay warm. In the early morning, they went to a tent settlement that Ma said was housing about 700 people. As of mid-afternoon, they were waiting for blankets and warm clothing to arrive.

The earthquake struck at a relatively shallow depth of 10 kilometers (6 miles) in Gansu's Jishishan county, about 5 kilometers (3 miles) from the provincial boundary with Qinghai, the China Earthquake Networks Center said. The U.S. Geological Survey measured the magnitude at 5.9.

State broadcaster CCTV said 113 were confirmed dead in Gansu and another 536 injured in the province. Eighteen others were killed and 198 injured in Qinghai, in an area north of the epicenter, CCTV said in an update early Wednesday.

There were nine aftershocks measuring magnitude 3.0 or higher by 10 a.m. — about 10 hours after the initial earthquake — the largest one registering a magnitude of 4.1, officials said.

Emergency authorities in Gansu issued an appeal for 300 additional workers for search and rescue operations, and Qinghai officials reported 16 people missing in a landslide, down from 20 earlier, according to Chinese state-owned media.

The earthquake was felt in much of the surrounding area, including Lanzhou, the Gansu provincial capital, about 100 kilometers (60 miles) northeast of the epicenter. Photos and videos posted by a student at Lanzhou University showed students hastily leaving a dormitory building and standing outside with long

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down jackets over their pajamas.

"The earthquake was too intense," said Wang Xi, the student who posted the images. "My legs went weak, especially when we ran downstairs from the dormitory."

The death toll was the highest since an August 2014 quake that killed 617 people in southwest China's Yunnan province. The country's deadliest earthquake in recent years was a 7.9 magnitude quake in 2008 that left nearly 90,000 dead or presumed dead and devastated towns and schools in Sichuan province, leading to a yearslong effort to rebuild with more resistant materials.

Li Haibing, an expert at the Chinese Academy of Geological Sciences, said that the relatively high number of casualties in the latest quake was in part because it was shallow. "Therefore, it has caused greater shaking and destruction, even though the magnitude was not large," he said.

Other factors include the quake's mainly vertical movement, which causes more violent shaking; the lower quality of buildings in what is a relatively poor area, and the fact that it happened in the middle of the night when most people were home, Li said.

The epicenter was about 1,300 kilometers (800 miles) southwest of Beijing, the Chinese capital. The remote and mountainous area is home to several predominantly Muslim ethnic groups and near some Tibetan communities. Geographically, it is in the center of China, though the area is commonly referred to as the northwest, as it is at the northwestern edge of China's more populated plains.

Tents, folding beds and quilts were being sent to the disaster area, state broadcaster CCTV said. It quoted Chinese leader Xi Jinping as calling for an all-out search and rescue effort to minimize the casualties.

The overnight low in the area was minus 15 to minus 9 degrees Celsius (5 to 16 degrees Fahrenheit), the China Meteorological Administration said. The Beijing Youth Daily, a Communist Party newspaper, quoted an unnamed rescue coordinator saying there was a need for generators, long coats and fuel for stoves, among other items. The coordinator recommended sending halal food because of the ethnic makeup of the affected population.

At least 4,000 firefighters, soldiers and police officers were dispatched in the rescue effort, and the People's Liberation Army Western Theatre set up a command post to direct its work.

A video posted by the Ministry of Emergency Management showed emergency workers in orange uniforms using rods to try to move heavy pieces of what looked like concrete debris at night. Other nighttime videos distributed by state media showed workers lifting out a victim and helping a slightly stumbling person to walk in an area covered with light snow.

Two residents of Jishishan county told The Associated Press that there were cracks in their walls but that their buildings did not collapse. They were unsure whether it was safe to stay in their homes and figuring out where to spend the night.

Middle school student Ma Shijun ran out of his dormitory barefoot without even putting on a coat, according to a Xinhua report. It said the strong tremors left his hands a bit numb, and that teachers quickly organized the students on the playground.

Earthquakes are somewhat common in the mountainous area of western China that rises up to form the eastern edge of the Tibetan Plateau.

In September 2022, 93 people were killed in a 6.8 magnitude earthquake that shook China's southwestern province of Sichuan, triggering landslides and shaking buildings in the provincial capital of Chengdu, where 21 million residents were under a COVID-19 lockdown.

Groups sue over new Texas law that lets police arrest migrants who enter the US illegally

By ACACIA CORONADO Associated Press

AUSTIN, Texas (AP) — The White House and Mexico's president on Tuesday came out strongly against a new Texas law that would allow police to arrest migrants who illegally cross into the U.S. and empower local judges to order them to leave the country.

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Also Tuesday, civil rights groups and Texas' largest border county filed a lawsuit, calling the measure that Republican Gov. Greg Abbott had signed into law less than 24 hours earlier an unconstitutional reach over the U.S. government's authority on immigration.

The Texas law that takes effect in March could be a test of how aggressively a state can limit immigration amid a surge in illegal crossings in remote areas that has escalated pressure on Congress to reach a deal on asylum. Abbott said Tuesday that Texas is going to such dramatic lengths because of frustration over the Biden administration's immigration policies.

White House press secretary Karine Jean-Pierre criticized the state's approach as extreme and dehumanizing to immigrants. She would not say whether the Justice Department would challenge the law.

"This is not who we are as a country," she said.

The lawsuit, filed in federal court in Austin, was brought by El Paso County along with the American Civil Liberties Union and the Texas Civil Rights Project. It was filed against the head of the Texas Department of Public Safety, whose troopers could arrest migrants, and the El Paso County district attorney, whose office would potentially prosecute cases in that border community.

El Paso County District Attorney Bill Hicks said he woke up Tuesday morning having no idea he would be sued by his own county. He told reporters that the lawsuit could reach the U.S. Supreme Court, a scenario that some Texas Republicans welcome even as they defend the law as constitutional.

A DPS spokesperson declined to comment in an email Tuesday, citing the pending litigation.

Abbott signed the law Monday in front of a section of border fence in Brownville. He was flanked by two signs in English and Spanish: "Warning! It is illegal to cross here. Punishable by removal or imprisonment."

Republican state Rep. David Spiller, who carried the law in the Texas House, said in an interview Tuesday that the vast majority of arrests under the law would occur within 50 miles (80 kilometers) of the border, though it could be enforced statewide. He said there needs to be evidence of someone crossing illegally, whether it be an officer who witnesses it firsthand or footage from border cameras.

"I believe that Texas and other states have the absolute right to enforce their borders," Spiller said.

Illegal crossings have topped 10,000 on some days this month, according to U.S. Customs and Border Patrol acting commissioner Troy Miller, who has called the number of daily arrivals "unprecedented."

The measure allows any Texas law enforcement officer to arrest people who are suspected of entering the country illegally. Once in custody, they could either agree to a Texas judge's order to leave the U.S. or be prosecuted on misdemeanor charges of illegal entry. Migrants who don't leave could face arrest again under more serious felony charges.

Opponents have called it the most dramatic attempt by a state to police immigration since a 2010 Arizona law — denounced by critics as the "Show Me Your Papers" bill — that was largely struck down by the U.S. Supreme Court. The lawsuit cites the 2012 Supreme Court decision on the Arizona law, which stated the federal government has exclusive power over immigration.

"The bill overrides bedrock constitutional principles and flouts federal immigration law while harming Texans, in particular Brown and Black communities," Adriana Piñon, legal director of the ACLU of Texas, said in a statement.

Earlier Tuesday, ACLU affiliates in Oklahoma, New Mexico, Arkansas, Louisiana, Arizona, Texas, and San Diego and Imperial Counties in California issued a travel advisory warning of a possible threat to travelers' civil and constitutional rights violations when passing through Texas.

Mexico President Andrés Manuel López Obrador said he worried the law could lead to racial profiling and family separation. He accused Abbott of looking to score political points with people's lives.

Other steps Texas has taken as part of Abbott's border security efforts have included busing more than 65,000 migrants to cities across America since August 2022 and installing razor wire along the banks of the Rio Grande.

Donald Trump banned from Colorado ballot in historic ruling by state's Supreme Court

By NICHOLAS RICCARDI Associated Press

DENVER (AP) — A divided Colorado Supreme Court on Tuesday declared former President Donald Trump ineligible for the White House under the U.S. Constitution's insurrection clause and removed him from the state's presidential primary ballot, setting up a likely showdown in the nation's highest court to decide whether the front-runner for the GOP nomination can remain in the race.

The decision from a court whose justices were all appointed by Democratic governors marks the first time in history that Section 3 of the 14th Amendment has been used to disqualify a presidential candidate.

"A majority of the court holds that Trump is disqualified from holding the office of president under Section 3 of the 14th Amendment," the court wrote in its 4-3 decision.

Colorado's highest court overturned a ruling from a district court judge who found that Trump incited an insurrection for his role in the Jan. 6, 2021, attack on the Capitol, but said he could not be barred from the ballot because it was unclear that the provision was intended to cover the presidency.

The court stayed its decision until Jan. 4, or until the U.S. Supreme Court rules on the case. Colorado officials say the issue must be settled by Jan. 5, the deadline for the state to print its presidential primary ballots.

"We do not reach these conclusions lightly," wrote the court's majority. "We are mindful of the magnitude and weight of the questions now before us. We are likewise mindful of our solemn duty to apply the law, without fear or favor, and without being swayed by public reaction to the decisions that the law mandates we reach."

Trump's attorneys had promised to appeal any disqualification immediately to the nation's highest court, which has the final say about constitutional matters.

Trump's legal spokeswoman Alina Habba said in a statement Tuesday night: "This ruling, issued by the Colorado Supreme Court, attacks the very heart of this nation's democracy. It will not stand, and we trust that the Supreme Court will reverse this unconstitutional order."

Trump didn't mention the decision during a rally Tuesday evening in Waterloo, Iowa, but his campaign sent out a fundraising email citing what it called a "tyrannical ruling."

Republican National Committee chairwoman Ronna McDaniel labeled the decision "Election interference" and said the RNC's legal team intends to help Trump fight the ruling.

Trump lost Colorado by 13 percentage points in 2020 and doesn't need the state to win next year's presidential election. But the danger for the former president is that more courts and election officials will follow Colorado's lead and exclude Trump from must-win states.

Dozens of lawsuits have been filed nationally to disqualify Trump under Section 3, which was designed to keep former Confederates from returning to government after the Civil War. It bars from office anyone who swore an oath to "support" the Constitution and then "engaged in insurrection or rebellion" against it, and has been used only a handful of times since the decade after the Civil War.

"I think it may embolden other state courts or secretaries to act now that the bandage has been ripped off," Derek Muller, a Notre Dame law professor who has closely followed the Section 3 cases, said after Tuesday's ruling. "This is a major threat to Trump's candidacy."

The Colorado case is the first where the plaintiffs succeeded. After a weeklong hearing in November, District Judge Sarah B. Wallace found that Trump indeed had "engaged in insurrection" by inciting the Jan. 6 attack on the Capitol, and her ruling that kept him on the ballot was a fairly technical one.

Trump's attorneys convinced Wallace that, because the language in Section 3 refers to "officers of the United States" who take an oath to "support" the Constitution, it must not apply to the president, who is not included as an "officer of the United States" elsewhere in the document and whose oath is to "preserve, protect and defend" the Constitution.

The provision also says offices covered include senator, representative, electors of the president and vice president, and all others "under the United States," but doesn't name the presidency.

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The state's highest court didn't agree, siding with attorneys for six Colorado Republican and unaffiliated voters who argued that it was nonsensical to imagine that the framers of the amendment, fearful of former confederates returning to power, would bar them from low-level offices but not the highest one in the land.

"President Trump asks us to hold that Section 3 disqualifies every oathbreaking insurrectionist except the most powerful one and that it bars oath-breakers from virtually every office, both state and federal, except the highest one in the land," the court's majority opinion said. "Both results are inconsistent with the plain language and history of Section 3."

The left-leaning group that brought the Colorado case, Citizens for Responsibility and Ethics in Washington, hailed the ruling.

"Our Constitution clearly states that those who violate their oath by attacking our democracy are barred from serving in government," its president, Noah Bookbinder, said in a statement.

Trump's attorneys also had urged the Colorado high court to reverse Wallace's ruling that Trump incited the Jan. 6 attack. His lawyers argued the then-president had simply been using his free speech rights and hadn't called for violence. Trump attorney Scott Gessler also argued the attack was more of a "riot" than an insurrection.

That met skepticism from several of the justices.

"Why isn't it enough that a violent mob breached the Capitol when Congress was performing a core constitutional function?" Justice William W. Hood III said during the Dec. 6 arguments. "In some ways, that seems like a poster child for insurrection."

In the ruling issued Tuesday, the court's majority dismissed the arguments that Trump wasn't responsible for his supporters' violent attack, which was intended to halt Congress' certification of the presidential vote: "President Trump then gave a speech in which he literally exhorted his supporters to fight at the Capitol," they wrote.

Colorado Supreme Court Justices Richard L. Gabriel, Melissa Hart, Monica Márquez and Hood ruled for the petitioners. Chief Justice Brian D. Boatright dissented, arguing the constitutional questions were too complex to be solved in a state hearing. Justices Maria E. Berkenkotter and Carlos Samour also dissented.

"Our government cannot deprive someone of the right to hold public office without due process of law," Samour wrote in his dissent. "Even if we are convinced that a candidate committed horrible acts in the past — dare I say, engaged in insurrection — there must be procedural due process before we can declare that individual disqualified from holding public office."

The Colorado ruling stands in contrast with the Minnesota Supreme Court, which last month decided that the state party can put anyone it wants on its primary ballot. It dismissed a Section 3 lawsuit but said the plaintiffs could try again during the general election.

In another 14th Amendment case, a Michigan judge ruled that Congress, not the judiciary, should decide whether Trump can stay on the ballot. That ruling is being appealed. The liberal group behind those cases, Free Speech For People, also filed another lawsuit in Oregon seeking to bounce Trump from the ballot there.

Both groups are financed by liberal donors who also support President Joe Biden. Trump has blamed the president for the lawsuits against him, even though Biden has no role in them, saying his rival is "defacing the constitution" to try to end his campaign.

Trump's allies rushed to his defense, slamming the decision as "un-American" and "insane" and part of a politically-motivated effort to destroy his candidacy.

"Four partisan Democrat operatives on the Colorado Supreme Court think they get to decide for all Coloradans and Americans the next presidential election," House Republican Conference Chair Elise Stefanik said in a statement.

New York will set up a commission to consider reparations for slavery

By MAYSOON KHAN Associated Press/Report for America

ALBANY, N.Y. (AP) — New York state will create a commission tasked with considering reparations to address the persistent, harmful effects of slavery in the state, under a bill signed into law by Gov. Kathy Hochul on Tuesday.

It comes at a time when many states and towns throughout the United States attempt to figure out how to best reckon with the country's dark past, and follows in the footsteps of similar task forces established in California and Illinois.

"In New York, we like to think we're on the right side of this. Slavery was a product of the South, the Confederacy," Hochul, a Democrat, said at the bill signing ceremony in New York City. "What is hard to embrace is the fact that our state also flourished from that slavery. It's not a beautiful story, but indeed it is the truth."

The law, which was passed by state lawmakers in June, says the commission will examine the institution of slavery, which was fully abolished in New York by 1827, and its ongoing impact on Black New Yorkers today.

"The battle for civil rights was not below the Mason-Dixon line. The largest port of slave trade was in Charleston, South Carolina and Wall Street, New York," said the Rev. Al Sharpton, who spoke at the signing ceremony. "So this today starts a process of taking the veil off of northern inequality and saying we must repair the damage and it can be an example for this nation."

The nine-member commission will be required to deliver a report a year after its first meeting. Its recommendations could potentially include monetary compensation but would be non-binding. The panel's findings are intended to spur policy changes, programs and projects that attempt to remedy slavery's harmful effects.

The idea of using public money to compensate the descendants of enslaved people is almost certain to draw a backlash from some, including some white people who don't believe they should have to pay for the sins of long-ago ancestors, and other ethnic groups that weren't involved in the slave trade.

Sharpton said he expected Hochul to pay a political price for convening the commission.

"I want to give credit to this governor for having the audacity and courage to do what others wouldn't do. And I know she had to wrestle with it. And I know her political advisors told her it's too risky," the famed civil rights activist said. "But she did it because it's right."

The governor and the legislative leaders of the state Assembly and Senate will each appoint three qualified members to the commission. They have 90 days to make their picks.

"This is not just about who we're going to write a check to, and what the amount is," said Democratic Assembly Speaker Carl Heastie, the first Black person to hold the position.

"It begins the conversation with one recognizing the issues that affected Black people and descendants of slaves in this state," he said.

State Senate Republican Leader Rob Ortt said in a statement that he believes New York's recommendations will come at an "astronomical cost" to all New Yorkers.

"The reparations of slavery were paid with the blood and lives of hundreds of thousands of Americans who fought to end slavery during the Civil War," he said. He added that it's unrealistic for states to meet the potentially expensive price tag that could come with cash reparations.

California in 2020 became the first state to create a reparations task force. The group handed its two-year report to state lawmakers in June, who then introduced a bill that would create an agency to carry out some of the panel's more-than 100 recommendations, including helping families with genealogical research. But turning those proposals into policies could be difficult, given the state is facing a heavy budget deficit.

Other states, including Massachusetts and New Jersey, have considered studying reparations, but none have yet passed legislation. A Chicago suburb in Evanston, Illinois, became the first city to make reparations available to Black residents through a \$10 million housing project in 2021.

Cornell William Brooks, a professor at the Harvard Kennedy School who teaches civil rights and researches

the economics of reparations, said state-led initiatives similar to New York's are crucial for reaching national reconciliation and repair.

"States and municipalities cannot solve a national problem by themselves, but they can be a means by which we reach a national solution," he said.

The U.S. Congress apologized to African Americans for slavery in 2009, but a federal proposal to create a commission studying reparations has long stalled.

The legislation establishing the New York commission notes that the first enslaved Africans arrived at the southern tip of Manhattan Island, then a Dutch settlement, around the 1620s and helped build the infrastructure of New York City — "including the wall that gives Wall Street its name."

New York City Mayor Eric Adams on Tuesday expressed support for the measure, noting that some venerable institutions in New York, as elsewhere, are tied to wealth that derived from exploiting the labor of enslaved people.

"We have to reckon with that," Adams, a Democrat and former state senator, said during a City Hall news conference.

Israeli airstrikes kill dozens more Palestinians across the Gaza Strip

By NAJIB JOBAIN, SAMY MAGDY and JACK JEFFERY Associated Press

RAFAH, Gaza Strip (AP) — The Israeli army has raided and detained staff at two of the last functioning hospitals in Gaza's north, where the defense minister said Tuesday that troops were working to completely clear out Hamas militants.

Israel bombarded towns across southern Gaza Tuesday with airstrikes, killing at least 45 Palestinians and pressing ahead with its offensive with renewed backing from the United States, despite rising international alarm. The Israeli defense minister, Yoav Gallant, warned the campaign in Gaza's south will persist for months.

In a hospital in the southern town of Rafah, Mahmoud Zoarab bid farewell to his two children — a 2-year-old boy, and a girl born two weeks ago — killed in a predawn strike on their home.

Wounded in the strike, he winced as he peeled back the shrouds to look at their faces as his wife and mother stood by his bed.

"Just two weeks old. Her name hadn't even been registered," said the children's grandmother, Suzan Zoarab. Addressing Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, she cried, "Does he think that by killing these children he will achieve something? Have they succeeded now? Has he achieved what he wants?"

Defense Minister Gallant said Israeli forces were entering Hamas' tunnel network in northern Gaza as part of a "final clearing" of militants from the region. The densely built urban north, including Gaza City, has seen ferocious fighting between troops and militants, with Palestinian health officials reporting dozens of people killed in bombardment in recent days.

Israeli troops have raided a series of hospitals and shelters in the north, detaining men in a search for militants and expelling others taking refuge there.

Gallant said that in southern Gaza, operations will take "months," including the military's assault on Khan Younis, the territory's second largest city. "We will not stop until we reach our goals," he said.

After meeting with Israeli officials Monday, U.S. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin urged Israel to protect civilians but reiterated America's support for Israel in its war against Hamas, saying he was "not here to dictate timelines or terms."

Austin's remarks signaled that the U.S. would continue shielding Israel from growing international calls for a cease-fire as the U.N. Security Council again delayed a vote — and would keep providing aid for one of the 21st century's deadliest military campaigns.

STRIKES ACROSS GAZA

Suzan Zoarab said her family was asleep when their home was hit before dawn.

"We found the whole house had collapsed over us." Twenty-seven people were killed in the strike, along with at least three others in a separate strike in Rafah, according to Associated Press journalists who saw the bodies arrive at two local hospitals early Tuesday.

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Rafah, which is in the southern part of Gaza and where Israel has told Palestinians to seek shelter, has been repeatedly bombarded, often killing large numbers of civilians. Israel said Tuesday it had killed a prominent Hamas financier in an airstrike on Rafah, without specifying when it occurred.

In central Gaza, at least 15 people were killed in strikes overnight, according to hospital records. Among the dead were a mother and her four children, who were killed as they sat around a fire, according to an AP reporter who filmed the aftermath.

Fierce battles also raged in northern Gaza, which has been reduced to a wasteland seven weeks after Israeli tanks and troops stormed in. The military said Tuesday its forces took "operational control" of the urban refugee camp of Jabaliya. Israel has killed hundreds of Hamas militants there and detained another 500 suspected militants, according to a statement from division commander Brig. Gen. Itsik Cohen.

The claims could not be independently confirmed.

Footage online showed a scene of devastation after a strike that hit a local charity in Jabaliya, with several torn bodies near a donkey cart on a street filled with rubble and twisted metal. At least 27 people were killed in that strike and others in the district Tuesday, according to Munir al-Bursh, a senior Health Ministry official.

The Health Ministry in Hamas-run Gaza said Tuesday the death toll since the start of the war had risen to more than 19,600. It does not distinguish between civilian and combatant deaths.

Hamas has continued to put up stiff resistance and lob rockets at Israel. The militants said they fired a barrage toward Tel Aviv on Tuesday, and air raid sirens went off in central Israel. There were no immediate reports of casualties or damage.

The war began after Hamas and other militants killed some 1,200 people in Israel, mostly civilians, and abducted 240 others.

Israel's military says 131 of its soldiers have been killed in the Gaza ground offensive. Israel says it has killed some 7,000 militants, without providing evidence, and blames civilian deaths on Hamas, saying it uses them as human shields when it fights in residential areas.

HOSPITAL RAID

Israeli forces raided the Al-Ahli Hospital in Gaza City overnight, according to the church that operates it, destroying a wall at its front entrance and detaining most of its staff.

The facility was the scene of an explosion early in the war that killed dozens of Palestinians, and which an Associated Press investigation later determined was likely caused by a misfired Palestinian rocket.

Don Binder, a pastor at St. George's Anglican Cathedral, which runs the hospital, said the raid left just two doctors, four nurses and two janitors to tend to over 100 seriously wounded patients, with no running water or electricity.

Binder said an Israeli tank was parked on the rubble at the hospital's entrance, blocking anyone from entering or leaving.

Israeli troops seized northern Gaza's Al Awda hospital on Sunday after besieging it for 12 days, the international aid group Doctors Without Borders said Tuesday. The troops stripped, bound and interrogated all males over 16, including six of the group's staff, it said. Most were sent back into the hospital, which the troops still hold, with dozens of patients inside but no essential supplies, it said.

There was no immediate comment from the Israeli military about the hospital raids.

Forces have raided other hospitals across northern Gaza, accusing Hamas of using them for military purposes. Hospital staff have denied the allegations and accused Israel of endangering critically ill and wounded civilians.

SECURITY COUNCIL AGAIN POSTPONES VOTE ON NEW TRUCE PROPOSAL

U.N. Security Council members continued intense negotiations on an Arab-sponsored resolution to spur desperately needed humanitarian aid deliveries to Gaza during some kind of a halt in the fighting. A vote on the resolution, first postponed from Monday, was pushed back again until Wednesday as talks continued to get the U.S. to abstain or vote "yes" on the resolution after it vetoed an earlier cease-fire call.

France, the United Kingdom and Germany — some of Israel's closest allies — joined global calls for a cease-fire over the weekend. In Israel, protesters have called for negotiations with Hamas to facilitate the

release of scores of hostages still held by the group.

CIA Director William Burns met in Warsaw with the head of Israel's Mossad intelligence agency and the prime minister of Qatar on Monday, the first known meeting of the three since the cease-fire and the release of some 100 hostages in a deal they helped broker.

But U.S. National Security Council spokesperson John Kirby said the talks were not "at a point where another deal is imminent."

Hamas and other militants are still holding an estimated 129 captives.

Netanyahu has insisted that Israel will keep fighting until it ends Hamas rule in Gaza, crushes its military capabilities and frees all the hostages taken during the Oct. 7 attack.

Drought-prone California OKs new rules for turning wastewater directly into drinking water

By ADAM BEAM Associated Press

SACRAMENTO, Calif. (AP) — When a toilet is flushed in California, the water can end up in a lot of places: An ice skating rink near Disneyland, ski slopes around Lake Tahoe, farmland in the Central Valley.

And — coming soon — kitchen faucets.

California regulators on Tuesday approved new rules to let water agencies recycle wastewater and put it right back into the pipes that carry drinking water to homes, schools and businesses.

It's a big step for a state that has struggled for decades to secure reliable sources of drinking water for its more than 39 million residents. And it signals a shift in public opinion on a subject that as recently as two decades ago prompted backlash that scuttled similar projects.

Since then, California has been through multiple extreme droughts, including the most recent one that scientists say was the driest three-year period on record and left the state's reservoirs at dangerously low levels.

"Water is so precious in California. It is important that we use it more than once," said Jennifer West, managing director of WaterReuse California, a group advocating for recycled water.

California has been using recycled wastewater for decades. The Ontario Reign minor league hockey team has used it to make ice for its rink in Southern California. Soda Springs Ski Resort near Lake Tahoe has used it to make snow. And farmers in the Central Valley, where much of the nation's vegetables, fruits and nuts are grown, use it to water their crops.

But it hasn't been used directly for drinking water. Orange County operates a large water purification system that recycles wastewater and then uses it to refill underground aquifers. The water mingles with the groundwater for months before being pumped up and used for drinking water again.

California's new rules would let — but not require — water agencies take wastewater, treat it, and then put it right back into the drinking water system. California would be just the second state to allow this, following Colorado.

It's taken regulators more than 10 years to develop these rules, a process that included multiple reviews by independent panels of scientists. A state law required the California Water Resources Control Board to approve these regulations by Dec. 31 — a deadline met with just days to spare.

The vote was heralded by some of the state's biggest water agencies, which all have plans to build huge water recycling plants in the coming years. The Metropolitan Water District of Southern California, which serves 19 million people, aims to produce up to 150 million gallons (nearly 570 million liters) per day of both direct and indirect recycled water. A project in San Diego is aiming to account for nearly half of the city's water by 2035.

Adel Hagekhalil, general manager of the Metropolitan Water District of Southern California, said the new rules "will enable water managers across the state to consider new projects that have not yet been contemplated."

Water agencies will need public support to complete these projects — which means convincing customers that not only is recycled water safe to drink, but it's not icky.

California's new rules require the wastewater be treated for all pathogens and viruses, even if the pathogens and viruses aren't in the wastewater. That's different from regular water treatment rules, which only require treatment for known pathogens, said Darrin Polhemus, deputy director of the division of drinking water for the California Water Resources Control Board.

In fact, the treatment is so stringent it removes all of the minerals that make fresh drinking water taste good — meaning they have to be added back at the end of the process.

"It's at the same drinking water quality, and probably better in many instances," Polhemus said.

It's expensive and time-consuming to build these treatment facilities, so Polhemus said it will only be an option for bigger, well-funded cities — at least initially.

In San Jose, local officials have opened the Silicon Valley Advanced Water Purification Center for public tours "so that people can see that this is a very high tech process that ensures the water is super clean," said Kirsten Struve, assistant officer for the water supply division at the Santa Clara Valley Water District.

Right now, the agency uses the water for things like irrigating parks and playing fields. But they plan to use it for drinking water in the future.

"We live in California where the drought happens all the time. And with climate change, it will only get worse," Struve said. "And this is a drought-resistant supply that we will need in the future to meet the demands of our communities."

Joaquin Esquivel, chair of the Water Resources Control Board that approved the new rules on Tuesday, noted that most people are already drinking recycled water anyway. Most wastewater treatment plants put their treated water back into rivers and streams, which then flow down to the next town so they can drink it.

"Anyone out there taking drinking water downstream from a wastewater treatment plant discharge — which, I promise you, you're all doing — is already drinking toilet to tap," Esquivel said. "All water is recycled. What we have here are standards, science and — importantly — monitoring that allow us to have the faith that it is pure water."

A Palestinian baby girl, born 17 days ago during Gaza war, is killed with brother in Israeli strike

By MOHAMMED JAHJOUH and SAMY MAGDY Associated Press

RAFAH, Gaza (AP) — She was born amid war, in a hospital with no electricity in a southern Gaza city that has been bombarded daily. Her family named her al-Amira Aisha — "Princess Aisha." She didn't complete her third week before she died, killed in an Israeli airstrike that crushed her family home Tuesday.

Her extended family was asleep when the strike leveled their apartment building in Rafah before dawn, said Suzan Zoarab, the infant's grandmother and survivor of the blast. Hospital officials said 27 people were killed, among them Amira and her 2-year old brother, Ahmed.

"Just 2 weeks old. Her name hadn't even been registered," Suzan said, her voice quivering as she spoke from the side of her son's hospital bed, who was also injured in the blast.

The family tragedy comes as the Palestinian death toll in Gaza nears 20,000, according to the Health Ministry. The vast majority have been killed in Israeli airstrikes which have relentlessly pounded the besieged Gaza enclave for two and a half months, often destroying homes with families inside.

The war was triggered when militants from Hamas, which rules Gaza, and other groups broke into southern Israel on Oct. 7, killing some 1,200 people, mostly Israeli civilians, and abducting 240 others.

The Zoarab family were among the few Palestinians in Gaza who remained in their own homes. Israel's onslaught, one of the most destructive of the 21st century, has displaced some 1.9 million people — more than 80% of the territory's population — sending them in search of shelter in U.N. schools, hospitals, tent camps or on the street.

But the Zoarabs stayed in their three-story apartment building. Two of Suzan's sons had apartments on higher floors, but the extended family had been crowding together on the ground floor, believing it would be safer. When the strike hit, it killed at least 13 members of the Zoarab family, including a journalist,

Adel, as well as displaced people sheltering nearby.

"We found the whole house had collapsed over us," Suzan said. Rescue workers pulled them and other victims, living and dead, from the wreckage.

Israel says it is striking Hamas targets across Gaza and blames the militants for civilian deaths because they operate in residential areas. But it rarely explains its targeting behind specific strikes.

Princess Aisha was only 17 days old. She was born on Dec. 2 at the Emirati Red Crescent Hospital in Rafah while there was no power at the facility, Suzan said — less than 48 hours after bombardment of the town and the rest of Gaza resumed following the collapse of a week-long cease-fire between Israel and Hamas.

"She was born in a very difficult situation," Suzan said.

As of Monday, 28 of Gaza's 36 hospitals across the Gaza Strip were reported as out of service, the U.N said, while eight remaining health facilities were only partially operational. Amid the devastation, some 50,000 Palestinian women are pregnant, the WHO said.

Princess Aisha and Ahmed's parents survived — their mother, Malak, with burns and bruises on her face, their father, Mahmoud, with a fractured pelvis. As Mahmoud lay in his bed at Rafah's Kuwati Hospital, Suzan brought him the two children for a final goodbye before they were buried.

Mahmoud grimaced with pain as he pulled himself up to cradle Ahmed, wrapped in a white burial shroud, before falling back and weeping. His wife held Princess Aisha, also bundled in white cloth, up to him.

Dozens of mourners held a funeral prayer Tuesday morning outside the hospital in Rafah, before taking Princess Aisha, Ahmed and the others killed in the strike for burial in a nearby cemetery

"I couldn't protect my grandchildren" Suzan said. "I lost them in the blink of an eye."

Washington's Kalen DeBoer is the AP coach of the year after leading undefeated Huskies to the CFP

By TIM BOOTH AP Sports Writer

SEATTLE (AP) — Kalen DeBoer landing the job at Washington two years ago seemed to be an unheralded transaction at the time.

It has turned out to be a shrewd decision by the Huskies. One might say it's been perfect.

DeBoer was named The Associated Press coach of the year on Tuesday after leading the Huskies to a 13-0 record, the Pac-12 championship and a spot in the College Football Playoff in just his second year in charge at Washington. The Huskies will face Texas in the Sugar Bowl on Jan. 1 with a spot in the CFP championship game on the line.

In his two seasons, the Huskies are 24-2, leaving behind the bitter memory of a 4-8 record in 2021 that led to a change and brought DeBoer to Washington.

"It's all about the people around me. This is a team award," DeBoer said. "When you win, I tell the players this, you win football games, you're going to get recognized and more awards are going to get shared. I'm fortunate enough to kind of be the figurehead of our team and receive these cool awards. Just really blessed."

DeBoer received 30 of 52 first-place votes and had 113 points overall from AP Top 25 poll voters to easily outpace Florida State's Mike Norvell (57 points). Missouri's Eli Drinkwitz (38) and Arizona's Jedd Fisch (28) were the only other coaches to receive multiple first-place votes.

DeBoer is the first Washington coach ever to be named the AP coach of the year and just the third Pac-12 coach to win the award in the last 25 years, joining Mike MacIntyre (Colorado, 2016) and Chip Kelly (Oregon, 2010).

"I think when dealing with the team, I think I'm the same. I think there's job responsibilities that come along with this level that you continue to adjust to and learn from — the good, bad and ugly, whatever it was that had happened," DeBoer said. "But I think when it comes to building the team, the foundation of it is the same, the same priorities."

DeBoer is in just his fourth season as a head coach in the Bowl Subdivision. He was 67-3 at his alma mater, Sioux Falls, from 2005-09 and won three NAIA championships. At Fresno State, he went 12-6 in

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two seasons, including 9-3 the final year.

When the Washington job came open, DeBoer knew he was ready for the challenge of a Power Five program. But he was inheriting a team that went through a tumultuous season that included the firing of coach Jimmy Lake with two games still on the schedule.

While DeBoer won at nearly every stop, he still needed to prove to his new team that his methods would work.

"We were open ears to what he had to say, and he was so persistent in his genuineness and his commitment to take this program to the top that at the end of the day, it was unstoppable to be able to trust him," first-team AP All-American wide receiver Rome Odunze said.

While it certainly helped to have talent like Odunze and Heisman Trophy runner up Michael Penix Jr., a significant amount of Washington's success this season came because DeBoer and the Huskies were great in close games.

Each of Washington's final eight games were decided by 10 points or fewer and all of them were in question into the fourth quarter. Washington's final four wins – Utah, Oregon State, Washington State and Oregon – were decided by a total of 15 points.

That speaks to coaching. And belief.

"We've gotten here because he's carried through with everything he said he was going to do with all his effort," Odunze said.

Illegal crossings surge in remote areas as Congress, White House weigh major asylum limits

By ELLIOT SPAGAT Associated Press

LUKEVILLE, Ariz. (AP) — Hundreds of dates are written on concrete-filled steel columns erected along the U.S. border with Mexico to memorialize when the Border Patrol has repaired illicit openings in the would-be barriers. Yet no sooner are fixes made than another column is sawed, torched and chiseled for large groups of migrants to enter, usually with no agents in sight.

The breaches stretch about 30 miles (48 kilometers) on a washboard gravel road west of Lukeville, an Arizona desert town that consists of an official border crossing, restaurant and duty-free shop. The repair dates are mostly since spring, when the flat desert region dotted with saguaro cactus became the busiest corridor for illegal crossings.

A Border Patrol tour in Arizona for news organizations, including The Associated Press, showed improvements in custody conditions and processing times, but flows are overwhelming. The huge spike in migrants and resulting chaos at various border locations have increased frustration with the Biden administration's immigration policies and put pressure on Congress to reach a deal on asylum. The numbers have nudged the White House and some congressional Democrats to consider major limits to asylum as part of a deal for Ukraine aid.

As Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas left closed-door talks with congressional leaders Friday, dozens of migrants from Senegal, Guinea and Mexico walked along the Arizona border wall built during Donald Trump's presidency, looking to surrender to agents. A Mexican woman walked briskly with her two daughters and five grandchildren, ages 2 to 7, after being dropped off by a bus in Mexico and instructed by guides.

"They told us where to go; to go straight," said Alicia Santay, of Guatemala, who waited in a Border Patrol tent in Lukeville for initial processing. Santay, 22, and her 16-year-old sister hoped to join their father in New York.

The dates when wall breaches were fixed are often bunched together, written in white letters against rust-colored steel. One cluster showed five dates from April 12 to Oct. 3. On Friday, agents drove looking for openings and found one on a column that was repaired twice — on Oct. 31 and again Dec. 5.

Smuggling organizations remove a few inches from the bottom of 30-foot (9.1-meter) steel poles, which agents say can take as little as a half-hour. Columns sway back and forth, like a cantilever swing, creating

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ample space for large groups to walk through. Welders often attach metal bars horizontally across several columns to prevent swinging, but there are plenty of other places to saw.

Agents say it takes up to an hour to drive from Lukeville along the gravel road to discover breaches — a large chunk of time when tending to so many migrants in custody.

“Our officers and agents are responding to large groups of migrants, which means that some of our agents aren’t on the line, not really monitoring for some of those cuts,” said Troy Miller, U.S. Customs and Border Protection’s acting commissioner. “If we don’t have anybody to respond, then you’re going to see what you’re seeing.”

The number of daily arrivals is “unprecedented,” Miller said, with illegal crossings topping 10,000 some days across the border in December. On Monday, CBP suspended cross-border rail traffic in the Texas cities of Eagle Pass and El Paso in response to migrants riding freight trains through Mexico, hopping off just before entering the U.S. The Lukeville border crossing is closed, as is a pedestrian entry in San Diego, so that more officials can be assigned to the migrant influx.

Arrests for illegal crossings topped 2 million for the first time each of the U.S. government’s last two budget years, reflecting technological changes that have increased global mobility and a host of ills prompting people to leave their homes, including wealth inequality, natural disasters, political repression and organized crime.

Miller said solutions go well beyond CBP, which includes the Border Patrol, to other agencies whose responsibilities include long-term detention and asylum screenings. On cuts in the wall, Miller said Mexican authorities “need to step up.”

Arrests in the Border Patrol’s Tucson sector, which includes Lukeville, topped all nine sectors on the Mexican border from May to October, except June, according to the latest public figures. It is a throwback to the early 2000s before traffic shifted to Texas, but the demographics are much different.

Arrests of people in families neared 72,000 in the Tucson sector from Oct. 1 through Dec. 9, more than nine times the same period last year. That’s a big change from when almost all migrants were adult men. Arrests of non-Mexicans topped 75,000, nearly quadruple the number from a year ago and more than half of all sector arrests.

Senegalese people accounted for more than 9,000 arrests in Tucson from Oct. 1 to Dec. 9, while arrests of people from Guinea and India each topped 4,000. Agents have encountered migrants from about four dozen Eastern hemisphere countries.

Agents who pick up migrants near the wall drive them to Lukeville to have photos taken on a mobile phone that starts their processing. They drive about 45 minutes to a station in Ajo that was built to detain 100 people but housed 325 on Friday. Some are bused to other Border Patrol sectors but most are sent to Tucson, about two hours away.

At a sprawl of white tents near Tucson International Airport that was built for about 1,000 people, some migrants are flown to the Texas border for processing. Others are released within two days, as mandated by a court order in the Tucson sector. CBP policy limits detention to 72 hours.

Most are released with notices to appear in immigration courts, which are backlogged with more than 3 million cases. Some are detained longer by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

The tents are a far cry from 2021 in Donna, Texas, where more than 4,000 migrants, largely unaccompanied children, were held in a space designed for 250 under COVID-19 restrictions. Some stayed for weeks, relying on sleeping pads and foil blankets. In 2019, investigators found 900 people crammed in a cell for 125 in El Paso, with detainees standing on toilets for room to breathe. They wore soiled clothing for days or weeks.

Discussions in Congress may produce the most significant immigration legislation since 1996. Potential changes include more mandatory detention and broader use of a rule to raise thresholds for initial asylum screenings. While the higher screening standard has been applied to tens of thousands of migrants since May after entering the country illegally, they are not used in the Border Patrol’s Tucson sector due to extraordinarily high flows.

Sandra Day O'Connor called a pioneer and 'iconic jurist' as she is memorialized by Biden, Roberts

By LINDSAY WHITEHURST and SEUNG MIN KIM Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Justice Sandra Day O'Connor, the Arizona rancher's daughter who became a voice of moderate conservatism as the first woman on the U.S. Supreme Court, was memorialized by President Joe Biden on Tuesday as a pioneer in the legal world who inspired generations of women.

Biden and Chief Justice John Roberts were among those who eulogized O'Connor at Washington National Cathedral. O'Connor retired from the high court in 2006 after more than two decades, and died Dec. 1 at age 93.

The president, a longtime senator who once chaired the Senate Judiciary Committee, began his remarks by recalling her 1981 confirmation hearing — a day that Biden described as momentous because of the history that she would make on the nation's most powerful court.

He called her "a pioneer in her own right" who shattered barriers in both the political and legal worlds, along with the "nation's consciousness." He said that "her principles were deeply held and of the highest order."

"How she embodied such attributes under such pressure and scrutiny helped empower generations of women in every part of American life, including the court itself — helping to open doors, secure freedoms and prove that a woman can not only do anything a man can do, but many times do it a hell of a lot — a heck of a lot better," the president said.

Biden added: "Excuse my language, Father."

Roberts, in his eulogy, also highlighted O'Connor's trailblazing career and said her leadership shaped the legal profession, making it clear that justices were both men and women. She had a distinct style during arguments, often jumping in with a question that cut to the heart of a case, he said. That put her most important issues on the table quickly, in line with one of her favorite sayings: "Get it done."

"She was so successful that the barriers she broke down are almost unthinkable today," Roberts said, calling her a "strong, influential and iconic jurist."

Roberts had initially been tapped to replace O'Connor, although during his confirmation process, he was nominated to be chief justice. He recalled how O'Connor, in response to questions from reporters about him, said the only issue with the then-nominee was that he didn't wear a skirt.

"My initial reaction was, of course, everything's negotiable," Roberts said.

O'Connor was nominated in 1981 by President Ronald Reagan. Largely unknown on the national scene until her appointment, she would come to be referred to by commentators as the nation's most powerful woman.

O'Connor wielded considerable influence on the nine-member court, generally favoring states in disputes with the federal government and often siding with police when they faced claims of violating people's rights. Her impact could perhaps best be seen, though, on the court's rulings on abortion. She twice helped form the majority in decisions that upheld and reaffirmed *Roe v. Wade*, the decision that said women have a constitutional right to abortion.

Thirty years after that decision, a more conservative court overturned *Roe*, and the opinion was written by the man who took her place, Justice Samuel Alito.

O'Connor was a top-ranked graduate of Stanford's law school in 1952, but quickly discovered that most large law firms at the time did not hire women. She nevertheless built a career that included service as a member of the Arizona Legislature and state judge before her appointment to the Supreme Court at age 51.

When she first arrived, there wasn't even a women's bathroom anywhere near the courtroom. That was soon rectified, but she remained the court's only woman until 1993, when Ruth Bader Ginsburg joined the court.

"She loved the law and the Supreme Court," said Jay O'Connor, one of her three sons, during her memorial service. "She loved our country and our democracy. And most of all, she loved her family."

She brought a formidable energy to her personal life as well, her son recalled, noting that her way of

relaxing after a long day at work was “three rounds of tennis or 18 holes of golf.”

She was a voracious reader and, along with her husband John, a talented dancer — the couple took disco lessons in Arizona in the late 1970s. She also ran a bustling household as her three sons grew up, at times employing the same skills she used to question attorneys in the courtroom.

“She honed those skills grilling her sons about being out late on Saturday night,” he said.

The late justice’s final message to her three sons, Jay O’Connor said, included the guidance: “Our purpose in life is to help others along the way.”

“What a beautiful, powerful and totally Sandra Day O’Connor sentiment,” he said.

In a speech before her casket lay in repose Monday, Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor remembered O’Connor as a trailblazer and a “living example that women could take on any challenge, could more than hold their own in any spaces dominated by men and could do so with grace.”

O’Connor retired at age 75, citing her husband’s struggle with Alzheimer’s disease. She later expressed regret that a woman had not been chosen to replace her, but would live to see a record four women serving on the high court.

President Barack Obama awarded O’Connor the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the nation’s highest civilian honor.

She died in Phoenix of complications related to advanced dementia and a respiratory illness. Her survivors include a brother, three sons and grandchildren. The family plans to return her remains to her childhood home, the Lazy B Ranch in Arizona.

The family has asked that donations be made to iCivics, the group she founded to promote civics education.

Zelenskyy says he’s confident Ukraine will get more U.S. support for its war with Russia

By ILLIA NOVIKOV Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said Tuesday he’s certain the United States will make good on its promise to provide billions of dollars in further aid for Kyiv to continue its fight against Russia, and he bluntly replied “No,” to a question about whether his country might lose the war.

Speaking at an end-of-year news conference in Kyiv, Zelenskyy also dismissed suggestions that Moscow’s forces have come out of 2023 on top after mostly beating back Ukraine’s counteroffensive and stepping up its military production.

“Russia failed to achieve any of its goals” this year, he said, although he conceded Ukraine still faces “lots of challenges” after expending Western military hardware in the counteroffensive that failed to make an impression on the 1,000-kilometer (600-mile) front line.

The U.S. Congress has left town for the holidays without a deal to send some \$61 billion to Ukraine, and the U.S. Defense Department says it is almost out of money to help Kyiv after almost 22 months of fighting. The European Union, too, had to push into the new year a plan to supply Ukraine with \$54.5 billion after a veto from Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban,

But Zelenskyy insisted he isn’t worried.

“I am confident that the U.S. will not let us down and that what we have agreed with the U.S. will be fulfilled,” Zelenskyy said.

Western support is crucial for Ukraine’s fight against its bigger and better armed neighbor, and the U.S. is by far the biggest single source of help. Russia still outguns and outnumbered Kyiv’s forces.

Ukraine has received additional U.S.-made Patriot surface-to-air systems and advanced NASAMS anti-aircraft systems, providing medium- to long-range defense against Russian missile attacks, Zelenskyy said, declining to elaborate.

Those weapons will help fend off expected Russian attacks on Ukraine’s power grid over the winter.

While Zelenskyy was upbeat about receiving further military and financial help from European Union countries, he was less optimistic about Ukraine’s chances of joining NATO.

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"NATO is the most powerful option for us. But we're not invited to NATO yet," he said. "All these signals about our membership so far are nonsense. We didn't receive a solid offer, not from a single partner of ours. It is hard to imagine at this point, how this can happen."

Ukraine's military wants to mobilize up to 500,000 more troops, Zelenskyy said, but he said he has asked the top brass to spell out the details on what is "a very sensitive matter" before deciding whether to grant their wish.

Such a major mobilization would cost Ukraine the equivalent of \$13.4 billion, Zelenskyy said. Other aspects to be considered include whether troops currently on the front would be rotated or allowed home leave.

Ukrainian Defense Ministry statistics say the Ukrainian military had nearly 800,000 troops in October. That doesn't include National Guard or other units. In total, 1 million Ukrainians are in uniform.

Earlier this month, Russian President Vladimir Putin ordered his military to increase the number of troops by nearly 170,000 to a total of 1.32 million.

The front line has barely budged this year as a Ukrainian counteroffensive ran up against sturdy Russian defenses. Now, with winter setting in, troop movements are being slowed by bad weather, placing greater emphasis on artillery, missiles and drones.

Putin said earlier Tuesday that the Kremlin's forces have taken the initiative in Ukraine and are well positioned for the coming year.

"We are effectively doing what we think is needed, doing what we want," Putin told the Russian military brass. "Where our commanders consider it necessary to stick to active defenses they are doing so, and we are improving our positions where it's needed."

But Zelenskyy insisted Moscow had failed in its efforts to occupy more of Ukraine since the full-scale invasion began on Feb. 24, 2022.

It wasn't possible to independently verify battlefield claims by either side.

In other developments Tuesday:

— The U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights, Volker Türk, said his agency has confirmed more than 10,000 civilian deaths in Ukraine since Russia's full-scale invasion started. The number includes more than 560 children, he said.

"The true toll is probably substantially higher," he said.

Türk also said his office is investigating six new reported cases of Russian soldiers allegedly killing civilians in Ukraine.

Since the start of the war, the Russian military has repeatedly used missiles to blast civilian targets, with devastating consequences.

— The toll the war is taking on Ukraine's economy was clear in figures published Tuesday that showed the volume of goods exports through November was 19.3% lower than in the same period last year.

The drop was due largely to Russia's "blockade of seaports and Russian attacks on our export transport logistics," Economy Minister Yulia Svyrydenko tweeted.

However, a recent uptick in sea exports came after Ukraine created a temporary grain corridor in the Black Sea and introduced a ship insurance mechanism, she said, adding that the growth bodes well for next year.

— Russian shelling late Tuesday wounded a woman and three children in Ukraine's southern city of Kherson, regional Gov. Oleksandr Prokudin said in a Telegram update. Two other civilians also were wounded in the Sumy region of northern Ukraine, which borders Russia, according to the local military administration.

Activists hope pope's approval of same-sex blessings could ease anti-LGBTQ+ bias and repression

By NICOLE WINFIELD Associated Press

ROME (AP) — Pope Francis' green light for Catholic priests to offer blessings to same-sex couples is in many ways a recognition of what has been happening in some European parishes for years. But his deci-

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sion to officially spell out his approval could send a message of tolerance to places where gay rights are far more restricted.

From Uganda to the United States, laws that discriminate against LGBTQ+ people or even criminalize homosexuality have increased in recent years, leaving communities feeling under attack. Pastors in some conservative Christian denominations, and the Catholic Church in particular, have sometimes supported such measures as consistent with biblical teaching about homosexuality.

In Zimbabwe, a country with a history of state harassment of LGBTQ+ people and a constitutional ban on same-sex marriage, news of Francis' approval was met with cautious optimism among activists.

But Chesterfield Samba, director of Zimbabwe's GALZ association, which represents LGBTQ+ people, said same-sex unions would likely remain taboo regardless of the pope's stance.

"Christians here are of the view that they are devoid of sin and cannot be aligned with LGBTQ+ people," Samba told The Associated Press.

By contrast, a Catholic priest in the United States — Alex Santora of Hoboken, New Jersey — was elated by the pope's declaration, hoping it would clear the path for him to bless a same-sex couple who had been part of the parish throughout his 19-year tenure there.

The Vatican says gays should be treated with dignity and respect but that homosexual acts are "intrinsically disordered." Francis hasn't changed that teaching, but he has spent much of his 10-year pontificate offering a more welcoming attitude to LGBTQ+ Catholics.

The Vatican statement Monday marked a new step in Francis' campaign, explicitly authorizing priests to offer non-sacramental blessings to same-sex couples. The blessings must in no way resemble a wedding, which the church teaches can only happen between a man and woman.

The Rev. Wolfgang Rothe, a German priest who participated in open worship services blessing same-sex couples in May 2021, said Tuesday that the approval essentially validated what he and other priests in Germany have been doing for years. But he suggested it would make life easier for homosexual couples in more conservative societies.

"In my church, such blessings always take place when anyone has the need," Rothe said.

But "in many countries around the world there are opposing moves to maintain homophobia in the church," he added. "For homosexual couples living there, the document will be a huge relief."

In Nigeria, authorities arrested dozens of gay people in October in a crackdown that human rights groups said relied on a same-sex prohibition law.

Nigeria is among 30 of Africa's 54 countries where homosexuality is criminalized with broad public support, though its constitution guarantees freedom from discrimination.

Uganda's president this year signed into law anti-gay legislation that prescribes the death penalty for "aggravated homosexuality," which is defined as sexual relations involving people infected with HIV, as well as with minors and other vulnerable people.

In the United States, the Human Rights Campaign has identified an "unprecedented and dangerous" spike in discriminatory laws sweeping statehouses this year, with more than 525 anti-LGBTQ+ bills introduced.

"Given the homophobic and transphobic climate created by many bishops in the United States, the average same-sex couple likely still won't feel comfortable presenting themselves to their local bishop or priest to ask for a blessing," said Jamie Manson, a lesbian and president of Catholics for Choice.

Starting from his famous "Who am I to judge" comment in 2013 about a purportedly gay priest, Francis has evolved his position to increasingly make clear that everyone is a child of God, is loved by God and welcome in the church.

In January, Francis told The Associated Press: "Being homosexual is not a crime."

Raul Pena, a spokesman for Crismhom, Madrid's main Catholic LGBTQ+ association, said small-town, conservative dioceses in rural Spain could benefit from Francis' message.

"If the priest from your town talks about gays being the devil in his sermons each Sunday, which some priests do, now you have the pope signing a document saying that homosexuals who live as a couple can be blessed," he said. "It's a fundamental step for those hierarchies and for those people who are in places

where being LGBT is difficult.”

Santora, pastor of the Church of Our Lady of Grace in New Jersey, said the pope’s declaration would be welcome in a parish that celebrates an annual Pride Mass and has many LGBTQ+ parishioners.

“This is a very important step, people realizing the church is finally recognizing the goodness of their lives,” he said.

Santora wants to set a date soon to bless a same-sex couple that has been part of the church for many years. Santora recently learned that they had yearned for his blessing but feared getting him in trouble.

“So this comes at the right time,” the priest said. “It’s a new way to set a date.”

Santora worries, though, that some gay and lesbian Catholic couples in the U.S. won’t be so fortunate.

“There are priests, many of them young, who are behind the times — they won’t do this,” he said. “It’s going to cause more hurt in some communities.”

Gary Stavella, a 70-year-old retiree, helps lead the LGBTQ+ outreach ministry at Our Lady of Grace.

He said he was happy about the pope’s declaration, particularly on behalf of LGBTQ+ Catholics in countries where homosexuality is criminalized.

“There are a lot of anti-LGBTQ cardinals in those countries, and in ours,” Stavella said. “For their boss to say, ‘You can’t condemn them, you should bless them’ is a sea change. It can save lives.”

Antonella Allaria, who lives in New York City with her wife, Amanda and their six-month-old son, said the pope’s decision is a positive step for her family and the church as a whole.

“I’m gay and it’s OK to be a person and to be gay. Where before yesterday, in the Catholic Church, it was not that OK,” she said. “I feel things are getting normalized. And it’s about time.”

Kimo Jung of Pittsburgh, a lifelong Catholic, met his future husband 34 years ago when they both attended a New York parish. Jung, 60, sees the Vatican declaration as monumental for the church, but less so for himself and his husband, whom he married in a civil ceremony in 2016.

“I would certainly ask my friends who are priests to convey such a blessing, but I wouldn’t approach any other church official to demand a rite to be blessed, because I already know God has blessed my relationship.”

As climate warms, that perfect Christmas tree may depend on growers’ ability to adapt

By MELINA WALLING Associated Press

CHICAGO (AP) — Christmas tree breeder Jim Rockis knows what it looks like when one dies long before it can reach a buyer.

Rockis farms trees in West Virginia and Pennsylvania, where he and other producers often grow their iconic evergreens outside their preferred habitat higher in the mountains. But that can mean planting in soil that’s warmer and wetter — places where a nasty fungal disease called Phytophthora root rot can take hold, sucking moisture away from saplings and causing needles to crisp to burnt orange.

“After a while, it just gets to the core of it,” Rockis said. “They just wither away.”

Christmas tree growers and breeders have long prepared for a future of hotter weather that will change soil conditions, too. People buying trees may not have noticed a difference in availability this year and may not even in the next couple; the average Christmas tree takes eight to 10 years to reach marketable size.

But that means the trees being grown right now are the beloved holiday traditions of tomorrow for millions of families.

“You’ve got to start thinking about how you are going to adapt to this,” Rockis said.

That’s why researchers like Gary Chastagner, a Washington State University professor called “Dr. Christmas Tree” for his decades of work on firs and other festive species, have been working with breeders like Rockis to see if species from other parts of the world — for instance, Turkish fir — are better adapted to conditions being wrought by climate change.

In the past two years, surprisingly high numbers of evergreens died of fungal disease outbreaks in

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Washington and Oregon. Chastagner has been concerned that changing soil temperature and moisture “may change the frequency at which we would see some Phytophthora that are more adapted to warmer soil conditions.” Some may attack trees even more aggressively, he added.

Chastagner and his team are doing more sampling work to understand the causes of these outbreaks and whether they represent a pattern that could extend into the future.

But some scientists say there isn’t enough research on warming soil temperatures that could affect Christmas trees and many other crops, especially trees.

A European study this year in the journal Nature Climate Change found that soil heat extremes are increasing faster than air heat extremes, which can affect the health of grasslands, forests and some agricultural areas.

The same weather conditions that can put trees under stress favor many pests and diseases that can attack them, such as insects and fungi. The changes in forests and farm fields might not happen overnight, said Bert Cregg, a professor of horticulture and forestry at Michigan State University. But over time with a warming climate, “some trees may become more difficult to grow,” he said.

Changes in soils also have implications for soil carbon storage, a climate change solution that the U.S. has already put a lot of money and effort into researching. Warmer soil temperatures reduce its long-term carbon storage ability, partly because microscopic life underground is affected, researchers say.

“The activity of these microbes usually increases with temperature, so it’s less stable to store carbon there,” said Almudena Garcia-Garcia, one of the Nature Climate Change authors and a postdoctoral scientist at the Helmholtz Center for Environmental Research — UFZ in Leipzig, Germany.

Although getting more information on how changing soils will affect crops and carbon alike is vital, scientists sometimes struggle to get enough data, said Melissa Widhalm, associate director and regional climatologist at Purdue University’s Midwestern Regional Climate Center. Since soil temperature is measured differently than air temperature, the records don’t go back very far, making it difficult to understand long-term trends.

Widhalm, who was not involved with the Nature Climate Change research, said she wished more studies like it existed in other places like North America, and that the results are compelling because they combined physical observations in the ground with satellite data and computer simulations. “This paper did a nice job quantifying soil temperature-moisture relationships that scientists know exist but are difficult to measure,” she said.

Garcia-Garcia said her team plans to study soil temperature changes more in the future, in more locations if they can. “All the sources of information indicate this is happening,” she said. “We are always studying extreme events from measurements in the air. But what is happening below our feet?”

These kids want to go to school. The main obstacle? Paperwork

By BIANCA VÁZQUEZ TONESS AP Education Writer

ATLANTA (AP) — It’s unclear to Tameka how — or even when — her children became unenrolled from Atlanta Public Schools. But it was traumatic when, in fall 2021, they figured out it had happened.

After more than a year of online learning, students were all required to come back to school. Tameka was skeptical the schools could keep her kids safe from COVID-19. One morning, in a test run, she sent two kids to school.

Her oldest daughter, then in seventh grade, and her second youngest, a boy entering first grade, boarded buses. She had yet to register the youngest girl, who was entering kindergarten. And her older son, a boy with Down syndrome, stayed home because she wasn’t sure he could mask.

After a few hours, one school called: Come pick up your son, they told her. He was no longer enrolled. Around lunchtime, the other called: Come get your daughter, they told her. She doesn’t have a class schedule.

Tameka’s children — all four of them — have been home ever since.

Thousands of students went missing from American classrooms during the pandemic. For some who

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have tried to return, a serious problem has presented itself. Onerous re-enrollment requirements, arcane paperwork and the everyday obstacles of poverty are preventing those children from going back.

"One of the biggest problems that we have is kids that are missing and chronic absenteeism," says Pamela Herd, a Georgetown University public policy professor. "I'm really taken aback that a district would set forth a series of policies that make it actually quite difficult to enroll."

In Atlanta, where Tameka lives, parents must present at least eight documents to enroll their children. One of them — a complicated certificate evaluating a child's health — is required by the state. Most of the others are Atlanta's doing, including Social Security cards and a notarized residency affidavit.

The district asks for proof of residency for existing students every year at some schools, and also before sixth and ninth grades, to prevent students from attending schools outside of their neighborhoods. The policy also allows the district to request residency proof after an extended absence. Without that proof, families say their children have been disenrolled.

Tameka's kids have essentially been out of school since COVID hit in March 2020. (Tameka is her middle name. The AP is withholding her full name because she runs the risk of jail time or losing custody since her kids aren't in school.)

Tameka's partner died of a heart attack in May 2020. His death left her overwhelmed and penniless. Tameka never graduated from high school and has never gotten a driver's license. But her partner worked construction and had a car.

Suddenly, she had four kids to care for by herself, with only government cash assistance to live on. Because her kids were home during the early days of COVID, she couldn't work.

When Tameka's children didn't return to school, she also worried about the attention from the child welfare department. She says staff visited her in spring 2021 after the school reported her children's absences.

The social workers interviewed the children, then said they'd be back to set her up with resources. For more than two years, she says, "they never came back."

When the kids missed 10 straight days of school that fall, the district removed them from its rolls, citing a state regulation. Tameka now had to re-enroll them.

Suddenly, another tragedy of her partner's death became painfully obvious. He was carrying all the family's important documents in his backpack when he died. It was never found.

Slowly, Tameka has tried to replace the missing documents. She says it took more than a year to get Medicaid cards to take her children to the doctor for the health verifications and immunizations the school requires.

When she called for a doctor's appointment in October, the office said the soonest they could see her children was December.

She also needs to show the school her own identification and a new lease, plus the notarized affidavit. "It's a lot."

Tameka says no one from the district has offered her guidance.

Contact logs show school social workers have sent four emails and called 19 times since the pandemic started. Most calls went to voicemail or didn't go through because the phone was disconnected. Tameka rarely called back.

The only face-to-face meeting was in October 2021, when Tameka sent her kids on the bus, only to learn they weren't enrolled. A staffer wrote: "Student lost father in May 2020 and only other barrier is uniforms."

The social worker said the school would take care of the uniforms. "Mom given enrollment paperwork," the entry ends.

"Our Student Services Team went above and beyond to help this family," wrote Atlanta communications director Seth Coleman.

In some cities, even during the pandemic, school staff checked on families in person. In Atlanta, Coleman said, the district avoided in-person contact because of COVID.

But Tameka currently lacks a working phone with a cell plan. An Associated Press reporter has had to visit in person to communicate.

The logs provided by Atlanta Public Schools show only one attempt to visit the family in person, in spring 2021. No one was home.

To many observers, Tameka's troubles stem from Atlanta's rapid gentrification. The city, known for its Black professional class, also boasts the country's largest wealth disparity between Black and white families.

"It looks good from the curb, but when you get inside you see that Black and brown people are worse off economically than in West Virginia," says Frank Brown, who heads Communities in Schools of Atlanta, which runs dropout-prevention programs.

Atlanta's school board passed many of its enrollment policies in 2008. The schools in mostly white and upper-income neighborhoods were complaining of "overcrowding."

"But it was also about race and class," says Tiffany Fick, of Atlanta-based Equity in Education.

The board cracked down to prevent parents living elsewhere from sending their children to those schools.

The Atlanta suburbs, plus communities such as St. Louis, the Massachusetts town of Everett and Tupelo, Mississippi, have adopted similar policies.

Advocates say the increased bureaucracy makes it difficult for the poor to attend their assigned schools. The AP spoke to five additional Atlanta mothers whose kids were withdrawn because their leases had expired or were month to month, or their child lacked vaccinations.

On a typical school day, Tameka's children sleep late and stay inside watching television.

The youngest, who should be in second grade, has had to settle for "playing school." She practices her letters and writes her name. She runs through pre-kindergarten counting exercises on a phone.

Even at 8, she understands it's not the real thing.

"I want to go to school," she says, "and see what it's like."

The color purple: It's a new movie and an old hue that's rich in meaning and history

By LEANNE ITALIE AP Lifestyles Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — "I think it pisses God off if you walk by the color purple in a field somewhere and don't notice it," Shug tells Celie in Alice Walker's "The Color Purple."

In nature, among the priestly and royal, as a symbol of independence, pride and magic, purple is weighty in history and culture. Now, with the Christmas Day opening of the second film based on Walker's 1982 book, purple takes a seat at the box office after the historic popularity of "Barbie" and all things pink.

Consider it a many-layered cultural counterpart to its frothier cousin.

Power, ambition, luxury. Purple reflects them all. It also expresses creativity, independence, pride, peace, mystery and magic.

In contemporary history and fiction, it often represents something sought dearly. In the early 20th century, purple attire and signage signified loyalty and dignity among the suffragists. In Walker's novel, Celie, the main character, wants a pair of purple shoes but can't afford them, so she settles on blue.

Oprah Winfrey, who played Sofia in the 1985 film version of "The Color Purple," has donned purple frequently to promote the new musical she helped produce. And she wore a purple taffeta gown by Christian Siriano in her recently unveiled portrait for the National Portrait Gallery.

To Oprah, purple is "seminal." To others, it's a shapeshifter, said Laurie Pressman, vice president of the Pantone Color Institute, which analyzes and consults on color, including for the folks who made this year's "The Color Purple."

"It can take on so many contexts," Pressman said. "It's a color that stands out, that makes a statement, that has a singular presence in the world."

Some ways to think about purple, the hues nestled between blue and red:

PURPLE, THE DYE

The Romans conquered the Greeks in the second century B.C. and returned home with lots of pigments and dyes, writes Victoria Finlay in "The Brilliant History of Color in Art." The most celebrated was "purpura,"

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which turned into a fashion phenom made with secretions of certain mollusks. The liquid transformed into purple when left out in the sun.

When Julius Caesar traveled to Egypt in 48 B.C. and met Queen Cleopatra, he noted her love of purple and embraced it himself. It's a love later taken up by Byzantine emperors. But before them, Caesar decreed that only Caesars could wear togas dyed completely purple.

Many, MANY mollusks were required to make purpura, which sometimes wasn't the color we know today. Finlay wrote that at least 250,000 were needed for half an ounce of dye. Ancient Tyrian purple, named for the town of Tyre in what is now southern Lebanon, was also rose, bluish red or velvety black, she writes.

Purple was reserved for royalty, priests and nobles at various times in history and in various places.

By the 14th century, the secrets of Tyrian purple were lost, according to the University of Chicago Library's 2007 exhibition "The Origins of Color." But all hail Tyrian purple! In 2001, through trial and error, the technique for making it resurfaced. Well before then, synthetic dyes, including purple, were available.

PURPLE, IN SONG

Prince's "Purple Rain." Jimi Hendrix's "Purple Haze." Juice WRLD's "Purple Devil." The rockers Deep Purple. The Grammy-winning song "Deep Purple," a No. 1 Billboard single for April Stevens and her brother, Nino Tempo, in 1963.

Purple has been peppering songs for decades, but no musical artist has been more closely aligned with the color than Prince. He became The Purple One after he and his band, the Revolution, put out "Purple Rain" in 1984 and won a Grammy for it, along with an Oscar for the score to the companion film.

Though the song peaked at No. 2 on Billboard's Hot 100 in 1984, it forever connected Prince with the color. And he leaned in with his purple attire, purple guitar and purple piano. After his 2016 death, his estate worked with Pantone to come up with an official Prince purple, dubbed "Love Symbol #2."

Of the song's meaning and title, Prince once explained: "When there's blood in the sky ... red and blue equals purple. Purple rain pertains to the end of the world and being with the one you love and letting your faith/God guide you through the purple rain."

Prince's Paisley Park estate outside Minneapolis remains bathed in purple at night.

In creating a world in sound, "purple doesn't have as clear a set of connotations" as some other colors, like the sadness of blue or the rage of red, said Nate Sloane, who specializes in the history of popular music and jazz at the University of Southern California's Thornton School of Music.

For musical artists, he said, that's freedom.

"Its ambiguity means you can explore more emotions and concepts that are less clear and established," Sloane said.

PURPLE, THE PROSE

The term "purple prose" stretches back to circa 18 B.C. and the "Ars Poetica" of Horace, according to Charles Harrington Elster in his 2005 book, "What in the Word?"

A phrase Horace used, the Latin "purpureus pannus," denoted an irrelevant and excessively ornate passage. Literally, it's a purple garment or raiment (think fancy). Horace's 476-line poem, a manual of sorts on how to write poetry, warns against "mediocrity in poets no man, god or bookseller will accept."

Generally speaking, purple prose came to mean writing that is laden with flowery descriptors and/or an oppressive structure with no real payoff to a reader. Consider this: Many writers of the 19th century were paid by the number of words they used or pages they produced.

"Purple prose doesn't seem to have become wholly pejorative until the 20th century when steep declines in the vocabulary and reading comprehension of college-educated Americans caused a panic in the education establishment and the newspaper industry," Elster wrote.

A blog post from the publishing site Reedsy offers this made-up example: "The mahogany-haired adolescent girl glanced fleetingly at her rugged paramour, a crystalline sparkle in her eyes as she gazed, enraptured, upon his countenance."

PURPLE, ON CANVAS

Monet, Chagall, Derain, Rothko, Matisse, Klimt. All were admirers of purple.

The color is said to have first surfaced in art during the Neolithic era, writes Hannah Foskett at the site

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Arts & Collections. The pre-Raphaelites in Britain especially loved purple.

Monet stands out for his use of violet in his Lily, Haystack, Snow and Rouen Cathedral series of paintings.

Another interpretation of purple, Foskett writes, is that it tires the eyes, "often symbolizing lust or sorrow in major artworks."

Color, in visual art, was helped along by the American portrait painter John Goffe Rand. In the 1840s, he invented a collapsible tube of tin in which to put his paint, rather than the pig bladders he and his counterparts had been struggling with for years, according to Finlay. With the invention of paint tubes, there were suddenly dozens of new pigments, including manganese violet.

"It was the first opaque, pure, affordable, mauve-colored pigment," wrote Finlay, "and it was seen as a wonder."

Google to pay \$700 million to US states, consumers in app store settlement

By MICHAEL LIEDTKE AP Technology Writer

Google has agreed to pay \$700 million and make several other concessions to settle allegations that it had been stifling competition against its Android app store — the same issue that went to trial in another case that could result in even bigger changes.

Although Google struck the deal with state attorneys general in September, the settlement's terms weren't revealed until late Monday in documents filed in San Francisco federal court. The disclosure came a week after a federal court jury rebuked Google for deploying anticompetitive tactics in its Play Store for Android apps.

The settlement with the states includes \$630 million to compensate U.S. consumers funneled into a payment processing system that state attorneys general alleged drove up the prices for digital transactions within apps downloaded from the Play Store. That store caters to the Android software that powers most of the world's smartphones.

Like Apple does in its iPhone app store, Google collects commissions ranging from 15% to 30% on in-app purchases — fees that state attorneys general contended drove prices higher than they would have been had there been an open market for payment processing. Those commissions generated billions of dollars in profit annually for Google, according to evidence presented in the recent trial focused on its Play Store.

Eligible consumers will receive at least \$2, according to the settlement, and may get additional payments based on their spending on the Play store between Aug. 16, 2016 and Sept. 30, 2023. The estimated 102 million U.S. consumers who made in-app purchases during that time frame are supposed to be automatically notified about various options for how they can receive their cut of the money.

Another \$70 million of the pre-trial settlement will cover the penalties and other costs that Google is being forced to pay to the states.

Although Google is forking over a sizeable sum, it's a fraction of the \$10.5 billion in damages that the attorneys general estimated the company could be forced to pay if they had taken the case to trial instead of settling.

Google also agreed to make other changes designed to make it even easier for consumers to download and install Android apps from other outlets besides its Play Store for the next five years. It will refrain from issuing as many security warnings, or "scare screens," when alternative choices are being used.

The makers of Android apps will also gain more flexibility to offer alternative payment choices to consumers instead of having transactions automatically processed through the Play Store and its commission system. Apps will also be able to promote lower prices available to consumers who choose an alternate to the Play Store's payment processing.

Investors seemed unfazed by the settlement as shares in Google's corporate parent, Alphabet Inc., rose slightly in Tuesday's midday trading.

The settlement represents a "loud and clear message to Big Tech — attorneys general across the country are unified, and we are prepared to use the full weight of our collective authority to ensure free and fair access to the digital marketplace," said Connecticut Attorney General William Tong.

Wilson White, Google's vice president of government affairs and public policy, framed the deal as a positive for the company, despite the money and concessions it entails. The settlement "builds on Android's choice and flexibility, maintains strong security protections, and retains Google's ability to compete with other (software) makers, and invest in the Android ecosystem for users and developers," White wrote in a blog post.

Although the state attorneys general hailed the settlement as a huge win for consumers, it didn't go far enough for Epic Games, which spearheaded the attack on Google's app store practices with an antitrust lawsuit filed in August 2020.

Epic, the maker of the popular Fortnite video game, rebuffed the settlement in September and instead chose to take its case to trial, even though it had already lost on most of its key claims in a similar trial targeting Apple and its iPhone app store in 2021.

The Apple trial, though, was decided by a federal judge instead of the jury that vindicated Epic with a unanimous verdict that Google had built anticompetitive barriers around the Play Store. Google has vowed to appeal the verdict.

Corie Wright, Epic's vice president of public policy, derided the states' settlement as little more than a one-time payout that provides "no true relief for consumers or developers," in a blog post.

In court documents, the attorneys general said they decided to settle because of significant risks posed by a trial, including the possibility that a jury may have thought their plan to seek \$10.5 billion in damages was exorbitant. The attorneys general also cited for the potential of jurors becoming confused had their case been presented alongside Epic's claims in the trial, as had been the original plan.

But now the Epic trial's outcome nevertheless raises the specter of Google potentially being ordered to pay even more money as punishment for its past practices and making even more dramatic changes to its lucrative Android app ecosystem.

Those changes will be determined next year by U.S. District Judge James Donato, who presided over the Epic Games trial. Donato also still must approve Google's Play Store settlement with the states.

"In the next phase of the case, Epic will seek meaningful remedies to truly open up the Android ecosystem so consumers and developers will genuinely benefit from the competition that U.S. antitrust laws were designed to promote," Wright pledged.

Google faces an even bigger legal threat in another antitrust case targeting its dominant search engine that serves as the centerpiece of a digital ad empire that generates more than \$200 billion in sales annually. Closing arguments in a trial pitting Google against the Justice Department are scheduled for early May before a federal judge in Washington D.C.

Marvel kicked out Jonathan Majors after his conviction. It's thrown years of plans into disarray

By JAKE COYLE AP Film Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Marvel had more riding on Jonathan Majors than perhaps any other actor. Now it's parting ways with him, and throwing years of plans for its cinematic universe in disarray.

Marvel Studios and the Walt Disney Co. dropped Majors from all future projects following the actor's conviction for assault and harassment on Monday, according to a person close to the studio who spoke on condition of anonymity because he wasn't authorized to speak publicly on the matter.

The swift move by Disney marked a stunning about-face for an actor who had been one of Hollywood's fastest-rising stars. A Manhattan jury on Monday found the 34-year-old Majors guilty of one misdemeanor assault charge and one harassment violation for a March altercation with his then-girlfriend Grace Jabbari.

Majors, who was acquitted of a different assault charge and of aggravated harassment, will be sentenced on Feb. 6. He declined to comment as he left the courthouse. Majors' attorney, Priya Chaudhry, said in a statement that "it is clear that the jury did not believe Grace Jabbari's story of what happened in the SUV because they found that Mr. Majors did not intentionally cause any injuries to her."

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"Mr. Majors still has faith in the process and looks forward to fully clearing his name," said Chaudhry.

As the superhero studio prepared phase five of the Marvel Cinematic Universe, it cast the highly acclaimed Majors as the antagonist Kang the Conqueror. The character was to span several films and series as the Marvel Cinematic Universe's next-phase answer to Thanos, the villain of "Avengers: Endgame."

Majors had already appeared in "Ant-Man and the Wasp: Quantumania" and the first two seasons of "Loki." He was to star in "Avengers: The Kang Dynasty," dated for release in May 2026.

The future of "The Kang Dynasty" is now unclear. Disney declined to comment on whether it will recast the role of Kang or pivot in a new direction.

The studio has been preparing for the possibility of Majors' exit from the franchise. But Marvel was limited in its ability to fashion rewrites due to the screenwriters strike that ran from May to late September. The studio recently hired screenwriter Michael Waldron to rework "The Kang Dynasty."

For Marvel, Majors' departure adds to a series of recent setbacks. Though its box-office success — nearly \$30 billion worldwide from 33 films — is unsurpassed in movie history, the superhero factory has recently seen some atypical struggles. "The Marvels," released in November, has been the MCU's worst performer in theaters, with \$204 million in worldwide ticket sales.

Majors also recently starred as a troubled amateur bodybuilder in "Magazine Dreams," which made an acclaimed debut at the Sundance Film Festival in January and was acquired by the Disney-owned indie distributor Searchlight Pictures. Following its premiere, an Oscar nomination for Majors was widely predicted.

"Magazine Dreams" had been dated to open in theaters in Dec. 8. But ahead of Majors' trial, Searchlight removed the film from its release calendar. Instead, on Dec. 8 text messages from Majors were read in the fifth day of the trial. In one, Majors begged Jabbari not to seek medical attention for a head injury sustained in 2022, warning she had "no perspective of what could happen" if the truth got out.

In late February as "Creed III," starring Majors alongside Michael B. Jordan, was being released, Majors spoke in an interview with The Associated Press in the neighborhood of Chelsea, just a few blocks away from where his fight with Jabbari would weeks later spill out onto New York streets.

Majors then sounded acutely aware that his rapid new fame carried the risk of a downfall.

"Though I've not seen the boogeyman, I know it's out there," Majors said. "And I've been around to know it's comin'. I won't go down my rabbit hole of death, but it's comin'. But you outrun it. You just stay out of the frame. I'll stay out of the frame."

Elf Bar and other e-cigarette makers dodged US customs and taxes after China's ban on vaping flavors

By MATTHEW PERRONE Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — In only two years, a small, colorful vaping device called Elf Bar has become the most popular disposable e-cigarette in the world, generating billions in sales and quickly emerging as the overwhelming favorite of underage U.S. teens who vape.

Last week, U.S. authorities publicly announced the first seizure of some of the company's products, part of an operation confiscating 1.4 million illegal, flavored e-cigarettes from China. Officials pegged the value of the items at \$18 million, including brands other than Elf Bar.

But the makers of Elf Bar and other Chinese e-cigarettes have imported products worth hundreds of millions of dollars while repeatedly dodging customs and avoiding taxes and import fees, according to public records and court documents reviewed by The Associated Press.

Records show the makers of disposable vapes routinely mislabel their shipments as "battery chargers," "flashlights" and other items, hampering efforts to block products that are driving teen vaping.

Elf Bar is the lead product of Shenzhen iMiracle, a privately held company based in Shenzhen, the sprawling Chinese manufacturing hub.

In the U.S., iMiracle recently abandoned the Elf Bar name due to a trademark dispute and efforts by regulators to seize its imports. Instead, its products are sold as EB Create.

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A spokesman for iMiracle said the company stopped shipping Elf Bar to U.S. earlier this year and is trying to comply with regulators.

When asked about EB Create e-cigarettes he said: "I can't tell you anything about that."

Details on the company's U.S. sales and activities are beginning to emerge in court documents.

At a 2022 court hearing in the case over the company's name, U.S. distributors described skyrocketing sales.

Jon Glauser of Demand Vape told a federal judge his company had sold more than \$132 million worth of Elf Bar products last year.

"We were selling it faster than we could get it in," Glauser said, according to the court transcript.

Glauser attributed Elf Bar's quick rise to its profit margin. Sellers make about a 30% profit, double that of other disposable e-cigarettes.

iMiracle's parent company, Heaven Gifts, previously described how it could help customers evade import fees and taxes. Heaven Gifts' website advertised "discreet" shipping methods to buyers, including not mentioning e-cigarettes or its company name "anywhere on the package."

"We also mark a lower value to avoid tax," the website stated.

In June, Heaven Gifts announced it would "go offline," after the FDA directed customs officials to begin seizing shipments from the company.

Neither Heaven Gifts nor iMiracle appear in customs data reviewed by the AP and compiled by ImportGenius, an analytics company.

The seizure announced last week suggests part of the answer: The shipments arrived at Los Angeles International Airport, and air carriers are not required to disclose the same details about their cargo as ocean vessels.

Ships docking in the U.S. must provide information on suppliers, recipients and types of cargo they are carrying. But importers can obscure their identities and products.

For example, recipient information is listed as "not available" for roughly 45 of over 100 shipments of e-cigarettes from China this year, according to ImportGenius data. U.S. companies can avoid disclosure by using third-party shippers, called freight forwarders.

It's likely most disposable e-cigarettes coming into the U.S. aren't even declared as vaping products.

Esco Bars, one of Elf Bars' chief rivals, imported 30 shipments from China this year labeled "atomizers," a generic type of hardware that turns a liquid into a spray.

U.S. Customs and Border Protection did not make officials available for interviews, but pointed to the agency's recent operation in Los Angeles with the FDA.

"The rise in illicit e-commerce demands that our agencies remain vigilant in intercepting shipments that could pose serious health risks to the public," Troy Miller, a senior official with the border agency, said in a release.

FDA Commissioner Robert Califf said that agency was "committed to continuing to stem the flow of illegal e-cigarettes."

China's vaping sector is estimated to be worth \$28 billion, and the U.S. accounts for nearly 60% of the country's vape exports, according to the China Electronics Chamber of Commerce.

Chinese authorities have encouraged those exports while at the same time curtailing the country's domestic vaping business.

The government brought vaping companies under control of its state-run tobacco administration last year, banning all flavors except tobacco.

Authorities cited "safety issues around unsafe additives," and other risks. But experts point to another cause. The China National Tobacco Corp. is the largest tobacco company in the world. In cooperation with its regulatory arm, the Tobacco Monopoly Administration, the entity controls the manufacture of all cigarettes made in China.

"The tobacco administration says, 'Well, every e-cigarette sold means one less cigarette smoked,' so they are going to regulate the hell out of them now," said Dr. Ray Yip, a former director of the Gates Founda-

tion's China program.

Hu Leng, manager at a vape manufacturer said: "There is no future in the domestic market. All of our products are sold to Europe."

Elf Bar-maker Shenzhen iMiracle is among the companies that have built their entire business on exports. In late 2021, the company began shipping to the U.S. to exploit a regulatory loophole: The FDA had prohibited kid-appealing flavors from reusable vapes, such as Juul, but not disposable ones.

A spokesperson for China's tobacco administration did not respond to requests for comment, but the country's tobacco regulations state that exported vapes "should comply with the laws, regulations and standards of the destination country." Since the FDA has declared Elf Bar illegal, iMiracle would seem to be violating Chinese law.

But experts say such rules go unenforced.

"China basically couldn't care what happens to the products if they're selling for export," said Patricia Kovacevic, an attorney specializing in tobacco regulation.

Pope approves blessings for same-sex couples that must not resemble marriage

By NICOLE WINFIELD and DAVID CRARY Associated Press

ROME (AP) — Pope Francis formally approved letting Catholic priests bless same-sex couples, the Vatican announced Monday, a radical shift in policy that aimed at making the church more inclusive while maintaining its strict ban on gay marriage.

But while the Vatican statement was heralded by some as a step toward breaking down discrimination in the Catholic Church, some LGBTQ+ advocates warned it underscored the church's idea that gay couples remain inferior to heterosexual partnerships.

The document from the Vatican's doctrine office elaborates on a letter Francis sent to two conservative cardinals that was published in October. In that preliminary response, Francis suggested such blessings could be offered under some circumstances if the blessings weren't confused with the ritual of marriage.

The new document repeats that condition and elaborates on it, reaffirming that marriage is a lifelong union between a man and a woman. And it stresses that blessings in question must not be tied to any specific Catholic celebration or religious service and should not be conferred at the same time as a civil union ceremony. Moreover, the blessings cannot use set rituals or even involve the clothing and gestures that belong in a wedding.

But it says requests for such blessings for same-sex couples should not be denied. It offers an extensive and broad definition of the term "blessing" in Scripture to insist that people seeking a transcendent relationship with God and looking for his love and mercy shouldn't be held up to an impossible moral standard to receive it.

"For, those seeking a blessing should not be required to have prior moral perfection," it said.

"There is no intention to legitimize anything, but rather to open one's life to God, to ask for his help to live better, and also to invoke the Holy Spirit so that the values of the Gospel may be lived with greater faithfulness," it added.

The document marks the latest gesture of outreach from a pope who has made welcoming LGBTQ+ Catholics a hallmark of his papacy. From his 2013 quip, "Who am I to judge?" about a purportedly gay priest, to his 2023 comment to The Associated Press that "Being homosexual is not a crime," Francis has distinguished himself from all his predecessors with his message of welcome.

"The significance of this news cannot be overstated," said Francis DeBernardo of New Ways Ministry, which supports LGBTQ+ Catholics. "It is one thing to formally approve same-gender blessings, which he had already pastorally permitted, but to say that people should not be subjected to 'an exhaustive moral analysis' to receive God's love and mercy is an even more significant step."

The Vatican holds that marriage is an indissoluble union between man and woman. As a result, it has

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long opposed same-sex marriage and considers homosexual acts to be “intrinsically disordered.” Nothing in the new document changes that teaching.

And in 2021, the Vatican’s Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith said flat-out that the church couldn’t bless the unions of two men or two women because “God cannot bless sin.”

That 2021 pronouncement created an outcry and appeared to have blindsided Francis, even though he had technically approved its publication. Soon after it was published, he removed the official responsible for it and set about laying the groundwork for a reversal.

In the new document, the Vatican said the church must avoid “doctrinal or disciplinary schemes especially when they lead to a narcissistic and authoritarian elitism whereby instead of evangelizing, one analyzes and classifies others.”

It said ultimately, a blessing is about helping people increase their trust in God. “It is a seed of the Holy Spirit that must be nurtured, not hindered,” it said.

It stressed that people in “irregular” unions of extramarital sex — gay or straight — are in a state of sin. But it said that shouldn’t deprive them of God’s love or mercy. “Even when a person’s relationship with God is clouded by sin, he can always ask for a blessing, stretching out his hand to God,” the document said.

“Thus, when people ask for a blessing, an exhaustive moral analysis should not be placed as a precondition for conferring it,” the document said.

The Rev. James Martin, who advocates for a greater welcome for LGBTQ+ Catholics, praised the new document as a “huge step forward” and a “dramatic shift” from the Vatican’s 2021 policy.

“Along with many Catholic priests, I will now be delighted to bless my friends in same-sex marriages,” he said in an email.

Traditionalists, however, were outraged. The traditionalist blogger Luigi Casalini of Messa in Latino (Latin Mass) blog wrote that the document appeared to be a form of heresy.

“The church is crumbling,” he wrote.

University of Notre Dame theologian Ulrich Lehner was also concerned, saying it would merely sow confusion and could lead to division in the church.

“The Vatican’s statement is, in my view, the most unfortunate public announcement in decades,” he said in a statement. “Moreover, some bishops will use it as a pretext to do what the document explicitly forbids, especially since the Vatican has not stopped them before. It is — and I hate to say it — an invitation to schism.”

Ramón Gómez, in charge of human rights for the Movement for Homosexual Integration and Liberation group in Chile, said the statement was a step toward breaking down discrimination in the church and could help LGBTQ+ people in countries where even civil unions aren’t legal.

But he said the document was “belated” and “contradictory” in specifying a non-ritualized blessing that cannot be confused with marriage. Such a mixed message, he said, “thus once again gives the signal that same-sex couples are inferior to heterosexual couples.”

The Vatican admonition to refrain from codifying any blessing or prayer appeared to be a response to Flemish-speaking bishops in Belgium, who last year proposed the text for a prayer for same-sex couples that included prayers, Scriptural readings and expressions of commitment.

In Germany, individual priests have been blessing same-sex couples for years, as part of a progressive trend in the German church. In September, several Catholic priests held a ceremony blessing same-sex couples outside Cologne Cathedral to protest the city’s conservative archbishop, Cardinal Rainer Maria Woelki.

The head of the German Bishops Conference welcomed the document.

“This means that a blessing can be given to couples who do not have the opportunity to marry in church, for example due to divorce, and to same-sex couples,” Bishop Georg Baetzing said in a statement. “The practice of the church knows a variety of forms of blessing. It is good that this treasure for the diversity of lifestyles is now being raised.”

In the United States, the Rev. John Oesterle, a Catholic priest and hospital chaplain in Pittsburgh, said many priests would probably not be open to offering such a blessing, but he welcomed Francis’ action.

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"I think the pope has learned to accept people as God made them," he said on Monday. "When I was growing up, the assumption was that God made everyone straight. What we have learned is that is not true. In accepting people as God made them, and if Jesus' primary teaching is we should love and serve one another in the community, I think that's what gives Pope Francis the openness to God's presence in those relationships."

The Church of England on Sunday announced a similar move allowing clergy to bless the unions of same-sex couples who have had civil weddings or partnerships, but it still bans church weddings for same-sex couples.

Today in History: December 20 The Louisiana Purchase is completed

By The Associated Press

Today is Wednesday, Dec. 20, the 354th day of 2023. There are 11 days left in the year.

On Dec. 20, 1803, the Louisiana Purchase was completed as ownership of the territory was formally transferred from France to the United States.

On this date:

In 1860, South Carolina became the first state to secede from the Union as all 169 delegates to a special convention in Charleston voted in favor of separation.

In 1864, Confederate forces evacuated Savannah, Georgia, as Union Maj. Gen. William T. Sherman nearly completed his "March to the Sea."

In 1945, the Office of Price Administration announced the end of wartime tire rationing, effective Jan. 1, 1946.

In 1963, the Berlin Wall was opened for the first time to West Berliners, who were allowed one-day visits to relatives in the Eastern sector for the holidays.

In 1987, more than 4,300 people were killed when the Doña Paz (DOHN'-yuh pahz), a Philippine passenger ship, collided with the tanker Vector off Mindoro island.

In 1989, the United States launched Operation Just Cause, sending troops into Panama to topple the government of Gen. Manuel Noriega.

In 1995, an American Airlines Boeing 757 en route to Cali, Colombia, slammed into a mountain, killing all but four of the 163 people aboard.

In 1999, the Vermont Supreme Court ruled that gay couples were entitled to the same benefits and protections as wedded heterosexual couples.

In 2001, the U.N. Security Council authorized a multinational force for Afghanistan.

In 2002, Trent Lott resigned as Senate Republican leader two weeks after igniting a political firestorm with racially charged remarks.

In 2005, a federal judge ruled that "intelligent design" could not be mentioned in biology classes in a Pennsylvania public school district, delivering a stinging attack on the Dover Area School Board.

In 2016, President Barack Obama designated the bulk of U.S.-owned waters in the Arctic Ocean and certain areas in the Atlantic Ocean as indefinitely off limits to future oil and gas leasing.

In 2017, Cardinal Bernard Law, the disgraced former archbishop of Boston, died in Rome at the age of 86; his failure to stop child molesters in the priesthood had triggered a crisis in American Catholicism.

Today's Birthdays: Original Mouseketeer Tommy Cole (TV: "The Mickey Mouse Club") is 82. Rock musician-music producer Bobby Colomby is 79. Rock musician Peter Criss is 78. Former U.S. Agriculture Secretary Sonny Perdue is 77. Psychic/illusionist Uri Geller is 77. Producer Dick Wolf ("Law & Order") is 77. Rock musician Alan Parsons is 75. Actor Jenny Agutter is 71. Actor Michael Badalucco is 69. Actor Blanche Baker is 67. Rock singer Billy Bragg is 66. Rock singer-musician Mike Watt (The Secondmen, Minutemen, FIREHOSE) is 66. Actor Joel Gretsch is 60. Country singer Kris Tyler is 59. Rock singer Chris Robinson is 57. Actor Nicole deBoer is 53. Movie director Todd Phillips is 53. Singer David Cook ("American Idol") is 41. Actor Jonah Hill is 40. Actor Bob Morley is 39. Singer JoJo is 33. Actor Colin Woodell is 32.