

# Groton Daily Independent

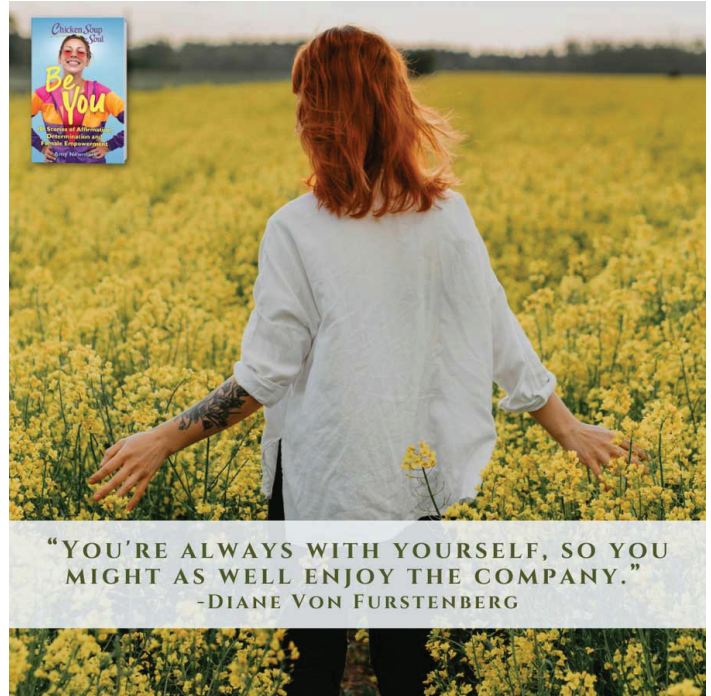
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## Friday, March 1

School Breakfast: Biscuits.  
School Lunch: Cheese pizza, green beans.  
Region 1A Boys Basketball at Groton Area. 7 p.m.:  
Groton Area vs. Aberdeen Roncalli  
Senior Menu: Scalloped potatoes and ham, peas,  
Mandarin orange salad, whole wheat bread.  
World Day of Prayer

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



## Saturday, March 2

Thrift Store open 10 a.m. to 1 p.m.  
Catholic: SEAS Confession, 3:45-4:15 p.m.; SEAS Mass, 4:30 p.m.

## Sunday, March 3

Open Gym: Grades JK-8 2:00-3:30 [Students accompanied by adults] Grades 6-12 3:30-5:00  
Groton CM&A: Sunday School at 9:15 a.m., Worship Service at 10:30 a.m.  
Catholic: SEAS Confession, 7:45-8:15 a.m., SEAS Mass, 8:30 a.m.; Turton Confession, 10:30-10:45 a.m.; Turton Mass, 11 a.m.  
First Presbyterian Church: Bible Study, 9:30 a.m.; Worship, 11 a.m.  
Emmanuel Lutheran: Worship with communion, 9 a.m. (Milestones 7th & 8th graders); choir, 6 p.m.  
St. John's Lutheran: Worship with communion: St. John's at 9 a.m., Zion at 11 a.m.; Sunday school, 9:45 a.m.  
United Methodist: Worship with communion: Conde at 8:30 a.m., Groton at 10:30 a.m.; Coffee hour, 9:30 a.m.; Sunday school, 10:30 a.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

In partnership with [smartasset](#)

Over 100 Palestinians were reportedly killed and at least 700 wounded in Gaza City yesterday after Israeli forces opened fire on crowds gathering near a convoy of aid trucks. The chaotic scene drew conflicting accounts—witnesses accused Israeli troops of firing as residents received food supplies, while the Israeli military claimed the crowd stampeded toward the trucks and allegedly looted supplies. Israeli officials attributed many casualties to overcrowding, trampling, and being run over by the trucks and said they would look into adapting

its aid delivery protocols.

“Dune: Part Two” is set to premiere today, projected to be one of the biggest movie debuts of 2024, pulling in as much as \$80M domestically and \$170M globally in its opening weekend.

The Smokehouse Creek Fire became the largest wildfire in Texas state history yesterday, with flames rapidly spreading across the state’s panhandle and into Oklahoma. Roughly 1,700 square miles of primarily rural prairie and brush have been burned, with the blaze at 3% containment as of this writing.

## Sports, Entertainment, & Culture

Video game giant Electronic Arts lays off 670 employees, roughly 5% of its workforce, amid industrywide layoffs. Universal Music Group begins previously announced layoffs across multiple company music labels.

Héctor Ortiz, former MLB catcher and longtime Texas Rangers coach, dies of cancer at 54. Former WWE star Billy Jack Haynes charged with second-degree murder in connection with shooting death of his wife.

Iowa’s Caitlin Clark now 18 points from breaking all-time, men’s or women’s, NCAA basketball scoring record; Iowa takes on Ohio State Sunday to wrap up their regular season. Clark declares for WNBA Draft, widely expected to be top pick.

## Science & Technology

Prostate cancer involves two distinct subtypes, new study finds; results may lead to more targeted treatments for the disease, which affects one in eight adult men.

Brain waves during sleep help flush cellular waste from the brain during sleep; rhythmic movement of neurons pushes cerebrospinal fluid through tissue, supports links between high-quality sleep and health.

Daddy longlegs species found to have a set of underdeveloped eyes as embryos; vestigial organs implying some types of the insect diversified earlier than previously thought.

## Business & Markets

US stocks markets close higher (S&P 500 +0.5%, Dow +0.1%, Nasdaq +0.9%); Nasdaq and S&P 500 rise to all-time highs. Key inflation metric—personal consumption expenditures price index—rose 2.8% year-over-year, the slowest annual pace since March 2021.

OpenAI faces investigation from US Securities and Exchange Commission over whether company’s investors were misled. US Commerce Department launches probe into potential national security risks of smart vehicles produced in China and other countries.

Weight Watchers shares drop 18% after Oprah Winfrey announces exit from company’s board, plans to donate all her stock to a museum. Humanoid robot startup Figure AI valued at \$2.6B after raising funds from investors including Jeff Bezos, Nvidia, Amazon, OpenAI, and Microsoft.

## Politics & World Affairs

Dual border trips made by President Joe Biden, former President Donald Trump in separate locations; issue expected to play a key role in upcoming presidential campaigns. Congress passes short-term funding extension to avert federal shutdown; new deadlines for two-phase funding bill are March 8 and 22.

Alabama lawmakers pass bill to protect in-vitro fertilization clinics in wake of state Supreme Court ruling granting frozen embryos personhood rights.

Former US ambassador to Bolivia admits to spying on behalf of Cuba, will plead guilty to espionage charges,

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## Groton Prairie Mixed Bowling League Week #15 Results

**Team Standings:** Chipmunks – 3, Cheetahs – 3, Shihtzus – 2, Coyotes – 2, Jackelopes – 1, Foxes – 1

**Men's High Games:** Ron Belden – 230, Lance Frohling – 202, Brad Waage – 195

**Women's High Games:** Darci Spanier – 173, Lori Giedt – 164, Vicki Walter – 162

**Men's High Series:** Brad Waage – 559, Lance Frohling – 534, Mike Siegler & Ron Belden – 503

**Women's High Series:** Darci Spanier – 458, Lori Giedt – 424, Vicki Walter – 415

**Fun Game** – Most 8 counts with no fill – Chipmunks with 17!

## 158 +/- ACRE LAND AUCTION

### WEST HANSON TWP., BROWN CO., SD

We will offer at Public Auction the following land located from Groton SD, (Intersection of Hwy 12 & Hwy 37) 8 miles south on Hwy 37 & 3 miles west on 141<sup>st</sup> St. Watch for auction signs on:

**THURSDAY, MARCH 14<sup>th</sup>, 2024 SALE TIME: 11:00 A.M.**

**Auctioneer's Note:** This auction presents the opportunity to purchase 158 +/- acres of productive tillable land located in West Hanson Twp., Brown Co., SD. The farm is free for possession for the 2024 crop year. This auction will be held live on-site w/online bidding available.

This 158 +/- acres of land, according to FSA information, has 156.85 +/- cropland acres and is made up of predominately Class II soils with a Surety AgriData soil productivity index of 76.8. Per FSA information, this farm has a soybean base of 78.6 acres and a PLC yield of 25 bu., and a wheat base of 78.6 acres and a PLC yield of 35 bu. There is approximately 40 +/- acres that are planted to winter wheat and this crop will go to the new buyer(s).

**Legal Description:** SE ¼ of Sec. 28, T-122-N, R-61-W, West Hanson Twp., Brown Co., SD

For additional information, terms, drone video, aerial, soil & plat maps and FSA-156EZ, please visit [www.burlagepeterson.com](http://www.burlagepeterson.com), or contact Auctioneers.

**MAKE PLANS TO ATTEND THIS AUCTION AND COME PREPARED TO BUY!**

**TERMS:** Visit [burlagepeterson.com](http://burlagepeterson.com) for full sale terms. Possession for 2024.

**Gary and Sharon Van Riper Charitable Remainder Annuity Trust – Owners**  
**First Bank & Trust – Trustee**

**BURLAGE PETERSON AUCTIONEERS & REALTORS, LLC**  
Land Brokers – Auctioneers – Realtors – Farm Managers  
Office@burlagepeterson.com or 605-692-7102  
317 4<sup>th</sup> Street, Brookings SD | [www.burlagepeterson.com](http://www.burlagepeterson.com)

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Auctioneers & Realtors, LLC.

## Meet foreign exchange student Divya Pelmelay Manjusha

Divya Pelmelay Manjusha is an exchange student currently attending Groton Area High School. Her host family in Groton is Nikki Kotzer and her 7th grade daughter Adeline.

Divya's home town has been named a UNESCO City of Music because its musical intuition is embedded in the very existence of its people.

"It is much warmer in Indonesia than here in South Dakota," Divya explained. "At home it's actually warm all year round."

"We speak Indonesian at home but learned to speak English as children," she said. "My parents were both English majors so that really helped too!"

"My mother teaches private English lessons as well as managing a music group," Divya listed. "My father is a co-owner of a bakery. I have one older sister who is currently in college getting a degree in economics."

"Taking English in school and watching American television have been a big help for learning the English language," Divya admitted. "Television helped with getting the correct accent and pronunciation!"

"The ninth grade level in Indonesia is part of the middle school instead of being considered a high school level as it is here in Groton," she added.

"I'm a junior here in Groton, taking English, art, government, FACS, biology, U.S. History, and math," she listed. "In Ambon I attend a private Christian school where the subjects are harder, and we have no choice in which classes we take."

"At home each class consists of the same students who take the same subjects all day long," Divya said. "I find it very interesting to see how different the schools are here compared to the way that it is at home where the classes are different every day."

"One reason the classes are harder at home is that we never get study guides to prepare for exams like the teachers hand out here," Divya stated. "In addition to that, the tests here seem easier because they mainly consist of true/false or multiple choice questions."

"The extracurricular offerings in Indonesia last the entire school year and include a choice of agriculture, music, English club, choir, math, physics, and art," she listed. "Although basketball is in most Indonesian schools, soccer is a club sport and is not connected to the school."

"When I return home, I will have to take the classes I've missed this year," she explained. "The credits earned in America won't transfer to my Indonesian school. After I finish high school, I plan to attend college, majoring in psychology," Divya said.

"One of the struggles I have experienced here in America is getting used to the food. Since rice is a very important part of Indonesian meals, I was excited to have a rice dinner at a Mexican restaurant. The spices used were not what I expected and did not agree with me!" she admitted. "My host mom is an amazing cook and makes really good meals at home that I like."

"Obviously the weather here is much different than back home," she smiled, "but I have also never been away from home for such a long time. To help with the separation from my parents and friends, I am like the Americans: I use Facetime to visit and actually 'see' people back home!"



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## 2<sup>nd</sup> Round Region 1A Boys Basketball @ Groton Area

Friday, March 1<sup>st</sup>, 2024

### Game Times/Locations: Main Court in Arena

\*The clock will be set to zero out at 6:55. The 15-minute warm-up will begin at 6:40.

- 7:00PM → #1 Groton Area (white) vs. #5 Aberdeen Roncalli (dark)
  - o Halftime Entertainment: Groton HS Dance Team

\*Prior to the game, the National Anthem will be first, with Varsity Introductions/Lineups to follow.

### ADMISSION & SPECTATORS: Adults: \$6.00 Students: \$4.00.

- No passes will be accepted for regional play.

### CONCESSIONS: Will be available

### LOCKER ROOM:

- Aberdeen Roncalli – last locker room down the JH hallway

### Team Benches –

- Groton: South Bench
- Aberdeen Roncalli: North Bench

### Fan Sections:

- East Side – Groton
- West Side – Aberdeen Roncalli

ATHLETIC TRAINER: There will be an athletic trainer on site. AED is located near the ticket booth.

Livestream: GDlive.com (FREE for Region Games) or NFHS

Varsity Officials: Justin Deutsch, Dave Planteen, Luke Andersen

Announcer: Mike Imrie

Scoreboard: Kristen Dolan

Official Book: Alexa Schuring

Shot Clock Operator: Kristi Zoellner

Ticket Takers: Kami Lipp and Kim Weber

National Anthem: Groton Area Senior and Miss Teen Wolf Pack, Anna Bisbee

*Thank you, Alexa Schuring, Athletic Director*

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## Flags at Half-Staff at State Capitol in Honor of Former State Legislator Burton "Burt" Elliot

PIERRE, S.D. – Today, Governor Kristi Noem ordered that flags be flown at half-staff at the State Capitol from sunrise until sunset on Saturday, April 20th, 2024, in honor of former state legislator Burton "Burt" Elliot. He represented Brown County in the South Dakota State House of Representatives from 2001-2008.

A memorial service for former state legislator Burt Elliot will take place at 11:00 am on April 20th, 2024, at the Plymouth Congregational UCC (431 W Melgaard Rd, Aberdeen, SD, 57401).

## School Board sets opt-out election, dates of public meetings

UNOFFICIAL PROCEEDINGS OF BOARD OF EDUCATION

GROTON AREA SCHOOL DISTRICT NO. 06-6

SPECIAL BOARD MEETING

February 29, 2024

President Gengerke called the meeting to order at 7:00 a.m. in the GHS Library Conference Room. Members present: Flihs, Gengerke, Lerseth-Flihs, Pharis, and Weismantel. Absent: Harder and Rix. Others present were Supt. J. Schwan, Principal Edwards, and Business Manager Hubsch.

Moved by Weismantel second Flihs to approve the agenda as written. Motion carried.

Pursuant to SDCL 23-3, no potential conflict disclosure was reported.

Members of the public are allowed five minutes to address the board on any topic of their choice. With no public members requesting to speak, the board proceeded with their agenda items.

Moved by Flihs, second Pharis to approve the General Fund Opt-Out Resolution 24-01, for \$1,250,000 for a ten-year term and vote to be held on April 9, 2024 (7:00 am to 7:00 pm), and authorized Business Manager to designated officials, with voting precincts in Andover, Bristol, Columbia, and Groton. Motion carried.

THE GOVERNING BOARD OF GROTON AREA SCHOOL DISTRICT 06-6 do state that the above said board is unable to operate under the tax limitation measure currently in statute for the General fund. We, therefore, OPT OUT of such tax limitation in the amount of \$1,250,000 starting with the calendar year 2024 taxes payable in the calendar year 2025. This opt out will be for ten years, which will be through taxes payable in the calendar year 2034 This action has been taken by the board and approved by at least a two-thirds vote of the board. Also, be it resolved that the GOVERNING BOARD OF GROTON AREA SCHOOL DISTRICT 06-6 will conduct an election to approve or disapprove the tax levy opt out pursuant to SDCL 10-12-43. The election will be held on April 9, 2024.

The board has set dates, times, and locations of public meetings to discuss opt out. Public meetings will be held in Columbia at the American Legion (102 N Broadway St) on March 11 at 6 pm, Bristol at the Community Center (86 S. Main St) on March 19 at 6 pm, and in Groton at the Community Center (109 N 3rd St.) on March 25 at 6 pm.

Moved by Weismantel, second Flihs to adjourn at 8:11 am. Motion carried.

Becky Hubsch, Business Manager

Deborah Gengerke, President

## Johnson Leads Bill to Secure Supply Chains in Emergencies

Washington, D.C. – Today, U.S. Representatives Dusty Johnson (R-S.D.) and Jim Costa (D-CA) introduced the Modernizing Operations for Vehicles in Emergencies (MOVE) Act to provide flexibility and certainty to our supply chains in times of emergency.

“It’s more important than ever to ensure goods are moving in an emergency,” said Johnson. “The MOVE Act is another way to remove unnecessary roadblocks and red tape in our supply chain to prevent another crisis like we saw during and in the aftermath of the pandemic.”

“During times of emergency and the pandemic, struggling communities in my district were hit hardest by roadblocks to our supply chain,” said Costa. “This bipartisan legislation will remove barriers that prevent us from delivering vital relief when communities need it most.”

“When hospitals and nursing homes are low on medicine, families are running out of food and water, and electricity is nonexistent, the last thing communities responding to natural disasters should have to worry about is bureaucratic red tape delaying truck drivers from moving relief supplies as quickly as possible,” said American Trucking Association President & CEO Chris Spear. “We commend Congressman Johnson on introducing this commonsense measure that will allow trucks to expedite the delivery of relief wherever and whenever it is needed.”

“The MOVE Act is a necessary step forward in ensuring that Shippers Coalition’s members are able to promptly and efficiently respond in times of crisis,” said Sean Joyce, Executive Director of the Shippers Coalition. “We commend Congressman Johnson for taking this common-sense step forward in modernizing our supply chain. By expanding the definition of an emergency, the legislation guarantees that Americans across the country will continue to have access to essential goods in their times of need.”

### Background:

In times of emergency or disaster, states have the authority to waive federal weight limits on the interstate system. These waivers allow shippers to expeditiously deliver relief supplies during times of disaster. Many companies used waivers during the pandemic to secure the supply chain and help American families access food, water, and products important to COVID-19 prevention, like cleaning supplies and personal hygiene products. Waivers are similarly used during natural disasters to provide much-needed relief supplies to impacted communities.

Under current law, special permits may be issued if the President has declared the emergency to be a major disaster under the Robert T. Stafford Disaster Relief and Emergency Assistance Act. Many emergencies that require shipper flexibility do not meet that standard, including COVID-19, which didn’t meet that test and legislation was needed to grant flexibility.

The MOVE Act modernizes the authority for vehicle weight waivers in cases of natural disasters, disease, and other emergencies that negatively impact commerce and supply chains.

### The Modernizing Operations for Vehicles in Emergencies (MOVE) Act:

- \* Expands the circumstances under which the Federal Government would allow a state to waive Federal weight limits on the Interstate System to include declarations by Governors, including declarations regarding disease and declarations regarding challenging supply chain conditions.

- \* Allows declarations to remain in effect for 270 days to allow for time needed to respond to emergencies and challenging conditions, compared to the 120-day maximum under current law.



## SOUTH DAKOTA SEARCHLIGHT

<https://southdakotasearchlight.com>

### **CO2 pipeline opponents doubt certainty of \$1 billion corn-based jet fuel project**

**Company reps say there's a path to profit through carbon reductions, incentives for farmers**

**BY: JOHN HULT - FEBRUARY 29, 2024 5:18 PM**

The largest economic development project in South Dakota history hinges on two things: a carbon pipeline and a \$950 million federal loan guarantee.

If the former doesn't happen, according to the company's CEO, the money secured through the latter won't land in South Dakota.

But opponents of the project and the Summit Carbon Solutions pipeline tied to it doubt the company will build in South Dakota or anywhere else.

The project in question is an approximately \$1 billion sustainable aviation fuel facility in Lake Preston, dubbed "Net-Zero 1" by Gevo, the Colorado-based carbon abatement firm.

Many state leaders, including Gov. Kristi Noem, have expressed enthusiasm for Net-Zero 1. Her son-in-law, Kyle Peters, is a registered lobbyist for Gevo. Senate Majority Leader Casey Crabtree has described both the pipeline and Gevo projects as critical to the future of South Dakota's ag industry.

Gevo secured \$12.3 million in project assistance through the state's Reinvestment Payment Plan in 2022, on top of \$500,000 in incentives for water infrastructure.

Doug Sombke of the South Dakota Farmers Union isn't as enthusiastic. He thinks Gevo's business plan is a house of cards, built on sustainable aviation fuel tax credits that could disappear under a Republican presidential administration and uncertainty on the method the federal government will use to calculate carbon sequestration values.

"This is such a wild-ass dream it's not even funny," Sombke said.

In public forums and legislative hearings on pipeline-related bills, opponents have begun pointing to Gevo's stock price to suggest that the company isn't healthy enough to trust. It trades below \$1 on the NASDAQ and has since mid-January, and has made a handful of recent lists of stocks to avoid in the business press.

"I think they're desperate," said Ed Fischbach, a Mellette-area farmer and vocal opponent of the pipeline and aviation fuel projects. "To be honest with you, I don't think they're financially stable, and they're running out of time."

The question of time has created a measure of desperation from pipeline opponents, as well. Lawmakers in Pierre are debating Senate Bill 201, which in its current form would offer counties per-mile payments from pipeline companies and certain landowner protections while forcing the state Public Utilities Commission to overrule "unreasonable" local ordinances that restrict pipeline siting.

Fischbach sees the bill as an attempt by lawmakers to fast-track the pipeline, and to secure Gevo's future. SB 201 has passed the Senate and the House in different versions, and a conference committee will try to work out the differences during the final days of the legislative session next week.

"We seem to just bend over backwards and give these companies free rein, basically, to try to get them here," Fischbach said.



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## Gevo: 'bizarre questions'

In an interview with South Dakota Searchlight, Gevo CEO Patrick Gruber described the viability questions coming in from the anti-pipeline side of the aisle as "bizarre."

Companies working in the sustainable aviation fuels business are all laboring under the reality of its nascency, in an investment environment with significant uncertainty on the regulations that will govern it.

In that space, Gruber said, Gevo is as solid as a company can be.

"We have \$380 million of cash on the balance sheet," Gruber said. "We are the most liquid company on the planet who does development like this."

Eric Frey, Gevo's vice president of finance and strategy, told investors in an online "fireside chat" with Water Tower Research that the company feels it's been undervalued. He made similar statements the following week in an online presentation for Renmark Financial Communications.

Gevo isn't the only renewable fuels company to see a drop in stock prices in recent months, Gruber said. But more importantly, the financing for Net-Zero 1 isn't tied to Gevo's market gains or losses. It's a "special purpose vehicle" project, meaning it's a separate entity for financing purposes, isolated from the company as a whole.

"It's a different equity set, different investors. It's infrastructure people, along with us," Gruber said. "Our stock price is actually irrelevant."

Gruber and others see sustainable aviation fuel as an inevitability in a world that increasingly values carbon dioxide abatement to reduce emissions of the heat-trapping gas into the atmosphere.

Airlines have made commitments to purchase sustainable fuel as an offset to their carbon footprints. The Biden administration wants to see 400 billion gallons mixed with conventional jet fuel by 2030, and the Inflation Reduction Act lays out per-gallon payments for it, based on carbon score calculations that have yet to be finalized.

Sustainable aviation fuel is produced now, but is sold by just two U.S. companies and represents 0.1% of all jet fuel, with 15.8 million gallons produced in 2022.

At the moment, it is only produced using beef tallow or discarded oil. The Inflation Reduction Act has incentives meant to encourage the production of 3 billion gallons by 2030.

Gruber calls ethanol-to-jet fuel the clearest, most cost-effective source path to a production ramp up: the infrastructure is in place, the product works and corn is abundantly available.

Ethanol as a starting point wins on price and practicality, he said, and "it's by a lot."

## Lower carbon intensity, higher growth potential

The "threat" to leave South Dakota, Gruber said, is just economic reality.

The project's federal financing is tied directly to Gevo's ability to push down the carbon score of its product.

To get the federal loan and a return on investment, Gevo needs to take full advantage of the carbon abatement dollars made available through federal and state governments.

Every point below 50 on a 100-point carbon intensity scale is worth money. Gevo has committed to fuels that score zero, but Gruber told lawmakers during a virtual listening session on Monday that they can get to -30 or lower, and produce a fuel that can compete in price with conventional jet fuel.

Cutting the carbon score is the reason Gevo picked Lake Preston: 71% of the area's farmers use sustainable practices like no-till agriculture, which could translate to a lower carbon score for its corn. It's why Gevo founded a company called Verity to track and verify carbon scores from corn plant to final product through on-farm data collection.

It's also why Gevo aims to build a wind farm near its plant: Turning ethanol into jet fuel is energy intensive – too intensive to turn out a low-carbon product without a renewable energy source.

All those factors are part of securing the \$950 million federal loan guarantee, which Gevo first sought last August and expects to have by the end of this year.

But without a carbon capture pipeline to further drive down the carbon intensity score, Gruber said, the company wouldn't get that guarantee. Carbon emissions from the plant would be captured, placed in

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the pipeline and transported to North Dakota for underground sequestration, along with emissions from numerous ethanol plants in multiple states.

There are "lots of states" more committed to carbon abatement than South Dakota, and some where sequestration can happen without a pipeline.

"Make no mistake, I am going to get a project financed," Gruber said.

He doesn't want to leave South Dakota. By the end of this year, he expects the company will have pumped \$200 million into the Lake Preston project.

## **Skeptics: carbon market unreliable**

Sombke counts himself a carbon abatement skeptic.

Aside from a northwest Iowa plant that produces renewable natural gas from livestock waste, he said, Gevo's business is built on capturing carbon. Its Luverne, Minnesota, ethanol plant is idle for now; its Texas-based plant makes aviation fuel to prove it can be done.

The political mathematics of carbon abatement are too fluid to be taken seriously as a business proposition, he said.

"I think there's a lot of smoke and mirrors, and I think it's a lot of hopeful thinking," Sombke said.

The method of measuring carbon intensity (CI) is just one issue. The Inflation Reduction Act called on the Department of Treasury and Internal Revenue Service to create a framework for measuring CI for the calculation of sustainable aviation fuel tax credits.

Of the options, Gevo and most agriculture organizations prefer the Greenhouse gases, Regulated Emissions, and Energy use in Transportation model, also known as GREET. South Dakota's congressional delegation wants that model used to calculate the impact of all biofuels.

The Biden administration recently announced its intention to work on a GREET update that would meet the law's expectations, and an update on those efforts is expected on Friday.

But that model is one of several options. If GREET isn't adopted, the climate smart ag practices built into Gevo's business plan wouldn't be worth as much on the carbon ledger.

There are also questions about the political appetite for carbon abatement if former president and climate change skeptic Donald Trump returns to the White House.

Trump did sign off on the carbon sequestration tax credits that would be used by the Summit Carbon Solutions pipeline during his time in office. But he's also signaled a desire to overturn the Inflation Reduction Act, the federal law that established the sustainable aviation fuel tax credits.

The Heritage Foundation, an influential conservative think tank, has argued for an immediate repeal of the act in its "Mandate for Leadership" position paper, part of its "Project 2025" effort to guide conservative policy.

"The next Administration should also push for legislation to fully repeal recently passed subsidies in the tax code, including the dozens of credits and tax breaks for green energy companies in Subtitle D of the Inflation Reduction Act," the document says.

"These tax incentives can go away in a flash," said Doug Durante of the Clean Fuels Foundation, a biofuels lobbying organization based in Washington, D.C.

Durante sees a simpler path forward for ethanol and emissions reductions: higher blends of ethanol. The Biden administration has pulled back on its push for electric vehicles and heavy cuts to tailpipe emissions by 2030, Reuters reported earlier this month.

With millions of gas-powered vehicles on the road and a slowing demand for EVs, more ethanol makes a lot of sense from a climate perspective, Durante said.

"We're going to be using trillions of gallons of gasoline for who knows how long," Durante said. "We only put 15 billion gallons of ethanol in it."

Sombke agrees on that point. He'd like to see the U.S. push for 20% ethanol in all vehicles, as Brazil has done.

As for carbon abatement credits, he'd much rather see them flow to farmers directly than to companies

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like Gevo, which has contracted with farmers to buy corn grown using climate-smart practices.

"They're farming the farmer here," Sombke said. "Even though the farmer might get paid a little bit more, there's others that are going to be making more money off of it."

## **Gevo: Carbon abatement is the future**

Gruber's not especially concerned about the political winds or a lack of subsidies in the long term.

If carbon credits disappear, he said, that won't change the trajectory of history. Consumers, particularly younger consumers, are concerned about climate change and are willing to pay more for it.

Republicans who express skepticism about climate change still see the benefit in economic development, he said, which resonates as a strong argument in favor of carbon abatement.

The Conservative Political Action Committee's recent conference in Florida saw Gov. Noem – who trumpeted Gevo as an economic development win for South Dakota – tied with Vivek Ramaswamy in a straw poll for the group's preferred vice presidential pick.

On Feb. 19, the New York Times reported that "more than half of the announced major clean energy projects and 67 percent of all announced jobs" have landed in Republican congressional districts.

Encouraging companies to pay farmers more for crops produced using carbon-friendly ag practices, Gruber said, is a win for rural America.

"You might not value it, but by God somebody else does," Gruber said. "Why wouldn't you want to get paid for the good work that you're doing?"

Most farmers understand that and want to take part, he argues.

Lake Preston-area farmer Paul Casper is among them. Casper was an early Gevo backer, and has had Verity software installed in his equipment for three years to help the company prove its worth. Once equipped, he said, the system logs every movement, every spray of fertilizer and anything else he does on his field, with GPS tracking to note where he's doing it.

"Whenever you start the combine or sprayer up, it's collecting data," Casper said.

He was already practicing no- and low-till agriculture across his 4,000 acres by the time he met Gevo representatives. As the years passed, other Lake Preston-area farmers noticed how much Casper's healthier, undisrupted soil produced, and followed suit.

The Verity software has made him even more vigilant about how many times he goes out into the field. Even without a per-bushel price boost, he said, he's saving money on fuel.

Moving from fuel savings to a future where sequestration is worth money is Casper's hope. But he also sees it as a necessity for the ethanol industry that's propped up farmers in South Dakota for decades.

Staying out of the game, he said, will hurt the state in the long run.

"If you don't sequester carbon, your competition is going to be doing it. That's going to put us in a real bad place with regards to selling our corn into ethanol and moving that ethanol out of here," Casper said. "We need to get this done."

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

## Senate change to teacher-pay bill sparks House rebuttal and sets up final-week showdown

BY: MAKENZIE HUBER - FEBRUARY 29, 2024 12:48 PM

Average teacher compensation would only have to rise half as much as state education funding under the new terms of legislation advanced Thursday morning by a committee of South Dakota senators.

Thursday afternoon, the state House reiterated its preference for the bill's earlier language, which would require the rate of average teacher compensation increases to match the rate of annual state funding increases.

The differing versions of the legislation set up a battle over teacher pay next week, which is the final week of this year's legislative session except for a day to consider vetoes later in March.

Thursday's action began when the Senate Education Committee voted 5-2 to endorse a bill meant to increase teacher pay in South Dakota. The committee amended the bill to "provide for flexibility but also accountability" for school districts, said committee member Sydney Davis, R-Burbank.

The legislation would set a statewide minimum teacher salary of \$45,000, beginning July 1, 2026. That minimum standard would increase each year by a percentage equal to the annual increase in state education funding approved by the Legislature and governor.

The bill formerly would have required school districts to also match their increases in average teacher compensation — including pay and benefits — to the annual increases in state funding. The amended bill would reduce that obligation to half of the annual increases in state funding. For example, if the Legislature passed a 4% increase to education funding, school districts would have to raise teacher compensation by at least 2%. That requirement would begin July 1, the beginning of fiscal year 2025.

School districts that fail to meet the bill's requirements could risk an accreditation review or suffer a \$500-per-teacher deduction in state education funding. But they could also request a waiver and work with the state School Finance Accountability Board to come into compliance. The bill does not include any additional money for schools beyond the regular, annual increases in state funding approved by lawmakers and the governor.

The amendment allows wiggle room for school districts to pay for other positions or services, lobbyists told lawmakers — such as career and technical education programs, paraprofessional salaries or bus driver salaries. It also lessens the impact on the few school districts that receive minimal state funding (because their local property taxes and federal funding cover most or all of their costs) or school districts experiencing declining enrollment and therefore seeing decreases in state funding.

Hours later, the House of Representatives "hoghoused" a bill — which is a term for striking the entire language of a bill and replacing it with a different bill — and replaced it with the language of the teacher pay bill from before it was amended Thursday morning. The hoghoused bill passed the House 60-7 (gaining two more votes since it originally passed the chamber last week).

Rep. Tony Venhuizen, R-Sioux Falls, told his colleagues that the House-approved version of the bill prioritizes teacher pay and ensures that increased state funding "gets from us, through to the school, into the pocket of teachers," which is "the most important thing we're doing."

"The House is just really reiterating our position that if we give an increase to the schools, they need to give a commensurate increase to teachers," Venhuizen told South Dakota Searchlight. "We're willing to talk to our friends in the Senate about that, but amendments that water that down mean that less money will go into teachers' pockets, and that's very concerning to us in the House."

Senate Education Committee Chair Kyle Schoenfish, R-Scotland, told committee members Thursday morning that he didn't think the House-approved legislation would make it through the Senate without an amendment.

"50% acknowledges you can't throw all your money into one basket here, so I think this is a good amendment to keep the discussion going," Schoenfish said.

Proponents said there are more discussions needed and work to be done before the bill can head to

the governor's desk.

Watertown Republican Rep. Hugh Bartels, who has been in discussions to amend and find compromise on the bill since it was first proposed, told lawmakers that while the House likely wouldn't agree with the amendment, it's something they can continue to work on in the legislative process.

Rep. Roger DeGroot, R-Brookings, told committee members that South Dakota is underfunding public education "a great deal." He said the state is underfunding education by roughly \$56 million, based on an "unsubstantiated" analysis of school districts passing opt outs (in which taxpayers elect to pay more in property taxes than state limits otherwise allow) or dipping into their capital outlay fund (typically reserved for buildings and construction) to pay for general fund expenses.

Christine Stephenson, a Rapid City Area Schools board member who spoke for herself and not the board, was the sole opponent to speak against the bill. She told lawmakers that inadequate funding must be addressed in the coming years — especially if the bill is signed into law.

Stephenson cited statistics from the U.S. Census Bureau showing that South Dakota public schools spend the least amount of money per student compared to surrounding states. North Dakota, for example, spends 37% more on education per student than the Mount Rushmore state.

According to the National Education Association, South Dakota ranks 49th in average teacher pay (out of 51, due to the inclusion of Washington, D.C.).

That's despite the passage of a half-percentage-point increase in the state sales tax rate in 2016 as part of legislation to raise teacher salaries. The legislation sent an infusion of money to schools that pushed South Dakota up a few places in national teacher pay rankings, but the state has slipped in the rankings since then. Last year, legislators and Gov. Noem reduced the state sales tax rate from 4.5% to 4.2%.

Sen. Davis said discussions about adequate education funding are for future sessions. This bill focuses on teacher pay accountability and addressing expiring provisions from the 2016 law that were intended to ensure such accountability.

"I know we've heard a lot of questions on sustainability of a bill like this and I think, in the future, this type of bill will lead to future discussions of funding, funding per student, and how we fund education," Davis said.

The House and Senate have next week to work out their differences and pass a bill to Gov. Kristi Noem, who has spoken repeatedly about her desire for action on teacher pay.

"We're very comfortable with the plan we have," Venhuizen said. "We'll keep talking to the senators, but we think we have the best plan and we're hoping we can move it forward."

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

## Election officials say verbal abuse is common as lawmakers reject bill to protect them

**BY: SETH TUPPER AND JOSHUA HAIAR - FEBRUARY 29, 2024 10:38 AM**

The assertion that election officials are not being threatened or intimidated in South Dakota helped derail legislation this week at the Capitol in Pierre that would have criminalized those acts.

Yet a South Dakota county election official published an article last month detailing verbal abuse suffered by her staff. And another county election official said this week that her office faces "intimidating" tactics from members of the public.

The article is from Susan Kiepke, the auditor of Davison County, which has its county seat in Mitchell. The National Association of Counties published the article Jan. 29 under the headline, "Rural county elections staff face harassment, misinformation."

Kiepke wrote that she has asked the sheriff's office to attend each county commission meeting, reduced the number of precincts and poll workers in her county, and asked for security at the courthouse while

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ballots are being counted on election nights, all due to safety concerns.

"I hate that elections have gotten so negative," Kiepke wrote. "I used to look forward to them. They were fun and people were happy. Now people come to my office and verbally attack myself and my staff."

"I never know when folks will show up," she also wrote, "to try to convince our commissioners that the DS850 scanner and tabulator that we use to count ballots has a microchip in it that feeds information to Russia."

On Wednesday, former legislator and current Gregory County Auditor Julie Bartling said her office fields similar questions about vote-counting machines at the courthouse in Burke.

"It's not threatening, but it can be intimidating," Bartling said in an interview with South Dakota Searchlight.

The most frustrating aspect of it, she added, is that the questions and suspicions come from people she's known for years.

"And they point-blank say, 'I don't believe you,'" Bartling said. "They don't believe that what I'm saying is true, that state law dictates that the machines cannot be connected to the internet, and they're not, but they don't believe me. And they tell me that."

To protect auditors and their employees and election workers, Senate Bill 20, introduced during the current legislative session, would have established the crime of threatening or intimidating election workers with the intent to improperly influence an election. The crime would have been a Class 1 misdemeanor punishable by up to a year in jail and a \$2,000 fine.

The bill passed a state Senate committee 8-0, the full Senate 23-10 and a House committee 8-5. Then it failed 24-46 on Tuesday in the House.

Rep. Rebecca Reimer, R-Chamberlain, spoke in favor of the bill on the House floor. Rep. Bethany Soye, R-Sioux Falls, asked her, "Did you say that this has been happening in our state, that poll workers are being threatened?"

Reimer answered, "I did not say poll workers are being threatened, but they have in other states. And no, I do not have an example for you."

Rep. Liz May, R-Kyle, picked up on Soye's point later in the debate.

"We haven't had any of this in South Dakota," May said. "None of this."

Rep. Phil Jensen, R-Rapid City, said the "vagueness" of the bill reminded him of a report he read on the events of Jan. 6, 2021, about "hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of fellow American patriots who were imprisoned because they were in the wrong place at the wrong time."

"Some were incarcerated without any evidence, just dug up, pulled out of thin air by the prosecutors in D.C.," Jensen said, before being cut off by Speaker Hugh Bartels, who ordered Jensen to address his remarks to the bill.

A congressional committee determined and a federal grand jury has alleged that the Jan. 6, 2021, attack on the U.S. Capitol was part of a coordinated effort led by then-President Donald Trump to subvert the 2020 election. More than 1,200 people have been charged with crimes in connection with the attack, resulting in more than 800 guilty pleas or convictions so far.

Meanwhile, election workers, staff and poll workers across the United States have seen a surge in threats in recent years, according to the MIT Election Data and Science Lab. A poll conducted by the Brennan Center for Justice last year found that 30% of local election workers in the U.S. said they have been abused, harassed or threatened because of their job.

In response, at least 14 states have passed legislation to protect election officials and workers since 2020.

*Seth is editor-in-chief of South Dakota Searchlight. He was previously a supervising senior producer for South Dakota Public Broadcasting and a newspaper journalist in Rapid City and Mitchell.*

*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.*

## In clash over immigration, Biden and Trump both bound for the U.S.-Mexico border Thursday

BY: JACOB FISCHLER - FEBRUARY 29, 2024 6:00 AM

Surrogates for President Joe Biden dismissed former President Donald Trump's scheduled visit to the U.S.-Mexico border Thursday as a political stunt, adding that the likely Republican presidential nominee was exploiting an issue that he has shown no desire to fix.

Illinois Gov. J.B. Pritzker and U.S. Rep. Robert Garcia of California, both Democrats, told reporters on a Wednesday conference call organized by the Biden reelection campaign that Trump's record — recently and throughout his public life — showed he was anything but serious about addressing the myriad issues resulting from a recent surge in migration across the southern border.

Trump is scheduled to visit the border town of Eagle Pass, Texas, on Thursday to call attention to Biden's record on border security.

Biden separately will pay a visit to Brownsville, about 300 miles southeast of Eagle Pass.

Trump has no credibility on immigration after tanking a bipartisan agreement to strengthen border enforcement, Pritzker and Garcia said Wednesday. Trump reportedly asked Republicans in Congress not to support the deal to avoid handing Biden a victory in an election year, they noted.

"Republicans frankly just do not care about solving the challenges facing this country," Pritzker said. "They only care about saving their own skin. This could have been a press call touting a bipartisan path forward. Instead, Donald Trump wanted a campaign slogan."

In a campaign statement Wednesday, Trump commended his own record on immigration, noting he signed executive orders calling for a wall on the southern border, declaring a national emergency on the border and sending police and military resources to the region.

Trump "created the most secure border in history," the statement said, and would reinstate several policies that Biden dropped.

Trump would end a policy that allows migrants to live freely in a U.S. community as they await immigration hearings, cease birthright citizenship for the children of migrants in the country without legal authorization — even though an amendment to the U.S. Constitution is interpreted to guarantee that right — and use the military to combat drug cartels, the statement said.

Trump said in a speech to the Conservative Political Action Conference, or CPAC, on Saturday that he would seek to enact the "largest deportation in the history of our country" if elected.

"The first and most urgent action when we win will be the sealing of the border, stopping the invasion, drill baby drill, send Joe Biden's illegal aliens back home," Trump said. "We'll do all of those things and we're gonna have to do them fast because no country can sustain what's happening in our country."

Garcia, who immigrated to the country as a child, said Trump's history of racist rhetoric showed he had misplaced priorities on immigration policy.

Trump has used what critics say are racist generalizations of immigrants since his entrance into national politics, a 2015 speech announcing his first White House run in which he made derogatory comments about immigrants from Mexico.

Trump believes "preying on immigrants is his path to reelection," Garcia said.

"This is a cruel man with a cruel agenda," he said.

Trump's "extremism" on immigration would go even further than in his first term, Garcia said.

The former president has talked about returning to the family separation policy at the border, which attracted major controversy in his first term, has expressed support for ending birthright citizenship and said he would act as a dictator for the first day of a potential second term to enact extreme border policies, Garcia said.

Trump and other Republicans have harshly criticized the Biden administration's approach to immigration, with House Republicans impeaching Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas this month over his supposed failure to enforce immigration laws.

Garcia called Trump's approach to the issue "fearmongering."

"Donald Trump doesn't give a damn about border security," he said. "All he cares about is stirring up pain, stirring up division."

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

## Thune, Rounds, Johnson vote yes as Congress passes funding extension, averts shutdown

**BY: JENNIFER SHUTT AND ARIANA FIGUEROA - FEBRUARY 29, 2024 8:02 PM**

WASHINGTON — Congress passed a short-term funding extension Thursday intended to give lawmakers a bit more time to wrap up work on the annual spending bills — dodging a shutdown despite election year politics and narrow margins.

The stopgap spending bill, sometimes called a continuing resolution, or CR, would keep funding mostly flat for programs funded in six of the full-year bills through March 8 and for programs in the other six bills through March 22. That means Congress will face another deadline just next week for action.

The House voted 320-99 to approve the stopgap bill a few hours before the Senate voted 77-13 to pass the measure. South Dakota Senators John Thune and Mike Rounds and Rep. Dusty Johnson, all Republicans, each voted yes.

The bill now goes to President Joe Biden for his signature, which he is expected to provide before the Friday midnight funding deadline for some federal departments.

Before approving the bill, senators voted to reject an amendment from Kentucky GOP Sen. Rand Paul that would have barred the Federal Reserve from buying state government debt.

Senators also voted to reject a proposal from Utah Republican Sen. Mike Lee that would have had the stopgap bill last through September, another from Kansas Republican Sen. Roger Marshall that did the same thing while adding aid for Israel and a third from Texas GOP Sen. Ted Cruz that would have added House Republicans' border security bill, often referred to by its bill number, H.R. 2.

House debate on the stopgap drew bipartisan backing from both Republicans and Democrats, though some especially conservative GOP lawmakers opposed the short-term extension.

"While at the time of passing our last continuing resolution I had hoped we would not need this measure, we owe it to the American people to do our due diligence in reaching the end of this process," the top Democrat on the House Appropriations Committee, Rep. Rosa DeLauro of Connecticut, said on the House floor. "I appreciate the respectful bipartisan cooperation that took place to put forward this continuing resolution and move us closer to the finish line."

GOP Rep. Chuck Fleischmann of Tennessee, an appropriator, acknowledged that many of his Republican colleagues would be upset with another CR, but he noted the slim majority in the GOP and that the bill gives Congress more time to pass the remaining appropriations bills.

"We are where we are," he said. "This negotiation has been difficult, but to close the government down at a time like this would hurt people who should not be hurt."

### Border security

Republicans like Rep. Andy Biggs of Arizona and Bob Good of Virginia expressed their frustration about border security, and said House Republicans have not leveraged the threat of shutting down the federal government to push for changes in immigration policy.

"We just keep spending money and we keep the policies that are in place," Biggs said.

House Speaker Mike Johnson of Louisiana said during a Thursday press conference that the bill texts for the first package of six spending bills will be released this weekend and members will be given at least 72 hours to read the bills before voting.

"This is a bipartisan agreement in the end, but it sticks to the numbers, the agreement on spending, it



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does not go above that," Johnson said. "It will increase a bit, defense spending, but there will be real cuts to non-defense discretionary spending."

Johnson added that after the remaining appropriations bills are done by the March 22 deadline, he wants to quickly move on to fiscal year 2025, as well as other issues, such as immigration.

Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, a New York Democrat, said Thursday morning the only way for Congress to accomplish anything during divided government is through bipartisanship.

"This agreement is proof that when the four leaders work together, when bipartisanship is prioritized, when getting things done for the American people takes a high priority, good things can happen, even in divided government," Schumer said. "And I hope this sets the stage for Congress to finish the appropriations process in a bipartisan way very soon."

Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, a Kentucky Republican, said he appreciated the "commitment to see this process through and make good on this essential governing responsibility."

"As I said earlier this week, government shutdowns never produce positive outcomes. That's why Congress is going to avoid one this week," McConnell said. "Leaders in both parties and both houses have agreed to a plan that would keep the lights on while appropriators complete their work and put annual appropriations bills on a glide path to becoming law."

Congress has used a series of these stopgap funding measures to extend its deadlines for passing the dozen annual appropriations bills after failing to meet an Oct. 1 deadline.

## Deep disagreements

House Republicans and Senate Democrats have had fundamental disagreements about spending levels and the policy that goes into the bills for months.

Those differences began after Biden submitted his budget request for fiscal year 2024 in March 2023, starting off the annual process.

The disputes appeared to abate a bit after Biden and then-Speaker Kevin McCarthy reached agreement on total spending levels in May 2023 at the same time they brokered a bipartisan agreement to address the nation's debt limit.

House GOP appropriators moved away from that agreement after McCarthy experienced pressure from especially conservative members to significantly cut spending on domestic programs below the agreement.

The original batch of House spending bills also included dozens of very conservative GOP policy initiatives, drawing rebukes from Democrats and impeding the path toward a final bipartisan agreement.

A faction of far-right House Republicans ousting McCarthy of California in early October and then spending weeks disagreeing about who should lead them also delayed the process.

Johnson, after becoming speaker, renegotiated the spending levels for defense and domestic discretionary programs with Biden in January, starting off the process of merging the GOP bills from the House with the broadly bipartisan bills approved by the Senate Appropriations Committee.

The spending deal sets spending on defense programs at \$886.3 billion and provides \$772.7 billion for non-defense discretionary spending.

Congressional leaders and the four lawmakers that lead the Appropriations committees in both chambers announced Wednesday they'd reached final agreement on six bills and had an agreement for another stopgap spending bill to bridge the gap.

Those bills, which will make up the first so-called "minibus," include Agriculture-FDA, Commerce-Justice-Science, Energy-Water, Interior-Environment, Military Construction-VA and Transportation-HUD.

## March 22 deadline

The remaining six bills, the toughest to negotiate, haven't yet garnered bipartisan, bicameral agreement, but the statement said they "will be finalized, voted on, and enacted prior to March 22."

That spending package is supposed to include the Defense, Financial Services and General Government, Homeland Security, Labor-HHS-Education, Legislative Branch and State-Foreign Operations government

funding bills.

Should Congress approve all dozen of the bills before the March 22 final deadline, and Biden signs them, that would place lawmakers 174 days behind their deadline.

That would be the latest members have completed work on all the bills since fiscal 2017, when they wrapped up work 216 days into the fiscal year, according to the nonpartisan Congressional Research Service.

Congress wrapped up work on all the bills during fiscal 2018 by March 23, but that was 173 days behind their deadline. The difference between this fiscal year and then is due to leap day.

The process of funding the government is expected to start anew on March 11 when Biden submits his budget request for fiscal 2025.

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

*Ariana covers the nation's capital for States Newsroom. Her areas of coverage include politics and policy, lobbying, elections and campaign finance.*

## Presidential campaign moves to the border, as Biden urges Trump to back immigration deal

**BY: ARIANA FIGUEROA - FEBRUARY 29, 2024 8:17 PM**

WASHINGTON — President Joe Biden and former President Donald Trump on Thursday afternoon paid competing visits to the nation's southern border, where Biden called on Congress to reconsider a bipartisan border security deal that Republicans tanked at Trump's direction.

Biden traveled to Brownsville, Texas, while Trump journeyed to Eagle Pass, highlighting how immigration policy has risen in importance as the 2024 presidential race takes shape. Biden is seeking reelection and Trump is the GOP primary front-runner.

"Here's what I would say to Mr. Trump," Biden said. "Instead of telling members of Congress to block this legislation, join me, or I'll join you in telling the Congress to pass this bipartisan border security bill. We can do it together."

Senate Republicans earlier this month walked away from that deal they brokered with the White House, following Trump's objection to the plan that would drastically overhaul U.S. immigration law and bolster funding.

Biden said that the Senate needs to reconsider the bipartisan border security bill and that Republican House Speaker Mike Johnson should bring the measure to the floor for a vote.

Johnson has refused, arguing that the House already passed its own measure in H.R. 2, and that Biden has the executive authority to take action to address high levels of immigration. Democrats object to many of the policies in that bill.

Accompanying the president was U.S. Department of Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas, who was impeached by House Republicans over policy disputes in early February, and Democratic Rep. Vicente Gonzalez of Texas, whose district includes Brownsville.

During his visit, Biden met with U.S. Border Patrol agents, law enforcement, frontline personnel and local leaders, the White House said.

"I just received a briefing from the Border Patrol at the border as well as immigration enforcement asylum officers and they're all doing incredible work under really tough conditions," Biden said. "They desperately need more resources."

Mayorkas said only Congress can help DHS fund more Border Patrol agents, immigration enforcement agents, asylum officers, immigration judges and support personnel, facilities and technology.

"You can see the impact these resources will have on our ability to strengthen our security, advance our mission to protect the homeland and enforce our nation's laws quickly and effectively," he said. "Though Congress has not yet provided the resources we need, DHS will continue to enforce the law and work to secure our border."

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## Migrant encounters

As the Biden administration deals with the largest number of migrant encounters at the southern border in more than 20 years, Trump's reelection campaign has centered on stoking fears surrounding immigration — as he previously did in his 2016 presidential campaign.

More than 300 miles away from Biden in Eagle Pass on Thursday, Trump criticized the Biden administration and touted how he managed the border during his first presidency.

He highlighted his "Remain in Mexico" program that required asylum seekers to stay in Mexico while waiting for their asylum cases to be heard — a move that many advocates documented resulted in harm, separation and deaths to those migrants who had to comply.

"The best was 'Remain in Mexico,'" Trump said. "You stay in Mexico."

Trump implemented the program in 2019 and the Biden administration sought to terminate it in June 2021.

But the U.S. District Court for the Northern District of Texas determined in *Texas v. Biden* that the termination memo from the Biden administration was not issued in compliance with the Administrative Procedure Act, so the court ordered the Department of Homeland Security to keep the program in place.

It took a Supreme Court ruling for the Biden administration to finally be allowed to end the program.

Trump also praised Texas GOP Gov. Greg Abbott, who is at odds with the Biden administration over who wields authority over the border, most recently when Abbott defied U.S. Supreme Court orders to remove razor wire along the border.

Abbott has also sent migrants on buses and planes to Democratic-led cities without warning local officials, putting strains on those cities.

"He's in some sanitized location," Abbott said of Biden's visit to Brownsville. "It just goes to show that Biden does not care about either Texas or the border and what's going on."

## GOP on the attack in D.C.

U.S. House Republicans at the Capitol also criticized Biden's visit to the border, calling it a "photo op," and arguing that Brownsville is not a busy area that encounters many migrants.

"The border is the issue for every American no matter where they live, no matter where their state is, because every state is a border state," Johnson said during a Thursday press conference.

Johnson also pressed for Biden to take executive action on immigration, something Biden has argued he cannot do without congressional authority.

Utah's Blake Moore, the vice chair of the House Republican Conference, argued that El Paso, Texas, and Tucson, Arizona, are busier than Brownsville in terms of immigration.

"Brownsville can hardly be considered one of the most challenging immigration areas," Moore said.

Moore said that this should not be just the second time in Biden's presidency he has visited the border, and that Trump's visit on the same day made it seem like Biden was trying to compete with Trump. Biden's first visit to the border was in January 2023.

"That is what the American people will take from this, and it's disheartening to know that that is the case," Moore said.

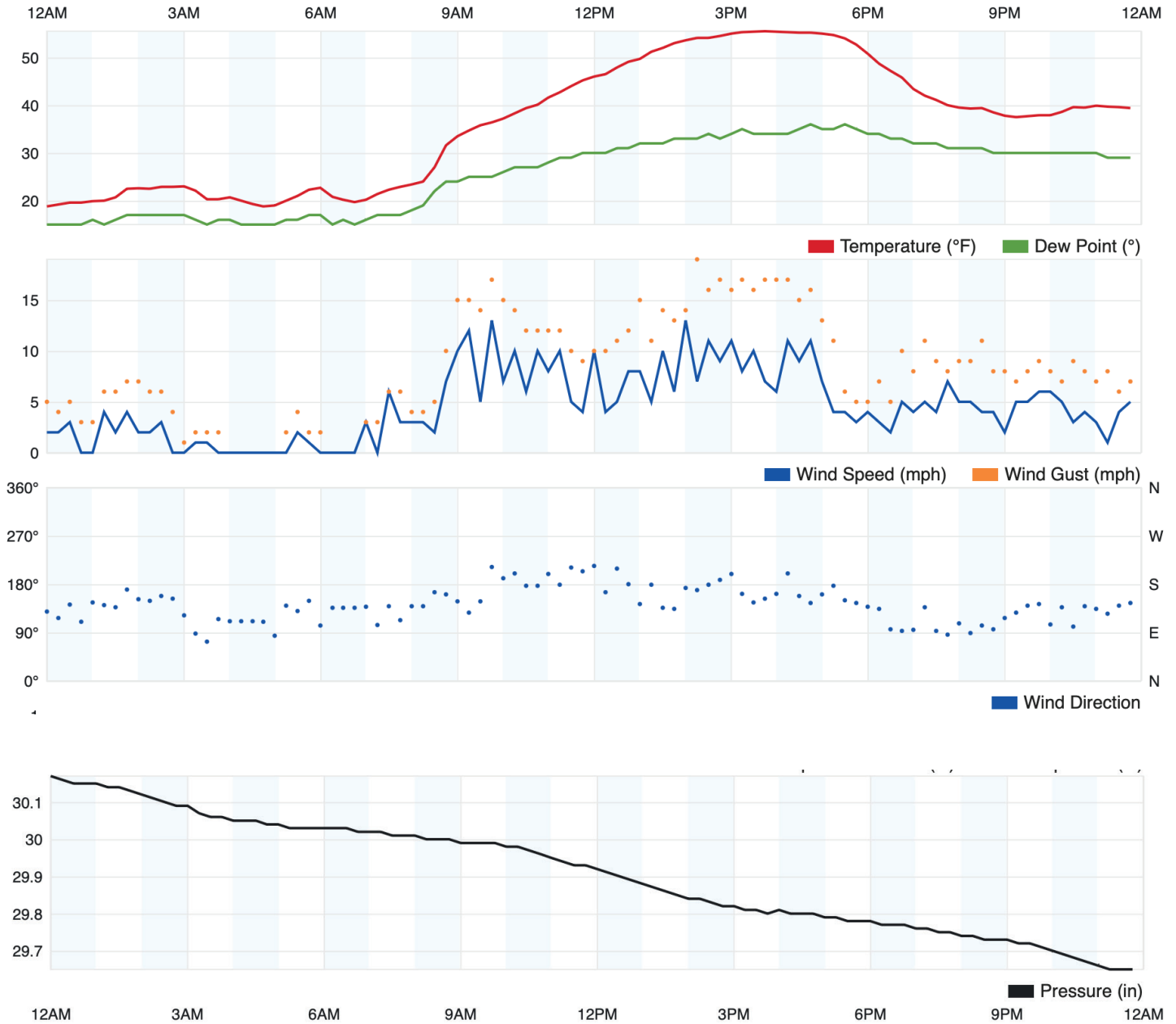
NBC has reported the White House says Trump's visit had nothing to do with Biden's trip to Texas.

*Ariana covers the nation's capital for States Newsroom. Her areas of coverage include politics and policy, lobbying, elections and campaign finance.*

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## Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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Today



Sunny

High: 66 °F

Tonight



Increasing  
Clouds

Low: 29 °F

Saturday



Partly Sunny

High: 54 °F

Saturday  
Night



Partly Cloudy  
then Slight  
Chance Rain

Low: 35 °F

Sunday



Breezy.  
Chance Rain  
then Chance  
Rain/Snow

High: 48 °F

Today



Highs: 60s

Saturday



20% chance of mainly light rain  
over north central SD

Highs: 50s

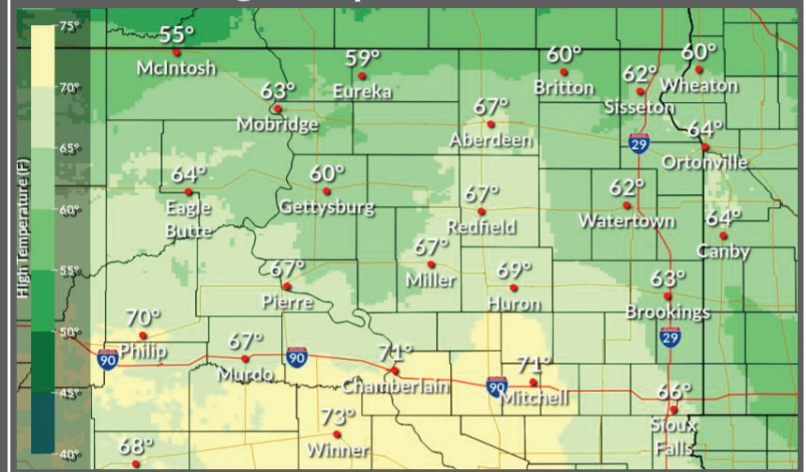
Sunday



30% chance of mainly light rain  
near the ND/SD border

Highs: 40s, except low 50s  
over far northeastern SD & west  
central MN

## High Temperatures Today



Above normal temperatures through the weekend!

Aberdeen, SD  
weather.gov/aberdeen



Dry weather will continue today, with highs in the 60s. These values are around 30 degrees above normal for this time of year. Highs will be mainly in the 50s Saturday, and mainly in the 40s Sunday. While mainly dry weather will continue, there is a 20 percent chance of mostly light rain across north central South Dakota tonight into Saturday morning, and around a 30% chance of mainly light rain near the North Dakota and South Dakota border on Sunday. Little precipitation is expected at this time.

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## Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 56 °F at 3:42 PM

Low Temp: 18 °F at 4:51 AM

Wind: 20 mph at 2:36 PM

Precip: : 0.00

Day length: 11 hours, 13 minutes

## Today's Info

Record High: 73 in 1992

Record Low: -29 in 1962

Average High: 34

Average Low: 12

Average Precip in March.: 0.02

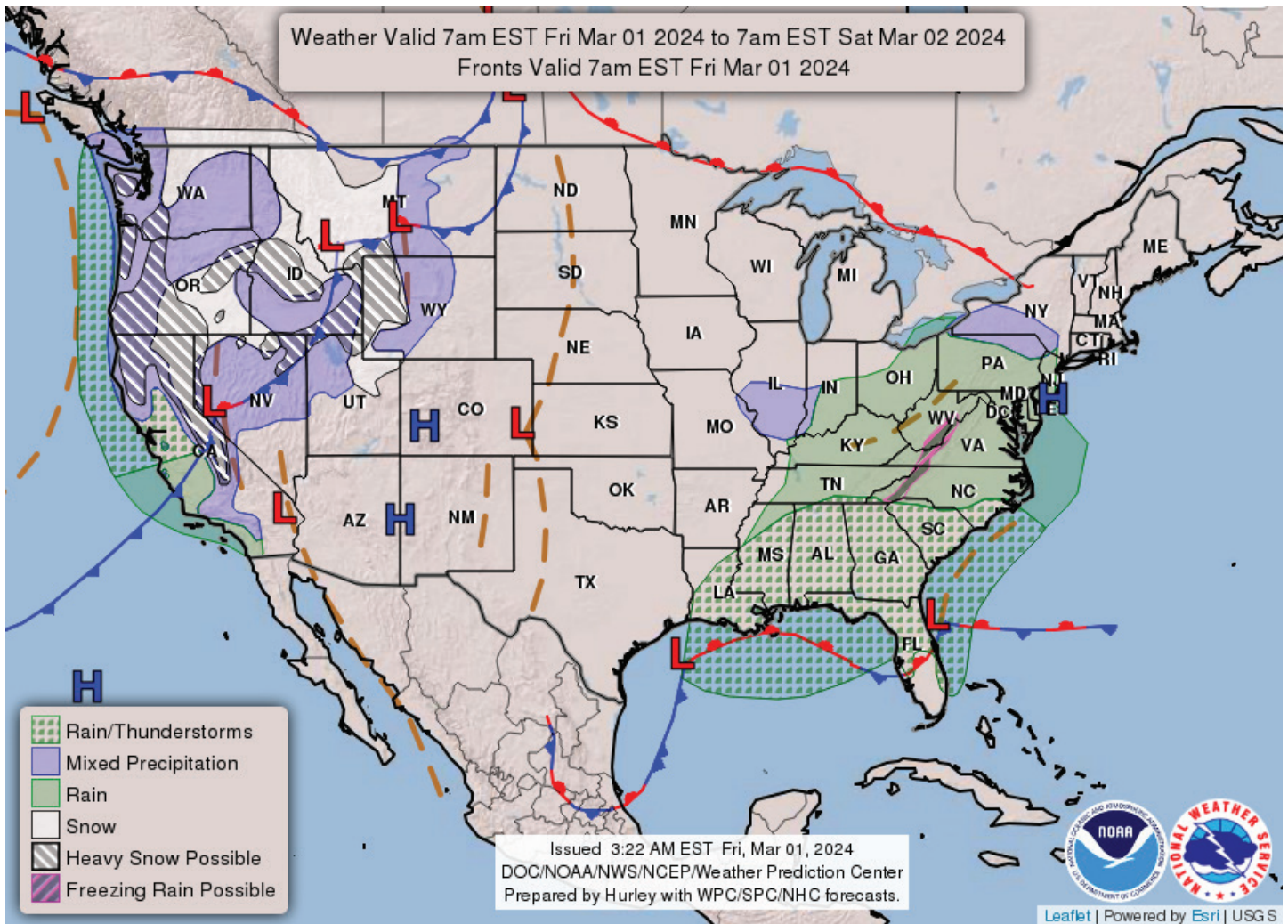
Precip to date in March.: 0.00

Average Precip to date: 1.19

Precip Year to Date: 0.07

Sunset Tonight: 6:21:30 pm

Sunrise Tomorrow: 7:05:48 am



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## Today in Weather History

March 1, 1970: Freezing rain and drizzle impacted much of South Dakota on March 1, 1970. Ice accumulation up to 1/8 of an inch thick was reported in Rapid City, with heavier amounts in the northwestern part of the state. Some utility lines were broken, but there was no extensive line damage. Also, some schools were closed due to icy roads.

March 1, 1998: An incredible amount of snow falls on Lead, South Dakota, from February 25 through March 1. The official storm total was 103 inches for five days. Click [HERE](#) for more information from the NWS Office in Rapid City.

March 1, 2014: Arctic air combined with strong northwest winds brought bitter cold wind chills to central and northeast South Dakota east of the Missouri River. Bitter wind chills of 35 below to around 40 below occurred. Some coldest wind chills include; 39 degrees below zero west of Long Lake, 40 degrees below zero at Highmore; 41 degrees below zero near Roy Lake; and 42 degrees below zero at Summit.

1849: The first recorded weather observation for Blowing Rock, Kentucky, occurred on March 1, 1849.

1910: The worst avalanche in US history regarding lives lost occurred in Wellington, Washington. Heavy snow occurred from February 26 through the 28th, which blocked the rail lines. Weather conditions turned on the 28th, with a thunderstorm occurring over the area. Just after 1 AM on March 1, a ten to the 14-foot-high mass of snow broke free from the mountainside and pushed the trains 150 feet down into the Tye River Gorge. In all, 96 people were killed by this avalanche.

1914 - High winds and heavy snow crippled New Jersey and New York State. Two feet of snow were reported at Ashbury Park, and at New York City the barometric pressure dropped to a record 28.38 inches. The storm caused complete disruption of electric power in New Jersey. (David Ludlum)

1980: March 1-3rd, North Carolina experienced a significant winter storm with heavy snow across the entire state and near blizzard conditions in the eastern part of the state. Widespread snowfall totals of 12 to 18 inches were observed over Eastern North Carolina, with localized amounts ranging up to 22 inches at Morehead City and 25 inches at Elizabeth City, with unofficial reports of up to 30 inches at Emerald Isle and Cherry Point. Norfolk, VA, received 13.7 inches of snow to push their season total to a record 41.9 inches exceeding their previous record by more than four inches.

1980 - An unusually large Florida tornado, 500 yards in width at times, killed one person and caused six million dollars damage near Fort Lauderdale. (The Weather Channel)

1983: Two tornadoes caused damage in the Los Angeles areas during the morning hours. The strongest tornado was an F2 on the ground for 21 minutes.

1983 - A ferocious storm battered the Pacific coast. The storm produced heavy rain and gale force winds resulting in flooding and beach erosion, and in the mountains produced up to seven feet of snow in five days. (The Weather Channel)

1986: Light snow fell during the early morning hour in Jacksonville, Florida. A half inch of snow was reported at the Jacksonville International Airport, the highest amount ever recorded in March.

1987 - A storm crossing the Great Lakes Region produced heavy snow and gale force winds from Wisconsin to northern New England, with eight inches of snow reported at Ironwood MI. (The National Weather Summary)

1988 - Thunderstorms produced large hail and damaging winds in north central Texas. Baseball size hail was reported at Lake Kickapoo. Hail fell continuously for thirty minutes in the Iowa Park area of Wichita Falls. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1989 - March came in like a lion, with snow and high winds, in the northwestern U.S. Winds gusted to 86 mph in the Rosario Strait of western Washington State. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

2006: The day's temperature of 93 degrees at the Dallas/Fort Worth Airport in Texas broke a 107-year-old record. Other hot North Texas cities included Wichita Falls at 96 degrees and Fort Worth Meacham Airport at 90 degrees.

1990 - A series of low pressure systems moving out of the Gulf of Alaska spread high winds and heavy snow across western Alaska. Winds in the Anchorage area gusted to 69 mph at Glen Alps, and Talkeetna was buried under three feet of snow in two days. Valdez received 21.4 inches of snow, raising their total for the winter season to 482.4 inches. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

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Daily Devotionals

## Seeds of Hope

### "I DO CARE"

George went to confession regularly. And, he was more faithful than most. But, whenever he went, he expressed no feelings of remorse or change of attitude, and his behavior showed no signs of repentance.

His priest was concerned that there was no sorrow for his sins or feelings of guilt for his shortcomings. It hurt the priest because he loved George deeply. He baptized him when he was an infant and had known him from his childhood.

One day in his frustration, he said, "George, please go into the cathedral. Near the altar is a statue of Christ on the cross. Get down on your knees, look into the face of our Lord, raise your fist and say, 'Jesus, you did all this for me, but I don't care! It's just not that important to me.' Will you do that for me, please?"

Reluctantly he agreed and went into the cathedral. He slowly walked to the cross, dropped to his knees, looked up into the face of Jesus, and began to repeat the words of the priest: "Jesus, you did all this for me...Jesus, you did all this for me...Jesus, you did all this for me." Suddenly he began to sob loudly and shouted, "Jesus, forgive me please, forgive me for my sins. Now that I see You, I really do care."

Once we finally see and feel, understand and care, realize and accept what Jesus did for us on the cross of Calvary, our lives will change.

Prayer: Lord, may we come to that place in our lives where we will in some small way realize the depth of Your suffering, the price of our salvation, and the debt we owe You. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: My old self has been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me. So I live in this earthly body by trusting in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. Galatians 2:20



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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## WINNING NUMBERS

### MEGA MILLIONS

WINNING NUMBERS: 02.27.24

6 18 26 27 49 4

MegaPlier: 3x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

**\$607,000,000**

NEXT DRAW: 17 Hrs 29 Mins 0 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### LOTTO AMERICA

WINNING NUMBERS:

02.28.24

16 18 25 37 46 7

All Star Bonus: 3x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

**\$3,650,000**

NEXT DRAW: 1 Days 16 Hrs 44 Mins 0 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### LUCKY FOR LIFE

WINNING NUMBERS:

02.29.24

15 21 37 41 44 2

TOP PRIZE:

**\$7,000/week**

NEXT DRAW: 16 Hrs 59 Mins 0 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### DAKOTA CASH

WINNING NUMBERS:

02.28.24

8 12 17 18 31

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

**\$20,000**

NEXT DRAW: 1 Days 16 Hrs 59 Mins 1 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### POWERBALL

DOUBLE PLAY

WINNING NUMBERS:

02.28.24

14 38 41 47 67 7

TOP PRIZE:

**\$10,000,000**

NEXT DRAW: 1 Days 17 Hrs 28 Mins 0 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### POWERBALL

WINNING NUMBERS:

02.28.24

16 26 29 38 50 6

Power Play: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

**\$443,000,000**

NEXT DRAW: 1 Days 17 Hrs 28 Mins 0 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

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## News from the Associated Press

Thioune's 31 lead South Dakota past North Dakota State 88-68

By The Associated Press undefined

VERMILLION, S.D. (AP) — Lahat Thioune's 31 points led South Dakota over North Dakota State 88-68 on Thursday night.

Thioune added 11 rebounds for the Coyotes (12-18, 5-10 Summit League). Max Burchill scored 17 points, going 5 of 9 (5 for 6 from 3-point range). Bostyn Holt was 5 of 9 shooting and 1 of 3 from the free throw line to finish with 11 points, while adding nine assists.

Andrew Morgan led the way for the Bison (15-15, 8-7) with 16 points and six rebounds. North Dakota State also got 16 points from Jacari White. In addition, Damari Wheeler-Thomas had 10 points.

The Associated Press created this story using technology provided by Data Skrive and data from Sportradar.

### South Dakota State earns 72-62 win against North Dakota

By The Associated Press undefined

GRAND FORKS, N.D. (AP) — Zeke Mayo's 26 points helped South Dakota State defeat North Dakota 72-62 on Thursday night.

Mayo added eight rebounds and four steals for the Jackrabbits (18-12, 11-4 Summit League). Charlie Easley scored 13 points while going 5 of 10 (3 for 7 from 3-point range). Luke Appel went 5 of 9 from the field to finish with 12 points.

Tyree Ihenacho and B.J. Omot each finished with 14 points for the Fightin' Hawks (17-13, 9-6). Treysen Eaglestaff also had 12 points.

The Associated Press created this story using technology provided by Data Skrive and data from Sportradar.

### Thursday's Scores

The Associated Press

GIRLS PREP BASKETBALL=

SDHSAA Playoffs=

Class A SODAK 16=

State Qualifier=

Flandreau 58, Hill City 32

Hanson 49, Florence-Henry 45

Mahpiya Luta Red Cloud High School 81, Belle Fourche 49

Mt. Vernon/Plankinton 46, Aberdeen Roncalli 40

Sioux Falls Christian 62, Miller 22

Sisseton 63, Tri-Valley 52

Tea 62, Mobridge-Pollock 37

Vermillion 60, Winner 30

Class B SODAK 16=

State Qualifier=

Arlington 69, Gayville-Volin High School 57

Centerville 66, Tripp-Delmont-Armour 45

Ethan 62, Andes Central/Dakota Christian 59, OT

Harding County 58, Northwestern 25  
James Valley Christian 61, Lemmon High School 50  
Lyman 63, Kadoka 48  
Wall 75, Colman-Egan 44  
Warner 61, Herreid-Selby 47

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

## South Dakota Republican lawmakers want clarity for the state's abortion laws. They propose a video

By JACK DURA Associated Press

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — South Dakota's Republican-controlled Legislature on Thursday approved the creation of a video to outline the state's abortion laws and to clarify when health care providers are legally allowed to intervene.

The bill passed by the state Senate in a 31-3 vote is also intended for the general public and would require the state Department of Health, which answers to Republican Gov. Kristi Noem, to create the informational video "and other materials" by Sept. 1. Creation of the video would take place in consultation with the state attorney general and legal and medical experts, describing how the state's abortion laws should be applied.

The bill previously passed in the House by a 63-6 margin, and now heads to Noem.

South Dakota outlaws all abortions except to save the life of the mother under a trigger ban that took effect in 2022 after the U.S. Supreme Court overturned *Roe v. Wade*.

Republican Rep. Taylor Rehfeldt said she brought the bill for clarity to providers who had questions about when they could intervene to save the life of a mother.

The bill seeks to provide clarification without "the noise of politics around the abortion issue," Rehfeldt said last week during an interview with The Associated Press. Efforts to clarify or redefine the statute itself likely would have failed, having little consensus around the issue, she said.

Republican Sen. Erin Tobin told a Senate panel on Wednesday that a video could be used by hospitals and health care systems "to review their policies and to educate all employees" and would be "an actual way to battle misinformation in the state of South Dakota." The video will be publicly accessible online, she said.

But "there will not be specific (pregnancy complication) circumstances in this video. That's the problem with health care, is that there are so many different circumstances that you have to allow doctors discretion," Tobin said.

She also said she didn't know whether the video will have a legal disclaimer.

Sanford Health, a South Dakota-based health care system, asked the panel to support the bill. Senior legislative affairs specialist Ally Brandner said, "At Sanford, we realize that we are entrusted with both the life of the pregnant mother and the child, and we appreciate the sponsor's efforts to provide clarity around our abortion (laws)."

Noem spokesman Ian Fury, who is the governor's "unborn child advocate," said the administration will make the proposed video and materials available on South Dakota's pregnancy resource website "to make sure that we are offering peace and knowledge to moms, families and the general public and that they can access those resources as well."

American Civil Liberties Union of South Dakota Advocacy Manager Samantha Chapman said the bill "does not solve the fundamental problem that we're facing here, which is that our underlying statutes are too vague to reasonably inform a medical practitioner as to what they are legally allowed to do in an emergency."

The video's budget is expected to be \$50,000, but it might cost less, Health Secretary Melissa Magstadt told the Senate panel.

A proposed ballot initiative would place abortion rights in South Dakota's constitution. The Legislature inked its official opposition to the measure earlier this month with a resolution against it.

Democratic Senate Minority Leader Reynold Nesiba said the video bill would open the state to litigation for attempting to influence the measure's election outcome.

## **Texas Sen. Cornyn announces run for GOP leader as scramble to succeed McConnell begins in the Senate**

By MARY CLARE JALONICK Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Texas Sen. John Cornyn has informed his colleagues that he intends to run for Senate Republican leader, becoming the first senator to announce a campaign after Sen. Mitch McConnell said he will step down from the post in November.

Cornyn, who served as McConnell's No. 2 in leadership before he was term-limited out of the job five years ago, is citing his experience in that role in a statement Thursday to fellow senators announcing his run. But he also is trying to distinguish himself from McConnell, saying, "I believe the Senate is broken -- that is not news to anyone."

"From experience, I have learned what works in the Senate and what does not," Cornyn said. "And I am confident Senate Republicans can restore our institution to the essential role it serves in our constitutional republic."

There has long been speculation that Cornyn, South Dakota Sen. John Thune and Wyoming Sen. John Barrasso -- the "three Johns" -- would vie to replace McConnell, R-Ky., if and when McConnell were to step down. But the longtime leader's surprise announcement on Wednesday that he won't run again for Republican leader after the November elections has jump-started the campaign earlier than expected, almost nine months before GOP senators are expected to gather and choose a new leader behind closed doors.

Cornyn, a former Texas attorney general who was first elected to the Senate in 2002, is a prominent member of the Senate Judiciary Committee and a popular member of the GOP conference who is seen as a steady hand. He has managed to bridge some of the caucus' deep divides in recent years while also occasionally negotiating with Democrats, as he did on bipartisan gun legislation in 2022.

He is also a prolific fundraiser for the party, having raised a total of \$13 million for incumbents, the party's Senate campaign arm, and Senate Republican nominees already in the 2024 cycle.

In his statement, Cornyn said he believes he has "built a track record of listening to colleagues and seeking consensus, while leading the fight to stop bad policies that are harmful to our nation and the conservative cause."

Cornyn said he would work to improve communication, try to move spending bills individually and make an effort to include every member in decisions. That's a response to frequent complaints from some senators about massive year-end spending bills and McConnell's top-down leadership approach.

Both Thune, the current No. 2 Republican, and Barrasso, the chairman of the Senate GOP conference, have left the door open to runs after McConnell's announcement. Neither has officially announced a campaign for the job.

Thune told reporters that McConnell's departure leaves "big shoes to fill," but that now is a time "to reflect on his service and and honor him for that. And then we'll we'll go from there." After Cornyn's announcement, a spokesman for Thune said the senator is reaching out to colleagues to discuss "the future of the Senate Republican Conference and what they would like to see in their next leader," but intends on keeping those conversations private.

Barrasso said Wednesday he's focused on the November election and getting a Senate majority. In terms of leadership decisions, "I'm going to talk to members of the conference, hear what they have to say, listen to them in terms of what direction they want to take."

Much of the race for leader is likely to take place through phone calls, one-on-one meetings and private gatherings over the next several months. Unlike the House, where both parties vote for speaker in

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a public — and recently messy — spectacle, Senate party leadership is chosen in closed-door conference meetings by secret ballot. Cornyn was already making calls and reaching out to his fellow senators in the hours since McConnell's announcement.

Republican senators haven't chosen a new leader since 2007, when McConnell was elected. That's before most current GOP senators took office.

It is unclear which of the three "Johns" would have an advantage among their peers.

While Cornyn is well liked and has drawn attention for his fundraising, Thune could have the advantage of incumbency, as McConnell's current deputy. Barrasso has tracked furthest to the right of the three, becoming the first of them to endorse former President Donald Trump for the GOP presidential nomination.

Thune and Cornyn have criticized Trump in the past, especially since the Jan. 6, 2021, attack on the Capitol by Trump's supporters. But each eventually endorsed him as it became more likely that he will be the party's presidential nominee this year.

There are certain to be other candidates, as well, including from the wing of the party that is closest to Trump.

Florida Sen. Rick Scott challenged McConnell in 2022 at Trump's urging, winning 10 votes, and he could run again. Scott has said he is focused on his own reelection bid this year, but has appeared open to a run after that.

"I think there's a better way to run the Senate," Scott said after McConnell's announcement. "So we'll see what happens."

On Thursday, Scott said that he and Sen. Ron Johnson, R-Wisc., will soon call for a special conference meeting to discuss the future of the party.

The sudden scramble for the next leader comes as McConnell, 82, had faced louder and increasing criticism from some within his party who have said it is time for a change in leadership. They have criticized McConnell's support for the huge end-of-year spending bills and, most recently, his outspoken backing for aid for Ukraine. A growing number in his conference has opposed the assistance, saying it would be better spent on the U.S.-Mexico border or elsewhere within the U.S.

The Republican leader was also at odds with Trump, whom he has said was "practically and morally responsible" for the Capitol attack. The two haven't spoken since before then, and Trump frequently bashes him publicly.

McConnell acknowledged his critics in his Senate floor speech announcing that he would step down from that role.

"Believe me, I know the politics within my party at this particular moment in time," McConnell said. "I have many faults, misunderstanding politics is not one of them."

He also echoed his critics, calling for a "new generation" to take over.

In the hours after the announcement, as the surprise wore off, many senators praised McConnell's legacy, including his role in the Senate confirmation of three conservative Supreme Court Justices who tilted the court to the right.

Others were more focused on the future.

"This is a good development," said Missouri Sen. Josh Hawley, a frequent McConnell critic. "My question is: Why wait so long?"

## Navalny's family is laying the opposition leader to rest after his death in prison

By KATIE MARIE DAVIES Associated Press

Relatives and supporters of Alexei Navalny are bidding farewell to the opposition leader at a funeral Friday in southeastern Moscow, following a battle with authorities over the release of his body after his still-unexplained death in an Arctic penal colony.

His supporters say several churches in Moscow refused to hold the service before Navalny's team got permission from one in the capital's Maryino district, where he once lived before his 2020 poisoning, treat-

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ment in Germany and subsequent arrest on his return to Russia.

The Church of the Icon of the Mother of God Soothe My Sorrows, which agreed to hold the service, did not mention it on its social media page. Authorities lined the road from from a nearby subway station to the church with crowd-control barriers, and riot police deployed in big numbers early Friday.

A hearse set out with Navalny's body toward the church, his team said.

Burial was to follow in the nearby Borisovskoye Cemetery, where police also showed up in force.

Navalny's mother, Lyudmila Navalnaya, spent eight days trying to get authorities to release the body following his Feb. 16 death at Penal Colony No. 3 in the town of Kharp, in the Yamalo-Nenets region about 1,900 kilometers (1,200 miles) northeast of Moscow.

Authorities originally said they couldn't turn over the body because they needed to conduct post-mortem tests. Navalnaya, 69, made a video appeal to President Vladimir Putin to release the body so she could bury her son with dignity.

Once it was released, at least one funeral director said he had been "forbidden" to work with Navalny's supporters, the spokeswoman for Navalny's team, Kira Yarmysh, said on social media. They also were unable to find a hearse for the funeral.

"Unknown people are calling up people and threatening them not to take Alexei's body anywhere," Yarmysh said Thursday.

Russian authorities still haven't announced the cause of death for Navalny, 47, who crusaded against official corruption and organized big protests as Putin's fiercest political foe. Many Western leaders blamed the death on the Russian leader, which the Kremlin angrily rejected.

It was not immediately clear who among Navalny's family or allies would attend the funeral, with many of his associates in exile abroad due to fear of prosecution in Russia. Navalny's Foundation for Fighting Corruption and his regional offices were designated as "extremist organizations" by the Russian government in 2021.

The politician's team said the funeral would be streamed live on Navalny's YouTube channel.

His widow, Yulia Navalnaya, accused Putin and Moscow Mayor Sergei Sobyanin of trying to block a public funeral.

"We don't want any special treatment — just to give people the opportunity to say farewell to Alexei in a normal way," Yulia Navalnaya wrote on X. In a speech to European lawmakers Wednesday in Strasbourg, France, she also expressed fears that police might interfere with the gathering or would "arrest those who have come to say goodbye to my husband."

Moscow authorities refused permission for a separate memorial event for Navalny and slain opposition leader Boris Nemtsov on Friday, citing COVID-19 restrictions, politician Yekaterina Duntsova said Thursday. Nemtsov, a 55-year-old former deputy prime minister, was shot to death as he walked on a bridge adjacent to the Kremlin on the night of Feb. 27, 2015.

Yarmysh also urged Navalny's supporters around the world to lay flowers in his honor Friday.

"Everyone who knew Alexei says what a cheerful, courageous and honest person he was," Yarmysh said Thursday. "But the greater truth is that even if you never met Alexei, you knew what he was like, too. You shared his investigations, you went to rallies with him, you read his posts from prison. His example showed many people what to do when even when things were scary and difficult."

Ivan Zhdanov, director of Navalny's Anti-Corruption Foundation, said that his funeral had initially been planned for Thursday — the day of Putin's annual state-of-the-nation address — but no venue agreed to hold it then.

In an interview with the independent Russian news site Meduza, Zhdanov said authorities had pressured Navalny's relatives to "have a quiet family funeral."

## **Bangladeshi leader says a shopping mall that caught fire had no emergency exits. Death toll climbs**

DHAKA, Bangladesh (AP) — A six-story shopping mall that caught fire in the Bangladeshi capital had no fire exits, the country's prime minister said Friday, as the death toll climbed to at least 46 and rescuers continued to search for more victims.

The fire started late Thursday in a restaurant on the first floor of the Green Cozy Cottage Shopping Mall in downtown Dhaka. More than a dozen firefighting units were deployed.

Firefighters rescued survivors and pulled out bodies, and by early Friday, at least 43 people were confirmed dead. Three injured people died later, said Health Minister Samanta Lal Sen. He said the toll could rise further as at least a dozen critically injured people were being treated in two state-run hospitals.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina expressed her shock at the loss of lives and said that it was a result of negligence.

"What could be more painful than this?" she said, speaking at an unrelated event in Dhaka.

"We always request our architects, at least when they design homes or buildings, (to) keep a small open balcony, a fire exit or ventilation. But architects ... will not design that properly and also the owners do not want to leave an inch of space," she said.

One survivor said people escaped by heading to the building's roof.

"I knew about the fire when it was at the first floor. We moved to the roof of the building. Around 30 people were there. After the fire was under control, fire service personnel broke into one side of the roof and rescued us," Mohammed Siam said.

Forty-one victims have been identified and 38 of the bodies have been handed to their families, said Bacchu Mia, who is in charge of a police outpost at Dhaka Medical College Hospital.

"Overnight many families waited here for their loved ones. It's a heartbreaking scene as they desperately looked for their family members who died in the tragedy," Mia said.

Five members of one family were among the dead, while the toll also included students, teachers and two reporters. The fire broke out at the beginning of the country's weekend and many people were dining.

A fire department team entered the charred building Friday morning to see if there were more bodies, and forensic experts began looking for evidence.

The cause of the fire has not been determined. But the fire service department said the building owner was served at least three times with notice to correct the building's fire extinguishing system.

Bangladesh has a history of such fires in commercial buildings in Dhaka and outside. Experts say lax monitoring and violation of building codes by construction companies and owners have proved deadly.

## **Iran votes in its first parliament election since 2022 protests as questions over turnout loom**

By The Associated Press undefined

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates (AP) — Iran on Friday held the country's first parliamentary election since the mass 2022 protests over mandatory hijab laws after the death in police custody of Mahsa Amini, with questions looming over just how many people will turn out at the polls.

Iranian officials and even Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei have urged the public to cast ballots, but polling stations in the country's capital, Tehran, appeared to see few voters.

Authorities have largely barred politicians calling for any change within the country's theocracy, known broadly as reformists, from running in the election — leaving mostly only a broad slate of conservative or hard-line figures.

Iran's economy continues to stagnate under Western sanctions over Tehran's rapidly advancing nuclear program and the country's arming of militia proxies in the Middle East and Russia in its war on Ukraine.

Some of the voters acknowledged the challenges facing the Islamic Republic.

"There are many problems; too many problems," said one voter, who just gave her last name, Sajjad.



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"We are sad, we are sorrowful and we voice our criticism as much as we can. God willing, those responsible (will) start thinking about us, and probably many of them do care."

Khamenei, 84, cast one of the first votes in an election that also will see new members elected to the country's Assembly of Experts. The panel of clerics, who serve an eight-year term, is mandated to select a new supreme leader if Khamenei steps down or dies, underscoring the panel's increased importance, given Khamenei's age.

Khamenei voted before a crowd of journalists in Tehran, his left hand slightly shaking as he took his ballot from his right, paralyzed since a 1981 bombing. State television showed one woman nearby weeping as she filmed Khamenei with her mobile phone.

He urged people to vote as soon as possible in the election, saying that both Iran's friends and enemies were watching the turnout.

"Pay attention to this, make friends happy and disappoint the evil-wishers," he said in brief remarks by the ballot boxes.

Khamenei's protégé, hard-line President Ebrahim Raisi, repeated that call and urged the public to make "a glorious day for the Iranian nation."

Some 15,000 candidates are vying for a seat in the 290-member parliament, formally known as the Islamic Consultative Assembly. Out of them, only 116 are considered as relatively moderate or pro-reform candidates. Those demanding radical changes are banned or didn't bother to register given widespread disqualifications by authorities.

Parliament terms run for four years, and five seats are reserved for Iran's religious minorities.

Under the law, the parliament has oversight over the executive branch, votes on treaties and handles other issues. In practice, absolute power in Iran rests with its supreme leader.

Hard-liners have controlled the parliament for the past two decades — with chants of "Death to America" often heard from the floor.

Under Parliament Speaker Mohammad Bagher Qalibaf, a former Revolutionary Guard general who supported a violent crackdown on Iranian university students in 1999, the legislature pushed forward a bill in 2020 that greatly curtailed Tehran's cooperation with the United Nations nuclear watchdog, the International Atomic Energy Agency.

That followed then-President Donald Trump's unilateral withdrawal of America from Iran's nuclear deal with world powers in 2018 — an act that sparked years of tensions in the Middle East and saw Iran enrich enough uranium at record-breaking purity to have enough fuel for "several" nuclear weapons if it chose.

More recently, the parliament has focused on issues surrounding Iran's mandatory head covering, or hijab, for women after the 2022 death of 22-year-old Amini in police custody, which sparked nationwide protests.

The protests quickly escalated into calls to overthrow Iran's clerical rulers. A subsequent security crackdown killed over 500 people, with more than 22,000 detained.

Calls for an election boycott have spread in recent weeks, including from imprisoned Nobel Peace Prize laureate Narges Mohammadi, a women's right activist, who called them a "sham."

The boycott calls have put the government under renewed pressure — since its 1979 Islamic Revolution, Iran's theocracy has based its legitimacy in part on turnout in elections.

The state-owned polling center ISPA hadn't put out election data prior to the vote until Thursday, something highly unusual as their figures typically get released much earlier. Its polling, based on a survey of 5,121 voting-age people, predicted a turnout of 23.5% in the capital, Tehran, and 38.5% nationally. It said the margin of error in the poll was 2%.

Iranian state television showed crowded polling stations but elsewhere, there appeared to be few voters braving the freezing temperatures in Tehran.

In one place, a young woman without a hijab and her mother, wearing one, entered the polling station together. There was no comment from officials or police on hand.

"I accompanied my mother who wanted to vote just to remind authorities about last year's crackdown," said the daughter, who gave her first name, Zohreh. Her mother voted for a relative moderate running in

their district, while Zohreh declined to cast a ballot, she said.

Meanwhile, a heavy security presence could be seen across the capital, with ordinary and anti-riot police officers visible in main squares and junctions. Some 200,000 security forces have been deployed across the country as over 59,000 polling stations opened. Another 1 million people reportedly are running the election, home to some 85 million people.

Estimates put the voting-age population at 61 million.

Polling places will be open until 6 p.m. local time (1430 GMT), though Iran typically extends voting at the last minute. Initial election results are expected as early as Saturday.

## The Latest | Condemnation of Israel's actions in Gaza grows after dozens killed while seeking aid

By The Associated Press undefined

Turkey has joined Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Jordan in condemning Israeli forces firing on Palestinians waiting for the delivery of aid, with its foreign ministry calling the event "yet another crime against humanity."

Israel said many of the dead were trampled in a chaotic crush for the food aid, and that its troops only fired when they felt endangered by the crowd.

The Health Ministry in Gaza says more than 100 people were killed and at least 700 wounded. That brings the Palestinian death toll to more than 30,000 in the Gaza Strip since Israel's war on Hamas began nearly five months ago after Hamas-led militants stormed across southern Israel on Oct. 7, killing 1,200 people and taking about 250 others hostage.

Israel responded with a blistering offensive in the Gaza Strip that has created a humanitarian catastrophe and devastation in northern areas like Gaza City, which are largely cut off from the rest of the territory with little aid entering. In a statement issued late Thursday, the Turkish Foreign Ministry accused Israel of using "starvation as a weapon of war in Gaza."

Currently:

- A Palestinian American woman who faces trial in Israeli military court is released on bail.
- Colombia pauses buying Israeli weapons and president calls war in Gaza "genocide."
- Journalism leaders ask for more protection for those covering the war.
- Find more of AP's coverage at <https://apnews.com/hub/israel-hamas-war>.

Here's the latest:

**TURKEY DENOUNCES ISRAELI FORCES FIRING ON PALESTINIANS WHO WERE WAITING FOR AID DELIVERY**

**ANKARA, Turkey** — Turkey denounced Israeli forces firing on Palestinians waiting for the delivery of aid as "yet another crime against humanity."

In a statement issued late Thursday, the Turkish Foreign Ministry accused Israel of using "starvation as a weapon of war in Gaza" and alleged that the latest event, which left more than 100 people dead, was evidence "of Israel's intention to destroy the entire Palestinian population."

"The entire world must realise that the atrocity in Gaza is about to become a global catastrophe with repercussions far beyond the region," the ministry said. "We therefore call on all those with influence over the Israeli government to stop the ongoing violence in Gaza."

## Parts of the Sierra Nevada likely to get 10 feet of snow from powerful storm by weekend

By SCOTT SONNER AND OLGA R. RODRIGUEZ Associated Press

**RENO, Nev. (AP)** — The most powerful Pacific storm of the season is forecast to bring up to 10 feet (3 meters) of snow into the Sierra Nevada by the weekend, forcing residents to take shelter and prompting at least one Lake Tahoe ski resort to close Friday.

The storm began barreling into the region on Thursday, with the biggest effects expected to close major

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highways and trigger power outages Friday afternoon into Saturday. A blizzard warning through Sunday morning covers a 300-mile (482-kilometer) stretch from north of Lake Tahoe to south of Yosemite National Park.

"Your safe travel window is over in the Sierra," the National Weather Service in Reno posted Thursday morning on social media. "Best to hunker down where you are."

Meteorologists predict as much as 10 feet (3 meters) of snow is possible in the mountains around Lake Tahoe by the weekend, with 3 to 6 feet (0.9 to 1.8 meters) in the communities on the lake's shores and more than a foot (30 centimeters) possible in the valleys on the Sierra's eastern front, including Reno.

Winds are expected to gust in excess of 115 mph (185 kph) over Sierra ridgetops, and 70 mph (113 kph) at lower elevations.

"This will be a legitimate blizzard," UCLA climate scientist Daniel Swain said during an online briefing Thursday. "Really true blizzard conditions with multiple feet of snow and very strong winds, the potential for power outages and the fact that roads probably aren't going to be cleared as quickly or as effectively as they normally would be even during a significant winter storm."

Backcountry avalanche warnings were in place around Lake Tahoe, as well as areas around Yosemite National Park stretching down to Mammoth Lakes.

Alpine Meadows, an affiliate of neighboring Palisades Tahoe, will be closed Friday. Palisades planned to open only its lowest elevation runs, and could end up closing those.

Andrew Schwartz, the lead scientist at UC-Berkeley's Central Sierra Snow Lab, said it is possible they could break their modern-day record of about 3.5 feet (1 meter) of snow in a single day from back in 1989. The lab was founded atop the Sierra in 1946 in Soda Springs, California, northwest of Lake Tahoe.

The California Highway Patrol imposed travel restrictions on a long stretch of Interstate 80 between Reno and Sacramento, requiring drivers to put chains on their tires. A stretch of the highway was closed for hours at midday Thursday while crews cleared the wreckage of a semi-trailer truck that overturned near Truckee, California.

On the bright side, California water officials said the storm should provide a much-needed shot in the arm to the Sierra snowpack, which is vital to the state's water supplies and sits well below normal so far this season.

Palisades Tahoe ski resort wrote on X, formerly known as Twitter, that the big dump expected over the weekend on top of 8 feet (2.4 meters) of snow in February should allow them to keep the slopes open through Memorial Day. But it warned blizzard conditions are likely to force temporary closures off and on through the weekend.

Todd Cummings decided to drive from Santa Cruz to the Lake Tahoe area ahead of the storm with plans to lay low during the blizzard and then hit the slopes.

"When a storm comes in, people have a tough time getting there, so there's sometimes less crowds on the mountains and there is untracked, fresh snow that it's super light and you float on it. It's fantastic!" he said.

Some remained skeptical it will be as bad as predicted.

Richard Cunningham said he has heard before about forecasts for the storm of the century that didn't materialize since he moved from Las Vegas to Reno in 1997.

"Same story, different day," he said. "Sometimes it doesn't even snow."

That was before blue skies gave way to clouds and gusty winds that blew the roof off a shed east of Reno Thursday afternoon.

Howie Nave, a radio DJ and stand-up comedian in South Lake Tahoe, said some people may not have been taking the storm seriously earlier in the week because dire forecasts of potentially heavy storms have not materialized several times this winter.

"There were times when I was expecting a Saint Bernard, but you gave me a Chihuahua," Nave said about the weather forecasters.

But "everybody's talking about the storm up here," he said. "This is the first time we've had a blizzard

warning.”

The Sierra Nevada snowpack stood at 80% of average to date but only 70% of the typical April 1 peak, California Department of Water resources officials said Thursday.

“The results today show just how critical this upcoming month is going to be in terms of our water supply outlook for the upcoming year,” hydrometeorologist Angelique Fabbiani-Leon said during a briefing at Phillips Station, a snowpack-measuring location south of Lake Tahoe.

## **Mourners to gather for the funeral of a slain Georgia nursing student who loved caring for others**

WOODSTOCK, Ga. (AP) — Family, friends and classmates planned to gather Friday at a church outside Atlanta to say farewell to Laken Riley, the nursing student found slain after she went out for a morning jog on the University of Georgia campus.

A funeral service for 22-year-old Riley was set to follow a visitation Friday afternoon at Woodstock City Church in Cherokee County, where Riley lived before graduating from high school in Atlanta’s northern suburbs.

Riley was enrolled in the Augusta Medical College’s nursing program in Athens when police found her dead Feb. 22 on the neighboring University of Georgia campus. A friend called police after Riley left to go running and didn’t come home.

The killing shocked Riley’s fellow students in Athens, where more than 41,000 attend UGA and another 210 are enrolled in the medical program where Riley studied nursing. Police arrested a suspect, Jose Antonio Ibarra, on murder charges the day after Riley was slain in a forested area with trails for running and walking.

Riley “loved nursing and caring for others,” according to her obituary from Poole Funeral Home. She had remained active in the AXO sorority at UGA, where she studied before enrolling in nursing school.

In addition to her parents, Riley is survived by her stepfather, two sisters and a brother. One of her siblings, Lauren Phillips, posted on social media that Riley was “the best sister and my built in best friend from the very first second.”

“This isn’t fair and I will never understand it but I know you are in heaven,” Phillips wrote on Instagram following her sister’s death. She added, “I’m not sure how I’m going to do this but it’s all going to be for you from now on. I cannot wait to give you the biggest hug someday.”

Ibarra is a Venezuelan man who entered the U.S. illegally and was allowed to stay to pursue his immigration case, which has thrust the slaying to the forefront of the U.S. debate over immigration, a top issue in the 2024 presidential campaign.

## **Paramedic convictions in Elijah McClain’s death spur changes for patients in police custody**

By COLLEEN SLEVIN and MATTHEW BROWN Associated Press

DENVER (AP) — Medical responders across the U.S. are rethinking how they treat people in police custody after a jury last December handed down a rare decision: It convicted two Colorado paramedics for their roles in the 2019 death of Elijah McClain following an overdose of a powerful sedative.

As one of the paramedics faces sentencing Friday at a hearing in which McClain’s mother could speak about her son’s death, the case has sent shock waves through the ranks of paramedics across the U.S. and thrust their profession into the acrimonious fight over social justice sparked by the 2020 murder of George Floyd by Minneapolis police.

McClain, a 23-year-old Black massage therapist, was forcibly detained by police in the Denver suburb of Aurora while walking home from a convenience store. After officers claimed McClain was resisting, the paramedics injected him with the sedative ketamine. He went into cardiac arrest on the way to the hospital and died three days later.

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The conviction of the paramedics and one of the police officers brought a small measure of justice to the victim's family. Yet the case has also highlighted gaps in medical procedures that experts said must be addressed so more deaths can be prevented.

"We failed to realize just how dangerous the restraint and chemical sedation of these individuals can be," said Eric Jaeger, a paramedic and EMS educator in New Hampshire. "For better or worse the criminal convictions are focusing attention on the problem."

The response includes revisions to patient protocols aimed at elevating how seriously ketamine injections are treated — or avoiding them altogether when alternative drugs are more appropriate.

Some departments now require comprehensive patient assessments before and after ketamine injections. They've also cautioned against using ketamine on people being restrained by police in a prone position — which increases the chances for fatal complications by making it harder for patients to breathe — and stocked medicine kits with alternative sedatives. And they've reminded their paramedics not to defer to police when making medical decisions.

In the McClain case, "a lot of these basics were not done," said Peter Antevy, medical director for several Florida fire departments.

"Everyone kind of assumed people just do them. But more and more you're seeing with the advent of body cameras that people aren't doing these things," he said. "We need to put the basics in black and white."

The changes have come relatively swiftly within a profession in which it can take up to a decade for the latest medical research to filter down to paramedics on the front lines, Jaeger said. Nevertheless, since McClain's death, Jaeger has documented five similar cases involving patients dying after receiving ketamine, most recently a 29-year-old man in Baltimore last summer.

In Aurora, the paramedics' indictment is blamed by union officials for prompting some medical responders to scale back their duties.

The day after the verdicts, Aurora's fire chief temporarily suspended a requirement that firefighters also serve as paramedics, fearing the convictions would lead to a mass exodus of personnel.

So far about 10% of the department's certified paramedics have taken a pay cut and are no longer working as paramedics, reverting to the role of emergency medical technicians, or EMTs, who cannot provide advanced life-saving measures.

Fire Chief Alec Oughton said enough paramedics remain for every ladder truck and engine to have an assigned paramedic.

But the president of the International Association of Fire Fighters union said the convictions put lives at risk in the city because EMTs aren't qualified to provide life-saving drugs, such as for patients suffering heart attacks.

"The legacy of Attorney General Phil Weiser is there is going to be less paramedics to respond to people who need help," said union president Edward Kelly, referring to the state attorney general tasked by Colorado's Democratic governor with reinvestigating McClain's death in 2020 following protests over the killing of George Floyd.

No one was initially charged in McClain's death, mostly because the first autopsy report could not conclude why he died. The autopsy was updated in 2021 — after Weiser convened a grand jury to examine the case — and it found McClain died because he was given ketamine after being restrained by police.

Kelly said ketamine did not kill McClain, noting the autopsy report's finding that the amount of the drug found in his system was at the low end of what is normally considered safe.

A 2021 study co-authored by Antevy examined 11,000 instances of patients receiving ketamine over a yearlong period. The drug was a possible contributor to just two deaths outside a hospital setting, the researchers concluded.

"Ketamine when used safely and correctly is a life-saving medication," Antevy said.

Paramedic Peter Cichuniec — the senior medical responder on the scene during the altercation with McClain — faces a mandatory yearlong prison sentence during Friday's hearing before a state judge.

A jury in December found him guilty of criminally negligent homicide and felony second-degree assault

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— the most serious verdict handed down against any of the first responders indicted in the case. The assault conviction carries a sentence of between five and 16 years in prison.

Police had stopped McClain following a suspicious person complaint. After an officer said McClain reached for an officer's gun — a claim disputed by prosecutors — another officer put him in a neck hold that rendered him temporarily unconscious. Officers also pinned down McClain before paramedic Jeremy Cooper injected him with ketamine. Cichuniec said it was his decision to use the drug.

Prosecutors said the paramedics did not conduct basic medical checks, such as taking McClain's pulse and monitoring his breathing before administering the ketamine. The dose was too much for someone of his size — 140 pounds (64 kilograms), experts testified.

Defense attorneys for the paramedics said they followed their training in giving ketamine after diagnosing McClain with "excited delirium," a disputed condition some say is unscientific and has been used to justify excessive force.

## Mexico is about to have its biggest election ever. Here's what to know

By MEGAN JANETSKY Associated Press

MEXICO CITY (AP) — Campaigning formally starts Friday for Mexico's biggest election in history.

Voters will choose the president, along with the winners of 628 seats in Congress and tens of thousands of local positions.

The country of 130 million people has often been marked by its "macho" culture. Now it is almost certain to elect its first woman president.

Also at play are escalating cartel warfare, the political legacy of President Andrés Manuel López Obrador and the long, often tumultuous relationship with the United States.

WHEN IS THE MEXICAN ELECTION AND HOW DOES VOTING WORK?

Parties selected their candidates well before the official start of campaigning for the presidential, congressional and municipal elections. On June 2, millions of voters will turn out to the polls to vote for their new leaders. The winner of the highly anticipated presidential elections will serve a five-year term.

While most eyes are on the presidential race, Mexicans will also vote for 128 senators, 500 congressional representatives and for tens of thousands of local government positions.

WHO IS RUNNING IN THE MEXICAN ELECTIONS?

Leading presidential candidate Claudia Sheinbaum has enjoyed a comfortable lead, with around 59% of the vote, according to a February poll. The former mayor of Mexico City, Sheinbaum is seen as a continuation of populist leftist leader López Obrador and is backed by his Morena party.

Senator Xóchitl Gálvez is in a not-so-close second with around 36% of the vote. Gálvez is a fierce critic of López Obrador and is running under the Strength and Heart for Mexico coalition. Trailing behind both is little-known Jorge Álvarez Máynez of the Citizen Movement party.

WHAT ARE THE RISKS IN MEXICO'S ELECTIONS?

In swathes of the country eclipsed by cartel violence, many have raised concerns about a security crisis that has spiraled under López Obrador. In the first two months of the year, a handful of candidates were slain before the election season officially began. Watchdogs warn that this year's elections could be Mexico's most violent on record.

For critics, the election has become increasingly about democratic concerns, which fueled massive February protests against electoral reforms made by López Obrador. However, the leader remain highly popular for many in Mexico's working class, López Obrador's base. With high inflation rates, such voters are likely to stick with a candidate that they feel will advocate for them. A great number feel that the president and his Morena party have done that.

HAS THERE EVER BEEN A FEMALE PRESIDENT IN MEXICO?

A female president would be a huge step in a country with soaring levels of gender-based violence and deep gender disparities.

Mexico still has famously intense "machismo" or male chauvinism, expressed in its most extreme form

in a high rate of femicides, but also daily in hundreds of more subtle ways.

While Mexican women have advanced to positions of political power in public life – in part because of required representation quotas for public office — women suffer from high levels of gender violence. Femicides — cases of women killed because of their gender — have been a persistent problem for decades.

## Some left helpless to watch as largest wildfire in Texas history devastates their town

By SEAN MURPHY and JIM VERTUNO Associated Press

STINNETT, Texas (AP) — As the largest wildfire in Texas history engulfed his town, Danny Phillips was left helpless.

“We had to watch from a few miles away as our neighborhood burned,” he said, his voice trembling with emotion.

In his hard-hit town of Stinnett, population roughly 1,600, families like his who evacuated from the Smokehouse Creek fire returned Thursday to devastating scenes: Melted street signs and charred frames of cars and trucks. Homes reduced to piles of ash and rubble. An American flag propped up outside a destroyed house.

Phillips’ one-story home was still standing, but several of his neighbors weren’t so fortunate.

Stinnett’s destruction was a reminder that, even as snow fell Thursday and helped firefighters, crews are racing to stamp out the blaze ahead of increased temperatures and winds forecast in the coming days.

Already, the Smokehouse Creek fire has killed two people and left behind a desolate landscape of scorched prairie, dead cattle and burned-out homes in the Texas Panhandle.

The blaze grew to nearly 1,700 square miles (4,400 square kilometers) early Thursday. It merged with another fire and is just 3% contained, according to the Texas A&M Forest Service. The largest of several major fires burning in the rural Panhandle section of the state, it has also crossed into Oklahoma.

Gray skies loomed over huge scars of blackened earth in a rural area dotted with scrub brush, ranchland, rocky canyons and oil rigs. Firefighter Lee Jones was helping douse the smoldering wreckage of homes in Stinnett to keep them from reigniting when the weather starts turning Friday and continues into the weekend.

“The snow helps,” said Jones, who was among a dozen firefighters called in from Lubbock to help. “We’re just hitting all the hot spots around town, the houses that have already burned.”

Authorities have not said what ignited the fires, but strong winds, dry grass and unseasonably warm temperatures fed them.

“The rain and the snow is beneficial right now — we’re using it to our advantage,” Texas A&M Forest Service spokesman Juan Rodriguez said of the Smokehouse Creek fire. “When the fire isn’t blowing up and moving very fast, firefighters are able to actually catch up and get to those parts of the fire.”

Authorities said 1,640 square miles (4,248 square kilometers) of the fire were on the Texas side of the border. Previously, the largest fire in recorded state history was the 2006 East Amarillo Complex fire, which burned about 1,400 square miles (3,630 square kilometers) and resulted in 13 deaths.

Two women are the only confirmed deaths so far this week. But with flames still menacing a wide area, authorities had yet to conduct a thorough search for victims or tally the numerous homes and other structures damaged or destroyed.

Cindy Owen was driving in Texas’ Hemphill County south of Canadian on Tuesday afternoon when she encountered fire or smoke, said Sgt. Chris Ray of the state’s Department of Public Safety. She got out of her truck, and flames overtook her.

A passerby found Owen and called first responders, who took her to a burn unit in Oklahoma. She died Thursday morning, Ray said.

The other victim, an 83-year-old woman, was identified by family members as Joyce Blankenship, a former substitute teacher. Her grandson, Lee Quesada, said deputies told his uncle Wednesday that they

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had found Blankenship's remains in her burned home.

President Joe Biden, who was in Texas on Thursday to visit the U.S.-Mexico border, said he directed federal officials to do "everything possible" to assist fire-affected communities, including sending firefighters and equipment. The Federal Emergency Management Agency has guaranteed Texas and Oklahoma will be reimbursed for their emergency costs, the president said.

"When disasters strike, there's no red states or blue states where I come from," Biden said. "Just communities and families looking for help. So we're standing with everyone affected by these wildfires and we're going to continue to help you respond and recover."

Republican Gov. Greg Abbott issued a disaster declaration for 60 counties and planned to visit the Panhandle on Friday.

The weekend forecast and "sheer size and scope" of the blaze are the biggest challenges for firefighters, said Nim Kidd, chief of the Texas Division of Emergency Management.

"I don't want the community there to feel a false sense of security that all these fires will not grow anymore," Kidd said. "This is still a very dynamic situation."

Jeremiah Kaslon, a Stinnett resident who saw neighbors' homes destroyed by flames that stopped just on the edge of his property, seemed prepared for what the changing forecast might bring.

"Around here, the weather, we get all four seasons in a week," Kaslon said. "It can be hot, hot and windy, and it will be snowing the next day. It's just that time of year."

Encroaching flames caused the main facility that disassembles America's nuclear arsenal to pause operations Tuesday night, but it was open for normal work by Wednesday. The small town of Fritch, which lost hundreds of homes in a 2014 fire, saw 40 to 50 more destroyed this week, Mayor Tom Ray said.

Texas Agriculture Commissioner Sid Miller estimated cattle deaths to be in the thousands, with more likely to come.

"There'll be cattle that we'll have to euthanize," Miller said. "They'll have burned hooves, burned udders."

Miller said individual ranchers could suffer devastating losses. But he predicted the overall impact on the Texas cattle industry and on consumer prices for beef would be minimal.

## **With salacious testimony finished, legal arguments to begin over Fani Willis' future in Trump case**

By KATE BRUMBACK Associated Press

ATLANTA (AP) — After several days of extraordinary testimony, the judge in the Georgia election interference case against former President Donald Trump is set to hear arguments Friday over whether Fulton County District Attorney Fani Willis should be removed from the prosecution over a romantic relationship.

Lawyers for Trump and other defendants in the election case argue Willis' romance with a special prosecutor she hired creates a conflict of interest. They say Willis paid outside lawyer Nathan Wade large sums for his work and then improperly benefited when he paid for vacations for the two of them.

Willis and Wade have acknowledged the relationship, which they said ended last summer, but they have argued it does not create any sort of conflict and has no bearing on the case. The pair said they didn't begin dating until the spring of 2022, after Wade was hired, and that they split travel expenses.

Since the relationship was revealed in early January, the subject dominating the court's time and the public's attention has not been the crimes prosecutors allege Trump and his allies committed while trying to overturn the election, but rather the intimate details of Willis and Wade's relationship.

The hearings have at times wandered into surreal territory: Atlanta's mayor watching from the gallery as a former Georgia governor testified, Willis' father talking about keeping stashes of cash around the house and details of romantic getaways.

Willis' removal would throw the most sprawling of the four criminal cases against Trump into question as the former president seeks a return to the White House. But it wouldn't necessarily mean the charges against him and 14 others would be dropped.



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Fulton County Superior Court Judge Scott McAfee heard details of Willis and Wade's personal lives and conflicting accounts of when they started dating, but it remains unclear whether he will find the relationship caused a conflict of interest that merits removing the prosecutors from the case.

At a hearing preceding testimony, McAfee noted that under the law, "disqualification can occur if evidence is produced demonstrating an actual conflict or the appearance of one." He said he wanted testimony to explore "whether a relationship existed, whether that relationship was romantic or non-romantic in nature, when it formed and whether it continues."

Those questions were only relevant "in combination with the question of the existence and extent of any personal benefit conveyed as a result of the relationship," McAfee said.

Georgia State University law professor Anthony Michael Kreis, who has followed the case closely, said a lot will depend on which standard McAfee uses: an actual conflict of interest or the appearance of a conflict.

"The standard I think that's applicable is an actual conflict of interest where the evidence produced shows that Fani Willis profited off the investigation and the charging decisions that she brought against the 2020 election interference defendants," he said.

Because Willis and Wade said the relationship ended before they sought an indictment in the election interference case, it's hard to argue the due process rights of Trump and his co-defendants were violated, Kreis said. But if McAfee applies an "appearance of conflict" standard, that could mean trouble for Willis and Wade "because the shadow has been cast over the whole thing," he said.

If Willis and her office are disqualified, a nonpartisan council supporting prosecuting attorneys in Georgia would be tasked with finding a new attorney to take over. That person could either proceed with some or all of the charges against Trump and others, or drop the case altogether.

Even if a new lawyer moved forward on the path charted by Willis, the inevitable delay would seem likely to lessen the probability of the case getting to trial before November's presidential election when Trump is expected to be the Republican nominee.

A Fulton County grand jury indicted Trump and 18 others in August on charges related to efforts to keep the Republican incumbent in power even though he lost the 2020 election to Democrat Joe Biden. Four people have pleaded guilty after reaching deals with prosecutors, while Trump and 14 others have pleaded not guilty.

Willis and Wade's relationship was first exposed in a motion filed by an attorney for Trump co-defendant Michael Roman that sought to have the indictment dismissed and to bar Willis and Wade and their offices from continuing to prosecute the case.

The motion alleges Willis and Wade were already dating when she hired him as special prosecutor for the election case in November 2021. Lawyers for Roman, Trump and some of the other defendants in the election case repeatedly tried during last month's hearing to prove the prosecutors were not being truthful about when their relationship began.

Robin Yeartie, Willis' former friend and employee, testified she saw the pair hugging and kissing long before Willis hired Wade. But Wade's former law partner and onetime divorce attorney, Terrence Bradley, expected to be a key witness for lawyers trying to disqualify Willis, was at times evasive during testimony, saying he had "no direct knowledge of when the relationship started."

Trump's attorneys filed an analysis of location data from Wade's cellphone that they say supports the assertion Willis and Wade began dating before he was hired. An investigator's statement says Wade's phone was in the neighborhood south of Atlanta where Willis was living at least 35 times in the first 11 months of 2021. Wade had testified he visited Willis' condo fewer than 10 times before his hiring.

## **Judge in Trump's classified documents case expected to set trial date during crucial hearing**

By ERIC TUCKER, ADRIANA GOMEZ LICON and FREIDA FRISARO Associated Press  
FORT PIERCE, Fla. (AP) — The federal judge overseeing the classified documents prosecution of Donald Trump is expected to set a trial date on Friday, a crucial decision that could affect whether the former

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president and leading Republican candidate faces a jury this year on charges that he hoarded top secret records and hid them from government investigators.

The trial, in federal court in Fort Pierce, Fla., is currently set for May 20. But U.S. District Judge Aileen Cannon has already postponed multiple dates in the case and signaled that she would revisit the trial date during a pivotal hearing on Friday.

Ahead of the hearing, federal prosecutors on Thursday requested a July 8 trial date. Defense lawyers said there was no way to hold a fair trial this year at a time when Trump is looking to clinch the Republican presidential nomination but nonetheless proposed Aug. 12 as a possible date to begin jury selection.

The trial date has taken on added significance in light of the uncertainty surrounding a separate federal case in Washington charging Trump with scheming to overturn the 2020 presidential election. The Supreme Court said this week that it would hear arguments in late April on whether Trump as a former president is immune from prosecution, leaving it unclear whether that case — also brought by special counsel Jack Smith — might reach trial before the November election.

If the Florida classified documents case were to be postponed until after the election, and if the Washington election subversion case does not take place this year, that would mean voters would head to the polls without two blockbuster federal prosecutions — both alleging felony charges — being resolved by a jury.

The highly anticipated hearing is the first public one in months in the case. It comes as prosecutors have sought to lay bare the gravity of the allegations against Trump and amid signs of simmering tensions between Smith's team and Cannon on the question of whether names of potential witnesses in the case could be disclosed by the defense on the public docket.

Trump faces 40 felony counts in Florida, brought by Justice Department special counsel Jack Smith, that accuse him of willfully retaining after he left the White House dozens of classified documents at his Mar-a-Lago estate in Florida and then rebuffing government demands to give them back.

Prosecutors in recent court filings have stressed the scope of criminal conduct that they say they expect to prove at trial, saying this week in one brief that "there has never been a case in American history in which a former official has engaged in conduct remotely similar to Trump's."

They allege, for instance, that Trump intentionally held onto some of the nation's most sensitive documents after he left office — only returning a fraction of them upon demand by the National Archives — and then urged his lawyer to hide records and to lie to the FBI by saying he no longer was in possession of them. He's also charged with enlisting staff to delete surveillance footage that would show boxes of records being moved around the property.

Trump and his lawyers have denied any wrongdoing. They asked Cannon last week to dismiss the case, citing among other arguments the same immunity theory now being considered by the Supreme Court.

Among the issues expected to be discussed at Friday's hearing is a dispute over whether defense lawyers can file publicly on the docket a substantially unredacted motion that would identify potential witnesses for the government and details of their expected testimony — information they were given by prosecutors under a protective order.

Cannon initially permitted the defense lawyers to disclose the witness names, but after prosecutors urged her to reconsider and said she had committed a "clear error," she put the order on hold.

## **French president raised the prospect of Western troops in Ukraine. What was he thinking?**

By SYLVIE CORBET Associated Press

PARIS (AP) — French President Emmanuel Macron appeared isolated on the European stage this week after saying the possibility of Western troops being sent to Ukraine could not be ruled out, a comment that prompted an outcry from other leaders.

French officials later sought to clarify Macron's remarks and tamp down the backlash, while insisting on the need to send a clear signal to Russia that it cannot win in Ukraine.

The Kremlin warned that if NATO sends combat troops, a direct conflict between the alliance and Russia

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would be inevitable. Russian President Vladimir Putin said such a move would risk a global nuclear conflict.

Here's a look into Macron's comments, his strategy and what's at stake.

## MACRON'S REMARKS, ALLIES' REACTION

Macron floated the possibility of Western troops helping in Ukraine while speaking at a news conference after 20 European heads of state, and other Western officials, met in Paris.

There was no consensus to send troops in an official, endorsed manner on the ground, Macron said, "but in terms of dynamics, nothing can be ruled out."

The exact signal Macron was trying to send remains unclear, but "it wasn't said by accident," said Phillips O'Brien, professor of strategic studies at the University of St. Andrews, Scotland.

"It could be a bit of a warning" to Russia or "it could be that this might happen, so people need to prepare for it," O'Brien said.

Macron was clearer when speaking about European leaders' evolving attitudes since Russia launched its full-scale invasion in February 2022. "I remind you that two years ago, many people around this table were saying: we're going to offer sleeping bags and helmets. Today they're saying: we need to work faster and harder to get missiles and tanks."

Soon after, officials from Germany, Poland and other countries that participated in the Paris meeting sought to distance themselves from Macron's comments, saying they would not send troops to Ukraine. The head of NATO, Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg, told The Associated Press there are "no plans for NATO combat troops" on the ground.

## FRENCH CLARIFICATION

French Defense Minister Sébastien Lecornu said the discussion about possibly sending Western troops into Ukraine centered on using them for de-mining and military training operations, away from the front lines — "not sending troops to wage war against Russia." He said no consensus emerged from the discussion.

The foreign minister, Stéphane Séjourné, said this type of military presence wouldn't be "crossing the belligerence threshold."

A French diplomat with knowledge of the Paris talks said the goal was also "to send a signal to President Putin that this is now an option and that he cannot simply count on the fact that none of Ukraine's partner countries will ever be deployed" there.

The diplomat insisted on anonymity to discuss such a sensitive issue. Macron "didn't rule out any options for one simple reason: as we've seen, there are all sorts of things that were ruled out two years ago but no longer are today," he said.

Paris said talks with allied countries will continue at meetings of European foreign and defense ministers to be set at a later date.

## MACRON'S EVOLVING VIEWS ON RUSSIA

After Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Macron initially kept open a line of communication with Putin.

He said in June 2022 that the Russian president made a "historic error" but that world powers shouldn't "humiliate Russia, so that when the fighting stops, we can build a way out together via diplomatic paths." The remark drew strong criticism from Ukraine and many of France's allies.

Macron last spoke with Putin in September 2022; he's taken a tougher stance publicly ever since.

His comments on Monday were clearly intended to "sound the alarm bell," said François Heisbourg, a defense analyst at the International Institute for Strategic Studies based in London.

"Yet some knock-on effects of the news conference were probably not expected," Heisbourg said. "It gives the impression that (the French) ventured out as mavericks, with the risk of being misunderstood."

## RUSSIA SEEN AS AN AGGRESSIVE FOE

In presenting his case, Macron raised concerns over Russia "getting tougher in recent months."

He cited the death of Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny, the repression of Russia's political opposition and the ferocity of combat along the front line in Ukraine.

The French government recently revealed that Russian forces threatened to shoot down a French surveillance aircraft patrolling in international airspace over the Black Sea. And earlier this month it accused

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Russia of spreading disinformation across Europe.

The hand-wringing over Russia in Europe comes amid worries that the U.S. will dial back support for Ukraine. European officials are also concerned that former President Donald Trump could be reelected later this year and potentially change the course of U.S. policy on the continent.

"Our security as Europeans is at stake," Macron said. "Should we delegate our future to American voters? My answer is no, whatever the vote is."

Whatever Macron's message was, some analysts say he may have fumbled the delivery.

"Macron wants to send a signal of strength to Russia. But for deterrence to work, it must be credible," said Jana Puglierin, head of Berlin's European Council on Foreign Relations, an international think tank. "He has unnecessarily introduced a potential for division into NATO."

"This is no way to promote European unity and strength," Puglierin said in a written statement.

## Fire at shopping mall in Bangladesh's capital kills at least 43 people

DHAKA, Bangladesh (AP) — A fire at a six-story shopping mall in the Bangladeshi capital overnight killed at least 43 people and injured dozens of others, with several people escaping to the building's roof, officials said Friday.

The fire started late Thursday at a restaurant on the first floor of the Green Cozy Cottage Shopping Mall in downtown Dhaka. Fire Service and Civil Defense Director General Brig. Gen. Md. Main Uddin said more than a dozen firefighting units were deployed to douse the fire.

Firefighters rescued survivors and pulled out bodies, and by early Friday, at least 43 people died. Health Minister Samanta Lal Sen said the toll could rise as at least 18 critically injured people were being treated in two state-run hospitals.

One survivor said people escaped by heading to the building's roof.

"I knew about the fire when it was at the first floor. We moved to the roof of the building. Around 30 people were there. After the fire was under control, fire service personnel broke into one side of the roof and rescued us," Mohammed Siam said.

Thirty-eight victims have been identified and 26 of the bodies have been handed to their families, said Bacchu Mia, who is in charge of a police outpost at Dhaka Medical College Hospital.

"Overnight many families waited here for their loved ones. It's a heartbreaking scene as they desperately looked for their family members who died in the tragedy," Mia said.

A fire department team entered the charred building in the morning to see if there were more bodies, and forensic experts began looking for evidence in the investigation of the fire. The cause of the fire has not been determined.

## What will win at the Oscars? AP's film writers set their predictions

By LINDSEY BAHR and JAKE COYLE AP Film Writers

Ahead of the 96th Academy Awards on March 10, Associated Press Film Writers Jake Coyle and Lindsey Bahr share their predictions.

### BEST PICTURE

Nominees: "American Fiction"; "Anatomy of a Fall"; "Barbie"; "The Holdovers"; "Killers of the Flower Moon"; "Maestro"; "Oppenheimer"; "Past Lives"; "Poor Things"; "The Zone of Interest."

BAHR: It will be "Oppenheimer." It's not just because it's won all the other major awards: This is a recognition that's a long time coming for Christopher Nolan and Emma Thomas, who have been nominated for best picture twice before, for "Inception" and "Dunkirk," but whose influence and impact on the industry and even the Oscars has extended far beyond a simple nomination tally (including leading a charge to save film). But perhaps it was worth the wait to get this moment with a film like "Oppenheimer."

COYLE: It's "Oppenheimer" all the way, and the only question is how many awards it ultimately walks away with. (I'll say eight.) But let's hear it for one of the best best-picture fields in recent memory. There's not really a clunker in the mix this year. The nominees run from epic to indie, blockbuster to arthouse.

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You've got more comedy than usual, too, including "Barbie" and her wicked twin, "Poor Things."

## BEST ACTRESS

Nominees: Annette Bening, "Nyad"; Lily Gladstone, "Killers of the Flower Moon"; Sandra Hüller, "Anatomy of a Fall"; Carey Mulligan, "Maestro"; Emma Stone, "Poor Things."

COYLE: On a night that should be kinda predictable, this is going to a nail-biter. Lily Gladstone ("Killers of the Flower Moon") and Emma Stone ("Poor Things") are seemingly in a dead heat, with odds-makers splitting them evenly. I'm going to give the edge to Gladstone, who's coming off a big win at the Screen Actors Guild Awards and has history riding on her potential victory. She would be the first Native American to win an Oscar, a prospect that "Saturday Night Live" joked has her fellow nominees saying, "Please don't let us win." Stone, though, is absurdly good in "Poor Things" and her chances can't be dismissed. She won at the BAFTAs and international Oscar voters are increasingly tilting close races.

BAHR: You know it's a tough year when the other three very accomplished and utterly committed performances aren't even in the conversation. I want Gladstone to win, but something is telling me that Stone is going to be the one up that stage (and no, it's not Searchlight or her publicists whispering in my ear).

## BEST ACTOR

Nominees: Bradley Cooper, "Maestro"; Colman Domingo, "Rustin"; Paul Giamatti, "The Holdovers"; Cillian Murphy, "Oppenheimer"; Jeffrey Wright, "American Fiction."

BAHR: This is going to be one of the bigger hold your breath moments on Oscars night as we wait to hear if best actor goes to Paul Giamatti or Cillian Murphy. Neither have won this award before and both gave undeniably great and memorable performances, both of which involved copious drinking and different kinds of regret, but only one of which gave the actor the chance to melodically slur "Monet, Manet, Picasso" and then, well, fart. I do think that Murphy, who has not won any Oscars, caught the wave, however, and will get the trophy for his singularly internal portrayal of an impossibly complex giant.

COYLE: As much as we'd all like to see a knock-down, drag-it-out fight between Murphy and Giamatti — two famously nice guys and much-admired character actors getting a leading-man moment — that tete-a-tete just never materialized. Murphy won at both the SAGs and the BAFTAs, and I think the "Oppenheimer" headwinds are just too strong for Giamatti to pull it off.

## BEST SUPPORTING ACTRESS

Nominees: Emily Blunt, "Oppenheimer"; Danielle Brooks, "The Color Purple"; America Ferrera, "Barbie"; Jodie Foster, "Nyad"; Da'Vine Joy Randolph, "The Holdovers."

COYLE: This race has been a lock for months, making Randolph all but certain to cruise to her first Academy Award. Out of the three pitch-perfect performances in Alexander Payne's "The Holdovers" (the others being Giamatti and newcomer Dominic Sessa), the sensitivity of Randolph's grieving mother has made her an Oscar shoo-in.

BAHR: Indeed, and let's hope that whoever is reading the winner card gets the pronunciation of her name correctly (unlike some others this season). Psst...it's DAY-Vine.

## BEST SUPPORTING ACTOR

Nominees: Sterling K. Brown, "American Fiction"; Robert De Niro, "Killers of the Flower Moon"; Robert Downey Jr. "Oppenheimer"; Ryan Gosling, "Barbie"; Mark Ruffalo, "Poor Things."

BAHR: It's just going to be an "Oppenheimer" night and we can all assume that Robert Downey Jr. will be the one bounding up to the stage to accept. The last time he was nominated was in 2008, for "Tropic Thunder," and his win will not just be for playing the vindictive Lewis Strauss but, kind of like Jamie Lee Curtis last year, an overdue acknowledgement of his lifetime in entertainment. Plus, he gives good speech and I'm sure he's saving the best for last.

COYLE: Honestly, what a strong group of nominees. Downey will win his first Oscar, which no one would say he doesn't deserve (though I would have handed it to him for "Kiss Kiss Bang Bang"). De Niro, almost half a century after winning this award for a little movie called "The Godfather, Part II," is back again, doing his best work in years. Brown, who gives "American Fiction" such a jolt, is as good as anyone working today. Ruffalo, great in everything, should someday soon get the "overdue Oscar" treatment Downey is receiving this year. And Gosling might be our best comic actor. He's going to lose but only because his

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Ken is TOO good.

## BEST DIRECTOR

Nominees: "Anatomy of a Fall," Justine Triet; "Killers of the Flower Moon," Martin Scorsese; "Oppenheimer," Christopher Nolan; "Poor Things," Yorgos Lanthimos; "The Zone of Interest," Jonathan Glazer.

COYLE: : I feel like there's someone missing here? Yes, this is the site of the most talked-about snub, for "Barbie" director Greta Gerwig. Gosling may still be shrieking in horror, but the hubbub has mostly subsided. (Still, Gerwig should have been nominated.) Either way, this is Nolan's award, for sure. It will be his first directing Oscar, a belated coronation for one of Hollywood's most respected auteurs. To see how seldom these chances can be, you need look no further than fellow-nominee Scorsese. He's only won it once. (Cue Gosling shriek.)

BAHR: It's such a great group, even so. And Nolan will surely be walking to the engraving station with this trophy in hand as well.

## BEST DOCUMENTARY

Nominees: "Bobi Wine: The People's President"; "The Eternal Memory"; "Four Daughters"; "To Kill a Tiger"; "20 Days in Mariupol."

BAHR: It's a bit funny to talk about a film made by your colleagues, but it's not hard when it's something as great as Mstyslav Chernov's "20 Days in Mariupol" which is both an incredible documentary and the clear frontrunner in the category. It's already won a BAFTA and a DGA. It missed the PGA to a film that wasn't nominated for an Oscar ("American Symphony"). It is difficult to watch, but that's the point: This is a film that bears witness to the horrible things you might want to look away from — urgent, timely and already an essential historical document of an atrocity that is ongoing.

COYLE: This awards season has been marked by the almost total absence of on-stage mention of the wars in Ukraine and Gaza. The great exception to that is the sober reportage contained within "20 Days in Mariupol," which harrowingly documents the early days of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. It should be noted, too, that this award a year ago went to "Navalny," the intimate portrait of the recently deceased Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny.

## BEST INTERNATIONAL FILM

Nominees: "Io Capitano," Italy; "Perfect Days," Japan; "Society of the Snow," Spain; "The Teachers' Lounge," Germany; "The Zone of Interest," United Kingdom.

COYLE: This is sure to go to "The Zone of Interest," Jonathan Glazer's chilling and formally masterful Holocaust drama. It's a best-picture nominee, which speaks to the academy's high regard for the movie. My favorite film of 2023 – the sublime Finnish film "Fallen Leaves," which was shortlisted – would have been my pick, though. Or Wim Wenders' radiant "Perfect Days," easily the best film about a Tokyo toilet cleaner you'll ever see.

BAHR: This is always the cruelest category, in which all of international cinema is whittled down to five nominees. Why not 10 here as well? And, you're right, when an international film also gets a best picture nomination you can usually safely bet that it'll win this award at the very least. But even an Oscar seems too small for something like Glazer's triumph. To quote a friend: "The Zone of Interest" feels more like a museum piece than a work of entertainment."

## BEST ANIMATED FEATURE

Nominees: "The Boy and the Heron"; "Elemental"; "Nimona"; "Robot Dreams"; "Spider-Man: Across the Spider-Verse."

BAHR: Unlike many years in the animated feature category, most of these films are richly deserving of the recognition. "Spider-Man: Across the Spider Verse" is probably the favorite, but because the first one already won the prize I'm going with Hayao Miyazaki's "The Boy and the Heron." Miyazaki does have two Oscars, a competitive one for "Spirited Away" and a honorary trophy from the academy's Board of Governors. Still, whether this is his last film or not (he keeps teasing), it would be one of those can't miss moments especially since he wasn't there to accept the award for "Spirited Away" on the 2003 telecast (his way of protesting the Iraq War).

COYLE: This comes down to either "The Boy and the Heron" or "Spider-Man: Across the Spider-Verse." I love them both, but I'm going to go with the "Spider-Verse" sequel. It triumphed at the Annie Awards, a strong precursor, and blew the doors off what sequels usually stand for in Hollywood. The 2018 original also won this award, so a victory for "Across the Spider-Verse" would be the first time the first two movies in a franchise won best animated film.

## As Congo seeks to expand drilling, some communities worry pollution will worsen

By SAM MEDNICK Associated Press

MOANDA, Congo (AP) — The oil drills that loom down the road from Adore Ngaka's home remind him daily of everything he's lost. The extraction in his village in western Congo has polluted the soil, withered his crops and forced the family to burn through savings to survive, he said.

Pointing to a stunted ear of corn in his garden, the 27-year-old farmer says it's about half the size he got before oil operations expanded nearly a decade ago in his village of Tshiende.

"It's bringing us to poverty," he said.

Congo, a mineral-rich nation in central Africa, is thought to have significant oil reserves, too. Drilling has so far been confined to a small territory on the Atlantic Ocean and offshore, but that's expected to change if the government successfully auctions 30 oil and gas blocks spread around the country. Leaders say economic growth is essential for their impoverished people, but some communities, rights groups and environmental watchdogs warn that expanded drilling will harm the landscape and human health.

Since the French-British hydrocarbon company, Perenco, began drilling in Moanda territory in 2000, residents say pollution has worsened, with spills and leaks degrading the soil and flaring — the intentional burning of natural gas near drilling sites — fouling the air they breathe. And the Congolese government exerts little oversight, they say.

Perenco said it abides by international standards in its extraction methods, that they don't pose any health risks and that any pollution has been minor. The company also said it offered to support a power plant that would make use of the natural gas and thus reduce flaring. The government did not respond to questions about the proposed plant.

Congo's minister overseeing oil and gas, Didier Budimbu, said the government is committed to protecting the environment.

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Congo is home to most of the Congo Basin rainforest, the world's second-biggest, and most of the world's largest tropical peatland, made up of partially decomposed wetlands plant material. Together, both capture huge amounts of carbon dioxide — about 1.5 billion tons a year, or about 3% of global emissions. More than a dozen of the plots up for auction overlap with protected areas in peatlands and rainforests, including the Virunga National Park, which is home to some of the world's rarest gorillas.

The government said the 27 oil blocks available have an estimated 22 billion barrels. Environmental groups say that auctioning more land to drill would have consequences both in Congo and abroad.

"Any new oil and gas project, anywhere in the world, is fueling the climate and nature crisis that we're in," said Mbong Akiy Fokwa Tsafak, program director for Greenpeace Africa. She said Perenco's operations have done nothing to mitigate poverty and instead degraded the ecosystem and burdened the lives of communities.

Environmental activists said Congo has strong potential to instead develop renewable energy, including solar, as well as small-scale hydropower. It's the world's largest producer of cobalt, a key component for batteries in electric vehicles and other products essential to the global energy transition, although cobalt mining comes with its own environmental and human risks.

Budimbu said now is not the time to move away from fossil fuels when the country is still reliant on them. He said fossil fuel dependency will be phased out in the long term.

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Rich in biodiversity, Moanda abuts the Mangrove National Park — the country's only marine protected area. Perenco has been under scrutiny for years, with local researchers, aid groups and Congo's Senate making multiple reports of pollution dating back more than a decade. Two civil society organizations, Sherpa and Friends of the Earth France, filed a lawsuit in 2022 accusing Perenco of pollution caused by the oil extraction; that suit is still pending.

During a rare visit by international media to the oil fields, including two villages near drilling, The Associated Press spoke with dozens of residents, local officials and rights organizations. Residents say drilling has inched closer to their homes and they have seen pipes break regularly, sending oil into the soil. They blame air and ground pollution for making it hard to cultivate crops and causing health problems such as skin rashes and respiratory infections.

They said Perenco has responded quickly to leaks and spills but failed to address root problems.

AP journalists visited drilling sites, some just a few hundred meters from homes, that had exposed and corroding pipes. They also saw at least four locations that were flaring natural gas, a technique that manages pressure by burning off the gas that is often used when it is impractical or unprofitable to collect. AP did not see any active spill sites.

Between 2012 and 2022 in Congo, Perenco flared more than 2 billion cubic meters of natural gas — a carbon footprint equivalent to that of about 20 million Congolese, according to the Environmental Investigative Forum, a global consortium of environmental investigative journalists. The group analyzed data from Skytruth, a group that uses satellite imagery to monitor threats to the planet's natural resources.

Flaring of natural gas, which is mostly methane, emits carbon dioxide, methane and black soot and is damaging to health, according to the International Energy Agency.

In the village of Kinkazi, locals told AP that Perenco buried chemicals in a nearby pit for years and they seeped into the soil and water. They displayed photos of what they said were toxic chemicals before they were buried and took reporters to the site where they said they'd been discarded. It took the community four years of protests and strikes before Perenco disposed of the chemicals elsewhere, they said.

Most villagers were reluctant to allow their names to be used, saying they feared a backlash from a company that is a source of casual labor jobs. Minutes after AP reporters arrived in one village, a resident said he received a call from a Perenco employee asking the purpose of the meeting.

One who was willing to speak was Gertrude Tshonde, a farmer, who said Perenco began dumping chemicals near Kinkazi in 2018 after a nearby village refused to allow it.

"People from Tshiende called us and asked if we were letting them throw waste in our area," Tshonde said. "They said the waste was not good because it spreads underground and destroys the soil."

Tshonde said her farm was behind the pit where chemicals were being thrown and her cassava began to rot.

AP could not independently verify that chemicals had been buried at the site.

Perenco spokesman Mark Antelme said the company doesn't bury chemicals underground and that complaints about the site near Kinkazi were related to old dumping more than 20 years ago by a predecessor company. Antelme also said Perenco hasn't moved operations closer to people's homes. Instead, he said, some communities have gradually built closer to drilling sites.

Antelme also said the company's flaring does not release methane into the atmosphere.

Perenco said it contributes significantly to Moanda and the country. It's the sole energy provider in Moanda and invests about \$250 million a year in education, road construction, training programs for medical staff and easier access to health care in isolated communities, the company said.

But residents say some of those benefits are overstated. A health clinic built by Perenco in one village has no medicine and few people can afford to pay to see the doctor, they said.

And when Perenco compensates for oil leak damages, locals say it's not enough.

Tshonde, the farmer, said she was given about \$200 when an oil spill doomed her mangoes, avocado and maize eight years ago. But her losses were more than twice that. Lasting damage to her land from Perenco's operations has forced her to seek other means of income, such as cutting trees to sell as charcoal.



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Many other farmers whose land has been degraded are doing the same, and tree cover is disappearing, she said.

Budimbu, the minister of hydrocarbons, said Congo's laws prohibit drilling near homes and fields and oil operators are required to take the necessary measures to prevent and clean up oil pollution. But he didn't specify what the government was doing in response to community complaints.

Congo has struggled to secure bidders since launching the auction in July 2022. Three companies — two American and one Canadian — moved on three methane gas blocks in Lake Kivu, on the border with Rwanda. The government said in May that they were about to close those tenders, but did not respond to AP's questions in January about whether those deals were finalized.

There are no known confirmed deals on the 27 oil blocks, and the deadline for expressions of interest has been extended through this year. Late last year, Perenco withdrew from bidding on two blocks in the province near where it currently operates. The company didn't respond to questions from AP about why it withdrew, but Africa Intelligence reported that Perenco had found the blocks to have insufficient potential.

Perenco also didn't respond when asked whether it was pursuing any other blocks.

Environmental experts say bidding may be slow because the country is a hard place to operate with rampant conflict, especially in the east where violence is surging and where some of the blocks are located.

Local advocacy groups say the government should fix problems with Perenco before bringing in other companies.

"We first need to see changes with the company we have here before we can trust other(s)," said Alphonse Khonde, the coordinator of the Group of Actors and Actions for Sustainable Development.

Congo also has a history of corruption. Little of its mineral wealth has trickled down in a country that is one of the world's five poorest, with more than 60% of its 100 million people getting by on less than \$2.15 a day, according to the World Bank.

And some groups have criticized what they see as lack of transparency on the process of offering blocks for auction, which amounts to "local communities being kept in the dark over plans to exploit their lands and resources," said Joe Eisen, executive director of the Rainforest Foundation UK.

Some communities where the government has failed to provide jobs and basic services say they have few options but to gamble on allowing more drilling.

In Kimpozia village, near one of the areas up for auction, some 150 people live nestled in the forest without a school or hospital. Residents must hike steep hills and travel on motorbike for five hours to reach the nearest health clinic and walk several hours to school. Louis Wolombassa, the village chief, said the village needs road-building and other help.

"If they come and bring what we want, let them drill," he said.

## Takeaways from Hunter Biden's combative deposition with Republican lawmakers

By FARNOUSH AMIRI and LISA MASCARO Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The transcript of the congressional deposition of Hunter Biden was released late Thursday, providing a full view of the contentious testimony that took place behind closed doors Wednesday as Republicans aggressively questioned the central figure in their impeachment inquiry.

The nearly 230 pages of questioning laid bare the deep-seated hostility between President Joe Biden's son and the GOP lawmakers who have been investigating his family for the past several years. Arguments were frequent and tempers short, providing a preview of what is sure to come when Republicans hold a public hearing with Hunter Biden in the next several weeks.

He was defiant through the deposition as Republicans flooded him with questions about his former business affairs and his life, his answers veering from heated to emotional as he talked of his long battle with addiction and turmoil in his personal life.

Throughout the nearly seven-hour deposition, Hunter Biden remained adamant on one point, vehemently

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and repeatedly denying under oath that his father ever financially benefited or participated in any of his business work.

Takeaways from the transcript:

'You always pick up the phone'

The 14-month Republican investigation into the Biden family has centered on Hunter Biden and his overseas work for clients in Ukraine, China, Romania and other countries. Republicans have long questioned whether those business dealings involved corruption and influence peddling by President Biden, particularly in the years when he was vice president.

Republican investigators zeroed in on a series of dinners and meetings that took place after Joe Biden left the vice presidency in which the younger Biden put his father on speakerphone while in the company of business partners.

"And why would you place your dad on speakerphone?" an unidentified Republican staffer asked.

"I'm surprised my dad hasn't called me right now, and if he did, I would put him on speakerphone to say hi to you and to Congressman Raskin and everybody else in the room," Hunter Biden replied. "It is nothing nefarious literally."

He said that after the tragedies his family has suffered — including the death of his mother and two siblings — calls in his family are always answered, no matter what.

"You always pick up the phone. It's something that we always do. And you can ask anybody that I know," Hunter Biden added.

Hunter Biden's 'darkest days'

Large portions of the testimony Wednesday diverged into Hunter Biden's well-documented battle with drug and alcohol addiction.

In one particularly harsh exchange, Rep. Matt Gaetz, a Republican from Florida, questioned whether the president's son's business dealings, particularly with the Ukrainian energy firm Burisma, were legitimate. Gaetz asked, "Were you on drugs when you were on the Burisma board?"

Hunter responded: "Mr. Gaetz, look me in the eye. You really think that's appropriate to ask me?"

"Absolutely," Gaetz said.

Biden's attorney, Abbe Lowell, intervened, telling his client he didn't need to respond.

"I will answer it this way: I have been absolutely transparent about my drug use," Hunter Biden said. "I'm sorry; I'm an addict. I was an addict."

He told the panel he has been in recovery for more than four years and works "really, really hard at it" under what he called an enormous amount of pressure.

"Was I an addict? Yes, I was an addict," he said. "What does that have to do with whether or not you're going to go forward with an impeachment of my father other than to simply try to embarrass me?"

Gaetz tried to interrupt, but Hunter Biden kept talking: "Why? Why?"

What was the 'Biden brand'?

Another point of interest for House Republicans' investigation is what they describe as Hunter Biden and associates selling the Biden "brand" to clients overseas.

One of their purported key witnesses, Devon Archer, a former business associate of Hunter Biden, testified to the House Oversight Committee last year that the president's family sold "the illusion of access" to the corridors of power in Washington. Republicans questioned whether Burisma, the Ukrainian energy firm, wanted Hunter Biden on its board in 2014 "because your dad was the Vice President?"

"No, I don't think that it's fair," Hunter Biden responded.

When asked about what value he brought to Burisma, Hunter Biden talked about the breadth of his resume and defended his family.

"Primarily, the name 'Biden' is my dad's legacy. And he passed it down to me and, when my brother was alive, my brother, my sister, now to my children. It's our responsibility to not screw that up."

He added, "If other people saw the brand as something that they could market, it's not -- it was not with my -- without going through me first. And if they did so, they didn't go through me first."

Rather than probe the Bidens, Democrats turn to the Trumps  
Democrats at one point tried to turn the deposition back toward Donald Trump, contrasting the Bidens' business dealings with the former Republican president's family and its business operations.

Rep. Eric Swalwell, the Democrat from California, led one particularly pointed exchange intended to draw out the differences between President Biden and Trump, the Republican front-runner to challenge him for the White House.

"Did your father ever employ in the Oval Office any direct family member to also work in the Oval Office?" Swalwell asked.

"My father has never employed any direct family members, to my knowledge," Hunter Biden testified.

Swalwell went on to ask questions referring to the Trump hotel in Washington, D.C., Trump's legal case in New York City, his daughter-in-law's recent bid to lead the Republican National Committee and his son-in-law Jared Kushner's business dealings with Saudi Arabia.

"As President and the leader of the party, has your father ever tried to install as the chairperson of the party a daughter-in-law or anyone else in the family?" Swalwell probed.

"No. And I don't think that anyone in my family would be crazy enough to want to be the chairperson of the DNC" — the Democratic National Committee.

Had his father ever been fined \$355 million? "No, he has not, thank God," Hunter Biden testified.

Emails, text messages and the laptop

The impeachment inquiry has focused on several pieces of evidence as Republicans try to build their case, including emails, text messages and a now-in-dispute laptop.

One email from a Hunter Biden business associate purportedly proposes a \$10 million equity stake in their firm to be held for "the big" guy, who Republicans say is Joe Biden. It's a message that has become central to the GOP claims of influence peddling, but one that another business associate Rob Walker has testified was all "bull—."

Hunter Biden testified that he does not recall ever responding to the email. "I'm not even sure whether I ever fully read this."

Further emails exhibited to the committee showed that any equity split would be made equally among the five partners, including Hunter Biden and his longtime business partner Jim Biden, who is the president's brother and his uncle. The business deal with a Chinese energy company never happened, and no one was paid.

"There's no secret big guy anywhere in this email?" asked a Democratic questioner.

"No, there's not," Hunter Biden replied.

"Joe Biden is not anywhere in this agreement?" he asked.

"No, he is not."

As for Hunter Biden's laptop that was allegedly dropped off at a Delaware repair shop and the source for many allegations against the Biden family, he testified that he does not recall bringing it in.

If his computer needed repairs, Hunter Biden testified, "I would have gone to the Apple store."

## Judge holds veteran journalist Catherine Herridge in civil contempt for refusing to divulge source

By ALANNA DURKIN RICHER and ERIC TUCKER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — A federal judge held veteran investigative reporter Catherine Herridge in civil contempt on Thursday for refusing to divulge her source for a series of Fox News stories about a Chinese American scientist who was investigated by the FBI but never charged.

U.S. District Judge Christopher Cooper in Washington imposed a fine of \$800 per day until Herridge reveals her source, but the fine will not go into effect immediately to give her time to appeal.

Cooper wrote that he "recognizes the paramount importance of a free press in our society" and the critical role of confidential sources in investigative journalism. But the judge said the court "also has its own role to play in upholding the law and safeguarding judicial authority."

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"Herridge and many of her colleagues in the journalism community may disagree with that decision and prefer that a different balance be struck, but she is not permitted to flout a federal court's order with impunity," wrote Cooper, who was nominated to the bench by former President Barack Obama.

A lawyer for Herridge, Patrick Philbin, declined to comment.

The case has been being closely watched by media advocates, who say forcing journalists to betray a promise of confidentiality could make sources think twice before providing information to reporters that could expose government wrongdoing.

"Holding a journalist in contempt for protecting a confidential source has a deeply chilling effect on journalism," Fox News said in a statement. "FOX News Media remains committed to protecting the rights of a free press and freedom of speech and believes this decision should be appealed."

A CBS spokesperson said the contempt order "should be concerning to all Americans who value the role of the free press in our democracy and understand that reliance on confidential sources is critical to the mission of journalism."

The source is being sought by Yanping Chen, who has sued the government over the leak of details about the federal probe into statements she made on immigration forms related to work on a Chinese astronaut program.

Herridge, who was recently laid off by CBS News, published an investigative series for Fox News in 2017 that examined Chen's ties to the Chinese military and raised questions about whether the scientist was using a professional school she founded in Virginia to help the Chinese government get information about American servicemembers.

The stories relied on what Chen's lawyers contend were items leaked from the probe, including snippets of an FBI document summarizing an interview conducted during the investigation, personal photographs, and information taken from her immigration and naturalization forms and from an internal FBI PowerPoint presentation.

Chen sued the FBI and Justice Department in 2018, accusing the government of violating the Privacy Act — which prohibits the public disclosure of private information about individuals without their consent. Chen's lawsuit says both her personal and professional life were upended amid a wave of negative media attention after the leak, leading to hate mail and death threats.

An attorney for Chen, Andrew Phillips, said the Privacy Act is meant to guard against government officials selectively leaking information about an American's citizen's private life "to smear reputations or score political points."

"Such misconduct should not be without recourse just because a rogue government official happens to launder his or her wrongdoing via a journalist," Phillips said in an email. "Today's ruling is an important one to ensure that government officials can be held to account for outrageous abuses of power."

The judge had ordered Herridge in August to answer questions about her source or sources in a deposition with Chen's lawyers. The judge ruled that Chen's need to know for the sake of her lawsuit overcomes Herridge's right to shield her source.

Herridge was interviewed under oath in September by a lawyer for Chen, but declined dozens of times to answer questions about her sources, saying at one point, "My understanding is that the courts have ruled that in order to seek further judicial review in this case, I must now decline the order, and respectfully I am invoking my First Amendment rights in declining to answer the question."

Philbin, who served as deputy White House counsel during the Trump administration, has said that forcing Herridge to turn over her sources "would destroy her credibility and cripple her ability to play a role in bringing important information to light for the public."

Philbin also told the judge that disclosing the identity of Herridge's sources raises national security concerns, writing in court papers that there is a "serious risk" that Chen "was involved in making information about U.S. military members available" to the Chinese.

Legal fights over whether journalists should have to divulge sources are rare, though they've arisen several times in the last couple of decades in Privacy Act cases like the one filed by Chen. Some lawsuits have ended with a hefty Justice Department settlement in place of a journalist being forced to reveal a source.

In 2008, for instance, the Justice Department agreed to pay \$5.8 million to settle a lawsuit by Army scientist Steven Hatfill, who was falsely identified as a person of interest in the 2001 anthrax attacks. That settlement resulted in a contempt order being vacated against a journalist who was being asked to name her sources.

## **Blizzard warning, avalanche watch as storm packing up to 10 feet of snow moves into Sierra Nevada**

By SCOTT SONNER AND OLGA R. RODRIGUEZ Associated Press

RENO, Nev. (AP) — The most powerful Pacific storm of the season started barreling into the Sierra Nevada on Thursday, packing multiple feet of snow and dangerous winds that forecasters say will create blizzard conditions likely to close major highways and trigger power outages into the weekend.

Much of the Sierra Nevada was under a blizzard warning stretching through Sunday, with the biggest effects expected Friday afternoon into Saturday.

As much as 10 feet (3 meters) of snow is possible in the mountains around Lake Tahoe by the weekend, with 3 to 6 feet (.9 to 1.8 meters) in the communities on the lake's shores and more than a foot (30 centimeters) possible in the valleys on the Sierra's eastern front, including Reno, the National Weather Service said.

Winds are expected to gust in excess of 115 mph (185 kph) over Sierra ridgetops, and 70 mph (113 kph) at lower elevations, it said.

The weather service in Reno said in its updated forecast as evening approached on Thursday it has seen no new scenarios to suggest a weakening of the storm: "Snow amounts have increased, if that is even possible."

Backcountry avalanche warnings were in place around Lake Tahoe, as well as areas around Yosemite National Park stretching down to Mammoth Lakes.

"Very dangerous avalanche conditions are expected from Friday afternoon through Sunday," the Eastern Sierra Avalanche Center in Mammoth Lakes said.

The California Highway Patrol imposed travel restrictions on a long stretch of Interstate 80 between Reno and Sacramento, requiring drivers to put chains on their tires. A stretch of the highway was closed for hours at midday Thursday while crews cleared the wreckage of a semi-trailer truck that overturned near Truckee, California.

"Your safe travel window is over in the Sierra," the weather service in Reno posted on social media. "Best to hunker down where you are."

The blizzard warning covers a 300-mile (482-kilometer) stretch of the Sierra from north of Lake Tahoe to south of Yosemite National Park effective until 10 a.m. Sunday.

"This will be a legitimate blizzard," UCLA climate scientist Daniel Swain said during an online briefing Thursday. "Really true blizzard conditions with multiple feet of snow and very strong winds, the potential for power outages and the fact that roads probably aren't going to be cleared as quickly or as effectively as they normally would be even during a significant winter storm."

On the bright side, California water officials said the storm should provide a much-needed shot in the arm to the Sierra snowpack, which is vital to the state's water supplies and sits well below normal so far this season.

Palisades Tahoe ski resort tweeted that the big dump expected over the weekend on top of 8 feet of snow in February should allow them to keep the slopes open through Memorial Day. But it warned blizzard conditions are likely to force temporary closures off and on through the weekend.

Todd Cummings decided to drive from Santa Cruz to the Lake Tahoe area ahead of the storm with plans to lay low during the blizzard and then hit the slopes.

"When a storm comes in, people have a tough time getting there, so there's sometimes less crowds on the mountains and there is untracked, fresh snow that it's super light and you float on it. It's fantastic!" he said.

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Some remained skeptical it will be as bad as predicted.

Richard Cunningham said he has heard before about forecasts for the storm of the century that didn't materialize since he moved from Las Vegas to Reno in 1997.

"Same story, different day," he said. "Sometimes it doesn't even snow."

But that was before blue skies gave way to clouds and gusty winds that blew the roof off a shed east of Reno Thursday afternoon.

The lead scientist at a snow lab atop the Sierra said it is possible they could break their modern-day record of about 3.5 feet (1 meter) of snow in a single day from back in 1989.

"It's a very serious storm for us," Andrew Schwartz said Wednesday from UC-Berkeley's Central Sierra Snow Lab, founded in 1946 in Soda Springs, California, northwest of Lake Tahoe.

Howie Nave, a radio DJ and stand-up comedian in South Lake Tahoe, said some people may not have been taking the storm seriously earlier in the week because dire forecasts of potentially heavy storms have not materialized several times this winter.

"There were times when I was expecting a Saint Bernard, but you gave me a Chihuahua," Nave said about the weather forecasters.

But "everybody's talking about the storm up here," he said. "This is the first time we've had a blizzard warning."

California Department of Water resources officials said Thursday that the Sierra Nevada snowpack stood at 80% of average to date but only 70% of the typical April 1 peak.

"The results today show just how critical this upcoming month is going to be in terms of our water supply outlook for the upcoming year," said hydrometeorologist Angelique Fabbiani-Leon in a briefing at Phillips Station, a snowpack-measuring location south of Lake Tahoe.

## Texas battles historic wildfires as snow covers scorched land in the Panhandle

By SEAN MURPHY and JIM VERTUNO Associated Press

STINNETT, Texas (AP) — A dusting of snow covered a desolate landscape of scorched prairie, dead cattle and burned out homes in the Texas Panhandle on Thursday, giving firefighters brief relief in their desperate efforts to corral a blaze that has grown into the largest in state history.

The Smokehouse Creek fire grew to nearly 1,700 square miles (4,400 square kilometers). It merged with another fire and is just 3% contained, according to the Texas A&M Forest Service.

Gray skies loomed over huge scars of blackened earth in a rural area dotted with scrub brush, ranchland, rocky canyons and oil rigs. In Stinnett, a town of about 1,600, someone propped up an American flag outside a destroyed home.

Dylan Phillips, 24, said he hardly recognized his Stinnett neighborhood, which was littered with melted street signs and the charred frames of cars and trucks. His family's home survived, but at least a half a dozen others were smoking rubble.

"It was brutal," Phillips said. "The street lights were out. It was nothing but embers and flames."

The Smokehouse Creek fire's explosive growth slowed Thursday as snow fell and winds and temperatures dipped, but it was still untamed and threatening. The largest of several major fires burning in the rural Panhandle section of the state, it has also crossed into Oklahoma.

Firefighter Lee Jones was helping douse the smoldering wreckage of homes in Stinnett to keep them from reigniting when temperatures and winds increase Friday and into the weekend.

"The snow helps," said Jones, who was among a dozen firefighters called in from Lubbock to help. "We're just hitting all the hot spots around town, the houses that have already burned."

Authorities have not said what ignited the fires, but strong winds, dry grass and unseasonably warm temperatures fed the blazes.

"The rain and the snow is beneficial right now, we're using it to our advantage," Texas A&M Forest Service spokesman Juan Rodriguez said of the Smokehouse Creek fire. "When the fire isn't blowing up and

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moving very fast, firefighters are able to actually catch up and get to those parts of the fire.”

Authorities said 1,640 square miles (4,248 square kilometers) of the fire were on the Texas side of the border. Previously, the largest fire in recorded state history was the 2006 East Amarillo Complex fire, which burned about 1,400 square miles (3,630 square kilometers) and resulted in 13 deaths.

Two women were the only confirmed deaths so far this week. But with flames still menacing a wide area, authorities had yet to conduct a thorough search for victims or tally the numerous homes and other structures damaged or destroyed.

Cindy Owen was driving in Texas’ Hemphill County south of Canadian on Tuesday afternoon when she encountered fire or smoke, said Sgt. Chris Ray of the state’s Department of Public Safety. She got out of her truck, and flames overtook her.

A passerby found Owen and called first responders, who took her to a burn unit in Oklahoma. She died Thursday morning, Ray said.

The other victim, an 83-year-old woman, was identified by family members as Joyce Blankenship, a former substitute teacher. Her grandson, Lee Quesada, said deputies told his uncle Wednesday that they had found Blankenship’s remains in her burned home.

President Joe Biden, who was in Texas on Thursday to visit the U.S.-Mexico border, said he directed federal officials to do “everything possible” to assist fire-affected communities, including sending firefighters and equipment. The Federal Emergency Management Agency has guaranteed Texas and Oklahoma will be reimbursed for their emergency costs, the president said.

“When disasters strike, there’s no red states or blue states where I come from,” Biden said. “Just communities and families looking for help. So we’re standing with everyone affected by these wildfires and we’re going to continue to help you respond and recover.”

Republican Gov. Greg Abbott issued a disaster declaration for 60 counties and planned to visit the Panhandle on Friday.

Nim Kidd, chief of the Texas Division of Emergency Management, said the weekend forecast and “sheer size and scope” of the blaze are the biggest challenges for firefighters.

“I don’t want the community there to feel a false sense of security that all these fires will not grow anymore,” Kidd said. “This is still a very dynamic situation.”

Jeremiah Kaslon, 39, a Stinnett resident who saw neighbors’ homes destroyed by flames that stopped just on the edge of his property, seemed prepared for what the changing forecast might bring.

“Around here, the weather, we get all four seasons in a week,” Kaslon said. “It can be hot, hot and windy, and it will be snowing the next day. It’s just that time of year.”

Encroaching flames caused the main facility that disassembles America’s nuclear arsenal to pause operations Tuesday night, but it was open for normal work by Wednesday. The small town of Fritch, which lost hundreds of homes in a 2014 fire, saw 40 to 50 more destroyed this week, Mayor Tom Ray said.

Texas Agriculture Commissioner Sid Miller estimated cattle deaths to be in the thousands, with more likely to come.

“There’ll be cattle that we’ll have to euthanize,” Miller said. “They’ll have burned hooves, burned udders.”

Miller said individual ranchers could suffer devastating losses. But he predicted the overall impact on the Texas cattle industry and on consumer prices for beef would be minimal.

## **Congress approves short-term extension to avoid shutdown, buy more time for final spending agreement**

By KEVIN FREKING Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Congress passed another short-term spending measure Thursday that would keep one set of federal agencies operating through March 8 and another set through March 22, avoiding a shutdown for parts of the federal government that would otherwise kick in Saturday. The bill now goes to President Joe Biden to be signed into law.

The short-term extension is the fourth in recent months, and many lawmakers expect it to be the last

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for the current fiscal year. House Speaker Mike Johnson said negotiators had completed six of the annual spending bills that fund federal agencies and had "almost final agreement on the others."

"We'll get the job done," Johnson said as he exited a closed-door meeting with Republican colleagues.

The House acted first Thursday. The vote to approve the extension was 320-99. It easily cleared the two-thirds majority needed for passage. Democrats overwhelmingly voted to avert a partial shutdown. But the vote was much more divided with Republicans, 113 in support and 97 against.

The Senate then took up the bill and approved it during an evening vote of 77-13.

"When we pass this bill, we will have, thank God, avoided a shutdown with all its harmful effects on the American people," Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer said moments before the vote.

Biden called Thursday night's vote "good news for the American people" but added, "I want to be clear: this is a short-term fix — not a long-term solution."

Next week, the House and Senate are expected to take up a package of six spending bills and get them to the president before March 8. Then, lawmakers would work to fund the rest of the government by the new March 22 deadline.

At the end of the process, Congress is expected to have approved more than \$1.6 trillion in spending for the fiscal year that began Oct. 1. That amount is roughly in line with the previous fiscal year and is what former Speaker Kevin McCarthy negotiated with the White House last year before eight disgruntled Republican lawmakers joined with Democrats a few months later and voted to oust him from the position.

Some of the House's most conservative members wanted deeper cuts for non-defense programs than that agreement allowed through its spending caps. They also sought an array of policy changes that Democrats opposed. They were hoping the prospect of a shutdown could leverage more concessions.

"Last I checked, the Republicans actually have a majority in the House of Representatives, but you wouldn't know it if you looked at our checkbook because we are all too willing to continue the policy choices of Joe Biden and the spending levels of Nancy Pelosi," said Rep. Matt Gaetz, R-Fla.

But Rep. Chuck Fleischmann, R-Tenn., countered before the vote that shutdowns are damaging and encouraged lawmakers to vote for the short-term extension.

"I want the American people to know, Mr. Speaker, that this negotiation has been difficult, but to close the government down at a time like this would hurt people who should not be hurt," Fleischmann said.

The split within the GOP conference on spending and their tiny House majority bogged down the efforts to get the bills passed on a timely basis. With the Senate also struggling to complete work on all 12 appropriations bills, lawmakers have resorted to a series of short-term measures to keep the government funded.

Republican leadership said that the broader funding legislation being teed up for votes in March would lead to spending cuts for many nondefense agencies. By dividing the spending bill up into chunks, they are hoping to avoid an omnibus bill — a massive, all-encompassing bill that lawmakers generally had little time to digest or understand before voting on it. Republicans vowed there would be no omnibus this time.

"When you take away Defense and Veterans Affairs, the rest of the agencies are going to be seeing spending cuts in many cases," said House Majority Leader Steve Scalise, R-La. "There are also some policy changes that we pushed through the House that will be in the final product. Of course, some of those are still being negotiated."

The temporary extension funds the departments of Agriculture, Transportation, Interior and others through March 8. It funds the Pentagon, Homeland Security, Health and Human Services and the State Department through March 22.

While congressional leaders have said they've reached final agreement on what will be in the first package of spending bills voted on next week, there's still room for an impasse on the second package to be voted on later in the month.

"We are working in a divided government. That means to get anything done, we have to work together, in good faith to reach reasonable outcomes," said Sen. Patty Murray, the Democratic chair of the Senate Appropriations Committee.

The renewed focus on this year's spending bills doesn't include the separate, \$95.3 billion aid package



that the Senate approved for Ukraine, Israel and Taiwan earlier this month, with much of that money being spent in the U.S. to replenish America's military arsenal. The bill also contained about \$9 billion in humanitarian assistance for civilians in Gaza and the West Bank, Ukraine and other war zones.

In his statement Thursday, Biden said, "It is time for House Republicans to put our national security first and move with urgency to get this bipartisan bill to my desk."

Biden had summoned congressional leaders to the White House on Tuesday, during which he and others urged Johnson to also move forward with the aid package. Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer said the U.S. can't afford to wait months to provide more military assistance to Ukraine, which is running short of the arms and ammunition necessary to repel Russia's military invasion.

"We've got a lot of priorities before us, but we have to get the government funded and secure our border and then we'll address everything else," Johnson told reporters upon exiting his meeting with GOP colleagues.

Democrats urged quicker action on Ukraine as the temporary spending bill was debated.

"Without swift action, the legacy of this Congress will be the destruction of Ukraine, the appeasement of a dictator, and the abandonment of starving children and ailing families," said Rep. Rosa DeLauro, the top Democrat on the House Appropriations Committee.

## **Texts show prosecutor's ex-law partner gave info for effort to remove Fani Willis from election case**

By KATE BRUMBACK Associated Press

ATLANTA (AP) — Attorneys for Donald Trump and other defendants in the Georgia election interference case hoped that lawyer Terrence Bradley would provide key testimony in support of their effort to remove Fulton County District Attorney Fani Willis — and they had good reason for their optimism.

Over several months, Bradley had been in touch with Ashleigh Merchant, a lawyer for Trump co-defendant Michael Roman, according to hundreds of text messages produced by Merchant as evidence and obtained by The Associated Press on Thursday.

Through the texts, Bradley fed Merchant information and made suggestions to help her prove that Willis had dated Nathan Wade, a special prosecutor hired for the election case. As Wade's former law partner and onetime divorce attorney, Bradley was well positioned to know things, and the texts seem to back that up.

But when he took the stand to testify under oath in mid-February, Bradley initially refused to answer most questions, asserting attorney-client privilege. On Tuesday, when the judge compelled him to testify after determining some of his communications with Wade weren't privileged, he repeatedly said he didn't know or couldn't remember crucial details. CNN reported on the text messages Wednesday.

Merchant filed a motion Jan. 8 seeking to remove Willis and Wade and their offices from the election case and to toss out the indictment against Trump and 14 others. She alleged that the prosecutors had been romantically involved before Wade was hired in November 2021, and she said Willis paid Wade large sums, then improperly benefited from his earnings when he took her on vacations.

"I am nervous," Merchant texted Bradley the day she filed her motion, adding, "This is huge."

He responded with a string of encouraging messages: "You are huge," "You will be fine," "You are one of the best lawyers I know," "Go be great."

The text exchanges show that Bradley willingly provided information to Merchant at least from mid-September through early February. But when Merchant questioned Bradley on Tuesday, asking whether he remembered telling her certain things, he said he did not, said he had been speculating or said she misinterpreted his messages.

"I have no direct knowledge of when the relationship started," Bradley said on the stand, repeating versions of that several times throughout the hearing.

Visibly frustrated at one point, Merchant told Fulton County Superior Court Judge Scott McAfee, "Judge, he doesn't remember much of anything right now."

McAfee has scheduled arguments for Friday on the motions to disqualify Willis and her office from the

election case. It's not clear whether attorneys for Trump and some of his co-defendants have met their burden of showing that Willis and Wade's relationship created a conflict of interest.

Willis and Wade acknowledged the relationship in February, but said it began after Wade was hired and that it ended last summer. Both insist the relationship did not create a conflict and had no bearing on the election interference case.

A Fulton County grand jury in August indicted Trump and 18 others on charges related to their efforts to overturn the 2020 presidential election in Georgia, won by President Joe Biden. But the details of Willis and Wade's relationship have completely overshadowed those charges for nearly two months and may continue to be a distraction even if the judge doesn't remove Willis and her office from the case.

Early in the text exchanges, on Sept. 18, Merchant asked Bradley if he knew of anyone who would be willing to write a sworn statement on Willis and Wade's relationship.

He responded: "No...no one would freely burn that bridge."

In mid-December, Merchant texted Bradley to say she had gotten "more confirmation about Fani and Nathan" but couldn't get anyone to go on the record.

On Jan. 5, just three days before she filed her motion, Merchant texted Bradley that Wade had taken Willis on a cruise and a trip to Napa Valley in California, saying she assumed Bradley knew about it. He responded that he didn't and asked when the trips happened. But then he said it didn't surprise him, adding that they had taken other trips together.

That same day, Merchant asked whether Bradley believed the relationship started before Willis hired Wade and he responded, "Absolutely."

The next day, they discussed a draft of her motion that she had sent him. He said she should include money he had been paid by Willis' office in a footnote detailing money paid to Wade's firm.

After she made that change, she asked, "Anything else? Anything that isn't accurate?"

He responded, "Looks good."

That specific exchange was the source of much frustration among defense attorneys at Tuesday's hearing. They grilled Bradley about why he had written that, only to insist on the stand that he couldn't remember important information that was included in the motion.

The texts show Bradley confirming information for Merchant and suggesting records she should request or people she should subpoena. Though he sometimes seemed to want to make sure certain information couldn't be traced to him, he said he was "ok with" being subpoenaed to testify.

Merchant assured him before filing her motion that she had protected him "completely," adding, "Not that you needed protection." She said she planned to put Willis and Wade on the stand and was sending subpoenas to Bradley and others only as backup.

"It is my hope they do the right thing before then," Merchant wrote on Jan. 24. Bradley said he didn't think they would, calling Willis and Wade "arrogant."

## On the Rio Grande, 300 miles apart, Biden and Trump try to use immigration to election advantage

By SEUNG MIN KIM, JILL COLVIN and COLLEEN LONG Associated Press

BROWNSVILLE, Texas (AP) — On the banks of the same Rio Grande but 300 miles apart, President Joe Biden and GOP challenger Donald Trump on Thursday surveyed the U.S.-Mexico border and tussled from a distance over who is to blame for the nation's broken immigration system and how to fix it.

Immigration has emerged as a central issue in the 2024 presidential campaign, which is widely expected to be a Biden-Trump rematch, and each man is seeking to use the border problems to his own political advantage.

Their itineraries were remarkably similar: They arrived in Texas within a half-hour of one another. Each chose an optimal location from which to make his point, got a briefing on operations and issues, walked along the scrub brush by the Rio Grande and spoke directly to the public. Their remarks even overlapped

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in time for a bit.

But that's where the parallels ended.

Biden sought to spotlight the necessity of a bipartisan border security bill that was tanked by Republicans on Trump's orders, and flat-out asked the Republican front-runner to join him in supporting a congressional push for more funding and tighter restrictions.

"Here's what I would say to Mr. Trump," Biden said. "Instead of playing politics with the issue, join me, or I'll join you in telling the Congress to pass this bill. You know and I know it's the toughest, most efficient, most effective border security bill this country's ever seen."

Biden went to the Rio Grande Valley city of Brownsville, which for nine years was the busiest corridor for illegal crossings. The numbers have dropped in recent months, which officials credited in part to Mexico for stepping up its own border security. The visit was a nod to how the Biden administration views migration: as a regional and global issue, not just a U.S. problem.

The president walked along the Rio Grande and received a lengthy briefing from Homeland Security officials, who spoke bluntly about what they needed to do their jobs effectively — in short, more money to hire more officers along the border and for use across the asylum process to help clear out massive backlogs.

"I want the American people to know what we're trying to get done," Biden said. "We can't afford not to do this."

Trump simply blamed Biden.

He traveled to Eagle Pass, roughly 325 miles northwest of Brownsville, in the corridor that's currently seeing the largest number of migrant crossings. He met with Republican Gov. Greg Abbott and Texas National Guard soldiers who have commandeered a local park and put up razor wire fencing at the river's edge to keep migrants from crossing illegally. The park has become a Republican symbol of defiance against the federal government.

"This is like a war," Trump said.

Gazing out over the river through the razor wire, Trump raised his fist and waved and shouted to people on the Mexico side, who waved back. Then, he declared that migrants arriving to the border were criminals and some were terrorists, a dialed-up version of the accusations he often used during the 2016 campaign. This time, he's started to harness rhetoric once used by Adolf Hitler to argue migrants are poisoning the blood of America.

"They're being let into our country and it's horrible," Trump said. "It's horrible."

Trump also brought up the killing of a 22-year-old nursing student in Georgia recently. The suspect is a Venezuelan migrant.

"Crooked Joe has the blood of countless innocent victims," Trump said. "It's so many stories to tell, so many horrible stories."

Despite Trump's claims, many studies have found immigrants are less drawn to violent crime than native-born citizens. One published by the National Academy of Sciences, based on Texas Department of Public Safety data from 2012 to 2018, reported native-born U.S. residents were more than twice as likely to be arrested for violent crimes as people in the country illegally.

As the politicians traded barbs over who was to blame, migrants were still making the dangerous journey into the U.S. Trump stood on a concrete boat launch where a day earlier, a man had been pulled from the river, drowned, trying to cross. In Brownsville where Biden spoke, a group of migrants had crossed illegally overnight.

Across the border from Brownsville, in Matamoros, makeshift shelters dotted the ground for migrants who hope to come to the U.S.

"I come completely alone on this journey, I have been on this journey for about six months and the only important thing I have in my life are my mom, my little sister and nobody else," Joseph Elián Gutierrez Castillo, a Nicaraguan migrant, said in Spanish. "With God's favor everything will go well."

The number of people who are illegally crossing the U.S. border has been rising for years, for reasons

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that include climate change, war and unrest in other nations, the economy, and cartels that see migration as a cash cow.

Migrants ask for asylum whether they come illegally or through ports of entry; in some cases they are turned away because of current policies, but many families are allowed into the U.S., where they often wait years for a court date to determine whether they can stay.

The administration's approach has been to pair crackdowns at the border with increasing legal pathways for migrants designed to steer people into arriving by plane with sponsors, not illegally on foot to the border. The numbers of migrants flowing across the U.S.-Mexico border have far outpaced the capacity of an immigration system that has not been substantially updated in decades.

Arrests for illegal crossings fell by half in January, but there were record highs in December.

Since the president was last at the border a year ago, the debate over immigration in Washington has shifted further to the right, with Democrats increasingly eager to embrace border restrictions now that migrants are sleeping in police stations and airplane hangars in major U.S. cities without the ability to legally work.

During bipartisan talks on the deal that would have toughened access for migrants and funded enforcement and immigration court, Biden himself said he'd be willing to "shut down the border" right now, should the deal pass.

The talks looked promising for a while. But Trump, who didn't want to give Biden a political win on one of his signature campaign issues, convinced Republicans to kill the deal. House Speaker Mike Johnson, R-La., declared the deal dead on arrival.

Republicans claim Biden has the power he needs to fix the issue, but absent legislative action, any major policy changes are likely to be challenged or held up in court. Under Trump, too, new hardline policies were often held up or stopped by the courts.

Among voters, worries about immigration are rising on both sides of the political divide, which could be especially problematic for Biden.

According to an AP-NORC poll in January, the share of voters concerned about immigration rose to 35% from 27% last year. Fifty-five percent of Republicans say the government needs to focus on immigration in 2024, while 22% of Democrats listed immigration as a priority. That's up from 45% and 14%, respectively, from December 2022.

Trump has laid out updated immigration proposals that would mark a dramatic escalation of the approach he used in office and that drew alarms from civil rights activists and numerous court challenges.

Some of those include reviving and expanding a travel ban, imposing "ideological screening" for migrants, terminating all work permits and cutting off funding for shelter and transportation for people who are in the country illegally.

## First US moon lander in half a century stops working a week after tipping over at touchdown

By MARCIA DUNN AP Aerospace Writer

CAPE CANAVERAL, Fla. (AP) — The first U.S. spacecraft to land on the moon since the Apollo astronauts fell silent Thursday, a week after breaking a leg at touchdown and tipping over near the lunar south pole.

Intuitive Machines' lander, Odysseus, lasted longer than the company anticipated after it ended up on its side with hobbled solar power and communication.

The end came as flight controllers received one last photo from Odysseus and commanded its computer and power systems to standby. That way, the lander can wake up in another two to three weeks — if it survives the bitterly cold lunar night. Intuitive Machines spokesman Josh Marshall said these final steps drained the lander's batteries and put Odysseus "down for a long nap."

"Good night, Odie. We hope to hear from you again," the company said via X, formerly Twitter.

Before losing power, Odysseus sent back what Intuitive Machines called "a fitting farewell transmission."

Taken just before touchdown, the picture shows the bottom of the lander on the moon's pockmarked

surface, with a tiny crescent Earth and a small sun in the background.

The lander was originally intended to last about a week at the moon.

Houston-based Intuitive Machines became the first private business to land a spacecraft on the moon without crashing when Odysseus touched down Feb. 22. Only five countries had achieved that since the 1960s, including Japan, which made a sideways landing last month.

Odysseus carried six experiments for NASA, which paid \$118 million for the ride. The first company to take part in NASA's program for commercial lunar deliveries never made it to the moon; its lander came crashing back to Earth in January.

NASA views these private landers as scouts that will pave the way for astronauts due to arrive in another few years.

Until Odysseus, the last U.S. moon landing was by Apollo 17's Gene Cernan and Harrison Schmitt in 1972.

## **Pentagon leak suspect Jack Teixeira expected to plead guilty in federal case**

By ALANNA DURKIN RICHER Associated Press

BOSTON (AP) — Jack Teixeira, the Massachusetts Air National Guard member accused of leaking highly classified military documents on a social media platform, is expected to plead guilty in his federal case, according to court papers filed Thursday.

Prosecutors asked the judge to schedule a change of plea hearing, but no other details were immediately available. The judge set the hearing for Monday in Boston's federal courthouse.

Teixeira had previously pleaded not guilty to six counts of willful retention and transmission of national defense information. Each count is punishable by up to 10 years in prison.

The Massachusetts U.S. attorney's office declined further comment. An attorney for Teixeira didn't immediately return a phone message Thursday.

Teixeira, of North Dighton, Massachusetts, has been behind bars since his April arrest for a leak that left the Biden administration scrambling to assess and contain the damage among the international community and reassure allies that its secrets are safe with the U.S.

He was accused of sharing classified military documents about Russia's war in Ukraine and other sensitive national security topics on Discord, a social media platform popular with people who play online games. Investigators believe he led a private chat group called Thug Shaker Central, where enthusiasts shared jokes, talked about their favorite types of guns and discussed wars, including Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Authorities say Teixeira, who enlisted in the Air National Guard in 2019, began around January 2023 sharing military secrets with other Discord users — first by typing out classified documents and then sharing photographs of files that bore SECRET and TOP SECRET markings. Teixeira worked as a "cyber transport systems specialist," essentially an IT specialist responsible for military communications networks.

Authorities have said that Teixeira was detected on April 6 — the day The New York Times first published a story about the breach of documents — searching for the word "leak" in a classified system. The FBI says that was reason to believe Teixeira was trying to find information about the investigation into who was responsible for the leaks.

Prosecutors say he continued to leak government secrets even after he was warned by superiors about mishandling and improper viewing of classified information. After being admonished by superiors, he was again seen viewing information not related to the intelligence field, not his primary duty, according to internal Air National Guard memos filed in court.

Authorities have provided few details about an alleged possible motive, but accounts of those in the online private chat group where the documents were disclosed have depicted Teixeira as motivated more by bravado than ideology.

Prosecutors had urged the judge to keep Teixeira jailed while the case played out, in part because of an arsenal of weapons found at his home and his history of disturbing online statements. That included one

social media post saying that, if he had his way, he would like to kill a "ton of people" because it would be "culling the weak minded."

U.S. District Judge Indira Talwani last year denied Teixeira's bid for release, saying "No set of release conditions will reasonably assure the safety of the community, or prevent destruction of evidence."

In pressing for their client to be freed from jail, Teixeira's attorneys pointed to the pretrial release of former President Donald Trump and others in high-profile classified documents cases. Teixeira's lawyers noted that prosecutors did not seek to detain Trump — or his co-defendant, Walt Nauta — even though they said the former president and his valet "possess extraordinary means to flee the United States."

## Lawmakers fault Defense Secretary Austin for a failure of leadership over his secret hospital stay

By LOLITA C. BALDOR Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin faced pointed bipartisan criticism at a congressional hearing Thursday for his failure to promptly notify President Joe Biden and other U.S. leaders about his hospital stay last month. Republicans demanded to know why no one has been disciplined.

Members of the House Armed Services Committee condemned the lapse as an embarrassment and a failure of his leadership. They said the fact that Biden was kept in the dark about Austin not being in command for days could have meant confusion or delays in military action, even though decision-making authorities had been transferred to the deputy defense secretary.

Austin insisted there were no gaps in control of the department or the nation's security because "at all times, either I or the deputy secretary was in a position to conduct the duties of my office." He said changes have been made to the notification process.

Many Democrats also expressed concerns about Austin's lack of transparency about his hospitalization for complications from prostate cancer surgery. But some also used the hearing to criticize House Republicans, who hold a slim majority, for not passing a budget or addressing critical national security needs.

Rep. Elissa Slotkin, D-Mich., denounced the "outrage and drama" from committee members as she said Austin has admitted making an error, apologized and taken action to prevent a repeat. She implored her colleagues to "focus in on the things that are actually important to national security" such as threats from Russia and China.

Nonetheless, there was general agreement that Austin and his staff bungled notifications about his hospital stay in early January.

"It's totally unacceptable that it took three days to inform the president of the United States that the secretary of defense was in the hospital and not in control of the Pentagon," said Rep. Mike Rogers, the committee chairman, adding that wars were raging in Ukraine and Gaza at the time. "The chain of command doesn't work when the commander in chief doesn't know who to call."

Lawmakers pointed out that any employee — from truck drivers to a subordinate military service member — who failed to notify their superior about an absence would typically face punishment.

"This is about judgment and poor judgment," said Rep. Michael Waltz, R-Florida. "My teenage daughter knows to tell her supervisor if she's not going to work. The American people, truck drivers, bartenders know they have to tell their boss or they get fired. But you've held yourself to a different standard and that's unacceptable."

Austin struggled at times when pressed on who was to blame. He said he took full responsibility, but also said he did not tell his staff to keep it a secret. At times he appeared to blame his staff.

"I was the patient and so my expectation is that the organization informed the right agencies," Austin said, when asked why it took four days to inform the White House that he was hospitalized. The Cabinet member said his public affairs staff knew he was hospitalized, but said he did not know why they did not tell anyone or if they made a decision not to inform the public.

The incident led to concerns about lapses in the command and control of the armed forces, including the country's nuclear arsenal.

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The Pentagon has said Austin's staff notified Deputy Defense Secretary Kathleen Hicks when Austin went into intensive care in early January. But that only raised questions about why Austin did not do that himself and whether that suggested there was a gap in control.

When asked later for more details, Maj. Gen. Pat Ryder, the Pentagon press secretary, said he doesn't have an exact timeline of events that day. But he said a communications specialist is always with Austin, and said the secretary's military aides made the decision to transfer authorities to the deputy when it became clear that Austin would not have access to those secure communications due to his move to the intensive care unit.

Austin told lawmakers that "at no time during my treatment or recovery were there any gaps in authorities." He offered a mea culpa that mirrored remarks early this month at a news briefing, saying he takes full responsibility and had apologized to Biden.

"I should have promptly informed the president, my team, Congress, and the American people about my cancer diagnosis and subsequent treatment. Again: We did not handle this right. And I did not handle it right," Austin said.

Austin was diagnosed with prostate cancer in early December. He went to Walter Reed National Military Medical Center for surgery on Dec. 22. On Jan. 1, he was taken back to Walter Reed by ambulance after experiencing significant pain. He was moved to the intensive care unit the next day.

Pentagon officials have acknowledged that public affairs and defense aides were told on Jan. 2 that Austin had been hospitalized but did not make it public and did not tell the military service leaders or the White House National Security Council until Jan. 4. Only then did Biden find out. It took four more days before the reason for Austin's hospitalization was disclosed.

A newly released internal review — conducted by Austin's subordinates — largely absolved anyone of wrongdoing for the secrecy. The review concluded there was "no indication of ill intent or an attempt to obfuscate," and it blamed communications failures on privacy restrictions and staff hesitancy to seek or communicate timely information about Austin's health and condition.

Austin spent several days in intensive care and transferred decision-making authorities to Hicks during that time and when he had the initial surgery in December. He did not tell her why.

In his news briefing Feb. 1, Austin said the cancer diagnosis "was a gut punch. And, frankly, my first instinct was to keep it private."

The internal review said procedures must be improved and information shared better when the defense secretary must transfer decision-making authorities to the deputy. The Defense Department's inspector general is also conducting a review.

## Alabama lawmakers advance plan to protect IVF clinics

By KIM CHANDLER Associated Press

MONTGOMERY, Ala. (AP) — Facing public pressure to get in vitro fertilization services restarted, Alabama lawmakers moved closer to approving protections for fertility clinics that shut down after a state court ruled that frozen embryos are the legal equivalent of children.

Both chambers of the Alabama Legislature advanced bills Thursday that would shield clinics from prosecution and civil lawsuits. Each bill now moves to the opposite chamber for debate. Bill sponsor Rep. Terri Collins said they are aiming to get the measure approved and to the governor on Wednesday.

"This would at least keep the clinics open and the families moving forward," Collins said. She described the legislation as a temporary fix while lawmakers weigh if additional action is needed.

The Alabama Supreme Court ruled in mid-February that three couples who had frozen embryos destroyed in an accident at a storage facility could pursue wrongful death lawsuits for their "extrauterine children." The ruling, treating an embryo the same as a child or gestating fetus under the wrongful death statute, raised concerns about civil liabilities for clinics. Three major providers announced a pause on IVF services.

Republicans' proposal focused on lawsuit protections instead of attempting to address the legal status of embryos. The legislation would shield providers from prosecution and civil lawsuits related to the "damage

to or death of an embryo" during IVF services.

The bills advanced with broad bipartisan support. Representatives voted 94-6 for the proposal, and state senators voted 32-0 for it.

Some Republicans said they want to consider future restriction on what happens to unused embryos.

Republican Rep. Ernie Yarbrough of Trinity tried unsuccessfully to put an amendment on the bill that would prohibit clinics from intentionally discarding embryos that are unused or after genetic testing.

Republican Rep. Mark Gidley of Hokes Bluff said he wants lawmakers to consider putting regulation on fertility clinics

"This is what is important to me and a lot of members of this House. Understand, that once that is fertilized, it begins to grow, even though it may not be in a woman's uterus," Gidley said.

A Democratic lawmaker said the state, which has a stringent abortion ban with no exceptions for rape, has spent too much time interfering with the decisions of women.

"I am so tired of folks telling me as a female in Alabama what I'm going to do with my own body. It's time that we stop this," Democratic Rep. Barbara Drummond of Mobile said. She said a woman texted her this morning asking if the state would take "custody" and responsibility of her frozen embryos if they are now considered children.

Democrats in the Alabama Senate had unsuccessfully tried to amend the bill to state that a human embryo outside a uterus can not be considered an unborn child or human being under state law. Sen. Linda Coleman-Madison, a Democrat from Birmingham, said that was the most direct way to deal with the issue. Republicans blocked the amendment from coming up for a vote.

In their ruling, Alabama justices cited anti-abortion language added to the Alabama Constitution in 2018, saying Alabama recognizes and protects the "rights of unborn children." The constitutional amendment was approved by 59% of Alabama voters.

Rep. Chris England, a Democrat from Tuscaloosa, said lawmakers may be able to provide a temporary solution through legislation but a long-term solution must address the 2018 constitutional amendment, which he said essentially established "personhood" for embryos.

"There are far-reaching ramifications of personhood," England said.

More than 200 IVF patients filled the Statehouse on Wednesday pressuring lawmakers to get IVF services restarted in the state. They showed lawmakers babies created through IVF treatment or described how the ruling halted their path to parenthood.

LeeLee Ray underwent eight miscarriages, one ectopic pregnancy and multiple surgeries before turning to surrogacy in hopes of having a child. She and her husband found a surrogate through a matching program, but now can't have their embryos transferred to her and are unable to move their embryos out of state.

"I'm just frustrated. We had a light at the end of the tunnel," Ray said Wednesday.

## Career US diplomat abruptly admits to spying for communist Cuba for decades

By JOSHUA GOODMAN and JIM MUSTIAN Associated Press

MIAMI (AP) — A former career U.S. diplomat told a federal judge Thursday he will plead guilty to charges of working for decades as a secret agent for communist Cuba, an unexpectedly swift resolution to a case prosecutors called one of the most brazen betrayals in the history of the U.S. foreign service.

Manuel Rocha's stunning fall from grace could culminate in a lengthy prison term after the 73-year-old said he would admit to federal counts of conspiring to act as an agent of a foreign government.

Prosecutors and Rocha's attorney indicated the plea deal includes an agreed-upon sentence but they did not disclose details at a hearing Thursday. He is due back in court April 12, when he is scheduled to formalize his guilty plea and be sentenced.

"I am in agreement," said Rocha, shackled at the hands and ankles, when asked by U.S. District Court Judge Beth Bloom if he wished to change his plea to guilty. Prosecutors, in exchange, agreed to drop 13 counts including wire fraud and making false statements.



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The brief hearing shed no new light on the question that has proved elusive since Rocha's arrest in December: What exactly did he do to help Cuba while working at the State Department for two decades? That included stints as ambassador to Bolivia and top posts in Argentina, Mexico, the White House and the U.S. Interests Section in Havana.

"Ambassador Rocha," as he preferred to be called, was well known among Miami's elite for his aristocratic, almost regal, bearing befitting his Ivy League background. His post-government career included time as a special adviser to the commander of the U.S. Southern Command and more recently as a tough-talking Donald Trump supporter and Cuba hardliner, a persona friends and prosecutors say Rocha adopted to hide his true allegiances.

Peter Lapp, who oversaw FBI counterintelligence against Cuba between 1998 and 2005, said the fast resolution of the case benefits not only the elderly Rocha but also the government, which stands to learn a lot about Cuba's penetration of U.S. foreign policy circles.

Typically in counterintelligence cases, the defendant is charged with espionage. But Rocha was accused of the lesser crimes of acting as a foreign agent, which carry maximum terms of between five and 10 years in prison, making it easier for prosecutors and Rocha to reach an agreement.

"It's a win-win for both sides," said Lapp, who led the investigation into Ana Montes, the highest-level U.S. official ever convicted of spying for Cuba. "He gets a significant payoff and the chance to see his family again, and the U.S. will be able to conduct a full damage assessment that it wouldn't be able to do without his cooperation."

"There are details that can really only come from the defendant," he added.

But the abrupt deal drew criticism in the Cuban exile community, with some legal observers worrying it amounted to a slap on the wrist.

"Any sentence that allows him to see the light of day again would not be justice," said Carlos Trujillo, a Miami attorney who served as U.S. Ambassador to the Organization of American States during the Trump administration. "He's a spy for a foreign adversary who put American lives at risk."

A Justice Department spokesman declined to comment.

Rocha was arrested by the FBI at his Miami home on allegations he had engaged in "clandestine activity" on Cuba's behalf since at least 1981 — the year he joined the U.S. foreign service — including by meeting with Cuban intelligence operatives and providing false information to U.S. government officials about his contacts.

Rocha made a series of recorded admissions to an undercover FBI agent who posed as a Cuban intelligence operative who reached out to Rocha on WhatsApp, calling himself "Miguel" and saying he had a message "from your friends in Havana."

Rocha praised the late Cuban leader Fidel Castro as "Comandante," branded the U.S. the "enemy" and bragged about his service for more than 40 years as a Cuban mole in the heart of U.S. foreign policy circles, prosecutors said in court records.

"What we have done ... it's enormous ... more than a Grand Slam," he was quoted as saying.

Federal authorities have said little about what Rocha actually did to aid Cuba, and FBI and State Department investigators have been conducting a confidential intelligence damage assessment that could take years.

But a recent Associated Press investigation found there were plenty of missed red flags over the years.

Those included a tip that a longtime CIA operative received warning in 2006 that Rocha was working as a double agent. It was never pursued. And separate intelligence revealed that the CIA had been aware as early as 1987 that Castro had a "super mole" burrowed deep inside the U.S. government, and some officials suspected it could have been Rocha.

Lawrence Gumbiner, a retired career diplomat, said the fact that Rocha went undetected for so many years underscores the sophistication of Cuba's intelligence services.

"It's a day for reflection for all of us who knew and worked with him," said Gumbiner, who served as acting U.S. ambassador to Cuba in 2017 and 2018. "Although the full extent of the damage he caused isn't yet revealed, it's hard to believe he didn't pass along some very serious information that compromised

our intelligence services and our own efforts against the Castro regime.”

## **Shohei Ohtani stuns Dodgers -- and many around the world -- with marriage announcement**

By DAVID BRANDT and STEPHEN WADE AP Sports Writers

GLENDALE, Ariz. (AP) — Shohei Ohtani stunned the Los Angeles Dodgers — and many around the world — with his marriage announcement on Thursday, so manager Dave Roberts said any gift the team gives the two-time MVP would be like most of the money in his contract: deferred.

“I’m very happy for him and his bride,” Roberts said, smiling. “As far as wedding gifts, we got surprised and didn’t have much time to think about it. I’m sure it’s en route.”

Ohtani, the two-way Japanese star, revealed on Instagram early Thursday that he was married. Much of the relationship remains shrouded in mystery.

“She is a Japanese woman,” Ohtani said through an interpreter. “I don’t really feel comfortable talking about when I got married exactly, but she’s a normal Japanese woman.”

Ohtani only gave a few more tidbits about the relationship during a short interview on Thursday, saying he had known his new bride for three or four years.

The 29-year-old Ohtani is Japan’s biggest celebrity. There has been curiosity about his personal life, which he has always kept private. His focus and his image has always been 100%-baseball focused and free of scandals and tabloid news.

“I felt like it was good timing because it was before the season,” Ohtani said. “I didn’t really want any distractions once the season started. I would have liked to announce it earlier, but there were some paperwork issues that (delayed) the whole process.”

Ohtani moved from the Los Angeles Angels to the Dodgers in December on a record \$700 million, 10-year contract that calls for \$680 million to be paid from 2034-43.

Ohtani said his marriage didn’t affect how he treated free agency.

“She has a great understanding of my profession, and she’s willing to be wherever I wanted to play and ultimately it was my decision,” Ohtani said.

The post on Instagram included a photo of his dog “Dekopin,” whom Ohtani also calls “Decoy.”

He wrote: “We hope the two of us — and one animal — will work together.”

The news broke in the middle of the night in North America and late afternoon in Japan where it was immediately the top news item.

Japanese television reports daily on his training in the United States and, because of his unprecedented success in North America, he has become the pride of Japan. The Dodgers have become Japan’s de facto team.

Ohtani is training with the Dodgers as they prepare to open in Seoul, South Korea, on March 20-21 in a two-game series against the San Diego Padres.

Ohtani underwent surgery on his right elbow last September and will not pitch this season. He will be used as a designated hitter and there is a possibility he could play in the field.

In his spring training debut this week, he hit a two-run home run against the Chicago White Sox.

Ohtani has hit 171 home runs, including 44 last season, and has a .274 career batting average along with a 38-19 pitching record in five seasons. He missed the 2019 season due to elbow surgery and has a 3.01 career ERA.

He was the 2018 AL Rookie of the Year and the 2021 and '23 AL MVP in 2021, often compared to Babe Ruth for his skill as a two-way player.

## **Palestinians say Israeli troops fired at people seeking food. Israel says scene was deadly stampede**

By WAFAA SHURAF, KAREEM CHEHAYEB and MELANIE LIDMAN Associated Press

RAFAH, Gaza Strip (AP) — Israeli troops fired on a crowd of Palestinians racing to pull food off an aid convoy in Gaza City on Thursday, witnesses said. More than 100 people were killed in the chaos, bringing the death toll since the start of the Israel-Hamas war to more than 30,000, according to health officials.

Israel said many of the dead were trampled in a chaotic stampede for the food aid and that its troops only fired when they felt endangered by the crowd.

The violence was quickly condemned by Arab countries, and U.S. President Joe Biden expressed concern it would add to the difficulty of negotiating a cease-fire in the nearly five-month conflict.

The Gaza City area was among the first targets of Israel's air, sea and ground offensive, launched in response to Hamas' Oct. 7 attack into Israel.

While many Palestinians fled the invasion in the north of the enclave, a few hundred thousand are believed to remain in the largely devastated and isolated region. Several deliveries of aid reached the area this week, officials said.

The deadly chaos in Gaza City will likely fuel criticism of Israel when it comes to allowing aid in.

Aid groups say it has become nearly impossible to deliver supplies in most of Gaza because of the difficulty of coordinating with the Israeli military, ongoing hostilities and the breakdown of public order, with crowds of desperate people overwhelming aid convoys. The U.N. says a quarter of Gaza's 2.3 million Palestinians face starvation; around 80% have fled their homes.

Military officials said the pre-dawn convoy of 30 trucks driving to northern Gaza were met by huge crowds of people trying to grab the aid they were carrying. Dozens of Palestinians were killed in the stampede, and some were run over by the trucks as the drivers tried to get away, said Rear Adm. Daniel Hagari, the chief military spokesperson.

Israeli troops guarding the area fired warning shots toward the crowd because they felt endangered, he said.

"We didn't open fire on those seeking aid. Contrary to the accusations, we didn't open fire on a humanitarian aid convoy, not from the air and not from land. We secured it so it could reach northern Gaza," he said.

Kamel Abu Nahel, who was being treated for a gunshot wound at Shifa Hospital, said he and others went to the distribution point in the middle of the night because they heard there would be a delivery of food. "We've been eating animal feed for two months," he said.

He said Israeli troops opened fire on the crowd as people pulled boxes of flour and canned goods off the trucks, causing the Palestinians to scatter, with some hiding under cars. After the shooting stopped, people went back to the trucks, and the soldiers opened fire again. He was shot in the leg and fell over, and then a truck ran over his leg as it sped off, he said.

At least 112 people were killed, Gaza Health Ministry spokesman Ashraf al-Qidra said. The ministry described it as a "massacre" and said more than 700 others were injured.

Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Jordan accused Israel of targeting civilians in the incident. In separate statements, they called for increased safe passages for humanitarian aid. They also urged the international community to take decisive action to pressure Israel to abide by international law and to reach an agreement for an immediate cease-fire.

Biden spoke with the leaders of Egypt and Qatar about the deaths, according to U.S. officials, and the U.N. Security Council scheduled emergency closed consultations on them for later Thursday.

"We are urgently seeking additional information on exactly what took place," State Department spokesman Matthew Miller said.

The increasing alarm over hunger across Gaza has fueled international calls for a cease-fire, and the U.S., Egypt and Qatar are working to secure a deal between Israel and Hamas for a pause in fighting and the release of some of the hostages Hamas took during its Oct. 7 attack.

Mediators hope to reach an agreement before the Muslim holy month of Ramadan starts around March 10. But so far, Israel and Hamas have remained far apart in public on their demands.

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Biden had earlier expressed hope that a deal would be done by Monday. He said Thursday that looked unlikely.

"Hope springs eternal," Biden told reporters. "I was on the telephone with people from the region. Probably not by Monday, but I'm hopeful."

When asked if the bloodshed in Gaza City on Thursday would complicate those efforts, he said, "I know it will."

In a statement condemning Thursday's attack, Hamas said it would not allow the negotiations "to be a cover for the enemy to continue its crimes."

Medics arriving at the scene of the bloodshed Thursday found "dozens or hundreds" lying on the ground, according to Fares Afana, the head of the ambulance service at Kamal Adwan Hospital. He said there were not enough ambulances to collect all the dead and wounded and that some were being brought to hospitals in donkey carts.

Another man in the crowd — who gave only his first name, Ahmad, as he was being treated at a hospital for gunshot wounds to the arm and leg — said he waited for two hours before someone with a horse-drawn cart had room to take him to Shifa.

The violence came more than a month after witnesses and health officials in Gaza accused Israeli troops of firing on a previous aid distribution in Gaza City, killing at least 20 people.

Dr. Mohammed Salha, the acting director of the Al-Awda Hospital, said the facility received 161 wounded patients, most of whom appeared to have been shot. He said the hospital can perform only the most essential surgeries because it is running out of fuel to power emergency generators.

The Health Ministry said the Palestinian death toll from the war has climbed to 30,035, with another 70,457 wounded. The agency does not differentiate between civilians and combatants in its figures but says women and children make up around two-thirds of those killed.

The ministry, which is part of the Hamas-run government in Gaza, maintains detailed records of casualties. Its counts from previous wars have largely matched those of the U.N., independent experts and even Israel's own tallies.

The Hamas attack into southern Israel that ignited the war killed 1,200 people, mostly civilians, and the militants seized around 250 hostages. Hamas and other militants are still holding around 100 hostages and the remains of about 30 more, after releasing most of the other captives during a November cease-fire.

Violence has also surged across the West Bank since Oct. 7. An attacker shot and killed two Israelis at a gas station in the settlement of Eli on Thursday, according to the Israeli military. The attacker was killed, the military said.

Meanwhile, U.N. officials have warned of further mass casualties if Israel follows through on vows to attack the southernmost city of Rafah, where more than half of Gaza's population of 2.3 million has taken refuge. They also say a Rafah offensive could decimate what remains of aid operations.

Hundreds of thousands of Palestinians are believed to remain in northern Gaza despite Israeli orders to evacuate the area in October, and many have been reduced to eating animal fodder to survive. The U.N. says 1 in 6 children under 2 in the north suffer from acute malnutrition and wasting.

COGAT, the Israeli military body in charge of Palestinian civilian affairs, said around 50 aid trucks entered northern Gaza this week. It was unclear who delivered the aid. Some countries have resorted to airdrops in recent days.

The World Food Program said earlier this month that it was pausing deliveries to the north because of the growing chaos, after desperate Palestinians emptied a convoy while it was en route.

Since launching its assault on Gaza following Hamas' Oct. 7 attack, Israel has barred entry of food, water, medicine and other supplies, except for a trickle of aid entering the south from Egypt at the Rafah crossing and Israel's Kerem Shalom crossing. Despite international calls to allow in more aid, the number of supply trucks is far less than the 500 that came in daily before the war.

## **Palestinian-American woman who faces trial in Israeli military court is released on bail**

By JULIA FRANKEL Associated Press

OFER PRISON, West Bank (AP) — A U.S. citizen who was dragged out of her home and detained by Israeli authorities for over three weeks was released on bail Thursday to wait out the remainder of her trial in the West Bank, the latest in a case attracting international attention for prosecuting an American in Israeli military court.

Samaher Esmail, a 46-year-old mother of Palestinian origin and resident of New Orleans, had been in the West bank for under three months when she was charged with incitement for several photos and messages she posted to social media. Some of them involved images of top Hamas leaders, but did not explicitly call for violence. Esmail, who suffers from cancer and kidney problems, was bruised and sickly when her lawyer visited her at Damon prison, where she was held in the north of Israel before her release.

Esmail is now allowed to return to her West Bank village. She will only be able to go back to the U.S. once her trial concludes, which could take months, and only if she is found not guilty.

That a U.S. citizen is being tried in military court — a legal system for West Bank Palestinians separate from the civilian courts enjoyed by Israelis — has drawn widespread criticism. Israel says it provides due process and largely imprisons those who threaten its security. Palestinians and human rights groups say the system is awash in violations of due process and almost always renders guilty verdicts, with 95% of military court hearings ending in convictions, according to Israeli watchdog Military Court Watch.

Esmail's representatives and family celebrated Thursday's decision to release her on bail, but expressed dismay at what they perceive as a tepid U.S. government response to the incarceration of an American by Israel.

"We're ecstatic because we feel like this rarely happens," said Esmail's son, Suliman Hamed, who lives in New Orleans. "I feel like because of all the media coverage they may have done it fairly this time around. I really thought I might never see her again."

On Feb. 6, Esmail was dragged out of her house by Israeli forces in the middle of the night. A video of the incident provoked outrage on social media. During her arrest, her lawyer alleges Israeli forces beat Esmail, did not give her time put on her hijab — the headscarf worn by some Muslim women — and her Israeli interrogator did not ask properly if Esmail wanted an attorney present.

Little was known publicly about her whereabouts, the charges against her, or her condition.

She was not able to see a lawyer until four days after her arrest, according to court documents from her initial hearing. Esmail reportedly did not have access to her medications for at least the first six days of her detention and fainted in prison, said a letter written to U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken by Jonathan Franks, a crisis management consultant who represents Americans detained abroad and is working for Esmail's family. A consular officer did not visit Esmail until 14 days after her arrest, Franks said Thursday.

"I was extremely frustrated, given the issue of her potentially having been abused in custody, that it took 14 days to get a consular officer to see her," said Franks, who flew from the U.S. to attend Thursday's hearing. "I would like to see a public statement from the embassy that it's our expectation that Americans are not going to be put through these military commissions. And I don't think that that's too much to ask of a friend."

The judge ruled Thursday at Israel's Ofer prison that the military court did not have jurisdiction to prosecute Esmail for posts she made while in the U.S., but charged her with incitement for posts she made while in the West Bank. Esmail attended the hearing remotely, via videoconference from Damon prison.

Three of the posts involved a figure resembling Abu Obeida, the spokesman of Hamas' armed wing. Under two of the images was the inscription "Victory or death of the Saints, God willing," according to court documents. Esmail also changed her profile picture to a masked man resembling Obeida twirling a ball on his finger, emblazoned with U.S. and Israeli flags.

She also posted a photo of Yahya Ayyash, who built bombs for Hamas and was killed by Israel in 1996, against the backdrop of Al-Aqsa mosque.

No post in question received more than 11 likes.

"The posts constituted incitement and support of an illegal organization, and are therefore not protected speech" the judge said Thursday.

The court's decision means that Esmail will have to remain in the West Bank until the legal proceedings against her are complete. During that time, Esmail is barred from posting publicly on social media. Her next trial at a military court is set for March 31, according to Franks.

In the meantime, her family is worried that she will not have access to adequate cancer treatment in the West Bank and that Israel may arrest her again.

Thursday's hearings followed a previous military court hearing six days after her arrest in which the military judge assigned to her case openly questioned the wisdom of prosecuting an American citizen and wondered if the court had jurisdiction, according to case files obtained by The Associated Press.

"It is not wise to file indictment against her based on the allegations," the judge said at the time. "In the substantial sense, nor even in the political sense (in its international sense)."

Despite the judge's recommendation that Esmail be released on bail, the military prosecutor filed an indictment — leading to Thursday's hearing.

The case comes at a time of high tension between the U.S. and Israel over the war in Gaza, which has claimed over 30,000 lives since Oct. 7, when Hamas militants staged a cross border attack, killing some 1,200 Israelis and dragging 250 hostages back to Gaza.

Since that day, Israel has clamped down on online speech perceived to glorify Hamas or the Palestinian cause. Palestinians have been arrested by Israeli authorities, fired by Israeli employers and expelled from Israeli schools for speech deemed incendiary, rights groups say.

Hamed, Esmail's son, said the family was disappointed that the embassy did not send a high-ranking official to attend Thursday's hearing, despite the family's representatives asking them to.

The U.S. Embassy did not have immediate comment.

Esmail's family said she often traveled back and forth between the West Bank and the U.S., where she manages a family owned grocery store in the New Orleans suburb of Gretna and worked as a tutor at a nearby high school. She was in the West Bank to see relatives and testify at a hearing about a previous encounter with Israeli forces where she was beaten, her representatives said.

"It's clear why they're holding her," said Hamed. "They're trying to use her as an example and to intimidate Palestinians. Cases like these have people deleting their social media, canceling their trips to Palestine. They're trying to silence us."

## Norovirus illnesses are up in some places.

### Here's what you need to know

By JONEL ALECCIA AP Health Writer

Cases of norovirus, a nasty stomach bug that spreads easily, are climbing in the Northeastern U.S., the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported Thursday.

Nationwide, about 12% of most recent norovirus tests sent to the CDC were positive, but the proportion was about 16% in the Northeast, the agency said. That compares with nearly 10% of norovirus tests in the Midwest and South and nearly 13% in the West.

Characterized by the sudden onset of vomiting, diarrhea and general feelings of misery, norovirus outbreaks are notorious on cruise ships, nursing homes, jails, schools and other places where people are in close contact.

Here's what you need to know about this wily germ:

#### WHAT IS NOROVIRUS?

Norovirus infections are caused by a group of viruses that spread remarkably easily. It can take as few as 10 viral particles — "a miniscule amount" — to make someone sick, said Dr. William Schaffner, an infectious disease expert at Vanderbilt University Medical Center.

#### HOW DOES NOROVIRUS SPREAD?

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Norovirus can spread from person to person, in food or water or on contaminated surfaces. Because it's so contagious, one handshake or a the touch of a contaminated door knob or handrail can be enough to cause illness, experts said.

## HOW LONG DOES A NOROVIRUS ILLNESS LAST?

Illness caused by norovirus typically starts suddenly, in what Schaffner called "a strikingly dramatic way." A person can go from slightly unwell to miserable within hours.

It usually lasts two to three days. Most people recover fully.

## WHO IS AT RISK?

There is no medication to treat norovirus. Dehydration from vomiting and diarrhea is a chief worry, so those most at risk include young children, older people and those with weakened immune systems.

It's important to replace fluids by sipping water, soda or other drinks — except coffee, tea and alcohol — during illness, Schaffner said. Anyone experiencing symptoms of dehydration should seek medical help, he added.

## HOW CAN I AVOID BEING INFECTED WITH NOROVIRUS?

The best defense against norovirus infection, especially during the peak winter season, is rigorous and frequent handwashing. Use ordinary soap and warm water and scrub hands vigorously for 20 seconds before meals.

Cleaning surfaces is important, too. Use household disinfectants and scrub well, Schaffner said.

## IS THIS SEASON WORSE THAN PAST YEARS?

The nationwide trajectory of norovirus doesn't seem very different this year than in past years, but there are still a few weeks left in the winter, experts noted.

The unpleasant truth is that a norovirus surge is to be expected at this time of year, said Dr. Daniel Griffin, an infectious disease expert at Columbia University Medical Center.

"We often call it 'winter vomiting disease,'" he said.

## Judge blocks Texas law that gives police broad powers to arrest migrants who illegally enter US

By ACACIA CORONADO Associated Press

AUSTIN, Texas (AP) — A federal judge on Thursday blocked a new Texas law that would give police broad powers to arrest migrants suspected of illegally entering the U.S., dealing a victory to the Biden administration with a broad rejection of Republican Gov. Greg Abbott's immigration enforcement effort.

U.S. District Judge David Ezra's preliminary injunction pausing a law that was set to take effect March 5 came as President Joe Biden and his likely Republican challenger in November, Donald Trump, were visiting Texas' southern border to discuss immigration.

The state attorney general's office immediately appealed the ruling, according to a statement Thursday.

The ruling rebuked Texas' immigration enforcement effort on multiple fronts, brushing off claims by Republicans about an ongoing "invasion" along the southern border due to record-high illegal crossings. Ezra also said the law violates the Constitution's supremacy clause, conflicts with federal immigration law, and could hamper U.S. foreign relations and treaty obligations.

It is the second time in six months that Ezra has stopped one of Abbott's border escalations, having also ruled against a floating barrier Texas erected in the Rio Grande.

Allowing Texas to "permanently supersede federal directives" due to a so-called invasion would "amount to nullification of federal law and authority — a notion that is antithetical to the Constitution and has been unequivocally rejected by federal courts since the Civil War," the judge wrote.

Opponents have called the Texas measure the most dramatic attempt by a state to police immigration since a 2010 Arizona law that opponents derided as the "show me your papers" bill. The U.S. Supreme Court partially struck down the Arizona law, but some Texas Republicans want that ruling to get a second look.

In his decision, Ezra wrote that the Texas law was preempted by the decision in the Arizona case, adding

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that the two laws had "striking similarities." He also struck down state officials' claims that large numbers of illegal border crossings constitute an "invasion," saying calling it such is a novel interpretation of the Constitution's invasion clause and that allowing the law to stand would be permitting the state to engage in war.

Although some may empathize with Texas officials' claims regarding the federal government's handling of immigration policy, it is not an excuse to violate the Constitution, the judge wrote.

In a statement, Abbott blamed the influx of migrants on Biden and said "we will not back down in our fight to protect our state — and our nation."

"Texas has the right to defend itself because of President Biden's ongoing failure to fulfill his duty to protect our state from the invasion at our southern border," he wrote, noting that he believes the case will ultimately end up before the Supreme Court.

Civil rights groups who sued the state have argued that if allowed to stand, the law — Senate Bill 4 — could lead to civil rights violations and racial profiling. They released a joint statement celebrating the decision.

"With today's decision, the court sent a clear message to Texas: S.B. 4 is unconstitutional and criminalizing Black, Brown, Indigenous, and immigrant communities will not be tolerated," said Jennifer Babaie, director of advocacy and legal services with Las Americas Immigrant Advocacy Center.

The Biden administration's lawsuit over the law is one several legal battles between it and Texas over how far the state can go to try to prevent migrants from crossing the border.

Under the rejected law, state law enforcement officers could arrest people suspected of entering the country illegally. Once in custody, they could agree to a Texas judge's order to leave the country or face a misdemeanor charge for entering the U.S. illegally. Migrants who don't leave after being ordered to do so could be arrested again and charged with a more serious felony.

Texas has been arresting migrants for years under a more limited program based on arrests for criminal trespassing.

At a Feb. 15 hearing, Ezra expressed skepticism as the state pleaded its case. Ezra, who was appointed by former President Ronald Reagan, said he feared the U.S. could become a confederation of states enforcing their own immigration laws. In his ruling, he doubled down on the thought, adding that "SB4 threatens the fundamental notion that the United States must regulate immigration with one voice."

Republicans who back the law have said it would not target immigrants already living in the U.S. because of the two-year statute of limitations on the illegal entry charge and would be enforced only along the state's border with Mexico.

Other Republican governors have expressed support for Abbott, who has said the federal government is not doing enough to enforce immigration laws.

Among other things, Texas placed the floating barrier in the Rio Grande, put razor wire along the U.S.-Mexico border and stopped Border Patrol agents from accessing a riverfront park in Eagle Pass that they previously used to process migrants.

## **Russian onslaught targets more Ukrainian towns and villages as Ukraine says it shot down 3 warplanes**

By ILLIA NOVIKOV Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — Russian forces are pushing hard against more Ukrainian towns and villages in eastern and southeastern Ukraine as Moscow tries to press its current advantage in weapons and troops, Kyiv officials said Thursday.

Despite Russia's apparent offensive momentum on the ground, Ukraine said it has shot down 13 Russian warplanes this month, including three on Thursday, as the Kremlin's forces pushed forward.

With the full-scale war now into its third year, Russian forces have been bludgeoning some Ukrainian defensive positions into submission, deploying overwhelming amounts of artillery and troop numbers in an effort to punch through defensive lines at targeted points.



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Though Russia's gains have been small, slow and costly, Ukraine doesn't have enough reservists and has a severe shortage of artillery shells as the supply of military aid from Western partners has waned.

The Russian army is trying to seize the towns and villages of Tonenke, Orlivka, Semenivka, Berdychi and Krasnohorivka in the eastern Donetsk region, Ukraine's army chief, Col. Gen Oleksandr Syrskyi, said on social media.

Those are places where Ukrainian military officials had said they would form a new line of defense after Ukrainian troops pulled out of Avdiivka on Feb. 17.

In the southeastern Zaporizhzhia region, Russian forces are focusing on retaking Verbove and Robotyne, towns that Ukraine won back in last summer's counteroffensive in 2023, Syrskyi said.

Syrskyi, who was appointed by Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy to lead the country's military on Feb. 8, accused some of his commanders of making "miscalculations" in assessing the enemy and taking countermeasures.

Meanwhile, Ukraine's Defense Ministry said that its forces shot down three Russian Su-34 jets overnight.

That made a total of 11 warplanes, including an early warning and control A-50 plane, that Ukraine claims to have downed since Feb. 17, and 13 in February — the highest monthly tally, it said, since October 2022.

"The enemy has increased its air presence in the east. Our top military leadership reacted accordingly," air force spokesman Yuriy Ihnat said on national television.

A major question for Kyiv officials is how they can unlock further military help from their partners. Emergency U.S. national security funds for Ukraine are still on hold amid a political dispute in Washington.

Ukrainian parliamentary Speaker Ruslan Stefanchuk addressed an open letter to U.S. House Speaker Mike Johnson, asking him to put to a vote the Biden administration's proposal to send \$60 billion of aid to Ukraine.

The letter Stefanchuk posted on X, formerly Twitter, on Wednesday was also signed by 23 speakers and heads of parliament in European countries.

Eight Ukrainian civilians, including a 6-year-old girl, were killed, and at least 12 people were wounded in the southeast over the previous 24 hours, the Ukrainian president's office said Thursday.

## **Texas Sen. Cornyn announces run for GOP leader as scramble to succeed McConnell begins in the Senate**

By MARY CLARE JALONICK Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Texas Sen. John Cornyn has informed his colleagues that he intends to run for Senate Republican leader, becoming the first senator to announce a campaign after Sen. Mitch McConnell said he will step down from the post in November.

Cornyn, who served as McConnell's No. 2 in leadership before he was term-limited out of the job five years ago, is citing his experience in that role in a statement Thursday to fellow senators announcing his run. But he also is trying to distinguish himself from McConnell, saying, "I believe the Senate is broken -- that is not news to anyone."

"From experience, I have learned what works in the Senate and what does not," Cornyn said. "And I am confident Senate Republicans can restore our institution to the essential role it serves in our constitutional republic."

There has long been speculation that Cornyn, South Dakota Sen. John Thune and Wyoming Sen. John Barrasso — the "three Johns" — would vie to replace McConnell, R-Ky., if and when McConnell were to step down. But the longtime leader's surprise announcement on Wednesday that he won't run again for Republican leader after the November elections has jump-started the campaign earlier than expected, almost nine months before GOP senators are expected to gather and choose a new leader behind closed doors.

Cornyn, a former Texas attorney general who was first elected to the Senate in 2002, is a prominent member of the Senate Judiciary Committee and a popular member of the GOP conference who is seen

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as a steady hand. He has managed to bridge some of the caucus' deep divides in recent years while also occasionally negotiating with Democrats, as he did on bipartisan gun legislation in 2022.

He is also a prolific fundraiser for the party, having raised a total of \$13 million for incumbents, the party's Senate campaign arm, and Senate Republican nominees already in the 2024 cycle.

In his statement, Cornyn said he believes he has "built a track record of listening to colleagues and seeking consensus, while leading the fight to stop bad policies that are harmful to our nation and the conservative cause."

Cornyn said he would work to improve communication, try to move spending bills individually and make an effort to include every member in decisions. That's a response to frequent complaints from some senators about massive year-end spending bills and McConnell's top-down leadership approach.

Both Thune, the current No. 2 Republican, and Barrasso, the chairman of the Senate GOP conference, have left the door open to runs after McConnell's announcement. Neither has officially announced a campaign for the job.

Thune told reporters that McConnell's departure leaves "big shoes to fill," but that now is a time "to reflect on his service and and honor him for that. And then we'll we'll go from there." After Cornyn's announcement, a spokesman for Thune said the senator is reaching out to colleagues to discuss "the future of the Senate Republican Conference and what they would like to see in their next leader," but intends on keeping those conversations private.

Barrasso said Wednesday he's focused on the November election and getting a Senate majority. In terms of leadership decisions, "I'm going to talk to members of the conference, hear what they have to say, listen to them in terms of what direction they want to take."

Much of the race for leader is likely to take place through phone calls, one-on-one meetings and private gatherings over the next several months. Unlike the House, where both parties vote for speaker in a public -- and recently messy -- spectacle, Senate party leadership is chosen in closed-door conference meetings by secret ballot. Cornyn was already making calls and reaching out to his fellow senators in the hours since McConnell's announcement.

Republican senators haven't chosen a new leader since 2007, when McConnell was elected. That's before most current GOP senators took office.

It is unclear which of the three "Johns" would have an advantage among their peers.

While Cornyn is well liked and has drawn attention for his fundraising, Thune could have the advantage of incumbency, as McConnell's current deputy. Barrasso has tracked furthest to the right of the three, becoming the first of them to endorse former President Donald Trump for the GOP presidential nomination.

Thune and Cornyn have criticized Trump in the past, especially since the Jan. 6, 2021, attack on the Capitol by Trump's supporters. But each eventually endorsed him as it became more likely that he will be the party's presidential nominee this year.

There are certain to be other candidates, as well, including from the wing of the party that is closest to Trump.

Florida Sen. Rick Scott challenged McConnell in 2022 at Trump's urging, winning 10 votes, and he could run again. Scott has said he is focused on his own reelection bid this year, but has appeared open to a run after that.

"I think there's a better way to run the Senate," Scott said after McConnell's announcement. "So we'll see what happens."

On Thursday, Scott said that he and Sen. Ron Johnson, R-Wisc., will soon call for a special conference meeting to discuss the future of the party.

The sudden scramble for the next leader comes as McConnell, 82, had faced louder and increasing criticism from some within his party who have said it is time for a change in leadership. They have criticized McConnell's support for the huge end-of-year spending bills and, most recently, his outspoken backing for aid for Ukraine. A growing number in his conference has opposed the assistance, saying it would be better spent on the U.S.-Mexico border or elsewhere within the U.S.

The Republican leader was also at odds with Trump, whom he has said was “practically and morally responsible” for the Capitol attack. The two haven’t spoken since before then, and Trump frequently bashes him publicly.

McConnell acknowledged his critics in his Senate floor speech announcing that he would step down from that role.

“Believe me, I know the politics within my party at this particular moment in time,” McConnell said. “I have many faults, misunderstanding politics is not one of them.”

He also echoed his critics, calling for a “new generation” to take over.

In the hours after the announcement, as the surprise wore off, many senators praised McConnell’s legacy, including his role in the Senate confirmation of three conservative Supreme Court Justices who tilted the court to the right.

Others were more focused on the future.

“This is a good development,” said Missouri Sen. Josh Hawley, a frequent McConnell critic. “My question is: Why wait so long?”

## **Nikki Haley can’t win the Republican primary with 40%. But she can expose some of Trump’s weaknesses**

By MEG KINNARD and AMELIA THOMSON-DEVEAUX Associated Press

GRAND RAPIDS, Mich. (AP) — Donald Trump’s campaign has vowed not to talk about her anymore. Many pundits have written her off entirely. But Nikki Haley is still campaigning across the country — and plenty of Republican voters are coming to hear what she has to say.

Before packed audiences in states that will vote on Super Tuesday next week, Haley is making the case she laid out after losing the primary in her home state of South Carolina: Roughly 40% of GOP voters support her over Trump, suggesting their party’s dominant figure is especially vulnerable in a November rematch against President Joe Biden.

“He lost 40% of the primary vote in all of the early states,” she told more than 500 people at a campaign event in the politically mixed suburb of Bloomington, Minnesota, on Monday. “You can’t win the general election if you can’t win that 40%.”

Trump is on the verge of winning several hundred more delegates for the GOP nomination on Super Tuesday and could eliminate Haley by clinching the nomination a few weeks later. But by staying in the race longer than any other major candidate, Haley has highlighted Trump’s political problems with key constituencies in their party and suggested that he is a “sinking ship.”

Trump won about 51% of voters in the Iowa caucuses, 54% in New Hampshire’s primaries and 60% in South Carolina. Haley didn’t come close to winning 40% in Michigan’s primary this week and instead lost to Trump by more than 40 points, 68% to 27%.

But just as she has throughout the primary, Haley did better in suburban areas like Oakland County near Detroit and Ottawa County near Grand Rapids. She also did better in Kent County, where Grand Rapids and a large suburban population is located.

Biden flipped Kent County and improved on Democrats’ 2016 performance in Oakland County on the way to winning Michigan in 2020 and beating Trump in the election.

Richard Czuba, a pollster who has long tracked Michigan politics, said Haley’s results were more significant for understanding a critical swing state in the general election than the campaign to vote “uncommitted” against Biden to protest his handling of the Israel-Hamas war, which drew about 100,000 votes and collected two Democratic delegates.

“This is by far, to me, the one narrative we saw (Tuesday) that will have major implications in November,” Czuba said.

Trump declined to mention Haley, his former U.N. ambassador, after beating her in South Carolina, and his campaign has accused her of deluding voters about her chances.

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"She can't name one state she can win, let alone be competitive in," spokesperson Steven Cheung said in a recent statement.

Haley indeed resisted naming a state she could win when questioned by The Associated Press and other media. But interviews with three dozen voters at her rallies and AP VoteCast data from the Republican primary suggest several vulnerabilities for Trump heading into a Biden rematch.

About half of Republican voters in South Carolina — including about a quarter of his supporters — are concerned that Trump is too extreme to win the general election, according to AP VoteCast, a survey of more than 2,400 voters taking part in the Republican primary in South Carolina, conducted for AP by NORC at the University of Chicago.

Trump allies have accused Haley of appealing to the left to vote in open Republican primaries. Some 19% of Haley voters in South Carolina identified themselves as Democrats or people who lean Democratic, according to AP VoteCast. But 72% were Republicans or lean toward the GOP.

About 3 in 10 South Carolina primary voters believe he acted illegally in at least one of the criminal cases against him, even though about three-quarters believe the investigations are political attempts to undermine him.

"We've been tightening the belt as much as we can, but can't think about having kids until we can afford it," said Jonathan Paquette, a 27-year-old contractor from Minnetonka, Minnesota, a suburb of the Twin Cities. "That's the kind of discussion this campaign should be about, not about lawsuits and criminal indictments. That doesn't solve any of our problems."

Lori Jacobson, a 64-year-old retired lab technician from Monticello, a small town northwest of the Twin Cities, said Trump "repulses me." She voted for Trump in 2016 but not 2020.

"It's all about revenge with him," Jacobson said. Haley, she said, "has a calm that stands in such contrast to him, though she is a very strong woman."

Across the states where Haley's post-South Carolina campaign has gone, some voters have picked up on that messaging.

"Forty percent is better than no percent," said Alyssa Prevo, an Uber driver from Williamston, Michigan, as she waited for Haley ahead of a Monday event in Grand Rapids, Michigan.

Prevo, a military veteran, described herself as a longtime Republican, although she said she had voted for Democratic candidates in the past.

"Forty percent is a lot, it's not a little, even though she lost her home state," Prevo said. "People focus on the losing, I don't. She has integrity. And for me, the umbrella, integrity, is everything she has under that."

Nearly 9 in 10 Haley voters in South Carolina said they would not be satisfied with Trump as the Republican Party's presidential nominee, about 7 in 10 say he does not have the mental capability to serve effectively as president, and about 6 in 10 say they would not ultimately vote for him.

Given the primary race's current trajectory, the Trump campaign may not have to address Haley again — and they expect that many disaffected Republicans will return to the former president's side in a Biden-Trump rematch.

Haley could lose any mathematical chance of becoming the nominee in the next few weeks as more states hold "winner-take-all" primaries that would let Trump sweep their delegates even if Haley closes the gap with him.

For now, Haley and her aides say they aren't planning beyond Super Tuesday. Indeed, Haley has not said where she'll campaign after those contests. And her campaign has yet to book any television or digital advertising beyond Super Tuesday, according to media tracking firm AdImpact.

"That's as far as we've thought so far," Haley said Saturday. "We've taken it one state, one month at a time, and focused on that — that's what's gotten us to this moment is discipline, hard work, being smarter than everybody else and making sure that we do whatever it takes to scrappy as we need, to get to the finish line."

## Putin warns that sending Western troops to Ukraine risks a global nuclear war

By VLADIMIR ISACHENKOV Associated Press

MOSCOW (AP) — Russian President Vladimir Putin vowed Thursday to fulfill Moscow's goals in Ukraine and sternly warned the West against deeper involvement in the fighting, saying that such a move is fraught with the risk of a global nuclear conflict.

Putin's blunt warning came in a state-of-the-nation address ahead of next month's election he's all but certain to win, underlining his readiness to raise the stakes in the tug-of-war with the West to protect the Russian gains in Ukraine.

In an apparent reference to French President Emmanuel Macron's statement earlier this week that the future deployment of Western ground troops to Ukraine should not be "ruled out", Putin warned that it would lead to "tragic" consequences for the countries who decide to do that.

Putin noted that while accusing Russia of plans to attack NATO allies in Europe, Western allies were "selecting targets for striking our territory" and "talking about the possibility of sending a NATO contingent to Ukraine."

"We remember the fate of those who sent their troop contingents to the territory of our country," the Russian leader said in an apparent allusion to the failed invasions by Napoleon and Hitler. "Now the consequences for the potential invaders will be far more tragic."

In a two-hour speech before an audience of lawmakers and top officials, Putin cast Western leaders as reckless and irresponsible and declared that the West should keep in mind that "we also have the weapons that can strike targets on their territory, and what they are now suggesting and scaring the world with, all that raises the real threat of a nuclear conflict that will mean the destruction of our civilization."

The strong statement followed earlier warnings from Putin, who has issued frequent reminders of Russia's nuclear might since he sent troops into Ukraine in February 2022 as he sought to discourage the West from expanding its military support for Kyiv.

Putin emphasized that Russia's nuclear forces are in "full readiness," saying that the military has deployed potent new weapons, some of them tested on the battlefield in Ukraine.

The Kremlin leader said they include the new Sarmat heavy intercontinental ballistic missile that has entered service with Russian nuclear forces, along with the Burevestnik atomic-powered cruise missile and the Poseidon atomic-powered, nuclear-armed drone, which are completing their tests.

At the same time, he rejected Western leaders' statements about the threat of a Russian attack on NATO allies in Europe as "ravings" and again dismissed Washington's claim that Moscow was pondering the deployment of space-based nuclear weapons.

Putin charged that the U.S. allegations were part of a ploy to draw Russia into talks on nuclear arms control on American terms even as Washington continues its efforts to deliver a "strategic defeat" to Moscow in Ukraine.

"Ahead of the U.S. election, they just want to show their citizens, as well as others, that they continue to rule the world," he said. "It won't work."

In his speech that focused heavily on economic and social issues ahead of the March 15-17 presidential vote, Putin argued that Russia was "defending its sovereignty and security and protecting our compatriots" in Ukraine, charging that the Russian forces have the upper hand in the fighting.

He reaffirmed his claim that the West was bent on destroying Russia, saying "they need a dependent, waning, dying space in the place of Russia so that they can do whatever they want."

The Russian leader honored the troops fallen in Ukraine with a moment of silence, and said that military veterans should form the core of the country's new elite, inviting them to join a new training program for senior civil servants.

Putin has repeatedly said that he sent troops into Ukraine in February 2022 to protect Russian interests and prevent Ukraine from posing a major security threat to Russia by joining NATO. Kyiv and its allies have denounced it as an unprovoked act of aggression.

The Russian leader has repeatedly signaled a desire to negotiate an end to the fighting but warned that Russia will hold onto its gains.

Putin, 71, who is running as an independent candidate in the March 15-17 presidential election, relies on the tight control over Russia's political system that he has established during 24 years in power.

Prominent critics who could challenge him have either been imprisoned or are living abroad, while most independent media have been banned, meaning that Putin's reelection is all but assured. He faces token opposition from three other candidates nominated by Kremlin-friendly parties represented in parliament.

Russia's best-known opposition leader Alexei Navalny, whose attempt to run against Putin in 2018 was rejected, died suddenly in an Arctic prison colony earlier this month, while serving a 19-year sentence on extremism charges. Navalny's funeral is set for Friday.

## **A California county ditched its vote-counting machines. Now a supporter faces a recall election**

By ADAM BEAM Associated Press

REDDING, Calif. (AP) — Voters in this rural California county have twice voted for Donald Trump by wide margins while electing staunch conservatives to their local governing board, even going so far as to boot some from office who were deemed not conservative enough.

But that string of victories at the ballot box has not been enough to instill confidence in the county's election system — not when Trump and his allies have repeatedly spread false claims about rigged elections and voter fraud, even in deep red Shasta County.

The Northern California county, known mostly for Lassen Volcanic National Park and views of the snow-capped peak of Mount Shasta, abruptly got rid of its ballot-counting machines last year. They were made by Dominion Voting Systems, the company at the center of debunked conspiracy theories about how Trump lost the 2020 presidential election.

Instead, the conservative majority on the board of supervisors directed the county's small election staff to count ballots by hand, a task experts say is unrealistic given the tens of thousands of ballots returned in countywide elections across dozens of races.

A mountain of criticism followed, capped by the Democratic-dominated state Legislature stepping in last year to pass a law that strictly limited ballot hand counts, a move that short-circuited any attempt to do that in Shasta's municipal elections last fall. On Tuesday, voters get to have their say on the county's direction since a slate of far-right conservatives who question the validity of elections took control of local government two years ago.

They will decide whether to recall Kevin Crye, a member of the conservative majority on the Shasta County Board of Supervisors that voted to get rid of the tabulators.

The recall has become a referendum not just for Crye, but also for the push to hand-count ballots that has been gaining popularity across rural America in response to baseless claims of widespread fraud tied to ballot-counting machines.

The controversy has divided voters, compelling county residents such as Mark Oliver to stand on a busy street corner in the rain on a recent chilly afternoon holding a sign urging people to vote yes on the recall. A resident of the county for 30 years, he has never before gotten involved in local politics.

"I feel like if we're not engaged, then you're going to have these kind of extremists who are just going to run rampant around here," he said.

The trouble started after Trump disputed the 2020 presidential election results, prompting suspicion among the president's followers. That outrage wound up at the doorstep of the Shasta County Registrar of Voters, where dozens of skeptical election watchers would show up to question staff members as they counted ballots.

In June 2022, with many of the far-right candidates losing in local primary races, a group of people walked in the back door of the elections office and started yelling at the clerk, said Joanna Francescut, the assistant registrar of voters.

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"I felt they were trying to intimidate us for doing our job," Francescut said.

Tuesday's recall election could offer a clue of rural America's reaction to the false election claims Trump and his allies have peddled since he lost his reelection bid in 2020. That drumbeat has had a deep impact on conservative voters: Polls have consistently shown a solid majority of Republicans believe Biden was not legitimately elected. And the effects have been playing out in conservative regions across the country.

In Gillespie County, Texas, where the entire election staff quit just months before the 2022 midterms, volunteers plan to hand-count ballots from the March 5 primary. In New Hampshire, at least a dozen communities will be debating hand counts during their annual town meetings in March. A group of far-right Republicans in North Dakota is gathering signatures for a November ballot measure that would, among other things, require hand-counting of ballots statewide.

As in other places, distrust of government surged in Shasta County during the COVID-19 pandemic, when schools and most businesses closed. A group calling itself a militia started raising the temperature in local public meetings. During one meeting in 2020, a man told county supervisors, "You have made bullets expensive. But luckily for you, ropes are reusable."

Amid the tensions, Shasta voters elected three far-right members to the five-member board of supervisors: Patrick Jones, Chris Kelstrom and Crye, who formed a new majority. Recall organizers said they are targeting Crye because the other two members of the majority are up for reelection in November, while Crye's term has two years left.

An unapologetic Trump supporter, Crye is careful how he talks about the former president's election-denying claims. He said he prefers hand-counting ballots because "one person can affect a handful of votes. One person with a machine can affect thousands."

A native of Shasta County who owns several local businesses, Crye has endeared himself to the community in part by freely giving out his cell phone number. When Jason Miller posted a lengthy rant on Facebook complaining about crime near his restaurant in Redding, he said Crye contacted him and brought the issue up with the police.

"It's like he's accountable for what he's doing," Miller said. "If you take that away from us ... that's not going to go well in Shasta County."

But critics see him differently. They point to Crye's decision last year to meet with Mike Lindell, the MyPillow CEO and Trump ally who has traveled the country spreading voting machine conspiracy theories.

"They've found that path that they're following and it is Trump's playbook, just disrupt the hell out of everything," said Charlie Menoher, a retired school district superintendent who is helping organize the recall effort.

Crye said he met with Lindell because he was researching hand counts and insisted Lindell did not convince him to get rid of the ballot-counting machines.

"All I ever wanted in this whole process was transparency and truth," he said.

## Young South Korean doctors resist back-to-work orders, risking prosecution

By HYUNG-JIN KIM and JIWON SONG Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea (AP) — As South Korea's government made a last plea for junior doctors to end a walkout hours before a Thursday deadline, many were expected to defy orders to return to work, risking suspensions of medical licenses and prosecution.

Thousands of medical interns and residents have been on strike for about 10 days to protest the government's push to boost medical school enrollments. Government officials have warned that strikers would face legal repercussions if they don't return to their hospitals by Thursday.

As of Wednesday night, about 9,076 of the country's 13,000 medical interns and residents were confirmed to have left their hospitals after submitting resignations, according to the Health Ministry. It said 294 strikers had returned to work.

There was no word on any others going back to their jobs as of 10 p.m. (1300 GMT) Thursday.

Observers say many strikers are likely to defy the deadline, continuing the work boycott for weeks or

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months. The government is expected to begin formal steps toward penalties on Monday, as Friday is a national holiday.

"We've said that we won't hold them responsible for leaving their worksites if they return by today," Vice Health Minister Park Min-soo told a briefing. "Doctors are there to serve patients, and those patients are anxiously waiting for you. This isn't the way to protest against the government."

Later Thursday, Park met some striking doctors for more than three hours, but there were no reports of a breakthrough. Officials invited 94 representatives of the strikers to the meeting, but Park said less than 10 showed up and they were ordinary strikers, not leaders. Park said they asked him about the government's recruitment plan and he called for them to end their walkouts.

Ryu Ok Hada, one of the striking doctors, told reporters that he wouldn't attend the meeting. He accused the government of treating the striking junior doctors "like criminals and inflicting humiliation on them."

Starting March 4, the government will notify doctors who miss the deadline that it plans to suspend their licenses and will give them opportunities to respond, senior Health Ministry official Kim Chung-hwan said.

Under South Korean law, the government can order doctors back to work if it sees grave risks to public health. Those who refuse to abide by such orders can have their medical licenses suspended for up to one year and also face up to three years in prison or a 30 million won (roughly \$22,500) fine. Those who receive prison sentences would be stripped of their medical licenses.

Some observers say authorities will probably punish only leaders of the strike to avoid further straining hospital operations.

At the center of the dispute is a government plan to admit 2,000 more applicants to medical schools starting next year, a two-thirds increase from the current 3,058. The government says it aims to add up to 10,000 new doctors by 2035 to cope with the country's fast-aging population. Officials say South Korea's doctor-to-population ratio is one of the lowest among industrialized countries.

But many doctors reject the plan, arguing that universities aren't ready to provide quality education to that many new students. They also say the government plan would also fail to address chronic shortage of doctors in essential but low-paying specialties like pediatrics and emergency departments.

But their critics say the striking junior doctors simply worry about expected lower income because of the sharply increased number of fellow doctors. The government's plan is broadly popular with the South Korean public, according to a poll.

"Doctors must cure sick people. If they all leave, who's going to treat them? Everyone would die," Kim Young Ja, an 89-year-old housewife, said near a Seoul hospital.

The country's 13,000 trainee doctors represent a small fraction of South Korea's 140,000 doctors, but they account for about 30%-40% of the total doctors at some major hospitals and perform many vital functions to support senior medical staff.

The doctors' walkouts have caused the cancellation or delay of several hundred surgeries and other medical treatments at their hospitals, according to the Health Ministry. The ministry says the country's handling of emergency and critical patients remains largely stable, as public medical institutions extended their working hours and military hospitals opened their emergency rooms to the public.

But experts say if senior doctors join the trainee doctors' strikes, South Korea's medical service would suffer serious damage. The Korea Medical Association, which represents the country's 140,000 doctors, has said it supports the trainee doctors, but hasn't yet decided whether to join the walkouts.

A 60-year-old patient who was diagnosed with breast cancer six weeks ago said she hopes for an early end to the walkouts so that her treatment would go ahead smoothly.

"For my cancer not to worsen, I need to receive treatments at the right time. So I hope the trainee doctors will return to work as soon as possible, normalizing hospital operations," said the woman, who wished to be only identified by her surname, Yu, citing privacy concerns.



## US adults fracture along party lines in support for Ukraine military funding, AP-NORC poll finds

By STEPHEN GROVES and LINLEY SANDERS Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — As Russia makes battlefield advances and Ukrainian soldiers run short on ammunition, U.S. adults have become fractured along party lines in their support for sending military aid to Kyiv, according to a poll from The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research.

Democrats are more likely to say the U.S. government is spending “too little” on funding for Ukraine than they were in November, but most Republicans remain convinced it’s “too much.” That divide is reflected in Congress, where the Democratic-held Senate — with help from 22 GOP senators — passed a \$95 billion package of aid for Ukraine, Israel and Taiwan earlier this month. But the bill, which includes roughly \$60 billion in military support for Kyiv, has languished in the Republican-held House as Speaker Mike Johnson has so far refused to bring it up for a vote.

President Joe Biden, along with top Democrats and Senate Republican Leader Mitch McConnell, passionately urged the Republican speaker during a White House meeting this week to take up the foreign aid package, but Johnson responded by saying that Congress “must take care of America’s needs first.”

Most Republicans still share Johnson’s view, and their opinions haven’t changed significantly since the fall: 55% say the U.S. is spending too much on Ukraine aid, compared to 59% in November.

Meanwhile, support for increasing Ukraine aid has grown among Democrats. About 4 in 10 Democrats say the U.S. is spending “too little” on aid to Ukraine in the war against Russia, up from 17% in November. The share of Democrats who say the U.S. is spending “too much” or “about the right amount” has also dropped over the same period.

Chloe Henninger, 24, a Democrat from West Hartford, Connecticut, was among those who said the U.S. is spending too little on aid to Ukraine. She said it was important for the U.S. to show commitment to democracies like Ukraine that are under siege.

“From a humanitarian point of view, there were sovereign borders agreed upon internationally. And then an autocratic power went and invaded a sovereign territory. The U.S., as one of the major military forces in the world, sort of has a duty to respond,” Henninger, who works as a cosmetic chemist, said.

The poll shows that two years after Russia’s initial invasion, the Ukraine war has become a partisan dividing line: Majorities of Democrats think it’s extremely or very important to prevent Russia from seizing more Ukrainian territory, to negotiate a permanent ceasefire between the two countries, help Ukraine regain its land and provide general aid to its military, while less than half of Republicans and Independents agree.

Biden and Democratic leaders in Congress have cast the conflict in Ukraine — the largest land invasion in Europe since World War II — as a potential turning point in history. Failing to repel Russian President Vladimir Putin’s assault, they warn, would have grave consequences, from destabilizing the rest of Europe to emboldening other potential foes such as China and North Korea.

At the same time, Donald Trump, the former president who appears to be marching towards the Republican nomination, has injected serious doubts about America’s involvement in Ukraine and the rest of the world. While McConnell, the top Republican in the Senate, has remained a strong advocate of robust American involvement abroad, Trump has swayed the party towards an isolationist stance, as well as at times heaped admiration on Putin’s strongman style of rule.

“We’re throwing all this taxpayer money to Ukraine and to Israel, and we can’t even take care of our own people,” said Jeffrey Jackson, a 55-year-old Republican from Granbury, Texas. “The U.S. government needs to take care of our own people and then worry about the rest of the world later.”

Jackson also holds deeply unfavorable views of Biden and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy. And while Jackson said he was not “pro-Putin,” he liked the way Putin has led Russia more than how Biden has led the U.S.

Putin is broadly unpopular among U.S. adults, including Republicans. About 8 in 10 U.S. adults have an unfavorable opinion of Putin, including nearly 9 in 10 Democrats and three-quarters of Republicans. Views of Zelenskyy are more reflective of the divisions over the war itself. About 4 in 10 U.S. adults have a favor-

able opinion of Zelenskyy, with Democrats having a more positive view than Republicans.

Trump has also cast doubt on whether he would uphold commitments to defend fellow NATO countries if he became president again. Jackson agreed with that sentiment, saying he would like to see NATO dismantled.

However, a majority of U.S. adults – including 52% of Republicans – support the spirit of Article V of the NATO military alliance, that an attack on one NATO country represents an attack on all. Nearly 6 in 10 adults say they would favor the U.S. deploying U.S. troops to defend a U.S. NATO ally if it were attacked by Russian forces.

Still, when it comes to Ukraine, partisan divisions persist even on questions about basic diplomacy. For example, around 4 in 10 Republicans say that negotiating a permanent ceasefire between Russia and Ukraine should be an extremely or very important foreign policy goal for the U.S., compared to about 6 in 10 Democrats. Overall, half of adults say it's highly important for the U.S. to focus on stopping Russia from gaining more territory in Ukraine.

Six in 10 adults continue to support imposing economic sanctions on Russia. And half favor providing weapons.

Chris Bahr, a 41-year-old from Houston, Texas, who described himself as libertarian politically, said he liked the fact that most of the funding for Ukraine would be spent on U.S.-made weapons. He wanted Congress to approve the aid package "as soon as possible."

"It helps another allied country defend itself and helps America economically — getting rid of a lot of our older weapons as we're ordering new stuff," Bahr said. "I think it would save lives in the long run just to not let Russia become expansionist again."

The poll of 1,161 adults was conducted Feb. 13–18, 2024, using a sample drawn from NORC's probability-based AmeriSpeak Panel, which is designed to be representative of the U.S. population. The margin of sampling error for all respondents is plus or minus 3.8 percentage points.

## Charred homes, blackened earth after Texas town revisited by destructive wildfire 10 years later

By SEAN MURPHY and LISA BAUMANN Associated Press

FRITCH, Texas. (AP) — The small town of Fritch is again picking through the rubble of a Texas wildfire, a decade after another destructive blaze burned hundreds of homes and left deep scars in the Panhandle community.

Residents in and around Fritch and other rural towns fled for safety Tuesday afternoon as high winds whipped the flames into residential areas and through cattle ranches.

Fritch Mayor Tom Ray said on Wednesday the town's northern edge was hit by a devastating wildfire in 2014, while this week's blaze burned mostly to the south of the town, sparing the residents who live in the heart of the community.

"I said, 'Oh Lord, please don't come down the middle,'" Ray said.

The mayor estimated up to 50 homes were destroyed near Fritch, with dozens more reportedly consumed by fire in small towns throughout the Panhandle.

The cluster of blazes included a fire that grew into one of the largest in state history. An 83-year-old grandmother from the tiny town of Stinnett was the lone confirmed fatality. However, authorities have yet to make a thorough search for victims and have warned the damage to some communities is extensive.

The cause of this week's fires is still unknown but dry, warmer than average conditions combined with high winds caused blazes that sparked to grow exponentially, prompting evacuations across a more than 100-mile (160-kilometer) stretch of small towns and cattle ranches from Fritch east into Oklahoma.

Photos showed homes throughout the area reduced to unrecognizable piles of ash and bricks with charred vehicles and blackened earth.

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Cody Bengé was a fire captain when a wildfire started about a block from his house on Mother's Day in 2014 and then tore through Fritch, decimating homes.

Bengé, who now lives in Oklahoma, immediately began checking on relatives and friends in Fritch when he heard about this week's fire.

"I immediately started praying and honestly, it brought back a lot of memories for me and the devastation that I saw," he said. "I can only imagine what everyone is seeing now."

Bengé battled the 2014 fire for at least 48 hours before he was able to get a break. As in the current fire, a cold front eventually moved over the area and allowed firefighters to gain some control of the blaze.

On Wednesday evening, more than a dozen exhausted-looking volunteer firefighters, many caked with ash and soot, gathered at the Fritch Volunteer Fire Department in the center of town. Residents had dropped off bagged lunches, snacks and bottles of water.

"Today your Fritch Volunteer Fire Department mourns for our community and those around it," fire officials wrote in a post on Facebook. "We are tired, we are devastated but we will not falter. We will not quit."

Meghan Mahurin with the Texas A&M Forest Service said they typically rely on heavy equipment to create containment lines around a wildfire, but the fire near Fritch jumped the lines in high winds.

"The wind has just been brutal on us," she said. "At one point the wind was so high and the flames were so tall that it was just blowing across the highway."

Lee Quesada, of Fritch, evacuated his residence Tuesday saying the fire got as close as two houses away.

"I haven't moved so fast since I was like 20," he said.

His attention then turned to his 83-year-old grandmother Joyce Blankenship, who lived about 21 miles (33 kilometers) away in the town of Stinnett. He posted on a Fritch Facebook community page wondering if anyone knew anything or could check on her.

On Wednesday, he said deputies called his uncle to say they found her remains in her burned home.

"Brings tears to my eyes knowing I'll never see her again," Quesada said.

Whether more lives were lost as well as the extent of the damage from the fires wasn't yet clear on Wednesday, largely because the fires continued to burn and remained uncontained, making complete assessments impossible.

"Damage assessment ... is our next priority, after life safety and stopping the growth of these fires," Nim Kidd, chief of the Texas Division of Emergency Management, said Wednesday, adding that residents should remain alert as conditions favoring fire growth could return later this week.

The Moore County Sheriff's Office, which encompasses some of Fritch, posted on Facebook Tuesday night that deputies had helped with evacuations.

"We have seen tragedy today and we have seen miracles," the post said. "Today was a historic event we hope never happens again. The panhandle needs prayers."

## Today in History: March 1, 7 Watergate figures indicted

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Friday, March 1, the 61st day of 2024. There are 305 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On March 1, 1974, seven people, including former Nixon White House aides H.R. Haldeman and John D. Ehrlichman, former Attorney General John Mitchell and former assistant Attorney General Robert Mardian, were indicted on charges of conspiring to obstruct justice in connection with the Watergate break-in. (These four defendants were convicted in January 1975, though Mardian's conviction was later reversed.)

On this date:

In 1815, Napoleon, having escaped exile in Elba, arrived in Cannes, France, and headed for Paris to begin his "Hundred Days" rule.

In 1867, Nebraska became the 37th state as President Andrew Johnson signed a proclamation.

In 1893, inventor Nikola Tesla first publicly demonstrated radio during a meeting of the National Electric

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Light Association in St. Louis by transmitting electromagnetic energy without wires.

In 1932, Charles A. Lindbergh Jr., the 20-month-old son of Charles and Anne Lindbergh, was kidnapped from the family home near Hopewell, New Jersey. (Remains identified as those of the child were found the following May.)

In 1945, President Franklin D. Roosevelt, back from the Yalta Conference, proclaimed the meeting a success as he addressed a joint session of Congress.

In 1954, four Puerto Rican nationalists opened fire from the spectators' gallery of the U.S. House of Representatives, wounding five members of Congress.

In 1966, the Soviet space probe Venera 3 impacted the surface of Venus, becoming the first spacecraft to reach another planet; however, Venera was unable to transmit any data, its communications system having failed.

In 1971, a bomb went off inside a men's room at the U.S. Capitol; the radical group Weather Underground claimed responsibility for the pre-dawn blast.

In 2005, Dennis Rader, the churchgoing family man accused of leading a double life as the BTK serial killer, was charged in Wichita, Kansas, with 10 counts of first-degree murder. (Rader later pleaded guilty and received multiple life sentences.)

In 2010, Jay Leno returned as host of NBC's "The Tonight Show."

In 2012, online publisher and conservative blogger Andrew Breitbart died in Los Angeles at age 43.

In 2015, tens of thousands marched through Moscow in honor of slain Russian opposition leader Boris Nemtsov, who had been shot to death on Feb. 27.

In 2020, state officials said New York City had its first confirmed case of the coronavirus, a woman in her late 30s who had contracted the virus while traveling in Iran. Health officials in Washington state, announcing what was believed at the time to be the second U.S. death from the coronavirus, said the virus may have been circulating for weeks undetected in the Seattle area.

In 2021, Vernon Jordan, who rose from humble beginnings in the segregated South to become a champion of civil rights before reinventing himself as a Washington insider, died at 85.

In 2022, in his first State of the Union address, President Joe Biden aimed to rally the American public to bear the costs of supporting Ukraine's fight to stave off the massive Russian invasion.

Today's birthdays: Rock singer Mike D'Abo (Manfred Mann) is 80. Former Sen. John Breaux, D-La., is 80. Rock singer Roger Daltrey is 80. Actor Dirk Benedict is 79. Actor-director Ron Howard is 70. Country singer Janis Oliver (Sweethearts of the Rodeo) is 70. Actor Catherine Bach is 69. Actor Tim Daly is 68. Singer-musician Jon Carroll is 67. Rock musician Bill Leen is 62. Actor Bryan Batt is 61. Actor Maurice Benard is 61. Actor Russell Wong is 61. Actor Chris Eigeman is 59. Actor George Eads is 57. Actor Javier Bardem is 55. Actor Jack Davenport is 51. Rock musician Ryan Peake (Nickelback) is 51. Actor Mark-Paul Gosselaar is 50. Singer Tate Stevens is 49. Actor Jensen Ackles is 46. TV host Donovan Patton is 46. Actor Joe Tippett is 42. Actor Lupita Nyong'o is 41. Pop singer Kesha (formerly Ke\$ha) is 37. R&B singer Sammie is 37. Pop singer Justin Bieber is 30.