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Christmas packages of hope

Bluffton-based ministry continues to share season's message behind bars

By MARK MILLER
While Covid had some impact on the Bluffton-based ministry of Christmas Behind Bars, operations are "back 100%," Lemuel Vega said. "Most, if not all of this year, we've been able to get ourselves and our volunteers back into all of our jails and in front of inmates."



Above: Bags filled with snacks, personal hygiene items, handmade cards of encouragement and other Christian reading materials await distribution in the central dining hall of Pendleton Correctional Facility Dec. 6 while a group of volunteers sing Christmas carols to the inmates. At right, two inmates bow their heads during one of the prayers offered for them. (Photos courtesy of Scott Roberson of the Indiana Dept. of Correction)



It is not like the pandemic shut operations down however. "Not at all," Vega replied. "We were on the road all the time."

Shortly after the shut-down began, he got a call from officials at the Pendleton Correctional Facility, asking if he'd be able to bring some sacks for the prisoners. "They were locked down, no visitors. It was a tough time for them too, or maybe even more so," he said. The same was true at other Indiana prisons and jails the group had been visiting for a number of years. So while they could still get the sacks of treats and snacks, which also include handmade cards and messages of hope from volunteers, Vega and his volunteers could not make their personal testimonies to the inmates.

day at the Pendleton facility. As reported in The News-Banner during the pandemic, the Amish community has played a key role in the ministry's growth, organizing groups to assemble the packets and making thou-

sands of handmade cards for the prisoners. At the Pendleton visit, they sang Christmas carols to groups of inmates, interspersed with testimonials and words of encouragement from Vega as well as a number of others speakers. Cody Stewart, for exam-

ple, described himself as a "hopeless hope dealer after spending years as a hopeless dope dealer" until "Jesus literally walked into my cell one day." He described that experience in detail to the inmates. He now has a full time ministry in India-

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Friday, Dec. 6, about 70 volunteers — including 55 members of the Grabill area Amish community — spent the



Henry County Sheriff John Sproles speaks to inmates at Pendleton as Christmas Behind Bars founder Lemuel Vega looks on. (Photo by Scott Roberson)

A sheriff on a mission

By MARK MILLER
"You're from Bluffton?" John Sproles asked. "I know Bluffton."

The Henry County sheriff of just two years has been in Bluffton many times. The company began by his father and of which he has become a key part of — Sproles Corporation — builds churches. Only churches. Their work includes Bluffton Nazarene, Hope Missionary and the Bluffton Church of Christ.

He made his second visit with Bluffton-based ministry Christmas Behind Bars to the Pendleton Correctional Facility — one of 18 Indiana state prisons — Dec. 6 to tell groups of prisoners that "I'm no different than you. We wear different uniforms. But God loves you as much as He loves me. You've made some mistakes. That shouldn't define your future. God can forgive."

Sproles is not your typical sheriff. He is not a career law enforcement officer and he does not hesitate to share his faith. That may be an understatement.

The son of a pastor, he always had an interest in law enforcement, joining the Henry County Sheriff's Reserves in a volunteer position as soon as he was old enough. While doing that, he worked with his father in

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Emergency management director gets significant salary increase in 2025

By HOLLY GASKILL
In their last meeting of the year on Monday, the Wells County Council approved a \$23,000 salary increase for the 2025 director of the emergency management agency.

The commissioner-appointed position, currently compensated at roughly \$42,000, was approved for up to \$65,000. Half the salary is paid through federal funding, meaning the county's increase will be approximately \$11,500.

Commissioner Jeff Stringer, who was present to discuss the change, advised

that the position has not maintained a competitive salary compared to neighboring and similar counties. Stringer also presented a new job description, not yet approved by the board of commissioners, which he feels will bolster the leadership and work of the department.

"I have been talking to a few other counties that surround us, and there's a big gap between where we're at and where Adams, Huntington (counties), and especially Allen County, and even Jay County has some advantages to

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2 Navy pilots shot down over Red Sea in apparent 'friendly fire' incident, U.S. military says

By JON GAMBRELL
Associated Press

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates (AP) — Two U.S. Navy pilots were shot down Sunday over the Red Sea in an apparent "friendly fire" incident, the U.S. military said, marking the most serious incident to threaten troops in over a year of America targeting Yemen's Houthi rebels.

Both aviators were recovered alive after ejecting from their stricken two-seat F/A-18 aircraft, with one suffering minor injuries. But the shutdown underlines just how dangerous the Red Sea corridor has become, with ongoing attacks on shipping by the Iranian-backed Houthis despite U.S. and European military coalitions patrolling the area.

The U.S. military had conducted airstrikes targeting Yemen's Houthi rebels at the time of the friendly fire incident, though the U.S. military's Central Command did not elaborate on what the pilots' mission was and did not respond to questions from The Associated Press.

The F/A-18 shot down had just flown off the deck of the USS Harry S. Tru-

man aircraft carrier, Central Command said. On Dec. 15, Central Command acknowledged the Truman had entered the Mideast, but hadn't specified that the carrier and its battle group was in the Red Sea.

"The guided-missile cruiser USS Gettysburg, which is part of the USS Harry S. Truman Carrier Strike Group, mistakenly fired on and hit the F/A-18," Central Command said in a statement. "This incident was not the result of hostile fire, and a full investigation is underway."

From the military's description, the aircraft shot down was a two-seat F/A-18 Super Hornet fighter jet assigned to the "Red Rippers" of Strike Fighter Squadron 11 out of Naval Air Station Oceana, Virginia. While Central Command referred to both as pilots, typically a two-seat F/A-18 has a pilot and a weapons officer on board.

It wasn't immediately clear how the Gettysburg could mistake an F/A-18 for an enemy aircraft or missile, particularly as ships in a battle group remain linked by both radar and radio communication.

However, Central Com-

mand said that warships and aircraft earlier shot down multiple Houthi drones and an anti-ship cruise missile launched by the rebels. Incoming hostile fire from the Houthis has given sailors just seconds to make decisions in the past.

Since the Truman's arrival, the U.S. has stepped up its airstrikes targeting the Houthis and their missile fire into the Red Sea and the surrounding area. However, the presence of an American warship group may spark renewed attacks from the rebels, like what the USS Dwight D. Eisenhower saw earlier this year. That deployment marked what the Navy described as its most intense combat since World War II.

On Saturday night and early Sunday, U.S. warplanes conducted airstrikes that shook Sanaa, the capital of Yemen which the Houthis have held since 2014. Central Command described the strikes as targeting a "missile storage facility" and a "command-and-control facility," without elaborating.

Houthi-controlled media reported strikes in both Sanaa and around the port

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Congress looks to ban Chinese drones widely used in U.S.; What to know about the debate

By DIDI TANG
Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The economic and technological rivalry between the United States and China has come to the drone market, where Chinese-made flying devices are a dominant player.

Lawmakers in Washing-

ton are seeking to ban new sales of drones from two dominant Chinese manufacturers, arguing they could be used to spy on Americans and that the low-cost models are hurting the U.S. drone industry.

A defense bill that passed Congress last week would bar new Chinese drones

from DJI Technology and Autel Robotics should a review find them to pose an "unacceptable" risk to U.S. national security.

But American users, from police officers to farmers, mappers and filmmakers, have come to rely on Chinese-made drones, espe-

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Sheriff on a mission

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the construction projects and founded Heartland Christian School in New Castle in 2013, “which has grown from zero to over 200 students,” he shared.

A little over two years ago, he felt another calling. He had joined that sheriff’s department in 2019 as a full time deputy and what he observed confirmed earlier observations in his volunteer position.

“The one thing I did see in Henry County was a ‘good-old-boy’ system,” he said in a subsequent interview. “The (sheriff’s) position had become a retirement gig for lifetime officers. And the culture was ‘Shut your effin’ mouth and do what I say,’” he continued. “That was prevalent. The jail was in constant chaos, the inmates were in control because all the jail commander and officers did was yell and cuss at them.”

So, he decided to run for sheriff in the 2022 election. “The campaign was focused on whether Henry County citizens wanted to simply hand the torch over to the next person in line or into an era of professionalism, accountability and transparency,” he said.

The first debate with his opponent — a nearly 40-year veteran who had been the subject of a lawsuit for punching a handcuffed inmate in the face, resulting in “a \$265,000 settlement that was swept under the rug,” Sproles said — was held in a “packed” Henry

County courtroom.

“Here’s my exact words,” he said. “‘If I am elected as your next sheriff, the f-word on duty is gone.’ You wouldn’t have believed the reaction. A huge round of applause. It was kind of shocking.”

As a reserve, he had witnessed “too many times that officers simply got into a screaming match. Once you drop an f-bomb, you have lost your authority, you simply went right to their turf. Your professionalism is gone,” he told The News-Banner.

After winning what he described as a hotly contested race, “it’s been wonderful,” he said. “A lot of people left before I even took office.” He subsequently dismissed both his jail commander and deputy commander who continued, in his view, to mistreat the prisoners, and “the morale at our office is sky high. We are fully staffed. The former administration would run 8-10 full time correctional officers short and many patrol spots. They didn’t want to work in that culture.” Now they do, he said.

“Here’s what I discovered,” he continued. “People who work in that kind of atmosphere, where they only berated the prisoners and the f-bomb is so prevalent, they’re not happy people. A miserable culture, a miserable environment, made for miserable people.”

But he is adamant that “we run our jail very firmly,” he said. “Don’t misunderstand. (Inmates) know

that if they mess up or trash their cell, there are consequences. But it’s not our job to further punish them. It is to take care of them and give them hope while they’re here. To encourage them for re-entry.” One of his instructions to his deputies is to stay in contact with people they had arrested to encourage them to move forward.

The result can also be seen in the jail’s atmosphere, which had included daily fights among inmates. “I think we’ve had to break up two fights in two years,” he said.

Sproles’ mission statement that he gives his entire staff is to “Do justice, love mercy and be humble,” a message he shared in his presentation at Pendleton, noting that “it comes right out of the Book of Judges.

“Sometimes doing justice means getting someone on the ground and under control,” he said. “But you can still show mercy and be humble.

“Another Biblical principle I give to my staff is the Golden Rule,” he said later. “If we can do those things, we win.”

“We’re firm, we’re not pushovers,” he reiterated. “When my dad set me straight — which he did of course from time to time — it was done in love. We try to treat our inmates the same way.”

Sproles said that Lemuel Vega “called me out of the blue” as that first Christmas he was sheriff approached in 2023.

“I had already prepared little gift packets for our inmates for Christmas,” he shared, “when Lemuel called me and told me what he had and asked if he could come by, I said ‘sure!’”

Sproles figures he had spent about \$3,000 for a few candy bars and other items for his 200-some inmates, “but what Lemuel brought was five times that. It was phenomenal.”

“He had no clue what we did, and he was very welcoming,” Vega said. “So I invited him to our next visit to Pendleton (this past summer) and he didn’t hesitate.”

“So this is my second time here with Lemuel’s program,” Sproles said after one of his presentations Dec. 6. “I actually got a ‘thank-you’ letter from an inmate after that visit, and he came up to me today and said ‘I wondered if that sheriff was going to come back.’”

Sproles credits his upbringing. “I just have a huge compassion for underprivileged people, especially for those growing up in rough environments,” he concluded. “Those of us who grew up in loving, supportive homes, we have no clue how lucky we are.

“I think it’s important for the inmates to hear this from someone in a uniform: I love them, I care about them and I pray for them. It’s shocking the responses I get from them many times. They tell me they never had someone in authority tell them they care about them. It’s phenomenal.”

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Closures listed for Christmas holiday

Christmas on Wednesday brings with it a host of closures. The offices of the City of Bluffton and Wells County governments will be closed. The Ossian and Bluffton locations of the Wells County Public Library are closed Tuesday, Dec. 24, Wednesday, Dec. 25, and Thursday, Dec. 26.

There is no mail delivery and The News-Banner does not publish Wednesday. The office will not be open. Normal publication and office hours will resume Thursday.

Weather

Tuesday, December 24, 2024

(24-hour observations at 10:19 p.m. Monday)

High: 39; Low: 26; Precipitation: 0.03 inches of rain
Wabash River Level (at the Main Street bridge): 1.29 feet at 8:45 p.m. Monday

Wells County forecast

Today: Cloudy, with a high near 40. West wind around 5 mph becoming north in the afternoon.

Tonight: A 20% chance of rain after 1 a.m. Cloudy, with a low around 33. Northeast wind around 5 mph.

Christmas Day: A 30% chance of rain. Cloudy, with a high near 42. Calm wind becoming east around 5 mph.

Wednesday Night: A 20% chance of rain before 1 a.m. Mostly cloudy, with a low around 35. East wind around 5 mph becoming calm.

Thursday: Mostly cloudy, with a high near 49.

Thursday Night: Mostly cloudy, with a low around 37.

Friday: A 30% chance of rain, mainly after 1 p.m. Mostly cloudy, with a high near 52.

Friday Night: Rain likely, mainly after 1 a.m. Cloudy, with a low around 46. Chance of precipitation is 60%.

Saturday: A 50% chance of rain. Mostly cloudy, with a high near 57.

Saturday Night: Rain likely. Mostly cloudy, with a low around 47. Chance of precipitation is 60%.

Sunday: Rain likely. Mostly cloudy, with a high near 52. Chance of precipitation is 60%.

Sunday Night: A chance of rain. Mostly cloudy, with a low around 39.

Emergency management director

(Continued from Page 1)

where they’re at, as far as being ready for a disaster,” Stringer said.

With this, Stringer advised he’d like to see the role more involved in grant writing, like the county’s efforts to obtain a \$1 million grant to buy encrypted radios for the 911 dispatch center. He likened the position to the county engineer, which has secured millions in funding for county projects.

Stringer said the county has received five applicants for the position, including current director Rick Velasquez, and the commissioners hope to approve the job description and make an appointment at their first meeting of the year, 5:30 p.m. on Jan. 6. He did add, however, that none of the applicants have grant writing experience.

Though Stringer said he did not want to discuss Velasquez’s performance, he did remark that he didn’t feel that “the one that we have,” referring to the current job description, “I’m not sure ... all the things have been completed on it.” Stringer repeatedly stipulated that the commissioners had not yet determined if it will be a new appointee to the position.

Springer added, “I called around to the different counties, and the sup-

port level in every county surrounding us, regardless of the wage, is different than what we have. So we’ve got to either educate the person that’s in there (about) what needs to happen or, again, we’ve got options.”

The council recognized that it has historically been difficult to get applicants and that the compensation was likely a contributing factor. They voted unanimously in favor of the increase, taking effect at the commissioner’s appointment; council members Seth Whicker, Scott Elzey, Brandon Harnish, Vicki Andrews and Steve Hugins were present, and Brian Lambert and Todd Mahnensmith were absent.

Also during the meeting, the council unanimously agreed that Elzey would serve as an alternate for Andrews on the Area Plan Commission board.

The primary purpose of the last 2024 meeting was to approve year-end transfers. They were:

- Sheriff’s Office: \$2,000 from gas, oil and lube, \$2,000 from K-9 supplies, \$2,000 from Air Cards and \$3,700 from service contract ERS to \$45 for office supplies, \$260 for uniforms, \$795 for IT equipment, \$5,770 for service contract, \$2,830 to equipment repairs.
- Jail: \$8,157 from meals to \$1,500

for supplies, \$1,857 for maintenance supplies and \$4,800 for general repairs.

- Coroner’s Office: \$3,024 from autopsy services to \$2,033 for office supplies and \$991 for repairs and maintenance.

- Circuit Court: \$60 from truck maintenance to secretary.

- IT Department: \$495 from training seminars and \$495 from consulting fees to \$990 for IT assistant.

- Reassessment: \$23 from training and seminars to computer equipment.

- Probation: \$475 from training and seminars to retirement.

- Purdue Extension: \$223.40 from computer supplies to office supplies.

- Election Board: \$70 from rent primary to LES software license fee.

- Circuit Court: \$40 from guardian ad litem to postage.

- Community Corrections: \$1,200 from part-time field officer 3 to \$750 for social security and \$450 for group health insurance, \$700 from service contract to monitoring fees, and \$10 from service contracts to telephone.

- Health Department: \$560 from part-time medical assistant to board compensation.

The council will meet for the first time in 2025 at 7 p.m. on Jan. 7.

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Chinese drones

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cially those by DJI.

Here are things to know about the debate.

Lawmakers say the drones pose a security threat

Rep. Elise Stefanik, R-N.Y., who is President-elect Donald Trump’s pick to be U.N. ambassador, has led House efforts to ban new Chinese drones, saying Americans have become too dependent on them.

“It is strategically irresponsible to allow Communist China to be our drone factory,” she argued.

It was the role of drones in everyday life that drove Sen. Rick Scott, R-Fla., to get Congress to restrict the purchase of Chinese drones by federal agencies. Those restrictions were included in a bill that Democratic President Joe Biden signed last year.

Scott has compared Chinese drones to spy balloons that could “gather data or carry harmful payloads” across America, posing risks to military bases, critical infrastructure and natural resources.

Drones made by DJI dominate the US market

DJI, named in the bill, is the best-known Chinese drone brand. The company has the lion’s share of the global drone market and is a dominant player in the U.S. market. Its drones have been used by first responders to

locate disaster victims, mappers to survey roads and utility lines, mosquito control officers to reach swarms of larvae, and filmmakers to capture aerial footage.

Founded in 2006 and based in the southern Chinese city of Shenzhen, DJI makes devices that are known for their affordability and high performance. They are even used on the battlefield in Ukraine by both sides, even though DJI does not make military drones.

As U.S.-China relations soured, DJI drones have come under scrutiny. The U.S. government has put the company on several blacklists citing human rights concerns as well as alleged links to the Chinese military. DJI has denied any wrongdoing, and is suing the Pentagon over the designation that it is a Chinese military company.

U.S. customs officials have also blocked some DJI shipments over concerns that the products might have been made with forced labor. DJI has called it “a customs-related misunderstanding.”

DJI has also expressed concern about the review of Chinese drones included in the defense bill., saying it doesn’t allow the company to defend itself. It called for “a fair right of reply to any findings.”

Users say Chinese drones can’t be easily replaced

Russell Hedrick, a North Carolina farmer, flies drones to spray fertilizers on his corn, bean and wheat fields at a fraction of what it would cost him to use a conventional ground spreader. A drone spreader costs \$35,000, while a ground sprayer would cost \$250,000, he said.

As a volunteer rescuer, Hedrick uses thermal drones to search for people trapped by mudslides and

cargo drones to send water and baby formula to those who are stranded — something he did after Hurricane Helene.

“I am not going to say I won’t love to have U.S. drones, but I don’t see the American drones as anywhere close to the DJI drones in terms of reliability, ease of use, and just the user-friendly software,” Hedrick said. “The U.S. drones are not as good as DJI ones but cost twice as much.”

Packages of hope

(Continued from Page 1)

napolis and makes regularly weekly visits to the state prison facility in Edinburg.

Nappanee native Bain Elliot served 13 years in the state prison system and became acquainted with Christmas Behind Bars while at the Miami County facility. After his release in 2022, then at the New Castle facility, he worked for a while as a catering manager while he got involved as a volunteer with a local ministry. He now works full time for the City of Refuge, a re-entry ministry for released offenders in Gilford and enjoys going on prison visits with Vega.

"I've been in their shoes," he says. "So now it's a privilege to contribute and help."

While Elliot did not make a presentation, he circulated among the inmates, speaking or praying with them individually if they so chose. "I'm giving back. It's my calling," he said.

"There are all sorts of religions in prison," Elliot said, "but the Christian-based (ministries) do the most. And it does resonate." The packets from Christmas Behind Bars and the cards "meant a lot to me," he continued. "They're handwritten. Somebody cares. I saved them all and still get them out to look at from time to time."

The most unlikely speaker, Henry County Sheriff John Sproles, might have also had the most rapt attention of the audience.

"I think it's important for them to see someone in my uniform tell them that God loves them as much as he loves me," he told The News-Banner in a subsequent conversation. His road to becoming sheriff two years ago and how he became involved with Christmas Behind Bars is another story, told nearby.

Going to Pendleton always has a special meaning to Vega, who spent about eight years as an inmate there. His ministry now makes semi-annual visits, sharing testimonials and offering one-on-one conversations. The group distributed 1,750 gift packets filled with treats, personal hygiene items, handwritten cards and additional Christian reading materials.

"We're taking 2,700 packets to Westville next week," he said Dec. 6, adding that volunteers will also be putting another 3,500 packets together for seasonal visits to county jails, including the Wells County Jail.

"We do see a change in behavior (after the visits)," Wells County Sheriff Scott Holliday said. "And we really appreciate the great people who take their time to come into our jail to minister to our inmates."

Holliday mentioned local resident Clem Reinhard, who has done jail ministry here "for about 30 years, I think," has recently taken on the title of volunteer jail chaplain. "We get a number of groups from local churches who also come in and Clem coordinates all of that," he continued. "I try to do my best to accommodate these, especially during the holidays when it's a tougher time than normal for (the inmates). These visits, these packages are great."

Christmas Behind Bars is now in 47 of Indiana's 92 county jails.

"We organize the visits north of Indy," Vega explained, "and we have another group of volunteers who organize and make the visits south." Local volunteers put the packets together and then put them into a semi-trailer that is parked in southern Indiana to supply those visits. The ministry also makes annual visits to dozens of state prisons as far south as Florida, west to Wyoming and east to West Virginia.

"We don't go into Wisconsin and Michigan because the Gideons and a ministry called 'The Forgotten Man' are active there, and that's great. You know," he continued, "many prisons have weekly Bible studies. They might have 100 inmates participate. That's wonderful, but I always ask 'What about the others?' So that's what we do, we get the message to all of them that there's hope for them."

Vega shared a story of a Muslim inmate who approached one of the Amish members after a session earlier this year.

"He told him that 'You and I, we believe different, but the love you show, I want to try Jesus.' Isn't that something? But we're not here necessarily trying to tell them what to believe," he continued. "We just want them to know that we love them, God loves them and that there's hope — no matter what you've done, because Jesus loves them."



Top: Two volunteer inmates help transport 1,750 gift packages into the Pendleton Correctional Facility early on Friday, Dec. 6. Above: Lemuel Vega, left photo, speaks to a group of inmates about his redemption while incarcerated at the prison and how it changed his life after a troubled childhood and subsequent drug addiction. His group of volunteers include other former inmates, such as George Werley, above left, who now runs a ministry in Indianapolis.

Left: Packages are also delivered to inmates not allowed to attend the assemblies such as to the cells in the mental health section of Pendleton.

Below: After the sessions at which carols are sung and a speakers share their experiences with the inmates, volunteers hand out the packets brought to the prison. At bottom right, two inmates couldn't wait to return to their cells to investigate what was inside.

(Photos courtesy of Scott Roberson, visual arts specialist with the Indiana Dept. of Correction.)



As reported in previous stories, Christmas Behind Bars is a year-round ministry created by Vega in the mid-1990s and is totally dependent on contributions of money and services. While some of the snacks and personal hygiene items are donated, "we buy about 80% of this stuff, but we always get super discounts," he explained.

For example, he recently had an opportunity to buy individual-sized packets of Ramen noodles, a popular item with inmates, for just 10 cents apiece.

"So there was 144,000 of them, which adds up to about \$15,000 and we have to ship them and store them," he said.

"But the Lord provides."

He emphasized his appreciation for his community sponsors. "We obviously couldn't do it without them," he continued.

He specifically mentioned Selking International who not only has supplied some trucks and trailers but "fixes any of them when they need repairs. But there are so many more, I just can't list them all — people who donate, who give us Bibles to hand out and make the cards. It's just phenomenal."

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Navy pilots

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city of Hodeida, without offering any casualty or damage information. In Sanaa, strikes appeared particularly targeted at a mountainside known to be home to military installations. However, there were no images or information released regarding the strikes — which has happened previously when airstrikes hit vital facilities for the rebels.

Brig. Gen. Yahya Saree, a Houthis military spokesman, released a prerecorded statement hours later in which he claimed the rebels launched eight drones and 17 cruise missiles in their attack. He also claimed without offering any evidence that the Houthis shot down the F/A-18, likely follow-

ing a pattern of him making exaggerated claims. During the Eisenhower's deployment, he repeatedly falsely claimed the carrier had been struck by Houthi fire.

The Houthis have targeted about 100 merchant vessels with missiles and drones since the Israel-Hamas war in the Gaza Strip started in October 2023 after Hamas' surprise attack on Israel that killed 1,200 people and saw 250 others taken hostage.

Israel's grinding offensive in Gaza has killed more than 45,000 Palestinians, local health officials say. The tally doesn't distinguish between combatants and civilians.

The Houthis have seized one vessel

and sunk two in a campaign that has also killed four sailors. Other missiles and drones have either been intercepted by separate U.S.- and European-led coalitions in the Red Sea or failed to reach their targets, which have also included Western military vessels.

The rebels maintain that they target ships linked to Israel, the U.S. or the United Kingdom to force an end to Israel's campaign against Hamas in Gaza. However, many of the ships attacked have little or no connection to the conflict, including some bound for Iran.

The Houthis also have increasingly targeted Israel itself with drones and missiles, resulting in retaliatory Israeli airstrikes.

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Will close for the winter at 4pm on the 28th
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Happy New Year!

Fred's heartwarming lesson about laughter and humor

This weekend's flurries that left us with a light covering of snow on the ground coupled with the crisp winter weather certainly makes staying inside a cozy home with a copy of my favorite Christmas novella a perfect way to spend a Sunday afternoon.

Each year I enjoy rereading and watching Charles Dickens' "A Christmas Carol," as there is always a new message to pull out of the short story that has entertained readers since December 1843.

Dickens uses his protagonist Ebenezer Scrooge to tell that story — a man who on Page 1 has lost sight of what really matters in life but throughout the course of the story sees the errors of his ways and changes before it's too late.

As I was re-reading my cherished copy this month, it was Scrooge's visit with the Ghost of Christmas Present to his nephew's house on Christmas Day that I found myself thinking about.

Scrooge and the spirit have just arrived at Fred's home. Within seconds, Fred's effervescent personality once again comes across as Dickens' describes him.

"Ha, ha!" laughed Scrooge's nephew. "Ha, ha ha!"

"If you should happen, by any unlikely chance, to know a man more blest in laugh than Scrooge's nephew, all I can say is, I should like to know him too. Introduce him to me, and I'll cultivate his acquaintance."

Dickens continues in the next paragraph:

"There is nothing in the world so irresistibly contagious as laughter and good-humor."

Fourteen simple words that when put together in a sentence remind us of a powerful message that we too often forget.

Forgetting the joy that laughter and good-humor bring to our lives happens too frequently these days, especially when it's so easy to turn on the TV or scroll through social media and be surrounded by negativity almost around the clock. Fred, however, shows us in this part of the story that we should never forget the joy that laughter and good-humor brings to us and to others.

Note Dickens' word choice when he describes humor — "good-humor," he pens.

Good-humor and laughter — along with Fred's steadfast kindness toward others — are so powerful that they help transform Scrooge — a "squeezing, wrenching, grasping, scraping, clutching, covetous, old sinner" who becomes a man who knows how to keep Christmas well and alive year-round.

There is nothing in the world so irresistibly contagious as laughter and good-humor.

May laughter, kindness and good-humor fill your heart on Christmas Day this year just like it does Fred's.

More importantly, however, is to ensure that same laughter, kindness and good-humor fill your heart every day so that you can spread that joy just as Fred and the redeemed Scrooge do in "A Christmas Carol."

Merry Christmas.

And as Tiny Tim observed, God bless us, every one.

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Justin Peeper

Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among men

In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be enrolled. This was the first enrollment, when Quirini-us was governor of Syria. And all went to be enrolled, each to his own city. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the city of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, to be enrolled with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. And while they were there, the time came for her to be delivered. And she gave birth to her first-born son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

And in that region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with fear. And the angel said to them, "Be not afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of a great joy which will come to all the people; for to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ

the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a babe wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger." And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying,

"Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among men with whom he is pleased!"

When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us." And they went with haste, and found Mary and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger. And when they saw it they made known the saying which had been told them concerning this child; and all who

heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them. But Mary kept all these things, pondering them in her heart. And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

Luke 2: 1-20 (RSV)



Christmas Trivia

1. Which U.S. state is home to the town of Snowflake?
2. The Airing of Grievances is part of what fictional holiday celebration?
3. Should you meet another person beneath this plant, the rule is you must kiss. What is it?
4. According to Hallmark, approximately how many Christmas cards are sent annually?
5. How long is the average growing time for a Christmas tree?
6. True or false: There's a real city called the North Pole.
7. What U.S. state is home to the town of Santa Claus?
8. What is the Hawaiian word for Santa Claus?
9. Where does the name "Kris Kringle" come from?
10. What is thought to be the first observation of the December 25 holiday?
11. When did Christmas become a national holiday?
12. What company is thought to have cemented the rosy-cheeked, bearded Santa Claus associated with Christmas today?
13. What did Coke's Haddon Sundblom base his rendering of Santa Claus on?
14. True or false: The North Pole has no time zone.
15. Who invented Christmas lights?
16. What year was the first Rockefeller Center Christmas tree erected?
17. What is the most popular Christmas cookie in the U.S.?

ANSWERS: 1 Arizona. 2 Festivus. 3 Mistletoe. 4 1.3 billion. 5 Seven years. 6 True. The city of North Pole is located in Alaska and boasts a population of around 2,300 citizens. 7 Indiana. 8 Kanakaloka. 9 According to Merriam-Webster, it's spelled "Kris Kringle" and is a modification of the German word "Christkindl" or Christ child. 10 The Christian church in Rome commemorated the Feast of the Nativity in 336. 11 On June 24, 1870, via a proclamation by President Ulysses S. Grant. 12 In 1931, Coca-Cola commissioned illustrator Haddon Sundblom to paint an image of Santa for their ads. 13 Clement Clarke Moore's "A Visit from St. Nicholas," otherwise known as "The Night Before Christmas." 14 True. All longitudinal lines start at the North Pole, which means there's no time zone. 15 Thomas Edison created the first strand of electric lights in 1880. 16 In December of 1931, workers at Rockefeller Center pooled their money to buy a Christmas tree. It was a 20-foot balsam fir. 17 According to YouGov, chocolate chip, followed by sugar, fudge and brownie cookies.



Memories of a 1970s Christmas

Why do Christmas memories from 50 years ago still hold so much power over me? I think I know now.

Christmas was a huge event for our family.

At St. Germaine School, we'd sell items to raise money for the needy, create decorations, practice for Christmas plays and concerts (we'd sing "Silent Night" and "Hark the Herald Angels Sing") and attend a million Advent ceremonies.

The preparation and ceremony filled us with a sense that something big was under way, and it was.

We were just as busy at home. My father and I visited several Christmas-tree lots in search of the perfect tree. We'd carefully assess several before making our pick.

Once we men had the platform set up and the lights strung, my sisters were called to the living room and everyone in our family decorated the tree.

The sun soon would go down and the light of our Christmas-tree bulbs reflecting off the tinsel would transform our living room into a brilliant glow of colors dancing on the walls and ceiling.

Christmas specials on TV were also family events. We'd pack into the living room and plug in the tree. We'd turn off all the lamps so that the Christmas lights would shine extra bright.

We'd wait with great anticipation for "The Grinch that Stole Christmas," "Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer," "A Charlie Brown Christmas" and a dozen others.

Even the Christmas commercials — I remember the clay animation of Santa gliding through the snow on a Norelco electric razor — now fill me with nostalgia.

Finally, Christmas Eve would arrive.

We'd light the candles in the luminaria that lined our street — all our neighbors had luminaria, and our streets glowed for several blocks.

Our next-door neighbors, the Kriegers, would visit for a few hours, filling our house with festivity.

Then off we went to bed.

My father would stack the old stereo console with every Christmas record we owned — "Holiday Sing-Along with Mitch Miller," "Christmas with the Chipmunks," "Snoopy vs. the Red Baron" and Bing Crosby singing "White Christmas."

As the scratchy old records played — as my mother and father assembled and wrapped gifts in the living room below — I was so filled with excitement I could never sleep.

I'd finally nod off only to wake at 5 a.m. I'd jump out of my bed and run around, waking my five sisters.

We'd rush down to the living room and open our gifts and laugh as our dog Jingles dived into the piles of wrapping paper.

My father would make a breakfast feast and we'd sit around laughing and talking, as we whiled the morning away.

Then we'd arrive at church to find that the stragglers, who only went to Mass on Christmas and Easter, had taken our seats, forcing us to stand in the aisle.

This simple Christmas experience may sound uneventful, but it was a huge event to me and millions of other American kids who were blessed to have a similar experience.

My fondness for this time was marked by a total sense of security — a total sense of being loved by a mother and father who were doing their best to provide for their children.

That's why Christmas memories from 50 years ago hold such power over me still.

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Tom Purcell

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Julia helps her grandmother with a Christmas surprise

“Mom, Grandma said she needs to talk with me on Tuesday after school.”

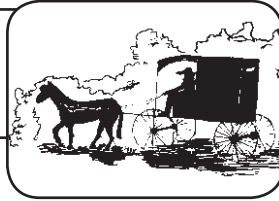
I glanced at my 13-year-old daughter. The glint in her eye was the telltale she knew all about it, and it was nothing negative. Catching on that Grandma most likely needed her to help with a surprise at our family gathering that was planned before Christmas to accommodate my sister from South Dakota, I gave my consent.

On Tuesday, she came back home with a spark. I knew she had fun, but she was not about to spill the secret.

I didn't have long to find out: yesterday was family day. All but Brother Micah and his family from Alaska gathered for the afternoon and evening. Supper was a joint effort. Hobo stacks are served as the main course, with fruit pizza for dessert. We are talking about a creamy, delicious, refreshing, and attractive dessert. The one crust especially got my attention. I've never had anything quite like it before. My sister-in-law from Indiana made a crust with small pretzel sticks. The children were intrigued as the cream cheese layer was spread on top of the pretzels that stayed stuck together in the bottom of the pan. I think the flavor surpassed the fruit pizza crust I've been using for years. The salty caramelized flavor blended super with the cream cheese topping, fresh fruit, and the layered glaze on top. It had me wanting to go back for

The Amish Cook

by Gloria Yoder



more, but then I knew snack time was coming up a couple of hours later.

After supper we sat around the living room relaxing, not worrying about the dishes. Mom got out her song copies. Something stirred deep within me. I enjoy God's gift of singing, which he gave to mankind, but this was something extraordinary to me. Mom's cousin, who has a son with cancer, wrote these songs. I thought of his wife, I thought of his two children. I knew life was no simple thing right now. I pictured him sitting at his table, penning the words of a song as God inspired him in the dark hours of his life. Like the quote on my dresser, "Sometimes the blackest days are the most important of our life." Today, we are recipients of God's grace flowing through their hard days. Our voices blended in song, "Every dark night has a dawn, there's an end to every storm... What is silence without thunder? Where is calm without wave?"

As the last notes faded, Mom informed us adults to stay in the house while she took the grandchildren out in the garage. Half an hour later I still wondered what they could be up to.

All at once it clicked. As the sudsy dishwasher swished around my fingers, I told myself, "It would sound just like my mom to help them with a nativity scene." I was tempted to peek beyond the cracks in the blinds in the double doors leading to the garage. But then, if I want to trust my children, I'd better be trustworthy myself," I mused.

Moments later, Mom said, "You can come out now!" I dried my hands and rounded the corner to the garage. There they were. It took a moment to take it all in. Three little 'wise men' stood to the right, all dressed up like men of the Bible, holding their presents, which were candy containers. Then there stood the angels. Adorable little girls, looking as pure as could be, dressed in white with dainty headbands, it just melted my heart. What do real angels look like?? I chuckled at the sheep, it was just too cute. Little Joshua and his cousin knelt on all fours with oversized cream-colored shirts draped over their clothes. How did Mom come up with all these ideas? A 'shepherd' stood, holding his sheep (a white toy poodle pup) and a broom handle which served as his

staff. Last but certainly not least, Joseph and Mary, which really were Austin and Hosanna, watched Baby Jesus. At first I did not recognize Austin in his garb which covered much of his head and body. Certainly Mom, Julia, and Sister Keturah had an amazing imagination in bringing it so close to life. I kept gazing over the group, a child at a time. I noticed how each had a part to fill and clothes to wear. Is that not how it is with Jesus today? We all have a place to fill and his garments of righteousness to wear.

Last of all, Away in a Manger was sung, and presents given to Baby Jesus.

The evening sped on. While we were finishing up dishes, my youngest sister came and asked if I wanted to help with a game of Masterpiece. I hardly knew what to say. Yes, I used to enjoy playing with others, but now, for many years, it was no option; with babies to take care of, many things as such had faded back. "Um, yes... actually, I think I would enjoy playing a game," I said slowly. It just seemed weird, it didn't seem like my life. I sat in the circle with family members. It wasn't long until I knew it was the tonic I needed. Julia, who was on my team, helped me plan and plot. We tried to figure out which player had what cards as we laughed our way through Masterpiece. I had forgotten how fun it was to just simply have fun on a lighter note of life.

Sweet and Salty Fruit Pizza

CRUST:
2 1/2 cups pretzels, broken
2/3 cup brown sugar
3/4 cup butter
Press into a greased 9 X 13 pan.
Bake at 350 for 10 minutes. Cool.

CREAM CHEESE MIXTURE:
1/2 cup powdered sugar (or 1/2 teas stevia)
8 ounces cream cheese, softened to room temperature
8 ounces whipped topping
Beat cream cheese and powdered sugar until smooth. Fold in whipped topping. If desired add a dash of lemon juice. Spread on top of cooled crust.

4-6 cups fresh fruit, sliced or diced. We enjoy kiwis, strawberries, blueberries, grapes, raspberries, or whatever we have easy access to at the moment.

GLAZE:
3/4 cup sugar
5 heaping tablespoons clear jel*
3 cups cold water
3 tablespoons pineapple or lemon jello
1/4 teaspoon salt

Mix all together in a saucepan, bring to a boil, simmer a few minutes. Cool and spread on top of fruit. Chill. We like it best the day after its made, as the flavor blends more.

*corn starch may also be used, it will result in a bit more cloudy-looking filling.

Gloria shares family favorites

Here are some of our family's favorite recipes to enjoy around the holidays. I hope you enjoy them!

HOLIDAY WHITE CHOCOLATE CHEESECAKE CRUST

1 1/4 cup flour
2 tablespoon powdered sugar
1 teaspoon grated lemon peel
1/2 cup butter, chilled and cubed

FILLING

4 - 8 oz packages cream cheese, softened
1 1/4 cup sugar
2 tablespoons flour
2 tablespoons lemon juice
2 tablespoons heavy whipping cream
1/2 cup sour cream
2 teaspoons vanilla
4 eggs
10 ounces white baking chocolate, melted and cooled
2 teaspoons grated lemon peel

Place a 9-inch spring form pan on a double thickness of heavy duty foil (about 18 inch square) securely wrap foil around pan & set aside.

In a small bowl combine crust ingredients until crumbly.

Press onto the bottom and one inch up the sides of the prepared pan.

Place on a baking sheet & bake at 325 for 25-30 minutes or until golden brown.

Cool on a wire rack.

In a large mixing bowl beat the cream cheese, sugar, flour, lemon juice, cream and vanilla until well blended.

Add eggs, beat on low speed just until combined, stir in white chocolate and lemon peel.

Pour into crust.

Place pan in a large baking pan; add 1 inch hot water to the larger pan.

Bake at for 65-85 minutes or until center is just set and to appears dull.

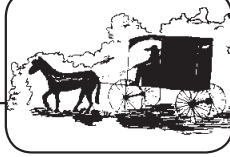
Remove the pan from water bath.

Cool on a wire rack for 10 minutes.

Carefully run a knife around the edge of pan to loosen sides. Cool one hour longer.

The Amish Cook

by Gloria Yoder



Refrigerate overnight. Remove from sides of pan before slicing.

OLD-FASHIONED AMISH TURTLE CANDIES

1 1/4 pound white chocolate
1/2 pound pecan halves
1 can sweet condensed milk

INSTRUCTIONS

Melt white chocolate in double-boiler or microwave, then spoon dabs on wax or parchment paper. Dabs should be 1" in diameter.

Press three pecan halves side by side into each dab of chocolate. Leave until the white chocolate is set.

Place an unopened can of condensed milk in a 3 quart kettle, cover completely with water.

Bring to a boil and boil gently for 3 hours.

The can needs to be covered at all times, so keep monitoring how much water is in your kettle and add more if needed.

Remove from heat. Let can set in water until it is room temperature.

Remove from can and spread 1 rounded teaspoon of caramelized milk on top of

the pecans.

Melt milk chocolate in a double boiler or microwave then spoon on top of caramel, covering all but the tips of the pecans.

Let set and enjoy!
Saltines or graham crackers

1 cup butter (use only 1/2 cup for crunchier candy)

1 cup brown sugar

1 1/2 cups chocolate chips

Instructions

1. Put a single layer of saltine or graham crackers side by side (with 4 sides touching one another) on a 10 by 15-inch rimmed cookie sheet, lined with parchment paper.

2. Bring butter and brown sugar to a rolling boil. Boil for three minutes.

3. Spread mixture on top of crackers.

4. Preheat oven to 400 degree.

5. Bake crackers with sauce, for 5 minutes.

6. Remove from heat and immediately sprinkle with 1 1/2 cups chocolate chips.

Let set three minutes and then spread melted chips over with a butter knife.

7. Cool and break into sized pieces of your choice.

Theme nights at Headwaters Park Ice Rink

Theme nights have been announced for the Headwaters Park Ice Rink in Fort Wayne.

Popular Pop will be held on Dec. 26.

Regular hours of operation are Monday through Friday from 4 to 9 p.m. and from noon to 9 p.m. on Saturday and Sun-

day. Holiday hours will include noon to 9 p.m. on Dec. 26, 27, Jan. 2, 3 and on Dec. 31 from noon to 6 p.m. (Closed Christmas eve, Christmas day and New Year's Day.

Skates rent for \$3 and admission is \$6 for those 3 and older. For event updates check out fortwayneparks.org.

Santa says ... Support your ho-ho-hometown!

SHOP LOCAL

Hidden Savings



Shopping locally can save you more than holiday cash. Stress, body weight and environmental harm are at risk of increasing during the holiday season. Implement a little bit of local shopping into your routine and watch those negative implications melt away. Here's how:

Save Stress

'Tis the season to be jolly, not stressed, frenzied, or road-raged. Trade in the hustle and bustle of long car rides and over-packed malls for a relaxing stroll through your favorite local business.

The benefits of slowing things down over the holidays can improve your health, well-being and overall mood, especially when schedules are at their fullest.

The less time you spend traveling great distances and drudging through hoards of shoppers, the more time you will be able to enjoy with your family around the fireplace. So maybe it's time to focus less on leaving the area, and take advantage of the calming convenience of shopping local.

Save the Environment

Staying local obviously cuts down on travel for both you and delivery drivers, a two-fold benefit that means less carbon, pollution and traffic congestion. According to the Environmental Protection Agency, trucks and locomotives are responsible for 25 percent of smog-causing pollution and the majority of the cancer threat posed by air pollution in some areas.

Local businesses help the environment by stocking local produce and food, and using less packaging than larger chain establishments. This helps make our local communities more sustainable and keeps hard-to-break-down plastics out of our landfills.

Local businesses depend less on packaging because their food is fresh and many of their products are locally produced, reducing the distance and packaging required to maintain quality.

Save Calories

Staying in the area for your Christmas shopping could be good for both your wallet and your waistline. If you live close enough to local businesses – and if you don't mind the chilly winter weather – walk or ride your bike to the store.

The central locations of downtown businesses provide a hub of shopping activity that requires only a short stroll down the sidewalk to shop door-to-door. Mixing in a little physical activity as opposed to spending hours in your car or extended periods of time on escalators, will aid in burning calories and improving your overall health.

And better health is a gift we all deserve.

Santa says ... Be sure to shop these businesses:

❄️ Above & Beyond Vehicle Reconditioning

❄️ Balance Massage Therapy & Body Works

❄️ Bluffton Tire

❄️ Moser & Son

❄️ Daniel's Jewelers

❄️ Mr Kool

❄️ Gerber Furniture

❄️ Northwood Computer

❄️ Habegger's ACE

❄️ Paddlefish

❄️ Lengerich Meats

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❄️ Wells County Chamber of Commerce

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Sunday, December 29th 2pm & 4:45pm

Sonic the Hedgehog 3
Tuesday, December 24th 1:20pm
Wednesday, December 25th 6:20pm
Thursday, December 26th 6:20pm
Friday, December 27th 6:20pm & 9pm
Saturday, December 28th
1pm, 3:30pm, 6:20pm & 9pm
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Sports Roundup

Norwell goes 1-4 at Wawasee wrestling tourney

Norwell went 1-4 at the Wawasee December Super Dual in wrestling on Saturday.

The Knights' lone win of the tournament and for the season came against Bishop Luers 53-21.

Cody Cox won 5-0 on the day with one forfeit, while Carson Powell and Luke Dreiband went 4-1.

Norwell will be off until it visits Bluffton at 6:30 p.m. Tuesday, Jan. 7.

Below are the rest of the results: Angola 58, Norwell 17

- Carter Shegog (A) won by fall over Eli Thomas at 106.
- Alex Delacruz (A) won by fall over Fielder Brege at 113.
- Both teams forfeited 120.
- Kam Straw (A) won by fall over Connor Rose at 126.
- Cooper Martin (A) won by forfeit at 132.
- Layne Pavka (A) won by forfeit at 138.
- Chace Behning (N) won by fall over Caiden Funk at 144.
- Cody Cox (N) won by fall over Thor Anderson at 157.
- Blake Denman (A) won by fall over Wyatt Lukins at 165.
- Gavin Hunt (A) won by fall over Camden Connett at 175.
- Jacob Carter (A) won by fall over Lincoln Moyer at 190.
- Lucas Lentz (A) won by fall over Ty Tofflemeyer at 215.
- Carson Powell (N) won by fall over Calvin Hubbell at 285.

Norwell 53, Bishop Luers 21

- Eli Thomas (N) won by forfeit at 106.
- Fielder Brege (N) won by forfeit at 113.
- Both teams forfeited 120.
- Khangye Hein (BL) won by decision 12-9 over Connor Rose at 126.
- Jake Gruss (N) won by forfeit at 132.
- George Gatchell (BL) won by forfeit at 138.
- Chace Behning (N) won by fall over Michael Smith at 144.
- Luke Dreiband (N) won by technical fall 20-4 over Isaac Joley at 150.
- Cody Cox (N) won by forfeit at 157.
- Wyatt Lukins (N) won by fall over Alex Joley at 165.
- Camden Connett (N) won by fall over Myles Joley at 175.
- Lincoln Moyer (N) won by fall over Kain Wallace at 190.
- Matthew Booker (BL) won by forfeit at 215.
- Carson Powell (N) won by forfeit at 285.

Northridge 58, Norwell 20

- Adley Yoder (North) won by major decision 20-8 over Eli Thomas at 106.
- Fielder Brege (Norw) won by fall over Chae Baldrige at 113.
- Maycen Slabaugh (North) won by forfeit at 120.
- Braxton LEchlitner (North) won by fall over Connor Rose at 126.
- Landon Wade (North) won by forfeit at 132.
- Aisa Khaoucha (North) won by forfeit at 138.
- Chace Behning (Norw) won by decision 9-7 over Jersey Slabaugh at 144.
- Luke Dreiband (Norw) won by forfeit at 150.
- Cody Cox (Norw) won by technical fall 22-6 over Gabe Barbo at 157.
- Cesar Moreno (North) won by fall over Wyatt Lukins at 165.
- Degan Lenhart (North) won by fall over Camden Connett at 175.
- Austin Parks (North) won by fall over Lincoln Moyer at 190.
- Eddie Klain (North) won by fall over Ty Tofflemeyer at 215.
- Travis Kenke (North) won by fall over Carson Powell at 285.

Plymouth 42, Norwell 27

- Eli Thomas (N) won by forfeit at 106.
- Caleb Jones (P) won by technical fall 18-2 over Fielder Brege at 113.
- Dylan Jones (P) won by forfeit at 120.
- Coen Kraemer (P) won by fall over Connor Rose at 126.
- London Beaumont (P) won by forfeit at 132.
- Christopher Firebaugh (P) won by forfeit at 138.
- Braxton White (P) won by major decision 12-1 over Chace Behning.
- Luke Dreiband (N) won by decision 11-4 over Victory Balica at 157.
- Cody Cox won by fall over Kenseth Bugg at 157.
- Wyatt Lukins (N) won by major decision 11-3 over Chase Holderread at 165.
- Aden VanDusen (P) won by decision over Camden Connett at 175.
- Lincoln Moyer (N) won by major decision 14-2 over Aiden Miranda at 190.
- Deley Mullins (P) won by fall over Ty Tofflemeyer at 215.
- Carson Powell (N) won by major decision 15-7 over John Klinedinst at 285.

Wawasee 55, Norwell 21

- Eli Thomas (N) won by forfeit at 106.
- Garrett Tittle (W) won by fall over Fielder Brege at 113.
- Cylus Mechling (W) won by forfeit at



- 120.
- Cameron Senter (W) won by fall over Connor Rose at 126.
- Isaac Ruff (W) won by forfeit at 132.
- Kailyb Ferrer (W) won by forfeit at 138.
- Cavan Tom (W) won by major decision 13-5 over Chace Behning at 144.
- Ethan Rodriguez (W) won by major decision 13-0 over Luke Dreiband at 150.
- Cody Cox (N) won by decision 13-10 over Carson Nine at 157.
- Moses Howard (W) won by fall over Camden Connett at 175.
- Lincoln Moyer (N) won by fall over Trayvon Senders at 190.
- Derek Morrison (W) won by fall over Ty Tofflemeyer at 215.
- Carson Powell (N) won by forfeit at 285.

Knights, Tigers split in county swimming clash

Bluffton and Norwell's swim teams geared up for one of their favorite meets of the season — the one against each other.

The ultra-competitive meet was hosted by the Knights on Saturday, and for the second straight year, a split was drawn.

The Tigershark boys defeated the Knights 112-74, while the Knight girls won 129-50. This was the same win-and-loss result from last year when Bluffton hosted.

Bluffton will be at the Jay County Border Wars at 8 a.m. Friday, Dec. 27.

Norwell will be off until Jan. 7 when it hosts Angola.

Event winners:

- Boys**
- Noah Brooks, Braden Lemler, Isaac Wheeler and Athan King (B) in the 200-yard medley relay.
- Griffin Linderwell (B) in the 200-yard freestyle and in the 50-yard freestyle.
- Wheeler (B) 200-yard IM and the 100-yard butterfly.
- Rylan Heyerly (N) in the 50-yard freestyle and in the 100-yard freestyle.
- Ben Peterson in the diving events.
- Lincoln Rodgers, Linderwell, Wes Frettinger and Athan King (B) in the 200-yard freestyle relay.
- Brooks (B) in the 100-yard backstroke.
- Kale Meredith (N) in the 100-yard breaststroke.
- Rhett Gerber, Wheeler, Linderwell and Brooks (B) in the 400-yard freestyle relay.
- Girls**
- Annalise Cornett, Ryleigh Huffman, Marlee Meredith and Emma Easley (N) in the 200-yard medley relay.
- Cassie Coyne (N) in the 200-yard freestyle and in the 500-yard freestyle.
- Ellie Coyne (B) in the 200-yard IM and in the 100-yard freestyle.
- Emerson Meredith (N) 50-yard freestyle and in the diving events.
- Huffman (N) in the 100-yard butterfly.
- Easley, Coyne, Marlee Meredith and Emerson Meredith (N) in the 200-yard freestyle relay.
- Rilynn Ervin (N) in the 100-yard backstroke.
- Marlee Meredith (N) in the 100-yard breaststroke.
- Cornett, Coyne, Karrigan Melcher and Emerson Meredith (N) in the 400-yard freestyle relay.

Bluffton City Gym's Men's Basketball League results

Another week went by for the Bluffton City Gym's Men's Basketball League on Monday.

- Below are the results of the games:
- Inteva Panels 68, The "B" Team 67.
- Jason Hauck and Matt Franks scored 21 points each for Inteva. Michael Scott led The "B" Team with 15 points and David Bradler 14.
- Craigville Appliance 61, The Irish 59.
- Hayden Nern led Craigville with 22 points and both Konner Norman and Doug Hindshaw had nine. Jenson Nusbaumer led The Irish with 18 points and Tanner Felger 15.
- Boleas Farms 90, Peyton's Northern 68.
- Grant Prible led Boleas with 45 points, Luke Roush 24. Vern Martin led Peyton's with 22 points and Aaron Thomas 19.
- Helena Agri Enterprises 94, Inteva Doors 56.
- Luke Reust led Helena with 23 points, Kevin Moser 14. Wasen Frillo led Inteva with 28 points and Kyler Jones 17.

EJ Tackett wins PBA's Player of the Year award, his third time in total and 2nd straight

Bluffton's very own has once again climbed the mountaintop of the bowling world.

On Dec. 12, EJ Tackett won the Chris Schenkel Professional Bowling Association's Player of the Year for the second straight season and third in total. His first time winning Player of the Year honors was in 2016, but nearly a decade later, Tackett is still bowling at his best.

During this season, Tackett won

the PBA World Championship and led the Tour with 29,920 points, according to the PBA. His 229.37 average was second most ever behind Jason Belmonte's 229.39.



EJ Tackett



Habegger takes home youth tournament

Bluffton's Miken Habegger won the All-Star Bowl competition at the Bowlyndy Youth Tournament in Indianapolis on Sunday. His day started with fourth-place finish in the qualifying round to the semifinals. From there, Habegger advanced to win the tournament. (Photo submitted)

Shohei Ohtani wins 3rd AP Male Athlete of the Year award

By BETH HARRIS
AP Sports Writer

LOS ANGELES (AP) — Shohei Ohtani is keeping elite company.

The Japanese superstar caps 2024 by winning The Associated Press Male Athlete of the Year for the third time, tying him with basketball great Michael Jordan. He trails only four-time winners Lance Armstrong, Tiger Woods and LeBron James.

"I'm very honored," Ohtani said through translator Matt Hidaka in an exclusive interview with the AP. "Obviously all the hard work has paid off. Maybe next year, I'll get the award again."

In balloting by 74 sports journalists from the AP and its members, Ohtani received 48 votes. He previously won the award in 2023 and 2021, when he was with the Angels.

"Growing up in Japan, I did follow Michael Jordan and Tiger Woods," he said. "I would see their accolades and how they were successful in the United States."

The AP honor has been given out since 1931. Golfer Babe Didrikson won six times, the most by a man or woman.

Swimmer Léon Marchand of France, who won four gold medals at the Paris Olympics, was second with 10 votes in balloting announced Monday. Golfer Scottie Scheffler, whose victories this year included the Masters and an Olympic

gold medal, was third with nine.

The AP Female Athlete of the Year will be announced Tuesday.

Moving from the beleaguered Los Angeles Angels to the powerhouse Los Angeles Dodgers, Ohtani won his third Most Valuable Player award and first in the National League, led his new team to its eighth World Series championship and created Major League Baseball's 50/50 club by hitting 54 home runs and stealing 59 bases.

Ohtani signed a then-record \$700 million, 10-year contract with the Dodgers in December 2023. Already a two-way superstar, he embellished his reputation even further despite not pitching all season while he rehabilitated from a second major right elbow surgery he had in September 2023.

Ohtani went wild on offense, making every at-bat a must-see moment. The 6-foot-4 designated hitter batted a career-high .310 while easily surpassing his previous career highs in home runs and stolen bases.

In September, he reached the previously unheard of 50/50 mark in a performance for the ages. Against the Miami Marlins in Florida, Ohtani went 6 for 6 with three homers, 10 RBIs, two

stolen bases and 17 total bases.

"It wouldn't shock me if he went 60/60 and 20 wins a year from now," Brad Ausmus, who managed the Angels in 2019 during Ohtani's second season in Anaheim, said recently. "This guy is the greatest athlete to ever play the sport of baseball and there's not a close second."

Ohtani said he knew the Dodgers' franchise record for most homers in a season was 49. His previous best was 46, set in 2021.

"I kind of wanted to get over that bar," he said. "I was pleasantly surprised I was able to pass that record."

Ohtani carried the Dodgers offensively during the regular season, and he stayed healthy until Game 2 of the World Series. He injured his left shoulder trying to steal second base against the New York Yankees and finished the Series playing hurt.

He underwent surgery a few days after the Dodgers celebrated their championship in early November.

"I don't have full range of motion yet, but it feels a lot better," he told the AP. "There's no pain. There's obviously still a little bit of tightness, but slowly but surely it's getting better."

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East				
y-Buffalo	12	3	0	800 469 331
Miami	7	8	0	467 305 329
e-N.Y. Jets	4	11	0	267 292 344
e-N. England	3	12	0	200 259 361
South				
W	L	T	Pct	PF PA
y-Houston	9	6	0	600 347 327
Indianapolis	7	8	0	467 318 359
e-Jacksonville	3	12	0	200 277 396
e-Tennessee	3	12	0	200 284 417

North				
W	L	T	Pct	PF PA
x-Baltimore	10	5	0	667 452 349
x-Pittsburgh	10	5	0	667 353 299
Cincinnati	7	8	0	467 423 393
e-Cleveland	3	12	0	200 245 380

West				
W	L	T	Pct	PF PA
y-Kansas City	14	0	0	933 356 278
Denver	9	6	0	600 363 281
L.A. Chargers	9	6	0	600 328 274
e-Las Vegas	3	12	0	200 284 390

National Conference				
W	L	T	Pct	PF PA
x-Philadelphia	12	3	0	800 402 283
Washington	10	5	0	667 432 348
e-Dallas	7	8	0	467 324 404
e-N.Y. Giants	2	13	0	133 215 362

South				
W	L	T	Pct	PF PA
Atlanta	8	7	0	533 327 349
Tampa Bay	8	7	0	533 427 352
e-New Orleans	5	9	0	357 309 312
e-Carolina	4	11	0	267 283 448

North				
W	L	T	Pct	PF PA
x-Detroit	13	2	0	867 493 299
x-Minnesota	13	2	0	867 396 276
Green Bay	10	4	0	714 379 287
e-Chicago	4	11	0	267 283 342

West				
W	L	T	Pct	PF PA
L.A. Rams	9	6	0	600 329 347
Seattle	8	7	0	533 339 340
e-Arizona	7	8	0	467 344 342
e-San Fran	6	9	0	400 331 349

Eliminated from playoffs
x-clinched playoff spot
y-clinched division

Thursday's Games				
L.A. Chargers	34	Denver	27	
Saturday's Games				
Kansas City	27	Houston	19	
Baltimore	34	Pittsburgh	17	

Sunday's Games

Atlanta 34, N.Y. Giants 7
Carolina 36, Arizona 30, OT
Cincinnati 24, Cleveland 6
Detroit 34, Chicago 17
Indianapolis 38, Tennessee 30
L.A. Rams 19, N.Y. Jets 9
Washington 36, Philadelphia 33
Minnesota 27, Seattle 24
Buffalo 24, New England 21
Las Vegas 19, Jacksonville 14
Miami 29, San Francisco 17
Dallas 26, Tampa Bay 24

Monday Night Football: Green Bay 34, New Orleans 0

Wednesday, Dec. 25
Kansas City at Pittsburgh, 1 p.m.
Baltimore at Houston, 4:30 p.m.

Thursday, Dec. 26
Thursday Night Football: Seattle at Chicago, 8:15 p.m.

Saturday, Dec. 28
L.A. Chargers at New England, 1 p.m.
Denver at Cincinnati, 4:30 p.m.
Arizona at L.A. Rams, 8:15 p.m.

Sunday, Dec. 29
Carolina at Tampa Bay, 1 p.m.
Green Bay at Minnesota, 1 p.m.
Indianapolis at N.Y. Giants, 1 p.m.
Las Vegas at New Orleans, 1 p.m.
N.Y. Jets at Buffalo, 1 p.m.
Tennessee at Jacksonville, 1 p.m.
Miami at Cleveland, 4:05 p.m.
Dallas at Philadelphia, 4:25 p.m.
Sunday Night Football: Atlanta at Washington, 8:20 p.m.

Monday, Dec. 30
Monday Night Football: Detroit at San Francisco, 8:15 p.m.

College

College Football Playoff First Round
No. 7 Notre Dame 27, No. 10 Indiana 17
No. 6 Penn St. 38, No. 11 SMU 10
No. 5 Texas 38, No. 12 Clemson 24

No. 8 Ohio St. 42, No. 9 Tennessee 17

College Football Playoff Quarterfinals
Rose Bowl
Pasadena, Calif.
Ohio St. vs. No. 1 Oregon, 5 p.m. (ESPN)

Peach Bowl
Atlanta

Texas vs. No. 4. Arizona St., 7:45 p.m. (ESPN)

Sugar Bowl

New Orleans
Notre Dame vs. No. 2 Georgia, 8:45 p.m. (ESPN)

BASKETBALL

High School

Saturday Boys' Scores
Anderson 79, Indpls Pike 63
Angola 53, Fremont 50
Batesville 60, E. Central 56
Berrien Springs, Mich. 54, Concord 42

Berrien Springs, Mich. 54, Elkhart Christian 42
Bloomfield 79, White River Valley 63
Bloomington North 58, Franklin 42
Bloomington South 80, Floyd Central 54

Brownstown 67, Mitchell 60
Cambridge City Lincoln 71, Randolph Southern 48
Carmel 74, Kokomo 36
Carroll (Flora) 61, N. Newton 27
Castle 72, Heritage Hills 57
Centerville 77, Knightstown 37
Charlestown 83, S. Central (Elizabeth) 47

Chicago Christian, Ill. 48, Illiana Christian High School 44
Cloverdale 82, Riverton Parke 57
Corydon 60, Jasper 57
Delta 49, Muncie Central 46, OT
Eastern (Greene) 43, Vincennes Rivet 36

Eastern (Greentown) 67, Cowan 42
Eastern Hancock 65, Blackford 62, OT
Edgewood 63, Sullivan 62
Edon, Ohio 64, Eastside 48
Evansville Harrison 55, Guerin Catholic High School 51
Evansville Mater Dei 56, N. Daviess 45

Evansville North 53, Henderson Co., Ky. 43
Evansville Reitz 87, Madisonville, Ky. 44
Fairfield 48, Jimtown 45
Fishers 93, Indpls Shortridge 64
Forest Park 58, Dubois 49
Frontier 59, S. Newton 40
Ft. Wayne North 62, Lakeland (IN) 56
Ft. Wayne Northrop 42, Heritage 39
Ft. Wayne Snider 67, Elkhart 56

Garrett 51, Bluffton 47
Gibson Southern 59, Mt. Vernon (Posey) 48
Greenfield 74, Lawrenceburg 44
Greensburg 48, Franklin Co. 45
Gurnee Warren, Ill. 76, Hammond Morton 60

Hammond Central 52, Harvey Thornton, Ill. 46
Haviland Wayne Trace, Ohio 50, W. Noble 41
Heritage Christian 49, Indpls Socinea 48

Indian Creek 77, N. Putnam 54
Indpls Ben Davis 65, Brownsburg 58
Indpls N. Central 75, Evansville Bosse 39

Indpls Ritter 70, Indpls Lutheran 50
Indpls Roncalli 61, Beech Grove 33
Jeffersonville 62, Indpls Attucks 56
Jennings Co. 53, Seymour 48, OT
Kenwood, Ill. 69, Gary West 58
Kouts 89, Argos 43

LaPorte 59, Hanover Central 58
Lafayette Jeff 71, Benton Central 32
Lapel 49, Mississinewa 45
Lawrence Central 51, Princeton 41
Lawrence North 77, New Albany 63
Lincoln Park, Ill. 74, Griffith 44
Linton 70, Wayne, W.Va. 57, OT
Loogootee 44, Springs Valley 37
Maconaquah 89, Logansport 66
Madison 68, Austin 64

Marion 73, Huntington North 60
Marshall, Ill. 58, N. Central (Farmersburg) 51
Martinsville 63, Monrovia 53
Mattawan, Mich. 58, Elkhart 56
Mattawan, Mich. 58, Elkhart Central 56

Mishawaka 53, New Prairie 37
Mishawaka Marian 72, Niles, Mich. 50
Monroe Central 64, Hagerstown 56
Mooreville 63, University 58
Morgan Twp. 56, Knox 26
Morristown 76, Blue River Valley 42
N. Posey 52, Crawford Co. 31
N. Vermillion 62, Shakamak 51
New Haven 61, Ft. Wayne Concordia 49

New Palestine 69, Franklin Central 38
Northridge 70, Goshen 33
Northview 64, Cascade 50
Oldenburg 55, Rising Sun 31
Orleans 60, N. Harrison 34
Parke Heritage 79, S. Putnam 46
Paw Paw, Mich. 54, Culver Academy 44

Pendleton Hts. 60, Liberty Christian 45

Peru 61, Cass 53
S. Bend Washington 78, Benton Harbor, Mich. 67
Tri-Central 56, Madison-Grant 35
Wapahani 51, Alexandria 35
Warsaw 51, Carroll (Ft. Wayne) 43
Wes-Del 58, Daleville 47
Woodlan 61, Churubusco 48

Saturday Girls' Scores
Bellmont 80, New Haven 37
Bluffton 70, Adams Central 33
Center Grove 48, Bloomington North 22
Churubusco 50, Ft. Wayne Canterbury 23

Cloverdale 53, S. Vermillion 23
Columbia City 59, E. Noble 39
Concord 59, Mishawaka 22
Corydon 53, Charlestown 39
Covenant Christian High School 52, S. Putnam 25

Daleville 74, Wes-Del 18
Delta 63, Greenfield 54
E. Central 44, Batesville 37
Eastbrook 49, Blue River Valley 27
Eastside 77, Lakeland (IN) 33
Elkhart 47, W. Noble 22
Elkhart Christian 44, S. Central

Greensburg 64, S. Ripley 21
Hamilton Hts. 48, Blackford 29
Hammond Central 49, Valparaiso 46
Hammond Morton 89, Thornton Fractional North, Ill. 75
Highland 52, Michigan City 49
Huntington North 55, Leo 44
Jay Co. 65, S. Adams 36
Maconaquah 58, Logansport 24
Mississinewa 52, Madison-Grant 18
Noblesville 53, Westfield 51
Norwell 40, DeKalb 22
Oak Hill 42, Frankton 18
Wabash 58, Northfield 47
Warsaw 73, Wawasee 41
Woodlan 68, Heritage 18

(Union Mills) 28
Evansville Bosse 57, Rock Creek Academy 31
Evansville Central 73, Tecumseh 37
Evansville Christian 49, N. Daviess 20
Evansville North 64, Boonville 50
Ft. Wayne Luers 64, Ft. Wayne North 36
Ft. Wayne Northrop 60, Bedford N. Lawrence 37
Gibson Southern 50, Indpls Roncalli 40

Greensburg 64, S. Ripley 21
Hamilton Hts. 48, Blackford 29
Hammond Central 49, Valparaiso 46
Hammond Morton 89, Thornton Fractional North, Ill. 75
Highland 52, Michigan City 49
Huntington North 55, Leo 44
Jay Co. 65, S. Adams 36
Maconaquah 58, Logansport 24
Mississinewa 52, Madison-Grant 18
Noblesville 53, Westfield 51
Norwell 40, DeKalb 22
Oak Hill 42, Frankton 18
Wabash 58, Northfield 47
Warsaw 73, Wawasee 41
Woodlan 68, Heritage 18

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GENERAC

Agriculture

USDA report reinforces family farms as backbone of U.S. agriculture

By AGDAILY

In a landscape defined by diversity and technological progress, family farms continue to serve as the foundation of U.S. agriculture.

Representing 96 percent of all farms and accounting for 83 percent of total agricultural production in 2023, according to a December report released by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, showing that family-owned operations are vital to feeding the nation and sustaining rural economies.

The USDA defines family farms as operations where the majority of the business is owned by an operator and their relatives. In 2023, these farms spanned various sizes and specialties, from small, retirement-focused plots to vast enterprises generating millions in gross cash farm income.

Small family farms alone made up 86 percent of all farms, operating 41 percent of agricultural land. Despite their numerical dominance, these smaller farms contributed only 17% of the total production value, highlighting the significant role of larger family farms in U.S. agriculture.

Large-scale family farms, while accounting for just 4 percent of all operations, were responsible for 48 percent of the total production value. These farms play a critical role in producing high-value commodities such as cash grains, cotton, and dairy,

underscoring the diverse contributions of family-owned enterprises to the agricultural sector.

Economic conditions in 2023 illustrated the challenges and opportunities facing family farms. Midsize and large-scale family farms showed strong financial stability, with many operating in the low-risk profit margin zone (operating profit margin greater than 25 percent). In contrast, small family farms often faced financial vulnerability, with up to 85 percent operating in the high-risk zone (profit margins below 10 percent).

Despite these challenges, family farms have demonstrated resilience through strategic diversification. Most family farm households rely heavily on off-farm income, with 85 percent of all households earning the majority of their income from non-agricultural sources in 2023. This reliance on external income underscores the adaptability of family farm operators in navigating financial uncertainties.

Family farms benefited significantly from government programs, particularly the USDA's Conservation Reserve Program, which targets environmentally sensitive cropland. Small farms received 76 percent of CRP payments in 2023, aligning with their role in managing smaller-scale, environmentally focused operations. Conversely, larger family farms dominated the receipt of countercyclical pay-

ments, reflecting their higher production of commodities like cash grains and soybeans.

CRP

Image by USDA

Participation in federal crop insurance also illustrated the critical role of family farms in safeguarding national food security. In 2023, midsize and large-scale family farms, which together accounted for 67 percent of harvested cropland, received a proportional share of insurance indemnities. These programs are vital in mitigating the financial risks posed by adverse weather and fluctuating market conditions.

Family farms are at the forefront of adopting precision agriculture technologies, which are transforming modern farming practices. Larger family farms have embraced tools such as yield monitors, autosteering systems, and variable rate technologies to increase efficiency and reduce costs. While smaller farms lag in adoption due to economic constraints, these technologies have the potential to level the playing field, enabling even small-scale operations to boost productivity and sustainability.

As the backbone of the agricultural sector, family farms are not only preserving traditions but also driving progress. Their ability to adapt and thrive ensures that they remain central to the nation's food system and rural economies for years to come.

House proposes funding measure that includes 1-year farm bill extension

By AGDAILY

The House of Representatives proposed legislation late Tuesday to fund the government through March 2025. The bill also includes a year-long extension of the 2018 Agriculture Innovation Act, known as the farm bill, plus \$10 billion in additional aid for farmers and ranchers.

Included in the \$10 billion is emergency economic aid that aims to address substantial losses stemming from weather and market challenges, offering critical financial support to the farming community.

House Agriculture Committee Chairman Glenn "GT" Thompson emphasized the importance of this assistance, describing it as a necessary "financial bridge" to help mitigate the current downturn in the agricultural economy.

Looking to the future, Thompson expressed a goal to pass a comprehensive five-year farm bill in the upcoming Congress. This legislation would aim to strengthen the farm safety net, reducing the need for recurring economic aid.

"Looking ahead to the 119th Congress, I hope to move quickly to enact

a five-year farm bill that aligns the farm safety net with the needs of producers, among many other policies, to minimize the need for annual economic aid," wrote Thompson.

American Farm Bureau Federation president Zippy Duvall in a news release also asked Congress to pass the bill.

"The high cost of supplies, low commodity prices, and out-of-reach interest rates are a recipe for farm failures without help," said Duvall.

Duvall stated that nearly 10,000 Farm Bureau members contacted lawmakers, urging them to prioritize agriculture.

House Agriculture Committee Chairman Rep. Glenn

Thompson, a Republican, told the Associated Press that while he had hoped for greater economic relief for farmers, "it's a great start."

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		4	9	6				
4								1
			3	2		4	5	
2	6		1				9	7
3	4	2			7	6		5
7	5	8				9	3	
	1			5		7	8	4

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12/24

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Monday's Drawings HOOSIER LOTTERY

Cash 5 — 04-15-18-23-40

Cash4Life — 09-25-35-41-45, Cash Ball: 03

Quick Draw Midday — 03-08-11-12-20-26-27-33-42-43-56-58-60-61-66-69-70-72-77-80, BE: 77

Daily Three-Midday — 03-01-08, SB: 07

Daily Three-Evening — 08-03-01, SB: 08

Daily Four-Midday — 00-07-02-06, SB: 07

Daily Four-Evening — 06-00-09-00, SB: 08

Quick Draw Evening — 05-06-07-08-10-13-17-33-41-44-45-49-51-52-58-65-67-69-70-75, BE: 69

Hoosier Lotto — Estimated jackpot (for Wednesday): \$33.6 million

MEGA MILLIONS

Estimated jackpot (for Tuesday): \$970 million

POWERBALL

22-42-44-57-64 Powerball: 18; Power Play: 2X

Public Sale Calendar

DECEMBER 29-JANUARY 5 - Bidding starts closing at 2 p.m. - Estate of Eldrid Tinkel, seller. Large antique and collectible auction. Country primitives, early metal toys including vintage tractors, farm implements, trucks, boats, more, antique furniture, cast iron collection, antique brass cash register, antique stoves, large and rare collection of vintage graniteware, Fenton, Marion advertising memorabilia, vintage beer signs, crocks, long guns, coins, more. Open house Dec. 29, 2-4 p.m., Jan. 4, 10 a.m.-noon, 1910 N Meridian St., Marion. Sale manager Brandon Steffen, 260-710-5684, TheSteffenGroup.com, 260-824-3006. **BIDDING ENDS DECEMBER 31 - Bidding starts closing at 2 p.m. - Estate of Richard Gerken and others, sellers.** "Outstanding year end auction." Very high quality art deco, Liadro collection art, mid century modern and Art Nouveau home furnishings, International Harvester collection, 2011 Platinum Ford F150 in pristine condition, high quality antiques, 3,500 record albums, vintage Schwinn bicycles, lawn mower, tools, advertising memorabilia, Coca Cola collection, antique gas pump, country primitives, military patches & pins, and more. Open house Dec. 26 and Dec. 30 from 3 p.m. to 6 p.m., 102 S. Jefferson St., Ossian, IN. Sale manager Rod Fetters, 260-557-8451, TheSteffenGroup.com, 260-824-3006. **BIDDING OPEN AND STARTS CLOSING JANUARY 2 at 10 a.m. - (Online Only) - MD Landscaping LLC, owner.** Over 170+ Lots. John Deere 5525 W/ Belly Blade, Bobcat Dozer 96" Blade, 2016 International 4300 Box Truck, 2003 Wells Cargo Enclosed/ Office Trailer, 84" 3-Point Cul-

tivator, 2008 Ford F-350 W/ Boss Snow Plow, 2007 Jeep Wrangler w/J Truck Bed, Volvo ECR88 Excavator Kawasaki 65TMMV Wheel Loader, Kubota SCL 1000 Mini Skid Steer, Skid Loader Attachments, Hardscape Stone, Walnut Slabs, Assorted Lawn Tools, Power Tools and much more. 3883 US HWY 33 Decatur IN, 46733. KrueckebergAuction.com, 260-724-7402, kjauction.com. **BIDDING ENDS JANUARY 7 at 10 a.m. - (Online Only) - Wayne Metals LLC Machining Division, owner.** Offering over 200+ Lots. Roskelley 1440 Lathe, 2007 Haas SL-40T CNC Turning Lathe, Hardinge CHNCl Precision CNC Machine, Delta Floor Drill Press, Omni Turn GT-75 CNC Lathe, Targa Surface Grinder, Acer Milling Machine W/ Phase-2 3 Jaw Chuck, Abex Denison Stamp Machine, Ooya RE-1225H Drilling & Tapping Radial Arm Drill, Cincinnati Milacron Hawk 150 A2100 CNC Lathe, Welders, Tooling Cabinets, Large Selection of pallet racking, Power & Hand Tools and much more. 9312 Avionics Drive, Fort Wayne IN 46809. KrueckebergAuction.com, 260-724-7402, kjauction.com.

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5	1	9	7	1	6	8	2	3
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3	1	1	2	9	6	7	8	5
6	7	2	9	8	4	9	1	
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AI will eavesdrop to track and help protect endangered wildlife

By MATT O'BRIEN
AP Technology Writer
 PUERTO JIMÉNEZ, Costa Rica (AP) — The endangered Geoffrey's spider monkeys that dangle high in the rainforest canopy are elusive and hard for scientists to track.

So biologist Jenna Lawson hid 350 audio monitors in trees across Costa Rica's lush Osa Peninsula to spy on them.

The devices recorded the sounds of the forest and surrounding countryside for a week, collecting so much data that Lawson could have spent years listening to it all.

Instead, she fed it into artificial intelligence systems trained to instantly recognize spider monkey calls and detect where the animals traveled. One of the world's largest acoustic wildlife studies when Lawson began the project in 2021, it revealed troubling findings about the health of a treasured wildlife refuge.

More of this AI-assisted wildlife surveillance is "urgently needed" as some 28% of all plant and animal species are now at risk of extinction, according to a

paper published in the academic journal Science this summer. Researchers from Dutch and Danish universities showed that machine-learning techniques can "handle huge amounts of data and uncover sound patterns, allowing for faster, cheaper, and better ecological studies" that can aid in biodiversity conservation. But many technical challenges remain.

Tech giant Microsoft's philanthropic AI for Good Lab announced this month it is hoping to answer some of those technical challenges with a new kind of hardware and computing system for eavesdropping on the planet's wildest places.

"Those remote places are also the most important places on the Earth from a biodiversity perspective," said Microsoft's chief data scientist, Juan Lavista Ferres, in an interview last week by video call from Colombia, where a research team was preparing to test the new approach.

Powered by the sun and energy-efficient AI computer chips, the devices can run for years rather than weeks without human intervention. And they can regularly

transmit their data online via low-Earth orbit satellites. It's called Sparrow, short for Solar-Powered Acoustic and Remote Recording Observation Watch.

Pablo Arbelaez, director of an AI-focused research center at the University of the Andes, said a first Sparrow test will happen in a jungle preserve along Colombia's largest river, the Magdalena. Eventually, the researchers hope to get a better idea of how deforestation — and efforts to reverse it — is affecting the population behavior of jaguars, blue-beaked parrots, spider monkeys and other endangered species.

Another project closer to Microsoft headquarters will monitor forests in Washington state's Cascade Mountains. By late 2025, Lavista Ferres plans to have devices on all continents, from remote corners of the Amazon rainforest to gorilla habitats of the Democratic Republic of the Congo. That will then be "open-sourced" to make it accessible to a wide body of researchers in real time, but with measures to obscure sensitive location

data. "What we don't want is these devices to ever be used for poachers to understand where the animals are," Lavista Ferres said.

It was a concern about encroachments on Costa Rican spider monkey habitat that led Lawson, then at Imperial College London, to undertake her ambitious bio-acoustic study three years ago. She persuaded landowners to let her place recording devices on their properties outside Corcovado National Park, a jewel of Costa Rica's decades-long efforts to preserve biodiversity by encouraging wildlife tourism.

"She basically realized the spider monkey is in a really critical situation," said local environmentalist and bug scientist Jim Córdoba-Alfaro. On a follow-up visit last year, he and Lawson trekked across a private reserve with an Associated Press reporter to observe the monkeys and check on the audio monitors.

Compared to the charismatic capuchin monkey and the notoriously loud howler monkey — both commonly seen or heard throughout

Costa Rica — spider monkeys are far more wary of humans and the changes they bring.

The Royal Society of London in March 2023 published Lawson's findings of what the audio monitors revealed: the spider monkeys weren't going anywhere near paved roads or the plantations harvesting palm oil and teak wood that bisect the region's protected national parks. That meant government-designated wildlife corridors meant to extend their range through and beyond the Osa Peninsula were not working as well as designed. She came

back to present those conclusions to local officials.

Unattended acoustic detection of animal sounds is valuable not just in rainforests but in a wide variety of ecosystems, according to the Science paper published earlier this year. For example, it could help sailors avoid colliding their ships with large baleen whales heard to be passing through a shipping channel.

Lavista Ferres said there are still numerous challenges to overcome, from humidity that can fray jungle monitors to elephants in African savannas unintentionally knocking them off a tree.

Inside the Gaetz ethics report, a trove of new details alleging payments for sex and drug use

WASHINGTON (AP) — The House Ethics Committee's long-awaited report on Matt Gaetz documents a trove of salacious allegations, including sex with an underage girl, that tanked the Florida Republican's bid to lead the Justice Department.

Citing text messages, travel receipts, online payments and testimony, the bipartisan committee paints a picture of a lifestyle in which Gaetz and others connected with younger women for drug-fueled parties, events or trips, with the expectation the women would be paid for their participation.

The former congressman, who filed a last-minute lawsuit to try to block the report's release Monday, slammed the committee's findings. Gaetz has denied any wrongdoing and has insisted he never had sex with a minor. And a Justice Department investigation into the allegations ended without any criminal charges filed against him.

"Giving funds to someone you are dating — that they didn't ask for — and that isn't 'charged' for sex is now prostitution!?" Gaetz wrote in one post Monday. "There is a reason they did this to me in a Christmas Eve-Eve report and not in a courtroom of any kind where I could present evidence and challenge witnesses."

The committee found that between 2017 and 2020, Gaetz paid tens of thousands of dollars to women "likely in connection with sexual activity and/or drug use." He paid the women using through online services such as PayPal, Venmo and CashApp and with cash or check, the committee said.

The committee said it found evidence that Gaetz understood the "transactional nature" of his relationships with the women. The report points to one text exchange in which Gaetz balked at a woman's request that he send her money, "claiming she only gave him a 'drive by.'"

Women interviewed by the committee said there was a "general expectation of sex," the report said. One woman who received more than \$5,000 from Gaetz between 2018 and 2019 said that "99 percent of the time" that when she hung out with Gaetz "there was sex involved."

However, Gaetz was in a long-term relationship with one of the women he paid, so "some of the payments may have been of a legitimate nature," the committee said.

Text messages obtained by the committee also show that Gaetz would ask the women to bring drugs to their "rendezvous," the report said.

While most of his encounters with the women were in Florida, the committee said Gaetz also traveled "on sev-

eral occasions" with women whom he paid for sex. The report includes text message exchanges in which Gaetz appears to be inviting various women to events, getaways or parties, and arranging airplane travel and lodging.

Gaetz associate Joel Greenberg, who pleaded guilty to sex trafficking charges in 2021, initially connected with women through an online service.

In one text with a 20-year-old woman, Greenberg suggested if she had a friend, the four of them could meet up. The woman responded that she usually does "\$400 per meet," Greenberg replied: "He understands the deal," along with a smiley face emoji. Greenberg asked if they were old enough to drink alcohol, and sent the woman a picture of Gaetz. The woman responded that her friend found him "really cute."

"Well, he's down here for only for the day, we work hard and play hard," Greenberg replied.

The report details a party in July 2017 in which Gaetz is accused of having sex with "multiple women, including the 17-year-old, for which they were paid." The committee pointed to "credible testimony" from the now-woman herself as well as "multiple individuals" who corroborated the allegation.

The then-17-year-old — who had just completed her junior year in high school — told the committee that Gaetz paid her \$400 in cash that night, "which she understood to be payment for sex," according to the report. The woman acknowledged that she had taken ecstasy the night of the party, but told the committee that she was "certain" of her sexual encounters with the then-congressman.

There's no evidence that Gaetz knew she was a minor when he had sex with her, the committee said. The woman told the committee she didn't tell Gaetz she was under 18

at the time and he didn't ask how old she was. Rather, the committee said Gaetz learned she was a minor more than a month after the party.

But he stayed in touch with her after that and met up with her for "commercial sex" again less than six months after she turned 18, according to the committee.

In sum, the committee said it authorized 29 subpoenas for documents and testimony, reviewed nearly 14,000 documents and contacted more than two dozen witnesses.

But when the committee subpoenaed Gaetz for his testimony, he failed to comply.

"Gaetz pointed to evidence that would 'exonerate' him yet failed to produce any such materials," the committee said. Gaetz "continuously sought to deflect, deter, or mislead the Committee in order to prevent his actions from being exposed."

The report details a months-long process that dragged into a year as it sought information from Gaetz that he decried as "nosey" and a "weaponization" of government against him.

In one notable exchange, investigators were seeking information about the expenses for a 2018 getaway with multiple women to the Bahamas. Gaetz ultimately offered up his plane ticket receipt "to" the destination, but declined to share his return "from" the Bahamas.

The report said his return on a private plane and other expenses paid by an associate were in violation of House gift rules.

In another Gaetz told the committee he would "welcome" the opportunity to respond to written questions. Yet, after it sent a list of 16 questions, Gaetz said publicly he would "no longer" voluntarily cooperate.

The report said that while Gaetz's obstruction of the investigation does not rise to a criminal violation it is inconsistent with the

requirement that all members of Congress "act in a manner that reflects creditably upon the House."

The committee began its review of Gaetz in April 2021 and deferred its work in response to a Justice Department request. It renewed its work shortly after Gaetz announced that the Justice Department had ended a sex trafficking investigation without filing any charges against him.

The committee sought records from the Justice Department about the probe, but the agency refused, saying it doesn't disclose information about investigations that don't result in charges.

The committee then subpoenaed the Justice Department, and after a back-and-forth between officials and the committee, the department handed over "publicly reported information about the testimony of a deceased individual," according to the report.

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