From: Kopsa, Ryan
To: Kopsa, Ryan
Cc: Pinkerman, Justin
Subject: Governor"s Office Daily Update - 3-10-21
Date: Wednesday, March 10, 2021 8:19:25 AM
Attachments: image001.png

AG VALLEY CO-OP

Eustis, NE

Commodity	Delivery	Price	Basis	Date (as of)
Corn	Mar 2021	5.22	-16.00	08:05
Corn	Oct 2021	4.54	-27.00	08:01
Milo	Mar 2021	6.38	100.00	08:05
Milo	Oct 2021	5.31	50.00	08:01
Soybeans	Mar 2021	13.51	-67.00	08:01
Soybeans	Oct 2021	11.76	-70.00	08:01
Wheat	Mar 2021	5.46	-69.00	08:05
Wheat	Jul 2021	5.66	-55.00	07:59

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KETV: 3,000 vulnerable Nebraskans wait years for services, advocates say the list is growing
NET: Pandemic-Inspired Easing Of Alcohol, Telehealth Regulations Advance
KETV: Troubled female youth will soon be housed in Hastings facility
KLKN: Health officials ask public to wait their turn, avoid 'vaccine tourism'
WOWT: OneWorld gearing up to vaccinate thousands of meatpackers in Douglas County
KLKN: Smaller vaccination clinics focus on minority groups
KMTV: Nebraska senators consider additional $5 million in state funding to local health departments

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OWH: Nebraska legislative panel votes to sets aside $115 million for prison overcrowding
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Colorado Sun: Colorado ranchers already had beef with Jared Polis. Then came "MeatOut Day."
AP: Nebraska bill to permanently allow carry-out booze advances
Norfolk DN: Marijuana amendment sparks controversy in Legislature
NCN: Medical marijuana gets public hearing in Lincoln

Brownfield Ag News: NE Governor Highlights E30 Study as Emissions Solution
GII: UNL study: E30 doesn't cut fuel efficiency or damage vehicles
NP Telegraph: DMV services like fleet renewal, title issuance, now available online
Neb Farmer: Complaint alleges environmental violations by AltEn
WOWT: Nebraska ranks No. 6 on U.S. News & World 'Best States' report
Daily Kos: Nebraska Republican considers giving up swingy House seat to run for governor
Norfolk DN: Ricketts discusses ethanol, vaccines and DMV services

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OWH: COVID vaccinations for people ages 50 to 64 could begin in April in Douglas County

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LJS: Gas companies describe 'ballistic' price increases to lawmakers

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LJS: Judge rules former meatpacking workers lack standing to sue Hastings plant
OWH: NSAA considering measures to combat rise of racist slurs in Nebraska high school sports
NET: Prescribed Prairie Fires In Flint Hills Come With Ag Benefits And Dirty Air
LJS: Camping World still coming to Lincoln, but Sidney plans on hold
OWH: Financial missteps by Sarpy County treasurer led to missed school tax payments, audit says
Kearney Hub: Hemp crop 'too hot' for new Pleasanton plant

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OWH Editorial: Fever for big spending, tax cuts carries dangers for Nebraska government
OWH Midlands Voices: Moving forward with Keystone XL pipeline is in the U.S. national interest
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WJAG: Ricketts gives legislative update on various key topics

LINCOLN - This year's Nebraska Legislative session is about a third of the way through with a number of key topics still on the table.
Governor Pete Ricketts tells News Talk WJAG, a budget has been introduced that will keep the growth of government to about 1.5 percent on average over the course of the next two years.
"That will allow us to deliver significant amounts of property tax relief. I've proposed over $1.36 billion between our homestead exemption act, the property tax credit relief fund and LB 1107 which was passed last year that will allow us to take the growth of revenues and put it into property tax relief. So a significant amount of property tax relief is in that budget."
Ricketts said they also just got an update to the state's revenue forecast which takes it up $462 million over the course of the next three years.
He said senators are looking at modernizing the income and sales tax base which is important, but whatever changes are made can't raise taxes on people as that would defeat the purpose of a modernization effort.
By Cody Ronnfeldt

OWH: Nebraska legislative panel votes to sets aside $115 million for prison overcrowding

LINCOLN — A key legislative panel decided Tuesday to take a wait-and-see position on Gov. Pete Ricketts' plan to build a $230 million prison.
The Appropriations Committee voted to set aside $115 million in its emerging budget plan "for the purpose of reducing prison overcrowding." But members did not actually appropriate the money, which means it cannot be spent.
State Sen. John Stinner of Gering, the committee chairman, said the move gives the state more time to determine the best course of action on its prisons, including time to get the results of a planned study of criminal justice reforms. The money will be held in the state's capital construction fund.
"We acknowledge there has to be something done with prison overcrowding," he said.
Nebraska has the second-most overcrowded prison system in the country, with facilities currently holding about 1,800 more inmates than the system's design capacity of 3,535.
Ricketts and state Corrections Director Scott Frakes have argued for building a new 1,600-bed prison to address the overcrowding and replace the aging State Penitentiary in Lincoln.
But Appropriations Committee members have been skeptical about the plan, which would be one of the most expensive state construction projects in history, and would require an additional $34 million a year to operate.
On Tuesday, Sens. Tony Vargas of Omaha and Anna Wishart of Lincoln sought assurances that putting aside money equal to the first two years of a four-year project would not tempt the administration to "buy a shovel" or otherwise move forward on a construction process. Wishart said the results of the study could end up pointing to less costly solutions.
State officials from all three branches of government announced last month that they would seek a federal grant for a "data-driven" study of reforms that could help the state maintain public safety

while avoiding the high cost of incarceration.
Sen. Steve Lathrop of Omaha, the Judiciary Committee chairman, was key in bringing officials together to make the grant request. On Tuesday, he said he was not surprised at the Appropriations Committee's action, calling it understandable.
During the same meeting, the budget-writing committee voted to put several million dollars' worth of other items into the budget package, including $10 million to help Gage County pay off a federal court judgment won by the Beatrice Six.
The $28.1 million in damages was awarded to six people who spent a combined 75 years in prison after being wrongfully convicted of a 1985 murder. Gage County has increased its property tax levy to the maximum level and imposed a sales tax to pay off the judgment, but the county still owes $16.8 million.
Sen. Myron Dorn of Adams had introduced Legislative Bill 103, seeking $2 million a year to help out the county. On Tuesday, Sen. Steve Erdman of Bayard proposed to increase the amount to $5 million a year, with the requirement that Gage County keep its levy at the maximum until the damages are paid. The committee voted unanimously to advance the bill with the higher amount.
Among other items approved Tuesday were: 2% annual increases in the payment rates for health and human services providers, a $5 million earmark of wildlife conservation money to reimburse farmers for damage caused by wildlife, an additional $5 million a year to help entrepreneurs and startup companies with growth potential, $25 million to help nonprofit organizations revive construction projects that were interrupted by the pandemic and $1 million a year to serve people waiting for developmental disability services.
By Martha Stoddard

CPR News: MeatOut, Or Meat In? Governor's Declaration Ignites Carnivorous Culture War

Steak will be on the menu in conservative strongholds across Colorado on March 20, thanks to a proclamation from the governor's office urging just the opposite.
Late last month, word started to get out that Gov. Jared Polis has proclaimed the 20th as MeatOut Day. The day, which was started in 1985 by the Farm Animals Rights Movement, is meant to encourage non-vegetarians to consider moving toward a plant-based diet.
When asked about the designation, Conor Cahill, the governor's spokesman, said the office "gets hundreds of requests for proclamations throughout the year and rarely declines these non-binding ceremonial proclamations that get auto-penned by the Governor."
Polis himself eats meat, although his fiance, first gentleman Marlon Reis, is a vegan and animal rights advocate.
While the declaration has no binding impact on what Coloradans choose to eat on the 20th, the suggestion that the governor would elevate an effort to get people to say goodbye to beef, if only for a day, quickly rankled Colorado's ranching sector and its defenders.
The Colorado Cattlemen's Association responded by urging people to celebrate a "Meat In" on the 20th. "On this day, CCA encourages Colorado to meet in a restaurant and order your favorite meat dish, meet your family and friends for a meal featuring meat!" states the group's announcement.
Already, numerous conservative groups — and Weld County's Board of Commissioners — have answered that call, pledging to hold cookouts heavy on the animal protein. Nebraska Gov. Pete Ricketts issued his own proclamation, declaring March 20 "Meat on the Menu" day for his state.

The backlash doesn't surprise CU professor Heide Bruckner, whose research involves the intersections of food and identity.
"Meat has always been politicized and meat-eating tied to a lot of perceptions of American identity and masculinity, especially here in the American West," she said.
Bruckner favors the idea of a MeatOut Day, as a way to introduce people to the idea that they can reduce the amount of meat in their diet without becoming a full vegetarian.
"There is a large area in between that all-or-nothing approach that we really should explore," she said. "Realistically, one day isn't radically going to shift perception, change behaviors or reduce meat consumption. But I do believe it can provide an opening for some to consider the role that meat plays in their diet."
The governor's office notes that Polis issues numerous proclamations each year celebrating the state's agricultural sector, including Colorado Ag Day, Farm Bureau Day, and Rocky Ford Cantaloupe Day.
But that has not stopped the criticism.
After word of the proclamation got out, several state Senators spoke out against MeatOut Day on the chamber floor.
"For our governor to say that we should have a meat-free day is the last straw. It's just one more attack against my county," said Republican state Sen. Barbara Kirkmeyer of Weld County. "Standing up for agriculture in this state is extremely important. It is the No. 2 economic driver in this state."
While most of the opposition has come from conservative critics, Democratic state Sen. Rhonda Fields of Aurora also declared MeatOut Day a tone deaf move, noting that many of her constituents live in food deserts, where nutritious vegetarian options aren't available.
"When I drive down Colfax coming from Aurora, I see people begging every day for food. And they're not saying, 'I want a carrot.' They're asking for a dollar or two or some change so they can feed themselves," said Fields. "There is an issue as it relates to food insecurity in the state of Colorado. We don't have the luxury in this COVID-19 environment to say, 'we have a holiday where you can't eat meat.' It might be a good idea, but I think it's the wrong approach."
By Megan Verlee

Colorado Sun: Colorado ranchers already had beef with Jared Polis. Then came "MeatOut Day."

LIMON — When Kelsey Pope watches her kids doing after-school chores, scattering hay for some of the 1,200 head of Red Angus cattle on their high plains farm, a beef-bashing proclamation from a governor 70 miles away doesn't feel like a distant nuisance.
Colorado's official embrace of "MeatOut Day" on March 20 feels like a personal attack.
"This is not the first time I would say that he has stepped on agriculture," Pope said of the governor.
Her family has raised beef cattle on River Bend Ranch for 40 years. Colorado cattle ranchers were already mad at the governor.
"We're just kind of tired of it," she said. "And we want to say, 'Hey, this is who we are. This is what we do.'"
The classic farmer-townie clash, coming in a cancel-culture era when America is taking sides on everything from food to celebrities to Dr. Seuss books, is another sign rural folks feel not just ignored but assaulted by urbanites. And it draws a dividing line between celebrating one kind of food versus trashing another.

“It almost feels like food has become a front line for the politicization of deeper issues,” said Dawn Thilmany McFadden, a professor of agriculture and resource economics at Colorado State University and co-director of CSU’s Regional Economic Development Institute. “Everything that’s feeling polarized about the world is now emanating through food values and food discussions.”

The backlash against “MeatOut Day” was instant, fierce, and viral. And it hasn’t subsided.

Gov. Jared Polis first stepped in the beef controversy two years ago when he suggested the state should open a fake-meat factory and then chomped on an Impossible burger while chatting in his office with a political columnist. To smooth things over, he then ate a real beef patty at a National Western Stock Show barbecue put on by the Colorado Cattlemen’s Association.

Then came the wolves.

The livestock industry wanted Polis to condemn the ballot measure Coloradans passed last year to reintroduce wolves into the state. The measure was narrowly approved, thanks to support from Denver voters and other cities far from where the newly placed wolves will actually roam and, ranchers fear, feast on their cattle. The governor didn’t take a stand either way and then directed Colorado Parks and Wildlife to expedite the reintroduction plan, though the wildlife commission opted instead for a slower approach.

So when Polis signed a proclamation promoted by animal rights activists designating March 20 as “MeatOut Day,” the state’s ranching community revolted.

Within hours, or maybe minutes, there was a counterplan for “Meat In Day.” A Facebook post from Greg Brophy, an Eastern Plains farmer and former Republican state senator, has 2,800 shares and counting: ““Polis wants March 20 to be a meat-free day. It’s your duty to eat bacon, burgers and steak for each meal that day.”

In Collbran, a ranching community outside of Grand Junction, the local Cattlewomen’s Association announced a beef-eating party and contest — restaurants will serve steaks and burgers that night, and anyone who posts a photo of their family eating beef for dinner gets entered in a prize drawing.

In Limon, Pope and her family picked apart the “MeatOut” proclamation and fumed over the perceived slandering of their stewardship in seemingly every word.

“Why our entire industry is fired up this time is because we’re fighting so much misinformation,” Pope said. Lean beef is part of a healthy diet. Ranch animals are not treated with violence. Cattle thrive on high-desert grazing land unsuited for anything else. “There’s so much in that proclamation that is just not true.”

In Buena Vista, a bull sale previously scheduled for March 20 is morphing into an eat-meat event, with free burgers for the town.

And on his Chaffee County ranch, Ken McMurry piled up a stack of round hay bales along U.S. 285 and spray-painted a message to anyone who passes by: “Eat Beef Every Day.” But it includes one date as most important of all: “3/20/21.”

McMurry, who runs about 450 head of cattle for his cow-calf operation, took a break from calving to talk politics with a reporter last week. The fourth-generation rancher who is hoping his youngest daughter will continue the family business is fed up with what he sees as antagonism against the livestock industry from the Democratic governor.

“For a governor to call out an industry and make it an anti-day is just wrong,” McMurry said. “If it had been a pro-vegetarian day, those of us who grow cows probably would have bristled. But this? How about an anti-vape day or an anti-smoke marijuana day?”

The farming and ranching industry feels the larger public perception of what’s vital to Colorado is warped. The media spends enormous time and space on the marijuana economy, for

example, which last year accounted for $2.2 billion in legal sales.
Cattle sales from ranches and feedlots, even before processing into higher-value products, amounted to $4 billion for Colorado's economy in 2017. Beef is raised in nearly every county of the state. Weld County and its feedlots consistently rank in the top 10 agricultural sales counties for the entire nation, CSU's McFadden said.
The MeatOut proclamation names a host of reasons not to eat meat, including that it's bad for your health and that cattle contribute to global warming.
"It strikes us that he is not just indifferent and tone deaf, but I think hostile to the livestock industry," said Brophy, the former state senator who grows corn and melons. "This is the third strike."
MeatOut Day invented by national animal rights group
The great "MeatOut" was invented in 1985 by the national group FARM, or Farm Animal Rights Movement, based in Washington, D.C. The group has been writing the proclamation for years, then pitching it to states and cities across the country.
This year, Colorado was the only state that bit.
"This is the most controversy that's ever been stirred," said Eric Lindstrom, the group's executive director. And while the attention has been most welcome, Lindstorm worries that no other governor will ever want to proclaim "MeatOut Day" again.
Nebraska Gov. Pete Ricketts, watching the controversy unfold in neighboring Colorado, proclaimed March 20 as "Meat On The Menu Day," erasing any possible doubt on Nebraska's official stance on beef. The Republican governor mentioned Polis' proclamation in his news release.
What's curious is that U.S. Sen. John Hickenlooper signed a similar "MeatOut" proclamation back in 2011 when he was Colorado's governor — without controversy. Ranchers say they don't even remember it and maybe never heard about it because they weren't on Twitter and Facebook back then.
The strong backlash also might be due to a particularly rough year, economically and politically, for rural Coloradans. And they're at a breaking point with Polis, who they felt gave a less-than-enthusiastic welcome to the industry during his inaugural Governor's Forum on Colorado Agriculture.
Add to the list the Polis' appointment last summer of ardent animal rights activist Ellen Kessler, who has criticized 4-H clubs, to the State Board of Veterinary Medicine, which regulates and licenses veterinarians. Ranchers told The Colorado Sun they protested to Polis' agriculture Agriculture Commissioner Kate Greenberg, but it didn't change the outcome.
After the appointment in July, the agricultural news outlet The Fence Post, published a photo from Kessler's Facebook page depicting her side-hugging the governor's partner and fiance, First Gentleman Marlon Reis, who is a vegan and speaks out regularly on animal rights matters.
Ranchers who dislike the governor's policies have questioned whether Reis has too much influence.
But Reis isn't responsible for "MeatOut Day," according to FARM, which dispatched one of its activists from Boulder to make the pitch to the governor's office. Marlon "had no involvement whatsoever," Lindstrom said.
But Lindstrom concedes he has no idea if the governor himself reads all the proclamations and decides which to sign.
Controversy is publicity, and FARM is thrilled with how worked up Coloradans are over a proposed no-meat day.
The day is planned to coincide with spring, when people are thinking about lifestyle changes. "You stop and think about what you're eating," Lindstrom said. "I completely understand the plight and

the difference of opinions that are raging over MeatOut Day. At the same time, I just have to give it up for the governor."
"Having the state of Colorado is a very proud moment for us."
It's only a proclamation, not a new state holiday
Polis declined an interview request for this story, but the message from his administration was simple: Calm down everyone, it's only a proclamation.
Besides, the governor eats meat and has joked that he would win against anyone in a brisket contest. He went to Fort Morgan last week as workers at Colorado meat-packing plants received the coronavirus vaccine, and afterward, the governor's Instagram account showed him clutching a thick steak.
Polis' press secretary Conor Cahill released a statement saying the governor's office rarely declines any of the hundreds of requests it receives throughout the year for "nonbinding, ceremonial proclamations that get autopenned by the governor." Among other days proclaimed by Polis: Agriculture Day, Colorado Farm Bureau Day and Truck Driver Appreciation Day.
And the governor's agricultural commissioner wrote an explanation published in various newspapers trying to quell the outrage.
The proclamation does not create a new state holiday, Greenberg noted, and said she and Polis have worked since "day one" to open up new business from Taiwan to Mexico for the state's agriculture producers. The administration also put agricultural workers on the state's coronavirus vaccine priority list.
"The livestock industry is an essential part of Colorado's past, present and future," Greenberg wrote. "No proclamation will change that."
The whole dustup comes at an unfortunate time for Polis, amid a cattle-centered power play involving the National Western Stock Show.
When coronavirus restrictions canceled the annual stock show in Denver, the party moved to Oklahoma in the form of the Cattlemen's Congress. Oklahoma Gov. Kevin Stitt, speaking at the event, poked at Colorado, accusing the state of putting the livestock industry in danger, and noted that Oklahoma was "so proud to get it done."
"In Oklahoma, we're always going to fight for the ag community and this way of life," he said, according to media reports. And Oklahoma officials are now encouraging big names like Angus and Hereford to move their national shows to Oklahoma for good.
In response, Polis and ag commissioner Greenburg wrote a letter praising the agriculture community as "the cornerstone and foundation of our state."
"My administration has done everything possible to successfully keep agriculture open for business through the toughest of times because we understand that agriculture is Colorado. We are also steadfastly committed to the future of agriculture."
The proclamation is only a "pro forma exercise," but one that's poorly timed, said Shawn Martini, vice president of advocacy for the Colorado Farm Bureau.
"Neighboring states are seizing on the Polis administration's perceived lack of support for traditional agriculture, doing all they can to woo away significant parts of the show," he said.
"The crap end of the stick"
Yuma rancher Kenny Rogers, incoming president of the Colorado Livestock Association, put it plainly. "We've been feeling like we're on the crap end of the stick," he said. "Why do you just keep poking us?"
Rogers said he asked the agricultural commissioner for help on the wolf reintroduction bill but got

nowhere. Rogers asked Greenberg for help again when Polis nominated animal rights activist Kessler to the veterinary board. He recalls telling her, “I would strongly urge you to march into the governor’s office and say, ‘With all due respect, this is not a good idea and I urge you to reconsider.’”
The day of the “MeatOut” proclamation, ranchers across the state began calling, texting and emailing Rogers asking what they could do to protest. “My social media blew up. My email blew up. It’s continuing. It hasn’t died down too much,” he said. “A lot of rural folks finally just said enough. We’re nice people. We typically don’t react. But it’s finally a tipping point with many and they just feel like they have to do something.”
“It’s just been one thing after another, after another, after another.”
The sentiment goes far beyond one anti-meat day, he said.
“Some of this divide we’re seeing, it’s not Democrat versus Republican — it’s urban versus rural,” Rogers said. “It’s deeper than politics. It’s one more thing that you are trying to cram down our throats.”
Lynne Sherrod, who owns a cow-calf operation in Collbran, said, too, that the current outcry goes much deeper than a rancher rift with Polis.
“It’s really an urban-rural divide,” she said. “I don’t think there is a conspiracy against us or that people hate us. I think there is a lack of understanding. People don’t understand our lifestyle and our culture.”
On her Mesa County ranch, with mountains in the distance, Sherrod feels forgotten by urban Colorado, so much an afterthought that Denver residents seem shocked or dismissive when ranchers get angry. “We all seem to rise from the dust and it takes people by surprise,” she said. “We tend to not speak up enough.”
“I don’t care what people eat,” Sherrod said. “It’s a free country. I would never denigrate anybody for how they live their life or what they choose to eat.”
What she can’t stand is the misinformation about the livestock industry that’s shared on social media and mentioned in the proclamation. Cattle emit only a small fraction of the methane gas that’s contributing to climate change, but Sherrod sees numerous posts online that make it seem otherwise.
“Agriculture is the second-largest contributor to the state’s economy,” she said. “The fact that he doesn’t understand or appreciate that more is disappointing for all of us.”
Can’t we all eat in peace?
CSU’s McFadden grew up on a farm herself, with meat at every meal, and doesn’t understand the urge to criticize one source of nutrition in order to elevate another. Why not just pick days to promote the positive side of all of Colorado’s rich food heritage, she wonders. It makes more sense for the state’s economy, and certainly would turn down the heat on culture wars.
Even if people want to promote vegetarianism, they could spotlight Colorado products that have made farmers a living long before lab-grown meat substitutes came along, McFadden noted. Previously popular vegetarian burgers, sausage patties and meat-like crumbles are made from Colorado farm economy staples like black beans, quinoa and millet. Even mushrooms grown indoors at a massive facility in the San Luis Valley.
“We can all kind of play together nicely in the same pool,” she said. “Anything that makes it so we can keep more of our food dollars here in the state, for a whole realm of foods people are buying. That’s great, too, right?”
The either-or mentality grinds on Limon rancher Pope, too. Why not promote all the choices at once? Pope went to Kansas State University with vegetarians, has friends who are allergic to certain

meats, and others who say they don't want to eat something that was alive. All fine with her.
What Pope loves to do with those friends, and through a group of volunteer farm women called CommonGround Colorado, is explain how cattle on her ranch are making something valuable from land that can't grow other crops besides shortgrass.
"And that's why cattle are so awesome," Pope said. "They produce protein from plants, it's really their superpower. That's a great way to utilize and be sustainable. And that's an 'ah-ha!' moment for people. Like, OK, I get what you do."
Ranchers who are fully aware of their impact on the state economy are baffled by a supposedly business-minded governor like Polis agreeing to insult a key agricultural industry. That it may have been done by autopen makes it worse, not better.
Beef is by far Colorado's most lucrative export. And the ag industry consistently vies with tourism as the second-largest sector of Colorado's economy, behind No. 1 oil and gas.
As Kelsey and Ronny Pope unroll a massive bale of hay for 75 heifers who will start birthing cows in about six weeks, wind towers generating electricity for Front Range cities twirl on the horizon bracketing the ranch to the north and south.
As their son, Chisum, and niece, Maelle Frasier, ignore warnings not to dip their boots in the water tank, the Popes tick off a list of things they wish people knew about raising cattle for beef:
Friends of prairie dogs in the city save the critters from development and drive out to release them on ranches. The prairie dogs compete with the cattle in grass consumption, and leave dirt potholes across the pastures.
The snowstorm about to hit metro Denver will leave desperately-needed moisture on the ranch, but will also send pregnant heifers in search of any hillside lee for shelter from the blizzard.
When the calves do come, gray wolves that have migrated to northwest Colorado from Wyoming may stalk the young animals on their friends' mountain ranches, and coyotes will circle River Bend waiting for their own chance. Each time the coyotes take a Red Angus calf — and they always get some — it is a loss of $1,000 in potential income for the ranch.
Pardon farm and ranch country, always on alert to threats, for being sensitive even to seemingly empty gestures, Kelsey Pope said.
After one of Polis' previous missteps, she said, "they brought him out and he ate a beef burger, and I think that made everybody happy.
"But then," she said, "here we are, back again."
By Michael Booth and Jennifer Brown

AP: Nebraska bill to permanently allow carry-out booze advances

LINCOLN, Neb. (AP) — An emergency order that lets Nebraska restaurants offer carry-out alcohol could become a permanent state law under a measure lawmakers advanced Tuesday.
The proposal builds off of Gov. Pete Ricketts' temporary executive order to try to help restaurants during the coronavirus pandemic. The policy has proven popular because it allows restaurant customers to order cocktails and other mixed drinks with their to-go orders.
Under the measure, drinks could only be sold in a sealed, tamper-evident container and not partially consumed.
Sen. Suzanne Geist, the bill's sponsor, said she introduced it to help local businesses recover some of the revenue they lost due to government-mandated social distancing restrictions. The bill could still be tweaked to address concerns raised by some senators.

The bill would also allow licensed farm wineries, microbreweries and micro-distilleries to sell alcohol at farmers' markets.
Other provisions of the bill would lower taxes for certain types of ready-to-drink cocktails, raising concerns about binge drinking.
Two additional votes are required to pass the bill and send it to Ricketts.

Norfolk DN: Marijuana amendment sparks controversy in Legislature

LINCOLN — Marijuana legalization continues to face hurdles from bill language technicalities and fiercely opposed law enforcement. However, this has not stopped Nebraska state senators from introducing marijuana bills during this legislative session.
Sen. Justin Wayne of Omaha has proposed a constitutional amendment to place legalization of recreational marijuana use on the November 2022 general election ballot. If Nebraskans vote to approve, the Legislature would form and enact laws regulating the sale of marijuana for those 21 years old and older.
"This is not saying whether you endorse recreational marijuana or not, you're saying let the people decide," Wayne said. "It gives a chance for the voters to decide whether we should legalize marijuana for those who are 21 years and older."
On Feb. 19, the Judiciary Committee heard testimony of LR2CA relating to marijuana decriminalization and recreational use.
Wayne has previously worked with Sen. Anna Wishart of Lincoln and Sen. Adam Morfeld of Lincoln to push medical marijuana legislation. Wishart and Morfeld, co-chairs of Nebraskans for Medical Marijuana, are longtime proponents of medical marijuana legislation.
In July 2020, Nebraskans for Medical Marijuana collected more than 182,000 signatures to put medical marijuana on the 2020 election ballot, despite COVID-19-related obstacles.
Wishart has said the petition drive indicates overwhelming statewide support for medical marijuana. However, the Nebraska Supreme Court ruled 5-2 that the ballot issue violated a single-subject requirement for a constitutional amendment, and the bill was disqualified. During this legislative session, Wishart introduced LB474 in another attempt to legalize medical marijuana.
Arizona, Montana, New Jersey and neighboring South Dakota voted to legalize marijuana last election. On Nov. 3, 54% of South Dakota voters approved a constitutional amendment that legalizes recreational and medical marijuana. Similar to the Nebraska Supreme Court case, a circuit judge later found that the amendment violated the single-subject rule. Sponsors of the measure will file an appeal with the South Dakota Supreme Court.
Undeterred by these past setbacks for marijuana legislation, Wayne said "it's time to go recreational."
"It's going to happen sooner or later; the feds are moving in that direction," he said. "I think it's better for Nebraska businesses and Nebraska people to be involved in the process and start the businesses in Nebraska versus from the conglomerates coming in and taking over."
Joe Nigro, speaking on behalf of the Nebraska Criminal Defense Attorneys Association, supported LR2CA. Nigro said the resolution is an important step in ending the "failed war on drugs" that originated during former President Richard Nixon's administration.
"This has been particularly devastating on people of color. Nowhere is this more apparent than with marijuana," Nigro said during the hearing. "Besides the consequences of criminal penalties for possession, conviction can affect eligibility for federal student loans, federal housing and loss of

immigration status."
According to a study conducted by the ACLU of Nebraska in 2018, Black people were three times more likely to be arrested for marijuana possession in Nebraska even though Black and White people use marijuana at similar rates.
Opponents included Dr. Gary Anthone, chief medical officer for the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services Division of Public Health. Anthone said there needs to be more scientific evidence on how the active ingredient in marijuana, THC, affects human development and U.S. Food and Drug Administration approval before legalizing this drug.
"Permitting marijuana use for any purpose poses an increased risk to the health and safety of Nebraskans by exposing them to a drug that does not meet the strict standards set by the U.S. FDA," he said.
Gov. Pete Ricketts is also a vocal opponent of legalizing marijuana in Nebraska. In a Feb. 23 press statement, Ricketts compared the marijuana industry to "Big Tobacco" and urged Nebraskans "to be steadfast in resisting their tactics."
"Nebraskans have common sense and instinctively understand how this dangerous drug could harm our youth, our communities, and our economy," Ricketts said. "While popular media has tried to reframe how the public thinks about marijuana, it's important to understand the health consequences and dangers of this drug."
By Madeleine Grant

NCN: Medical marijuana gets public hearing in Lincoln

LINCOLN, Neb. -- Unable to ask voters to legalize medical marijuana last November, a move is in the works for an up or down vote in the Legislature in the next few months.
A dozen lawmakers, led by State Senator Anna Wishart of Lincoln, back a legalization bill that will be the subject of a public hearing Wednesday at the state capitol.
A 2020 petition drive making medical marijuana the law of the land in Nebraska, as it is in 34 other states, grabbed 190 thousand signatures, more than enough to make the ballot.
But a legal fight over the wording on the ballot found the case going all the way to the Nebraska Supreme Court, which ruled against the measure keeping it from the voters.
Among those opposed to medical marijuana are Husker football legend, Coach Tom Osborne and Governor Pete Ricketts. Both see it opening the door to recreational marijuana.
One of Osborne's former players, Grant Wistrom, is expected to speak on behalf of legalization. Wistrom recently co-authored an editorial in the Lincoln Journal Star criticizing Ricketts' stance on the issue.

Brownfield Ag News: NE Governor Highlights E30 Study as Emissions Solution

A recent study by the University of Nebraska says E-30 fuel would produce less carbon and be more cost effective than E-15.
Nebraska Ethanol Board Administrator Roger Berry says if 10 percent of non-flex fuel vehicles in Nebraska moved to E-30, ethanol consumption would increase by nearly 19 million gallons a year decreasing CO_2 emissions by 64 thousand tons per year.
"Our nation faces a very crucial task of lowering greenhouse gasses in our atmosphere," Berry said. "It is critical that we immediately start reducing the greenhouse emissions from our transportation

sector."
The study says the two blends showed a 'nearly identical' cost per mile. The researchers estimate that E-30 would cost 2.5 percent less per gallon which Nebraska Governor Pete Ricketts says would boost corn demand.
"This is something where people, by using ethanol, can save money at the pump, help clean up the environment," he said. "And, of course, this is great for our farmers and ranchers as 35 percent of our corn crop goes into ethanol."
Renewable Fuels CEO Geoff Cooper says the study demonstrates the benefits of higher ethanol blends and RFA will continue to advocate for optimizing vehicles to burn higher ethanol fuels.
The yearlong study tested 50 vehicles ranging from six- to eight-years-old by splitting them between E-15 and E-30 and driving for more than 300,000 miles.
By Will Robinson

GII: UNL study: E30 doesn't cut fuel efficiency or damage vehicles

A University of Nebraska-Lincoln E30 demonstration project reported great news for the Nebraska ethanol industry this week.
The project found that E30, a fuel blend of 70% gasoline and 30% ethanol, is safe for long-term use in non-flex fuel vehicles.
UNL conducted the project with the support of the Nebraska Department of Administrative Services. Gov. Pete Ricketts announced its results Monday.
Ricketts said the study will be a "great aid as we advocate for growing the volume of E30 in our nation's fuel supply."
With 25 ethanol plants in Nebraska, ethanol production is a value-added industry, using 35% of the corn grown in the state. Nebraska is the nation's second-leading ethanol producing state behind Iowa. State ethanol plants have the annual capacity to produce more than 2.2 billion gallons.
The purpose of the UNL project was to examine the effect of higher ethanol blends on fuel efficiency and vehicle engine performance.
"There has been inconsistent messaging that using higher blends of ethanol reduces the fuel efficiency or wears down parts," said Adil Alsiyabi, the primary UNL researcher of the E30 demonstration.
Alsiyabi said the project's results show that is not true.
Under current Environmental Protection Agency guidelines, only flex-fuel vehicles can use ethanol blends higher than E15. Auto manufacturers typically advise against use of more than 10% ethanol in their non-flex-fuel vehicles. The ethanol industry's hope is that the UNL research project and similar projects can convince the federal government and auto manufacturers to change their guidelines.
Most ethanol in Nebraska is sold in a 10% blend, though stations, such as Bosselman's Pump & Pantry, sell several different ethanol blends to consumers, including E15 and E85. Gasoline with ethanol is usually 20 cents to 30 cents cheaper per gallon than a straight blend of gasoline.
"I am encouraged that we now have hard facts that show E30 can safely be used in vehicles other than flex fuels," said Roger Berry, Nebraska Ethanol Board administrator.
According to Growth Energy, a national ethanol organization, if the U.S. transitioned from E10 to E15, greenhouse gas emissions would be lowered by 17.62 million tons per year, which is the equivalent of removing approximately 3.85 million vehicles from the road.
The more the amount of ethanol in the blend is increased, the more its use will decrease harmful

emissions.
It took a long time for the ethanol industry to convince the EPA to allow use of E15 in non-flex-fuel vehicles, but that finally happened in May 2019. Then it took some time for gas stations to adapt their pumps to be able to sell E15. It is taking more time to get the driving public to use E15 because of the misinformation campaign supported by the oil industry.
The EPA's name says its purpose is to protect the environment. So it should be seeking out ways to do that. Ethanol has been proven to be a major part of protecting our environment.
The Biden administration should now take the next step to approve E30 for general use. That will be good news for our nation's corn growers, the ethanol industry and the environment.

NP Telegraph: DMV services like fleet renewal, title issuance, now available online

LINCOLN — The Department of Motor Vehicles launched three new services in 2020 that will help customers save time and save money: Fleet Renewal Services, Dealer eServices and Real-time SR22 Submission.
Gov. Pete Ricketts highlighted the new services at a press briefing Monday.
"These new services demonstrate the ongoing effort of my administration to create more efficient and effective customer-focused state government," Ricketts said. "This is another example of government working collaboratively with our industry partners to provide modern, innovative, and convenient ways to do business in Nebraska."
Fleet Renewal Services allows for business that maintain a fleet of vehicles to monitor and renew registrations for their fleet's vehicles online.
Previously, businesses had to either mail or personally visit every county treasurer where a vehicle was registered.
For example, some Nebraska businesses may have hundreds of vehicles that do business in dozens of counties, leading to thousands of transactions.
Now, those registrations can be renewed in a single monthly transaction.
Dealer eServices gives automobile dealers the ability to request a title issuance electronically at the time of sale, instead of needing to mail a county treasurer or have the purchaser complete the process themselves.
This saves dealers, purchasers, county treasurers, and customers time and prevents errors and delays in issuing a vehicle title.
Real-time SR22 Submission allows insurance companies to file a SR22 document electronically, either through an overnight or real time process for less than the cost of a stamp.
A SR22 is a document that insurance companies provide to the DMV when a driver is seeking to reinstate a suspended or revoked driver's license.
Previously, insurance companies typically mailed this document, increasing the amount of time and cost of reinstating a driver's license.
"These new services now give customers and various industry partners more convenient and cost-saving options when doing business with the DMV," said Rhonda Lahm, director of the Nebraska DMV. "These new services are completely online and allow what were once complex processes to be completed with a few clicks."
These new online services were developed in partnership with the state's e-government service provider, NIC Nebraska.
The Nebraska DMV has an encompassing suite of online services including driver license renewal,

registration renewal, and more at dmv.nebraska.gov/services.

Neb Farmer: Complaint alleges environmental violations by AltEn

On March 1, Nebraska Attorney General Doug Peterson filed a complaint in the District Court of Saunders County, alleging environmental violations by AltEn LLC, which operates an ethanol plant at Mead, Neb.

The complaint alleges violations of the Nebraska Environmental Protection Act (NEPA); violations of the Integrated Solid Waste Management Act; and multiple violations of permit conditions, including violations of an order from the director of the Nebraska Department of Environment and Energy.

The attorney general was joined in a press conference by Gov. Pete Ricketts and Jim Macy, director of NDEE, to discuss the court filing and to answer questions regarding concerns surrounding the Mead plant.

In a statement received by Nebraska Farmer from AltEn on March 5 regarding the attorney general's actions, the company said, "AltEn takes the lawsuit seriously. Regardless of the filing of the lawsuit though, AltEn desires to do what it can to cooperate with the State to the extent resources are available to address concerns properly. AltEn does not wish to litigate the pending claims in the press."

AltEn originally was permitted to produce ethanol using field corn as its primary feedstock. The attorney general's complaint alleges that AltEn was using discarded treated seed corn, rather than normal field corn, to produce ethanol. In 2019, the Department of Agriculture determined the treated seed corn produced distillers grains containing pesticides. Since then, AltEn has been prevented from land-applying the distillers grains as a soil conditioner.

The company's alleged use of treated seed corn for ethanol production has also produced contaminated wastewater, according to a March 1 news release from the attorney general's office. The release noted that on March 1, AltEn had significant stockpiles of contaminated distillers grains and was operating its three wastewater lagoons at improperly high levels.

NDEE has ordered AltEn to dispose of all of the contaminated distillers grains and address the contaminated wastewater. The complaint alleges AltEn failed to do so. The complaint also accuses AltEn of missing deadlines and failing to complete actions required by NDEE to fix the environmental problems at the facility.

The complaint filed by the attorney general seeks proper disposal of the contaminated byproducts (distillers grains and wastewater); compliance with state statutes, their permit conditions and the order of the director; and civil penalties (NEPA authorizes $10,000 per day per violation, subject to the court's discretion).

NDEE created a webpage for updates related to cleanup and sampling activities at the AltEn plant at dee.ne.gov. The attorney general's complaint and other NDEE press releases regarding AltEn can be accessed from that page.

By Curt Arens

WOWT: Nebraska ranks No. 6 on U.S. News & World 'Best States' report

OMAHA, Neb. (WOWT) - The Cornhusker state has jumped up three spots since 2019 for the 2021 "Best State" rankings from U.S. News & World Report.

Nebraska was ranked No. 9 in education, No. 6 in infrastructure, No. 10 in opportunity, and No. 6 in

environment rankings.
"This is Nebraska's highest ranking in recent years in the 'Best States' report," Gov. Pete Ricketts said. "We are helping to set the bar in key areas such as infrastructure, affordability, and how we conserve our natural resources. As we emerge from the pandemic, Nebraska is positioned to grow back stronger and better than ever before."
In 2019, the state was ranked at No. 9 for best state.
By Taleisha Newbill

Daily Kos: Nebraska Republican considers giving up swingy House seat to run for governor

Rep. Don Bacon, who is one of just nine House Republicans to represent a Biden district, confirmed to the Omaha World-Herald over the weekend that he was considering running to succeed termed-out Republican Pete Ricketts as governor of Nebraska. Bacon, who previously served in the Air Force as a brigadier general, said he would "be very cautious" as he mulls whether to run statewide, but he did not give a timeline for when he'd decide.
Republicans have held Nebraska's governorship since the 1998 elections, and that streak is likely to continue no matter who wins next year's primary. The bigger consequence of a Bacon statewide campaign, though, would likely be in the battle for the House. The Omaha-based 2nd District swung from 48-46 Trump to 52-46 Biden last year, but Bacon ran far ahead of the ticket and won his third term 51-46.
It also remains to be seen if Republican mapmakers will get the chance to gerrymander Nebraska's congressional map to ensure that they can easily hold the 2nd District with or without Bacon. That's because Nebraska's unicameral legislature, which is formally nonpartisan but run by the GOP, offers lawmakers with an uncommonly strong filibuster. Republicans weren't able to win the two-thirds majority it would need to overcome a Democratic filibuster aimed at stopping new maps (a job that would then likely fall to the courts), but the GOP retains the ability to end the filibuster rule with a simple majority.
By Jeff Singer

Norfolk DN: Ricketts discusses ethanol, vaccines and DMV services

Nebraska Gov. Pete Ricketts addressed a number of topics during a press conference Monday morning.
E-30 fuel tested
Nebraska began an E-30 fuel demonstration project in 2019.
As part of the project, the state worked with the EPA to use E-30 in conventional, state-owned vehicles to find out what effect the fuel would have on non-flex fuel vehicles, Ricketts said.
In the test, 26 vehicles used E-10 or E-15 fuel, while 24 used E-30, said Rajib Saha, a professor at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. The vehicles were monitored for one year.
"We haven't found any negative impact on any of our vehicles," Saha said.
This could be good for Nebraska's economy and the environment, Ricketts said, as 35% of the state's corn crop currently goes to ethanol production and wider use of E-30 fuel would reduce carbon emissions.
"Higher blends of ethanol help clean up the environment," Ricketts said.

Roger Berry of the Nebraska Ethanol Board said the study could help convince automakers to design vehicles to use E-30 fuel.
Auto companies have the ability to make engines that are optimized to run on E-30, Berry said. But before these go into production, they need to know that current vehicles can run effectively on E-30, as the study suggested.
E-30 fuel is cheaper than E-15 by 5 cents per gallon, Berry said. So it also would save drivers money at the pump.
The possible increase in ethanol production could boost the state's economy as well, Berry said.
"It would be huge to the state of Nebraska and the entire corn belt and the entire nation," he said. "When agriculture's doing well, the whole state is doing well."
While increased ethanol production would mean more carbon emissions from plants, there are solutions to that problem, Berry said.
"There are very easy ways to collect that carbon dioxide," Berry said. "We're excited about the opportunities that are coming to make ethanol even more green than it is today."
One plant in Nebraska is already capturing carbon dioxide, Berry said. That carbon goes to the production of dry ice.

Vaccinations continue

Nebraska has delivered more than 519,000 doses of the vaccine, with 90,000 vaccinated from Feb. 28 to March 6 alone, Ricketts said.
According to new CDC guidelines, people who have been vaccinated can meet together inside without masks.
Ricketts clarified that it takes 14 days for immunity to kick in after being fully vaccinated. After that, a person would not have to quarantine after being exposed to someone with virus.
So far, more than 200,000 Nebraskans have signed up to get the vaccine. That's roughly 1 in 6 Nebraskans age 16 or older, Ricketts said.
On Monday there were 142 hospitalizations for COVID, Ricketts said.
"We have robust hospital capacity," he said.

DMV expands online services

The Nebraska Department of Motor Vehicles has added a number of new online services.
These include:
— E-Fleet service: Businesses with 25 or more vehicles may register them with the state at one place online, even if they are registered in different counties. Previously, businesses had to either mail or personally visit every county treasurer where a vehicle was registered.
— Dealer E-Services: Dealers and insurance companies may issue vehicle titles electronically, instead of needing to mail to a county treasurer or have the purchaser complete the process themselves. This saves dealers, purchasers, county treasurers and customers time and prevents errors and delays in issuing a vehicle title.
— SR-22 electronic submission: Insurance agencies may submit information online, where it is updated in real time. An SR22 is a document that insurance companies provide to the DMV when a driver is seeking to reinstate a suspended or revoked driver's license. Previously, insurance companies typically mailed this document, increasing the amount of time and cost of reinstating a driver's license.
These new online services were developed in partnership with the state's e-government service provider, NIC Nebraska.
"These new services demonstrate the ongoing effort of my administration to create more efficient

and effective customer-focused state government," Ricketts said. "This is another example of government working collaboratively with our industry partners to provide modern, innovative, and convenient ways to do business in Nebraska."
By Cole Bauer

AP: Nebraska confirms more cases of virus variants in the state

OMAHA, Neb. (AP) — Nebraska health officials continue to identify more cases of different variants of the coronavirus in the state.
The state said Monday that five cases of the variant first identified in the United Kingdom and 14 cases of a variant first identified in California have now been confirmed in Nebraska. Both of those variants of the virus are believed to be more easily transmitted than the original coronavirus but less is known about the California variant.
State officials said they expect to receive 82,430 doses of the Pfizer and Moderna vaccines this week but no additional doses of the new Johnson & Johnson vaccine as that company works to ramp up production. That may lead to a small drop in the number of people vaccinated in the state this week after officials vaccinated 90,461 people across Nebraska last week.
The state says 519,857 doses of the vaccines have now been administered, and 12% of the state's population has received their required shots.
There have now been 203,279 cases of the virus and 2,113 deaths in the state since the pandemic began a year ago.
The seven-day rolling average of daily new cases in Nebraska remains low, but it has risen over the past two weeks from 244.71 new cases per day on Feb. 21 to 311.14 new cases per day on Sunday.

LJS: Lancaster County could move into next phase soon, health director says

Lancaster County residents ages 50 to 64 could begin receiving COVID-19 vaccine in the next month, as the Lincoln-Lancaster County Health Department works through the 65-plus age group, Health Director Pat Lopez said Tuesday.
She estimated the department could wrap up the Phase 1B groups in the next four weeks.
Also Tuesday, the Health Department announced it would extend the current local directed health measure restrictions, which include a mask mandate, by one month to April 12.
The Health Department held its largest vaccination clinic yet at Pinnacle Bank Arena on Monday when more than 8,000 residents 65 and older received vaccines, Lopez said.
A second clinic for residents 65 and older, along with some educators, will be at Speedway Sports Complex on Friday, she said. A second-dose clinic for residents 73 and older will be Thursday.
The Health Department held a second clinic for educators at Lincoln North Star High School on Tuesday. Lopez estimates about 15,000 educators still need vaccinations.
It may be early April before the county moves fully into Phase 2A, the 50-64 age group, unless vaccine allotment changes. Lopez noted the next shipment of the one-dose Johnson & Johnson vaccine will not arrive until later this month.
The Health Department continues working to provide clinics that target vulnerable populations, and later this week hopes to hold another clinic with Bryan Health for residents with serious health concerns, she said.
About 130 mostly older residents received vaccines at a clinic hosted by the Asian Community

Center on Tuesday, which marked the first in a series of clinics planned to increase vaccine access for racial and ethnic minorities in the city.
"We are prioritizing efficiency as well as equity," Lincoln Mayor Leirion Gaylor Baird said during the city's weekly virus news conference.
A clinic seeking to serve Black residents will be conducted at Mount Zion Baptist Church, 3301 N. 56th St., on March 29, the Rev. Tremaine Combs said.
Meanwhile, the Health Department's COVID-19 risk dial will remain in mid-yellow for the fourth straight week as indicators such as average daily cases and hospitalizations remain steady, Lopez said.
Tuesday marked the 11th straight day the county has not recorded a coronavirus death, so the local pandemic death toll remains at 221.
Lancaster County confirmed 66 new coronavirus cases Tuesday for a total of 28,608, and Lincoln hospitals cared for only 25 COVID-19 patients, the lowest since August.
The hospitalizations included 14 Lancaster County residents and one patient who was on a ventilator.
"Vaccinating our most vulnerable residents is keeping people out of the hospital and saving lives," Gaylor Baird said.
Statewide, the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services reported that 13.2% of the state's adults had been fully vaccinated as of Monday.
While Lancaster County is looking to move into Phase 2A of vaccinations next month, some health districts are expected to make that move over the coming weeks.
By Riley Johnson

OWH: COVID vaccinations for people ages 50 to 64 could begin in April in Douglas County

Douglas County hopes to begin offering COVID vaccinations to people ages 50 to 64 by April 1, the county's public health director said Tuesday.
Adi Pour told the Douglas County Board that the push to vaccinate older people, health care workers and educators is going well enough that the county expects to be ready soon to move on to the next younger age groups.
She said the county will begin offering the vaccines to the 50-to-64-year-old age group in five-year increments. Pour did not give a breakdown of possible dates for people in those five-year subsets.
"Things are moving forward pretty quickly," Pour said.
The county has been allotting 90% of its doses from the state to people 65 and older; 10% has gone to health care workers and, more recently, teachers and school staff.
"We are seeing some open appointments; we are looking at that pretty carefully, and we just switched this morning and said the 90/10 may not be adequate anymore," Pour said. "So we are switching and moving more to the critical infrastructure."
That means more vaccines for educators and more doses for the next tiers in Nebraska's phased vaccination plan: food processing and grocery store workers, and then moving on to workers in funeral homes, transportation, the U.S. Postal Service and public transport, followed by those in congregate living, such as the jail and homeless shelters.
She did not provide details on the number of doses that will be allotted for those groups or dates when those workers' turns will come.

“I foresee that we should be done with all of this (critical infrastructure groups) by the end of March,” Pour said. “So by April 1, I hope we can open up to those 50- to 64-year-olds. We are going to do it in the same way we did with those 65 and above; we’re doing it in five-year increments.”
She said there are more than 30,000 people in each of those five-year age groups in Douglas County.
Pour said the county is also working with health care providers on vaccinating people under 65 years old with medical conditions that put them at high risk if they contract COVID. The health care systems are analyzing their patient data and crafting lists of those with the highest risks. If the providers have unfilled appointments, they are preparing to begin offering those slots to their patients based on that ranking of risks, Pour said.
“That is moving forward,” she said.
Pour did not provide details of the medical conditions or dates when appointments will be available. She said that the health care providers would use similar methodology and that they, not the county, will notify their patients.
Pour also said that OneWorld Community Health Center is getting 2,000 Johnson & Johnson doses directly from the federal government and plans to use them to begin vaccinating meatpacking workers in plants.
By Christopher Burbach

OWH: Nebraska could end sales tax on water bills, income tax on Social Security benefits

LINCOLN — Nebraska’s brightening fiscal outlook has state lawmakers thinking favorably about an array of tax cuts, including an often-discussed but never-advanced state tax exemption for Social Security income.
On Tuesday, the Legislature’s Revenue Committee voted for a bill to exempt sales taxes on residential water bills. Members also advanced a measure that would divert state sales taxes generated near new youth sports complexes to help finance such facilities, on the grounds that large tournaments provide an economic boost to local motels and eateries.
In addition, the committee appears poised to advance a proposal on Wednesday that would gradually phase out state income taxes on Social Security. Nebraska is one of only 13 states that tax those benefits, which has been a longtime gripe of retirees in the Cornhusker State.
State Sen. Lou Ann Linehan of Elkhorn, who chairs the Revenue Committee, said state lawmakers have known for a long time that taxes are too high in Nebraska but were limited in what they could do. This year, Nebraska has a projected surplus in state tax collections, anticipated COVID-19 aid from Congress and additional expected economic growth as the pandemic eases.
“Now we have the revenue to do something,” Linehan said.
Omaha Sen. Brett Lindstrom, who has pushed for tax breaks on Social Security and help for sports complexes for several years, echoed that.
“Since we’ve been good stewards of our money, we’ll be able to do some tax reform,” Lindstrom said.
To be sure, advancement by a legislative committee only means the bill will be debated by the full Legislature. But it does appear that there’s momentum behind proposals that reduce taxes or divert tax revenue toward economic development measures.
Omaha Sen. Justin Wayne introduced Legislative Bill 26, the sales tax exemption on residential water service. It would save Nebraskans about $8 million in sales taxes each year.
Sen. Rich Pahls of Omaha — who has long argued that it doesn’t make sense to exempt bottled

water from sales taxes but tax tap water —said Tuesday that he would prioritize LB 26, ensuring that it will be debated.
“Water is an essential part of life” that should not be taxed, Pahls said.
Lindstrom’s proposal for sports complexes, LB 39, would turn back sales taxes generated by new hotels and other businesses built within 600 yards of new facilities for baseball, soccer, football and other field sports. A proposal to upgrade Omaha’s Tranquility Park for major youth sports tournaments would be one possible beneficiary.
The turnback mechanism has been used in the past to help finance Omaha’s CHI Health Center, Lincoln’s Pinnacle Bank Arena and the Ralston Arena. Lindstrom emphasized that LB 39 would not take away money for those arenas, or reduce funds granted to smaller cities for community halls, but would generate perhaps $7 million a year to develop sports complexes.
Currently, he said, Omaha loses baseball tournaments and other youth sports events to Council Bluffs because of a lack of places to accommodate tournaments.
“Youth sports is a multibillion-dollar industry that we haven’t been able to capitalize on,” Lindstrom said.
Under an amended version of LB 39, 30% of the turnback revenue — about $3 million a year — would be set aside for a “Support the Arts” grant fund. The money would help finance “creative districts” that have been established in cities of between 5,000 and 100,000 in population.
An amended version of LB 64, which the Revenue Committee will consider Wednesday, would gradually phase out income taxes on Social Security over 10 years. Ultimately, that would save taxpayers as much as $140 million a year.
Also advanced from the committee on Tuesday was the Nebraska Rural Projects Act, LB 40. It would set aside $10 million in matching funds over the next two years, and ultimately up to $30 million, to help communities finance railroad spurs to new manufacturing plants, distribution centers or other major businesses. It was introduced by North Platte Sen. Mike Groene, who has said that central Nebraska city could use help to land a major employer to offset a loss in railroad jobs.
By Paul Hammel

LJS: Gas companies describe 'ballistic' price increases to lawmakers

Nebraska's largest natural gas providers leaned upon their reserve supplies to insulate their customers from skyrocketing prices during last month's brutal cold snap.
Doing so kept most customers from experiencing any interruptions in service, and will result in only modest increases to gas bills, the Legislature's Urban Affairs Committee learned Tuesday.
The committee has had the purview of regulating natural gas companies in the state since 1970.
Mirroring a hearing the Natural Resources Committee held last week with public power providers and the Southwest Power Pool, senators heard from utilities large and small about their experiences during the polar vortex of Feb. 13-17.
Black Hills Energy, which serves more than 300,000 customers in 319 communities across the state, was able to meet demand through the work of its operators and some recently finished upgrades to its infrastructure, particularly in and around Lincoln and in central Nebraska.
Kevin Jarosz, Black Hills' vice president of operations for Nebraska, told the committee the utility system "performed as intended" even as temperatures fell to 31 degrees below zero.
While it was able to rely upon its three suppliers in Nebraska, Jarosz said Black Hills experienced some wholesale increases to its natural gas costs.

Those increases, which will be passed along to customers based upon their usage, will be spread over time to minimize their impact, he added.
"We will see an increase, but it's not going to be the extreme like you see in Texas," Jarosz told the committee.
The Metropolitan Utilities District said using storage facilities helped Omaha customers avoid having to pay an additional $100 million in gas costs from Feb. 10-22, according to vice president and general counsel Mark Mendenhall.
"To put that in perspective, that is approximately our annual budget for gas purchases," he said.
Smaller gas suppliers, many owned by towns and villages, had a much different experience during the cold snap, however.
Beth Ackland, director of gas operations for two different companies under the Nebraska Municipal Power Pool, which serves communities ranging in size between 500 to 3,000 people, said one of her members described the price hikes as "ballistic."
Over five days in February, six of the eight communities served by the Nebraska Public Gas Agency saw gas prices three times their annual budget.
Four of those communities did not have access to gas-storage facilities, or faced rationing from gas suppliers, she said, which led them to need to purchase more on the spot market.
"That was actually a common story we saw throughout the Midwest," Ackland said.
Ryan Hurst, general manager of Wahoo Utilities, told the committee the Saunders County community watched as gas prices rose from $6.50 per unit on Feb. 12 — already more than three times the normal price — to more than $400 per unit over the Valentine's Day weekend.
"Wahoo Utilities was able to secure $203 — a real steal rate," Hurst joked.
At the same time, Wahoo's usage went up to about 150% of what was normal, and it was forced to purchase nearly 2,500 units, or about 30% of the gas it needed, from the spot market.
The price tag exceeded $511,000, Hurst said. Put another way: 6% of its gas usage for the month of February accounted for 80% of its bill, while 1.5% of its annual usage accounted for roughly half of its yearly budget.
Wahoo's Board of Public Works decided to withdraw $200,000 from its cash reserves to "take the edge off" of its customers, but must otherwise pass along the cost.
Once again, Hurst told senators, Wahoo plans to spread out the increase to ratepayers over the year.
Looking ahead, the utility plans to study ways it can prevent the steep increase from happening in future extreme weather events, but Hurst said Wahoo will be limited in what it can pursue after dipping into its cash reserve.
He also said he worries about what happens if the polar vortex Nebraskans experienced in February becomes a more regular occurrence.
"I'm also nervous that in two to three years, we'll have to go back to the customers and say 'Well, here we are again,'" he said.
By Chris Dunker

OWH: Troubled ethanol plant near Mead has begun charring contaminated waste seed corn

LINCOLN — A troubled ethanol plant near Mead that has been sued by the state for possible pollution has started "charring" thousands of tons of distilled seed corn in hopes of eliminating the

hazardous chemicals the corn contains.
The Nebraska Department of Environment and Energy said it will be sampling the charred corn to determine whether the charring process has destroyed the harmful chemicals.
The AltEn ethanol plant, unlike other ethanol plants, had used leftover seed corn, which is coated in pesticides, in producing alcohol. The process intensified the chemical content, rendering the distilled corn unfit for feeding to livestock and unfit for land application.
A 2019 test by the Nebraska Department of Agriculture found that if the distilled corn were used as a soil enhancer, the level of one chemical would be 85 times higher than the maximum annual field load allowed by the manufacturer.
The department banned AltEn from applying the corn on land and ordered it to either dispose of it at a landfill or incinerate it by March 1.
A lawsuit filed by the Nebraska Attorney General's Office, however, said that the company had not taken action to dispose of the corn. The March 1 lawsuit said that at least 84,000 tons of distilled corn, in three piles covering 30 acres, was piled at the AltEn plant site.
Environment and Energy officials, in a Friday press release, said nearby residents may notice steam coming from the "biochar" unit, which is owned by GreenCycle Solutions and being operated by AltEn. A biochar unit typically chars biomass, with the resulting material typically intended for use as a soil amendment, the NDEE said.
The department said that emission testing it ordered of AltEn and GreenCycle Solutions on the biochar unit showed, as of July 2020, that it did not detect pesticides and showed emissions tested below the criteria for other air pollutants.
Results from tests on the charred corn will be made available on NDEE's public records portal.
By Paul Hammel

LJS: Judge rules former meatpacking workers lack standing to sue Hastings plant

A federal judge has dismissed a lawsuit against a Nebraska meatpacking plant accused of failing to take steps to protect its workers from the coronavirus.
Chief U.S. District Judge John Gerrard granted Noah's Ark Processors' motion to dismiss the lawsuit because the plaintiffs don't currently work there.
Three of the four are former employees who quit last year and have kept in touch with workers at the Hastings plant. The fourth is a pediatric doctor there who treats the children of plant workers and people with COVID-19.
"While the court does not question their sincere concern for the well-being of Noah's Ark employees, the court finds that they lack standing to assert the claims they have alleged," Gerrard wrote in a 10-page order last week.
The American Civil Liberties Union filed the federal lawsuit in November against Noah's Ark Processors, alleging the plant wasn't taking needed precautions to protect its workforce and the community at large.
Plaintiffs said plant managers failed to spread workers out to limit the spread of the virus, failed to promptly replace workers' masks when they became soiled with blood and sweat and pressured people to continue working even when they were sick and showing symptoms of COVID-19.
In his order March 1, the judge said plaintiffs in federal court must be able to show that they personally suffered an injury traceable to the defendant's conduct.
In this case, Gerrard said, the gist of the plaintiffs' claims is that there "could be another COVID-19

outbreak at Noah's Ark, and that could cause widespread disease in the community in which they live, and that could endanger them and affect the community."
He said their predictions of what could happen fall short of describing an imminent injury. And they can only speculate whether an outbreak in the community could be tied to the plant or some other cause.
Gerrard said it would be different if the plaintiffs were current employees. Then, their risk of COVID-19 might be fairly traceable to their workplace.
"In this case, of course, the people directly put at risk by Noah's Ark's alleged misconduct are the people who work there now, and the plaintiffs cannot assert their claims for them," he wrote.
The ACLU had argued people who currently work at the plant would face retaliation if they sued so others should be allowed to raise the claims on their behalf.
Gerrard said the attorneys gave no explanation why current employees couldn't use pseudonyms, like the three former employees in the suit had. And he dismissed the lawsuit.
The company employs between 300 and 400 workers at the plant.
Nationwide, the United Food and Commercial Workers union, which represents roughly 80% of the nation's beef and pork workers and 33% of its poultry workers, estimates that at least 22,000 meatpacking workers have been infected or exposed, and 132 have died of COVID-19.
By Lori Pilger

OWH: NSAA considering measures to combat rise of racist slurs in Nebraska high school sports

High school athletes in Nebraska are encountering more racist comments during competition, and the Nebraska High School Activities Association is searching for new ways to prevent the incidents.
Jay Bellar, executive director of the NSAA, said he wished he could say that such occurrences as a Norfolk fan yelling the N-word at Omaha Northwest basketball players don't happen a lot.
But he said school officials have told him that it happens more than is reported to the state organization, he said.
"I think it may be more prevalent than we let on," Bellar said.
Bellar said he commented recently to Omaha Northwest Principal Thomas Lee, an NSAA board member, that in three years as executive director, he's dealt with the issue on three occasions.
"He (Lee) said, 'Jay, we've dealt with it more than that, you just don't hear about it,'" Bellar said. "So I think it is a problem in our schools. ... I wish I could tell you that if we do this, this and this we're going to stamp it out, but I sure don't know that we are."
Bellar said the organization is considering measures to try to deter such incidents, such as increased anti-bias education, penalties for schools where repeated instances occur and additional supervision of young fans. He spoke in an on-the-record interview last week with The World-Herald editorial board to which a reporter was invited.
The NSAA Board of Directors is scheduled to discuss the issue when it meets Wednesday. The agenda includes an item to "discuss, consider, and take all necessary action on discriminatory comments at activities."
The NSAA, which has 304 member schools, is led by an eight-member board of directors from across the state. It runs district and state competitions in sports and such activities as speech and drama. Member schools agree to follow the association's rules for sports and activities.
Several times in recent years, fans at sporting events have made racist remarks to Black or Latino

athletes. It happened to Lincoln High girls in a basketball game in Fremont in 2020, prompting a petition drive from the American Civil Liberties Union of Nebraska and several advocacy groups. Parents, students and advocates appeared at an NSAA board meeting in 2017 to report racist taunts flung at Lexington high school and middle school students. Bellevue West star Chucky Hepburn was called the N-word by a Creighton Prep fan during a game this January, his father reported.

It has been a growing issue around the nation. Racist taunts from students led to a brawl at a high school basketball game in Oklahoma City last week, The Oklahoman reported. Last July in Iowa, school officials reported that people yelled racist slurs at Storm Lake Latino students and families during a softball game in Spirit Lake, and at a Black baseball player in a game against Waverly-Shell Rock High School, according to the Des Moines Register and the Cedar Rapids Gazette. This February, a Florida high school soccer coach reported that a player on his team was called the N-word by an opposing player.

The latest incident in Nebraska occurred Feb. 11 in Norfolk. Young fans, possibly middle schoolers or junior high students, yelled a racial slur at Omaha Northwest players after a game at Norfolk High School.

Unlike the Fremont or Creighton Prep incidents, Omaha Public Schools officials filed a formal complaint with the NSAA. After an investigation by the schools and the NSAA, the Norfolk Public Schools was placed on probation for the remainder of the school year. Besides submitting a formal apology letter to the Omaha Public Schools, the district has changed seating arrangements at activities, including requiring supervision of younger students, and is developing an equity and diversity plan that it will present to the NSAA board in August.

“Nobody wants this to happen,” Bellar said in the interview. “Norfolk didn’t want it to happen. Of course Northwest didn’t want it to happen. Fremont didn’t want it to happen last year. But unfortunately, somebody makes a very foolish comment and it’s there, and so we have to deal with it. ... I think that education piece is going to be huge in where we decide to go from here. We worry so much about the punishment end of thing; if we can catch people that say or do it, we want to deal with that right away. It’s huge, and it’s a tough problem to deal with.”

He said he didn’t want to throw NSAA member schools under the bus. He said Norfolk Public Schools officials “are working hard and trying to rectify what went on.” Bellar said Nebraska school officials in general “are very concerned about the topic ... and they’re gonna do whatever they can to make sure that kids are treated the way they should be treated.”

Northwest parents also sent letters after the Norfolk game to the NSAA calling for action. One of the parents, Tahnee Markussen, invited NSAA officials and school leaders to participate in training led by the North Carolina-based Racial Equity Institute. The Omaha-based Lozier Foundation, where Markussen works as a program officer, will sponsor the training. Bellar and several school superintendents have signed up for the training so far.

By Christopher Burbach

NET: Prescribed Prairie Fires In Flint Hills Come With Ag Benefits And Dirty Air

In the next few weeks, huge, prescribed burns will take place in the Flint Hills of Kansas and Oklahoma, the last tall grass ecosystem left in the United States. The burns send thick smoke north to Nebraska, but also help get rid of invasive plants that could overtake the prairie. They also improve the quality of forage for cattle. It’s a balance between nurturing an ecosystem and preserving the air.

For farmer Ken Yates in Hallam, just south of Lincoln in Lancaster County, this isn't his favorite time of year. After a suspected case of COVID-19 last April, he's not looking forward to smoky air.
"I'm bracing for this year's onslaught," Yates said. "Thank God my lungs are a little better."
Yates farms around 100 acres of hay and never uses fire to keep out invasive plants. Instead, he mows and clips out the woody plants. For him, it's about the environment.
"Fire is definitely wonderful and control, oh my God. I'd love to burn my farm too to get rid of them, but I won't do it to our planet," Yates said.
Last year, more than 2.6 million acres of grassland burned in the Flint Hills, which led to ten days of moderate air quality in Nebraska and one day of unhealthy air. But prescribed burns make economic sense for producers in Kansas and Oklahoma.
"It is the most economically viable approach to maintaining large areas of prairie," said Dirac Twidwell, an associate professor of horticulture and agronomy at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. "If you go to an alternative management type in order to keep woody plants out you're talking about increasing the economic burden on ranchers and reducing profit margins."
There are working groups in Nebraska, Kansas and Oklahoma trying to find a solution to the bad air problem associated with the prescribed burns.
"That's why there are certain recommendations that out there of trying to widen the burning window," Twidwell said. "Of course that's going to come with trade-offs to the agricultural infrastructure and design, so change comes slow and with always trade-offs to, in this case, the producer."
The prescribed burns take about a month and are expected to start next week.
By Jack Williams

LJS: Camping World still coming to Lincoln, but Sidney plans on hold

It appears that Camping World's Lincoln store will be the only one opening in Nebraska, at least for now.
The recreational vehicle retailer Monday officially announced plans for the Lincoln store, along with new stores in Billings, Montana, and Georgetown, Delaware. All three stores will be the first Camping World locations in their respective states.
"We continue to fill in the missing pieces toward our goal of operating locations in the 48 contiguous states," Marcus Lemonis, CEO and chairman of Camping World, said in a news release.
Lemonis confirmed the plans for a Lincoln store to the Journal Star in November. They will include a roughly 30,000-square-foot sales and service facility on approximately 18 acres near 63rd Street and Arbor Road, adjacent to the Interstate 80 exit at 56th Street.
Lemonis said at the time that he hoped to have the store open by the end of 2021.
Conspicuously absent from this week's announcement, however, was any mention of plans for a store in Sidney.
Last August, Lemonis visited Sidney and laid out plans to local officials for a 30,000- to 40,000-square-foot store that also would include Gander Outdoors, along with Overton's, which sells water sports equipment, and The House, which sells ski equipment. He also talked of possibly opening a small distribution center there and a facility to manufacture RV mattresses.
However, those plans appear to be on hold.
The Sidney City Council got word last month that a land deal between Camping World and a local commercial real estate company had been terminated.

David Scott, Sidney's city administrator, said Camping World had signed a letter of intent to buy land near I-80 for the proposed Sidney store and that deal has now fallen through.
Scott said he spoke to Lemonis, who told him that the plans for Sidney are "on hold" and not canceled, and that Lemonis "just needs to make the numbers work."
He said he takes Lemonis at his word but doesn't want people in Sidney to get their hopes up about the project.
"We'll see where it goes," Scott said, noting that "there's no agreement in place right now."
By Matt Olberding

OWH: Financial missteps by Sarpy County treasurer led to missed school tax payments, audit says

One alleged error by the Sarpy County Treasurer's Office caused Millard Public Schools to miss out on a nearly $2.4 million tax payment, while Bellevue's school district was overpaid by $2.3 million.
In another accounting misstep, according to state auditors, the treasurer distributed certain funds to school districts only once in a year, rather than on a monthly basis, as is required. As of Dec. 31, more than $515,000 had not been distributed to the school districts.
Those were among the findings of a 75-page audit of Sarpy County Treasurer Brian Zuger's office released Tuesday by State Auditor Charlie Janssen's office.
The county and state auditors say no money is missing, but the report's findings detail miscalculated distributions to school districts and other entities that rely on property taxes, inaccurate financial reconciliations and a patchwork system of bookkeeping in an office that oversees about $130 million on a daily basis.
The findings of the audit, called an attestation, prompted the Sarpy County Board on Tuesday to vote unanimously to authorize a law firm to begin legal proceedings that could lead to Zuger's removal from office. He was elected to the post in 2018 and makes $101,000 a year.
In all, the audit identified multiple issues that affected more than $12.5 million in public funds.
"Our priority is to protect Sarpy County taxpayers, so we take the (audit's) findings very seriously," County Board Chairman Don Kelly said in a statement after Tuesday's vote.
"The attestation identifies millions of dollars of funds incorrectly distributed to the schools, the cities and the county, which is why we're exploring all of our options moving forward," Kelly said.
In a statement sent by his attorney after the vote, Zuger said the shortcomings identified in the audit existed "long before" he was elected treasurer, and that his office has been working to correct them.
"I am deeply disappointed by the board's decision to seek my removal from elected office," Zuger said. "Our taxpayers put me in this position because I promised to modernize the Treasurer's Office, expand taxpayer services and develop a culture of engaged, empowered and high-performance employees. I am doing just that."
The audit states that Zuger's office failed to include the tax levies of all school districts in Sarpy County cities when calculating the tax payments that the Omaha Public Power District makes to county and city governments and school districts. The utility directs 5% of its gross revenues from the previous year's retail electricity sales to those entities.
That alleged omission by Zuger and his team led to over- and underpayments to schools and cities, the report says.
The County Board's vote Tuesday paved the way for outside law firm Kutak Rock to begin the legal process of removing Zuger from office. County officials contend they can either direct the firm to file

a petition in district court to attempt to remove Zuger, or hold an administrative hearing in which the board would oversee proceedings.
It wasn't clear Tuesday how the county will proceed, or when.
The report also notes that Zuger hired an outside firm to recommend improvements and assist with financial operations. Between June and February, the county paid BerganKDV more than $142,000 from the treasurer's budget.
Despite the help, "numerous issues" continued to exist, including problems with the reconciliations completed by BerganKDV, the report says. The Treasurer's Office could have hired "two or three full-time staff for an entire year for the amount of money paid to BerganKDV" to complete the same work, according to the report.
A BerganKDV spokesperson did not immediately return a request for comment Tuesday.
The county is responsible for paying for the state auditors' work, but officials do not yet know the cost of the attestation, a county spokeswoman said. To date, the county has paid Kutak Rock more than $35,000 to represent and advise the county on the audit.
Zuger said he was sorry that his office was "unable to catch and fix every issue," but his staff is taking corrective steps to address auditors' concerns.
"I am proud of the service I provide to our taxpayers and intend to continue to provide," he said.
By Reece Ristau

Kearney Hub: Hemp crop 'too hot' for new Pleasanton plant

PLEASANTON — Rory Cruise was doing research long before he launched Sweetwater Hemp Co. last year on his family's farm near Pleasanton.
In preparing to be one of Nebraska's first licensed industrial hemp growers and processors, Cruise studied the industry for about six years, went to a "hemp college" in Iowa and attended trade shows where he connected with the company from which he purchased his processing equipment, Canada-based Whistler Technologies.
Despite all the preparation, there were two big first-year hurdles.
COVID-19 pandemic issues slowed plant equipment deliveries and delayed the start of hemp processing.
On the growing side of the business, his entire crop of 900 "Stormy Daniels" hybrid plants grown in the Cruise family's greenhouse tested "too hot" at harvest time.
That means the plants exceeded the 0.3% limit of THC, the psychoactive component of cannabis.
"Nothing's really changed," Cruise said recently in discussing his business plans. "But the experience of having a crop go hot and how fast it changed, that was an eye-opener for me."
The biggest moment for state-licensed growers comes ahead of harvest when plant samples are collected by the Nebraska Department of Agriculture and tested for THC levels. If they meet the low-THC standard, harvest must be completed in 30 days. Cruise said the original timetable was within 15 days.
Hemp plants testing above the THC limit must be destroyed and disposed of in accordance with the federal Controlled Substances Act and Drug Enforcement Administration regulations.
In an interview for a series published in the Hub last September about Nebraska's first year of licensed industrial hemp production and processing, Cruise said there is a fine balancing act in selecting harvest time.
That's because both THC and the valued cannabinoids — CBD and CBG — increase as a crop

matures.
Harvesting too early means a lower CBD percentage. Harvesting too late runs the risk of going over the THC limit.
A huge issue for farmers who grow industrial hemp outside is preventing cross-pollination from Nebraska's all-too-common feral hemp. Cruise explained that cross-pollination makes plants focus on producing seeds, not cannabinoids.
He said it is a worry locally, but not as big of an issue for his hemp suppliers farther west in Nebraska and in Colorado.
"I'm already doing a winter crop to see how it does in the greenhouse," Cruise said. "I did change genetics to what's called 'Gatsby' … It's heading into the flowering stage."
When those plants are ready to harvest, he hopes they will be Sweetwater Hemp's first fresh frozen crop to be processed.
All five of his current hemp suppliers dried their plants and delivered them to the rural Pleasanton plant in huge bags that are stored on shelves in the processing plant's warehouse area.
Cruise said the plants he grows — 500 currently — mostly will be used for research and development on industrial hemp genetics. Using a greenhouse allows him to test variations in growing conditions.
He will contract with larger growers for the volume of hemp needed to keep the processing plant running.
When asked what he learned about industrial hemp production in 2020, Cruise replied, "I think a lot of growers learned this (first) year how hard it is and how much labor it takes."
By Lori Potter

OWH Editorial: Nebraska must take new strides to protect financially vulnerable seniors

Nebraska in recent years has begun to focus important attention on safeguarding elderly residents vulnerable to financial exploitation. The state in 2014 created public guardians, under the Nebraska court system, who help seniors with financial management. Last year the Legislature empowered Nebraska financial institutions to notify a caretaker or other third party about suspected financial exploitation of vulnerable seniors.
This year, Nebraska lawmakers have given first-round approval to a similar proposal allowing investment advisers and brokers to put a hold on transactions they suspect may involve the scamming of an elderly individual.
State officials must decide carefully in enabling government power to restrict a senior's ability to move his or her own money. But the magnitude of financial abuse has crossed a troubling threshold, spurring wide consensus that protective action is needed.
The need is real. An estimated one in five Americans older than 65 has been exploited financially, according to Jina Raglin of AARP Nebraska. The average loss: an estimated $125,000.
Over the past two years, about a quarter of reports of elder abuse to the state have involved financial exploitation, according to the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services.
"This is not a hypothetical situation," Theresa Heye, speaking on behalf of the Nebraska Independent Community Bankers Association, told a legislative committee last year. "This has been a reoccurring problem."
Momentum for progress on this issue has been building for years. In 2010, a World-Herald investigation examined concerns in the handling of more than 12,000 incapacitated Nebraskans who

rely on guardians, conservators or both. One high-profile case involved a court-appointed guardian-conservator in Omaha who was convicted of stealing more than $400,000 from eight of her wards.
In 2013, the State Auditor's Office found ongoing problems in regard to protection of vulnerable seniors, and the Legislature responded by creating a set of public guardians to provide such support. This year, the State Office of Public Guardian had more than 100 wards in 40 assisted-living centers, nursing homes and group homes across Nebraska.
There is a waiting list for the services, and the demand for the services is likely to grow in coming years. The state's population aged 65 and older has increased from 246,000 in 2010 to 324,000 now, heading toward 418,000 by 2030.
The current proposal on this issue at the State Capitol is Legislative Bill 297 by State Sen. Brett Lindstrom of Omaha. Under the measure, broker-dealers and investment advisers would be required to notify the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services' Office of Adult Protective Services and the State Department of Banking and Finance within two business days in order to delay a transaction and conduct an internal review.
The measure is in line with bills or statutes in at least 28 other states. At a recent committee hearing, Lindstrom's bills received supportive testimony from the State HHS and Banking Department as well as AARP Nebraska and the National Association of Insurance and Financial Advisors. No one spoke in opposition.
The state's heightened focus on this issue is welcome. As Nebraska's population ages, the state must remain attentive to safeguarding the vulnerable.

OWH Editorial: Fever for big spending, tax cuts carries dangers for Nebraska government

Every once in a while, a fever breaks out at the Nebraska State Capitol. This year, it looks like it's about to strike, despite the mask wearing. The fever's symptoms don't involve sniffles, achiness or coughing, and we're not talking about COVID.
We're talking about a spending fever.
There's a good chance, too, of a related ailment: tax cut fever.
These fevers are spurred by the positive projections by the state forecasting board about likely revenues for Nebraska state government. To be sure, it's very good news that Nebraska's economy has the vigor, despite the pandemic, to generate robust revenues. It's entirely appropriate for state leaders to consider some increased spending for Nebraska's many needs, and for them to consider options to reduce the burden on taxpayers.
Our point, though, is for Nebraska leaders to be wide awake to the dangers of overcommitting state government for the long term, whether on the spending side or the tax cut side. A sense of moderation, of caution, has great value in this situation.
In the 21st century alone, the Legislature found it necessary on several occasions to make deep reductions in the budget because the economy sputtered and couldn't provide adequate revenues to sustain the state's spending commitments. And Kansas, under the Brownback administration and its obedient legislature, provided a sobering example of how overcommitting a state on the tax cut side can throw a budget into grave imbalance.
The Legislature has an obligation to be mindful of these dangers. This duty falls not only to the Appropriations and Revenue Committees, but also to Speaker Mike Hilgers, who provides important guidance, and to all other state senators, given that their individual bills can ultimately add up to a very large spending total.

It's encouraging that some lawmakers are pointing to the need to rebuild the state's rainy day fund, which has repeatedly proven its value when the state faced major revenue shortfalls.
The Legislature is already guarding itself against COVID. It must also do the same against the spending/tax cut fever.

OWH Midlands Voices: Moving forward with Keystone XL pipeline is in the U.S. national interest

The Keystone XL Pipeline debate has become a microcosm of everything wrong in Washington today. Like so many critical issues, it has been governed by policy that values rhetoric over facts. What should be a decision best informed by climate scientists and economic experts has instead been hijacked by extremists from both sides, who see it as either a symbol of support for the entire fossil fuel industry or the beginning of the end of the world, depending on which side you're on. Once you get past the rhetoric, though, the proper course of action becomes clear.
Keystone XL expands an existing pipeline that carries Canadian crude oil into the United States. The expansion would allow crude oil brought in by truck and rail to be more safely transported via pipeline from the Canadian oil sands to Gulf Coast refineries.
This pipeline directly travels through Nebraska and affects our economy, energy sector, and the livelihoods of so many. On Jan. 20, President Biden issued an executive order rescinding the project's border-crossing permit. The decision was a gut punch not only to good-paying union jobs but also to small businesses along the route.
Biden based his decision in part on an Obama administration review that advocated for the United States to focus on "the development of a clean energy economy, which would in turn create good jobs." He cited U.S. "national interest" in letting other countries see America moving away from fossil fuels. But the truth is that the State Department's environmental impact report said the pipeline expansion would not have a serious or even substantial impact on greenhouse-gas emissions.
Some argue that the pipeline is less important today than 12 years ago when oil was at $100 per barrel — and they are correct. But the bigger issue is whether finishing the pipeline is in the long-term interests of the U.S., both economically and environmentally.
Killing Keystone won't keep fossil fuels in the ground; they will still be transported into the United States. An array of environmental experts and groups agree that transporting oil through a pipeline is safer, more efficient and more environmentally friendly than other means of energy transportation.
Canada, the world's fourth-largest oil exporter, sells most of its oil to the United States. Without a pipeline, we could be forced to buy more oil from adversarial states like Russia and Venezuela, even as we move our energy usage toward clean sources.
U.S. Rep. Cathy McMorris Rodgers of Washington, the ranking Republican member of the Energy and Commerce Committee, says we don't need to be killing jobs in the midst of a pandemic for policy decisions that are misdirected at best. Like many of us, she believes we need realistic, all-of-the-above energy solutions that address climate-change risks and keep control of our energy future from China, Russia, and Saudi Arabia without hampering our economy.
She supports H.B. 684 — the Keystone XL Pipeline Construction and Jobs Preservation Act — as do I. The fact that the bill's 125 sponsors are all Republican shows how partisan politics has kept Democrats from reaching across the aisle on an issue in which the facts are so clear.

One reason Republicans did well in downstream races in 2020 was this issue. We need to win only a few swing districts to retake control of Congress, and challenging Democrats on energy policies is a likely 2022 strategy.

It is not hyperbole to say that H.B. 684 will save energy and construction jobs; protect U.S. national security; keep energy costs low; and promote American-led energy innovation. Oil's next price boom will scramble industry and political priorities, and we'll all see that President Biden's decision was more more controversial than it appears today as it pushes us toward less stable trading partners for oil.

Moderate Republicans can provide President Biden with an alternative to aligning with extremists on the left by passing good legislation that preserves jobs and still benefits the environment.

U.S. Rep. Don Bacon represents Nebraska's 2nd District. Sarah Chamberlain is president and CEO of the Republican Main Street Partnership, which promotes bipartisan consensus-building on public policy issues.

LJS Editorial, 3/10: Champs not only winners in state tourneys

Lincoln is right in the middle of two magical weeks.

Last Saturday, six girls basketball teams were crowned state champions. This coming Saturday, six boys teams will emerge winners.

A year ago this week, the world seemed to change. The 2020 girls tournament was played unchanged in front of lots of fans. A week after, the boys played in front of only family members in largely empty venues.

A year of mask-wearing, social distancing and directed health measures on both local and state levels got us here -- to fuller hotels, fuller restaurants and fuller stands.

The girls tournament was a success. Good basketball. Good turnout. Good behavior. Inside the venues, folks largely adhered to the rules employed to minimize the spread of COVID. Away from the court, we might still have work to do.

Twelve percent of Nebraskans are fully vaccinated. The Centers for Disease Control have issued new guidelines that open up possibilities for that 12%. For the rest of us, we must remain on guard, to protect ourselves, our fellow community members and the progress we have made.

Students across the state have high hopes of finishing up as normal of a school year as they can in these abnormal times. Next week, all Lincoln Public Schools high schoolers are allowed to return to full-time, in-person classes. Lincoln students, and those visiting from across the state for tournaments, deserve our best efforts to keep everyone safe.

The five-day format of the tournament -- dictated by the fact that the Devaney Center is unavailable for games -- may have been a boon for local businesses, with families staying -- and eating out -- longer than in other years.

Restaurants, hotels and shopping areas last weekend had the familiar tourney-time buzz. The weather outside (sunny and unseasonably warm) was as welcome -- after our record-setting cold snap -- as the Pinnacle crowds, and certainly contributed to the number of folks enjoying the Haymarket.

The taste of normality was pleasant and reassuring, and we've got another four days of it before the last of the tournament crowd starts heading home. It was a simultaneous boost for morale and the economy.

And its a taste of even better things to come as long as we remain careful while the vaccination rate

grows.
Yes, we'll have crowned 12 state champions in two weeks by the end of Saturday. But another winner will be our community.

LJS Local View: Deferred maintenance plan builds for NU's future

As any Nebraska homeowner knows, home maintenance and repair are issues that never go away. Our homes require regular care and attention to keep them functioning properly, to say nothing of unexpected needs that can crop up at any time.
Now imagine you own 1,000 buildings, spread from Scottsbluff to Omaha, worth a combined $5.5 billion. Maintaining that kind of physical plant would require an even greater level of planning and budgetary discipline.
That scenario is reality for our State College and University of Nebraska systems, which own a combined total of more than 70% of state government buildings across Nebraska.
University buildings are the places where 52,000 future teachers, nurses, farmers and scientists are educated every year. They are the sites of world-leading research in agriculture, cancer and national security. State colleges educate 8,400 students each year, providing Nebraska with an accessible workforce pipeline.
These buildings are valuable state assets, and I believe Nebraska taxpayers have a vested interest in keeping them safe, functional and up-to-date.
Yet taxpayers also expect and deserve that their money will be spent wisely and transparently when it comes to maintaining state college and university facilities.
That is why I am pleased to sponsor LB588, a proposal that lays out a long-range plan to take care of our state college and university buildings in a conservative, responsible, transparent way.
LB588 is the result of extensive collaboration with university leadership and the Board of Regents, along with state college leadership, and is a win all the way around for taxpayers, students, faculty and current and future elected leaders.
No. 1, our plan addresses what has grown into an $800 million deferred maintenance problem across the university system. It puts the university on the path to self-sustainability so that we as taxpayers and legislators do not find ourselves in this predicament again.
And as we heard from University of Nebraska President Ted Carter, by locking in today's historically low interest rates, LB588 would save taxpayers $1.5 billion over the next 40 years compared to sticking with the approach of the past.
No one wishes for a crisis, but the economic impacts of COVID-19 have created a unique opportunity for us to secure capital at cheaper rates than we will likely ever see again. As a banker who has spent my career evaluating financial risk and reward, I can say with confidence that this is exactly the type of fiscally responsible approach the Legislature and taxpayers should expect their university to follow.
Some may wonder how the campuses could have $800 million in deferred maintenance needs when we invest operating dollars into the university every year.
Taxpayer dollars, matched by university dollars, have gone a long way toward maintaining the current quality of our classrooms, laboratories and offices. Look at the new Discovery Hall at the University of Nebraska at Kearney, which will educate scientists, engineers and IT professionals who are desperately needed in our workforce, especially in rural parts of the state.
But the simple truth is that the university and state college's maintenance needs have exceeded the

available dollars. Again, think of your own home. Without regular care, it would fall into disrepair. The university and state colleges are no different.

The challenge is heightened by the fact that we are dealing with an aging infrastructure. One-third of the university's buildings are at least 50 years old. If we want to extend the life of these buildings for future generations of students and faculty, we will need to give them proper attention.

Perhaps the part of our proposal that I am most excited about is a requirement that the university set aside a portion of its own money each year to put toward future deferred maintenance needs. Not only will this demand an even greater level of accountability and discipline by the university in its spending, but the idea is that after 40 years, the university will have its own self-sustaining fund to care for its buildings.

In other words, not only do we solve most of the university's $800 million problem, but we guard against the state facing this question again down the road.

That sets Nebraska apart. Our university and state colleges are not alone in facing a large and growing deferred maintenance backlog. But we are unique in putting forward a responsible and visionary plan to do something about it.

Sen. John Stinner of Gering represents District 48 and is chair of the Legislature's Appropriations Committee.

LJS: State failing on Mead pollution

This truly is a rare incident." That's the headline of a front page story in the Lincoln Journal Star on Feb. 26.

This headline is a direct quote of the director of Nebraska's Department of Environment and Energy, Jim Macy, in testimony before the Legislature regarding the tragic pollution in Mead.

The comment seems to imply that this incident is a naturally occurring event rather than the failure of our state's regulatory efforts. With proper government oversight, events like this would be nonexistent rather than rare.

It isn't as if Mr. Macy doesn't know how to protect someone either, as indicated by his refusal to respond when asked if he had referred the matter to the attorney general. Mr. Macy claimed that was confidential.

In the midst of a crisis like the one in Mead, Mr. Macy would do well to remember that he works for the people of Nebraska and that the steps taken, or not taken, to protect us from environmental disasters are not confidential. This raises the question: Whom is he trying to protect, himself or our attorney general?

There's an arrogant attitude that permeates our state agencies these days, an attitude that government has no significant role to play in our lives. An attitude that running government like a business is the best model. An attitude that we the people don't have a right to know how things are done in our state government.

It's an attitude that is wrong on many levels. It's an attitude that starts at the top.

Terrence Keefe, Lincoln

AP: Pentagon approves extending Guard deployment at Capitol

WASHINGTON (AP) — Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin has formally approved an extension of the National Guard deployment at the U.S. Capitol for about two more months as possible threats of

violence remain, the Pentagon said Tuesday.

According to a statement issued by the department, close to 2,300 Guard troops will continue to provide security in Washington until May 23, at the request of the Capitol Police. Officials have been scrambling in recent days to determine if and how to fill the request, as the original March 12 deadline for them to leave Washington loomed.

There are currently about 5,100 Guard troops in Washington, and they were scheduled to leave this weekend. It was unclear if any of those forces will have to stay an extra day or two while any new troops arrive and get trained and settled in. The Pentagon said defense officials will work with the Capitol Police to incrementally reduce the number of Guard needed in the city as time goes on.

The decision to keep Guard members in the city underscores concerns about security at the Capitol, two months after rioters breached the building in an attack that left five people dead. Law enforcement has remained in a heightened security posture in response to intelligence suggesting possible threats to the Capitol by militia groups.

The request to extend the deployment met resistance last week, as some governors expressed reluctance or flatly refused to commit their troops to more time in the city. There now appear to be enough states willing to provide Guard troops for the mission, said defense officials, who spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss internal deliberations.

Earlier Tuesday, chief Pentagon spokesman John Kirby said the decision on maintaining a Guard presence would be based on local law enforcement concerns along with the needs of the Capitol Police.

“It’s not just about a threat assessment, it's about assisting and supporting capabilities that the Capitol Police may now lack and may need to look at improving,” Kirby said, adding that the extension request was based largely on using the Guard to make up for gaps in the capabilities of the Capitol Police.

Army leaders had also initially questioned whether the Capitol Police had exhausted all other options to fill the need, such as asking other federal law enforcement agencies to provide security. But officials said military leaders thought it was important to find ways to work out the details.

The threat was tied to the far-right conspiracy theory promoted by QAnon supporters that former President Donald Trump would rise again to power on March 4, the original presidential inauguration day. That day passed with no problems, but law enforcement has said threats to buildings and personnel remain.

The Guard's deployment to the Capitol has been troubled. Early on, Guard members were briefly forced to take rest breaks and meals in a nearby cold garage, sparking outrage within the Biden administration. Officials quickly found new spaces within congressional buildings for the on-duty breaks.

In addition, Guard members complained of bad food, and some said they became sick. On Monday, Kirby said about 50 Guard troops had been treated for gastrointestinal issues, out of the 26,000 that deployed to Washington. He said six sought outpatient medical treatment, while the rest were treated at aid stations set up for the Capitol Hill mission.

Kirby said Gen. Daniel Hokanson, chief of the National Guard Bureau, has been visiting the troops several times a week and eating with them to ensure that they were getting good food.

Acting Capitol Police Chief Yogananda Pittman made the request to have the Guard members stay on, setting off a series of discussions with the Pentagon and National Guard leaders.

In a statement late Tuesday, the Capitol Police force said it is “extremely grateful for the Department of Defense’s continued commitment to support our critical mission to protect Congress.”

U.S. military officials have said the cost of deploying about 26,000 Guard troops to the U.S. Capitol from shortly after the Jan. 6 riot to this Friday is close to $500 million. No cost estimate for the next two months has been released. The costs include housing, transportation, salaries, benefits and other essentials.

AP: Arkansas governor signs near-total abortion ban into law

LITTLE ROCK, Ark. (AP) — Arkansas Gov. Asa Hutchinson on Tuesday signed into law legislation banning nearly all abortions in the state, a sweeping measure that supporters hope will force the U.S. Supreme Court to revisit its landmark Roe v. Wade decision but opponents vow to block before it takes effect later this year.

The Republican governor had expressed reservations about the bill, which only allows the procedure to save the life of the mother and does not provide exceptions for those impregnated in an act of rape or incest. Arkansas is one of at least 14 states where legislators have proposed outright abortion bans this year.

Hutchinson said he was signing the bill because of its “overwhelming legislative support and my sincere and long-held pro-life convictions."

The bans were pushed by Republicans who want to force the U.S. Supreme Court to revisit its 1973 Roe v. Wade decision legalizing abortion nationwide. Conservatives believe the court is more open to striking down the decision following former President Donald Trump's three appointments to the court.

“We must abolish abortion in this nation just as we abolished slavery in the 19th century – all lives matter," Republican Sen. Jason Rapert, the bill's sponsor said in a statement.

Hutchinson has signed several major abortion restrictions into law since taking office in 2015, but he had voiced concerns that this bill directly challenges Roe and about the lack of rape and incest exceptions. He repeated those concerns as he announced his decision.

“(The ban) is in contradiction of binding precedents of the U.S. Supreme Court, but it is the intent of the legislation to set the stage for the Supreme Court overturning current case law," he said in a statement released by his office. “I would have preferred the legislation to include the exceptions for rape and incest, which has been my consistent view, and such exceptions would increase the chances for a review by the U.S. Supreme Court.”

As the Legislature considered the measure, Hutchinson shared with lawmakers a letter written by an attorney for abortion opponents National Right to Life that said the chances of the bill leading to Roe being overturned were “very small and remote.” National Right to Life didn't take a position on the bill, though its Arkansas affiliate supported the ban.

The legislation won't take effect until 90 days after the majority-Republican Legislature adjourns this year's session. That means it can't be enforced until this summer at the earliest. Abortion rights supporters said they plan to challenge the ban in court before then.

The American Civil Liberties Union of Arkansas called the ban “cruel and unconstitutional."

“Governor Hutchinson: we’ll see you in court," ACLU of Arkansas Executive Director Holly Dickson said.

“This is politics at its very worst," Alexis McGill Johnson, president of Planned Parenthood Action Fund, said in a statement. “At a time when people need economic relief and basic safety precautions, dismantling abortion access is cruel, dangerous, and blatantly unjust."

Hutchinson had until Wednesday afternoon to take action on the bill before it would have become

law without his signature, a move past governors have taken to express displeasure with a bill without risking an override fight with the Legislature. It takes a simple majority for the Legislature to override a governor's veto in Arkansas.

Arkansas has some of the strictest abortion measures in the country and two years ago Hutchinson signed into law a measure that would ban the procedure if the Roe decision was overturned.

Another measure Hutchinson signed in 2019 banning abortions after 18 weeks of pregnancy is on hold due to a legal challenge.

Several other restrictions are still being considered in the Legislature, including one approved by the Senate a day earlier that would require a woman having an abortion to first be shown an ultrasound.

Another sweeping abortion ban was signed into law by South Carolina's governor last month but was quickly blocked by a federal judge due to a legal challenge by Planned Parenthood. Alabama enacted a near-total ban on abortions in 2019 that has been blocked because of court challenges.

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