LOCAL BRIEFS

Newman Grove students qualify for science fair

Seventy-eight students from Northeast Nebraska schools competed during the Nebraska Junior Academy of Science's (NJAS) Northeast Regional Science Fair held March 28 at Wayne State College.

Sixteen science projects received invitations to NJAS's State Science Fair on April 24. Schools participating in the Northeast Regional Science Fair at Wayne State were Allen Consolidated Schools, Lyons-Decatur Northeast School, Newman Grove Junior/Senior High School, and Wayne Community Schools.

As an affiliate of the Nebraska Academy of Sciences, the NJAS seeks to stimulate science education and to encourage young people to become involved in science, according to the NJAS handbook.

The following Newman Grove Junior/Senior High School students participated in the science fair: Jayahn Banks, Jayden Benson and Maddy Wiese (state qualifier), Savannah Douglas, Pierce Fehringer, Owen Flood, Jace Forre, Elia Jarecki, Abby Matson (alternate), Ariyana Potmesil, Isabella Santarosa (state qualifier), Cash Sweeter, Morely Warren.

United Way announces annual meeting, volunteer appreciation

Columbus Area United Way will hold its annual meeting and volunteer appreciation event from noon to 1 p.m. Thursday, April 17, at Prime 10, 4174 63rd Ave., in Columbus.

Lunch will be provided with the registration cost of $18 for the meal. Interested community members who would like to attend are asked to RSVP by April 10 to Sara Baustert at 402-564-5661 or email sbaustert@columbusunitedway.com.

The Columbus Area United Way Board of Directors will enter a regularly scheduled business meeting upon completion of the annual meeting and volunteer appreciation event.

Reichmuth receives DAISY Award

Columbus Community Hospital has announced Macy Reichmuth, RN, BSN, as the March 2025 DAISY Award recipient. The DAISY Award celebrates nurses who profoundly impact patient and family lives.

COLUMBUS COMMUNITY HOSPITAL

Columbus Community Hospital has announced Macy Reichmuth, RN, BSN, as the March 2025 DAISY Award recipient. The DAISY Award celebrates nurses who profoundly impact patient and family lives.

Her nomination detailed her unwavering advocacy — particularly when a young patient developed complications. Reichmuth trusted her instincts, extending the patient's stay and communicating her concerns to the patient's providers.

"If this were my child, I would want a nurse to advocate for them just as I am doing for her," she told the parents.

Kayla Gehring, manager of perianesthesia services, nominated Reichmuth for the award. Gehring's nomination letter emphasized Reichmuth's display of extraordinary compassion for a patient.

"Macy's actions exemplify the true spirit of nursing," wrote Gehring. "Her commitment to patient advocacy, and her ability to provide comfort and reassurance during a stressful time, made a significant impact on the patient and their family."

Gehring praised Reichmuth's "remarkable care and compassion" and her role in ensuring "critical, emergent care." Reichmuth spent hours comforting the patient and providing detailed guidance. Her actions underscore the power of nurse advocacy.

"Macy exhibited remarkable care and compassion, passionately advocating for the patient's well-being," Gehring wrote. "Her dedication ensured the patient received critical, emergent care when it was needed most."

Reichmuth was honored with an award presentation on March 28.

Columbus Community Hospital invites nominations for the DAISY Award at columbushosp.org/patients-visitors/nominate-a-nurse.

Food

From A1

million in funds also were cut for Local Food for Schools, a program that allows states to buy food and distribute it to schools and child care facilities. The USDA confirmed the cuts.

In Illinois, the state Department of Agriculture also said the Resilient Food Systems Infrastructure Program, which offers better market opportunities and new streams of revenue to small and mid-sized agricultural producers, also ceased to operate.

Cuts to SNAP would impact about 1.9 million people in Illinois, 1.5 million in Michigan, 1.4 million in Ohio, 705,000 in Wisconsin and 610,000 in Indiana, according to a report from the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. Federal SNAP spending totaled $112.8 billion in 2023, according to the USDA.

"You're taking food away from families — it's not Democratic families, or Independent families or Republican families, it's all families," said Democratic Rep. Raja Krishnamoorthi. "It's people in all states."

There's also uncertainty around the Emergency Food Assistance Program Funding, which aids food banks. In a letter to the USDA, U.S. Sen. Amy Klobuchar, D-Minn., and 25 other senators questioned the agency on reports that a part of the program was paused.

"A cancellation of these funds could result in $500 million in lost food provisions to feed millions of Americans at a time when the need for food shelves is extremely high due to costly groceries and an uncertain economy," the senators said. In a statement to Bloomberg, the USDA said the administration of President Joe Biden "created unsustainable programming and expectations using the Commodity Credit Corporation" but the USDA continued to purchased food for the TEFAP, which aids food banks.

Still, the Greater Chicago Food Depository said this week that it learned 1.7 million pounds, or 52 truckloads, of government food set to arrive between April and August was suspended. The shipments, purchased through Commodity Credit Corporation funding, amounted to $3.3 million and included dairy, pork, chicken, eggs, dried plums and cranberries.

The White House didn't immediately respond to a request for comment.

Wisconsin Gov. Tony Evers, a Democrat, said the Trump administration is "turning their backs on America's Dairyland and betraying our farmers." Trump won the state, which distributed about $4 million in food last year, with a majority of rural voters.

Massachusetts Gov. Maura Healey, also a Democrat, criticized Trump and Elon Musk for cutting a $12 million award used to provide local food to schools and child care programs.

Illinois Gov. JB Pritzker, one of Trump's most vocal critics, said farmers in the biggest U.S. soybean-producing state need the business brought in by USDA programs. In cutting spending cuts, the administration "made farmers the collateral damage in that endeavor," the Democrat said.

"Cutting the funding leaves farmers on the hook for expenses they incurred believing they would be reimbursed and leaves our most vulnerable, food-insecure communities without meat, fresh produce and other nutritious donations they were promised," Jerry Costello II, director of the Illinois Department of Agriculture, said of the Local Food Purchase Assistance Program. "The federal government broke its promise, and the people of Illinois are paying the price."

A number of food banks in Chicago met with officials to discuss potential cuts to SNAP. The program provides nine times more meals than all the food banks in the country are able to, said Kate Maehr, chief executive officer of the Greater Chicago Food Depository.

Balloons

From A1

staff.

Flood said information gleaned from weather balloons is one of the reasons no lives were lost in the state last year despite 100 confirmed tornadoes.

When potential extreme weather nears Nebraska and the Midwest in the spring, weather balloons launched by stations like Valley have been a crucial tool in providing accurate forecasts.

KILEY CRUSE, THE WORLD-HERALD

In this Jan. 26, 2009 photo, Terry Landsvork prepares Monday evening's weather balloon for launch. Because of a lack of staffing, the Valley weather station has temporarily suspended its twice-daily launchings.

What do weather balloons do?

About the size of a beach ball, the expanding balloon soars up to 100,000 feet, collecting real-time data on temperature, dew point, humidity, barometric pressure and wind speed and direction from an instrument called a radiosonde that's attached to its tail.

Those snapshots, from around 100 upper-air sites across the United States, Caribbean and the Pacific basin, help the weather service and meteorologists share information with the public about weather events that may be heading their way.

"Being specific and being accurate is really critical in having people know if something is warned for their area, and they need to take it seriously," said Bill Randby, chief meteorologist for KETV.

Flood isn't the only politician concerned.

Rep. Don Bacon, R-Neb., said he will reach out to the White House regarding weather balloons and other cuts to the National Weather Service.

"Nebraska is a hotbed for extreme weather as shown by last year's tornado in Elkhorn, and the recent blizzard when over 100,000 people in the second district lost power because of the heavy wet snow," he said in an email to The World-Herald.

In a conference call with reporters last week, U.S. Sen. Pete Ricketts, R-Neb., said he was not aware of any specific staff cuts within the weather service in Nebraska.

"We do want to make sure that we're protecting our ability to get the early warning on bad weather out, as we saw how critical that was with the Arbor Day tornadoes," he said.

With the loss of the Omaha weather balloons, and cutbacks to releases in North Platte and some other Midwest stations, Randby said, there's an information hole in the middle of the country, a region that is not as well protected from bad weather as it has been in the past.

North Platte now does just one release early in the morning. Rapid City, South Dakota, no longer is doing weather balloon releases.

A weather balloon void in the evening stretches from Davenport, Iowa, to Riverton, Wyoming, and from Aberdeen, South Dakota, to Topeka, Kansas, Randby said.

"A lot of bad storms occur in the evening, and we don't have that initial information anywhere about Nebraska," Randby said.

When are weather balloons used?

The loss of balloons takes data away from forecast models and opens the door for more errors, said Clay Ostarly, a former broadcast meteorologist at WOWT who now is co-owner of Storm Guides, a private meteorology consultant.

He said balloons are a critical piece of technology when it comes to weather forecasting.

"If we are in a situation where we are expecting a tornado outbreak, and we don't have balloon data to look at for that day, we have no idea what the atmosphere is set up to do. That's where balloons come into play," Ostarly said.

Randby said wind, temperature and moisture information from the balloon helps to analyze how a storm might move or form and how strong it might be.

The data collected when countries across the globe send up helium or hydrogen-filled weather balloons at the same time every morning and evening is invaluable, Ostarly said. The data is collected and put into forecast models, which allow the weather service and meteorologists to know exactly what is going on from the ground level to 100,000 feet across all those locations.

Not all balloons are released in metropolitan areas. Stations are set up in grids so people can collect information as weather moves west to east across the United States.

The state won't be devoid of forecasts. Computer models provide a broad brush and there is also surface observation, radar and satellite information. But those Global Forecast System and European models Randby often mentions on TV are more accurate with data from a weather balloon.

Cutting them is not a good idea, Randby said.

Officials at the Valley office would not say how many employees were trimmed at their station or how it would affect forecasts, and referred callers to NOAA.

Flood said he believed there are fewer than a dozen people working at the station. He said 10 years ago, there were three people working per shift and now there is only two and sometimes one. He said the station can still release a balloon if requested because of bad weather.

"To truly fix this problem, they need six people added to their operation, as I understand it," he said.

When asked about the situation at Valley, a spokeswoman at NOAA, Marissa Anderson, said via email that "the more data we can feed into our weather models, the more accurate our forecasts, but I can't speculate on the extent of future impacts."

She said that other than public information statements that were issued to announce cuts, the agency had nothing else to say.

Katie Gross, a meteorologist in Valley, said: "We are going to keep doing our warning just as good as we have in the past."

Randby said he understands staffers would be worried about talking about cuts because they fear for their jobs. But he said it's odd to get rid of weather balloons in the middle of the country, because those details matter here as well as to those downstream in Iowa and Illinois.

Flood said weather balloons released in Nebraska can even supply information during hurricanes on the East Coast.

"It will hurt here to not have that during severe weather," Randby said. "It will hurt to have a big gap right across the middle of the country."

Red light

From A1

slow down.

The cameras, she said, would be a relief to law enforcement, who do not have the personnel to patrol all the highway construction zones.

Opponents' concerns for the bills included privacy issues and the data that private providers gather and potentially sell or use. Spike Eickholt, a lobbyist for the American Civil Liberties Union of Nebraska, also questioned the legality of the two bills, saying they turned a criminal traffic offense into a civil offense.

While both bills set relatively low fees for drivers that don't involve points that affect insurance, Eickholt said the bills work around the criminal process without a presumption of innocence or opportunity to face your accuser in court.

Both Cavanaugh and DeBoer preemptively acknowledged those concerns, saying they want to work on ways to challenge a violation. They called the bills works in progress that attempt solutions for serious safety concerns.

The Douglas County Sheriff's Office also opposed both bills over privacy issues, and the associations representing Nebraska's police chiefs and sheriffs opposed LB 616. Kearney Police Chief Bryan Waugh spoke on behalf of those agencies and said he is concerned red-light cameras may cause drivers to overcorrect, braking hard when uncertain if they can get through a yellow light causing the next car to rear-end them.

Timothy Adams, a traffic engineer who worked with Omaha on its plan to end traffic deaths, said those accidents are less likely severe than ones that may result from running a red light. Adams said drivers would have to adjust to traffic changes, but they learn and become safer. Red-light cameras have a track record of reducing intersection crashes and may save dozens of lives in Nebraska, said Adams, who noted that his wife received minor injuries after she was hit by a car that ran a red light on Antelope Valley Parkway in Lincoln.

Omaha saw 14 pedestrian deaths in 2024, the most in the city had seen in at least five years, according to Omaha police.

The state also saw an uptick in traffic deaths. The 251 people who died on Nebraska roadways were a 17-year high for the state, Kramer said.

MEGAN NIELSEN, THE WORLD-HERALD

State Sen. John Cavanaugh of Omaha speaks Jan. 8, the first day of Nebraska's 2025 legislative session, at the Nebraska State Capitol in Lincoln. He has proposed a bill to allow use of automatic cameras to catch drivers who run through red lights.