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Sailors begin moving back onto Roosevelt

By CAITLIN DOORNBOS

Stars and Stripes

YOKOSUKA NAVAL BASE, Japan — The Navy began moving sailors back aboard the aircraft carrier USS Theodore Roosevelt, sidelined in Guam after nearly a fourth of its 4,000-member crew tested positive for coronavirus.

The sailors returning to the ship Wednesday had been restricted to off-base hotel rooms for nearly a month as officials tested all crew members for the coronavirus and sanitized the carrier, according to a statement Wednesday from

the Joint Region Marianas Public Affairs Office in Guam.

Sailors who tested negative for coronavirus in three separate tests were allowed to embark the Roosevelt.

The carrier had been deployed to the western Pacific when it diverted to Guam on March 26 after several of its sailors tested positive for the virus. Since then, more than 900 Roosevelt sailors have tested positive, one of whom died, according to the Navy.

About 700 sailors stayed aboard to “maintain the ship’s essential functions and to conduct deep cleaning and sanita-

tion of the ship’s space over the past few weeks,” the Navy statement said.

“Now, the ship is fully prepared to receive healthy Sailors who have spent up to 27 days in quarantine ashore,” the statement said.

Also Wednesday, Acting Navy Secretary James McPherson directed Adm. Mike Gilday, the chief of naval operations, to conduct a new follow-up command investigation after receiving Gilday’s recommendations from the initial inquiry into the outbreak and the Navy’s response. That response included the firing of the ship’s commander, Capt. Brett Crozier.

Navy leader calls for new probe into Roosevelt outbreak

By CAITLIN M. KENNEY

Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — The Navy’s top civilian has ordered another investigation into the service’s response to the coronavirus outbreak aboard the USS Theodore Roosevelt after the initial examination left him with “unanswered questions.”

Acting Navy Secretary James McPherson said in a statement issued Wednesday that he has directed Adm. Mike Gilday, the chief of naval operations, to conduct a new, follow-up investigation to look more closely into the outbreak and the Navy’s response.

“I have unanswered questions that the preliminary inquiry has identified and that can only be answered by a deeper review,” McPherson said in the prepared statement.

The extended investigation follows Defense Secretary Mark Esper’s own request Friday for more time to review the Navy’s written investigation after he was verbally briefed

‘I have unanswered questions that the preliminary inquiry has identified and that can only be answered by a deeper review.’

Acting Navy Secretary James McPherson

by McPherson and Gilday on the report’s recommendations.

News reports on Friday said the Navy leaders have recommended Capt. Brett Crozier, the former commander of the USS Theodore Roosevelt, be reinstated following the investigation into his letter warning of a severe coronavirus outbreak among his crew.

The Navy initiated an investigation into the outbreak aboard the Roosevelt and the conduct of Crozier after the nuclear-powered aircraft carrier arrived in Guam on March 27 as the virus spread among the ship’s crew of more than 4,800 sailors.

At the time that Crozier was

fired April 2, more than 100 Roosevelt sailors had tested positive for the virus. As of Tuesday, more than 900 sailors have the coronavirus, 29 had recovered, and one sailor was hospitalized at a Navy hospital in Guam. One Roosevelt sailor died April 13 from complications of the virus.

On Wednesday, sailors began returning to the Roosevelt after weeks of quarantine in Guam. Sailors who have repeatedly tested negative for the virus are allowed back on the aircraft carrier, which has been cleaned, according to the Navy.

But defense officials have said the Navy’s investigation

concerns more than Crozier and it examined communications between naval officers as well as the service’s response efforts spanning multiple time zones and commands.

The initial investigation was ordered by former acting Navy Secretary Thomas Modly after he fired Crozier when a letter that the captain sent to Navy officials requesting assistance for the outbreak was leaked to the media.

Modly resigned days later after disparaging statements that he made to the crew of the Roosevelt about their former commander were leaked online.

The new Navy investigation “will build on the good work of the initial inquiry to provide a more fulsome understanding of the sequence of events, actions, and decisions of the chain of command surrounding the [coronavirus] outbreak aboard USS Theodore Roosevelt,” McPherson said.

Chinese ship sails between Okinawa islands

BY MATTHEW M. BURKE
AND AYA ICHIHASHI

Stars and Stripes

CAMP FOSTER, Okinawa — A Chinese aircraft carrier sailed between two islands of Japan's Okinawa prefecture for the second time this month, according to Japanese officials.

The Chinese carrier Liaoning and its five-ship strike group were spotted at around 9 a.m. Tuesday approximately 50 miles southeast of Miyako, a Japan Ministry of Defense Joint Staff statement said. The ships sailed north, passing between Okinawa itself and Miyako at about 10 a.m. before

traversing the East China Sea later that day.

The Liaoning strike group was spotted by the JS Kongo, a guided-missile destroyer of the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force, the destroyer JS Umi-giri and a P-3C Orion maritime surveillance aircraft. The Liaoning was accompanied by two Chinese guided-missile destroyers, two multirole warships and one supply-class fast combat support ship.

It was the second time the strike group traveled through the 155-mile-wide strait this month and just the fifth time since the Liaoning was commissioned in 2012.

"This is the first time the Chinese Navy made round-trip passage through the Miyako Strait," a spokesman from the Joint Staff told Stars and Stripes on Wednesday. "The coronavirus will not affect our mission. We will keep eyes on them very closely."

The spokesman declined to comment on the Chinese flotilla's exact location, except to say that it was in the East China Sea. He also declined to comment on where it appears to be headed.

"They are not intending to come closer at this moment," he said. Some Japanese government spokespersons tradi-

tionally speak on the condition of anonymity.

The Liaoning strike group last passed through the Miyako Strait on April 11, the Joint Staff statement said. The strait, though a passageway between two Japanese islands, is an international waterway. The U.S. and its allies in the region viewed the April 11 transit cautiously due to the flotilla's passing east of Taiwan.

The earlier Liaoning passage occurred after a coronavirus outbreak sidelined the aircraft carrier USS Theodore Roosevelt in Guam, leaving the U.S. without a carrier on patrol in the western Pacific.

Navy head of aviation training center fired

BY WYATT OLSON

Stars and Stripes

The commander of the Navy's aviation maintenance training center at Naval Air Station Pensacola, Fla., was relieved Tuesday for loss of confidence in his ability to command, the Navy said in a statement.

Capt. Nate Schneider was relieved from the Center for Naval Aviation Technical Training and has been temporarily assigned to Naval Air Station Pensacola headquarters, a Navy spokesman said in an emailed response to a query by Stars and Stripes.

Officials from the Naval Education and Training Command completed an investigation into allegations about Schneider, Cmdr. James Stockman said in the response. Rear Adm. Kyle Cozad, who heads the training command, relieved Schneider.

"Based on this investigation, he was relieved due to loss of confidence," Stockman said, adding that the Navy would not comment on the investigation's details.

"Command leaders are held

to a high standard," he said. "Their positions require the utmost in responsibility, reliability and leadership, and the Navy holds them accountable in cases where they fall short of those standards."

Capt. Bryant Hepstall, the aviation center's executive officer, will assume command.

The aviation center is responsible for educating and training enlisted personnel and officers in aviation maintenance.

Schneider first served as the aviation center's executive officer before taking command in November 2018, according to his Navy biography.

He enlisted in the Navy in 1981 and was later commissioned through the Enlisted Commissioning Program. He served at sea on a host of ships in the field of aviation maintenance, including four different aircraft carriers.

He has earned numerous personal awards, including the Legion of Merit, the Meritorious Service Medal five times and the Navy and Marine Corps Commendation Medal times.

Esper defers projects to fund US border wall

BY JOHN VANDIVER

Stars and Stripes

STUTTGART, Germany — Military projects primarily aimed at countering Russia, including upgrades to a U.S. Navy base in Spain, are among those being put on the backburner as the Pentagon shifts funds to pay for a border wall.

Defense Secretary Mark Esper this week ordered \$545 million in construction projects to be redirected to fund a wall along the U.S.'s southern border with Mexico.

The move restores funding to 22 projects that were deferred at domestic bases and instead defers or cancels 18 projects overseas and one in Texas. Europe's portion added up to around \$270 million worth of project delays and cancellations.

The projects deferred at the Navy base in Rota, Spain, are a joint mobility center, a small craft berthing facility and a munitions facility, Esper's directive stated Monday. A hot cargo pad where explosives can be unloaded at Moron Air Base, Spain, used by crisis response

Marines, also was postponed.

In Germany, a logistics hub in Gernersheim was deferred. Funding for a taxiway at an air base in Rygge, Norway, was canceled.

All the Europe projects were connected to the European Deterrence Initiative, which sets aside money for countering Russia — a top priority in the Pentagon's national defense strategy.

Rep. Adam Smith, the Democratic chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, accused the Trump administration of pilfering funds to pursue a domestic political agenda.

"Our partners and allies rely on the support of EDI funds to prevent Russian aggression in the region, and these cuts will have real, lasting effects on our national security," Smith said in a statement.

Other overseas deferrals include funds for air traffic control facilities at Kwajalein and in Jordan, an electrical system upgrade in Bahrain and a school administration building at Yokota Air Base, Japan.

DODEA gives base students a break on 2020 grades

BY KIM GAMEL
Stars and Stripes

SEOUL, South Korea — Students on U.S. military bases will get the higher grade from the last two quarters of the school year to help those struggling with home studies and other difficulties during the coronavirus pandemic, the organization that oversees the schools said.

The Department of Defense Education Activity in an April 24 memo explained that the grade expectations are aimed at making sure students aren't unnecessarily disadvantaged, as schools have now been closed for several weeks.

Teachers will maintain normal grading procedures for the fourth quarter, but once those grades are calculated they will be compared with the grades received in the third quarter, DODEA said.

"Students will receive the higher of the two grades for each course on their Q4 report cards," it said.

DODEA has also advised teachers to show flexibility with missing or incomplete work by offering students options to finish or redo assignments.

"Any student who has attempted an assignment can receive a grade no lower than 50% on the assignment," it said, adding that seniors who were on track to graduate when schools closed will be able to do so.

DODEA also explained the guidelines, which apply system-wide, in a question-and-answer fact sheet published online.

The practices "provide a path that encourages student engagement and learning, while ensuring students are held harmless for a situation out of their control," DODEA director Thomas Brady said in the memo.

"Feedback on learning activities and ongoing assessments are critical to improving student achievement, whether in the classroom or in distance education settings," he said.

Senate Dems rip DOD's virus response in letter to Esper

BY COREY DICKSTEIN
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Ten Democratic senators blasted the Pentagon's response to the coronavirus crisis as "disjointed and slow" in a letter to Defense Secretary Mark Esper, accusing him of unnecessarily placing troops at risk.

"Civilian leadership of the Department has failed to act sufficiently, quickly and has often prioritized readiness at the expense of the health of service members and their families," the senators wrote Monday in the eight-page letter shared by the office of Sen. Elizabeth Warren, of Massachusetts. "This failure has adversely affected morale, and, despite the department's best intentions, undermined readiness."

The letter was signed by Democratic Sens. Warren; Mazie Hirono, of Hawaii; Kamala Harris, of California; Patty Murray, of Washington; Richard Blumenthal, of Connecticut; Jeff Merkley, of

Oregon; Sherrod Brown, of Ohio; Ron Wyden, of Oregon; Amy Klobuchar, of Minnesota; and Edward Markey, of Massachusetts.

Warren, Harris and Klobuchar were presidential candidates in the 2020 campaign and are expected to be among the top potential vice presidential candidates to run alongside Joe Biden, the expected Democratic nominee for president. Warren, Hirono and Blumenthal are members of the Senate Armed Services Committee.

In their letter, the senators took issue with steps Esper has taken since the pandemic began in February that have impacted the military. Among them, they criticized Esper's decision to restrict data about outbreaks at installations, the department's inability to test troops on a mass scale and the Pentagon's handling of its largest outbreak — aboard the aircraft carrier USS Theodore Roosevelt, which has seen nearly 1,000 sailors contract the virus since last month.

But the senators were es-

pecially critical of Esper's decision to issue broad guidance to the force on protective measures, leaving much of the military's response to the pandemic in the hands of local commanders who implemented varying interpretations of social distancing measures and other health guidelines.

"Your inability or unwillingness to issue clear, department-wide guidance has forced the services and local commanders to make their own decisions on a case-by-case basis," the senators wrote. "Although local commanders know their units and operating environments better than anyone in the Pentagon, they are not public health experts. And they are now left to make decisions they should never have to make."

Esper has repeatedly defended his decisions throughout the pandemic response. He has said that providing commanders broad guidelines was necessary to give them leeway for differing coronavirus threats around the world and varying operating environments.

64 Kidd sailors have tested positive

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The number of coronavirus cases aboard the USS Kidd rose to 64 as the Navy destroyer pulled into port at San Diego on Tuesday to get medical care for the crew and to disinfect and decontaminate the ship.

The Kidd is the second Navy ship to have an outbreak of the disease while at sea, the other being the USS Theodore Roosevelt, an aircraft carrier that has been docked at Guam for a month. The Roosevelt has more than 900 sailors with confirmed cases of COVID-19, but the entire crew has now been tested.

The Navy has moved swiftly

to get the Kidd's crew ashore. That was a point of contention with the Roosevelt, whose skipper, Capt. Brett Crozier, felt compelled to write to several other commanders pleading for more urgent Navy action to protect his crew of nearly 5,000.

Crozier was then relieved of command for what the Navy's top civilian official at the time, Thomas Modly, called poor judgment. Modly resigned several days later, and the Navy is now seeking higher-level approval to reverse his move and restore Crozier to command.

The Navy said that 63% of the Kidd's crew of more than 300 had been tested as of Tuesday. One sailor was medically evacuated to the United States

on April 22 after experiencing shortness of breath. Fifteen were transferred to another ship with a medical facility for closer observation of symptoms.

Sailors being removed from the Kidd at San Diego will be isolated with twice-daily medical screenings.

Crew members who have tested negative will enter quarantine for a period of observation, with military health professionals monitoring them for symptoms. Also, a small contingent of sailors who tested negative will remain on the ship for essential services and deep cleaning. The cleaning is expected to take two weeks.

US economy shrank 4.8% last quarter

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The U.S. economy shrank at a 4.8% annual rate last quarter as the coronavirus pandemic shut down much of the country and began triggering a recession that will end the longest expansion on record.

Yet the drop in the January-March quarter will be only a precursor of a far grimmer report to come on the current April-June period, with business shutdowns and layoffs striking with devastating force. With much of the economy paralyzed, the Congressional Budget Office has estimated that economic activity will plunge this quarter at a 40% annual rate.

That would be, by a breathtaking margin, the bleakest quarter since such records were first compiled in 1947. It would be four times the size of the worst quarterly contraction on record set in 1958.

The Commerce Department estimated Wednesday that the gross domestic product, the total output of goods and services, posted a quarterly drop for the first time in six years. And it was the sharpest fall since the economy shrank at an 8.4% annual rate in the fourth quarter of 2008 in the depths of the Great Recession.

“The longest U.S. economic expansion has ended,” said Gregory Daco, chief economist at Oxford Economics.

Daco predicted that the recession will cause a drop in output that will be three times the size of the economic decline during the Great Recession.

In just a few weeks, businesses across the country have shut down and laid off tens of millions of workers. Factories and stores are shuttered. Home sales are falling. Households are slashing spending. Consumer confidence is sinking.

The GDP report showed that the weakness was led by plummeting consumer spending, which accounts for 70% of economic activity. Consumer spending tumbled at an annual rate of 7.6% in the first quarter — its steepest decline since 1980.

Business investment was also weak: It sank 2.6%, with investment in equipment down a sharp 15.2%.

A rare bright spot in the report was trade, which added 1.3 percentage points to GDP activity in the quarter. Government spending was up 0.7% in the first quarter, a figure that will likely accelerate with all of the support Congress has approved for rescue packages.

And housing showed a 21% increase in

the first quarter, boosted by lower mortgage rates. But home sales, like much of the economy, have taken a nosedive since the virus-related shutdowns began in mid-March.

As the economy slides into what looks like a severe recession, some economists are holding out hope that a recovery will arrive quickly and robustly once the health crisis has been solved — what some call a V-shaped recovery. Increasingly, though, analysts say they think the economy will struggle to regain its momentum even after the viral outbreak has subsided.

Many Americans, they suggest, could remain too fearful to travel, shop at stores or visit restaurants or movie theaters anywhere near as much as they used to. In addition, local and state officials may continue to limit, for health reasons, how many people may congregate in such places at any one time, thereby making it difficult for many businesses to survive. It’s why some economists say the damage from the downturn could persist far longer than some may assume.

There is also fear that the coronavirus could flare up again after the economy is reopened, forcing reopened businesses to shut down again.

Experimental drug proved effective against virus

Associated Press

Science provided a glimmer of hope Wednesday when a biotech company announced that an experimental drug proved effective against coronavirus in a government study.

The virus has infected more than 3.1 million people and killed close to 220,000 people worldwide, according to a tally by Johns Hopkins University. On Tuesday, the confirmed death toll in the U.S. surpassed the 58,220 American service members killed in Vietnam, according to the university’s statistics.

The true toll is believed to be much higher because of limited testing, differences in counting the dead and concealment by some governments.

Amid the lockdowns that have closed factories and businesses from coast to coast, the U.S. said that the gross domestic product, or economic output, shrank at an annual rate of 4.8% in the January-March period, the sharpest quarterly drop since the global meltdown of more than a decade ago.

Economic damage continued to pile up elsewhere around the world.

Globally, the United Nations’ main labor

body raised its prediction of full-time-equivalent job losses in the second quarter to an estimated 305 million.

It also projected that 1.6 billion workers in the “informal economy,” including those working without proper contracts or oversight by government regulation, “stand in immediate danger of having their livelihoods destroyed.” That is nearly half the global workforce of 3.3 billion people.

In Paris, aircraft maker Airbus reported a first-quarter loss of \$515 million, laid off thousands of workers and sought billions in loans to pull through the crisis.

Ratings agency Fitch cut Italy’s government debt rating in the first downgrade of a major economy. The country was lowered one notch to BBB-, just one level above junk bond status. It expects the outbreak to shrink the Italian economy by 8% this year.

Germany’s economy minister said the government is projecting a contraction of about 11% in GDP by the end of the quarter. But he also predicted a sharp recovery in 2021.

On Wall Street, the S&P 500 surged 2.3% in morning trading, and stocks in Europe also jumped, after biotech company Gilead Sciences reported that remdesivir works.

It gave no immediate details.

Still, many health experts believe the key to ending the crisis will be a vaccine, and developing one could take a year or more.

With the crisis easing in places like Italy, France and Spain, European governments are turning their attention to rethinking public transportation to get their economies up and running again without setting off a second wave of infections.

Solutions include putting red stickers on the floor to tell bus passengers in Milan how far apart to stand. The Dutch are putting on longer, roomier trains. Berlin and many other cities are opening up more lanes to bicyclists. And in Britain, bus passengers are using the middle or rear doors to reduce the risk to the driver.

With South Koreans about to celebrate their longest holiday since infections there surged in February, authorities urged people to think twice about traveling and to continue to wear masks, not share food and stay home if they are feeling sick.

“We must not let a moment of carelessness trigger mass transmissions that would make the efforts we invested so far vanish like bubbles of water,” Vice Health Minister Kim Gang-lip said.

New York state sees new hospitalizations dip

Associated Press

NEW YORK — New COVID-19 hospitalizations in New York state are averaging under 1,000 a day for the first time this month, the latest sign of slowly decreasing pressure on the health care system.

Gov. Andrew Cuomo told reporters Tuesday that hospitalizations and deaths from the outbreak were both continuing to tick down. The daily death toll dropped again, with 335 deaths reported Monday — the lowest daily tally recorded in April and the third straight day under 400.

There have been 17,638 deaths in New York since the outbreak began, according to state figures. The state total doesn't include more than 5,200 New York City deaths that were attributed to the virus on death certificates but weren't confirmed by a lab test.

At the peak of the outbreak earlier this month, there had been more than 3,000 new COVID-19 hospitalizations a day, based on a three-day rolling average. The comparable figure released Tuesday was 953.

"It's still a significant number of people," Cuomo said. "But overall you see the numbers coming down, so that's good news."

The total number of patients hospitalized dropped to 12,646.

With caseloads dropping, the Navy hospital ship USNS Comfort, sent to relieve stress on city hospitals at the height of the pandemic, was set to depart Thursday.

Operations also appeared to be winding down at the temporary federal medical facility at the Javits Center. There were 69 patients inside the cavernous Manhattan convention center Tuesday, according to the Cuomo administration.

California

NEWPORT BEACH — Newport Beach won't close its beaches, officials voted Tuesday, despite criticism by California's governor that weekend crowds threatened efforts to

slow the coronavirus and reopen the state's economy.

The City Council voted 5-2 to reject a motion to close the beaches for the next three weekends, although city piers and the famous Wedge surfing spot are shut down. There will be additional enforcement of social distancing rules, officials said.

The vote during a virtual meeting came after 80,000 people hit shores in the Orange County city last weekend when the first heat wave of the year sent temperatures soaring. Lifeguards said most people appeared to be obeying social distancing rules and maintaining 6 feet of distance between groups.

Many recreational areas, from hiking trails to parks and playgrounds, have been shut down for weeks and tens of millions of Californians have been encouraged to avoid going out under various stay-at-home orders designed to limit contact that could spread COVID-19.

Georgia

ATLANTA — Two Georgia men were hospitalized after drinking cleaning products hoping to prevent a coronavirus infection.

Georgia Poison Control Director Gaylord Lopez told the Atlanta Journal-Constitution the men in Atlanta, who had a history of mental health issues, are expected to recover after drinking the products over the weekend.

Lopez said he does not know if the men ingested the cleaning solutions because of President Donald Trump's musings on whether injecting disinfectants could treat the virus.

The first man in Atlanta drank about 16 ounces of bleach. He was treated in a hospital and has since been discharged from a psychiatric ward, Lopez said. Authorities did not reveal his identity but noted the man was in his 50s.

A second man in his 30s was discharged after he guzzled a mixture of Pine-Sol, mouthwash, beer and pain medica-

tions, Lopez said. At least two other people in Georgia have consumed household chemicals since the virus outbreak began and before Trump made his comments, the news outlet reported.

Kentucky

LEXINGTON — Lottery tickets in Kentucky took a nosedive amid the coronavirus pandemic.

Chip Polston, the state lottery's vice president of communications, told WLEX-TV that Kentucky's Mega Millions and Powerball jackpots sales are down 50%, or nearly \$9.2 million, compared to the same period last year.

Polston said the Kentucky Lottery would still honor the commitment it made to send thousands of students to college through its proceeds despite the sales drop.

Lottery tickets have also been declining in other states during the virus outbreak.

Louisiana

NEW ORLEANS — In much of Louisiana, restaurant owners are cautiously looking forward to opening some outdoor tables, and mall stores to beginning curbside service. But New Orleans won't be participating in those slight relaxations of rules set up to slow the spread of the new coronavirus — even though Gov. John Bel Edwards cited it as meeting federal guidelines for a wider reopening.

Edwards has extended Louisiana's stay-at-home order through May 15, with those two tweaks to start Friday. But New Orleans' stricter rules will continue through May 15, Mayor LaToya Cantrell said.

In a statement Monday night, she said, "It is absolutely critical for the safety of our people that residents continue to STAY HOME at this time, and not move prematurely to resume public activity."

North Dakota

FARGO — Barbers, bartenders and baristas in North Dako-

ta can return to work later this week, after Gov. Doug Burgum unveiled guidelines Tuesday for reopening certain businesses that have been closed to slow the spread of the coronavirus.

The plan to ease restrictions includes tough love for some types of businesses, such as limiting bars and restaurants to half capacity, requiring barbers and cosmetologists to wear face masks and prohibiting some high-intensity fitness classes.

Burgum had ordered all bars, restaurants, barber shops, beauty salons and health clubs shut down until Thursday. He said it's unlikely that he will extend the order because he believes the state has made significant strides in containing the spread of COVID-19, even though the number of confirmed cases is still rising.

Ohio

COLUMBUS — Gov. Mike DeWine on Tuesday relaxed his order on mandatory face coverings for business customers and clients, saying that after receiving input on his decision, mask-wearing will be recommended but not required.

The governor clarified late in the day that masks will still be required for employees under most circumstances.

DeWine said he recognized that the order covering customers was off-putting to many Ohioans who saw it as "one government mandate too far," the governor said.

As of Tuesday night, the first protocol on DeWine's online list for businesses starting to reopen said: "Require face coverings for employees and recommend them for clients/customers at all times."

For employees, the recommendation is mandatory "unless not advisable by a health care professional, goes against industry best practices, or is not permitted by federal or state laws and regulations," the governor's office said.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Speedy Gonzalez, mail fraud suspect, arrested

GA LAWRENCEVILLE — After months on the run, a mail fraud suspect who lived up to his legal name — Speedy Gonzalez — was arrested in Georgia.

The 35-year-old Buford man — who shares a name with the fast-running cartoon mouse — was taken into custody during a traffic stop in Gwinnett County, authorities said. Authorities began looking for Gonzalez after a victim reported in January that multiple checks were stolen from his mailbox in Suwanee, Gwinnett County police said in a statement.

Police determined Gonzalez was the one who swiped the checks, then visited a Home Depot to buy more than \$3,000 worth of merchandise with the funds before returning the items for cash, officials said.

Habitat safeguard for snakes proposed

AZ TUCSON — Conservationists are having a mixed reaction to a proposal from federal wildlife officials to protect critical habitats of endangered garter snakes in Arizona and New Mexico.

Jenny Loda, attorney for The Center for Biological Diversity, said the number of acres that would receive protection is far less than previously stated.

Under the proposal, more than 18,700 acres of critical habitat for narrow-headed garter snakes and nearly 27,800 acres for the northern Mexican garter snake would be safeguarded across both states.

This proposal is a culmination of a failed attempt by U.S. Fish and Wildlife to finalize a proposal in 2013 that would have protected more than 420,000 acres.

Twin sisters accepted to 5 Ivy League schools

NJ CLIFTON — A set of fraternal twin sisters from New Jersey was accepted to five Ivy League universities.

Jessica and Nicole Alexander got the good news late last month when they learned they had earned spots at Dartmouth, Princeton, Harvard, the University of Pennsylvania and Yale.

The Clifton residents say they've narrowed their selection down to two universities, though they haven't said which ones, and both are open to attending different schools.

School buses deliver internet to students

VA HOPEWELL — A school district in Virginia is outfitting school buses with wireless routers to deliver high-quality internet to students who can't get online.

The Progress-Index reported that the 31 school buses in the Hopewell City Public Schools will be able to send wireless signals to homes within roughly 300 feet.

Kris Reed, the supervisor of information technology at Hopewell City Public Schools, said the project's aim is to help close the "equity gap" of internet access in the district.

Welcome mat seeks warrant, deputies did

FL PALM COAST — A welcome mat at the front door of a Florida home read "come back with a warrant" — and that's just what deputies did before finding drugs and drug paraphernalia inside.

The Daytona Beach News-Journal reported the home in

Palm Coast was part of an investigation into illegal drugs. After seeing the doormat, authorities said the Flagler County Sheriff's Office got the warrant.

Deputies found fentanyl and drug paraphernalia inside during a search.

Police break up crowd of drivers, spectators

MO ST. LOUIS — Officers were called to downtown St. Louis recently to break up a crowd of between 200 and 250 stunt drivers and spectators, police said.

Officers who arrived at the scene found it packed with cars and people, television station KMOV reported. The event included drivers doing burnouts in the parking lot near Busch Stadium and speeding down the street, witnesses and police said. The crowd violated a state-issued stay-at-home order and ban on gatherings of more than 10 people as part of an effort to slow the spread of COVID-19.

Stinging caterpillars are out in some areas

MS STARKVILLE — It's stinging caterpillar season in Mississippi and Louisiana — spiny buck moth caterpillars are out and about.

The 2-inch-long critters are fearsome-looking, armed with rows of branched spines. Those connect to glands producing venom so potent that even a glancing touch from a falling buck-moth caterpillar can bring on instant pain and swelling.

April and May are the usual months for the caterpillars in Louisiana and Mississippi. In Alabama, they show up in May and June, according to an Auburn University entomologist.

Ex-golf course worker charged in thefts

PA EASTON — A former employee of a Pennsylvania golf course was charged in connection with a series of thefts that totaled more than \$100,000.

A number of charges were filed against Patrick Mallory, 52, of Wayne, N.J., including theft of trade secrets from the Morgan Hill Golf Course in Williams Township. The thefts took place from 2016 to 2017 and may have cost the business and its customers \$100,515, according to a state police report.

Mallory is also accused of sharing confidential trade secrets from his former employer with a business partner.

He faces charges of theft of movable property and eight counts of theft by false impression.

Teen accused of throwing rocks at drivers

LA BATON ROUGE — A 14-year-old was arrested for allegedly throwing large rocks at motorists in Louisiana's capital.

WAFB-TV reported the teenager is accused in three incidents and faces three counts of aggravated criminal damage to property.

A Baton Rouge Police Department spokesman said the incidents occurred as vehicles traveled Interstate 110 in Baton Rouge. In one incident a rock shattered the windshield of a Prairieville woman's vehicle, hitting her head. The injury required staples.

The woman, whose name was not released, posted on Facebook pictures of a gash to her head that was caused by the broken glass.

From wire reports

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NASCAR gets OK to stage Coca-Cola 600

Associated Press

CHARLOTTE, N.C. — NASCAR can go forward with the Coca-Cola 600 at Charlotte Motor Speedway without fans in attendance at the end of May unless health conditions deteriorate in the state, the governor of North Carolina said Tuesday.

Gov. Roy Cooper said he and state public health officials have had discussions with NASCAR and the speedway located in Concord regarding safety protocols for staging the race. Cooper said the state offered input on NASCAR's plan, but he believes the race can go forward on Memorial Day weekend for the 60th consecutive year.

"We believe that unless health conditions go down, we believe we can hold the Coca-Cola 600," Cooper said. "I think NASCAR will be making that announcement, but that's what will happen."

NASCAR on Monday gave teams its latest revised schedule, which shows racing resuming May 17 at Darlington

Raceway in South Carolina, followed by a second race at that track on May 20. The 600 would be held on May 24, followed by a second race at Charlotte on May 27.

Marcus Smith, president and CEO of North Carolina-based Speedway Motorsports, thanked Cooper for working with Charlotte Motor Speedway "to get NASCAR back on track with the Coca-Cola 600 on Memorial Day weekend where it belongs."

Cooper last week extended North Carolina's stay-at-home order through May 8. Most teams are based in the Charlotte area and are expected to return to work this week as essential businesses.

NASCAR completed four of its 36 races before the season was suspended because of the coronavirus pandemic. The sanctioning body has vowed to run all 36 Cup Series races, although the schedule will change dramatically and some tracks likely will be dropped this season if their state does

not permit a sporting event.

NASCAR has yet to publicly release its safety plans but is expected to limit team rosters, have one-day events, and scrap qualifying and practice at many places. A proposal to eliminate pit stops to reduce the number of team employees at the track has stalled.

South Carolina has said it will host a "spring" NASCAR race, while Florida and Texas have said NASCAR is welcome to compete without spectators. NASCAR for now is trying to schedule events only at tracks within driving distance to the Charlotte region so teams can get to a track, compete and return home in one day without needing air travel or hotel accommodations.

Darlington is owned by NASCAR, while Speedway Motorsports owns the Charlotte track. Because tracks will now likely host more events than originally scheduled, track operators will likely relinquish events at other venues to make the 36 races fit.

Eight events have been suspended, but NASCAR could have difficulty moving forward with some events, like the June race scheduled at Sonoma Raceway in California. That track is owned by Speedway Motorsports, which could shift Sonoma's date to another one of its properties.

That sort of shuffling is what NASCAR is working through now, as well as who can enter the track and how to socially distance the teams.

North Carolina House Speaker Tim Moore, one of the state lawmakers to initially petition Cooper to permit racing at Charlotte Motor Speedway, welcomed the return of NASCAR and praised the "Tar Heel spirit."

"I appreciate this collaborative effort to help NASCAR run the Coca-Cola 600 and believe that this is an important step in bringing our economy back, bringing businesses back, and bringing exciting competitive events back to North Carolina," he said.

NCAA board approves compensating athletes

Associated Press

The NCAA is moving forward with a plan to allow college athletes to earn money for endorsements and a host of other activities involving personal appearances and social media.

The NCAA announced Wednesday that its Board of Governors supports a plan that gives athletes the ability to cash in on their names, images and likenesses as never before and without involvement from the association, schools or conferences.

Ohio State President and board chairman Michael Drake called it an "unprecedented" move by the NCAA.

The next step is for membership to draft legislation by Oct. 30. A formal vote will be taken by schools at the next conven-

tion in January and new rules will go into effect no later than the 2021-22 academic year.

"NCAA membership schools have embraced very real change," NCAA President Mark Emmert said in a conference call with reporters Wednesday.

The nation's largest governing body for college sports said it will still seek a federal law to keep individual states from passing their own laws on compensation for college athletes.

The board on Monday and Tuesday reviewed detailed recommendations put forth by a working group led by Ohio State athletic director Gene Smith and Big East Commissioner Val Ackerman. The recommendations took an aggressive approach, opening the door for athletes to make money on ev-

erything from autograph signings and memorabilia sales to signing endorsement deals with companies large and small.

College athletes will not be allowed to use their schools' logos or markings in any sponsorship deals, but they will be permitted to use agent representation in making any deals.

Smith said there will be "guardrails" in place to ensure athletes are being compensated at an appropriate rate for their services and there will be consequences for athletes who do not meet disclosure requirements.

Payments to athletes will not be permitted to be used as recruiting inducements to high school athletes.

The need for change was sped up by pressure from state lawmakers. California was first to pass a bill into law that

would make it illegal for NCAA schools to prohibit college athletes from making money on endorsements, social media advertising and other activities tied to name, image and likeness.

Dozens of states have followed California's lead, some more aggressively than others. California's law does not go into effect until 2023 while a Florida bill awaiting the governor's signature would go into effect July 2021.

"It's clear we need Congress' help in all of this," Emmert said.

NCAA leaders have already been engaged with federal lawmakers.

The working group was put together about a year ago, but its work kicked into high gear since the NCAA convention in January.

Sources: MLB considering regional play

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Major League Baseball is exploring various options that could allow the season to start if the medical situation allows, including a plan in which the 30 teams might be split into three regional divisions.

Among the formats under consideration is one in which teams could be restricted to playing within their region, two people familiar with the discussions said Tuesday. The people spoke to The Associated Press on condition of anonymity.

That plan, if used, would break up the traditional alignments of the American and National leagues. It also would cut travel during the pandemic.

MLB also has looked at configurations for all-Arizona, Arizona-and-Florida and Arizona-plus-Texas-plus-Florida locations, the people said. The plan was first reported by USA Today.

Another variation would have teams start in Arizona, Texas and Florida, playing in empty ballparks, and then if the health situation allows, switch later to their regular-season sites. If conditions improve later in the year, they possibly could start playing before fans with only a percentage of seats sold.

Opening day was scheduled for March 26, but the new coronavirus caused MLB to delay the start to mid-May at the earliest.

Any plan would be subject to medical approval plus consent of federal, state and local authorities. Any schedule with games at neutral sites or without fans would require an agreement between MLB and the players' association.

Baseball officials have told the union of their thinking but have not made any formal proposals.

Baseball also is considering expanding playoffs beyond the 10-team format. Officials have discussed extending the playoffs into November or possibly even December, using domed ballparks and warm-weather cities.

Any plan would be contingent on baseball gaining access to test about 3,000 people

on a regular basis: about 1,200 players plus staff and broadcast personnel. Players most likely would need three to four weeks of workouts before opening day.

Baseball officials have been encouraged by statements about starting the season from President Donald Trump, Govs. Greg Abbott (Texas), Andrew Cuomo (New York) and Tom Wolf (Pennsylvania) and Chicago Mayor Lori Lightfoot, one of the people said.

In a sign of baseball's significance, Cuomo appointed Yankees president Randy Levine and Mets chief operating officer Jeff Wilpon to his New York Forward reopening advisory board on Tuesday.

Mid-level recruits hurt by shutdown of summer hoops

Associated Press

PHOENIX — Jake Murphy expected this summer to be his showcase for college coaches, a chance to catch an eye, hopefully earn a Division I basketball scholarship.

The 6-foot-3 guard for Phoenix-based PowerHouse Hoops garnered attention from schools in the West Coast, Southern, Big Sky and Atlantic Sun. Murphy just needed to prove what he could do against elite competition over the summer after being hampered by injuries and changes in the recruiting calendar.

Once the world changed, so did his plans. The coronavirus pandemic put sports on hold and the summer basketball circuit with it, leaving non-elite basketball recruits with no opportunity to make an in-person impression on college coaches.

Murphy opted to take the most sensible road rather than try sorting through the uncertainty, committing to play at the Air Force Academy, where his brother was already a cadet.

"I think if I could have played in front of more coaches, there's always the chance of a very different outcome," Murphy said. "But with how everything went

and kind of happened, I feel like this is how it's supposed to be."

The spread of COVID-19 has led to a dramatic shift in recruiting practices for college basketball coaches. Instead of crisscrossing the country to watch recruits play and hosting them for on-campus visits, coaches now have to get creative while in lockdown mode.

So do the recruits trying to get their attention.

The high-end recruits? They'll be fine. Coaches have been tracking most of them since middle school and already know what they can do.

The middle-of-the-road and borderline-Division I recruits still have something to prove. The pandemic prevents them from doing it in person, leaving game video or long-distance communication as the only options to make an impression.

"Those are the kids that are hurt the most because they don't have an opportunity to break out and play in front of coaches. It's tough for them," said Ryan Silver, director and founder of the West Coast Elite Under Armour program. "The coaches can watch film, but want to see them live."

Video tells one story, usually the most positive one, at

least when it comes to highlight reels. Live is where the middle-to-lower-level recruits make their mark.

Playing in front of college coaches provides an opportunity to show off intangibles, like attitude, coachability, adaptability, basketball knowledge, whether a player might be molded into a particular system. Sometimes all it takes is one play for a recruit on a smaller summer team or one buried on the bench of a larger one to catch a coach's attention.

Those opportunities, at least for now, are gone.

"The no-brainers are still the no-brainers. Maybe their egos are hurt a little bit because they don't have the ability to earn their way up five more spots on the (recruiting ratings) board or something," PowerHouse Hoops coach John Ortega said. "But this hurts the tweeners, for sure, the guys that are 6-3 and below, the very skilled players that need to show that, 'hey, I can guard better athletes or I can play this other position.' Now they can't."

The summer shutdown will likely have lasting implications into the fall and beyond.

Players who were expecting to make college decisions dur-

ing the early signing period in November now may wait to make a commitment as they weigh options and coaches sort out their rosters.

Like Murphy, Dexter Stratton has generated interest from plenty of college coaches, mostly across the West since he wants to be close to home where his family can watch him play.

The 6-7 forward from San Diego could have expanded his options with a good summer playing for his summer-league team. Instead, the virus has forced him to stay home, attending daily Zoom meetings with West Coast Elite, working on ballhandling, lifting weights, running hills and getting shots up in his driveway.

The coaches may not be able to watch him play, but Stratton is keeping himself on their radar by continuing conversations and sending film.

"It pushes things back a little bit," Stratton said. "It makes it harder to have an idea at a time right now. But my goal is right about the start of my senior year for high school, maybe not be committed, but have a really good idea."