

STARS AND STRIPES[®]

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Lights return in Texas as water woes rise

Associated Press

AUSTIN, Texas — States slammed by winter storms that left millions without power for days have traded one crisis for another: Broken water pipes brought on by record-low temperatures have created a shortage of clean drinking water, shut down airports and left hospitals scrambling.

Texas authorities ordered 7 million people — a quarter of the population of the nation's second-largest state — to boil tap water before drinking it because low water pressure could have allowed bacteria to seep into the system. A man died at an Abilene health care facility when a lack of water pressure made medical treatment impossible.

About 260,000 homes and businesses in Tennessee's largest county, which includes Memphis, were told to boil water due to water main ruptures and problems at pumping stations. Memphis International Airport canceled all incoming and outgoing passenger flights Friday due to water pressure issues.

And in Jackson, Miss, most of the city of about 161,000 was without water. Crews pumped water to refill city tanks but faced a shortage of chemicals for treatment because icy roads made it difficult for distrib-

utors to deliver them, Mayor Chokwe Antar Lumumba said.

"We are dealing with an extreme challenge with getting more water through our distribution system," Lumumba said.

The city was providing water for flushing toilets and drinking, but residents had to drive to set locations to pick it up — leaving elderly and those living on icy roads vulnerable.

Lisa Thomas said her driveway, located on a hill, is a sheet of ice. Her husband, who is on a defibrillator and heart monitor, is running out of his heart medication, with enough to get him through Sunday, because she hasn't been able to make it to the pharmacy to refill it.

"It would be nice to have some type of answers," she said. "People are in dire need here. We need urgent help."

The water woes were the latest misery for residents left without heat or electricity for days after ice and snow storms swept through early in the week, forcing utilities from Minnesota to Texas to implement rolling blackouts to ease strained power grids.

Texas' grid operators said Friday that the system has returned to normal for the first time since a storm knocked out power to more than 4 million customers. Smaller out-

ages remained, but Bill Magness, president of the Electric Reliability Council of Texas, says the grid again has enough capacity to provide power throughout the entire system.

Gov. Greg Abbott has ordered an investigation into the failure in the energy capital of the U.S., while ERCOT officials have defended their preparations and the decision to begin forced outages early Monday as the grid reached a breaking point.

The storms also left more than 330,000 from Virginia to Louisiana without power and about 71,000 in Oregon were still enduring a weeklong outage following a massive ice and snow storm.

The extreme weather was blamed for the deaths of at least 59 people, including a Tennessee farmer trying to save two calves that apparently wandered into a frozen pond. A growing number of people have perished trying to keep warm.

Federal Emergency Management Agency acting administrator Bob Fenton said teams were in Texas with fuel, water, blankets and other supplies. "What has me most worried is making sure that people stay warm," Fenton said on "CBS This Morning," while urging people without heat to go to a shelter or warming center.

Biden urges allies to prove democracy not a 'relic'

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — In his first big appearance on the global stage, President Joe Biden called on fellow world leaders to show together that "democracies can still deliver" as he underscored his administration's determination to quickly turn the page on Donald Trump's "America First" approach.

Biden, in a virtual address Friday to the annual Munich Security Conference, said it was a critical time for the world's democracies to "prove that our model isn't a relic of our history."

"We are in the midst of a fundamental debate about the future direction of our world," Biden said in the address just after taking part in his first meeting as president with fellow Group of Seven world leaders.

That debate is "between those who argue that — given all of the challenges we face, from the fourth industrial revolution to a global pandemic — autocracy is the best way forward and those who understand that democracy is essential to meeting those challenges."

Biden made his address to a global audience as his administration has begun reversing Trump administration policies.

He said that the U.S. stands ready to rejoin talks about reentering the 2015 multilateral Iran nuclear deal abandoned by the Trump administration. The Biden administration announced Thursday its desire to reengage Iran, and it took action at the United Nations aimed at restoring policy to what it was before President Donald Trump with-

drew from the deal in 2018.

Biden also spoke out about the economic and national security challenges posed by Russia and China, as well as the two-decade war in Afghanistan, where he faces a May 1 deadline to remove the remaining 2,500 U.S. troops under a Trump administration negotiated peace agreement with the Taliban.

As he underlined challenges facing the U.S. and its allies, Biden tried to make clear that he's determined to repair a U.S.-Europe relationship that was strained under Trump, who repeatedly questioned the value of historic alliances.

"I know the past few years have strained and tested the transatlantic relationship," Biden said.

Cold-stunned sea turtles rescued by Navy families

The Washington Post

Will Bellamy spotted two injured birds along the Texas coast earlier this week, and the self-described animal lover delivered them to conservationists for care. But the conservationists had a message themselves, he said: watch out for distressed sea turtles.

The deadly winter storm that swept across Texas and parts of the South knocked out power and water for millions. It also created a catastrophe for animals statewide — including for sea turtles prone to freezing in frigid waters.

Bellamy, an Army and Marine Corps veteran who served in Iraq and Haiti, spotted some turtles Tuesday with his son Jerome. But he needed help. He alerted Capt. Christopher Jason, the commander of Naval Air Station Corpus Christi in southeastern Texas, and his wife, Cheryl Jason. The commander grabbed his

kayak, paddled into the cold waves and retrieved a lapful of cold-shocked turtles.

But the next day, on Bellamy's turtle patrol, the situation became far more urgent, he said, and one that would require a lot more hands.

"It was like an apocalypse of turtles littered on the beach," Bellamy told *The Washington Post* in a phone interview Thursday.

More than 800 turtles have since been plucked from Laguna Madre by a ragtag group of about 50 Navy pilots and flight students, military spouses, family members and military retirees, said Biji Pandisseril, the Navy installation's environmental manager. More turtles are still coming in, he said, and some have died.

Green sea turtles, listed as a threatened species, feast on grasses found in the waters of Laguna Madre, but in winter weath-

er, the chilling shallow water zaps strength from the cold-blooded reptiles. They become immobile and unable to power their fins to warmer, deeper waters, putting them at risk of dying of predation or exposure, according to the National Park Service. Some wash ashore like driftwood.

Rescuing "cold-stunned" turtles has become an annual routine in Texas, with dozens or hundreds aided in a typical year, Sajuana Zavala, a spokeswoman for the conservation group Sea Turtle Inc. told *The Post*.

But with the weather so much more severe, thousands of turtles have been rescued in the larger effort this week. Many could die if facilities that care for them don't get power soon, the group has said.

Word spread in the military community, but the movement began with Bellamy flagging down motorists to help, he said. From there, the efforts mush-

roomed to a full-blown operation. Bellamy said one active duty Navy pilot trainee on scene called in other trainees with pickup trucks to haul the stunned turtles to heated storage facilities at the air station.

Jason kayaked out to distant turtles, while others used a more novel approach: wielding laundry baskets to corral them in shallow water.

Back at the storage facility, the inevitable happened, Pandisseril said. The turtles, suddenly warmer, began moving — though, of course, a little slowly. The volunteers did their best to contain them for 24 hours, when they were handed off to Park Service officials, he said.

"Things have been rough over the past year. It's fun to see people come together focused on recovering these turtles. People just need it," Bellamy said.

NASA's Perseverance rover lands on Mars to look for life

Associated Press

CAPE CANAVERAL, Fla. — A NASA rover streaked through the orange Martian sky and landed on the planet Thursday, accomplishing the riskiest step yet in an epic quest to bring back rocks that could answer whether life ever existed on Mars.

Ground controllers at the space agency's Jet Propulsion Laboratory in Pasadena, Calif., leaped to their feet, thrust their arms in the air and cheered in both triumph and relief on receiving confirmation that the six-wheeled Perseverance had touched down on the red planet, long a deathtrap for incoming spacecraft.

"Now the amazing science starts," a jubilant Thomas Zurbuchen, NASA's science mission chief, said at a news conference, where he theatrically ripped up

the contingency plan in the event of a failure and threw the document over his shoulders.

The landing marks the third visit to Mars in just over a week. Two spacecraft from the United Arab Emirates and China swung into orbit around Mars on successive days last week. Perseverance, the biggest, most advanced rover ever sent by NASA, became the ninth spacecraft since the 1970s to successfully land on Mars, every one of them from the U.S.

The car-size, plutonium-powered vehicle arrived at Jezero Crater, hitting NASA's smallest and trickiest target yet: a 5-by-4-mile strip on an ancient river delta full of pits, cliffs and rocks. Scientists believe that if life ever flourished on Mars, it would have happened 3 billion to 4 billion years ago, when water still flowed on the planet.

Accelerated Afghan peace talks urged by NATO chief

Associated Press

BRUSSELS — NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg on Thursday urged the Afghan government and the Taliban to step up the pace of peace talks amid doubts over whether the military alliance will pull thousands of troops out of the country by a May deadline.

NATO has just under 10,000 troops in the war-ravaged country, helping to train and advise the Afghan security forces. Most are not U.S. forces, but those troops could not continue the NATO operation if American transport, logistics and other support were withdrawn.

President Joe Biden is reviewing his predecessor's 2020 deal with the Taliban, which includes a May 1 deadline for a final U.S.

troop withdrawal. In Washington, calls are mounting for the United States to delay the final exit or renegotiate the deal to allow the presence of a smaller, intelligence-based American force.

"The problem is that we are in a situation where we have a date — the 1st of May — approaching and so far we have seen that the peace talks are fragile," Stoltenberg said after chairing a meeting of NATO defense ministers, including new U.S. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin.

"The talks are fragile, and progress is slow. So, it is now imperative to re-energize the peace process," Stoltenberg said, referring to the stalled negotiations in Qatar between the Afghan government and the Taliban.

Breach shows need for bigger budget

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Jolted by a sweeping hack that may have revealed government and corporate secrets to Russia, U.S. officials are scrambling to reinforce the nation's cyber defenses and recognizing that an agency created two years ago to protect America's networks and infrastructure lacks the money, tools and authority to counter such sophisticated threats.

The breach, which hijacked widely used software from Texas-based SolarWinds Inc., has exposed the profound vulnerability of civilian government networks and the limitations of efforts to detect threats. It's also likely to unleash a wave of spending on technology modernization and cybersecurity.

"It's really highlighted the investments we

need to make in cybersecurity to have the visibility to block these attacks in the future," Anne Neuberger, the newly appointed deputy national security adviser for cyber and emergency technology said Wednesday at a White House briefing.

The reaction reflects the severity of a hack that was disclosed only in December. The hackers, as yet unidentified but described by officials as "likely Russian," had unfettered access to the data and email of at least nine U.S. government agencies and about 100 private companies, with the full extent of the compromise still unknown. And while this incident appeared to be aimed at stealing information, it heightened fears that future hackers could damage critical infrastructure, like electrical grids or water systems.

President Joe Biden plans to release an ex-

ecutive order soon that Neuberger said will include about eight measures intended to address security gaps exposed by the hack. The administration has also proposed expanding by 30% the budget of the U.S. Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Agency, or CISA, a little-known entity now under intense scrutiny because of the SolarWinds breach.

Republicans and Democrats in Congress have called for expanding the size and role of the agency, a component of the Department of Homeland Security. It was created in November 2018 amid a sense that U.S. adversaries were increasingly targeting civilian government and corporate networks as well as the "critical" infrastructure, such as the energy grid that is increasingly vulnerable in a wired world.

Alaska woman attacked by bear in outhouse

Associated Press

ANCHORAGE, Alaska — An Alaska woman had the scare of a lifetime when using an outhouse in the backcountry and she was attacked by a bear, from below.

"I got out there and sat down on the toilet and immediately something bit my butt right as I sat down," Shannon Stevens told The Associated Press on Thursday. "I jumped up and I screamed when it happened."

Stevens, her brother Erik and his girlfriend had taken snowmobiles into the wilderness Feb. 13 to stay at his yurt, located about 20 miles northwest of Haines, in southeast Alaska.

Her brother heard the screaming and went out to the outhouse, about 150 feet

away from the yurt. There, he found Shannon tending to her wound. They at first thought she had been bitten by a squirrel or a mink, or something small.

Erik brought his headlamp with him to see what it was.

"I opened the toilet seat and there's just a bear face just right there at the level of the toilet seat, just looking right back up through the hole, right at me," he said.

"I just shut the lid as fast as I could. I said, 'There's a bear down there, we got to get out of here now,'" he said. "And we ran back to the yurt as fast as we could."

Once safely back inside, they treated Shannon with a first aid kit. They determined it wasn't that serious, but they would head to Haines if it worsened.

"It was bleeding, but it wasn't super bad," Shannon said.

Alaska Department of Fish and Game Wildlife Management Biologist Carl Koch suspects it was a black bear based upon photos of the tracks he saw and the fact that a neighbor living about a half mile away sent him a photo of a black bear on her property two days later.

Koch suspects Shannon's wound was caused by the bear swatting at her with a paw rather than being bitten. Either way, the location might be a first.

"As far as getting swatted on the butt when you're sitting down in winter, she could be the only person on Earth that this has ever happened to, for all I know," Koch said.

Honest Abe statues may be removed in Chicago

Associated Press

A city commission is determining the fate of monuments to Abraham Lincoln and George Washington and other historical figures in Chicago as part of a "racial healing and historical reckoning project" that began over the summer.

No decision has been made on whether any of the 41 statues and other commemorative markers of presidents Lincoln, Washington, Ulysses S. Grant and William McKinley, Benjamin Franklin, and more, will be taken down. But in a city where Lin-

coln Park and Grant Park attract visitors from around the world and in a state that the license plates call the "Land of Lincoln," the review adds a new wrinkle into the national conversation about honoring historical figures tied to slavery, oppression or subjugation.

"This project is a powerful opportunity for us to come together as a city to assess the many monuments and memorials across our neighborhoods and communities — to face our history and what and how we memorialize that history," Mayor Lori Light-

foot said in a statement. "Given the past year and in particular the past summer that made clear history isn't past, it is essential that residents are a part of this conversation."

The Chicago Monuments Project was launched over the summer to review more than 500 statues and monuments. On Wednesday, besides identifying statues and markers of Lincoln, Washington and others for review, the city launched a website that details those flagged for review by the mayor's commission on monuments.

Big storms, outages force tough choices

Associated Press

DALLAS — Weighing the risks in the pandemic era is fraught enough. But the storms and outages that have hit a big swath of the U.S. over the past several days have added a whole new layer of complexity.

Should we stay in a hotel or go to a shelter? And what to do about hand-washing, the most basic of precautions, when there is no running water?

Ella Ewart-Pierce, a public health analyst, said her family has been especially cautious about the coronavirus because her husband is in a vulnerable group. The Dallas couple has been working from home, avoiding places where people gather and getting groceries delivered.

But when they lost power, the risk calculation shifted. Ewart-Pierce said they decided to take their young kids to a hotel Monday after their home became so cold they had to shut off the water to keep the pipes from bursting.

“It was 13 degrees outside and our house was 38 degrees inside,” Ewart-Pierce said. “The kids were already crying because they were cold even though they were wearing all their clothes.”

Public health experts say that crowding people into shelters can contribute to the spread of COVID-19, but that there are ways to lower the risks, through masks and distancing.

“The ethics of the situation are simple enough,” said Dr. Stefan Kertesz, a University of Alabama at Birmingham professor of medicine and a homeless health researcher who runs a clinic for homeless veterans. “We can’t protect people tomorrow if they die today. Warming stations are needed.”

Texas

AUSTIN — Texas reported 97 more deaths Thursday from the new coronavirus that causes COVID-19, but state health offi-

cials say disruptions caused by this week’s winter weather are delaying many reports.

“Winter weather is affecting the reporting of new COVID-19 cases and fatalities across many jurisdictions. New case counts will be artificially low until reporting resumes,” said a statement on the Texas Department of State Health Services’ COVID-19 dashboard.

The confirmed and probable coronavirus cases reported to the state rose by 3,012 to 2,574,194, of which an estimated 235,855 are active. Of those, 7,874 required hospitalization as of Wednesday, the state’s most recent total made available. That was up from 7,609 the day before, the first increase in a month.

Alabama

MONTGOMERY — The number of people in Alabama hospitals with COVID-19 dipped Thursday to around 1,000, the lowest since late autumn.

The decline in hospitalizations, daily new cases and the percent of tests coming back positive — three major barometers of the pandemic’s severity — is an encouraging sign that the state has emerged from the record-setting winter surge, said Dr. Don Williamson, the president of the Alabama Hospital Association. An unknown, however, is if the state will see another spike from the spread of variants.

COVID-19 hospitalizations have declined from more than 3,000 on Jan. 11 to 1,003 on Thursday, the lowest level since early November.

“These are the best numbers we’ve seen certainly since November,” Williamson said. “We are headed in the right direction if we don’t do anything to mess it up.”

Williamson attributed the drop in hospitalizations to both a drop in cases and treatment with monoclonal antibodies.

Oregon

PORTLAND — The Oregon Health Authority reported Thursday that an infant boy in Oregon had tested positive for COVID-19 and died the same day.

“We have all worked together for nearly a year in Oregon to protect the lives of those we hold most dear,” Gov. Kate Brown said. “The loss of a life so young is an indescribable tragedy for a family.”

The infant boy, from Umatilla County, tested positive for the coronavirus at the Kadlec Regional Medical Center in Washington Jan. 17 and died the same day. Health officials say the infant had underlying health conditions.

The infant boy is the only person in Oregon nine or younger who has died from the virus. In addition there has only been one death between the ages of 10 and 19, based on data from the health authority.

Sin

Wisconsin

MADISON — Gov. Tony Evers on Thursday signed into law a bill that cuts taxes by nearly half a billion dollars for Wisconsin businesses that accepted loans to help them through the coronavirus pandemic.

The new law makes loans administered through the federal government’s Paycheck Protection Program tax deductible under Wisconsin’s tax code. The loans are already tax deductible under federal law but not under the state code. It’s estimated to result in a state tax cut of \$450 million by the middle of 2023.

“This past year has been challenging and unrelenting for so many, but since the beginning of this pandemic, we’ve been committed to providing economic relief to the folks who’ve been affected by the pandemic,” Evers said in a statement saying he was proud to deliver tax relief.

Florida

TALLAHASSEE — Since the first day Florida began receiving coronavirus vaccines, Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis said seniors 65 and up would be a priority, but now Democrats are criticizing him for targeting wealthy retirement communities.

DeSantis appeared at Lakewood Ranch in Manatee County on Wednesday, where a reporter questioned why he chose the community for a pop-up vaccine site. The governor replied, “Would they rather us send it to other counties?”

“It was a choice about where is there a high concentration of seniors,” DeSantis continued. “It wasn’t choosing one ZIP code over another.”

Democrats latched onto the Republican governor’s comments and said he was making threats to withhold vaccines if he was criticized. They also noted that a homebuilder in the community has been a major donor to DeSantis’s political committee.

But DeSantis pointed out that the additional 3,000 vaccines were above what Manatee County was already receiving and not a diversion from other communities.

Kansas

TOPEKA — College students who lost class time or were forced into online classes because of the pandemic could have some of their tuition refunded under a measure Kansas lawmakers are debating.

A House panel amended the state’s higher education budget Wednesday to require that colleges, community colleges and technical schools reimburse students for 50% of the tuition paid every day they spent online instead of in the classroom. The amendment would reimburse at 100% for days that students missed class entirely, The Kansas City Star reported.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Man accused of putting rabbit heads on car

NH MANCHESTER — A man accused of putting two severed rabbit heads on a woman's car in what authorities called a domestic incident has turned himself in to police.

Estevan Hincapie, 24, went to Manchester police on Wednesday, a day after an arrest warrant was issued for him.

In December, police said the woman told them a man she knew had been threatening her via text messages and said he had left her a "surprise" outside. When she went outside on Dec. 29, she found the animal heads on her vehicle.

Hincapie was charged with three counts of criminal threatening and two counts of cruelty to animals.

Vaping rate by students more than doubles

HI HONOLULU — A new Hawaii State Department of Health survey indicated the rate of daily vaping among high school students more than doubled over two years.

The Hawaii Youth Risk Behavior Survey results released by the department Tuesday showed the number of Hawaii teens vaping every day between 2017 and 2019 increased from 3.5% to 7.9%, the Honolulu Star-Advertiser reported Wednesday.

The survey found 30.6% of Hawaii public high school students said in 2019 they vaped at least once in the previous 30 days, up from 25.5% in 2017. The state figure was less than the national rate of 32.7% for 2019.

Bomb threat prompts evacuation of university

CA AZUSA — Azusa Pacific University and its regional campuses were evacuated Wednesday because of threatening messages that included a bomb threat, authorities said.

The university, a private Christian school in the Los Angeles suburb of Azusa, announced shortly after 5:30 p.m. that students should evacuate, stay away from campus or shelter in place if they lived in on-campus housing.

The evacuation was later extended to regional campuses including Los Angeles, Monrovia, Murrieta, San Diego, Orange County, the high desert and the Inland Empire.

Azusa police said campus safety officials had received an email that said explosives had been placed on campus but didn't specify which campus.

Former mayor to plead guilty to bank fraud

WI COLUMBUS — The former mayor of Columbus has agreed to plead guilty to a federal bank fraud charge.

Michael Eisenga was accused of using fraudulent documents to get a loan for a building in Columbus that he falsely told the lender was under a long-term lease.

The 49-year-old former mayor has signed an agreement in which he will plead guilty to fraud, a charge that carries up to 30 years in prison and a \$1 million fine.

Prosecutors have agreed to recommend that Eisenga get the

maximum available reduction in his sentence in return for the guilty plea, the State Journal reported.

The agreement requires Eisenga to forfeit nearly \$7 million, the amount he received in a loan from Alliant Credit Union of Rolling Meadows, Ill. Eisenga wanted to buy a commercial property in Columbus that included a grocery store he claimed was under a 20-year lease agreement.

Another calf born to endangered orcas

WA FRIDAY HARBOR — Whale researchers say another calf has been born to the endangered Southern Resident orcas of the Salish Sea.

The Orca Network wrote on its social media pages Wednesday that the whale known as L-86, or by the nickname "Surprise!" for her own surprise birth in 1991, had been seen with a new calf.

Only about half of newborn orcas survive, but if this one does it will boost the population to 75.

All three pods—the J, K and L pods—of the whales were seen heading up Haro Strait between San Juan and Vancouver islands. Two calves were born to J pod in September.

Dead dogs, piglets, piles of trash dumped on road

AL MONTGOMERY — Dead animals and all types of trash are being dumped on a Montgomery road that played a key role in the city's civil rights history.

Cleanup crews found five dead dogs wrapped in sheets

and plastic bags along Todd Road, The Montgomery Advertiser reported.

A resident recently reported that someone had dumped a dead pig and piglets at the site.

City sanitation workers have worked to remove the trash and dead animals.

But it's an ongoing problem because people continue to dump trash at the site, Montgomery Neighborhood Services Director Amanda Miller said.

The road's history includes a 1983 confrontation between white police officers and a Black family that led to the creation of several local groups devoted to racial reconciliation, the newspaper reported.

Businesses trying to end Fake Patty's Day event

KS MANHATTAN — Businesses in Manhattan's Aggieville entertainment district don't plan to support the traditional Fake Patty Day's celebration this year.

The event has been held in March before students go on spring break, and it drew thousands of people in the past.

But attendance has dropped in recent years and the Aggieville Business Association no longer believes it is worth the effort to provide events or promotions connected to it, said Dennis Cook, executive director of the business association.

Fake Patty's Day began in 2007 as a prime partying opportunity, particularly for college students. It has been criticized for encouraging excessive drinking and a related increase in crime, The Manhattan Mercury reported.

— From wire reports

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NCAA tourney in uncharted territory

Associated Press

There's no need to worry about geography in this year's NCAA Tournament.

Get ready for plenty of talk about the so-called "S curve" instead. And don't worry—it's not that complicated.

With the entire tournament taking place in or near Indianapolis, there is no reason for the four geographic regions that have been a part of past NCAA brackets. The NCAA doesn't have to ensure the best teams play closer to home.

The NCAA instead is trying to use the "S curve" in which a team's placement is more dependent on its strength than its location. The No. 1 overall seed ideally would have the No. 8 overall seed as the second-best team in its region, the top No. 2 seed in the same section with the No. 7 overall seed and the same approach for 3 vs. 6 and 4 vs. 5.

Whether that happens isn't a sure thing: Rules prevent conference rivals from facing off early in the tournament and the S curve — the NCAA helpfully

put out a specific explanation of this term — often gets broken up.

"The likelihood of being able to be a perfect S curve is probably unlikely," said Kentucky athletic director Mitch Barnhart, who chairs the NCAA Division I men's basketball committee. "There's going to have to be modifications."

It is creating plenty of uncertainty for teams competing for bids — as well as the people filling out the bracket.

"This is just an unprecedented tournament, an unprecedented time," Wisconsin coach Greg Gard said. "Hopefully it's only a one-off and we're only going to have to do this and navigate this one time this way."

Those conference matchups: Teams from the same conference can't meet before the regional final if they've already played each other at least three times in a season. If they've faced off twice, league foes can't meet until the regional semifinals.

Some of this is already being played out. For instance, when

the committee revealed last week which schools would earn the top 16 seeds if the bracket were being announced that day, No. 4 overall seed Ohio State was included in a region with No. 14 seed Texas Tech, rather than No. 13 seed Iowa. Ohio State and Iowa already met once, are scheduled to face off again Feb. 28 and could battle each other a third time in the Big Ten Tournament.

No. 8 overall seed Houston was in a region with No. 3 overall seed Michigan rather than No. 1 overall seed Gonzaga. Plenty of other pairings also didn't quite match what a true S curve would have reflected.

Lack of nonconference games: Division I teams played fewer than half as many nonconference games as usual this year. That makes it tougher than ever to compare the credentials of teams from various leagues.

It also could make it particularly challenging for teams from outside the major conferences to land at-large bids. Typically, contenders from those

leagues build their resumes by beating schools from bigger leagues. Those schools didn't get nearly enough of those opportunities this year.

Barnhart said the biggest challenge is the fact that pandemic-related pauses have caused some teams to play fewer games than others through no fault of their own. There's also the dilemma of how to rate a team that might lose a game or two due to the rust factor after a long layoff.

"There is no hard-and-fast rule," Barnhart said. "I think the thing we've got to understand is, we're going to play the ball as it lies. The resumes are the resumes."

How low is too low: Up to now, no team has ever earned an at-large bid with a worse record than the 16-14 mark that Villanova had in 1991 and Georgia had in 2001.

That could change this season, because the pandemic limited the number of so-called guarantee games that allow major conference teams to boost their records.

No. 1 Gonzaga keeps rolling, beats Saint Mary's

Associated Press

SPOKANE, Wash. — Corey Kispert scored 20 points, Joel Ayayi added 16 and top-ranked Gonzaga beat cold-shooting Saint Mary's 87-65 on Thursday night, extending the nation's longest winning streak to 25 games over the past two seasons.

Drew Timme scored 12 points to help Gonzaga (21-0, 12-0 West Coast Conference) extend its home winning streak to 48 games. Fans were allowed at a Gonzaga home game for the first time this season and a few dozen family members of players were in the stands.

Judah Brown scored 16 points, and Logan Johnson had 13 for Saint Mary's (11-7, 2-5). The Gaels are typically one of Gonzaga's archrivals but are having a down season made worse by prolonged COVID-19 closures.

Gonzaga has won 18 consecutive games by double digits.

No. 3 Michigan 71, Rutgers 64: Franz Wagner scored 20 points and Mike Smith added 12 to lift the Wolverines past the visiting Scarlet Knights.

Hunter Dickinson added 10 points for Michigan, which won its second straight game since returning from a lengthy layoff after the athletic department paused activities for coronavirus-related reasons.

No. 4 Ohio State 92, Penn State 82: E.J. Liddell scored 17 of his 23 points in the first half and the Buckeyes outlasted the host Nittany Lions.

Duane Washington scored 21 points and C.J. Walker added 13 for Ohio State (18-4, 12-4 Big Ten), which used a 15-0 run midway through the second half to take control and win for the seventh straight time.

Wichita State 68, No. 6 Houston 63: Tyson Etienne and Alterique Gilbert each scored 16 and Dexter Dennis had 12 points

and a crucial steal in the final seconds, leading the host Shockers past the Cougars.

Wichita State (13-4, 9-2 American Athletic Conference) moved past Houston (17-3, 11-3) and into first place in the league.

No. 11 Iowa 77, No. 21 Wisconsin 62: Luka Garza scored 30 points, Joe Wieskamp had 17 and the visiting Hawkeyes pulled away to beat the Badgers.

Freshman Keegan Murray had 12 rebounds for Iowa (16-6, 10-5 Big Ten).

No. 25 San Diego State 67, Fresno State 53: Matt Mitchell scored 19 points and Trey Pulliam matched his career high with 18 points for the Aztecs, who beat the host Bulldogs for their seventh consecutive win.

Jordan Schakel had 13 for the Aztecs (16-4, 10-3 Mountain West).

Orlando Robinson had 17 points and 13 rebounds for Fresno State (9-8, 6-8).

Cole: Players want MLB more competitive

Associated Press

New York Yankees pitcher Gerrit Cole and other baseball players will be pushing for changes that make more teams competitive as they think about looming labor negotiations that could lead to a work stoppage at the start of 2022.

Many veterans who are not top stars have taken substantial paycuts in recent years. Others have turned down cuts and retired.

The players' association is upset that some teams have lowered major league payroll in favor of rebuilding with youth, a process it calls tanking and that management defends as long-allowed refocusing on retooling for long-term gain.

"For me, it just goes back to competitiveness," Cole said Thursday. "We have a lot of great veterans that offer great entertainment, a quality style of baseball, that continuously are being pushed out because of surplus value on younger players is too high—the analytics are driving the game in that direction. And we want to have an open field for the clubs to be able to find talent, find surplus value."

Cole is starting the second

season of a \$324 million, nine-year contract, the largest deal among pitchers. He was elected in December to the union's eight-man executive subcommittee, its highest-ranking policymaking body.

The average Major League Baseball salary dropped for an unprecedented third straight year, even before the shortened season caused by the coronavirus pandemic. The players' association calculated the 2020 average would have been \$3.89 million if a full season had been played. That was down 4.2% from the 2019 average of \$4.05 million and represented a 5.2% decrease from the record average of just under \$4.1 million in 2017.

Because the pandemic caused players to receive roughly 37% of pay last year, the actual average plunged to \$1.59 million, its lowest since 1998.

"There's always concern when the average salary is dropping," said Yankees reliever Zack Britton, also an executive committee member. "Yeah, definitely issues that we would like to change. And I think MLB probably has issues that they would like to change, too. But to

the best of my knowledge, we're going to work through those things."

Stars are getting their money. Traded from Boston to the Dodgers, outfielder Mookie Betts negotiated a \$365 million, 12-year contract during the pandemic and helped Los Angeles win its first World Series title since 1988.

Betts' deal is second behind outfielder Mike Trout's \$426.5 million, 12-year contract with the Los Angeles Angels. Cole also trails outfielder Bryce Harper's \$330 million, 13-year contract with Philadelphia and outfielder Giancarlo Stanton's \$325 million, 13-year agreement he signed with Miami before he was traded to the New York Yankees.

San Diego shortstop Fernando Tatis Jr., who has played just two major league seasons, has a pending \$340 million, 14-year contract that could be finalized this week, the longest deal in baseball history.

Mark Melancon, a pitcher who joined the Padres this week as a free agent, praised the small-market Padres for not being among the cutters.

"It's great, because there are

so many teams that are doing the opposite," Melancon said. "It's sad when there's only 30 teams out there and you get a sense that a lot of them don't want to win, so to see San Diego step up and being in a little bit of a smaller market is fun and exciting. It's a shame to see big-market teams kind of dump."

Cole and Britton are among four clients of agent Scott Boras on the executive subcommittee, joined by Washington pitcher Max Scherzer and Seattle pitcher James Paxton. The other members are Houston catcher Jason Castro, New York Mets shortstop Francisco Lindor, St. Louis pitcher Andrew Miller and Toronto shortstop Marcus Semien.

Castro, Paxton and Semien were free agents this offseason, experiencing the slow pandemic market firsthand. Lindor was traded by Cleveland, which did not want to lose him as a free agent at the end of this season.

Baseball was interrupted by eight work stoppages, but none since the 7½-month strike caused cancellation of the 1994 World Series. The collective bargaining agreement expires Dec. 1.

Nets rout short-handed Lakers for 5th straight win

Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — James Harden scored 23 points, Joe Harris added 21 with six three-pointers and the Brooklyn Nets routed the short-handed Los Angeles Lakers 109-98 on Thursday night for their season-best fifth straight victory.

Kyrie Irving had 16 points and seven rebounds as Brooklyn easily won this matchup of NBA title contenders and improved to 4-0 on a five-game West Coast trip with Kevin Durant missing his third straight game with a strained left hamstring.

Timothe Luwawu-Cabarrot

scored 15 points and hit five of the Nets' 18 three-pointers.

LeBron James scored his 35,000th career point while getting 32 points, eight rebounds and seven assists for the Lakers. Kyle Kuzma added 16 points and 10 rebounds.

Anthony Davis and Dennis Schroder sat out for Los Angeles, leaving the defending champions without two of their top three scorers. Davis missed his second straight game after aggravating his strained right calf and Achilles last weekend. The Lakers also played without Schroder, a late scratch under the NBA's health and safety

protocols.

Raptors 110, Bucks 96: Norman Powell scored 29 points, Pascal Siakam had 27 and visiting Toronto handed Milwaukee its fifth consecutive loss.

Powell matched a season high in scoring while shooting 9-for-12 overall, including 4-for-7 from three-point range. Fred VanVleet added 17 points for the Raptors.

The Bucks last dropped five straight games from Jan. 25 to Feb. 3 in 2017. This entire skid has come without guard Jrue Holiday, who has missed six consecutive games due to

health and safety protocols.

Giannis Antetokounmpo had 23 points, 12 rebounds and eight assists for the Bucks before fouling out with 1:19 left.

Heat 118, Kings 110: Jimmy Butler had 13 points, 13 assists and 10 rebounds for his third consecutive triple-double, helping Miami beat host Sacramento.

Bam Adebayo also had a triple-double with 16 points, 10 assists and 12 rebounds to help Miami win for the first time in Sacramento in nearly five years. Tyler Herro scored 27 points, and Kelly Olynyk added a season-high 22.

Medvedev advances to Aussie Open final

Associated Press

MELBOURNE, Australia — Daniil Medvedev simply does not lose right now. Not to Top 10 opponents. Not to anyone, really. Certainly not to a drained Stefanos Tsitsipas in the Australian Open semifinals.

Now let's see what happens against Novak Djokovic in Rod Laver Arena.

Medvedev made it to his second Grand Slam final as he pursues his first major championship, overwhelming fifth-seeded Tsitsipas 6-4, 6-2, 7-5 on Friday at Melbourne Park to run his winning streak to 20 matches. That includes a dozen victories against members of the Top 10.

"He's a player," Tsitsipas said, "who has unlocked pretty much everything in the game."

Tsitsipas, a 22-year-old from Greece, came out flat, looking drained after an epic four-hour victory over Rafael Nadal in the quarterfinals Wednesday, com-

ing back from a two-set deficit. Still, Medvedev was terrific, getting broken just once and accruing 17 aces among his 46 winners.

That latter total featured a backhand pass he flipped down the line after sprinting into a slide for a break in the next-to-last game, a spectacular effort Medvedev celebrated by raising both arms and waving his hands in a gesture that told the world, "Check me out!"

"The moment that I won the match," Medvedev called it. "One of my best shots in my career."

In Sunday's final, the No. 4-seeded Medvedev will take on No. 1 Djokovic, who already owns eight Australian Open titles among his 17 Grand Slam trophies as he tries to gain on the men's record of 20 shared by Nadal and Roger Federer.

Djokovic, who won his semifinal against 114th-ranked qualifier Aslan Karatsev on Thurs-

day, is a combined 17-0 in semifinals and finals at Melbourne Park.

"It's him that has all the pressure, getting (closer) to Roger or Rafa in the Grand Slams," Medvedev said. "So I just hope that I'm going to get out here, show my best tennis. As we see, I can win (against) some big names if I play good. That's the main part. He has, for sure, more experience, but more things to lose than me."

Medvedev was the runner-up to Nadal at the 2019 U.S. Open.

"It was my first Grand Slam final against one of the greatest," said Medvedev, a 25-year-old from Russia. "Sunday, I'm going to come (up) against one of the other greatest."

It took just 75 minutes for Medvedev to grab a two-set lead against Tsitsipas. He went up 3-1 in the third before Tsitsipas made things a tad more interesting, if only briefly, by taking three games in a row, including

his only break of the match.

But Medvedev, his baseline defense exquisite, proved too tough.

"I'm happy that I managed to change my focus and change the momentum," Medvedev said.

Earlier, down a set and a break in the second, Tsitsipas sat down at a changeover and chucked an open water bottle, causing a splash on the court that forced ball kids to scramble for towels to wipe up the mess. The petulant scene drew a side-eye from Medvedev.

Early in the third set, Medvedev told chair umpire James Keothavong that Tsitsipas' father, who also coaches him, "is talking way too much" from the stands.

Melbourne has a sizable Greek population, and Tsitsipas got a much warmer greeting, replete with flapping blue-and-white flags, when he arrived at the court; Medvedev actually heard some jeers.

Matthews scores 2 goals as Leafs hammer Senators

Associated Press

TORONTO — Auston Matthews scored his 15th and 16th goals to pad his NHL lead and had two assists to help the league-leading Toronto Maple Leafs thump the last-place Ottawa Senators 7-3 on Thursday night.

Matthews has scored those 16 goals in just 17 games played, and has scored 15 times in his last 13 contests.

Toronto beat Ottawa for the second straight night after blowing a 5-1 lead in a 6-5 overtime loss in the series opener Monday night.

Mitch Marner had a goal and three assists, Joe Thornton a goal and two assists, William Nylander a goal and an assist, and John Tavares and Ilya Mikheyev also scored.

Blues 3, Sharks 2 (OT): Brayden Schenn tied it late in

the third period and David Perron scored on a power play in overtime in host St. Louis' victory over San Jose.

Mike Hoffman also scored, and Jordan Binnington made 29 saves for the Blues.

Penguins 4, Islanders 1: Sidney Crosby scored his sixth goal of the season, Tristan Jarry stopped 31 shots and host Pittsburgh held off New York.

Teddy Blueger, Jason Zucker and Bryan Rust also scored for the Penguins.

Devils 3, Bruins 2: Kyle Palmieri scored two goals, one of them short-handed, to help visiting New Jersey beat Boston for its second straight victory since returning from a two-week COVID-19 pause.

Pavel Zacha scored for the second consecutive game for the Devils, who had their first seven games in February post-

poned, with a total of 19 players added to the NHL's COVID-19 list.

Rangers 3, Flyers 2 (SO): Kaapo Kakko and Artemi Panarin scored in the shootout to lift visiting New York past Philadelphia.

Colin Blackwell and Brendan Smith scored in regulation to help the Rangers snap a four-game skid.

Capitals 3, Sabres 1: Nicklas Backstrom, Tom Wilson and Conor Sheary scored, Vitek Vanecsek made 22 saves and host Washington beat Buffalo for its second consecutive victory.

Backstrom's goal came on the power play in the first period, Wilson's short-handed in the second and Sheary at even strength in the third.

Kings 3, Coyotes 2 (SO): Gabriel Vilardi scored in the fourth round of a shootout, Jonathan

Quick stopped 20 shots and visiting Los Angeles beat Arizona.

Dustin Brown and Jeff Carter scored for Los Angeles in the first period, and Phil Kessel and Conor Garland countered for Arizona in the second.

Blue Jackets 3, Predators 0: Elvis Merzlikins made 32 saves in his first start since coming off injured reserve, Cam Atkinson scored his team-leading seventh goal and host Columbus beat Nashville.

Merzlikins had his sixth career shutout.

Wild 3, Ducks 1: Ryan Hartman and Kevin Fiala scored 38 seconds apart in the first period, Kaapo Kahkonen stopped 16 shots and visiting Minnesota beat Anaheim.

Marcus Foligno added a power-play goal for the Wild, who snapped a two-game losing streak.