

Crews fight devastating wildfires in LA

Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — Firefighters began to make progress battling the deadly and devastating fires in the Los Angeles area early Thursday, especially because the ferocious winds that have been driving the fast-moving flames are expected to slow down.

Firefighters were able to knock down a major threat that broke out Wednesday evening in the Hollywood Hills as flames struck closer to the heart of the city, the roots of the entertainment industry. By morning, authorities lifted an evacuation order for the area.

The weather forecast could provide an opportunity for firefighters to make progress in reining in blazes that have killed five people, ravaged communities from the Pacific Coast to Pasadena and caused thousands of people to frantically flee their homes.

Flare-ups overnight illumi-

nated the Santa Monica Mountains above Pacific Palisades. Homes continued to burn, but unlike Tuesday night when a fierce wind blew embers sideways and fueled new outbreaks, sparks mostly drifted upward.

The flames from the Sunset Fire in the Hollywood Hills had put the densely populated neighborhoods on edge. Only about a mile away, the streets around the Hollywood Walk of Fame, the TCL Chinese Theatre and Madame Tussauds were bustling, and onlookers used their phones to record video of the blazing hills.

Los Angeles Fire Department Capt. Erik Scott said they were able to keep the fire in check because “we hit it hard and fast and Mother Nature was a little nicer to us today than she was yesterday.”

On Wednesday, hurricane-force winds blew embers, igniting block after block in the coastal neighborhood of Pacific Pal-

isades and in Altadena, a community near Pasadena. Aircraft were grounded for a time because of the winds, hampering firefighting efforts.

Nearly 2,000 homes, businesses and other structures have been destroyed in those blazes — called the Palisades and Eaton fires — and the number is expected to increase. The five deaths recorded so far were from the Eaton Fire near Pasadena.

More than 100,000 people are under evacuation orders, and the fires have consumed about 45 square miles — roughly the size of the city of San Francisco. The Palisades Fire is already the most destructive in Los Angeles’ history.

Jose Velasquez sprayed his family’s Altadena home with water as embers rained down on the roof. He managed to save their home, which also houses their family business selling churros, a Mexican pastry.

Many of his neighbors were at work when they lost their homes.

“So we had to call a few people and then we had people messaging, asking if their house was still standing,” he said. “We had to tell them that it’s not.”

In Pasadena, Fire Chief Chad Augustin said the city’s water system was stretched and was further hampered by power outages, but even without those issues, firefighters would not have been able to stop the fire due to the intense winds.

Winds gusted at 80 mph Wednesday, according to the National Weather Service. Fire conditions could last through Friday, but wind speeds were expected to be lower on Thursday.

President Joe Biden signed a federal emergency declaration after arriving at a Santa Monica fire station for a briefing with Gov. Gavin Newsom, who dispatched National Guard troops.

Mourners remember Jimmy Carter, who ‘waged peace’

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Jimmy Carter was celebrated Thursday for his personal humility and public service before, during and after his presidency during a funeral at Washington National Cathedral featuring the kind of pageantry the 39th U.S. president typically eschewed.

All of Carter’s living successors were in attendance, with President Joe Biden, the first sitting senator to endorse his 1976 run for the White House, delivering a eulogy. Biden and others took turns praising Carter’s record — which many his-

torians have appraised more favorably since losing his bid for a second term in 1980 — and extolling his character.

“He built houses for people who needed homes,” said Joshua Carter, a grandson who recalled how Carter regularly taught Sunday school in his native hamlet of Plains, Ga., after leaving the White House. “He eliminated diseases in forgotten places. He waged peace anywhere in the world, wherever he saw a chance. He loved people.”

Joshua said Carter explained his dedication by saying that, as a Christian and a follower of Je-

sus Christ, “he worshipped the Prince of Peace.”

Jason Carter, another grandson, praised his grandfather and his wife, Rosalynn, who died in 2023.

“They were small-town people who never forgot who they were and where they were from no matter what happened in their lives,” said Jason, who chairs the Carter Center, a global humanitarian operation founded by the former president shortly after leaving office.

Carter died Dec. 29 at the age of 100, living so long that two of the eulogies were written by people who died before him —

his vice president Walter Mondale and his White House predecessor Gerald Ford.

“By fate of a brief season, Jimmy Carter and I were rivals,” said the eulogy from Ford, which was read by his son Steven. “But for the many wonderful years that followed, friendship bonded us as no two presidents since John Adams and Thomas Jefferson.”

Days of ceremonies and remembrances from political leaders, business titans and rank-and-file citizens have honored Carter for decency and using a prodigious work ethic to do more than obtain political power.

Austin urges Ukraine aid meetings to continue

By JENNIFER H. SVAN
Stars and Stripes

RAMSTEIN AIR BASE, Germany — Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy appealed to President-elect Donald Trump to help prevent his country from being “erased off the map,” following the announcement Thursday of a final \$500 million military aid package under the outgoing Biden administration.

Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin announced the weapons deal with Zelenskyy by his side at the U.S.-led Ukraine Defense Contact Group meeting at Ramstein, a gathering of representatives of about 50 partner nations who

have come to Ukraine’s defense since Russia launched its full-scale invasion nearly three years ago.

Austin and other senior leaders made a case for continuing the meetings once Trump, who has criticized U.S. aid to Ukraine, assumes office.

“Here is the fundamental truth: Ukraine’s fight matters to all of us,” Austin said. “[Russian President Vladimir] Putin’s war is a challenge to free people everywhere.”

Zelenskyy expressed gratitude to Austin for leading the contact group and for his help sustaining Ukraine’s fight against the Russian invasion.

“It’s clear that a new chapter starts for Europe and the entire world just 11 days from now, at a time when we have ... to rely on one another even more and achieve even greater results together,” Zelenskyy said, referring to Trump’s inauguration.

“We’ve come such a long way that it would honestly be crazy to drop the ball now and not keep building on the defense coalition we’ve created,” Zelenskyy said. “No matter what’s going on in the war, everyone wants to feel sure that their country won’t just be erased off the map.”

Whether the contact group will continue under Trump remains to be seen, said German

Defense Minister Boris Pistorius, while speaking to reporters during a break from meeting with allies. But “the best solution is to continue the format as it used to be with the leadership of the United States of America,” he said.

If Trump decides to bow out of the group, then Europe must be prepared to work even more closely together “for its own defense,” Pistorius said.

The aid announced by Austin will come from existing stockpiles and includes air defense missiles, ammunition, air-to-ground munitions and other equipment to support Ukraine’s F-16s.

Del Toro embarks on new year by naming 2 future destroyers

Stars and Stripes

Secretary of the Navy Carlos Del Toro last week announced the names of two new Arleigh Burke-class Guided Missile Destroyers, the future USS Robert Kerrey and USS Intrepid to start off the new year.

The USS Robert Kerrey honors the former U.S. senator, Nebraska governor and Navy SEAL officer who received the Medal of Honor for heroism displayed during the Vietnam War, according to a Navy news release.

“This will be the first Navy vessel named in his [Kerrey’s] honor, and it is most appropriate we do so, for his actions in Vietnam and his continued service to this country well beyond his naval service,” Del Toro said Saturday.

On Friday, Del Toro and Kerrey met in New York to share the news of the naming of the destroyer.

“My sincere thanks to President [Joe] Biden, Secretary of

the Navy Del Toro and the United States Navy that gave me the opportunity to serve my country for three of the best years of my life,” Kerrey said. “I am very grateful for this recognition.”

Before the meeting with Kerrey on Friday, Del Toro named the future USS Intrepid aboard the former aircraft carrier that shares its namesake at the Intrepid Museum, N.Y.

The Intrepid honors the skilled, fearless crews of the four previous Navy ships to bear the name. This will be the fifth vessel named Intrepid, according to a Navy news release.

“It is deeply meaningful to stand aboard USS Intrepid — the fourth vessel to bear the name and whose proud legacy continues to inspire and remind so many visitors of the courage, resilience and sacrifice that define the U.S. Navy — and it is with profound respect that we also look to the future of our Navy from these decks,” Del Toro said.

VA expands illness list covered under PACT Act

By LINDA F. HERSEY
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Acute and chronic leukemias and other life-threatening cancers will now be recognized as presumptive conditions for toxic-exposed veterans who served during the past 25 years in Afghanistan, Iraq, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and across the Middle East, the Department of Veterans Affairs announced Wednesday.

Veterans deployed to specific locations in the Middle East during the Gulf War and after Sept. 11, 2001, will have a lower threshold to prove the cancers are related to their exposure to hazardous substances during military service to qualify for medical treatment and disability pay, the VA said.

The VA will automatically assume a service connection for the following diseases that develop in the blood and bone marrow: acute and chronic leukemias, multiple myelomas, myelodysplastic syndromes and myelofibrosis. The

coverage goes into effect starting Friday.

VA Secretary Denis McDonough said Wednesday at a news conference that the VA has particular interest in helping veterans diagnosed with cancer following exposure to industrial solvents and chemical weapons at Karshi-Khanabad, also known as K2, a former air base in Uzbekistan. About 16,000 veterans served at the base, which borders Afghanistan, from 2001 to 2005.

The inclusion of several cancers for VA coverage follows a review by the agency on the prevalence of cancer in veterans who had served at certain installations, including K2.

“We need to get to the bottom of what was [at K2]. It was a toxic soup,” McDonough said, referring to hazardous waste present throughout the former Soviet military installation, which contained abandoned chemical weapons, depleted uranium and industrial solvents pooling from the ground.

Southern states weather new winter storms

Associated Press

DALLAS — Another blast of winter storms in the U.S. on Thursday closed schools, snarled flights and put millions of residents across the South under warnings of snow and freezing rain that could cause dangerous travel conditions.

The storm started dumping a mix of sleet and heavy snow Thursday morning in north Texas and Oklahoma, where schools canceled classes for more than 1 million students. Closures also kept students home in Kansas City and Arkansas, while in Virginia, frustrations mounted in the state capital over a boil-water advisory caused by an earlier round of winter storms.

Hundreds of flights were canceled by Thursday morning in Dallas, according to tracking platform FlightAware, with more than 2,100 delays and 1,500 can-

cellations reported nationally.

The cold snap coincided with rare January wildfires tearing through the Los Angeles area, forcing residents to flee from burning homes through flames, ferocious winds and towering clouds of smoke.

Road crews began treating roads in Arkansas, Oklahoma and Texas ahead of the expected arrival of as much as 7 inches of snow in some parts of those states. The precipitation early Thursday was mostly wet snow in the Dallas metroplex, with heavier snowfall farther north into Oklahoma, according to the National Weather Service.

"The roads are slushy, but there's also slick spots," said Charles Daniel, a truck driver hauling a 48-foot trailer in south-central Oklahoma on Thursday. "I have not seen any accidents, but I have seen a couple of people

get stuck out on the road and sliding around.

Gov. Greg Abbott said the state deployed emergency crews in advance and urged residents to avoid driving in bad weather if possible. In Arkansas, Gov. Sarah Sanders mobilized 140 National Guardsmen to assist State Police with transporting any stranded motorists.

Roads could be slick Friday as 75,000 fans were expected head to AT&T Stadium in Arlington for the college football championship semifinal between Texas and Ohio State in the Cotton Bowl. Arlington spokesperson Susan Shrock said crews will be ready to address any hazardous road conditions.

A mix of sleet, snow and freezing rain was expected along a stretch from New Mexico to Alabama. Forecasters said the heaviest amounts were likely in parts of

Arkansas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Oklahoma and Texas.

The system was expected to push northeastward by Friday with heavy snow and freezing rain all the way to the Virginia and North Carolina coasts. As much as 8 inches of snow could fall in parts of Georgia, North Carolina, Tennessee and West Virginia through Saturday, the weather service said.

Georgia Gov. Brian Kemp declared a state of emergency across the state on Thursday as the northern half of the state girded for snow and ice beginning Friday morning.

In Virginia, Richmond will remain under the boil-water advisory until at least Friday as officials work to restore the water reservoir system, which malfunctioned after a storm caused a power outage, Mayor Danny Avula said.

Biden casts doubt on fitness to serve another four years

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President Joe Biden, in a new interview days before he leaves office, cast doubt on his fitness to serve another four years even as he maintained that he could have won election to a second term.

The outgoing Democratic president also told USA Today in the interview published Wednesday that he tried during his Oval Office meeting with President-elect Donald Trump to discourage the Republican from going after his political opponents, as he has said he would.

And Biden said he had not decided whether to issue sweeping pardons to preemptively protect those individuals from any possible retribution by Trump or the incoming administration.

"I don't know," Biden responded when USA Today Washington Bureau Chief Susan Page asked if he would've had the vig-

or to serve another four years in office. Biden and Page sat down at the White House on Sunday for the president's rare interview with a print publication.

Biden, 82, talks about how he didn't intend to run for president in 2020, but says that when Trump sought reelection last year, "I really thought I had the best chance of beating him. But I also wasn't looking to be president when I was 85 years old, 86 years old."

Did he believe he could have been reelected? "It's presumptuous to say that, but I think yes," Biden said. He said his assessment was "based on the polling" he reviewed, but he did not elaborate.

Biden dropped out of the presidential race under pressure last July after faltering in a debate against Trump. He endorsed Vice President Kamala Harris. She lost to the Republican.

Trump's inaugural effort raises \$170M in donations

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President-elect Donald Trump has raised more than \$170 million for his upcoming inauguration, a record amount as tech executives and big donors have eagerly written large checks to help bankroll the ceremony.

The private donations collected thus far were confirmed by a person with firsthand knowledge of the fundraising who was not authorized to speak publicly. The person said Trump's inaugural committee is expected to raise more than \$200 million by the end of the effort.

Trump's inaugural committee did not immediately respond to a message seeking comment Wednesday. The committee has not yet detailed how it plans to spend the donations.

The private donations are typically used to help pay for events surrounding the inaugu-

ration, such as costs related to the oath of office ceremony itself, along with a parade and glitzy inaugural balls. Money leftover from the inaugural committee is expected to be used toward a future Trump presidential library, according to the person.

The whopping amount raised thus far by Trump's presidential inaugural committee is more than double the amount President Joe Biden raised four years ago when he brought in nearly \$62 million for his inauguration, according to Federal Election Commission records.

After the former president's victory in November, along with Republicans winning control of both chambers of Congress, major donors, including tech companies, have been writing big checks as they've sought to improve their relationship with the incoming president.

6 S. Korean parties seek probe of Yoon

Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea — South Korean opposition parties introduced a bill Thursday calling for an independent investigation into impeached President Yoon Suk Yeol's brief martial law declaration, as thousands of his supporters and critics held tense rallies near his residence ahead of his potential detention.

The bill, jointly submitted by six parties, including the main liberal opposition Democratic Party, proposes that a special prosecutor investigate whether Yoon's martial law decree on

Dec. 3 constituted an attempted rebellion.

The bill also calls for an investigation into opposition claims that Yoon sought to provoke a clash with North Korea by allegedly flying drones over Pyongyang or discussing the possibility of shooting down trash-laden balloons launched from North Korea across the border, to justify a power grab at home. Yoon's lawyers and the South Korean military have denied the suspicions.

Yoon remained holed up at his official residence in the capital city of Seoul, where the

presidential security service has fortified the grounds with barbed wire and rows of vehicles blocking the roads, anticipating another attempt by law enforcement to detain him after last week's failed effort.

The Corruption Investigation Office for High-Ranking Officials, leading a joint investigation with police and the military, has pledged to work with police to make a more forceful effort to detain Yoon. It has warned that members of the presidential security staff could be arrested if they obstruct attempts to apprehend the embattled president.

Yoon's lawyers argued against bringing him to custody, claiming he isn't a threat to flee or destroy evidence. They claimed that images of him being dragged out in handcuffs could spark a "civil war" in the divided country.

At a news conference Thursday, Seok Dong-hyeon, a lawyer on Yoon's legal team, highlighted the fervent protests by Yoon's supporters and claimed that the anti-corruption office's "reckless" attempts to detain Yoon would "provoke a significant backlash from outraged citizens."

Accused 9/11 mastermind's lawyers fight for plea deal

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Lawyers for accused 9/11 mastermind Khalid Sheikh Mohammed are urging a federal appeals panel to let his scheduled guilty plea Friday in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, go forward in a plea agreement that would spare him and two co-defendants the risk of the death penalty in al-Qaida's notorious Sept. 11, 2001, attacks.

Defense lawyers in a filing late Wednesday described Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin's attempts to throw out a plea deal that his own military had negotiated and approved as the

latest in two decades of "fitful" and "negligent" mishandling of the case by the U.S. military and successive administrations.

Mohammed is due to enter his plea Friday morning in the attacks, in which 19 al-Qaida hijackers smashed airliners into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon and another crashed into a Pennsylvania field, killing nearly 3,000 people. Family members of some of the victims are gathered at Guantanamo for the moment.

Austin unexpectedly renounced the plea agreement after it was announced this sum-

mer, and the Biden administration's Justice Department is seeking to block Mohammed's plea from going forward at a U.S. military commission courtroom.

"An 11th-hour stay will accomplish nothing but more delay and it will reward the government for its — at best — negligent handling" of the 9/11 prosecutions, Mohammed's lawyers argued in a filing to a District of Columbia federal appeals panel just before midnight.

The federal appeals panel appears on track to possibly rule

Thursday on the request by the Biden administration.

Legal and logistical challenges have bogged down the 9/11 case in the 17 years since Mohammed, who prosecutors say conceived the idea of using hijacked planes in the attacks, was first charged. The case remains in pre-trial hearings, with no trial date set.

Years of defense and prosecution testimony are ongoing about how much the sustained torture of Mohammed and other defendants in CIA custody renders their later statements legally inadmissible.

Energy czar named amid Puerto Rico's power crisis

Associated Press

SAN JUAN, Puerto Rico — Puerto Rico's new governor appointed a so-called energy czar on Wednesday to help pull the U.S. territory out of a power-supply crisis.

The nomination of Josué Colón comes days after a massive blackout hit the island, leaving nearly all its 3.2 million inhabitants in the dark as they prepared for New Year's Eve.

"Right now, we're in an

emergency," said Gov. Jenniffer González Colón. "Our electrical system is in such a precarious situation that anything can cause the power to go out."

Josué Colón is currently the executive director of Puerto Rico's Electric Power Authority but would step down if lawmakers approve his new position, which they're expected to do in upcoming days. In his new role, he will supervise Genera PR, which oversees the

generation of power on the island, and Luma Energy, which handles transmission and distribution.

As outages persist and officials investigate what caused the Dec. 31 blackout, critics have called on the government to cancel its contracts with the two private power companies. Last year, the average duration of power interruptions per client in Puerto Rico increased by nearly 20% to 1,432 minutes a

year, far above the established benchmark of 102 minutes, according to Puerto Rico's Energy Bureau. The average frequency of interruptions also increased last year.

In an update Wednesday, Luma said more than 2,500 clients remain without power since the Dec. 31 blackout and that it would continue cooperating with government officials and others to overcome the grid's "latent challenges."

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Dems keep control of Statehouse after election

VA RICHMOND — Virginia Democrats preserved their Statehouse majority on Tuesday in the first test of voters' energy since President-elect Donald Trump's win in November, which left many party members reckoning with their losses.

Tuesday's races were the first official elections in Virginia since November's presidential contest. Democrats now have a narrow 21-19 edge in the state Senate and a 51-49 lead in the House of Delegates, preserving their majorities in both chambers during Republican Gov. Glenn Youngkin's last year in office.

The results could limit Youngkin's conservative agenda for the state, requiring the governor to gain bipartisan support for his legislative vision. Democrats' wins also give the party a small boost days before Trump is set to take office after a decisive victory that included sweeping the swing states and leaving many liberals demoralized.

Biden establishes 2 new national monuments

DC WASHINGTON — President Joe Biden on Tuesday established two new national monuments in California, the latest in a flurry of major environmental initiatives affecting the Golden State as his presidency comes to a close.

Biden designated the Chuckwalla National Monument in Southern California and the Sattitla Highlands National Monument in Northern California.

Chuckwalla is 624,000 acres of federal land, mostly overseen by the Bureau of Land Management, where the Colorado and Mojave deserts come together in a mix of scenic mountains and canyons that is home to bighorn sheep, desert tortoises and chuckwalla lizards. Sattitla is 224,000 acres of national forest land in the remote landscapes of Siskiyou and Modoc counties, a landscape rich with bald eagles, black bears and salmon. Together, the two areas are larger than Yosemite National Park.

Both places are sacred to native tribes, who pushed for monument status, which limits logging, mining and other extractive uses, such as energy development.

No more S'mores for Girl Scouts cookies fans

GA SAVANNAH — In a bittersweet statement issued on Tuesday, the Girl Scouts of the USA revealed two fan-favorite treats, the S'mores and Toast-Yay!, will be discontinued at the end of 2025. That means cookie-lovers have just one year left to stock up before the sweet snacks are sealed into the Girl Scouts' vault of retired flavors.

Whether the advance notice is part of a bid to curb the black market-like resale of the treats — like when Raspberry Rally was discontinued in 2023 — is not clear. Boxes of the fruity cookie, filled with a crispy, raspberry-flavored center and coated in chocolate, sold online for as much as five times the usual price, which ranges from \$4 to \$7.

The S'mores cookie, inspired

by the campfire favorite, made its debut in 2017 while Toast-Yay!, made to taste like tiny French toast treats, hit the shelves in 2021.

Jan. 6 defendant going to Trump inauguration

KS TOPEKA — A federal judge approved a Kansas Jan. 6 defendant's request to attend President-elect Donald Trump's inauguration, the first person charged with a felony to receive such permission.

William Pope, of Topeka, filed a motion with the court on Dec. 28 asking for approval to go to the Jan. 20 event. His request was granted by U.S. District Judge Rudolph Contreras in the U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia.

"I'm currently working out travel plans," Pope told The Star on Tuesday afternoon. "I knew I had a decent chance to get approved, but waiting for the decision took longer than I thought it would."

In his brief order, Contreras — a President Barack Obama appointee — said he took into consideration that Pope "is not charged with assault or vandalism-related charges."

Legislation targets transgender athletes

CA SACRAMENTO — A new bill introduced Monday aims to prevent transgender students in California from participating in female sports, part of a broader wave of opposition as schools and classrooms across the state enact policies protecting transgender students and athletes.

The Protect Girls' Sports Act, introduced by Orange County Republican Assemblymember Kate Sanchez, would require organizations overseeing high school sports, including the California Interscholastic Federation, to only allow individuals who were assigned female at birth to participate in female sports.

Sanchez, a former high school athlete, said women's sports are increasingly becoming "unfair, disheartening and dangerous."

Passenger opens door as flight taxis for takeoff

MA BOSTON — A person on board a plane at Boston Logan International Airport that was taxiing for takeoff suddenly opened an exit door and was quickly restrained by other passengers, authorities said.

The JetBlue passenger, Angel Luis Torres Morales, of Puerto Rico, was arraigned Wednesday on charges of interfering with operations of an aircraft, according to The Boston Globe.

The door was opened about 7:30 p.m. "suddenly and without warning," Massachusetts State Police spokesperson Tim McGuirk said in a statement.

The opening of the overwing exit door caused an emergency slide to deploy aboard JetBlue flight 161 from Boston to San Juan, the airline said in a statement.

Passenger Fred Wynn told WCVB-TV the passenger was seated behind him and was arguing with his girlfriend over a cellphone, then "the guy got up and ran down the aisle" toward the door.

— From wire reports

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Texas, Ohio State in Dallas for Cotton Bowl

Associated Press

GRAPEVINE, Texas — The games have been stacking up for Texas, which after playing in the Southeastern Conference championship had to win two extra games in this expanded College Football Playoff to get back to the same spot they were last season.

At least the Longhorns didn't have to travel far Wednesday for this CFP semifinal, their 16th game this season. It was only about a 45-minute flight from their campus to North Texas, where they play the Buckeyes in the Cotton Bowl on Friday night.

"You can't take it for granted. Most people don't get opportunities to still be playing, and then to still be playing, I mean, down the road from Austin, that's another blessing," All-America cornerback Jahdae Barron said after the team's arrival.

Texas (13-2) and Ohio State (12-2) got to the Dallas area as scheduled ahead of an expected winter storm that was forecast bring 2 to 4 inches of snow Thursday, along with sleet and rain.

With the game played inside

at AT&T Stadium, the home of the NFL's Dallas Cowboys, the weather won't have direct impact on the game that determines which will advance to the national championship. Penn State and Notre Dame were to play the other semifinal Thursday at the Orange Bowl.

"They said there's gonna be freezing up here," cornerback Jordan Hancock said with a laugh after Ohio State arrived from Columbus, where the high temperature was 24 degrees. "We came up here and I'm like, 'Dang, it's pretty warm up here.' So it's definitely great to be down here."

The Buckeyes are playing in the Cotton Bowl for the second year in a row, but there is so much more riding on the outcome of this one.

Last time, Ohio State was coming off a loss to Michigan in its regular-season finale, their first loss of the season knocking it out of the Big Ten title game and playoff contention. Starting quarterback Kyle McCord had transferred and two-time All-America receiver Marvin Har-

rison Jr. opted out of playing last season's game in Arlington, a 14-3 loss to Missouri.

This game comes 10 years after the Buckeyes won the first national championship game of the four-team College Football Playoff era — also played at AT&T Stadium.

While Ohio State ended this regular season with another loss to Michigan, it got into the playoff as the eighth seed and beat Tennessee at home in the first round. The Buckeyes then avenged their other loss, beating then-undefeated and top-seeded Oregon in the Rose Bowl on New Year's Day.

The fifth-seeded Longhorns are playing their second playoff game in the Lone Star State. They beat Clemson at home in the first round before a win over Big 12 champion Arizona State in the Peach Bowl.

Texas, before completing its long-awaited move into the SEC last summer, got into the playoff last season after winning the Big 12 championship at AT&T Stadium. Its 14th and final game was a 37-31 loss to Washington in the

CFP semifinal at the Sugar Bowl.

"Wasn't very fun, that's for sure," Longhorns quarterback Quinn Ewers said as he recalled the feeling after that game. "I knew this is exactly where I wanted to be ... back here right now."

More than half of the Texas roster played in that Big 12 title game, and many Longhorns have also played in Texas state high school championship games that are held annually at AT&T Stadium.

"Yeah, I'm going to be real comfortable," said linebacker Anthony Hill Jr., from nearby Denton. "It's going to be real good playing in the stadium, being back home."

Ewers lost a title game there his junior year with Southlake High, then skipped his senior prep season for a semester at Ohio State — where he took only two snaps in a game — before transferring to Texas. Now he's facing Ohio State for a spot in the national title game January 20 in Atlanta.

"Full-circle moment for sure," he said.

Sinner, Djokovic in opposite ends of Australian Open draw

Associated Press

MELBOURNE, Australia — Defending champion Jannik Sinner and 10-time Australian Open winner Novak Djokovic have landed in opposite sides of the draw for the season's first major, ruling out a replay of last year's semifinal match.

Sinner upset Djokovic in the semifinals last year before coming back to beat Daniil Medvedev in the final 3-6, 3-6, 6-4, 6-4, 6-3 for his first Grand Slam singles title.

Top-ranked Sinner has a first-round match against Nicolas Jarry and also has Taylor Fritz, Ben Shelton and Medvedev in his quarter of the draw. Fritz will open against fellow American Jensen Brooksby.

Djokovic and No. 3 Carlos Alcaraz could meet in the quarterfinals, with a possible semifinal against No. 2 Alexander Zverev.

At the draw Thursday to set the brackets for the singles fields, defending champions Sinner and Aryna Sabalenka walked

into the official ceremony on the steps of Margaret Court Arena holding their trophies.

Sabalenka won her second consecutive title at Melbourne Park in 2024 by defeating Zheng Qinwen 6-3, 6-2. Sabalenka will be attempting to win a third consecutive women's singles title at Melbourne Park, something last accomplished by Martina Hingis from 1997 to 1999.

Sabalenka drew a tough opening match against 2017 U.S. Open champion Sloane Stephens and has 17-year-old Mirra Andreeva and Zheng in her section.

"I have a lot of great memories and to be back here ... as a two-time Australian Open champion, it's definitely something special," Sabalenka, who won the Brisbane International title last week, said at the draw ceremony. "I hope that I can keep doing what I'm doing here in Australia."

Third-seeded Coco Gauff is a potential

semifinal rival for Sabalenka. Gauff has a challenging first-round match against former Australian Open champion Sofia Kenin and is in the same section of the draw as four-time major winner Naomi Osaka and seventh-seeded Jessica Pegula.

No. 2 Iga Swiatek and 2022 Wimbledon champion Elena Rybakina are on the other half of the draw.

The Australian Open starts Sunday morning in Melbourne (Saturday night EST in the United States) and will run for 15 days.

Djokovic will be playing in his first event alongside new coach Andy Murray, his former on-court rival and a three-time major champion. Nobody has won the men's title at Melbourne Park more often than Djokovic, although he said he still feels trauma from 2022 when he wasn't allowed to play due to not revealing his COVID-19 vaccination status.

Siakam scores 26 as Pacers beat Bulls

Associated Press

INDIANAPOLIS — Pascal Siakam scored 26 points, Thomas Bryant added a season-high 22 and two-time All-Star Tyrese Haliburton had 16 points and 13 assists in the Indiana Pacers' 129-113 victory over the Chicago Bulls on Wednesday night.

Siakam made 11 of 17 shots from the field to help Indiana win its fourth straight, all by 10 or more points. Bryant had eight rebounds as the Pacers continued climbing the Eastern Conference standing with their 10th win in 13 games.

Zach LaVine led the Bulls with 31 points. Coby White had 19 points and five assists as Chicago lost for the first time in three games and just the second time in six.

Indiana led 36-18 early in the second quarter. The Bulls never got within single digits again.

Cavaliers 129, Thunder 122: Jarrett Allen scored 25 points, Evan Mobley added 21 and host Cleveland ended Oklahoma City's 15-game winning streak by beating the Thunder in a

marquee meeting between the NBA's top two teams.

The Cavaliers extended their winning streak to 11, improved the league's best record to 32-4 — 11-0 against the West — and moved to 19-1 at home. They did it on an off night for leading scorer Donovan Mitchell, who had just 11 points on 3-for-16 shooting.

Shai Gilgeous-Alexander scored 31 points and Jalen Williams had 25 for Oklahoma City in its first loss since Dec. 1.

In a close game that was seen as an early potential Finals preview, there were 30 lead changes and neither team led by more than nine.

76ers 109, Wizards 103: Tyrese Maxey scored the go-ahead basket with 23.7 seconds left and finished with 29 points to lead host Philadelphia to a win over Washington.

Guerschon Yabusele scored 21 points and blocked a potential tying layup with 14 seconds left to preserve the win for the Sixers.

Knicks 112, Raptors 98:

Karl-Anthony Towns had 27 points and 13 rebounds, OG Anunoby scored 27 points and host New York beat Toronto.

Josh Hart added 21 points and 11 rebounds while Jalen Brunson had 13 points for the Knicks, who snapped a three-game losing streak that followed nine consecutive victories.

Pistons 113, Nets 98: Malik Beasley scored 23 points, Cade Cunningham had 13 points, five assists and five rebounds, and visiting Detroit won its fifth straight game, over Brooklyn.

The Pistons' bench outscored the Nets' 50-20, led by reserves Simone Fontecchio with 17 points and Marcus Sasser, who added 15 points.

Trail Blazers 119, Pelicans 100: Deni Avdija scored 26 points, Shaedon Sharpe added 21 points and visiting Portland led wire to wire in a victory over struggling New Orleans.

Anfernee Simons scored 17 points and Toumani Camara 15 for the Trail Blazers, who led 75-42 at halftime and cruised from there. Deandre Ayton scored 11

points and grabbed 13 rebounds for Portland, which shot 54.5% (48 of 88).

Nuggets 126, Clippers 103: Jamal Murray had 21 points and nine assists, Russell Westbrook added 19 points and eight assists and host Denver beat Los Angeles in a matchup of short-handed teams.

Clippers forward Kawhi Leonard was not available after he flew back to Los Angeles before the game to help his family deal with the wildfires.

Bucks 121, Spurs 105: Damian Lillard had 26 points and eight assists, Giannis Antetokounmpo had 25 points, 16 rebounds and eight assists, and host Milwaukee beat San Antonio.

Brook Lopez scored 22 points, including 17 in the first half, and AJ Green and Gary Trent each added 14 as the Bucks won their second consecutive game after losing four of five.

Keldon Johnson scored 24 points to lead the Spurs. Victor Wembanyama had 10 points, 10 rebounds and three blocks

Villanova upsets No. 9 UConn, ends Huskies' streak

Associated Press

VILLANOVA, Pa. — Eric Dixon scored 18 of his 23 points in the second half and Villanova held on for a 68-66 victory over No. 9 UConn on Wednesday night after the Huskies' Alex Karaban missed two free throws with 3.1 seconds left.

Wooga Poplar added 18 points for the Wildcats (11-5, 4-1 Big East), who led by as many as 12 points in the second half.

Solo Ball scored 16 points to lead UConn (12-4, 4-1). The Huskies had won eight in a row since dropping all three games in the Maui Invitational in November.

UConn played without star freshman Liam McNeeley, out with a right foot injury.

The Huskies had several

chances to take the lead late, the last when Karaban was long on both free-throw attempts.

No. 5 Alabama 88, South Carolina 68: Mark Sears scored 22 points — hitting 4 of 6 3-pointers — to help the visiting Crimson Tide beat the Gamecocks for their seventh straight victory.

Aden Holloway added 13 points for Alabama (13-2, 2-0 Southeastern Conference) in its 10th straight victory over the South Carolina (10-5, 0-2).

No. 10 Texas A&M 80, No. 17 Oklahoma 78: Zhuric Phelps scored a career-high 34 points, including the go-ahead 3-pointer with 19 seconds remaining, and the visiting Aggies rallied from 18 down in the

second half to defeat the Sooners.

Texas A&M (13-2, 2-0 SEC) won its ninth straight game.

Oklahoma reserve Brycen Goodine had a season-best 34 points in 27 minutes.

No. 11 Kansas 74, Arizona St. 55: Zeke Mayo scored 23 points and the host Jayhawks held the Sun Devils to 13 points in the second half of its victory.

Hunter Dickinson added 15 points and 12 rebounds for Kansas (11-3, 2-1 Big 12), which started the second period with a 20-3 spurt that turned a six-point deficit into an 11-point lead at the second media timeout.

No. 13 Illinois 91, Penn St. 52: Ben Humrichous scored a season-high 21 points, Morez

Johnson Jr. had a career-high 20 points along with 11 rebounds and the host Illini beat the Nittany Lions for their fifth straight victory.

Tre White also had 20 points for Illinois (12-3, 4-1 Big Ten).

No. 18 Gonzaga 92, San Diego 80: Ben Gregg scored 23 points and Khalif Battle added 20 to lead the host Bulldogs to their fourth straight win, over the Toreros.

Graham Ike had a career-high 19 rebounds to go with 15 points for Gonzaga (13-4, 4-0 West Coast Conference).

No. 23 Mississippi 73, Arkansas 66: Malik Dia scored 21 points to lead the host Rebels to a win over the Razorbacks for Mississippi's first win in Fayetteville since 2015.

Capitals beat Canucks 2-1 in overtime

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Pierre-Luc Dubois scored his second goal of the game late in overtime, Logan Thompson made 30 saves and the Washington Capitals beat the Vancouver Canucks 2-1 on Wednesday night despite another sluggish performance.

Dubois ended it with 40.3 seconds left in the 3-on-3 OT, long after scoring on Kevin Lankinen with 32.7 seconds remaining in the first period. Thompson stopped 20 of the 21 shots he faced in the second period, and Washington was lucky to avoid another loss while managing just 18 on net.

Lankinen made 16 saves and Conor Garland scored the only goal for the Canucks, who have lost three in a row and eight of their past 10 games.

Alex Ovechkin was held without a goal for back-to-back games and remains at 872. He is 23 away from breaking Wayne

Gretzky's NHL career record.

Blackhawks 3, Avalanche 1: Connor Bedard had a goal and an assist as Chicago beat visiting Colorado.

Frank Nazar and Ilya Mikheyev also scored for Chicago, which had lost six of seven. Petr Mrazek stopped 35 shots.

Bedard made it 3-1 when he beat Trent Miner for his 11th goal 11:54 into the third period. The 19-year-old center has four goals and seven assists during an eight-game point streak, a career-best run in his second season.

Juuso Parssinen scored for Colorado in the opener of a three-game trip. Miner stopped 17 shots in his first career start.

The Avs played without forward Jonathan Drouin, who was sidelined by an upper-body injury. They dropped to 12-4-1 in their last 17 games.

Panthers 4, Utah 1: Jesper Boqvist scored twice in the third period as Florida beat host Utah.

Sam Reinhart and Eetu Luostarinen each had a goal for the reigning Stanley Cup champions. Matthew Tkachuk finished with two assists, and Sergei Bobrovsky made 26 saves.

Boqvist scored at 1:48 of the third to make it 2-0, then again at 17:59 from his own end into an empty net to make it 3-1. Luostarinen added another empty-netter with 22 seconds remaining.

Reinhart opened the scoring at 1:05 of the second. It was his 67th power-play goal for the Panthers, passing Scott Mellanby for second place in franchise history.

Utah got on the board at 13:41 of the third with Logan Cooley's power-play goal, assisted by Clayton Keller and Mikhail Sergachev.

Kings' home game postponed due to fires

The NHL postponed the Los Angeles Kings' home game against the Calgary Flames on

Wednesday with several massive wildfires burning across the greater Los Angeles area.

The Kings and Flames were scheduled to play Wednesday night at the Kings' downtown arena.

The NBA on Thursday postponed a game between the Los Angeles Lakers and the Charlotte Hornets in the same arena.

"Our hearts are with our entire Los Angeles community," the Kings said in a statement. "We appreciate the hard working first responders who are diligently working to contain the fire and protect our community. We appreciate the league's support in keeping our fans, staff, and players safe."

The NFL is monitoring the potential impact of the fires on the two playoff-bound LA teams' preparations and the Rams' wild-card postseason game against the Minnesota Vikings scheduled for Monday night at SoFi Stadium in Inglewood.

NHL will have outdoor games in Fla. next season

Associated Press

MIAMI — Hockey. Outdoors. In Florida.

Next season, the NHL is making it happen — twice.

The NHL announced Wednesday that the Stanley Cup champion Florida Panthers will play host to the New York Rangers at loanDepot Park in Miami — home of baseball's Marlins — on Jan. 2, 2026, in the Winter Classic, with the Tampa Bay Lightning playing host to the Boston Bruins at Raymond James Stadium on Feb. 1, 2026, in a Stadium Series game.

"Stanley Cups, strings of sellouts and the exponential growth of youth and high school hockey throughout the state have demonstrated that Florida is a hockey hotbed," NHL Commissioner Gary Bettman said. "Outdoor NHL games in the

Sunshine State? Never let it be said that our league isn't willing to accept a challenge."

It's a long time coming, but the Panthers and Lightning have represented the Eastern Conference in each of the last five Stanley Cup Finals and they've built heavily engaged fan bases. And both franchises have asked the NHL to bring an outdoor game — or two, in this case — to the Sunshine State for many years.

The league listened.

"To be able to celebrate these two franchises against great Original Six teams, I think, is phenomenal," Panthers President Matthew Caldwell said. "And I think our time has come. We deserve that outdoor game and we're fired up to have it right here locally."

The Marlins' ballpark, locat-

ed about a 45-minute drive south of the Panthers' home arena in Sunrise, can hold about 37,000 fans. Raymond James Stadium — home of the NFL's Tampa Bay Buccaneers — can hold about 65,000 for most events, and capacity can be increased a bit if necessary.

"We couldn't be more excited for this landmark event to finally arrive for Bolts Nation and the Tampa Bay community," Lightning CEO Steve Griggs said. "This moment has been a long time coming, and we're thrilled to see this dream become a reality."

These will not be ordinary outdoor games.

The high in Miami on Jan. 2 this year was 78. The high in Tampa last year on Feb. 1 was 66. Those temperatures aren't conducive to finding ice outside.

And the high game-time temperature for any of the previous outdoor games in NHL history, the league said, was 65 for a game in Denver in 2016.

"We understand it's risky," said Steve Mayer, the NHL's president of content and events. "I think we like it. And it's not a challenge. It's actually an opportunity for us."

The Marlins' loanDepot Park has a retractable roof and that will play a big role in getting that stadium ready for hockey. The air conditioning will be cranked up — way up — and the Panthers-Rangers game will be played at night with the roof open. For the Lightning-Bruins game inside the open-air stadium in Tampa, the NHL will build a temporary roof over the ice surface and remove it just a few hours before game time.