

Lawmakers Debate Approaches To Wind Energy

LINCOLN, Neb. (AP) — Lawmakers have advanced a bill intended to attract more wind-energy companies to Nebraska, as long as residents receive some of the benefits. The bill won first-round approval on Monday with a 33-0 vote. The measure by Sen. Heath Mello would make it easier for renewable energy firms to qualify for sales-tax exemptions under an existing state program. At least 25 percent of the revenue from their power-purchase agreements would have to go to Nebraska-based owners, or a local community. It was the second wind-energy measure advanced within the last week. Lawmakers say one or both bills will have to shrink to fit in the budget. The other bill is aimed at larger wind farms that could export energy to other states.

Warmer Weather Improves Farm Conditions

SIOUX FALLS (AP) — Pastures are beginning to turn green following warm weather and sunshine in South Dakota. The U.S. Department of Agriculture says in its weekly crop report that the spring-like conditions resulted in 1.7 days suitable for fieldwork. Activities included caring for livestock and preparing for spring planting. Winter wheat conditions were rated 16 percent very poor, 35 percent poor, 43 percent fair, 6 percent good and 0 percent excellent. Calving was 77 percent complete and lambing was 85 percent complete. Cattle and calf conditions were rated as 1 percent very poor, 6 percent poor, 29 percent fair, 57 percent good, and 7 percent excellent.

Neb. Water Task Force Bill Headed To Final Vote

LINCOLN, Neb. (AP) — A proposal to create a Nebraska state water task force is headed to a final vote in the Legislature. Lawmakers gave the bill second-round approval on Monday. The task force would include members of the Nebraska Natural Resources Commission, plus 11 members appointed by the governor. It also would have non-voting members, including the Department of Natural Resources director, the Legislature's Natural Resources chairman, and five other lawmakers. The 11th appointed member would represent a metropolitan utilities district. Several Omaha senators argued in favor of adding that member. The appointed members would have to come from a range of water interests, from public power and irrigation districts to agriculture and outdoor recreation. The bill was introduced by Sen. Tom Carlson, of Holdrege.

Sales Tax Revenue Up Across Black Hills

RAPID CITY (AP) — Sales tax revenue figures indicate business is booming in Rapid City and communities across western South Dakota's Black Hills. Energy activity in neighboring North Dakota is one likely reason. Rapid City saw a \$7 million increase in municipal tax revenue collections from 2010 to 2012, to \$52.6 million. The cities of Deadwood, Sturgis and Spearfish also have seen steady climbs, the *Rapid City Journal* reported. Local tax revenues come from city sales and use taxes, as well as taxes on hotel stays. Officials cite several local factors for the increases, including a healthy housing market, strong tourism spending and new industries. Some also credit the oil boom in western North Dakota. In the western South Dakota city of Belle Fourche, where a lot of North Dakota oil workers live and commute, sales tax collections jumped nearly 9 percent from 2011 to 2012, according to the South Dakota Retailers Association. Figures from the first quarter of this year also show increases, with January up 11.3 percent over 2012, February up 29.2 percent and March up 4.2 percent over the prior year.

Sioux Falls Para-Transit System Strained

SIOUX FALLS (AP) — The para-transit system in South Dakota's largest city is considering limiting ridership because the service lacks money to accommodate additional people. The Sioux Falls service provides about 600 rides a week for people with disabilities — about 100 more than the system can comfortably handle, said City Transportation Planner Sam Trebilcock. Use of the service has expanded with the population growth in Sioux Falls, with more residents moving in to take advantage of support networks and medical services, he said. "It's a capacity issue," he said. "It just kind of comes down to, at peak hours, we just can't get to everybody in a timely and safe manner."

The Public Transit Advisory Board has presented several options to the City Council, including limiting the service's coverage area during peak travel times and not accepting new subscribers in certain areas, the *Argus Leader* newspaper reported. The council is expected to consider the matter in May. Trebilcock said the goal is not to eliminate the service. "We're not trying to limit the system so much that the people who really need it, can't utilize it," he said. "A lot of agencies we've talked to are trying to find more independent transportation options."

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Snow, Rain Improve S.D. Drought

Despite Moisture, Deeper Soil Levels Still Dry

BY CHET BROKAW
Associated Press

PIERRE — Drought conditions in much of South Dakota have improved because of the past month's early spring storms, but it's not enough to recharge the deeper levels of soil, a state climatologist said Monday. Dennis Today said conditions are better than last summer, when the drought cut into crop yields and forced many ranchers to sell cattle in South Dakota and other states. But people are still worried because deeper soil levels are dry, he said. "If we don't get sufficient rainfall in a two-week period, we're back into — not as bad as last year — but in tough conditions already," Today said at a meeting of the state Drought Task Force. The task force, a group of state officials and others appointed by Gov. Dennis Daugaard, meets periodically to get an update of conditions and consider responses to dry conditions. The U.S. Drought Monitor report issued last week indicated that all of South Dakota is at least abnormally dry. About two-thirds of the state is rated in severe or extreme drought; no part is in the highest category of exceptional drought. That's a big improvement since January, when nearly 97 percent of the state was in severe, extreme or exceptional drought.

The driest parts of South Dakota include most of the southern counties along the Nebraska border and a big part of the state west of the Missouri River. Phil Hofer, who farms near Bridgewater in southeastern South Dakota, said crop yields were poor last year, but that the recent rain, sleet and snow dropped up to 4 inches of moisture in his area and recharged the top two or three feet of soil. That will support the corn crop until it's chest-high in July, he said, though more rain will be needed this summer to provide a good yield. "But we're headed in the right direction, I'll say that," Hofer said. "It's improving, but we're not out of the woods yet." Today said warmer and drier weather is expected in the next two weeks, which will limit the state's drought recovery. Because of the drought, fire danger is elevated in many areas due to dead and dry grass, said Daren Clabo, a fire meteorologist at the South Dakota School of Mines and Technology. Grass should green up in the next two weeks and reduce the danger, he said. And Jay Esperance, director of the State Wildland Fire



Today

Division, said an expert in his agency expects no large forest fires in the Black Hills before the Fourth of July. Kent Juhnke, who farms and ranches near Vivian in central South Dakota, an area rated as one of the state's driest, said much of the winter wheat he planted last fall never came up. He said he will have to decide soon whether to plant milo, corn or sunflowers in those bare areas in hopes that enough rain will fall. Juhnke, a former state lawmaker, said recent snow and rain totaled 2 1/2 inches in his area, which he said is "an attitude-changer, but not a farm-saver." "It's not greening up real fast, but I'm an optimist. With the moisture have we broken the cycle? I'm not convinced," Juhnke said. Officials also said warm temperatures have thawed the soil in most of the state, allowing the recent precipitation to soak into the soil and leaving little chance of significant flooding along rivers. Larry Gabriel, a rancher near Cottonwood in western South Dakota, said he received nearly 3 inches of precipitation in the past three weeks, mostly from snow. The former state agriculture secretary and state lawmaker said his family sold some cows to get through the drought, but the recent snow recharged the top layer of soil. "Hopes are up, and that's what it takes to be a farmer or rancher," Gabriel said.

Obama Meets Neb. Boy Who Won Hearts In Spring Game

BY ERIC OLSON
AP Sports Writer

The 7-year-old cancer patient who became an Internet sensation for his touchdown run in Nebraska's spring football game has yet another fan — President Barack Obama. Jack Hoffman, his family and former Cornhuskers running back Rex Burkhead visited Obama for 15 minutes in the Oval Office on Monday. Obama presented Jack with a new football and told him he was proud of him. "I thought it was awesome," Jack said. Burkhead, who was drafted by the Cincinnati Bengals on Saturday, befriended Jack shortly after the boy was diagnosed with brain cancer in 2011. Their friendship led to the "Team Jack" campaign that has raised awareness and funds for research. The trip to Washington came about after Sen. Deb Fischer, R-Neb., mentioned Jack's touch-

down run to the president in casual conversation, said Jack's father, Andy Hoffman. Obama told Fischer that he knew about Jack from watching his touchdown run on television and that Jack should visit him at the White House. The Hoffmans, from Atkinson, Neb., arrived in Washington on Saturday, did some sightseeing Sunday and plan to go home Tuesday. Jack met first with Obama, and then he introduced the president to parents Andy and Bri, little sisters Ava and Reese, and Burkhead. Obama spoke briefly to Burkhead about his NFL prospects and thanked him for all he has done for Jack. The Hoffmans, in turned, thanked Obama for meeting with them. "It was just such a great opportunity for us to visit him and raise national awareness for pediatric brain cancer," Andy said. "He talked about his commitment to research and science."

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Avera Medical Group Behavioral Health Ribbon Cutting

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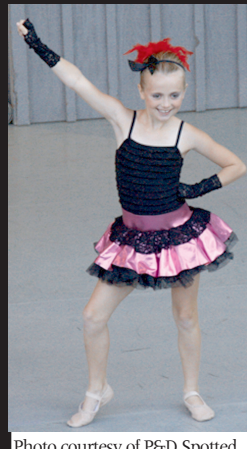


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