

South Dakota

Infant Mortality Rate Dips

BY BOB MERCER
State Capitol Bureau

PIERRE — South Dakota's campaign to reduce infant mortality showed positive results again during 2014, state Department of Health officials said Monday.

A closer look at the statistics showed improvements for white and American Indian mothers although a wide gap remained.

Seventy-three babies died before their first birthdays, a rate of 5.9 per 1,000 live births.

That was the lowest rate in several decades, besting the 6.5 from 2013 and the previous 20-year lows of 6.3 in 2011 and 6.4 in 2007.

By race, the infant mortality rate was 4.4 among whites and 12.2 among American Indians.

American Indian babies accounted for 15.7 percent of all live births last year but represented 31.5 percent of infant deaths.

Linda Daugaard, the governor's wife, made the project her personal priority in 2011. She described the overall improvement Monday as "encouraging."

The project is promoting safe sleeping practices for babies, providing prenatal care during the first trimester of pregnancy and helping pregnant moth-



PHOTO: METRO GRAPHICS

ers quit smoking.

First trimester care went to 72.2 percent of pregnant mothers last year. The national goal is 78 percent by 2020.

A major challenge remained: Smoking during pregnancy, as 12.8 percent of white mothers and 26.5 percent of American Indian mothers continued to do it.

But those smoking numbers were smaller than the rates of 17 percent for

white mothers and 30 percent for American Indian mothers in 2011 when the project began.

South Dakota's situation triggered the project. From 2000 through 2010, South Dakota's infant mortality rate of 7.0 was worse than the national average.

Last year saw five babies die from Sudden Infant Death Syndrome. There were nine SIDS deaths in 2013.

Drought Expands Across Large Section Of Nation's Crop Region

BY DAVID PITT
Associated Press

DES MOINES, Iowa — Drought conditions expanded last month amid weather that was warmer and drier across much of the western U.S., but spring rain in the agricultural Midwest could improve conditions for farmers preparing for the corn and soybean growing season.

Weekly data released by the National Drought Mitigation Center shows moderate drought or worse covered 36.8 percent of the U.S. as of late last week, up nearly five percentage points from the previous week but slightly below last year's levels. Over the last decade, the figure has ranged from 9 percent in 2010 to nearly 52 percent during the devastating drought of 2013.

Here's a look at the current conditions:

FARMERS LOOKING UP

Some areas of Iowa, Illinois and Kentucky saw rain last week, and additional rain could move across the same area this week. But abnormally dry areas are beginning to reflect the lack of moisture from last fall and recent months, said Brian Fuchs, a climatologist at the center.

That's a change from the last few years, when too much rain left many farmers in parts of Iowa and Illinois unable to plant or work in their fields.

"The dryness is kind of a double-

edged sword," Fuchs said. "They can get into the fields without fighting the wetness that traditionally for the last few years has been hampering some producers. But by the same token, dryness could start causing a problem down the road."

Data shows that drought conditions now cover 22 percent of the land used in U.S. corn production and 18 percent of soybean land. That's a spike compared to early March, when only 6 percent of corn-growing areas and 5 percent of the soybean region.

The dry weather isn't helping winter wheat. Drought now covers to 42 percent of the area where the crop is grown, up from 33 percent in early March. During the winter and early spring months, the condition of the wheat crop had already sharply declined in Nebraska, South Dakota and Kansas, said Brad Rippey, a meteorologist with the U.S. Department of Agriculture who wrote the latest drought monitor report.

WARY MONTHS AHEAD

Kansas farmer Clay Scott said that this year, he hasn't seen the dirt storms he experienced in recent years. But he noted that the area is entering its fourth growing season in drought.

"There is a desperate need for rain right now," he said. "If we catch a good rain here shortly, we'll have a nice wheat crop here in southwest Kansas compared to last couple of years."

Scott, who farms around Ulysses, is planting around 2,000 acres of corn in dry land and irrigated fields. Climatologists expect a wetter pattern to develop later this month, which gives farmers hope, he said.

Drought developed during March in much of central and northern Wisconsin, with 55 percent of the state in moderate drought. Nebraska, which reported no drought four weeks ago, is now experiencing moderate drought over 22 percent of its land.

A substantial jump also was reported in Minnesota, North Dakota and South Dakota. In Colorado, coverage of severe drought jumped to 40 percent from 12 percent.

DRY WEST

Californians can attest to the impact as the state enters the fourth year of widespread drought. Gov. Jerry Brown has ordered the first-ever mandatory reductions in water usage, as drought now covers more than 98 percent of the state. Two-thirds of California is in extreme to exceptional drought.

The drought monitor measures drought in five levels ranging from abnormally dry which is short-term dryness that can hinder crop development to exceptional drought, which causes widespread crop loss and water shortages in reservoirs and streams leading to water emergencies.

Ricketts Opposes Medicaid Expansion

LINCOLN, Neb. (AP) — Nebraska Gov. Pete Ricketts is reiterating his opposition to a Medicaid expansion bill set for debate in the Legislature.

The Republican governor said in his weekly column Monday that the bill would create an expensive burden for taxpayers, adding \$158 million in expenses to the state budget.

Ricketts says Nebraska's

Medicaid program consumes \$1.8 billion of the total budget to serve about 238,000 people annually. Instead of Medicaid expansion, he says Nebraska should focus on creating jobs that offer private coverage.

Supporters say the bill would provide cost savings for residents, including \$1 billion in "silent taxes" that insured people pay through higher premiums and a re-

duction in medical-related bankruptcies.

Lawmakers are scheduled to begin debate Wednesday.

US Safety Board: Oil Train Tank Cars Need Urgent Upgrades

BILLINGS, Mont. (AP) — Tank cars carrying oil or ethanol by rail urgently need to be retrofitted or replaced to make them more fire-resistant after a spate of explosive accidents in recent months revealed the shortcomings of voluntary industry standards, U.S. safety officials said Monday.

The National Transportation Safety Board issued a series of recommendations calling for tank cars to be fitted with protective systems better able to withstand fire than the bare steel construction now widely in use. It said a decade-long retrofit timeline that's been suggested by the tank car industry was too long to wait.

"The longer we wait, the more we expose the public to the problems of these cars that aren't especially robust," NTSB Chairman Christopher Hart told The Associated Press.

One alternative cited by the safety board would equip flammable liquids cars with ceramic "thermal blankets"

that surround the tank and shield it from intense heat should a nearby car catch fire. Those blankets already are used for transporting liquefied petroleum gas.

Also recommended were relief valves that can prevent pressure from building inside tank cars as they heat up from nearby fires.

The industry in 2011 voluntarily adopted rules requiring sturdier tank cars for hauling flammable liquids such as oil and ethanol. But cars built to the new standard split open in at least four accidents during the past year, including oil trains that derailed and burned in West Virginia in February and Illinois last month.

The recommendations come as the Department of Transportation considers new rules to bolster tank car safety. Oil and ethanol train crashes have stirred widespread worry in the U.S. and Canada, where 47 people were killed when a runaway oil train crashed in Lac-Mégantic, Quebec two years ago.

Fatality In RC Car Chase Identified

RAPID CITY (AP) — A 15-year-old Rapid City boy died and at least five others were injured after a police chase ended in the crash of a stolen car.

The victim was identified as Robert Charging Dubray Jr. Authorities say he died Sunday after the driver failed to negotiate an intersection and the car rolled over.

Rapid City police said the chase lasted about two minutes. Five of the seven juveniles in the car were taken to a hospital and treated for injuries ranging from minor to life-threatening.

A seventh person ran from the scene but was later located. It was not clear whether that person was injured.

Dubray's aunt, Lisa Andrews, tells the *Rapid City Journal* that her brother died in a drunken driving accident at the same intersection 15 years ago.

Neb. Marriage Rate Lowest Since 1925

OMAHA, Neb. (AP) — Nebraska's marriage rate has dropped to its lowest point since 1925.

The *Omaha World-Herald* reports that in 2013, the state's marriage rate was 6.3 marriages per 1,000 residents, according to a study by the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services. The rate was 6 in 1,000 in 1925.

The national marriage rate was 6.8 marriages per 1,000 residents in 2012.

The report says over half of all marriages in Nebraska in 2013 included either a bride or a groom who were over 30 years of age, which is up 40 percent from 1988.

A sociology professor says that people have shifted from looking for a "yoke mate" who can help them survive financially to a "soul mate." Sociologists also cite women delaying marriage to pursue education and a career, and more couples choosing to live together without getting married.

Men Break Into Omaha School, Take Car

OMAHA, Neb. (AP) — Police say five men broke into an Omaha school and robbed a teacher who was working in her classroom.

The Omaha Police Department says the men entered the Integrated Learning Center about 5:30 p.m. Sunday. The *Omaha World-Herald* reports that the group took several items in the school before two men broke off and entered a classroom where the 65-year-old teacher was working.

The teacher tells police that one man threatened her with a hammer. Police say the pair then took her purse, cellphone, car keys and her Honda Fit.

Police say the men likely broke a window on the north side of the building to get inside. No arrests have been made.

Neb. To Change Sentence Calculations

LINCOLN, Neb. (AP) — Nebraska's corrections department is upgrading its computer software to calculate more prison sentences automatically following news last year that hundreds of inmates were released too early.

Gov. Pete Ricketts announced Monday that the upgrades should be completed by October.

An investigative committee concluded last year that prison officials ignored several Nebraska Supreme Court rulings that outlined the correct way to calculate sentences.

In addition, many of the incorrect sentences were calculated manually by corrections staff because of gaps in the current online system. Ricketts says the changes will help automate and streamline the process.

Nebraska Department of Correctional Services Director Scott Frakes says the new software will help minimize the possibility of human error in the calculation process. Frakes says the changes are one step toward prison reform.

Man, 64, Injured In Omaha Shooting

OMAHA, Neb. (AP) — Police say a 64-year-old man has been critically injured in a shooting in Omaha.

The *Omaha World-Herald* reports that Arthur Henderson was listed in critical but stable condition following the shooting around 6:20 a.m. Monday.

Officers reported to Creighton University Medical Center to learn that Henderson had been taken into surgery for a life-threatening gunshot wound. Further information wasn't immediately available.

Police say the case remains under investigation. No arrests have been made.

Family Of WWII Veteran To Get Award

RAPID CITY (AP) — The family of a South Dakota man is set to receive an award honoring his service in the Civil Air Patrol during World War II.

Relatives of pilot Earl Wilkinson on Wednesday will receive a bronze replica of the Congressional Gold Medal. U.S. Rep. Kristi Noem will present the award.

The medal is being given to members of the organization for their role in protecting the U.S. against German U-boat attacks during World War II and carrying out other wartime domestic missions.

Wilkinson, of Rapid City, is among the four South Dakota natives whom Congress has begun to honor since December. Sylvia Henkin, of Sioux Falls, is the only living recipient from the state.

ND Gov. Issues Memo Barring Discrimination Against Gays

BISMARCK, N.D. (AP) — North Dakota's Republican governor sent a memo to 17 government departments on Monday saying discrimination against anyone is unacceptable, just two hours before every Democrat in the Legislature delivered a letter calling on him to go further and issue an executive order prohibiting bias against gays and lesbians.

Gov. Jack Dalrymple's chief of staff sent the letter to all agency directors appointed by the governor.

"This administration expects all cabinet agencies to hire employees and to maintain agency staff based on ability and performance," Chief of Staff Ron Rauschenberger wrote. "Ours remains a policy of non-discrimination, including no discrimination based on sexual orientation."

All 38 Democrats from the House and Senate delivered a letter to Dalrymple later in the day asking him to issue an executive order to require state agencies to ban discrimination in hiring and employment based on sexual orientation. Democrats are the minority in the Legislature, where Republicans hold two-thirds majorities.

Dalrymple's staff late Monday said such an executive order already exists because the governor last year "reaffirmed and ratified" an order signed by former GOP Gov. Allen Olson in 1981 that mandates all state employees be provided "fair, equitable and uniform treatment."

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