

NATIONAL BRIEFS

USPS to suspend pension contributions, seeks 4-cent stamp price hike

The U.S. Postal Service has decided to temporarily suspend its contributions to Federal Employees Retirement System annuities. This move is aimed at preserving cash and liquidity amid a severe financial crisis. Officials warn the USPS could run out of cash by February 2027. The Postal Service also hopes to increase postage rates, including raising the price of a First-Class Mail

Forever stamp. Despite the suspension of the pension payment, current and future retirees will not be immediately impacted. The Postal Regulatory Commission has also granted a waiver in a related matter, allowing USPS to redirect revenue previously earmarked for retiree benefits, providing some financial flexibility.

Maryland settles with owner and operator of ship that crashed into Baltimore's Key Bridge

ANNAPOLIS, Md. — Maryland officials have

announced a settlement with the owner and operator of the massive cargo ship that crashed into a Baltimore bridge two years ago, causing its deadly collapse. Attorney General Anthony Brown said Thursday that a settlement in principle was reached with Grace Ocean Private Limited and Synergy Marine Pte Ltd, the owner and operator of the M/V Dali. The settlement resolves a portion of the state's claims arising from the ship's March 26, 2024 crash into the Francis Scott Key Bridge. Details of the settlement were not disclosed, and the attorney

general declined further comment.

A Buffalo-area man ends his fight to reclaim Albert, his 12-foot alligator seized in 2024

A Buffalo-area man has given up his legal battle to reclaim his seized alligator, Albert. Tony Cavallaro sued the state Department of Environmental Conservation after officers seized the 12-foot alligator from his home in March 2024. Albert was taken to a Texas sanctuary.

Cavallaro said Thursday that he decided to throw in the towel after almost two years of litigation with no quick end in sight. He said it was too exhausting. The state has said Cavallaro's license to keep Albert had expired in 2021.

Former NYPD officer gets 3 to 9 years in prison for throwing a cooler that caused fatal crash

NEW YORK — A former New York City police officer has been sentenced to three to

nine years in prison for tossing a picnic cooler full of drinks at a fleeing suspect, who then crashed his motorized scooter and died. Former Sgt. Erik Duran was convicted of manslaughter for the 2023 death of Eric Duprey. Duran had pleaded not guilty. He testified at his trial that he was trying to protect other officers from the approaching scooter on a Bronx sidewalk. Prosecutors argued the sergeant had enough time to warn others to move but instead tossed the cooler in frustration.

First lady denies knowledge of Epstein crimes

BY COLLIN BINKLEY AND WILL WEISSERT
ASSOCIATED PRESS

WASHINGTON — First lady Melania Trump is denying ties to Jeffrey Epstein and knowledge of his sex crimes, saying Thursday that the “stories are completely false” and calling accusations that she was somehow involved “smears about me.”

Reading an extraordinary statement at the White House, Melania Trump said she and her attorneys were fighting back against “unfounded and baseless lies” in regards to her connections to the late financier, a convicted sex offender who leveraged connections to the rich, powerful and famous to recruit his victims and cover up his crimes.

“The lies linking me with the disgraceful Jeffrey Epstein need to end today,” she said. “The individuals lying about me are devoid of ethical standards, humility and respect. I do not object to their ignorance, but rather I reject their mean-spirited attempts to defame my reputation.”

The seemingly out-of-the-blue message came as her husband, President Donald Trump, and his administration had finally seemed to move past more than a year of controversy surrounding Epstein, especially as the Iran war had become all-consuming in Washington.

The first lady's comments almost assuredly will serve to push the story back into the political spotlight even as the president urged the public and media to move on from the case.

Nick Clemens, a spokesperson for the first lady, said the West Wing was



First lady Melania Trump speaks to reporters on Thursday in the Grand Foyer of the White House in Washington.

Jacquelyn Martin | AP Photo

aware beforehand that she was making a statement. But he deferred to the West Wing on whether the content of what Melania Trump planned to say was known. The White House press office did not respond to requests for comment.

CALLS FOR A CONGRESSIONAL HEARING FOR EPSTEIN VICTIMS

The first lady spoke for about five minutes, reading her statement in the Grand Foyer, then walked away without taking questions. She did not go into detail on the accusations against her, but said they came from “individuals and entities looking to cause damage to my good name.”

She added that they were financially and politically motivated.

Melania Trump also called on Congress to hold a public hearing centered on survivors of Epstein's

crimes, with a chance to testify before lawmakers and have their stories entered into the congressional record.

“Each and every woman should have her day to tell her story in public if she wishes,” she said. “Then, and only then, we will have the truth.”

Two of Epstein's accusers, Maria and Annie Farmer, said in a subsequent statement: “What we want is accountability, transparency, and justice.”

Former Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene, a Georgia Republican and onetime fierce Trump supporter who resigned from Congress after a public falling out with the president, posted on X, “I am grateful to the First Lady for her brave statement today about Epstein and his victims.”

Democrats, meanwhile, jumped on Melania Trump's comments, saying they agreed with her call for a congressional

hearing. In a social media post, Rep. Robert Garcia, the top Democrat on the House Oversight Committee that is investigating Epstein, called on the Republican chair of the committee, Rep. James Comer, to schedule a public hearing “immediately.”

Rep. Thomas Massie, R-Ky., who sponsored a bill prompting the release of millions of Epstein documents, turned attention back to the Justice Department, saying it's the attorney general's job to bring in survivors for testimony. Massie, who has pressed for more arrests in the Epstein case, ended a social media post with a call to “PROSECUTE!”

Questions about Epstein's reach have loomed over the administration and divided Republicans, driving a wedge into Trump's MAGA base as some pressed for the government to release more files and prosecute figures linked to the finan-

cial.

The issue has dogged Trump and fractured some of his alliances, including the one with Greene. Trump dismissed the issue as a “Democrat hoax” but later signed a bill to release files from Epstein's case.

It was not clear what prompted the first lady to revive the issue. She noted that several individuals and organizations have had to apologize for their “lies about me.” Of the examples she cited, the most recent was in October.

In that case, book publisher HarperCollins UK apologized to the first lady and retracted passages from a book suggesting Epstein played a role in introducing her and Donald Trump.

Melania Trump mentioned her husband several times in her comments. She said Epstein did not introduce her to Trump, and that she met her future husband at a New York City party in 1998.

EMAIL TO MAXWELL WAS 'TRIVIAL'

The first lady brought Epstein back to the forefront months after federal authorities released millions of pages of documents under the Epstein Files Transparency Act, the law enacted after months of public and political pressure that requires the government to open its files on the late financier and his confidant and onetime girlfriend, Ghislaine Maxwell.

Lawmakers complained when the Justice Department made only a limited release last month, but officials said more time was needed to review additional documents that

were discovered and to ensure no sensitive information about victims was released.

Melania Trump said Thursday that she was not friends with Epstein or Maxwell, but was in overlapping social circles in New York and Florida. She described an email reply she sent to Maxwell as “casual correspondence” without elaborating.

“My polite reply to her email doesn't amount to anything more than a trivial note,” she said.

Among the documents released by the Justice Department was a brief email from 2002 with the sender and recipient blacked out. It begins, “Dear G!” and ends “Love, Melania,” and compliments the recipient on a magazine article about “JE.”

“I know you are very busy flying all over the world,” it says. “How was Palm Beach? I cannot wait to go down. Give me a call when you are back in NY.”

That email was sent the same month that a New York Magazine article was published about Epstein in which Trump called him a “terrific guy.”

Among other documents released was an image from Epstein's home showing a series of photographs along a credenza and in drawers. In that image, inside a drawer among other photos, was a photograph of Trump, alongside Epstein, Melania Trump and Maxwell.

Epstein killed himself in 2019 while awaiting trial on sex trafficking charges in New York. Maxwell was convicted in 2021 of luring teenage girls to be sexually abused by Epstein and was sentenced to 20 years in prison.

West Texas oil output stabilizes U.S. supply amid Iran war

BY CARLOS NOGUERAS RAMOS/THE TEXAS TRIBUNE
ASSOCIATED PRESS

Texas produced nearly half of all U.S. oil last year despite having drilled fewer new oil wells in 2025, a trend that analysts and industry groups said is possible due to the state's geological makeup, a network of pipelines and transportation, and the ability to work on multiple production sites in less time.

And that West Texas oil has helped keep U.S. supply steady as oil supply across the world has been squeezed during the Iran war, experts said.

American oil companies produced 13.6 million barrels of oil daily last year, once again breaking their own record, according to a report by the Energy Information Administration. Almost half — 6.6 million barrels a day — came from the Permian Basin, the vast stretch of oil-rich

deposits spanning tens of thousands of square miles between western Texas and southeastern New Mexico.

Oil companies accomplished the record with a fraction of available drilling rigs, which the industry historically relied on to search for, find and lift fossil fuels from the ground. The EIA, in its report, said fewer rigs could lead to a 2% drop in production in 2027, marking the first time oil could dip since 2021.

And in light of the U.S. war on Iran, domestic oil production — particularly in West Texas — has taken on a new meaning.

The war pushed gas prices sky high as the global supply of oil has been slashed during the conflict. Texas oil leaders said the situation could have been worse had it not been for their work.

“Without the millions of barrels produced a day in

the Permian Basin there's no question we'd be in much more volatile times,” said Ben Shepperd, president of Permian Basin Petroleum Association, the largest regional trade group in the country. “The strong production coming out of the Permian Basin, however, helps provide a stable source of energy for the United States and our allies, which can reduce volatility when conflicts arise in other parts of the world.”

The report's findings aren't a first for Texas oil companies. For at least the past six years, industry groups have announced a record production levels. Industry and political leaders alike have celebrated the production as a win for the state's economy, saying royalties and taxes from the industry translate to billions of dollars for the state's coffers and school districts.

Texas Oil and Gas Asso-

ciation President Todd Staples said that 10 years ago, oil companies drilled 9.2 million barrels of oil using 1,543 rigs. In 2025, oil companies produced more than 13 million barrels with only 582 rigs.

The agile infrastructure — and geology beneath — affords operators in the Permian to adapt quickly when the market is under duress.

Different layers of rock underground allow operators to extract more fossil fuels at varying depths. Operators can also transit between wells within hours rather than days, drill multiple wells from a single site, or drill in multiple directions and at multiple depths.

“While we are not immune from what's happening around the world, we occupy a position of strength far beyond most other nations,” Staples said. “The Permian's ... consistently demonstrated

ability to adapt quickly to market shifts make it one of the most competitive oil-producing areas in the world.”

Some experts cautioned that declining rig counts, if sustained, could hinder production, if not stop it altogether.

“Depressed rig counts raise legitimate concerns about future production sustainability,” said Ed Longanecker, president of the Texas Independent Producers and Royalty Owners Association. “If the trend continues without offset, operators risk slower inventory replacement and a potential plateau or gradual decline in output over the medium term, particularly if new drilling fails to keep pace with natural decline rates in existing wells.”

The conflict in the Middle East has, Longanecker and other experts argued, given oil companies short-term economic windfalls.

Gas prices have shot up with the closure of the Strait of Hormuz, which cut 20% of the world's oil.

On Tuesday, oil prices soared to at least \$114 a barrel prior to the ceasefire.

Experts suggested it could be worse. A mix of experts and groups representing oil companies' interests in Texas said the U.S. has been insulated from more devastating economic consequences of the war. The amount of oil West Texas produces can determine the severity of the impact to the U.S. economy, they said.

“West Texas serves as a partial counterweight to disruptions in the Middle East,” said Stephen Sagriff, director of intelligence at Enverus, an energy analytics company. “It is also a source of geopolitical leverage for the U.S., a region whose own investment decisions are shaped by the volatility.”