

### **No injuries reported in 2 fires at high school in Lincoln**

LINCOLN, Neb. (AP) — Officials have canceled classes for the rest of the day after two fires were set at Lincoln High School in the capital city. Concerns over smoke in the building led to the cancellation on Thursday morning. No injuries have been reported. Students and school workers were evacuated twice. The first time was after someone started a fire in a trash can. The second time was after someone set fire to wrestling mats stored in a hallway near one of the gymnasiums. District operations director Scott Wieskamp says officials hope to let people back into the building later Thursday to collect personal items.

### **Yellowstone oil spills fuel arguments over Keystone line**

BILLINGS, Mont. (AP) — As Congress presses the Obama administration to approve the Keystone XL pipeline, government records show oil pipeline accidents have become increasingly frequent in the U.S. An Associated Press review shows accident numbers growing steadily since 2009, reversing a decade-long decline. Keystone would go from Canada to the Gulf, passing near where 30,000 gallons of crude spilled into Montana's Yellowstone River earlier this month. The recent breach became the latest in a string of spills to highlight ongoing problems with maintenance of the nation's crude pipeline network. After the U.S. Senate voted Thursday in favor of Keystone, Sen. Maria Cantwell of Washington state cited the increase in spills in calling for Obama to veto the measure. Keystone supporter North Dakota Democrat Sen. Heidi Heitkamp said building it was preferable to using older pipelines.

### **Renters could benefit from Nebraska property tax measure**

Renters could benefit from Nebraska property tax measure LINCORN, Neb. (AP) — Renters and some homeowners could end up saving money under a proposed income tax credit in the Nebraska Legislature. Senator Kate Bolz of Lincoln presented the bill to a legislative committee Thursday as part of the ongoing debate over property taxes. The measure would create an income tax credit that residents could claim once their property tax bill reaches a certain percentage of their income. Renters could also claim the credit based on a percentage of their rent. Renee Fry of the OpenSky Policy Institute, which supports the bill, says most of the tax reductions would go to low- and middle-income residents. Mark Intermill, a lobbyist for AARP Nebraska, says the bill provides additional cash to those who need it most to cover basic necessities. The bill is LB186.

### **Nebraska Gov. Ricketts stands by ag director reappointment**

LINCOLN, Neb. (AP) — Nebraska Governor Pete Ricketts says he stands by his decision to reappoint the state's agriculture director despite protests from animal welfare groups that want him removed. Ricketts said Thursday that he thinks Department of Agriculture director Greg Ibach will continue to improve his agency's policies for enforcing animal neglect penalties.

Ibach's legislative reappointment hearing on Tuesday was marked by protests from animal welfare activists who said the department wasn't doing enough to enforce humane regulations in commercial breeding facilities. A petition on the website [change.org](http://change.org) called for citizens and senators to block his reappointment. Ricketts pointed to the positive testimony on Ibach's working relationships with the Nebraska Farm Bureau and the Nebraska Humane Society. The governor says new regulations to address the protesters' concerns are currently under review.

### **Nebraska marriage fee proposal still waiting for vote**

LINCOLN, Neb. (AP) — A proposal to raise the cost of marriage licenses issued by Nebraska counties has yet to reach a vote in the Legislature. The bill continued to face opposition Thursday from Sen. Ernie Chambers of Omaha, who has promised to prolong the debate until the measure is withdrawn. Lawmakers adjourned for the day without voting on the bill. Opponents say the proposed increase from \$15 to \$50 amounts to a tax increase of more than 300 percent for couples getting hitched. Senator Kathy Campbell of Lincoln has said the current \$15 fee doesn't cover the cost of collecting and filing marriage licenses. The new fee was proposed by the Nebraska Association of County Officials, which notes that the fee hasn't been changed in 20 years.

### **Nebraska governor, ag director announce annual ag conference**

LINCOLN, Neb. (AP) — An annual state agriculture conference is expected to focus on helping small and mid-sized Nebraska farmers prepare a transition plan for their operations. Director of Agriculture Greg Ibach announced the annual agriculture conference with Governor Pete Ricketts in a news conference Thursday. The Governor's Ag Conference is set for March 4 and 5 in Kearney. Ibach says a study showed more than 50 percent of the state's small and medium dairy farms don't have successors. A panel will address how to transition operations to younger farmers. Ricketts says the conference will also address connecting the state's urban and rural sectors through agriculture and increasing foreign exports to countries in Asia. Representatives from the US Department of Agriculture, the Greater Omaha Chamber of Commerce and the Scoular Company will speak.

### **Nebraska plant giving away tons of rotten sugar beets**

SCOTTSDLUFF, Neb. (AP) — Western Sugar Cooperative officials say the co-op must dispose of 10,000 tons of rotten sugar beets and has offered them free to livestock feeders. The co-op's Jerry Darnell told television station KDUH that the problem cropped up at its Scottsbluff plant in November, when temperatures dropped from 40 degrees to minus 20. Piles of beets outside froze, trapping warm air inside that led to the rotting. Darnell says the co-op wants "to process everything we buy and make it into refined white sugar. This year Mother Nature has not cooperated, and it's throwing us a curveball." He says the loss will affect growers, because there are fewer beets to process into sugar and, thus, less sugar to sell.

### **Omaha man pleads no contest for strangling girlfriend**

OMAHA, Neb. (AP) — An Omaha man has pleaded no contest to second-degree murder charges for strangling his girlfriend and leaving her in an empty grave. The Omaha World-Herald reports 20-year-old Mikael Loyd entered his plea deal Thursday. He was charged for choking 19-year-old Melissa Rodriguez in August 2013 and later dumping her body into a grave. Police say the murder occurred just after Loyd had left a mental health institution. They say Loyd had an outstanding arrest warrant for making comments about wanting to kill his mother, but they didn't take him into custody before the murder. A message left for Loyd's attorney was not immediately answered. Loyd faces 20 years to life in prison. A sentencing hearing has been set for April.

### **Omaha man convicted of first-degree murder in party slaying**

OMAHA, Neb. (AP) — An Omaha man has been convicted of first-degree murder in connection to a shooting death at a party following a Miley Cyrus concert last year. The Omaha World-Herald reports 24-year-old LaRon M. Jones was found guilty Thursday in the March shooting of 21-year-old Brandon Samuels. He was also convicted on two weapons charges. Police say a fight broke out at the house party, and when the fight escalated, Jones and others got into cars to leave. They say Jones returned to the end of the home's driveway and began firing shots into the air and then at the house. Jones faces a life term in prison. A sentencing hearing has not yet been scheduled.

### **Man accused in 5-year-old Omaha girl's death takes plea deal**

OMAHA, Neb. (AP) — The 21-year-old man accused in the shooting death of a 5-year-old Omaha girl has taken a plea deal. KETV-TV reports Vincent Hicks pleaded no contest Thursday to second-degree murder and use of a weapon to commit a felony. He had previously been charged with first-degree murder and other weapons counts in connection to the January 2014 killing of Payton Benson. A sentencing hearing for Hicks has been scheduled for April 3rd.

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