



Stephanie Klein-Davis/The Roanoke Times via AP

Jeff Morris watches flood waters from his porch on Midland Trail Road in Callaghan, Va., Friday.

At least 23 dead in West Virginia floods

CHARLESTON, W.Va. (AP)—As a deluge swamped southeast West Virginia — a disaster that killed at least 23 people — Ronnie Scott's wife called him and told him their house was filling up with water. She fled to the attic with two dogs and a cat and waited. She smelled natural gas.

Then, the house blew up. Belinda Scott was able to break a vent and get out onto a porch, then make it onto a tree, which she clung to for hours before being rescued by state police, Ronnie Scott told The Associated Press on Friday. His wife was in the hospital with burns on 67 percent of her body. The pets did not make it out alive.

"My wife was out there four and a half hours hanging in a tree with a house burning right beside her, flood waters running all around her," said Scott, who was not at the White Sulphur Springs home when the waters rose.

Early reports indicate about 9 inches of rain damaged or destroyed more than 100 homes and knocked out power to tens of thousands of others, Gov. Earl Ray Tomblin said.

About 500 people were stranded overnight in a shopping center when a bridge washed out, and dozens of other people had to be plucked off rooftops or rescued from their cars.

"Our focus remains on search and rescue," the governor said. He added: "It's been a long 24 hours and the next 24 hours may not be much easier."

Greenbrier County Sheriff Jan Cahill described "complete chaos" in his county, one of the hardest hit.

"Roads destroyed, bridges out, homes burned down, washed off foundations," he said. "Multiple sections of highway just missing.

Pavement just peeled off like a banana. I've never seen anything like that."

In the towns of Rainelle and White Sulphur Springs, rescue crews went door to door to check on residents, a painstaking task that could stretch into the weekend. Once a residence was checked, a red or orange "X" was marked on the home.

The state Division of Homeland Security reported 15 people killed in Greenbrier County and rescue efforts continue.

Currently 200 National Guardsmen were assisting in eight counties, helping local crews with swift water rescues, search and extraction efforts and health and welfare checks. The governor declared a state of emergency in 44 of 54 counties and authorized up to 500 soldiers to assist.

The governor said he had planned to fly around the hard-hit areas, but wasn't able to because all state aircraft were being used for rescues.

Eric Blackshire was one of the stranded at Crossings Mall, a mix of restaurants, stores and a hotel in Elkview, which is about 15 miles northeast of Charleston. Some had to sleep in their cars or at businesses overnight. Blackshire opted for a hotel room.

"It was kind of like a hurricane party. I guess you could call it a flood party. There were lots of beers being drank last night," he told The Associated Press.

He was able to get to safety Friday when Pinch Volunteer Fire Department firefighters used a rope to guide people down a hillside. Crews were working to build a gravel road on the backside of the shopping plaza.

An area near the West Virginia-Virginia border received at least 9 inches of rain.

Sen. Wyden renews scrutiny of pharmaceutical ties to federal panel

By MATTHEW PERRONE
AP Health Writer

WASHINGTON — A high-ranking Senate Democrat is pushing for more answers on why doctors and patient advocates with financial ties to the pharmaceutical industry came to serve on a panel that advises the federal government on pain issues.

Sen. Ron Wyden says he is "even more concerned" about these apparent conflicts of interest after receiving a response from the National Institutes of Health, which vetted and selected the panel members. In a letter sent Thursday to the Obama administration's top health official, Wyden requests a series of documents related to the pain panel, including financial disclosure forms filled out by its members.

A spokesman for the Department of Health and Human Services, which oversees NIH, said in a statement, "we will be reviewing the letter and responding in a timely manner."

The panel attracted attention late last year when several members bashed a federal plan to recommend doctors reduce prescribing of painkillers used to treat chronic pain, such as



U.S. Sen. Ron Wyden

OxyContin and Percocet. The guidelines were ultimately issued in March by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, despite the panel's objections.

The Associated Press reported earlier this year that nearly half of the non-federal members on the panel had apparent ties to pharmaceutical companies or advocacy groups that receive funding from drugmakers. The panel includes federal officials and outside doctors and patient representatives.

"I'm going to continue to demand accountability to ensure the manufacturers of these powerful prescription drugs aren't having an undue influence on policies designed to reduce their usage," said Wyden, who is the highest-ranking Democrat on the Senate Finance

Committee, in a statement.

Two panelists work for the Center for Practical Bioethics, a Missouri nonprofit which receives funding from drugmakers, including OxyContin-maker Purdue Pharma, which donated \$100,000 to the organization in 2013. One panelist holds a chair at the center created by a \$1.5 million donation from Purdue. The other has received more than \$8,660 in speaking fees, meals, travel accommodations and other payments from pain drug-makers, including Purdue, according to federal records.

In total, the Center for Practical Bioethics says drug and device companies have contributed about 5 percent of its funding in the last four years, though the center does not publish specific donation amounts.

Wyden's ongoing inquiry comes as Congress tries to stem the rise in fatal painkiller overdoses, which rose to an all-time high of nearly 19,000 in 2014, up fourfold since 2000.

"Given the public health epidemic rooted in prescription opioid addiction, current policy governing these powerful drugs merits particularly close scrutiny, and at this time appears to be

inadequate," states Wyden, in the letter.

In an April response to Wyden, NIH Director Dr. Francis Collins explained that "all members fully disclosed" their earned income from pharmaceutical manufacturers, as required. He also explained that NIH took great care to make sure the panel "is balanced in terms of the points of view and the functions performed."

But Wyden's letter points out that the two members of the panel who worked for the Center for Practical Bioethics did not recuse themselves from discussion of the CDC guidelines, which could hurt painkiller sales for drug-makers.

"In my view, this is indicative of a flawed conflicts of interest policy," states Wyden.

The Oregon Democrat is asking the Department of Health and Human Services to turn over the standards it uses to choose panelists and explain how each panel member met those standards. He also asks for the nomination forms related to the panel and all instances when the panel received comments from drug-makers. Wyden requests the materials by June 30.

Experts demand more effort to save coral reefs

HONOLULU (AP) — As the largest international gathering of coral reef experts comes to a close, scientists and policy makers are moving ahead with plans for action to save the world's reefs, which are being rapidly damaged.

"We are not ready to write the obituary for coral reefs," James Cook University professor Terry Hughes, who is also the president of the ARC Centre of Excellence for Coral Reef Studies in Australia, said about the "unprecedented" move by the scientific community. Scientists are not known for their political activism, he said, but they felt this crisis warranted such action.

A call to action from three Pacific island nations whose reefs are in the crosshairs of the largest and longest-lasting coral bleaching event in recorded history was presented Friday at the conclusion of



XL Catlin Seaview Survey via AP

This photo shows before, March 2016, left, and after, May 2016, images of coral bleaching and death at Lizard Island on Australia's Great Barrier Reef.

the International Coral Reef Symposium in Honolulu. The Associated Press was given advance access to the call for action and the scientific community's response.

The heads of state from Palau, Micronesia and the Marshall Islands attended the conference and will provide a plan to help save their ailing coral reefs,

which are major contributors to their local economies and the daily sustenance of their people. The call to action, signed by the three presidents, asked for better collaboration between the scientific community and local governments, saying there needs to be more funding and a commitment to protect the reefs.

"If our coral reefs are further degraded, then our reef-dependent communities will suffer and be displaced," the letter said. They also called for more integration of "traditional knowledge, customary practices and scientific research" in building a comprehensive coral reef policy.

Bleaching is a process where corals, stressed by hot ocean waters and other environmental changes, lose their color as the symbiotic algae that lives within them is released. Severe or concurrent years of bleaching can kill coral reefs, as has been documented over the past two years in oceans around the world. Scientists expect a third year of bleaching to last through the end of 2016.

In the northern third of the Great Barrier Reef, close to half of the corals have died in the past three months, said Hughes, who focuses his research there.

BRIEFLY

2 die in California wildfire that left little time to flee

LAKE ISABELLA, Calif. (AP) — A deadly wildfire that roared through dry brush and trees in the mountains of central California gave residents little time to flee as flames burned dozens of homes to the ground, propane tanks exploded, and smoke obscured the path to safety.

Two bodies were found Friday near Lake Isabella, a popular recreation area east of Bakersfield that was ravaged by wind-whipped flames, said Phil Neufeld, a spokesman for the Kern County Fire Department.

At least 80 houses were destroyed in the southern Sierra Nevada as the fire burned out of control across 29 square miles, leveling neighborhoods and forcing thousands of people to flee from fast-moving flames.

David Klippel, 78, a retired police officer, said he didn't see much of a threat after receiving an automated call advising him to leave. That changed dramatically within an hour Thursday afternoon.

"I've never been so close to a fast-moving, ferocious fire. It was unbelievable," said Klippel, who later learned his house had caught fire. "I almost didn't have time to get out."

Neighborhoods of mobile homes were charred to their foundations. Heavy smoke hung over Lake Isabella, and winds pushed the flames farther into drought-starved terrain.

"The forces of nature collided with a spark," Kern County Fire Chief Brian Marshall said. "The mountainous terrain, five years of drought and wind gusts of over 20 mph all drove a fire over 11 miles in 13 hours."

Scorching heat and tinder-dry conditions across the West have contributed to massive wildfires in the past week that have destroyed properties.

Obama names Stonewall national monument; 1st for gay rights

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Barack Obama created the first national monument to gay rights on Friday, designating the site of the Stonewall riots in Manhattan where the modern gay rights movement took root nearly five decades ago.

The Stonewall National Monument will be anchored by Christopher Park, a small park just across from the iconic Stonewall Inn tavern, and covers a 7.7 acre swath of Greenwich Village where the uprising took place after police raided the gay bar in 1969. Obama said the monument would "tell the story of our struggle for LGBT rights" and of a civil rights movement that became a part of America.

"I believe our national parks should reflect the full story of our country: the richness and diversity and uniquely American spirit that has always defined us," Obama said. "That we are stronger together, that out of

many, we are one."

Designating the small area marks a major act of national recognition for gay rights advocates and their struggles over the last half-century. In addition to the Supreme Court decision, since the 1969 uprising the U.S. has enacted anti-discrimination protections, allowed gays and lesbians to serve openly in the U.S. military and seen prominent athletes and entertainers come out of the closet.

Last year, New York City made it a city landmark — the first named primarily because of significance to LGBT history.

Officials: No evidence Orlando gunman was gay

WASHINGTON (AP) — FBI investigators so far have not turned up persuasive evidence that Orlando gunman

Omar Mateen was gay or pursuing gay relationships, according to two government officials familiar with the investigation.

The FBI began looking into that possibility after media reports last week quoted men as saying that Omar Mateen had reached out to them on gay dating apps and had frequented the gay nightclub where the June 12 massacre took place. One man claimed to be Mateen's gay lover in an interview with Univision that aired this week, while another recalled Mateen as a regular at the Pulse club who tried to pick up men.

But the officials say the FBI, which has conducted about 500 interviews and is reviewing evidence collected from Mateen's phone, has not found concrete evidence to corroborate such accounts nearly two weeks into the investigation. They also cautioned that the investigation is ongoing and

that nothing has formally been ruled out.

The officials were not authorized to discuss an ongoing investigation by name and spoke on condition of anonymity.

Law enforcement officials have said there is no doubt that Mateen was radicalized at some point before the Pulse nightclub attack, though there is no evidence that he was directed by any foreign terror groups.

In calls with the police after the shooting began, he pledged his allegiance to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the leader of the Islamic State group, declared himself to be an Islamic soldier and demanded that the United States stop bombing Syria

and Iraq, the FBI said.

"I let you know, I'm in Orlando and I did the shootings," he said, according to a partial transcript of a 911 call made public by the FBI on Monday.

Attorney General Loretta Lynch has taken pains not to describe radical extremism as his sole motivation and declined in an interview with The Associated Press on Tuesday to rule out any other possibility, including that he was secretly gay. She also declined to say what evidence, if any, existed to support alternate theories but said investigators remain focused on why he picked a gay nightclub as the target of his attack.

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