

Senate confirms billionaire investor as commerce secretary

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Senate on Monday confirmed billionaire investor Wilbur Ross as commerce secretary as President Donald Trump adds to his economic team.

The vote was 72-27. Breaking with Republican orthodoxy, Ross said the Trump administration will work quickly to re-do the North American Free Trade Agreement. That's the massive trade pact with Canada and Mexico that has boosted trade but still stings laid-off workers across the Midwest.

Senators from both political parties were deferential to Ross at his nearly four-hour confirmation hearing, which was much more subdued than the confirmation hearings of other Trump nominees. Former commerce secretaries have praised him, including one who served under former President Barack Obama.

“Mr. Ross will bring decades of business, entrepreneurial and civic experience to this important position,” said Sen. John Thune, R-S.D., chairman of the Commerce Committee.

Sen. Elizabeth Warren of Massachusetts criticized Ross' business ties to Russia and the way he ran a mortgage lender during the housing crisis.

“Mr. Ross has extensive ties to Russia. He plans to keep making money from his major oil shipping companies while working as Commerce Secretary. He's made billions off the backs of struggling home owners,” Warren said Monday. “He is practically a cartoon stereotype of a Wall Street fat cat.”

As part of his ethics agreement, Ross is giving up his position at Diamond S. Shipping, but he will retain a stake in the company, which ships petroleum and other products. As part of the agreement, Ross has promised not to take any action as commerce secretary that would benefit any company in which he has a financial interest.

Cause of most U.S. wildfires traced to people, study finds

WASHINGTON (AP) — People have triggered five out of six wildfires in the U.S. over the last two decades, tripling the length of the wildfire season and making it start earlier in the East and last longer in the West, a new study finds.

Even as climate change worsens the nation's fire season — making it longer and easier to burn more acres — researchers said human activities play an even bigger role.

While fire experts have long blamed people more than lightning, the new work details the extent of human-caused ignitions and how they interact with global warming to make matters worse.

Scientists analyzing fire data from 1992 to 2012 found that 84 percent of all U.S. wildfires — but only 44 percent of the total acres burned — were started by people, either by accident or on purpose. And human-caused blazes have more than tripled the length of the wildfire season from 46 days to 154 days, according to a study in Monday's journal Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences.

“People are moving more and more into natural wild areas and essentially providing ignition for wildfires,” said lead author Jennifer Balch, a fire ecologist at the University of Colorado.

Of the more than 1 million human-started fires since 1992, about 29 percent began by trash burning, another 21 percent were arson and 11 percent were from misuse of equipment, Balch said.

Last year's Soberanes fire in California was sparked by an illegal campfire and burned for nearly three

months. The blaze surpassed \$200 million in firefighting costs, the most expensive in U.S. history.

One out of every five wildfires occurs on the Fourth of July from fireworks, Balch said.

Probe into Russia ties to Trump off to rocky start

WASHINGTON (AP) — A simmering dispute between leaders of the House intelligence committee spilled into the public Monday over an investigation into whether President Donald Trump has ties to Russia, even as they pledged to conduct a bipartisan probe.

The Republican committee chairman, Rep.

Devin Nunes of California, said he has heard no evidence so far that anyone in Trump's orbit was in contact with Russians during the presidential campaign. The top Democrat on the committee, Adam Schiff, also of California, said the committee's investigation was hardly off the ground and it was premature to make any conclusions.

The nature of ties between Trump's associates and Russia has dogged him throughout his nascent presidency, and Monday brought renewed calls for a special prosecutor to investigate the unusual situation. Federal investigators have been looking into contacts between Trump advisers and Russia for months, along with

Russia's role in political hacking during the campaign aimed at Democrats. Trump, on Monday, said he hasn't called Russia in 10 years.

The House and Senate intelligence committees are conducting separate investigations. But revelations last week that the White House enlisted the Republican chairmen of those committees to push back against news reports have intensified concerns over whether the congressional investigations will be tainted by political influence.

Nunes has said the White House asked him to talk with one reporter, but didn't give him any guidance on what to say. He said he told that reporter the same thing he's said to many other reporters in the course of discussions.

SpaceX says it will fly two people to moon next year

CAPE CANAVERAL, Fla. (AP) — SpaceX said Monday it will fly two people to the moon next year, a feat not attempted since NASA's Apollo heyday close to half a century ago.

Tech billionaire Elon Musk — the company's founder and chief executive officer — announced the surprising news barely a week after launching his first rocket from NASA's legendary moon pad.

Two people who know one another approached the company about sending them on a weeklong flight just beyond the moon, according to Musk. He won't identify the pair or the price

tag. They've already paid a “significant” deposit and are “very serious” about it, he noted.

“Fly me to the moon ... Ok,” Musk said in a light-hearted tweet following the news conference.

Musk said SpaceX is on track to launch astronauts to the International Space Station for NASA in mid-2018. This moon mission would follow about six months later, by the end of the year under the current schedule, using a Dragon crew capsule and a Falcon heavy rocket launched from NASA's former moon pad in Florida.

If all goes as planned, it could happen close to the 50th anniversary of NASA's first manned flight to the moon, on Apollo 8.

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