

<b>DOW</b> 31,961.86 +424.51	<b>NASDAQ</b> 13,597.97 +132.77	<b>S&amp;P 500</b> 3,925.43 +44.06	<b>30-YR T-BOND</b> 2.24% +.04	<b>CRUDE OIL</b> \$63.22 +1.55	<b>GOLD</b> \$1,796.40 -8.00	<b>SILVER</b> \$27.86 +.17	<b>EURO</b> \$1.2148 +.0004
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## BRIEFING



WSDA via Capital Press

**Last year, thousands of people across the U.S. received unsolicited seed packages in the mail.**

### USDA concludes 'mystery seed' investigation

The U.S. Department of Agriculture has concluded its monthslong investigation into last year's "mystery seed" case, during which thousands of people across the U.S. received unsolicited seed packages in the mail.

The Agriculture Department said it found no evidence that someone was trying to harm U.S. agriculture. The report concluded the seeds were likely part of an internet scam to help a seller boost its search results.

The investigation also prompted the agency to create new guidelines to prevent such events in the future.

The mass mailing sparked concern about foreign seeds. Both state and federal agriculture departments issued warnings to citizens not to plant the seeds, saying the packages could potentially contain invasive species, pathogens or pests.

### Funky electronics chain Fry's closes

Fry's Electronics, the go-to chain for tech tinkerers looking for an obscure part, is closing for good.

The company, perhaps even more well known for outlandish themes at some of its stores, from Aztec to "Alice's Adventures in Wonderland," said Wednesday in an online posting that the COVID-19 pandemic had made it impossible to continue.

The chain was concentrated on the West Coast, but had 31 stores in nine states. It was founded 36 years ago.

The pandemic has done heavy damage to retailers, but Fry's was already getting hammered by online competition and a battle between heavy-hitters Best Buy and Amazon.com.

### New-home sales jump 4.3%

Demand for new homes in the U.S. surged 4.3% in January with the housing market still one of the strongest segments of the economy.

Last month's increase pushed sales of new homes to an adjusted annual rate of 923,000, the Commerce Department reported Wednesday. That's much stronger than the 855,000 that economists were expecting. December's new home sales figure was revised higher as well, from 842,000, to 885,000.

Sales of new homes are now 19.3% higher than they were last year at this time.

"Sales would have been much higher if only builders could build faster," said Robert Frick, economist with Navy Federal Credit Union. "Supply is only one issue, and for many Americans trying to buy their first home, rising prices are shutting them out of the market."

— Bulletin wire reports

## COVID-19

# ID theft targeting jobless claims has increased

BY MIKE ROGOWAY  
The Oregonian

The Oregon Employment Department experienced a tenfold increase in identity theft issues in 2020 as new jobless claims poured in during the pandemic, mirroring a spike in claims that took place across the country.

Cyberthieves capitalized on the huge volume of unemployment claims filed during the early months of the pandemic to submit fraudulent benefit applications. Washington lost upwards of \$200 million during the pandemic; California's losses top \$11 billion. But unlike several other

states, Oregon won't say how much money was lost to fraud.

The employment department rejected a public records request submitted in December, citing a broad statutory exemption from the records most state agencies must disclose. The department also refused an accompanying request seek-

ing records explaining how it reached the decision not to disclose information on fraud.

The employment department maintains that thieves are watching news coverage and social networking groups for clues as to how individual states are fighting fraudulent activity. Acting Director David

Gerstenfeld said that putting a dollar figure to the state's losses, even for a full year, could trigger a wave of attempted theft that could drain the state's unemployment insurance trust fund and slow payments to legitimately unemployed Oregonians.

See **Theft** / A12

## OREGON LEGISLATURE



# 'Goat yoga' bill draws support, skepticism

BY MATEUSZ PERKOWSKI  
Capital Press

Therapy and exercise classes involving livestock could be permitted in Oregon's exclusive farm use zones under a bill that's drawn skepticism from agriculture and farmland protection groups.

Proponents of "goat yoga" are urging lawmakers to pass Senate Bill 559, which would include livestock in a land use provision under which counties can already allow horse-related "exercise, therapeutic and counseling activities" in EFU zones.

See **Yoga** / A12



**PHOTOS FROM TOP: A Pygmy goat jump past Rebecca Ballantine during goat yoga at Li' Holler Farm near Westminster, Maryland, in 2017. A bill in Oregon proposes allowing "livestock therapy," such as goat yoga, in exclusive farm use zones.**

Ken Koons/Baltimore Sun/TNS; WSU Extension via Capital Press

# Will holograms be the next innovation in the workplace after the pandemic?

BY DALVIN BROWN  
The Washington Post

It's a pressing question that has yet to be answered: Once the pandemic passes, what will the return to work look like for millions of Americans?

Some tech companies have said people can continue to work from home indefinitely. Surveys suggest that most others are contemplating hybrid workspaces where

staffers rotate between working remotely and coming into the office. The possible post-coronavirus situation has some companies envisioning a future where people can collaborate in more interactive and engaging ways, whether they're on-site or at home. One novel approach is to use 3D holograms.

Last month, Canada-based ARHT Media launched Ho-

loPod, a 3D display system that beams presenters into meetings and conferences they otherwise wouldn't be able to attend.

That same month, the 3D graphics company Imverse was recognized at the global tech conference CES for software that enables hologram collaboration within virtual meeting rooms. Last year, Spatial enabled holographic-style virtual meetings on

Oculus Quest.

Others are racing to develop similar web-conferencing capabilities under the notion that holograms are more engaging to work with than tiles of faces on a computer screen. On the fringe for years, workplace holograms would enable employees to virtually re-create in-person meetings whether they're at home or in the office.

See **Holograms** / A12

# Lawsuits claim auto insurers overcharge in pandemic

*Class-action lawsuits: Companies failed to account for a drop in driving and crashes*

BY MICHELLE L. PRICE  
The Associated Press

LAS VEGAS — Class-action lawsuits were filed in Nevada against 10 major auto insurance companies on Tuesday, contending that the companies charged excessive insurance premiums during the pandemic by failing to account for a drop in driving and crashes.

The lawsuits acknowledge that some insurers provided discounts over the emptier roads and drop in accidents and claims, but the discounts did not offer "any meaningful relief that actually reflects the reduction in cars on the road and reduced driving during the pandemic," according to the court filings. The rates that were charged violate state law against excessive premiums, the lawsuits contend.

The lawsuits were filed on behalf of Nevada insurance customers against State Farm, USAA, Geico, Acuity, Liberty Mutual, Farmers, Progressive, Travelers, Nationwide and Allstate.

"The filing of a lawsuit does not substantiate the allegations within the complaint," State Farm, the country's largest auto insurer, said in a statement. "We've recently learned about the filing, and it is premature to comment at this time."

USAA was reviewing the lawsuit, according to spokesman Matt Hartwig. "However, I do think it's important to note that on three occasions in 2020, USAA returned dividends totaling \$1.07 billion to all auto insurance policy holders due to fewer drivers on the road because of the ongoing pandemic," he said.

Liberty Mutual declined to comment.

Phone and email messages seeking comment from the other insurers were not immediately returned Tuesday.

States across the country began reporting a decline in traffic and crashes when COVID-19-related closures and stay-at-home orders were imposed starting in the spring. Companies that sell the majority of the policies across the U.S. announced refunds or credits to drivers.

The discounts provided by insurers to reflect pandemic driving conditions varied, from \$50 to \$100 one-time refund from Acuity, a 25% reduction in bills from March 20 to May 31 from State Farm, to a 15% credit from Geico only when renewing a policy between April 8 and Oct. 7, according to the lawsuits.

See **Overcharge** / A12