

[MUSIC PLAYING]

**SINGER:** One, two, three, four.

**CATHY WURZER:** It's *Minnesota Now*. I'm Cathy Wurzer. A COVID testing company that operates in Minnesota is accused of fraud and profiteering. Our colleagues at APM Reports investigate. We'll have the story. A Minnesota company has a major deal with Major League Baseball. We'll talk to the owners about their dream come true.

Farmers are under stress from drought conditions and the war abroad. We'll hear how they're making do. Plus we'll talk about the North Star Gay Rodeo this weekend in Hugo, Minnesota. Wally and Eric are back to talk sports. We'll have the Minnesota music minute and the song of the day.

All of that and more coming up after the news.

Live from NPR News in Washington, I'm Lakshmi Singh. A Congressional investigation finds four corporate landlords used abusive tactics and evicted far more people during the coronavirus pandemic than previously reported. Here's NPR's Jennifer Ludden.

**JENNIFER LUDDEN:** The yearlong investigation found the four companies filed to evict three times as many people as was known. Many tenants had missed only one month of rent or already applied for emergency rental aid. Representative James Clyburn says one company even led tenants to think they were no longer covered by the federal eviction moratorium.

**JAMES CLYBURN:** It looks as if they were using information, and even misinformation, in order to set people up for evictions.

**JENNIFER LUDDEN:** The companies say they've always complied with the moratorium and helped tens of thousands of residents stay in their homes. Jennifer Ludden, NPR News, Washington.

**LAKSHMI SINGH:** Questions over whether the US is already in a recession are mounting-- new data revealing a second consecutive quarter of negative economic growth in the US. In the last three months, the economy shrank 0.9%. In the previous quarter, the GDP fell at an annual rate of 1.6%.

Mark Zandi, chief economist at Moody's Analytics, says there's evidence that growth rate is slowing. And if it stays that way, that would be the basis for an economy going into recession. But consumer spending, he says, in the latest quarter, was still positive.

**MARK ZANDI:** It was a source of growth in the quarter, but it was a smaller positive. So consumers are still spending. They're still engaged. And that's key to keeping the economy out of recession. That's good news.

**LAKSHMI SINGH:** President Biden addressing inflation and other economic concerns this hour. Russia says no deal has yet been struck for a potential prisoner swap involving two Americans jailed in Russia. From Moscow, NPR's Charles Maynes has the latest.

**CHARLES MAYNES:** Speaking to reporters about the prisoner exchange, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said no agreements were yet finalized. Similarly, the foreign ministry acknowledged negotiations had been ongoing for some time but had yet to yield results. In a press conference Wednesday, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said the White House had delivered a substantial proposal to Russia involving an exchange for US basketball star Brittney Griner, currently on trial for drug charges in Moscow, and former Marine Paul Whelan, who was convicted of espionage in 2020.

While the US has not confirmed reports, that deal may involve freeing a convicted Russian arms dealer. Moscow says Griner's release can only come once her trial is over. Charles Maynes, NPR News, Moscow.

**LAKSHMI SINGH:** Top Senate Democrats have introduced a \$21 billion emergency spending bill to address the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and other emerging diseases, this as the country experiences a surge in the Omicron BA.5 variant and faces rising cases of monkeypox in this country and around the globe. You're listening to NPR News.

**ANNOUNCER 1:** Support for NPR comes from BetterHelp, connecting people with a therapist online for issues like depression and relationships. 25,000 therapists are available through BetterHelp, using a computer or smartphone, [betterhealth.com/public](https://betterhealth.com/public), and the Lemelson Foundation.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

**CATHY WURZER:** Around Minnesota right now, skies are mostly sunny. There are some showers in parts of Northern Minnesota. It kind of feels more like September than late July, highs today upper 60s to the mid-70s.

At noon in Hibbing, it's sunny and 62, 72 in downtown Saint Paul, and outside Joe Jitters Coffee House in Moose Lake, it's raining and 63 degrees. I'm Cathy Wurzer with Minnesota news headlines.

Minnesota Attorney General Keith Ellison says he will not appeal a judge's ruling that struck down many of the state's abortion restrictions, including the 24-hour waiting period and two-party parental notification as unconstitutional. Ellison says the AG's office has put about \$620,000 toward the case in staff time and other costs since 2019.

Police in Edina are asking the public for help locating a person they say may have information about a noose found hanging at the city's community center. Tim Nelson has more.

**TIM NELSON:** Edina officials say they found the noose, often a reference to lynching and a symbol of racial hatred, on Tuesday. The noose was secured to the roof and hung in a courtyard at the Edina Community Center. It was immediately removed.

Police say they have since found surveillance video of someone they call a person of interest in the incident. Police say the video shows a white teenage male wearing a black Vans hoodie sweatshirt, dark shorts, tall socks, black slip-on canvas tennis shoes, and a backpack. He appears to be wearing a medical face mask in the images released by police. Edina authorities are asking anyone who might have information to contact police.

The news follows racist and anti-LGBTQ graffiti left on an Edina school tennis court last week. A rally held Wednesday called for an end to racism and hate in the city. I'm Tim Nelson.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

**CATHY** Our investigative team, APM Reports, has a story today about a COVID-19 testing company that operates in Minnesota and why it's under investigation. The team found that Nebraska-based GS Labs was slow to report some tests to state regulators and that some customers waited weeks to get results from the company, if they ever got them at all. Tom Scheck of APM Reports joins us right now to talk about the story. Thanks, Tom. How are you doing?

**TOM SCHECK:** Hey, there. I'm great.

**CATHY** Good. What led you to start digging on this story?

**WURZER:**

**TOM SCHECK:** Well, Cathy, we've been covering COVID testing, basically, since the pandemic started. And after we ran a story last year, we started seeing and hearing complaints about GS Labs.

And so then we started doing the basic reporting that anyone does. We started filing public records requests in Minnesota and in other states where the company operated. We also reached out to consumers and current and former employees of the company. And then, over the next 10 months, we ended up going through thousands of pages of records and interviewed more than 65 consumers, former employees, and some public health officials. And my colleague Anna Canny had this to say about what we found in Minnesota.

**ANNA CANNY:** In early 2020, an investment firm with interest in real estate, restaurants, and car washes got into the health care business. The firm partnered with two medical professionals to open a new men's health clinic. But as COVID-19 spread across the country, they quickly shifted their business model to testing.

Since then, the firm, now known as GS Labs, has operated in 21 states. The Nebraska-based company set up pop-up sites in places like an abandoned bank and a glow-in-the-dark mini-golf course. And they attracted long lines of customers with billboards, online ads, and commercials, like this one that ran in Minneapolis during the Super Bowl. It shows people happy at a Super Bowl party because they tested negative for COVID.

**ANNOUNCER 2:** GS Labs, this year's COVID testing MVP, is making a difference in the lives of over a million patients with fast, accessible, and convenient COVID testing.

**ANNA CANNY:** But an APM Reports investigation has found recurring problems with the speed and accuracy of GS Labs's testing services. Former employees in seven states say GS Labs try to maximize revenue by pressuring patients into getting three different types of COVID tests at the same time. Kathy Lusack worked at the Eagan location for about a month last spring.

**KATHY** They wanted you to get all three of those tests, even though individuals did not want them.

**LUSACK:**

**ANNA CANNY:** The company denies pressuring patients. But the triple tests are the subject of lawsuits by three health insurance companies in Minnesota, Missouri, and Washington State. They accuse GS Labs of overcharging for tests and profiteering from the pandemic. At one point, the company was charging up to \$979 for a PCR test, the most definitive COVID test.

Officials at GS Labs declined interview requests for this story. But in a written statement, they defended high prices to make up for their substantial startup costs. They say it's the insurance companies who are motivated by what they called, quote, "unmitigated greed."

GS Labs has long maintained that it provides reliable testing for communities in crisis. In a promotional video from September, the company's medical director and founder, Darin Jackson, said employees are driven by a sense of mission.

**DARIN JACKSON:** It really boils down to everybody knew the importance of the service we were providing. This is the best way we could serve our community.

**ANNA CANNY:** But for more than a year, GS Labs has repeatedly failed to report timely results. And that's disrupted contact tracing. In one instance last summer, GS Labs admitted in an email to Minnesota state health officials that it was falling behind. The company said they stored samples in freezers for about a month.

In September, a health inspector visited the company's Omaha lab, which processed all of the company's PCR samples at the time. The inspector found the lab was in, quote, "immediate jeopardy," meaning it posed a serious risk to public health.

**BURTON WILCKE:** It's kind of amazing, actually, how poorly they performed in a site visit.

**ANNA CANNY:** That's Burton Wilkie, the former director of Vermont's Public Health Laboratory. He reviewed the inspectors' findings for APM Reports.

**BURTON WILCKE:** The list of violations or conditions not being met were just pretty astounding in terms of the sloppiness.

**ANNA CANNY:** GS Labs said some of the findings lacked merit. Others were corrected. And after a follow-up inspection, the Omaha lab was allowed to continue operating. The company spent millions on a brand-new facility in Nebraska. But the reporting problems continued.

In December, GS Labs reported that they had delayed providing results to the state of Minnesota for nearly 28,000 tests. Some tests were from samples taken five weeks earlier. GS Labs said the reporting delays only affected state health departments, not individuals. But consumers express frustration with the company's reporting process, too.

**KATE BAILEY:** We had no clue that we were just shedding virus all over the place.

**ANNA CANNY:** When Minneapolis resident Kate Bailey tested positive for COVID, she worried her two young sons were exposed. So she took them to get tested at GS Labs in Eagan. When the boys received negative rapid test results, Bailey sent them to stay with her ex-husband. The kids went back to school.

Six days later, public health officials called her and said one of the boys tested positive.

**KATE BAILEY:** I said, what are you talking about?

**ANNA CANNY:** GS Labs told health officials that her son had COVID, according to the results of the more definitive PCR test. That surprised Bailey. She says the company didn't contact her with the PCR results.

**KATE BAILEY:** I felt so guilty. I felt horrified that I was exposing other people, and other people could get sick, or worse, because of my kid.

**ANNA CANNY:** GS Labs says cases like Bailey's are a result of patient error because some of the results end up in junk or spam folders. But Bailey says it was a confusing process. She didn't know she had to create a second account to get PCR results.

Other public records show that some consumers got someone else's results. That was the case for Lucas Prince, who was tested at a GS Labs site in Bloomington.

**LUCAS PRINCE:** I think it's ridiculous that I got somebody else's results. I just don't trust this whole process anymore.

**ANNA CANNY:** In addition to state investigations, the company is also facing scrutiny from two federal agencies. GS Labs declined to comment on the investigations, except to say they're fully cooperating. The company continues to operate at six Minnesota locations. For MPR News, I'm Anna Canny.

**CATHY WURZER:** Tom Scheck joins us again to talk a bit more about this story related to GS Labs. Tom, we heard from consumers and the company in Anna's story. So what are public health officials doing about the complaints against this company?

**TOM SCHECK:** Well, many public health officials declined to be interviewed. But a look at public records shows that there was growing frustration with the slow reporting of results by GS Labs. There were also instances where health officials discussed ways that they could get the company to improve. But in many instances, they were just stymied by rules and regulations that weren't designed to monitor fast-growing labs that were operating in a global pandemic. And you could see that in those records.

**CATHY WURZER:** Anna mentioned that there are investigations. Can you tell us more about that?

**TOM SCHECK:** Sure. We do know that the federal government and several states, including Kansas, Nebraska, and Washington, are all investigating the company. And we learned that through public records and through confirmation from the states and from federal agencies.

Now, in Minnesota, it was a little bit more difficult because we figured out that there may be an investigation going on, even though the state didn't officially disclose that information. And that's because the state has a law that allows a public agency to keep documents secret if those materials deal with an open investigation. The Minnesota attorney general's office cited that law when it denied our records request relating to GS Labs. And they did it again last week.

**CATHY WURZER:** So the company says it's cooperating with investigators? What did the company say about the slow reporting to public health officials?

**TOM SCHECK:** They say some of the issues we raised were from more than a year ago, and they fixed many of the reporting problems. And the company also maintains that any reporting errors only amount to a small fraction of the more than 2 million tests that the company has done.

**CATHY** All right. Tom Scheck, thanks for the update.

**WURZER:**

**TOM SCHECK:** Thank you.

**CATHY** Tom Scheck is a reporter with American Public Media. You can read more about this story at [mprnews.org](http://mprnews.org).

**WURZER:**

[MUSIC PLAYING - "YOU ARE MY SUNSHINE"]

It's the Minnesota music minute, and this is pianist Mary Louise Knutson, with her jazz rendition of "You Are My Sunshine." Knutson is one of the Twin Cities jazz scene's most talented musicians. She's passionate about getting more women and girls interested in jazz music and actively works to pave the way for women instrumentalists in the local scene.

12:15 here on Minnesota now from MPR News. I'm Cathy Wurzer. You could say one Minnesota baseball bat company hit a home run this week, signing a licensing deal with the Major League Baseball Association. It's Pillbox Bat Company based out of Winona.

When founders Zak Fellman and Dan Watson first started the company a few years ago, they never imagined how fast it would grow. And now they've achieved their dream of officially designing bats and pennants and other art for all 30 MLB teams. Dan Watson is co-founder of Pillbox Bat Company. He's on the line right now. Hey, Dan, welcome to *Minnesota Now*.

**DAN WATSON:** Yeah, thank you, Cathy.

**CATHY** And congratulations on the new deal.

**WURZER:**

**DAN WATSON:** Yeah, thank you very much. It's quite exciting.

**CATHY** So what did you say when you first heard the news?

**WURZER:**

**DAN WATSON:** Honestly, I don't know if I said too much. I was in so much shock. It just was a whirlwind of emotions and the realization of a lot of hard work come to a point where we finally got-- achieved what we were after, so.

**CATHY** Tell me about the agreement if you can. What kinds of projects are you going to be working on?

**WURZER:**

**DAN WATSON:** Well, right now, we are fulfilling orders for the teams and getting our products into their stores and the stadiums and things like that. But a lot of the things that we are hoping to work on in the future-- really celebrate the game and a lot of the stories around the game with the individual players, whether they be from the Hall of Fame or current players.

We've got tons of ideas and ways that we want to go. But right now, we're focused on team logos, on our products, and fulfilling the orders that we've just received, so.

**CATHY** Now, you're a bat company, right? You make bats, obviously?

**WURZER:**

**DAN WATSON:** Yeah, we make decorative art bats. We also make other products as well. We make wood pennants, hand-painted baseballs. And we do some other coasters as well.

Kind of our thing is we like to take what's familiar with baseball fans or sports fans and then make it premium and handcrafted.

**CATHY** Ah, I see. You and your co-founder Zak, I understand, are childhood best friends. So has this been a dream of

**WURZER:** yours?

**DAN WATSON:** Yeah, yes. I would say yes. We started doing this kind of thing when we were 12 years old. As a matter of fact, we've got a couple of the bats that we made when we were 12 in our shop in Winona.

But I think as we got older and got into our careers, both going the entrepreneur route, we always said to each other, like, wouldn't it be great if we could just work together doing this stuff? And so, yeah, five, six years ago, we finally accomplished that and have grown Pillbox to what it is today.

**CATHY** When you two were kids, how did you-- I'm trying to get a mental picture here of an art bat or whatever you were

**WURZER:** doing at that point. I mean, what did you do, take a bat and draw on it?

**DAN WATSON:** Kind of. Well, it was a little bit more than that, actually more of what it looks like today, which is we went out to the woods and we found a tree branch that was fairly straight, sat down on the porch with our pocketknives, spent hours whittling it into a shape that looked like a bat, and then we just painted them.

And typically, they ended up in home derbies in the backyard. So that's kind of how Pillbox got started.

**CATHY** I love that. You're based out of Winona. Is there a reason for that? Are you from Winona?

**WURZER:**

**DAN WATSON:** Yeah. We're both from the Winona area, grew up there. I'm currently located in St. Cloud, Minnesota. But the shop and our business is located in Winona.

**CATHY** And what have you heard from the community and other local business owners after this big deal?

**WURZER:**

**DAN WATSON:** Oh, it's just been really great. I think there's just been a lot of inquiries about projects, like certain companies want to do some custom stuff with us, which we do a lot of custom work for companies, putting their logos on things, and just trying to be involved in what we're doing, which is really awesome support and really fun to do.

**CATHY** Now, you've done work, if I'm not mistaken, with the Baseball Hall of Fame, the Negro League Baseball Museum.

**WURZER:** Is that right?

**DAN WATSON:** Yes, we have. Yeah, some really fun projects there.

**CATHY** Magic wand time or, I guess, maybe when you look into your crystal ball, so you say you have a lot of other cool

**WURZER:** ideas that are on the table. Can you give me an idea of what you might want to-- where you might want to take this?

**DAN WATSON:** Yeah. So I think, kind of within the next couple of years, I think we really want to develop our product line, finding more of those products that are familiar but then making them premium, putting the Pillbox spin on it. We want to expand that product line.

But we also have our eyes on other sports as well. We've done projects with the Utah Jazz already and have had some really fun conversations with teams in the NHL and the NFL. So we'd like to expand our product offering, not just to Major League Baseball, but to the rest of the sports and just really, I don't know, kind of upgrade what fans are used to seeing as far as memorabilia goes.

**CATHY** I'm presuming that you both are huge sports fans.

**WURZER:**

**DAN WATSON:** Oh, yeah. Baseball is our first love. But Zak and I both played multiple sports year round, that kind of thing, and just enjoy watching our Minnesota teams and things like that. So yeah.

**CATHY** Would this mean that you would expand Pillbox, maybe, to other locations? If you're based in Winona, obviously,  
**WURZER:** your production facility is in Winona. Would you be able to expand, perhaps?

**DAN WATSON:** Yeah, I think we could. We will. I definitely see that happening to other locations.

We like the idea of being a small-town company and being located in Winona. Both of us grew up there. So it's kind of fun to kind of, in a way, give back and create jobs in the town that we grew up in.

So, yeah, I see us expanding to other places. I think we'll probably stay in Minnesota. At least that's my answer right now.

**CATHY** Good. I'm glad to hear that. I'm sure everyone else is as well.

**WURZER:**

Say, have you heard from any of the players who might have some of your stuff? Have you had any feedback from some big-name players?

**DAN WATSON:** Yeah, that's funny that you asked. I was actually-- we had just done a little swap with the Minnesota Twins. And Joe Ryan, he saw one of our bats, and we swapped him for an autographed ball and got a picture of him holding one of our bats.

And then Jonathan India from the Reds, Cincinnati Reds, is also looking to do the same thing. And we're hopeful that that kind of spreads because we love that kind of stuff. Having Major League Baseball players interested in what you do is pretty cool.

**CATHY** Say, when you were growing up, who was your favorite baseball player? And is there something you can do with  
**WURZER:** maybe getting the rights to some of the older baseball players, maybe do some throwback stuff?

**DAN WATSON:** Oh, yeah. Oh, that's amongst the list of things that we really want to do. You just nailed it-- set me up perfectly.

Kirby Puckett, for sure, was my favorite player. I feel like every Minnesotan for a few generations would say Kirby. Kent Hrbek, I know, is one, too. Obviously, anyone who played for the '91, '87 Twins, they're all in our shortlist of players to do things with, so.

**CATHY** So there you go. I'm glad-- you do have some pretty big plans, my friend.

**WURZER:**

All right. Well, we wish you well. Congratulations again, and thanks for taking time to talk with us.

**DAN WATSON:** Yeah. Thank you so much, Cathy.

**CATHY** Absolutely. Best of luck. Dan Watson is the co-founder of the Pillbox Bat Company based in Winona.

**WURZER:**

**ANNOUNCER 3:** Support comes from Loring Park Art Festival featuring 140 visual artists, live music activities, and more this Saturday and Sunday. Details, including parking and rides for Metro Transit, at [loringparkartfestival.com](http://loringparkartfestival.com).

Support for MPR News comes from Planned Parenthood North Central States, a nonprofit dedicated to the belief that every person should control their own body, life, and future. In the fight for reproductive rights, Planned Parenthood will never back down. [PPNCS.org](http://PPNCS.org).

**CATHY** Say, while we're talking about sports, when a racehorse goes off at big odds, they don't know that. They're just running their race. So it was with the horse Just Ask Joel last night at Canterbury Park.

**WURZER:**

Just Ask Joel was running in a lowly claiming race, where the horses are among the cheapest at the track. Joel went off at 80-to-1 odds. And in a thrilling run down the homestretch, he beat out the favorite, resulting in the largest payout in track history for a win ticket. If you had Joel to win on a \$2 bet, you won \$162. That is a decent return on investment. Just Ask Joel.

Coming up in the next half hour, speaking of sports, we'll continue on this tread. We will talk to our sports guys Wally Langfellow and Eric Nelson. They will talk a bit more about the Vikings' training camp underway.

It just doesn't seem possible. It's at the end of July, but I guess that's right-- Vikings training camp, also the Gopher football team. They're talking about a national championship. And there's some other stuff to talk about with Wally and Eric coming up in the next half hour.

Around the region at this hour, it's a very pleasant day-- a little rain across portions of Northern Minnesota. It looks like Ely's getting a little bit of rain right now-- 63 degrees, partly sunny skies, in Duluth. That's over the hill at the harbor.

It's 68 in Brainerd. It's also 68 degrees under a sunny sky in Rochester, 62 in Thief River Falls and in Bemidji, 72 in Winona. It appears that Appleton is the hot spot at 73 degrees. It's 74 in the Twin Cities.

A pleasant day, as I mentioned, ahead of us-- high temperatures, generally speaking, today will be in the upper 60s and mid-70s with that chance of showers in far Northeastern Minnesota. A slight chance of showers and thunderstorms in Northeastern Minnesota tonight and tomorrow-- another pleasant day before we're going to crank up the heat and humidity for the weekend. Tomorrow's highs-- lower 70s, lower 80s, under sunshine, practically perfect.

John Wanamaker is in the wings with a look at news. John?

**JOHN WANAMAKER:** Kathy, the US economy shrank from April through June for a second straight quarter, contracting at a 0.9% annual pace and raising fears that the nation may be approaching a recession. The decline in the gross domestic product, the broadest gauge of the economy, followed a 1.6% annual drop from January through March.

And many economists see consecutive quarters of falling GDP as an informal though not definitive indicator of a recession. And on Wednesday, of course, the Federal Reserve raised its benchmark interest rate by a sizeable 3/4 of a point for a second straight time in response to inflation.

President Biden declared the deal Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer struck with holdout Senator Joe Manchin a godsend for American families. Biden's remarks today at the White House urged Congress to put politics aside and pass the \$739 billion package. Schumer rallied Democrats during a closed-door morning meeting, and Manchin called the package a, quote, "win-win" at his own press briefing.

That expansive agreement had eluded them for months. The Senate is expected to vote on the wide-ranging measure next week, setting up President Biden and Democrats in the run-up to November congressional elections. However, Republicans are staunchly opposed.

President Biden and Chinese President Xi Jinping spoke for more than two hours today amid rising tensions between their two nations. Xi emphasized China's claim over Taiwan. And the Ministry of Foreign Affairs said those who play with fire will perish by it. Relations between the two countries have been strained by talk of House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's potential trip to the island, which has a democratic government.

And one of the nation's biggest lottery prizes has grown a little bit larger as the Mega Millions jackpot increased to an estimated \$1.1 billion. The increase ahead of the next rung on Friday night makes the jackpot the third-largest behind the \$1.5 billion prizes won in 2018 and 2016. And, of course, we have to remind people that the odds are slim, one in \$302.5 million. This is MPR News.

**CATHY WURZER:** Thank you, John. It's 12:28. A big chunk of Southern Minnesota is abnormally dry with the Twin Cities in a severe drought. The lack of rain is a big concern for farmers, as is the ongoing Russian invasion of Ukraine, which is creating volatility in agricultural markets.

So we thought it's a good time to check in with Kent Thiesse. He's a farm management analyst and senior vice president at MinnStar Bank. And he's always a good guy to talk to when it comes to the farm economy. How are you doing, Kent? Good to have you on board again.

**KENT THIESSE:** Well, doing great. I heard you talking about the beautiful weather, a beautiful day here in Southern Minnesota. We haven't had many like that this summer. We've either-- it seems like it's been hot and humid and windy most days, and today's almost perfect.

**CATHY WURZER:** Well, go out and enjoy it because it's going to go back to being hot, humid, and windy over the weekend into next week, evidently, which I'm sure is not going to make farmers all that happy. How is the weather affecting our farmers this summer?

**KENT THIESSE:** It's really varied all across Southern Minnesota, but really, across the whole state. Last year started out very ideal, and then we got dry late in the year, especially Western Minnesota up into northern Minnesota. This year has been a little different. We started out planting later than normal, and it got very late planting in parts of West Central and Central Minnesota up into Northwest Minnesota.

And some of those areas that were very dry last year were actually too wet early this year. And, really, the northern third of the state has had more than adequate moisture most of the year this year, and down into parts of Central Minnesota.

But as you mentioned the Twin Cities area, and really, if you go from the Twin Cities straight west of the South Dakota border, and then you go south from there down to about the southern two tiers of counties in Minnesota, that band of Minnesota has missed a lot of the rainfall here in the last six weeks and tends to be very dry.

Now, when you get way down near the Iowa border, kind of the I-90 corridor, and up a couple counties in Minnesota, the moisture has been a little more frequent.

Just to give you an example, I follow the weather data at two of the University of Minnesota experiment stations and research centers in Southern Minnesota. And at the Waseca site, which is a little further east and a little further south, they've been fairly close to normal precipitation in the months of June and July. They've had about nine inches of rainfall, and fairly frequently. So they really haven't dried out that much.

On the other side of the coin, out at Lamberton in Southwest Minnesota, which is further west and a little further north, they only got a little over an inch of rain total in the month of June. And they've only had an inch and a half of total rainfall in the month of July. And most of that came in a three-day period from the 4th to the 6th of July.

So conditions are certainly a lot different when we get into some of those areas that have just missed the rainfalls. Now, these rainfalls have also been spotty. One location might catch an inch and a half of rain, and a few miles away, they probably got less than a quarter-inch. And that's just the kind of summer it's been here in the last six weeks as far as rainfall in much of at least the southern half of Minnesota.

**CATHY WURZER:** Yeah. No, I understand, looking at the crop report, that, really, the crops are hanging in there, though. They don't look like-- there might be a little stress. But they don't look bad at this point.

**KENT THIESSE:** No, they really are. It's amazing how they have. And I guess one benefit of the extra heat we talked about is it did allow our crops to really catch up, even where we planted later than normal.

Again, looking at those research centers, they were running about 10% behind normal growing degree units at the 1st of June from starting May 1. And since June 1, we're now running about 8% to 10% ahead of normal. So that means not only did we make up what we lost early from the cool, wet weather, we actually have went beyond that.

And that's certainly helped. Especially where there's no moisture stress, the crops are doing very good. And I looked back. This week, in the crop report, we were looking at about 61%, rated good to excellent for corn-- this is nationwide-- and 59% for soybeans. That's just nationwide. We're slightly below last year. We were at 64%, good to excellent, and 61% a year ago.

But if we look at Minnesota, we're currently at 63%, good to excellent on corn, and 62% on soybeans. So we're actually running 2% to 3% ahead of the national average. And last year, we were running behind the National average as the drought had set in a lot more intense out in parts of West Central and Northwest Minnesota.

So, actually, as you say, we're kind of hanging in there. I'd say we're a good-- we need a couple more timely rainfalls, probably, in the next two to three weeks here to really determine our crop, because there are some areas that are really, as you mentioned, either abnormally dry into a moderate to slight drought. And certainly, the weather forecast for next week, with temperatures back in the 90s, is going to put a lot of stress on the crops.

Both corn and soybeans right now are at their max moisture usage. And in a lot of areas, our stored soil moisture is fairly well depleted. So there's not the reserves we had maybe even a year ago, especially in Southern Minnesota.

**CATHY WURZER:** So farmers have got their fingers crossed, obviously, for a break in the weather. And I'm wondering-- so there's that issue, right? But there's also inflation. And I'm wondering, how is that affecting farmers, given the price that everything they need to produce the crop has gone up?

**KENT THIESSE:** Well, I think farmers have a lot of concern. The inflation, we hear about it every day in the news, obviously. And it affects consumers and folks on a day-to-day basis.

For farmers, they tend to lock in a lot of their inputs usually starting about now. The inputs for 2023, they probably start about now out until about February or March after the first of the year. So the inflation impacts for this year's crop didn't impact them as much as it will for next year's crop.

So we're looking at fertilizer costs right now to produce corn are about double what they were, probably, for the-- at least 2021 crop, but even, probably, at least 50% to 75% higher than it was for 2022 for most farmers. And in addition, costs for seed, for chemicals, for repairs, labor-- just about every category you got of input costs for farming have went up.

And it isn't just the cost of things. The supply chain issues have also caught up, where we saw that happen earlier in the year where we had a lot of severe storms back in May and early June in parts of the state where farmers had damage to grain legs and grain bins. And in some cases, farmers have not been able to get the steel or the parts to repair those or repair machinery. So some of the big-picture issues that are affecting all residents and all consumers also affect agriculture and are affecting agriculture.

**CATHY WURZER:** So you were visiting with us back in March. And we were talking about how the Russian invasion of Ukraine was going to affect regional farming. So how has the war overseas affected prices?

**KENT THIESSE:** Well, it's kind of interesting. Obviously, early on, it was a positive. But just a couple of weeks ago there when-- or 10 days ago, when it looked like they were going to have a temporary agreement with Russia to maybe allow some of the grain exports to be shipped out of Ukraine, suddenly, that was a negative on our markets in the US. And, of course, then that didn't come to reality because the Russians didn't follow through. And all of a sudden, the markets have rebound.

And so what we've really seen happen here just in the last week, a combination of the dry weather we're talking about, not just in Minnesota but many parts of the Midwest, and the situation with Ukraine, we've seen the price of soybeans jump up over \$1 a bushel just in the last week. And we've seen the price of corn jump up \$0.50 a bushel.

And so it had been kind of negative because of-- the crop looked like it was going to be a little better than they thought, and then the Ukraine situation, and just some other dynamics in the markets. But we're not back to the highs that we had back in late May and to mid-June. But we certainly have rebounded quite a bit here in the last week.

And so the market still pays a lot of attention to what's happening in Ukraine, especially with world grain supplies and what that might look like months down the road after we get through the US harvest this fall.

**CATHY** Say, I got about a minute left here. I know you're going to be at Farmfest, which is coming up next week. You're  
**WURZER:** the farm coordinator this year. There's always something going on at Farmfest.

**KENT THIESSE:** Well, there is. And I encourage anyone to come out. We're really excited because we have two full days of candidate forums. And, of course, this being a big election year, the Minnesota Governor Candidate Forum is on the middle day, Wednesday, August 3, at 10:30 in the morning.

And I believe this will be the first time that Governor Walz and Dr. Scott Jensen have been together on the same format for a forum discussion. And the first day at 9:30, we're going to have the 1st Congressional District candidates together in a forum. And then we have the candidates from the 2nd, 6th, 7th, and 8th districts together at 10:30 on August 2 to talk about ag and rural issues.

**CATHY** All right. Well, I know some reporters will be down there covering it. Kent, it was good to talk with you again.  
**WURZER:** Thanks so much.

**KENT THIESSE:** You bet. Let's hope for some cool weather for Farmfest.

**CATHY** I'm not sure if that's going to happen, my friend. Good luck, though. Talk to you later. Bye-bye.  
**WURZER:**

Kent Thiesse is farm management analyst and senior vice president at MinnStar Bank. Farmfest, by the way, happens, as he mentioned, Tuesday and Wednesday of next week, August 2 and 3.

**ANNOUNCER 3:** Programming is supported by Minneapolis College of Art and Design, offering adult continuing education classes throughout the summer, including figure drawing, graphic design, user experience design, landscape painting, and more. Registration information at [mcad.edu](http://mcad.edu).

**CATHY** Well, this weekend the North Star Gay Rodeo Association will put on its yearly rodeo in Hugo, Minnesota. The  
**WURZER:** two-day event welcomes members of the LGBTQ+ community to come show off their best wrangling, riding, and roping skills. Jorge Sanchez joins us right now to share the details of the event. He is the president of the North Star Gay Rodeo Association. Welcome to the program.

**JORGE** Hi, Cathy. Thanks for having us.  
**SANCHEZ:**

**CATHY** I'm so glad that you are here. Thanks. Say, I know that the North Gay Rodeo Association has been around for a pretty long time, since 1989. So tell us how you all got started.

**JORGE** It was actually part of the Imperial Court of Minnesota. And then they decided to start a rodeo. And from there, we went from there. And it's been around for over 30 years now.

**CATHY** How is this rodeo lumped into the National Gay Rodeo Circuit?

**WURZER:**

**JORGE** Oh, the international one?

**SANCHEZ:**

**CATHY** Yes.

**WURZER:**

**JORGE** They are branched off of us. So there's the International Gay Rodeo Association. And then we all have associations off of them. So there's other gay associations branched off that are throughout the United States and Canada.

**CATHY** OK. I enjoyed watching the PBS documentary series *Subcultured*. It was a nice piece on gay rodeo that was on the air there. And it was a good story about how you began.

**WURZER:**

And I'm wondering about the contestants that we'll see in this rodeo. Do they participate every year? Are you seeing new folks?

**JORGE** The good thing is right now, we're getting a lot of new faces around, which we love, because we love to have new people involved with our rodeo. But you'll see people from all over the place, from Texas, New Mexico, Missouri, Canada, Arkansas, Oklahoma, Arizona, Colorado, California, Nevada, and we also have another one called Red River. And they are from, also, Texas, Northern Texas.

**CATHY** So all over.

**WURZER:**

**JORGE** So you see people from all over the place.

**SANCHEZ:**

**CATHY** Yeah. Jorge, the mainstream rodeo world is thought of as pretty conservative, macho, homophobic, perhaps. Tell me about the queer rodeo world.

**WURZER:**

**JORGE** The great thing about us is we accept everybody. We don't care if you're gay, you're straight. You can be anything.

**SANCHEZ:**

And with us, we also-- you can compete at anything. So the straight rodeo, women can only do horse events. At ours, if you want to be a bull rider, you go ahead and you get on that bull, and you're a bull rider.

And same with the men-- a lot of women's events that are in the straight rodeo, men can do. So we don't judge. You can be anything and do whatever you want to do.

**CATHY** Bronc riding I see. You got barrel racing, the usual events. I've never seen calf roping on foot, to be honest with you, Jorge. What's that like?

**JORGE** It's roping. So it's almost same thing which you would see where you're roping [AUDIO OUT].

**CATHY** Hmm. I feel bad. We might have lost Jorge. Oh, no. Oh, that's too bad. Oh, goodness-- this technology that we have.

Jorge was explaining about calf roping on foot. In case you're just tuning in, we're talking about the North Star Gay Rodeo, which has been going on now for a number of years. And it's a two-day event in Hugo. And we're talking about the various events that they're going to have.

And Jorge was talking about calf roping on foot. If we don't get Jorge back, we might just have to continue on here. Jorge, there you are.

**JORGE** I'm here. I'm here. I'm sorry.

**CATHY** No, no, no, no. You're doing good. You were talking about calf roping on foot.

**JORGE** So yeah, it's basically on foot. And you have, literally, the chutes open up, the calf comes out, and rope as fast as you can.

**CATHY** On foot.

**JORGE** On foot. Yep, you're on foot. So you're not on your horse or anything like that. So it can be challenging because literally it's-- you have a second to, when it releases, you're right there.

**CATHY** Yeah.

**JORGE** So you have to be quick and try to-- it's entertaining.

**CATHY** I bet it is. What are you most looking forward to this weekend?

**JORGE** Just, I think, the new people. I love the new participants. I love also the fans that come.

We're having fun events afterwards. So we have the rodeo. And, like I said, we have fun camp events, too, like our steer deco and then wild drag race and goat dressing. So you put underwear on a goat.

Whoever can do it in the fastest time-- so you got two teams coming down. You run down. Whoever throws the underwear on and runs back the fastest-- hey, it wins. You win.

So I love those same things. And then I think people see, wow, this is what-- this is a fun rodeo. And so I want to introduce people of how fun we can really be.

And also, then, we also have events afterwards. We're doing a beer bust and line dancing. And we're going to have a campfire. So we're going to have a lot of things on Saturday night, too.

**CATHY** OK. And you're at the Dead Brook Arena in Hugo, right?

**WURZER:**

**JORGE** That is correct.

**SANCHEZ:**

**CATHY** All right. Jorge, thank you for joining us, and have a great weekend.

**WURZER:**

**JORGE** Thank you, Cathy. Hope to see you guys out there.

**SANCHEZ:**

**CATHY** Absolutely. Jorge Sanchez is the president of the North Star Gay Rodeo Association. The rodeo is this weekend in Hugo.

**WURZER:**

[MUSIC PLAYING]

Switching focus a little bit here, talking about the end of July-- time for football, which kind of seems early. But the Vikings are in training camp. The U of M Gophers are aiming for a national championship.

It's a lot to talk about with Wally Langfellow, the founder of *Minnesota Score Magazine* and the co-host of *10,000 Takes* sports talk show.

Eric Nelson is the other host of *10,000 Takes* and the Minnesota Vikings reporter for CBS Sports Radio's *Eye on the NFL*. Guys, how are you?

**WALLY** Did you actually say Gophers and national championship in the same sentence?

**LANGFELLOW:**

**CATHY** I'm sorry. I think that PJ Fleck was talking about that. That was not my view, Wally Langfellow.

**WURZER:**

**ERIC NELSON:** Kathy sunshine. I love it.

**CATHY** Right. Well, I mean, wouldn't that be something if that actually were to happen?

**WURZER:**

**WALLY** Let's get to a Rose Bowl first.

**LANGFELLOW:**

**CATHY** Well, good point, good point. How about the Vikings? Let's start with the Vikings, OK? So the three of us have been waiting for this now for several weeks. Wally, they started on Wednesday.

**WURZER:**

**WALLY** Well, in the words of Allen Iverson, we're talking about practice. Yeah, I know.

**LANGFELLOW:**

Training camp's underway. The big news out of camp yesterday was that rookie Andrew Booth-- say that fast five times-- intercepted Kirk Cousins in some kind of a passing scrimmage. And that's the big news.

Yes, they're underway. New regime, of course, with Kevin O'Connell and his new coaching staff-- folks are optimistic.

It is Eagan. It's all packaged neatly out there at the Vikings' training facility in Eagan. It's not Mankato anymore.

I do miss the days of going to Mankato. I think a lot of people do. It's a lot more homogenized, if you will. You've got to buy tickets. You got to pay for parking.

There's all kinds of tripwires now if you want to go out to training camp. It's very much scheduled and not quite as freewheeling as it used to be. I miss those days. I probably won't make my way out to Eagan anytime soon.

**CATHY** But Eric will.

**WURZER:**

**WALLY** Oh, I doubt it.

**LANGFELLOW:**

**ERIC NELSON:** Yeah, TBD, Kathy.

**CATHY** Oh.

**WURZER:**

**ERIC NELSON:** I do agree with Wally on this one. Training camp for the NFL isn't what it used to be. Here in the upper Midwest, once upon a time, we had the Cheese League, which was which was a small-scale version of, say, spring training in Arizona or Florida, the Cactus and Grapefruit leagues.

The Minnesota Vikings for decades trained at Minnesota State Mankato. They really were Minnesota's team, or the upper Midwest, if you will. Green Bay is still in Northeastern Wisconsin. That tradition remains.

Kansas City used to bring the Chiefs over to your alma mater, UW-River Falls. I remember seeing Joe Montana and Marcus Allen over there. The New Orleans Saints came upriver to La Crosse. The Chicago Bears were in Platteville, Wisconsin.

This was special. And for the teams like Kansas City and New Orleans, they would escape the sauna-like heat in those areas and those regions. And it was like air conditioning practicing in Wisconsin. So I remember going around one day, seeing the Vikings and then seeing the Chiefs, then the Saints, then the Bears. It was a lot of fun.

But you don't have that anymore in the NFL. It is all packaged. Most teams practice at their facility, including the Vikings at TCO Performance Center in Eagan.

But there are a group-- I'm calling them the Elite Eight, Cathy-- that actually still practice in a college setting. They stay in dorms, and they try to build camaraderie.

It would be Buffalo, Carolina, Dallas, which is training north of Los Angeles, believe it or not. The LA Rams train at UC Irvine in Orange County. Kansas City is in St. Joseph, Missouri.

The Pittsburgh Steelers, for about 50 years now, have trained at Latrobe, Pennsylvania at St. Vincent College. The Indianapolis Colts are away from their facility, as is Jacksonville. But those teams are swimming upstream. Everybody else stays home.

**CATHY** OK. Hey, let's talk about the Twins. Should I get a little nervous about where we are in terms of how they're  
**WURZER:** leading their division? They have a kind of a shaky lead, Wally.

**WALLY** Yeah, they do. They're only a game and a half up on Cleveland now. They lost both to the Milwaukee Brewers in  
**LANGFELLOW:** Milwaukee this past week.

They are in San Diego right now. They'll play the Padres in a three-game set beginning tomorrow night. And the tipping point of this, or the interest point-- they could see former Twin Taylor Rogers, who really was the backbone of the back end of their bullpen.

They traded him to San Diego at the beginning of the year. It was definitely a monetary move because Rogers's contract was up at the end of the year. They didn't want to lose him, so they figured they'd get something out of the deal.

Well, what they've gotten out of the deal so far-- a couple of pitchers that have not produced, Emilio Pagán one of them. He has been less than stellar. And Paddack has been on the injured list. So those two guys have not panned out.

Rogers is one of the leading relievers in the National League so far, although he did get knocked around yesterday, by the way. He got beat by Detroit. But the Twins have struggled. Their bullpen has just been abysmal, and yesterday was no different.

Jharel Cotton came in, and he got rocked yesterday. Their bullpen has given up more home runs than any team in the American League. And that is not a good sign.

They've given up more than Tampa Bay. And Tampa's bullpen tends to be used more than anybody else. So they have more innings logged, just the way that they do things in Tampa.

So I guess the big news going forward here is, will the Twins make a move before the August 2 trade deadline to get some pitching to try and help their hopes down the stretch here? If they're going to make a run, they're going to need more pitching. And they're going to have to make a move. Eric?

**ERIC NELSON:** Well, the good news Kathy is-- I'm always looking for the bright side of things, unlike Wally.

**WALLY** Wow.  
**LANGFELLOW:**

**ERIC NELSON:** The Twins get an off day in San Diego, which is, self-proclaimed, America's most livable city, right? And off days in a Major League Baseball season are cherished. You play 162 games, roughly 30 to 40 in spring training. So these are things that players covet.

So you have a free day out there in SoCal. Think of the choices for the Twins, Cathy. They can surf. They can hike. They can eat fish tacos.

They can go to the San Diego Zoo. They can go to Coronado Island. They can go down to the border if they want. Mexico is 15 miles away.

This beats a free day in Detroit or St. Louis or Wally's hometown of Cleveland. So--

**WALLY** Hey, hey, hey.

**LANGFELLOW:**

**ERIC NELSON:** --I hope the Twins getting recharged out there in San Diego-- great place to have an off day.

**CATHY** Yes. I wouldn't mind an off day out in San Diego myself. Say, before we go, we got to talk about Larry McKenzie,  
**WURZER:** Coach McKenzie from Minneapolis North High, one of the winningest high school basketball coaches in state history. He's retiring.

And Wally and Eric had a chance to talk to him on *Morning Edition*. And he said some really interesting things about why he is leaving. He is not happy with some of the new rules at the Minnesota State High School League.

**WALLY** Yeah, one of them being the NIL, the Name, Image, and Licensing. That's the same thing that is going on in  
**LANGFELLOW:** college sports right now. And that's one of those changes, and I think that more so, the overall changes just within the environment of high school basketball, I think.

Larry and I are close friends, and he has told me these things over the last several years. We broadcast together, and we've been doing the state high school tournament on the radio for the last 15, 20 years now. And Larry was just-- I think he had just reached a point where if he couldn't do things his way, it was time to move on.

And I think that social media has a lot to do with it, Cathy, because a lot of these kids now, what they're doing in high school basketball, it's all about them and not necessarily about the team. And I know that really bothered a coach like Larry McKenzie.

**CATHY** Mm-hmm. I've got about a minute left here. Eric, you want to tell me about the Gophers going to the national  
**WURZER:** championship?

**ERIC NELSON:** Well, this week, they've had Big Ten football media day. It's really a two-day event down there in Indianapolis, Indiana. Let the fertilizer fly, right?

There's currently 14 teams in the Big Ten, soon to go to 16, and maybe, who knows, 20? The Big Ten wants to conquer the world.

But, yeah, all the teams are optimistic. Everybody's undefeated. Everyone thinks they're going to win a national title, including the Minnesota Gophers. But I'll throw the gauntlet down here in our final seconds.

If they don't win the Big Ten West this year or next year, which they've never done in school history, and go to the Big Ten title game, it may never happen because USC and UCLA are the elephants in the room. They will soon join the conference-- Notre Dame, maybe Stanford. Minnesota better do it now.

**CATHY**

All right. We've heard it. Wally Langfellow, Eric Nelson, thanks, you guys. Talk to you later. Have a good week.

**WURZER:**

You're listening to *Minnesota now* here on MPR News 91.1, KNOW Minneapolis-St. Paul.

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All right, so the forecast-- where are we here in terms of temperature? Mostly sunny skies, 75 degrees at the airport, on our way to a high today, well, pretty much where we are-- 75, 76 degrees, northwest winds 10 to 20-- lovely day today.

Overnight lows should be about 55 degrees. Tomorrow's high, upper 70s. Pleasant Saturday, a little hotter, 88, and then we're going to crank up the heat and humidity on Sunday-- close to 90 on Sunday, kind of soggy, sultry conditions. Rain is likely Sunday night into Monday morning.