

Business: Vendors ready to dazzle at CES. C7



Local: Danville girl competing on 'Kids Baking Championship.' B1



Sports: Purdy wants drama-free negotiations with the 49ers. C1



World: Canada's Trudeau to resign. A4



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SAN FRANCISCO BAY

Floating lab transitions into educational facility



PHOTOS BY RAY CHAVEZ — STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Dr. Charles Drew Elementary School of San Francisco students ride on a sailboat from the Treasure Island Sailing Center, where the Buoyant Ecologies Float Lab is anchored near the Treasure Island shore in San Francisco on Nov. 1.

After rough waters upended original mission, it's now a 'really effective tool for our STEM curriculum that gives it more pizzazz,' sailing center director says

By Anna Fitzgerald Guth
Correspondent

On an overcast November morning, 15 apprehensive fourth-graders tumbled out of a faded yellow bus at Treasure Island. They came to experience the thrill of sailing on the San Francisco Bay — and to get a lesson on its ecology.

The scene has played out regularly for the past decade at the Treasure Island Sailing Center, a nonprofit that seeks to make sailing accessible to young people around the Bay Area. While the group suspended its operations in December to begin construction on a sizable expansion project, it spent several months last year highlighting a new attraction in Clipper Cove: a car-sized, floating marine biology lab.

Before moving to its new home, the Buoyant Ecologies Float Lab spent the



Chris Childers, executive director of Treasure Island Sailing Center, collects green algae and other tiny creatures living under the lab's deck to show the students.

Float Lab » PAGE 5

DECISION CALLED 'TRUMP-PROOF'

Biden bans new offshore oil drilling on all federal waters along state coast, elsewhere

By Paul Rogers
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In a sweeping environmental decision during the final days of his presidency, President Joe Biden on Monday banned new offshore oil and gas drilling across 625 million acres of America's oceans, including all federal waters in the Pacific off California, Oregon and Washington.

Biden said the move, which also includes a prohibition on the Atlantic coast from Maine to Florida, across the eastern Gulf of Mexico and in portions of the Bering Sea in Alaska, is vital to protect coastal communities, marine wildlife, the fishing industry and tourism from pollution and oil spills, such as the 2010 Deepwater Horizon oil spill

in the Gulf of Mexico. "My decision reflects what coastal communities, businesses and beachgoers have known for a long time," Biden said. "That drilling off these coasts could cause irreversible damage to places we hold dear and is unnecessary to meet our nation's energy needs. It is not worth the risks."

President-elect Donald Trump blasted the decision. "Look, it's ridiculous. I'll unban it immediately," Trump said in a radio interview on "The Hugh Hewitt Show."

That may be difficult, however. Biden acted under the 1953 Outer Continental Shelf Lands Act. That law, signed by then President Dwight Eisenhower, gives presidents broad authority to withdraw federal waters



MARIO TAMA — GETTY IMAGES

People gather after sunset recently with the offshore oil and gas platform Esther visible in the distance in Seal Beach.

from future oil and gas leasing and development.

After former President Barack Obama used the law to ban drilling in parts of the Arctic Ocean off Alaska, Trump repealed his order after taking office in 2017.

Environmental groups sued. In 2019, a federal judge in Alaska ruled that Obama's ban could not be undone without an act of Congress.

Republicans currently

Drilling » PAGE 5

STATE VOTER MANDATE

Leaders targeting high cost of living

Democratic lawmakers vow a new focus on affordability but have few details as legislative session begins

By Grant Stringer
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As California lawmakers returned Monday to Sacramento for the legislative session, Democrats acknowledged a clear message from voters: California's sky-high cost of living needs to drop back down to Earth.

"We get it," Democratic state Sen. Dave Cortese said. "The Democratic Party, has, in effect, just been called out by the voters on that issue."

The state's Democrats say they'll focus this year on making California more affordable, and party leaders are increasingly railing on the high costs of staples such as groceries and home electricity bills.

The reason? Even though Democrats kept their supermajorities in both houses of the Legislature after November's election, anxiety about inflation helped Republicans make significant inroads with working class voters in California, including in the heavily Democratic Bay Area. And in the Legislature, the GOP gained three seats.

Gov. Gavin Newsom called a special session of the Legislature to quickly budget tens of millions of dollars for anticipated legal battles with the incoming administration of Republican president-elect Donald Trump. That special session will play out at the same time as the regular session, but will likely end earlier. Both sessions began on Dec. 2.

Cortese, who represents much of Santa Clara County, said voters made it clear that affordability is their "priority number one."

Lawmakers will take up plans on housing, electricity bills, home insurance, grocery costs and more, Bay Area Democrats told this news organization. In the Senate, a select group of legislators will form a work group focused on affordability, which will study and release a package of

Legislature » PAGE 5

ELECTORAL VOTE TALLY

Congress peacefully certifies presidential victory by Trump in stark contrast to 2021

By Lisa Mascaro, Mary Clare Jalonick, Farnoush Amiri and Matt Brown
The Associated Press

WASHINGTON » Congress certified President-elect Donald Trump as the winner of the 2024 election in proceedings Monday that unfolded without challenge, in stark contrast to the Jan. 6, 2021, violence as his mob of supporters stormed the U.S. Capitol.

Lawmakers convened under heavy security and a winter snowstorm to meet the date required by law to certify the election. Layers of tall black fences flanked the Capitol complex in a stark reminder of what happened four years ago, when a defeated Trump sent rallygoers to "fight like hell" in what became the most gruesome attack on the seat of American democracy in 200 years.

The whole process this time concluded swiftly and without unrest. One by one, a tally of the electoral votes from each state was read aloud to polite applause in the House, no one objected and the results were certified.

"Today, America's democracy stood," Vice President Kamala Harris, a Democrat, said after presiding over the session — as is the role of her office — and her own defeat to Trump.

Trump » PAGE 3

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INDEX

Business C7
Classified B5

Comics/TV B6
Local B1
Lottery A2

Obituaries B4
Puzzles B2, C5, C6
Weather B8

WEATHER

H: 65-67 L: 43-45
Full report on B8



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Drilling

FROM PAGE 1

have a very narrow majority in the House of Representatives — 219 to 215 — meaning they can only lose one vote and still pass bills. Republicans in coastal states such as California, Oregon and Washington, along with New York and Florida, are not likely to vote for new offshore drilling off their coastlines, longtime observers of the issue said Monday.

“This is Trump-proof. It won’t be reversed,” said Richard Charter, a senior fellow with The Ocean Foundation, a nonprofit environmental group. “It is very profound, and I expect it will be long-lasting.”

Oil industry officials criticized the move.

“President Biden’s decision to ban new offshore oil and natural gas development across approximately 625 million acres of U.S. coastal and offshore waters is significant and catastrophic,” said Ron Neal, chairman of the Independent Petroleum Association of America Offshore Committee. “It represents a major attack on the oil and natural gas industry.”

California Gov. Gavin Newsom on Monday took the opposite view.

“Hundreds of miles of California’s iconic coastline are now fully protected,” Newsom said, adding “new offshore drilling has no place in California.”

Polls consistently show

NEW DRILLING BANNED

President Biden on Monday banned new offshore oil and gas drilling across 625 million acres of federal ocean waters, citing the need to protect coastal communities and wildlife from oil spills and pollution.



Source: U.S. Department of the Interior BAY AREA NEWS GROUP



EUGENE GARCIA — THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

Cargo vessels are anchored offshore while sharing space with oil platforms near the Los Angeles–Long Beach port in 2021. President Joe Biden has banned new offshore drilling.

Californians oppose new oil and gas drilling along California’s coastline.

Overall, just 31% said they support it, while 78% favored construction of offshore wind turbines, which Biden and Newsom have pushed for, according to a 2024 poll by the nonpartisan Public Policy Institute of California.

California is the nation’s seventh-largest oil-producing state. Most of its oil comes from inland wells in places such as Kern, Los Angeles and Fresno counties. But there are about 30 offshore platforms and artificial islands where oil is produced in the ocean, all located in Southern California off Santa Barbara, Ven-

tura, Los Angeles and Orange counties.

Those platforms date back to the 1950s. No new ones have been constructed in decades because of opposition from political leaders, conservation groups and the tourism and fishing industries. The last new platform built in Southern California waters was in 1984.

State leaders and many residents still remember the 1969 Santa Barbara oil spill, which resulted in more than 3 million gallons of black crude from a Union Oil platform coating beaches for miles.

After former President Ronald Reagan and his Interior Secretary James Watt pushed for drilling off

Big Sur, Monterey Bay and along the San Mateo and Sonoma coasts during the 1980s, former California Gov. Pete Wilson, a Republican, signed a law in 1992 banning all new oil drilling in state waters out to three miles offshore. But federal waters extend to 200 miles.

Drilling is banned in national marine sanctuaries, such as Monterey Bay, Greater Farallones and Channel Islands. Biden established the new Chumash Heritage National Marine Sanctuary in November, which stretches along 156 miles of coast in San Luis Obispo and Santa Barbara counties.

Embracing the slogan “Drill Baby, Drill!” in January 2018, Trump announced he would seek to open 90% of the offshore areas in the

United States, including most of the California coast, to new oil and gas drilling.

But nothing ever came of those plans. Gov. Jerry Brown signed a law that year prohibiting California’s State Lands Commission from approving any new pipelines, wharfs or other facilities out to three miles offshore that could be used to expand oil production.

On top of that, Democrats regained control of the House of Representatives in 2019 and, led by then-Speaker Nancy Pelosi, D-San Francisco, pushed through a budget that blocked the Department of Interior from spending any money on new offshore leasing activity.

In 2010, an explosion at the Deepwater Horizon

oil platform, owned by BP, dumped 210 million gallons of oil into the Gulf of Mexico and killed 11 people. The worst oil spill in U.S. history, it coated beaches in Louisiana, Alabama, Mississippi and Florida.

After Republicans in Florida, North Carolina, and other states told Trump officials that he had a better chance of winning there in the 2020 presidential election if he dropped oil drilling plans, he used the same 1953 law Biden used Monday to withdraw those areas from drilling until 2032.

“I’m pleased beyond belief,” Charter said. “This makes sure our beaches won’t look like the Gulf Coast after the Deepwater Horizon spill. This means the California coast will always be there as we love it.”

Float lab

FROM PAGE 1

past five years moored off the Port of Oakland, quietly collecting data from the Bay with audio, light and temperature sensors, a GoPro and an array of underwater racks.

Bobbing in small boats, clad in helmets and life jackets, the fourth graders from San Francisco’s Dr. Charles R. Drew College Preparatory Academy hollered as they passed by the cove’s latest addition. The bulbous lab, once iceberg-like with a white fiberglass frame that’s a mirror image shape above and below water, is now laden with barnacles, algae and bird droppings. Despite its scuzzy appearance, Chris Childers — the sailing center director — is excited about the lab’s new lease on life as an educational tool at Treasure Island.

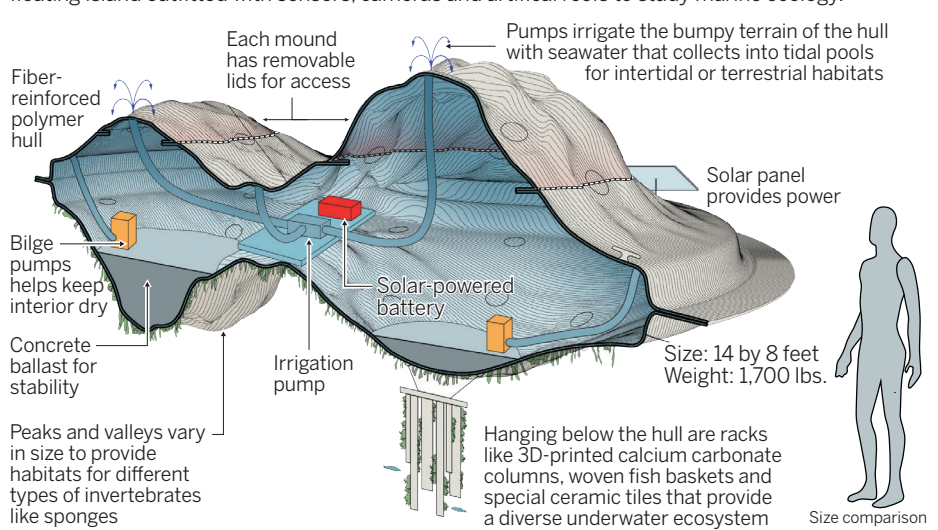
“The lab’s charismatic,” Childers said. “It’s a really effective tool for our STEM curriculum that gives it more pizzazz.”

The lab emerged from a partnership of local educators, architects and scientists. Together, they wanted to experiment with floating architecture that’s resilient to climate change, while collecting scientific data and raising awareness of the effects of rising sea levels.

The structure, which has won design awards, was the brainchild of California College of the Arts faculty, designer Margaret Ikeda and architects Evan Jones and Adam Marcus — who now leads research at the Cen-

FLOATING LAB OFFERS NOVEL WAY OF RESEARCHING

Moored between Treasure Island and the Bay Bridge is the float lab, a man-made, car-sized floating island outfitted with sensors, cameras and artificial reefs to study marine ecology.



Source: Architectural Ecologies Lab at the California College of the Arts, deezen.com Rendering by Architectural Ecologies Lab BAY AREA NEWS GROUP

ter on Climate Change and Urbanism at Tulane University. Marine biologists affiliated with the Benthic Lab at Moss Landing Marine Laboratories fine-tuned the design, and Bill Kreysler, a renowned fiberglass innovator, fabricated the structure. Students from all the academic institutions took part in the process.

“People are very excited about the float lab,” said Ikeda, who started CCA’s Architectural Ecologies Lab with Marcus and Jones, her husband. “The design of it, the unusualness of it, has resonated really around the world.”

The float lab’s original mission was threefold. First, the biologists wanted to know whether the lab’s undulating surface would attract a diverse group of species. Architecturally, the lab was a prototype for larger models, testing whether floating structures

— and the organisms attached to them — could not only withstand rising seas, but also dissipate wave energy and prevent erosion on shore. Lastly, the group hoped the lab would be educational, drawing attention to climate change.

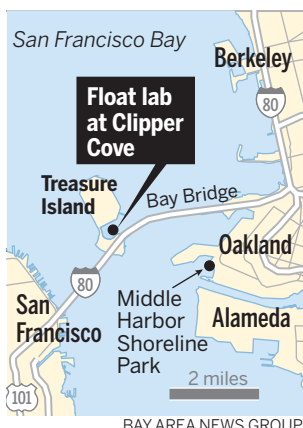
After it deployed in the port in 2019, rough waves from passing cargo ships and storms took a toll. The researchers struggled to monitor and maintain the lab, which was a choppy, 30-minute kayak paddle from shore. Underwater racks, designed to entice a wide range of organisms, and dangling woven baskets for growing thick algae and sheltering fish broke free.

Some structures clung on, such as cylinders of calcium carbonate that mimicked natural reefs. Within months, invertebrates crowded the columns, fanning out like multicolored

wigs. But it turned out that nonnative species like sponges and tunicates — filter feeders with sac-like bodies — dominated. These species are common in the San Francisco Bay, often brought in by the ballast water and hulls of visiting cargo ships. Among the tiniest creatures, some native crustaceans, mollusks and sea slugs snuck in with the invasives on the columns.

“We figured things would grow on the lab, but we just didn’t know what,” said Kamille Hammerstrom, who directs the group Coastal Conservation and Research in Moss Landing, and co-lead the biological research. “What happened wasn’t a surprise, given that the San Francisco Bay is one of the most invaded estuaries in the world.”

While the poor showing of native species was disappointing, the float lab results helped inform a sub-



BAY AREA NEWS GROUP

sequent project in brackish water near the San Francisco Presidio, coaxing native oysters to grow on fiberglass panels the CCA students designed. From what they learned with the float lab, Hammerstrom and her team sought a calm, accessible place in the bay so they could visit often. They found salinities, depths and light levels the oysters prefer.

The lab also helped biologists consider how “fouling” organisms that boaters typically clean off their vessels’ hulls could actually become an asset for floating structures, mitigating wave damage and boosting ecology.

In its new location at Clipper Cove, the float lab will become the hub for three floating mini-labs, each three feet long and fitted with a device to monitor plankton — the drifting, microscopic algae and creatures that are central to marine food chains that can also explode into toxic algal blooms.

The device, a “PlanktoScope” designed by scientists at Stanford University, looks like a large, homemade radio and captures

images of plankton. The plan is to tie one of these baby labs onto the mother lab in Clipper Cove and moor two others elsewhere in the Bay before the end of the year.

After the Charles Drew students clambered off the boats, Childers reached into the water and yanked out a handful of what was growing below. The fourth graders crowded around his open palms, sifting through green and purple seaweeds and a few creepy crawlies.

Then the students filed into the center’s waterside classroom. To illustrate the local ecology, a teacher from the sailing center offered everyone a coloring book. Ikeda, Hammerstrom and two of their graduate students created the book, featuring zoomed-in images and descriptions of all the life growing on the lab.

Donald Bursey, who teaches the fourth-grade class at Charles Drew, watched from the back of the classroom, pleased that his students were getting such a vivid experience of marine ecology.

“Here out in the Bay, they get to see the animals that live here, the rocks, the type of plant life that grows in the water, and they interact with it,” Bursey said. “A lot of kids who grow up in urban areas see the Bay, but they don’t get the chance to be out here on the water.”

Legislature

FROM PAGE 1

bills this year, Cortese said.

“The watch word will be affordability,” said Thad Kousser, professor of political science at the University of California, San Diego. “The Legislature and the Governor will be looking for any route they can toward addressing that in the short term and the long term.”

Although state Democrats are in lock step about their priorities this year, party leaders are tight-lipped so far. A spokesperson for Senate President Mike McGuire did not make him available for an interview.

Yet Democrats have already introduced some affordable-minded measures. Another effort to cut gas prices, Assembly Bill 30, would direct the California Air Resources Board to blend more ethanol into

gasoline. Assembly Bill 6 would direct a state agency to study construction standards that drive up home building costs and possibly recommend relaxed rules.

As in years past, Republicans don’t have nearly enough votes to halt Democrats’ plans for at least the next two years. Sen. Brian Jones, the Republican minority leader in the state Senate, may find common ground this session with Democrats on affordability issues, he said, but he isn’t afraid to dissent.

“When they’re working on issues that are harmful to Californians, we’re going to fight ‘em, and we’re going to present our solutions,” he said.

So far, Republicans are pushing plans to reverse controversial amendments to a state air pollution program, which are expected to further raise gas prices, and cut taxes on gas and electricity.

McGuire and Assembly Speaker Robert Rivas told

CalMatters last month that affordable housing and services for California’s growing population of unhoused people will be top of mind this session, as well as electricity bills.

“Obviously, homelessness has been on the top of everyone’s mind here in the Bay Area for a very long time,” said Sen. Josh Becker of Menlo Park, who chairs the Bay Area Caucus.

This session, Becker said he plans to advance “interim housing” solutions that temporarily provide shelter for unhoused people. That will probably include a follow-up bill to Senate Bill 1395, a law now in effect that seeks to ramp up construction of tiny homes by exempting them from the California Environmental Quality Act, he said.

Becker also plans to combat rising home power bills and help shore up insurance coverage for homes in wildfire-prone areas. Last month, California In-

surance Commissioner Ricardo Lara unveiled a regulation to restore coverage that could allow home insurers to drive up rates by up to 50%. A spokesperson said Becker, who sits on the Senate’s insurance committee, plans to monitor the new regulations and “step in” later this year if they’re not making insurance more affordable or accessible.

“I’m getting outreach from people who are completely losing coverage,” said Becker, whose district includes the Santa Cruz Mountains. “That’s kind of existential. Making sure they’re covered is job one.”

Sen. Scott Wiener of San Francisco has already introduced two bills to cut health care costs for patients. Senate Bill 40 would cap copays for insulin at \$35 for a month supply, and Senate Bill 41 would regulate pharmacy benefit managers — middlemen that influence the cost and availability of medicines.

“Democrats need to show we can deliver real results on affordability,” Wiener said in an emailed statement. “That’s true on healthcare — there is no reason that California should be lagging behind red states like West Virginia and Florida on delivering affordable insulin and other prescription drugs.”

Wiener also introduced the Budget Act of 2024, which would release \$60 million for litigation against the federal government and legal representation for undocumented immigrants. That’s more than double Newsom’s original ask of \$25 million, which was introduced in the Assembly by Jesse Gabriel of Encino. The main package for the special session, Newsom says the funding is intended to defend Californians from the Trump administration’s policies on reproductive rights, climate change, immigration and more.

Jones said he is “absolutely opposed.” In a news release Monday, Jones said “our job is to fix California and the everyday problems our constituents face,” and implored lawmakers “to step back from the national scene and concentrate on delivering results for our state.”

Beyond “Trump-proofing” California policies and affordability, lawmakers also plan to introduce a slew of bills on a wide range of topics during the new legislative session, from artificial intelligence to education and constitutional conventions. Lawmakers had introduced nearly 180 bills as of Jan. 5.

Among them is a placeholder bill introduced by Assemblyman Marc Berman, a Menlo Park Democrat, to speed up California’s notoriously slow vote count process, which stretched on for weeks this year.

“Details still to come,” Berman said.