



ALLEN J. SCHABEN Los Angeles Times
A HOUSE on Palm Street in Altadena is cleared of debris by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers on Feb. 11.

TRYING TO STAY IN U.S. GETS HARDER

State loses 25% of its immigration judges at same time deportation campaign intensifies.

By Andrea Castillo

WASHINGTON — More than a quarter of federal immigration judges in California have been fired, retired or quit since the start of the Trump administration.

The reduction follows a trend in immigration courts nationwide and constitutes, critics say, an attack on the rule of law that will lead to yet more delays in an overburdened court system.

The reduction in immigration judges has come as the administration scaled up efforts to deport immigrants living in the U.S. illegally. Trump administration officials have described the immigration court process, in which proceedings can take years amid a backlog of millions of cases, as an impediment to their goals.

Nationwide, there were 735 immigration judges last fiscal year, according to the Executive Office for Immigration Review, the arm of the Justice Department that houses immigration courts. At least 97 have been fired since President Trump took office and about the same number have resigned or retired, according to the union representing immigration judges.

California has lost at least 35 immigration judges since January, according to Mobile Pathways, a Berkeley-based organization that analyzes immigration court data. That's down from 132. The steepest drop occurred at the San Francisco Immigration Court, which has lost more than half its bench.

"A noncitizen might win their case, but the key question is, did they receive a hearing?" said Emmett Soper, who worked at the Justice Department before becoming an immigration judge in Virginia in 2017. "Up until this administration, I had always been confident that I was working in a system that, despite its flaws, was fundamentally fair."

The administration intends to fill some judge positions, and in new immigration judge job listings in Los Angeles, San Francisco and elsewhere seeks candidates who want to be a "deportation judge" and "restore integrity and honor to our Nation."

[See Judges, A7]

Even latest 'Avatar' can't rescue 2025's box office

Results for U.S. and Canada are expected to be just slightly better than last year.

By Samantha Masunaga

As "Avatar: Fire and Ash" headed to the big screen this month, theater owners held their breath.

In an uneven year that saw two billion-dollar hits and a viral "chicken jockey" craze, but also a disastrous

first quarter and a nearly 30-year low at the October box office, the end of December was the last chance for theaters to make up ground.

But even James Cameron and the Na'vi — the latest "Avatar" film has already grossed more than \$472 million globally — couldn't save 2025 from a disappointing conclusion.

Box-office revenue in the U.S. and Canada is expected to total \$8.87 billion for the year, up just 1.5% from last year's disappointing \$8.74 billion tally, according

to movie data firm Comscore. More troubling is that 2025's domestic box-office haul is projected to be down more than 20% compared with 2019, before the pandemic changed audiences' moviegoing habits and turbocharged streaming in ways that the exhibition industry is still grappling with.

The problem: Fewer people are buying movie tickets. Theatrical attendance is running below last year's levels, with an estimated 760 million tickets sold as of Dec.

[See Box office, A12]



RONALDO BOLANOS Los Angeles Times
A FAN takes a selfie as she and others make their way around the airship.

Inflated? Absolutely. Overhyped? Not a chance

As the blimp turns 100, fan base is as buoyant as ever

By June Hsu

When Lauren Richeson created the Goodyear Blimp Fan Club on Facebook in 2009, she expected only a few family members and friends to join. But like the blimp itself, the club began to slowly and steadily take off.

"Days would be where I'd have to approve 100 people to get in one day," she said. "It's been quite overwhelming to see how many people across the world are interested."

The fan club has 12,500 members and counting and is more lively than ever as the Goodyear Blimp celebrates its centennial this year.

Richeson created the Facebook group when she lived in Torrance, where she and her husband would often see the

blimp en route to its base in nearby Carson. Now, the full-time artist lives in a part of Florida where sightings are few and far between, so on trips to California she always makes time for one special stop.

"There's certain things that I go back to L.A. for, like my favorite restaurant, the favorite places to shop that I don't get here in Florida, and seeing the blimp is one of those things," Richeson said. "So when I get to see the blimp, I'm a happy camper."

Wingfoot Three, the blimp based in Carson, has two siblings: Wingfoot One in Suffield, Ohio, and Wingfoot Two in Pompano Beach, Fla. A fourth blimp is based in Europe.

[See Blimp, A7]

Brigitte Bardot dies at age 91

Before seclusion, the French movie star was heralded in midcentury as the prototype of liberated female sexuality. **WORLD, A2**

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Fear lingers after ICE raids

July's immigration actions at the Glass House cannabis farms continue to ricochet. **CALIFORNIA, B1**

Weather
Lots of sun.
L.A. Basin: 72/55. **B6**

Duffer brothers send off series

The "Stranger Things" creators on taking big swings in last episodes. **ENTERTAINMENT, E1**

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Fire cleanup reports allege illegal dumping

U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' quality assessments describe improper actions.

By Tony Briscoe

The primary federal contractor entrusted with purging fire debris from the Eaton and Palisades fires may have illegally dumped toxic ash and misused contaminated soil in breach of state policy, according to federal government reports recently obtained by The Times.

The records depict harried disaster workers appearing to take dangerous shortcuts that could leave hazardous pollution and endanger thousands of survivors poised to return to these communities.

The Federal Emergency Management Agency and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers allocated \$60 million to hire personnel to monitor daily cleanup operations and document any health and safety risks. The Times obtained thousands of government oversight reports that detail these federal efforts to rid fire-destroyed homes of toxic debris between February and mid-

May.

The records, which were obtained on a rolling basis over several months, include dozens of instances in which oversight personnel flagged workers for disregarding cleanup procedures in a way that probably spread toxic substances.

The latest batch of reports — turned over to The Times on Dec. 1 — contained allegations of improper actions involving Environmental Chemical Corp., the primary federal contractor, and the dozens of debris removal crews it supervised.

For example, on April 30, federally hired workers were clearing fire debris from a burned-down home in the Palisades burn scar. According to the Army Corps of Engineers, after the last dump truck left, an official with Environmental Chemical Corp., a Burlingame, Calif., company hired to carry out the federal debris removal mission, ordered workers to move the remaining ash and debris to a neighboring property.

The crew used construction equipment to move four or five "buckets" worth of fire debris onto the neighboring property. It's unclear whether that property was also destroyed in the Palisades fire.

[See Cleanup, A9]

Rewriting memory, with good intent

In his lab, a scientist manipulates neurons in mice. That could help humans one day.

By Corinne Purtill

We often think of memories like the contents of a museum: static exhibits that we view to understand the present and prepare for the future.

The latest research, however, suggests they are more like well-thumbed library books that wear and change a little bit every time they're pulled off the shelf.

Think of one of your happiest memories. For real. Sit with the recollection. Let your mind's eye wander around the scene. See if you can feel a spark of the joy or hope you felt at the time. Let a minute pass. Maybe two.

If you played along with this experiment, you are

physically different now than you were a few minutes ago.

When you began to reminisce, brain cells dormant just seconds before began firing chemicals at one another. That action triggered regions of your brain involved in processing emotions, which is why you may have reexperienced some feelings you did at the time of the event.

Chemical and electrical signals shot out to the rest of your body. If you were stressed before you began this exercise, your heart rate probably slowed and stabilized as levels of cortisol and other stress hormones decreased in your blood. If you were already calm, your heart rate may have quickened with excitement.

In either case, regions of the brain that light up when you get a reward jittered with dopamine.

The memory changed

[See Memory, A10]



ALEX BRANDON Associated Press
PRESIDENTS Trump and Volodymyr Zelensky of Ukraine said thorny issues remain in peace efforts.

Trump and Zelensky optimistic after talks

By Will Weisert, Seung Min Kim and Elise Morton

WEST PALM BEACH, Fla. — President Trump on Sunday insisted Ukraine and Russia are "closer than ever before" to a peace deal as he hosted Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky at his Florida resort, but he acknowledged that negotiations could still break down and leave the war dragging on for years.

The U.S. president's statements came after the two leaders met for a discussion that took place after what Trump described as an "excellent" 2½-hour phone conversation with Russian President Vladimir Putin, whose invasion of Ukraine launched the war four years ago. Trump said he believed Putin wants peace, even as Russia launched another round of attacks on Ukraine while Zelensky flew to the United States for the latest

[See Zelensky, A10]