



Preparations for Trump and Mount Rushmore fireworks include First Amendment area for protesters

BY MEGHAN O'BRIEN

The National Park Service is designating an area for protesters as the agency prepares to welcome thousands of attendees, including President Donald Trump, to a Friday fireworks display at Mount Rushmore National Memorial in western South Dakota.

The display is the first at the mountain carving in six years. In 2020, the Park Service approved a fireworks show after then-Gov. Kristi Noem asked Trump in his first term to reinstate the event — despite concerns about potential wildfires sparking from falling fireworks embers, pollution and litter from exploded fireworks, and the opposition of Lakota people from whom the surrounding Black Hills were taken through broken treaties.

A Native American-led protest along the road leading to Mount Rushmore during the 2020 event resulted in physical clashes with law enforcement, ending in arrests of protesters. Charges were later dropped.

This year, the Park Service has designated a 100-foot-long First Amendment area for protesters along Highway 16A at the edge of the town of Keystone, about 2 miles below the entrance to the memorial.

The Pennington County Sheriff's Office will have an increased law enforcement presence

throughout Keystone and other towns near Mount Rushmore. It's also increasing patrols throughout the Black Hills, according to Patrol Capt. Casey Kenrick.

"We always increase our staffing in those areas," Kenrick said. "Obviously, with the fireworks and it being the 250th anniversary of the country, we're expecting a bigger draw of people to the area."

Most of the agency's focus is on the influx of visitors to nearby towns and traffic control. The memorial will be closed to the public starting late Thursday night. Only the 4,800 ticketholders for the fireworks show — who obtained their tickets months ago in an online lottery — can get into the memorial Friday.

"We're expecting that to cause some traffic delays and traffic headaches, just because we all know about it, but people from outside of the area might not necessarily know that it's going on or be aware of where the roadblocks are," Kenrick said.

The department will also monitor protests.

Nick Tilsen, CEO of Rapid City-based Indigenous advocacy group NDN Collective, was a leader of the protests in 2020 and was one of the people arrested. He said his group is "boycotting" the Trump visit this time.

"We're not participating in any of that," Tilsen said.

Since 2020, Tilsen said, Native



A June 2025 view of Mount Rushmore National Memorial in South Dakota's Black Hills.

(Photo by Seth Tupper/South Dakota Searchlight)

American activists in South Dakota and elsewhere have "chalked up wins" through community organizing. He pointed to a jury trial victory in a lawsuit against owners of the Grand Gateway Hotel in Rapid City who were accused of discriminating against Native American guests, a company's withdrawal from an exploratory graphite drilling project in a Black Hills meadow used for spiritual ceremonies, and a 20-year ban on mining activity in the Pactola Reservoir and Rapid Creek watershed area of the Black Hills.

"It's one of the reasons, strategically, that we're not doing a flashy action when Trump comes to the Black Hills," Tilsen said. "Quite frankly, we don't need to feed into his narrative."

Separately, Tilsen has also helped launch the Day One Movement, described as "the beginning of a new future" on Sunday, the day after the nation's 250th birthday. The movement includes advocacy for returning lands taken from Native Americans and providing reparations to

African American people for slavery, among other goals.

Wildfire risk

Law enforcement authorities are also preparing to help with evacuations in the case of a wildfire.

Wildland firefighting personnel are at full staffing, working seven days a week to support fire suppression, according to Krista Landreneau with the Black Hills National Forest, which surrounds Mount Rushmore.

Landreneau also said there will be "robust aerial support" in the form of two helicopters and an airplane, to help with spotting wildfires and access points for ground crews, fire retardant deployment and coordinating aircraft in the airspace above a wildfire.

Wildfires can start when fireworks embers fall on dry vegetation. Parts of Pennington County — where Mount Rushmore is located — are in severe or extreme drought conditions, according to the U.S. Drought Monitor.

South Dakota's Department of Tourism entered into a \$700,000

contract in April with California-based Pyro Spectaculars to produce the fireworks show, and for "lighting elements that can be utilized if environmental conditions require an alternative to fireworks," according to the department.

Few details about that alternative have been publicly released.

"If an alternative to fireworks is required, the lighting presentation is designed to illuminate Mount Rushmore National Memorial in a patriotic display, providing visitors with a meaningful visual experience accompanied by an Americana soundtrack," Department of Tourism Public Relations Director Katlyn Svendsen said in an emailed statement.

A drone light show was considered, but the National Park Service dismissed it from further study as an alternative to the fireworks display, according to the service's environmental assessment for this year's event.

Livestreams available
The fireworks event is officially known as South Dakota's Free-

dom 250 Mount Rushmore Fireworks Celebration, in honor of the nation's 250th birthday. The fireworks show is expected to start at 9:30 p.m. Mountain time, preceded by keynote remarks from Trump. A Freedom 250 press release said Interior Department Secretary Doug Burgum — the former governor of North Dakota — and South Dakota Gov. Larry Rhoden will also speak. U.S. Senate Majority Leader John Thune and Sen. Mike Rounds, both of South Dakota, have said they will attend.

Livestreams of the event will be available on C-SPAN and on the Travel South Dakota website. Watch parties are planned in Rapid City at Main Street Square and the Hotel Alex Johnson, and at the Custer Beacon in Custer.

Trump also visited the new Theodore Roosevelt Presidential Library in Medora, North Dakota, on Wednesday.

South Dakota Searchlight's John Hult contributed to this report.

Belcourt School District #7 Bid Advertisement

Open Date: July 6, 2026

The Belcourt School District is calling for sealed bids for the following:

The SALE and REMOVAL of ...

• 2010 7x14 ft Haulmark Food/Concession Trailer in AS IS condition.

The trailer can be viewed at the Belcourt School Event Center between the hours of 9a.m. to 3p.m. Monday thru Friday. The contact person for trailer viewing is Monte LaVallie and can be reached at 701-550-6781 (cell).

Sealed bids must be submitted to Duane Poitra, Business Manager at the school Business Office by the closing date of July 16, 2026 at 1:00 pm. The mailing address is Belcourt School District #7, Attn: Duane Poitra, PO Box 440, Belcourt, ND 58316. The Belcourt School District #7 Board reserves the right to accept or reject any or all bids or any part of the bid or to waive any formalities in the bidding. For further information regarding the bidding process, contact:

Duane Poitra
Business Manager
P.O. Box 440
Belcourt, ND 58316
(701) 477-6471 ext. 3213

REQUEST FOR SERVICE PROPOSAL EAGLE HEART BUILDING LOG HOUSE, DUNSEITH, ND 58329

The Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa Indians, is requesting sealed bids for a service Proposal for the following:

Replace Existing Doors (4) Four Pairs:

- Demo of existing doors and frames
- Install new entrances to fit existing door openings
- White painted doors and frames
- Clear insulated High-Performance glass
- One (1) @ East Entrance to be a single door with equal side lights each side. To include Panic Devices with Exterior ADA Pull Handles
- Two (2) @ West Entrance to be single doors with equal side lights each side. To include Panic Devices with Exterior ADA Pull Handles
- One (1) @ North Entrance to be a pair of doors. To include Vertical Rod Panic Device with ADA Pull Handles and Hold Open Closers
- All required trim, materials and hardware must be included

Bidder is required to include 3% TERO fee to bid of \$10,000.00 or more
Must specify 3% TERO fee
Must specify 1% EPA fee

All sealed bids must be addressed and mailed to:

Allan Malatterre, TM Property Director
TMBCI
PO Box 900
4180 Highway 281
Belcourt, ND 58316-0900
Contact No: 701-477-2635

Faxed bids will not be accepted.

All Tribal and TERO Regulations will be applicable, and must be concurred with.

The Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa Indians reserves the right to accept or reject any or all bids.

Closing Date: All bids must be received on or before the close of business at 4:30p.m., July 17, 2026

DATEBOOK

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time, the word "desert" was used to describe any treeless area. Long was not impressed with the promise of the High Plains. He saw the region as barren and lacking potential for agriculture. His assessment was that the land was unsuitable for settlement and discouraged westward migration.

Today, we know Long's conclusion was wrong. North Dakota has an impressive agricultural output, producing everything from cattle to sunflowers. But there was something else Long missed. When he scanned the vast and seemingly empty plains, he failed to recognize the geological treasure beneath his feet.

On this date in 1895, the North Dakota State Legislature created the North Dakota Geological Survey, known as the NDGS. Operating under the Department of Mineral Resources, the legislature directed the Survey to "effect a complete account of the mineral resources of the state." That included geological materials such as ores, coal, mineral water, and "other useful materials" like building stones.

During the first half of the 20th century, the NDGS published bulletins, reports, and maps, focusing mainly on the state's water, coal, and clay resources. When oil was discovered, the NDGS shifted focus to petroleum geology and began regulating oil exploration and production.

Today, there's growing interest in rare earth elements. These seventeen elements are essential components of modern technology, including smartphones, electric and hybrid vehicles, and flat-screen TVs. Though small in quantity, without them, many of the devices we rely on wouldn't exist.

In the fall of 2014, the NDGS proposed a rare earth project. The following year, an in-depth survey began to investigate their presence in North Dakota. Since then, the NDGS has published re-

ports detailing those findings. The conclusion? Rare earth elements are present and several companies are exploring the possibility of extracting them.

That development could be a major boost to the state's economy and help reduce America's reliance on foreign sources.

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Fort Rice and the Lakota Sioux

By Dr. Carole Butcher

July 2, 2026 – As settlers and prospectors moved into Dakota Territory, conflicts increased between the newcomers and the people who had long called the Great Plains home. The Fort Laramie Treaty of 1851 was an attempt to reduce that conflict and allow for free passage through Native American lands. The treaty established territory for the exclusive use of different tribes. Unfortunately, the terms began to unravel almost immediately. The United States lacked the resources to stop the flow of prospectors and settlers.

Fort Rice was the first Army post on the Upper Missouri River. It became the site of both peaceful cultural contact and armed conflict. According to the 1861 treaty, the land around the fort was designated as Lakota territory. The Lakota were not pleased with the location of the fort, and tensions were rising.

On this date in 1868, the largest peace gathering ever held on the Great Plains took place at Fort Rice. It was estimated that as many as 50,000 Native Americans gathered for the meeting. But some of the most important Native leaders chose not to attend. Sitting Bull, quickly gaining recognition as a strong defender of Native rights, refused to participate. As one of the most respected leaders, his absence meant the treaty carried little weight without his approval.

The Treaty of 1868 appeared to offer security to the Lakota with

the creation of the Great Sioux Reservation, an enormous area covering parts of present-day North Dakota, South Dakota, Wyoming, Montana, and Nebraska. The government also agreed to remove Army posts along the Bozeman Trail, which ran through Wyoming to the gold fields of Montana.

But the treaty lasted only six years. In 1874, Lieutenant Colonel George Armstrong Custer led an exploratory expedition into the Black Hills. When news broke that the expedition had found gold, prospectors poured into the area and the government again lacked the means to stop them.

In the end, the impressive gathering of so many Native Americans in the quest for peace came to nothing. Two years after his expedition, Custer met his end at the Battle of the Little Bighorn and the Lakota lost possession of the Black Hills that had been promised to them.

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Rodney Kephart's Flag

By Scott Nelson

July 3, 2026 – Rodney Kephart was born in Spencer, Iowa, on this date in 1917. He and his family later moved to North Dakota.

In early 1941, Kephart took a job building a military airfield on Wake Island in the Pacific. On December 7, the same day Pearl Harbor was bombed, Wake Island was also attacked. Kephart, a civilian contractor, assisted the US Marines defending the Island. The Americans fought off the Japanese until December 23, when the remaining forces surrendered. Rodney Kephart became a prisoner.

Along with several hundred prisoners, Rodney was shipped to Japan. 98 prisoners left on Wake were eventually executed.

For the next several years, Kephart worked in a POW labor camp. Many of his fellow prisoners died from malnutrition and

mistreatment by Japanese guards. Rodney served as the camp Chaplain and provided services for those who passed away.

As the war was ending, the last days of August, 1945, the Japanese guards abandoned the camp. American planes dropped food and supplies to the prisoners. Red, white and blue parachutes used to drop supplies were brought to Rodney with instructions to make an American flag. Kephart worked all night, and on the morning of September 2nd, the day the Japanese surrendered, the American flag was raised over the Fukuoka Number 6 POW camp. It flew over the camp until the prisoners were repatriated.

Rodney did not see the flag again until 36 years later at a POW convention in Oregon. It was on loan from the Idaho Historical Society. No one knew how it got from Japan to Idaho.

In 1994 the flag was brought to Jamestown, North Dakota, to be displayed for a convention in the custodial care of Mr. Kephart. At the close of the convention, Raymond Seerup of Miles City asked what Rodney was going to do with the flag. "Send it back to Idaho" was his response. Seerup said, "That flag is yours. You made it, you keep it."

Rodney did keep his flag, but was then sued by the Idaho Historical Society! However, the Historical Society had no proof of ownership. Kephart's proof was that he had made the flag. Rodney won the suit.

Rodney Kephart died at Stanley, North Dakota, on February 5, 2003, and was buried as a civilian with full military honors for fighting with the Marines on Wake Island.

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