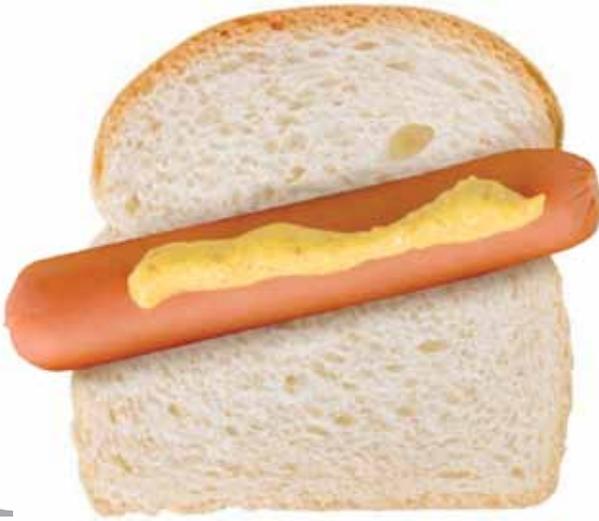


1



NO PEAS FOR PRISONERS

First it was lunches, now the last supper. Texas is cutting prison costs by cutting meals. Last April, officials stopped serving lunch on the weekends to about 23,000 inmates in 36 state prisons. Breakfast and lunch were combined into brunch. In the fall, officials ended the traditional special meal the night before executions. According to the New York Times, other cuts include replacing milk in a carton with the powdered version (for a savings of \$3.5 million a year) and substituting hot dog and hamburger buns with bread slices. "If they don't like the menu," Texas Senator John Whitmire told the newspaper, they shouldn't "come there in the first place." Federal and county prisoners in Texas still receive three meals a day.

4



IPADS IN THE CHAMBER

Indiana lawmakers—at least some of them—will be testing iPads this session for their usefulness in conducting official business. Starting this month, members of one committee from each chamber will receive the tablets to read new legislation, take notes, send emails, and communicate with constituents via social media. The Data Processing Subcommittee is conducting the pilot program. Senator Brandt Hershman told the Times of Northwest Indiana that he believes switching to iPads will "not only enhance efficiency, but could lead to savings," by eliminating the need to print all bills.

5

FOOD FIGHT

Some of the most heated debates in Arizona these days are not over immigration or recalls, but food. Macayo's Mexican Kitchen started a petition drive to lobby the Legislature to make the chimichanga—a king-sized tortilla wrapped around beef, chicken or pork, along with cheese, sour cream, salsa and guacamole and deep-fried in lard—the official state food. Others just enjoy eating them. "You know your chimichanga is authentic if, an hour after eating it, you feel a log gently rolling around in your stomach," Tom Miller of Tucson, a self-described chimiologist, told The New York Times. Lawmakers in the Grand Canyon State already have some official items: the bolo tie (neckwear), the Apache trout (fish), the Arizona Tree Frog (amphibian) and the Colt single-action Army revolver (firearm). Problem is, no one knows for sure who invented the chimichanga, and several folks are claiming naming rights. Oklahoma is ahead of Arizona on this matter; it has an entire official meal that includes okra, grits and black-eyed peas. Yum, yum. For a list of all official state foods, go to www.ncsl.org/magazine.



TALKING BEARS

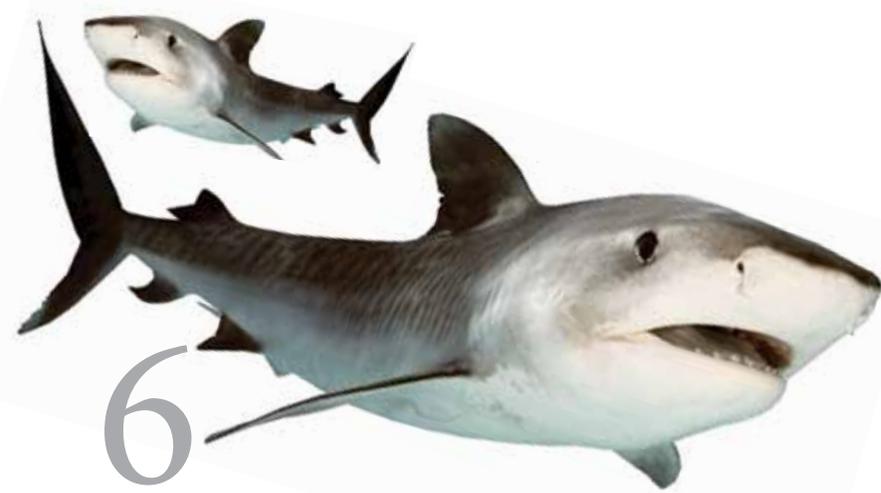
The Lakota Native American language got some help from Papa Bear, Mama Bear and all the little Berenstain Bears. Twenty episodes of "Math Waúnsila Thiwáhe" (The Berenstain Bears popular children's show) were translated into the endangered language and shown on public television in North Dakota and South Dakota. It's the first animated series to be translated into an American Indian language. With fewer than 5 percent of the Sioux tribe able to speak the language of their ancestors, "the bears are doing their part to save a language," Wilhelm Meya, executive director of Lakota Language Consortium, told the Associated Press. There are about two dozen Sioux tribes in North America, with reservations in Minnesota, Montana, Nebraska and Canada, along with the Dakotas.

3

STUDENT POWER

Give students the chance, and they come up with some pretty good ideas. Freya Chay did. After her local government passed a resolution exempting renewable energy systems from property taxes, she learned it couldn't go into effect without changes to the Alaska state tax code. So Chay created and helped pass an amendment to a Senate bill allowing any municipality in Alaska the option to exempt. Chay's idea came from a program called Caring for the Kenai, which encourages young people to submit ideas to improve their local environment. Legislators and state agency staff often help students with their projects, invest some time and, occasionally, some money. Districts in Anacortes, Wash., and Alberta, Canada, have adapted the program, and others in California, Hawaii and New York have shown interest.

2



6

APPLAUSE FOR JAWS

Florida is making happy campers out of four kinds of sharks. Wildlife officials have banned fishermen from keeping tiger and three kinds of hammerhead sharks caught in state waters, according to the Miami Herald. Populations of these species have dipped by 50 percent recently. Another 22 species already are protected. As the top dogs in their habitats, sharks play an important role in marine ecosystems.

7

PENSION TENSION

Rhode Island lawmakers passed a major overhaul of their public employees' pension system. The plan will cut unfunded pension liability by 41 percent by suspending cost-of-living increases, raising the retirement age of most employees to match their Social Security retirement age, and switching to a hybrid system of defined benefits and defined contributions. Rhode Island is the first state in at least a quarter-century to revise the basic structure of a pension plan for current state employees. It was one of only two states with less than 50 percent of the assets needed to pay benefits, and one of 33 with less than 80 percent of the needed assets. "It would certainly be a lot easier to walk away from this reform," Senate President Teresa Paiva Weed, told the Washington Post. "However, it is clear that doing nothing only puts our retirees and our active members' benefits at greater risk. We owe it to them, as well as to all other taxpayers, to attack this challenge head on."



8

FARMERS FOREVER

A group of farmers in North Dakota is backing a proposal to add this to the state constitution: "The right of farmers and ranchers to engage in modern farming and ranching practices shall be forever guaranteed in this state. No law shall be enacted which abridges the right of farmers and ranchers to employ agricultural technology, modern livestock production and ranching practices." The farmers were concerned about efforts by animal rights groups to limit certain farming practices in other states. Opponents told the Associated Press that farmers and ranchers shouldn't have unlimited control, voicing the need for some environmental and animal rights regulations. Agriculture is important to North Dakota, generating up to one-fourth of the state's economy.

9

PILL MILL BILL

Tennessee lawmakers passed new regulations on the so-called "pill mills" that provide dealers and addicts with illegal prescription drugs. The new rules require pain clinics to be certified through the Health Department, prohibit cash transactions and apply stiff penalties for any violations on those who work at the illegal pain clinics. Prescription drug abuse is the fastest-growing drug problem in the country, according to the National Office of Drug Control. Tennessee has an overdose of these clinics; it ranks second in the nation in the number of prescription medications dispensed. Tennessee Senator Ken Yager, sponsor of the legislation, told The Tennessean the problem affects every county in the state. "I have received more calls on this bill than any bill I've done in the legislature."

10

RUNNING FROM OFFICE

Utah's ban on campaign fundraising while the Legislature is in session is causing several lawmakers who are contemplating running for other offices to consider resigning. "I'm not sure I'm willing to take a 45-day hiatus from raising money," Representative Carl Wimmer, who is running for Congress, told The Salt Lake Tribune. The Legislature will meet in session until March 8, followed almost immediately by the Democratic caucuses on March 13 and the Republican caucuses on March 15. That's not much time to raise money. Twenty-eight states restrict giving and receiving campaign contributions during the legislative session, according to NCSL. Courts have ruled in some states that lawmakers running for federal offices cannot be restricted by a state law. Utah Lieutenant Governor Greg Bell, however, interpreted the ban "to apply to contributions to any campaign for any office for which a legislator maybe a candidate," according to the Salt Lake Tribune.

