



Credit: C. Cravatta / NPS Photo

#1

It's that time of year! Fat Bear Week is here!

In preparation for hibernation, the brown bears in Alaska's Katmai National Park and Preserve have started doubling their weight by feasting on salmon, berries, and grass — sometimes consuming as much as 160,000 calories per day. Now, it's our job to crown one extremely fat bear as the chunky champion of Fat Bear Week 2023.

The 12 contestants for this year's competition were revealed on Monday night, and voting officially began today.

Park rangers have created a March Madness-style bracket pitting the bears against each other. The internet will help narrow down the list, with voting concluding on October 10, a.k.a. Fat Bear Tuesday.

This year's competition has been off to a bit of a slow start, as Katmai's bears have had trouble gaining weight.

"The salmon run this year was really slow in coming [to] Brooks River and bears have had to work a little bit harder than in years past," said Mike Fitz, who created Fat Bear Week back in 2014.

While most only know Fat Bear Week as a viral gag event, it has some real benefits, too. Officials said that the attention Fat Bear Week receives actually helps the park showcase conservation efforts. The size of the park's bears are a reflection of the local ecosystem's health, as well as that of the Bristol Bay watershed.

"It's just an incredible opportunity for people to celebrate the success and survival of these bears," Keith Moore, Katmai's lead interpretive park ranger, told ABC News.

The National Park Service reported that more than 1 million votes were cast in last year's competition. However, Fat Bear Week 2022 was shrouded in controversy after allegations of ballot stuffing began swirling.

"Like bears stuff their face with fish, our ballot box, too, has been stuffed," Katmai National Park tweeted last October.

Bear 435, known as Holly, was initially leading in the polls. But after a number of votes deemed fake were discarded, Bear 747 (a.k.a. Bear Force One) was ultimately crowned the victor.

747, a fan favorite and 2-time winner, will be a contender in this year's competition, as well.

In addition to a bear's size, there are other factors one might consider when voting, like a bear's looks, personality, and how hard it worked to pack on the pounds. After all, the competition's website does instruct voters to select the bear they believe "best exemplifies fatness," which is a pretty open-ended prompt.

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You can cast your votes for Fat Bear Week 2023 [here](#) and watch a livestream of the bears [here](#).

NOW YOU KNOW

- **Now that Rep. Kevin McCarthy has been ousted as House speaker**, who will take his place? The fight for his successor has already begun, and here are [some of the leading candidates](#).
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- **Grimes sued Elon Musk over parental rights** of [their 3 children](#), X Æ A-12, Exa Dark Sideræl, and Techno Mechanicus.
- **A group of countries announced yesterday they would raise \$12 billion** to help [protect and restore coral reefs](#). But experts are skeptical of how much it will help if greater action to reduce greenhouse gas emissions isn't taken.
- **Former Russian TV journalist Marina Ovsyannikova was sentenced to 8.5 years in prison in absentia today** [for protesting](#) the war in Ukraine. Footage of Ovsyannikova videobombing a live TV broadcast in March 2022 was one of the war's first truly viral moments.
- **UK Prime Minister Rishi Sunak has proposed raising the minimum age to buy cigarettes** every year by one year [until it's illegal](#) for the whole population.
- **Pakistan yesterday announced a mass deportation of Afghan migrants** who entered the country illegally. An estimated 1.7 million people now have to [leave the country](#) by November or face deportation.
- **Michael Jordan is the first pro athlete to make it on Forbes 400**, with his net worth at \$3 billion.



Credit: Caitlin O'Hara for The Washington Post via Getty Images

#2

A Saudi-owned farm in Arizona is losing access to state land — and the groundwater beneath it

Arizona Gov. Katie Hobbs (D) announced this week that the state would end land leases to a Saudi-owned alfalfa farm, citing violations of the agreements' terms. The decision against the ["high-volume water user"](#) comes as Arizona grapples with extreme drought conditions.

Hobbs said Fondomonte "continued to pump unchecked amounts of groundwater out of our state while in clear default on their lease" [in a Monday statement](#). A spokesperson for the company [told the AP](#) that it would appeal Hobbs' decision.

The state is terminating 1 lease and doesn't plan on renewing 3 others that expire next year, the governor said. The terminated lease covers 640 acres in Butler Valley, located west of Phoenix, though Fandomonte's footprint in the area totals about 3,500 acres, and the company owns another 10,000 acres in nearby Vicksburg. Both Butler Valley and Vicksburg are located in La Paz County, which the Washington Post calls "one of the poorest and least-populated parts of the state." Fandomonte operates in Southern California, as well.

Fandomonte's Arizona leases attracted controversy for allowing the company to pump state groundwater with little restriction, free of charge, to grow alfalfa. The alfalfa is then sent to Saudi Arabia, where it's used by Fandomonte's parent Almarai — one of the Middle East's largest dairy suppliers — to feed cows. Alfalfa is arguably the U.S. Southwest's biggest and "thirstiest" crop, according to the Guardian, and it thrives in arid regions. In fact, nearly half of the irrigated acres of farmland in Arizona, Colorado, and Utah in 2017 were used for alfalfa. And that same year, 7 of the 9 highest-yielding alfalfa counties in the entire country were in the Grand Canyon State specifically.

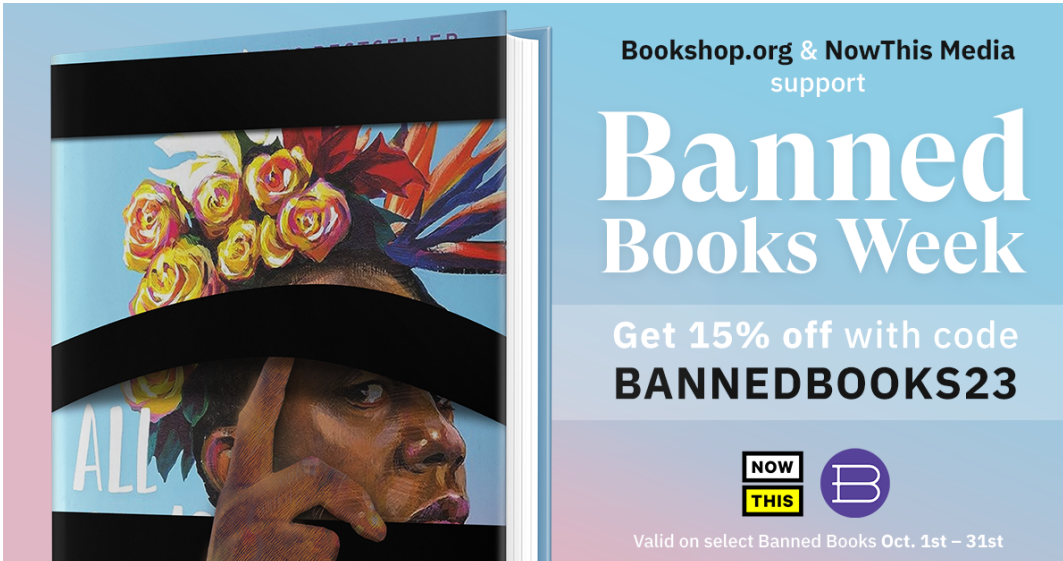
The crop has come under scrutiny in recent years because it uses so much water. Saudi Arabia essentially banned alfalfa farming in 2018 to protect its own water resources and encouraged dairy farms to import the crop instead.

Meanwhile, Arizona, which makes up a large portion of the Colorado River Basin, has been experiencing a megadrought for approx 23 years. State officials announced in June that they would stop approving some housing developments around the Phoenix area because there just wasn't enough groundwater to support them. A New York Times investigative report in August found significant declines in groundwater resources across the country over several decades, forcing Americans to dig even deeper wells in states like Arizona, "chasing rapidly falling water levels downward." But irrigated agriculture like that of alfalfa continues to use approximately 74% of Arizona's available water supply.

"As these big mega-farms continue to pump water up, [residents are] seeing their own water depleted," Nate Halverson, a reporter for the Center for Investigative Reporting's Reveal, told NPR. "And some folks have had to spend tens of thousands of dollars to drill deeper wells. Other folks can't afford it, and so they're having to have water trucked in. And some folks have just left the area."

→ KnowThis

Fandomonte is not the only foreign entity farming in the country — or in the water-strapped Southwest, for that matter. Approximately 3% of U.S. farmland is under the control of foreign entities and individuals, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Although there are restrictions in some states, no state completely bars the practice.



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VIDEO OF THE DAY



3D-printed ghost guns were found at an NYC day care facility

Thanks for reading, and we'll see you back here tomorrow.

This newsletter featured contributions from Sophia Anderson, Jessica Cohen, Aliya Karim, and Tom McKenna.

This edition was copy edited by Aryana Azari and Shayna Posses.

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