

Five big issues to watch in '15

It's a new year, and here are five things we expect to be big stories in 2015 in Grant County and beyond.

- The Blue Mountain Forests Plan Revision. After more than a decade of fits and starts, the multi-forest proposal was released last year to little acclaim and much concern.

The Eastern Oregon Counties Association rejected all the alternatives, fueled by concerns about the sustainability of local communities and industries. Other groups focused on concerns about road closures and access to the forests. A big concern is the possibility that a regionwide approach may undercut forest health advances already in process on the Malheur National Forest.

Forest Service officials are meeting with an array of community partners this month to hash out how the work will proceed. For 2015, this plan remains a work in progress, and the shoutin's far from done.

- The new John Day Fire Station. The voters said yes to a bond measure last year, clearing the way for construction of a new fire hall to replace the aging garage on Dayton Street.

City and John Day Rural Fire District officials have hired Kirby Nagelhout as construction manager and general contractor for the project, and work has begun with Pinnacle Architect on the design.

The agencies are hoping to begin construction in the late spring or early summer and finish the job before winter sets in. A celebratory open house would be a great capper for the year.

- The progress of the Malheur National Forest's 10-year stewardship contract, a sweeping effort to restore this region's ecosystems, make the forests more fire- and bug-resilient, and bring economic stability to the local communities.

The latter appears to be on target, despite some discouraging news this past week as Malheur Lumber Co. confirmed the layoff of its recently hired second shift. Yet the cutbacks, while painful for those involved and the community, appear to be a business decision based on supplies and capacity, and not a signal that something's awry with the stewardship program.

In 2015, we'll be watching to see how this new and evolving strategy for forest restoration plays out. We won't be alone, as the 10-year contract has drawn regional and national attention. Working in everyone's favor: The diverse partners that crafted this plan continue to be committed to bettering the forest, as well as the community and industry infrastructure.

- The outcome of two lawsuits facing Grant County officials over sexual orientation slurs in a hiring meeting more than a year ago. Will these cases go to court, or be settled? Either way, we can expect the proceedings to have a price tag for the county.

At least part of the blame for this situation rests on the County Court, which in recent years has treated human resources management as a passive and occasional duty. The experts say municipalities that neglect personnel and management training do so at their own peril – and at considerable cost to the taxpayers when lawsuits result. The Court was on course to create a dedicated human resources position late last year, but got derailed as commissioners pondered whether the duties could be handled instead by County Clerk Brenda Percy and Judge Scott Myers. It's not clear how a tag-team approach would be effective or proactive, nor is it clear how this added responsibility would fit in with – or interrupt – the duties for which both were elected.

Those questions have yet to be answered, so the process is stalled, leaving the county in jeopardy. We hope that situation will change soon, regardless of how the current lawsuits pan out.

- On a statewide level, we'll be watching to see whether Gov. John Kitzhaber's Teflon coat wears thin. The governor begins his fourth term this week amid continuing controversy over his fiancée's apparent blending of her own business interests and the staffing, resources and privileges she enjoys as the state's first lady. With the governor's office facing a continuing barrage of public records requests, and with an ethics review in the wind, this is one story that won't end quietly or soon for Dr. K.

Stay tuned, and thanks for reading. – SC



LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

State needs ID law

To the Editor:

The Oregon Legislature should grant the authority and appropriate the necessary funding to meet the REAL ID Act standards. These standards increase privacy protections for Oregon driver's license card holders and mitigate the risk of license fraud.

On Dec. 15, the Oregon DMV provided the Oregon Transportation Commission with a report detailing progress in meeting the REAL ID standards, noting a \$4 million price tag to achieve full compliance. Additionally, the report stated that the DMV did not have the legislative authority to implement 10 of the standards.

Specifically, Oregon does not conduct background checks on employees who have access to sensitive personal data. Insider fraud is a real issue in DMVs. Often, motor vehicle employees are paid from \$1,000 to \$5,000 to provide licenses to individuals under a fraudulent identity. Background checks mitigate that risk, ensuring that employees who have been convicted of certain crimes do not have access to sensitive personal data.

Moreover, when renewals are issued, Oregon does not reverify that a Social Security Number is valid. When a driver's license is issued, nearly all the states require that an applicant provide a Social Security card as proof of identity. The information on the card, the name and number, is then verified with the Social Security Administration to ensure that the card is not a counterfeit.

Many states reverify with the Social Security Administration that a SSN is still valid and issued to the right person at the time of renewal. In cases of stolen identity, Social Security Numbers have to be changed and cards reissued. This has become common, as black markets are dealing in whole identities that are sold and resold.

The catalog of crimes associated with driver's license fraud aside (and it is far reaching), for victims recovering from identity theft and fraud usually takes years, not months or days. The Legislature should move quickly and grant the Oregon DMV the necessary authority to move forward, not only because it's a federal law, but because it's good for Oregon.

Andrew Meehan,
policy director
Coalition for a Secure
Driver's License
Washington, D.C.

More kudos for driver

To the Editor:

This is reinforcement to Bob Watt's applause last week for Oak Harbor Freight driver Ernie Hopper. For 10 years, Oak Harbor and Ernie have transported, free of charge, the hundreds of shoeboxes assembled by Grant County citizens each year and shipped under the organization of Samaritan's Purse. Called "Operation Christmas Child," these boxes are filled with gifts that bring excitement and joy to children in impoverished countries.

Ernie's contribution is particularly appreciated. Responsible, congenial, ready to work, he made freight hauling a seamless endeavor. This year, a break in plans resulted in the forklift not being available to load the pallets of heavy containers packed with shoeboxes. Ernie could have justified a furrowed brow, but rather, he stepped right up and, with exertion and muscle power, loaded them all by hand.

Some good things are subject to ending, and Ernie is retiring. We wish him active and gratifying years to come, and he will be missed.

Three cheers for Ernie Hopper and Oak Harbor Freight Lines!

Zola Pike
Operation Christmas Child

ODFW and wildlife management

To the Editor:

Here we go again! The ODFW always blames bad habitat for a decline of a species. Now it is the greater sage grouse. They say too many juniper, magpies, ravens, skunks, coyotes, and badgers just to name a few. They all love eggs! When these predators eat all of the eggs, you get no reproductions. When you get no reproduction, the old ones eventually die off.

The magpies and the raven can't even be controlled because they are protected. I'm sure the ODFW could get authority to control them. I can tell you what they have proposed – getting rid of the junipers and cutting back on the grazing – isn't going to work. Maybe that is what they want? They can take the grazing from the ranchers and run the public off more public land.

Before I worked for them and after I worked them, the Game Commission said the three main things in wildlife management are habitat, habitat, habitat. Now the three main things in wildlife management should be predators, predators, predators!

Kenneth R. Moore
Mt. Vernon

Oregon gets D+

To the Editor:

In the recent article "Keep your dog safe during trapping season" (Dec. 23, 2014 Blue Mountain Eagle), even the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife warns of the danger and indiscriminate nature of wildlife traps, and the deadly toll they can have on family pets.

Every year, innocent dogs and cats, "non-target" wild animals, or threatened species are caught in traps intended for wild furbearers, losing their limbs and lives. Traps will catch any animal unfortunate enough to cross its path – whether it's a beloved dog, cat, or even a child.

Research has shown that for every target animal captured, at least two non-target animals are caught. The only way to protect pets and wildlife from these inhumane traps is to ban the use of these archaic devices on public, state and federal lands. Born Free USA recently launched Safe Trails, www.

bornfreeusa.org/safetrails, which educates the public on the dangers of wildlife traps and how to keep safe from them. This site contains information about the dangers of traps to companion animals and what people can do in emergencies, including how to release dogs from all types of traps.

State regulations vary widely. Born Free USA's State Trapping Report Card (www.bornfreeusa.org/a10_trapping_reportcard.php) assigned Oregon a D+, in part because the state allows for most all kinds of traps including leghold, Conibear, and snares. Pets have been maimed terribly and even killed due to these traps.

No animal, wild or domesticated, deserves to suffer such a horrifying fate.

Kate Deylewsky,
Born Free USA staff
Washington, D.C.

Equal opportunity for all?

To the Editor:

I can think of very few things more healthy and wholesome than bicycling. Especially bicycling that takes the bikers off crowded, shoulder-less highways.

I was, therefore, disappointed to read that our County Court abruptly shot down a proposed bicycle route in Logan Valley. What really got my goat were statements made by local rancher Shannon Voigt. Here is a man who raises cattle for a living and who is outraged about a little additional poop and pee on the landscape. Good grief! Can't he see the extreme double standard of his statements?

I know of no other activity in Grant County that pollutes our land and water more than masses of cattle doing their business where ever they please. Each summer Grant County rivers are discolored from cattle excrement, a result of flood irrigation of hay fields where cows overwintered. This activity overheats the water as well as pollutes it.

We recently saw local ranchers band together to shoot down a proposed land deal that would have created another state park in our county. Why is it that these people have such self-inflated views of their importance? Is it that nothing belongs here that is not in keeping with their traditions, or doesn't benefit ranching?

I am reminded of an incident in Fox Valley a year ago. I had been photographing birds from a county road, an activity as innocent as bicycling, when a rancher flagged me down and demanded to know just what I was doing out there. While he wasn't aggressive, it aggravated me that he assumed a right to stop me on a public road. Our conversation and disagreements ended as he drove off declaring he didn't know if I had a right to photograph birds perched on his property.

I personally hope that the County Court will take another look at the proposed Logan Valley bike path. It's a worthy project that deserves to be considered from all points of view.

Terry Steele
Ritter



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