

# TANKER

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 marily in the daytime when there are more firefighters on the ground. "You want to drop fire retardant when you can best follow it up with ground forces," Gray said. Pilots generally try to drop retardant from a height of 300 feet. Dropping it from a height greater than this increases the chance the retardant will dissipate before it hits the fire, and if dropped at a lower height, the retardant might not dissipate before it hits the ground. The goal is for the retardant to dissipate immediately above the fire before hitting the ground. "We want to create a rainfall effect so that it will fully cover the fuel," Williams said, explaining the retardant is much less effective if it hits the ground before dissipating. The La Grande Air Tanker Base fuels and loads planes with retardant for fires up to 500 miles away. The majority of the planes leaving the base make a round trip back to



Cherise Kaechele / The Observer

Katie Gray, a public information officer for the Willowa-Whitman National Forest, points to a board that indicates the number of tankers that have flown out of the La Grande base over the years and the number of gallons those tankers held.

the La Grande base. Planes are not sent from La Grande to a wildfire in that 500-mile radius if there is a tanker base closer to it. This is why planes did not leave the La Grande base

for the Substation Fire in Wasco County earlier this summer. Williams said tankers for that fire, which broke out July 17, were sent from a tanker base in Redmond, which is at least 130 miles closer to

Wasco County than La Grande. Retardant was particularly effective in the Substation Fire because much of it was in open areas where there were few trees to prevent the retardant from reaching the flames. "In tall timber, retardant is less likely to hit the ground as quickly," Williams said. The largest planes flown out of the La Grande Air Tanker Base are MD-87 and C-130 jets. The MD-87s have a 3,000-gallon capacity and the C-130s have a 4,000-gallon capacity. The smallest planes flown from the base are single-engine prop planes, which carry about 700 gallons of retardant. The jets are a far cry from the less advanced aircraft that flew out of the La Grande Air Tanker Base close to three decades ago. Williams knows this well because his father, Wayne, managed the air base from 1989 to 1994. The planes flown from the base then were slower and less powerful. "They would have to circle the valley two or three times before

they could get high enough to leave the valley," said Williams, who has been the manager of the La Grande Air Tanker Base since 2016. The planes flying out of La Grande's base today do not need to circle the Grande Ronde Valley even once to build up the speed needed to get out, Williams said. He said if today's aircraft leave from the proper angle, they can fly directly out of the valley. The facility's equipment is also superior to what was available years ago. Williams said the base has high-quality pumps and other top-of-the-line equipment due in large part to Russell Hurst, who managed the base from 1994 to 2015. "He paid close attention to detail," Williams said. He said Hurst, who lives in Union, also played an important role in developing an efficient system for the base's operations. "It is one of the nicest, cleanest and best run tanker bases in the nation," Williams said.

# FBI

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 Ammon and Ryan Bundy plus five other occupiers were found not guilty of conspiracy and gun charges in a trial that ended two years ago. Earlier this year, charges stemming from the Bundys' armed standoff with government agents in Nevada were dropped. Billy Williams, U.S. Attorney for Oregon, said he strongly believed the Astarita case needed to be tried. "Our system of justice relies on the absolute integrity of law enforcement officials at all levels of government," he said. The errant shots came as Fincum left his pickup while authorities tried to arrest him at a roadblock on Jan. 26, 2016. Oregon State Police fatally shot Fincum seconds later — a killing that was deemed legally justified. Investigators looking into the shooting were able to identify those responsible for six of the eight rounds fired that day. No one owned up to the other two. After an investigation, Astarita was indicted in June 2017.

Prosecutors said he was the only one who could have fired the shots. Their assertion was based on FBI aerial surveillance videos and forensic analysis tracing a bullet back to his position. Fincum and other occupiers led by Ammon Bundy seized the refuge on Jan. 2, 2016, to protest the imprisonment of two Oregon ranchers who had set fires. President Donald Trump recently pardoned those men, Dwight and Steven Hammond. On Jan. 26, the FBI learned that Fincum, Bundy and other key figures were leaving the refuge in two vehicles to meet with a sheriff sympathetic to their cause. Police stopped the vehicles, and several people surrendered, including Ammon Bundy. But Fincum fled at more than 70 mph with Bundy's brother Ryan and several others, authorities say. Roughly a mile down the road, Fincum swerved to avoid a roadblock, nearly hit an FBI agent and careened into a snowbank. Three shots, none fired by Astarita, hit the pickup during the chaos. The two disputed gunshots rang out as Fincum emerged from his pickup and yelled, "Go ahead and shoot me!" One bullet missed everything and was never recovered. The other struck the pickup and shattered a window.

# GRANT

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 percent of the residents are paying more than 50 percent of their income toward rent or mortgages. The (Legislature) allocated money to issue grants to (cities) to do this housing needs analysis." That allocation now includes the City of La Grande. The intention is to do the analysis, then come up with a strategic plan, or multiple plans, that will help solve the crisis. Boquist said the city has conducted one before, but it's been quite a while and the analysis was not specific enough. He plans to break the analysis down to the categories of people who need housing the most. "I want the study more valuable to us, where it identifies the type of housing, whether it's transitional housing, low income or working families or higher-end housing," Boquist said. "I think we have a need

in all of those categories. Whether you're a renter or property owner, the market has more people looking for housing than what's available. I don't know what category of need is greater." Boquist said the analysis will help determine if there is an actual need for housing or only a perceived need. "I don't know how much of a crisis there actually is," he said. He compared it to the downtown parking issue. He said there have been complaints about a lack of parking in the downtown area, but the reality is that there are people who don't want to walk to the parking lots that are available. "Maybe for the higher-end housing there's a perceived problem," he said. "I don't know what the different levels are — where there's a true need and a perceived need." Boquist said the city's housing issues are becoming more visible. An

example is the warming shelter, which opened last winter for those who are homeless and in need of a warm place to sleep. "The housing crisis is becoming more of a visual and apparent issue that people are recognizing in our community," Boquist said. "We are having that need and people are pointing it out." He added there is a possibility that those who had to use the warming shelter are homeless because of the housing shortage. "One of the challenges they are finding is rental rates are going up," Boquist said. "Property owners are charging more for rent than they used to. I don't know whether it's because it costs more or the demand is so high that they can charge anything they want. What was a \$500 apartment is now \$800." Those who own rental properties may increase their rates to match the other rates in the area, and

the end result is an entire population of people who can't afford the rent. "Maybe those who are semi-homeless were doing just fine (with their rent) at some point, but (now) they can't afford stable housing," Boquist said. He said that while economic development is essential to La Grande, it can contribute to the housing shortage. If new businesses bring new employees, they'll need to find housing. "If you can't support the housing, then where do they go?" he asked. Simultaneously supporting economic development and solving the lack of affordable housing is going to require some creativity, Boquist said. "The next step after the analysis is to seek another grant or funding to do a strategic plan," he said. "That essentially will explore the options. (The plan will) recognize the challenges and (lay out) a

number of scenarios where you can explore and solve the various issues (with housing)." The third step is to implement the chosen solutions. The important thing is that the grant-funded analysis will allow the city to take a much needed first step. Boquist said other communities have come up with plans to help with their housing shortage. It's possible to fix, but it will take time. "A lot of this is going to be brainstorming," he said.

# VALENTINE

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 mum of three months to an entire school year, during which time the Valentines and their sons formed a unique bond with each student, even taking some on trips to Yellowstone National Park and the Grand Canyon. "The key element of hosting exchange students is broadening your own family horizons and pushing the envelope outward so you get a feel for how other cultures think and how they view the world," Eric said. "For us, it's a real joy to take them places." While the experience is mutually beneficial, Meg reflected on how she believes it benefited her sons in particular. "Having students from a number of different countries and very different cultures we felt was good for the boys as they were growing up," she said. "They got to know somebody from another country, hear the language (and) learn a few words of the language. We felt that was really valuable." Perhaps those experiences paid off. Their son, Matt, participated in two exchanges himself: a summer in Switzerland and a full year in Greece after graduating high

school. Their other son, Michael, spent six months in South Africa. Eric and Meg also have a granddaughter who exchanged in Spain. The couple has managed to keep in touch with many of their students over the years, some through Christmas cards, others who have returned to visit and through visits of their own. The two have made the journey to Costa Rica, Denmark and, most recently, Iceland, visiting a student they perhaps have the closest relationship with — Disa, who stayed with the Valentines the longest. After losing contact for many years, Disa found one of the Valentines' sons on Facebook and rekindled their connection. Since then, the Valentines have visited Disa and her husband, and the Icelandic couple came to La Grande to visit the Valentines. "Basically, Disa is the daughter we never had," Eric said with a laugh. The majority of these exchanges happened in a time when technology severely limited the amount and frequency of commu-

nication between students and their homes — an era before FaceTime, texting and social media made communication easier and cheaper. "That (technology) really can change the whole context of living in a new place," Meg said of how tech is changing the foreign exchange experience. "If you're allowed to do that you don't benefit your family and don't get much out of the experience. That's a hard break for a lot of kids to make." Eric mirrored Meg's thoughts on exchange programs in the modern age. "Whether you're a U.S. student going abroad or an international student coming here, how do you make it a whole experience within (that) country if you're in constant touch?" he said. "It's a real escape hatch." Technology and coping with homesickness have come a long way since the 1960s and '70s, and the differences between past and present are remarkable to compare. "When we were in the Peace Corps, it took two weeks for a letter to reach our parents and two weeks

for them to respond, so we communicated once a month," Eric said. "And there weren't any phone calls, (as they) were really expensive. It's such a different world now." Similarly, Meg recalled a return visit to her Danish family around Christmas time while studying abroad in Germany, three years after her initial visit. Her Danish "father" gave her a phone call home as a Christmas gift, which cost \$36 for a three-minute conversation, all of which had to be coordinated by phone operators and a particular time for the call scheduled with her parents back home. Despite the changes nearly four decades have made, the benefits of foreign exchange remain the same. "Our sons) got to know somebody better than we would've (just) traveling through another country. (These are people) that they know and remember. They have great memories and (had) great times together," Meg said. "It's important for the community to get to know these international students. They certainly add to the community."

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