

THE OBSERVER'S TOP 10 STORIES OF THE YEAR

it makes them impassable by laying trees across them and putting in water bars.

"They do a lot more than put up gates," Beverage noted.

The Blue Mountains plan's proposed limits on grazing were also discussed. Beverage said grazing restrictions would have a number of drawbacks. For example, she said grazing restrictions, like logging restrictions, allow fuels such as grasses to build up, making forests more susceptible to major wildfires.

"Grazing keeps forage down, preventing large fires," Beverage said. "Cattle can be a good tool for managing forests."

The U.S. Forest Service will present an updated Blue Mountains Forest Plan in 2019 after considering the objections presented in the recent forums.

The public forum on the Blue Mountains Forest Plan in La Grande was one of five conducted in Eastern Oregon by the Forest Service in November and December.

Boise Cascade plants purchased by Woodgrain

Boise Cascade announced in May it was going to do a phased shutdown that included the sawmill, planer and shipping department in Elgin. The shutdown impacted 90 employees.

"Boise Cascade has operated the Elgin lumber mill since 1960. This portion of the Elgin complex is not cost competitive in the marketplace given its age, size and technology," Wood Products Regional Manager John White said in a press release. "Even with significant new capital investments, it is not clear the lumber mill can be positioned to be cost competitive. We have announced an indefinite curtailment as we assess the future of the Elgin lumber operation."

In September, Woodgrain Millwork, a company based in Fruitland, Idaho, announced its intent to purchase three Northeast Oregon facilities owned by Boise Cascade.

Woodgrain purchased Boise Cascade's lumber mills in La Grande and Pilot Rock and the particleboard plant in Island City. This transaction did not include the plywood mill or the powerhouse and log utilization center in Elgin.

"We've (previously) outsourced the sawmill aspect of our processor of the wood," said Tanner Dame, the corporate marketing manager for Woodgrain. "We still do buy a decent amount of wood and process that into the molding and windows. More recently we wanted to streamline our supply and make sure we are dictating what's happening instead of being dictated by the pricing."

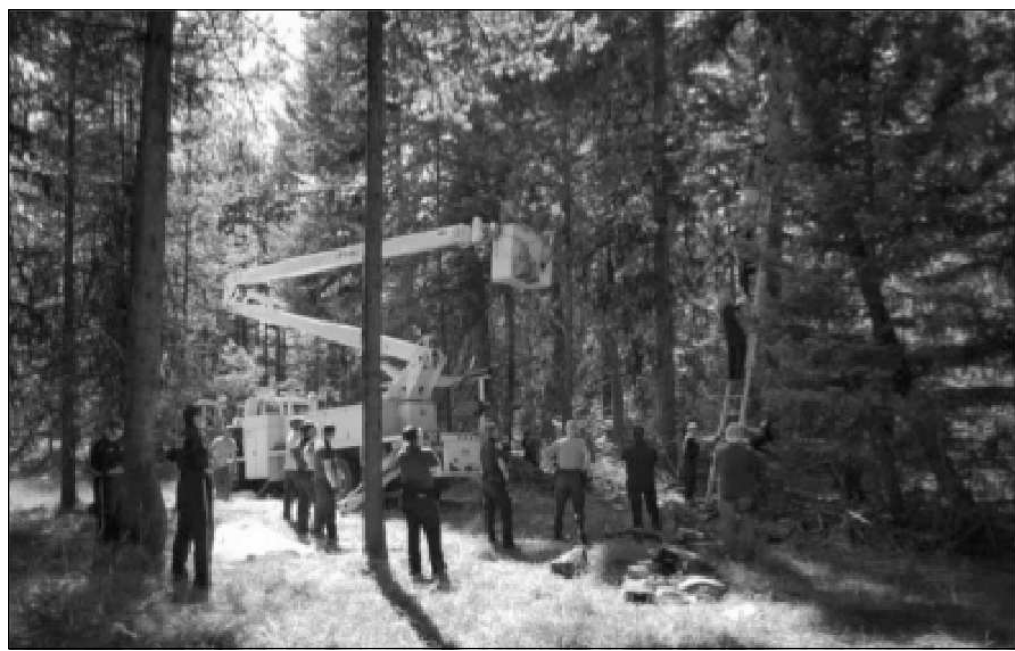
He said purchasing sawmills, like Boise Cascade, preserves Woodgrain's future by vertically integrating the company in all aspects of what it produces.

In November, Woodgrain officially took over the facilities. Dame said there were no layoffs in the transition and the employees received the



Cherise Kaechle/The Observer

In one of Northeast Oregon's closest races this fall, Wes Williams eked out a win against incumbent Mona Williams in the election for 10th Circuit Court Judge, which encompasses Union and Wallowa counties. The battle for the judgeship drew an unprecedented amount of letters to the editor.



Submitted photo

In late August, a number of emergency responders came together to help a hunter who was suspended upside down in a tree. The man is expected to make a full recovery.

same salary and benefits as they had before — or received a better offer. The company also had positions it was hiring for.

"The core of our business is located in small towns," Dame said. "Kelly (Dame, Woodgrain CEO) has lived in Ontario for most of his professional adult life. The company has deep ties to (this area). The workforce has always been blue collar — we get a type of person who knows hard work and values the work they put in. That's the kind of employee we pride ourselves in — someone who takes pride in their work."

UC Commissioner Steve McClure set to retire

A week from now, on Jan. 7, 2019, Steve McClure will leave the political arena for

the first time in 35 years, when he steps down from his position on the Union County Board of Commissioners. McClure has served as a Union County Commissioner for more than 28 years and before that was a member of the Elgin School Board for seven years.

McClure said he did not run for re-election this year partially because of health concerns.

"I've enjoyed my time on the commission. Now it is time for someone else to do the job," said McClure, who will be succeeded by Matt Scarfo, who was elected to replace McClure in May.

People who work with

McClure are often startled by his breadth of knowledge on local issues.

"I sometimes think he has a photographic memory," said Donna Beverage, one of the three current Union County Commissioners.

McClure first entered politics in the early 1980s when he was elected to the Elgin School Board. He won re-election four years later and served as the board's chair for a portion of his tenure. Serving on a school board is an excellent way to get introduced to politics, the commissioner said. McClure noted being involved in decisions like whether a student should be suspended was a valuable learning experience.

"Getting between a parent and a child (who may be disciplined) is very intense. You learn about politics up close," McClure said.

With his school board experience under his belt, McClure first ran for a position on the Union County Board of Commissioners in 1988. He lost in the general election to retired La Grande High School teacher and football coach Doc Savage by just 48 votes.

Still, McClure did not give up in his effort to join the board of commissioners.

"I felt I had something to contribute," he said.

Two years later, McClure was appointed to fill the five-month unexpired term of Marie Lester after she retired as a Union County Commissioner. In November 1990, he won the election for a four-year term, the first of seven

elections he would win.

Group protests B2H as Idaho Power moves forward

A proposed route that would make the future Boardman to Hemingway 500-kilovolt transmission line less visible in the La Grande area is set to be placed under a microscope by the Oregon Department of Energy.

The state agency will examine the proposed B2H route sometime in the next year to see if it meets state standards, said Jeff Maffuccio, facility and siting coordinator for Idaho Power at a public B2H information meeting in October held in La Grande. Should the Department of Energy determine the proposed route, named the Morgan Lake route, meets state standards, plans for it will be sent to the state's Energy Facility Siting Council, which will then vote on whether to approve it. Should it be given the green light by the Energy Facility Siting Council, Idaho Power will then decide on whether to select the Morgan Lake route for the B2H path through Union County.

Idaho Power may have to decide between the Morgan Lake route and the Mill Creek route, said Maffuccio at the October meeting, which was conducted by the Oregon Department of Energy and Idaho Power. Maffuccio explained that a plan for a Mill Creek route

in the La Grande area will also be submitted to the state for approval.

In September, a local group decided to make a visual representation of what the Boardman to Hemingway transmission line tower will look like.

Peter Barry is the landowner where a 100-foot swath of foil was set on the hillside going up to Morgan Lake, which is visible in portions of La Grande.

The mysterious strip of silver glinting in the light has been a topic of conversation, he told The Observer, which is exactly what he and the other members of the Stop B2H coalition wanted.

"This is a very small representation," Barry said of the line. "We're trying to remind people that there's an impending disaster in our community. This is supposed to represent one tower. But there will be about 15 to 20 transmission line towers that are approximately 185 feet tall. And it's going right through La Grande."

Wes defeats Mona in battle of the Williamses

In one of Northeast Oregon's closest races this November, Wes Williams eked out a win against incumbent Mona Williams in the election for 10th Circuit Court Judge, which encompasses Union and Wallowa counties.

In November, unofficial returns from Union and Wallowa counties had Wes with 52.66 percent of the vote to Mona's 47.17 percent.

Wes said it was crucial for voters to have a chance to choose their own judge.

"It was important to me to contest the seat because it had been a long time since the voters of Union and Wallowa County had the opportunity to elect their own judge," Wes said. "A judge should not be selected from the top down. A judge should not be selected by the governor. A judge should be elected by the people."

Wes has been an attorney in La Grande since 1996. He works as both a civil and criminal lawyer. He said the transition from lawyer to

judge will be challenging.

"I think it's going to require a lot of hard work, studying and self-discipline, but that's something I'm accustomed to," he said. "I'm very humbled that the citizens of Union and Wallowa County have honored me and I'll work for them every day as hard as I can to be the best judge I can."

Wes was born in Oregon City and graduated from Estacada High School in 1979. He went on to attend Southern Oregon State College before graduating from Portland State University with a degree in social science and a teaching certificate. Wes went on to teach at Sandy High School for seven years, while saving money for law school. He then attended law school at the University of Oregon and graduated with a juris doctor degree in 1996.

First responders save hunter dangling from a tree

Local first responders received nationwide recognition after they rescued a

10 hunter who had been found dangling from a tree for two days north of Highway 244 in late August.

Edward Voelker, of Prineville, was found suspended head-down from a tree 20 to 30 feet in the air after he fell while hunting. He was tangled in his safety harness and unable to free himself.

A multi-agency rescue — made up of the La Grande Fire Department, Union County Search and Rescue, LifeFlight, Umatilla County Sheriff's Office, Pendleton Fire Department Oregon Trail Electric Co-op and the U.S. Forest Service — came together to help save Voelker, who is 70 years old.

Approximately 30 people were there to help the man. It was not an easy task because of the health problems that can be caused by being upside down for two days. Before they could move Voelker, they had to tackle the challenge of how to treat him while still suspended. The unusual situation demanded an unusual solution.

LGFDF decided to call on the Oregon Trail Electric Cooperative since its employees are trained to help save people from power poles — similar to Mr. Voelker's plight.

OTEC immediately deployed a truck and its crew got there as quickly as they could. With their help, the medical responders were able to reach Voelker and eventually remove him from his predicament.

In December, it was reported Voelker is expected to make a full recovery. Additionally, the LGFD was recognized on an EMS website as having the fifth most "strange" rescue in the nation this year.

"While most calls are fairly routine, first responders dealt with several incidents in 2018 that are so unbelievable, they sound like episodes of a fictional television show," according to the Year in Review article on EMS1.com.

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