

WALLOWA COUNTY'S TOP 10 NEWS STORIES OF THE YEAR

Coho salmon return to the Lostine River

1 LOSTINE — After a nearly 40-year absence, the first adult coho salmon entered the mouth of the Lostine River in late October. The silvery female returned to the river where she was released as hatchery-raised smolt.

Just a day later, a male coho found his way into the fish trap at the mouth of the river.

In an email announcing the return of the first two coho, Jim Harbeck, manager of the Nez Perce Tribe's Joseph Fisheries office, joked, "Now they're a couple."

What isn't a joke are the odds these fish overcame to get to the Lostine. Part of a reintroduction project sponsored by Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife and the Tribe, this first couple of adult coho were some of 500,000 smolt, juvenile salmon ready to migrate to the ocean, released during a ceremony March 9, 2017.

Becky Johnson, Nez Perce Fisheries production division director, said she is pleased with the return so far.

"It is encouraging (especially because) these fish came from fish trapped at Bonneville," Johnson said. "Their parents didn't swim over all those dams and they were raised in a hatchery, put on a truck and transported to Lostine without being acclimated. It's an awesome testament to how tough salmon are," Johnson said.

"We're really happy to see this pay off and (are) super curious how it plays out from here and where else they show up in the basin," said Jeff Yanke, the state fish biologist in Enterprise.

Wallowa County proposes library district

2 ENTERPRISE — Following the defeat of Wallowa County's proposed library district in the May primary election, neither supporters nor county officials have developed an alternative plan to fund literacy programs for youth, the elderly and its most remote communities.

The county commissioners decided to close the county library last spring, eliminating \$105,000 from its budget, but agreed to keep it open with reduced hours and continue the \$35,000 for programming until after the May election. As of now, the county library, based in Enterprise, will close and its programs end June 30.

"We looked at services that citizens can get elsewhere (and) the library was the one of those things," said Union County Commissioner Susan Roberts referring to the budget decisions.

Roberts said if the library supporters want to put the measure up for another vote they will have to circulate a petition and hire a lawyer to help them with the process of filing with the state.

Kim Witherite was an ardent supporter of the county library and the library district proposal.

"We would like to challenge opponents to be active in the conversation and have solutions and not just naysay the hard work of people in the community," Witherite said.

Organization leads effort to take Spalding's Catchfly off list

3 ENTERPRISE — A group of Northeast Oregonians are leading a grassroots effort to get Spalding's Catchfly, a wildflower endemic to the inland Northwest, removed from the Endangered Species List.

Convinced the elusive plant with its irregular blooming cycle is more populous than feared, the Wallowa County Stockgrowers Association asked Kelly Birkmaier, a rancher and rangeland consultant in Joseph, to spearhead a community-wide project to map the county's Spalding's Catchfly, a plant listed in 2001 as threatened on the federal Endangered Species List.

In 2007 the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service published a recovery plan that said recovery could potentially conflict with economic activities. In Wallowa County, the only county in Oregon where Spalding's Catchfly is found, conflict with economic activities means cattle ranching.

"Since the plant's been listed there has been ongoing National Environmental Policy Act work on grazing allotments. Locally there are stringent mitigation measures for cattle use where Catchfly is located," Birkmaier said.

At the time the recovery plan was written, there were 99 known plant populations in its limited range — Northeast Oregon, Eastern Washington, Northern Idaho and Northwestern Montana. Through her findings on private ranches and those discovered on the 33,000-acre Zumwalt Prairie Preserve, Birkmaier said at least 100 new sites have been found in the last few years on private land.

4 **Lostine corridor safety project lawsuit continues**
ENTERPRISE — The Lostine Corridor Safety Project has been mired in controversy since its proposal in 2016. The case still awaits yet another judge's decision in the Ninth Circuit Court.

The suit aimed to halt the agency's use of an expedited environmental analysis called a categorical exclusion to harvest timber along the upper Lostine River corridor.

The special authority, allowed under the 2014 Farm Bill, gives the Forest Service the ability to treat areas smaller than 3,000 acres without going through a lengthy environmental impact statement process.

For 20 years, mixed conifer growth was unchecked in the canyon, leading to overstocked conditions and an ever-increasing forest fire risk. The Wallowa Mountain Office staff designed a project

that would clear fuel away from private land boundaries, decrease forest stand density and improve transportation in and out of the heavily-used canyon in the case of an evacuation order.

In June Federal Magistrate Patricia Sullivan ruled in favor of the U.S. Forest Service in a suit brought by plaintiffs Oregon Wild and Greater Hells Council, groups that complained that the project wasn't developed with enough environmental activist input.

On Aug. 17, Simon upheld Sullivan's recommendation that the court deny the plaintiffs' motion for summary judgment, struck their extra-record evidence and granted the defendants' cross motion for summary judgment.

Plaintiffs appealed the case a second time, in hopes that a judge in the San Francisco-based court would rule in their favor.

Transient room tax proposal fails

5 ENTERPRISE — An attempt to raise county funds through a proposed increase in the county's transient room tax was withdrawn just days before the filing deadline for the November 2018 general election.

Facing a lawsuit by hotelier David Hurley, the commissioner did not file it's ballot measure with the state that would have raised hotel tax in unincorporated Wallowa County by three percent.

According to the ballot measure the increased tax would have benefited the Wallowa County Sheriff's Office and Wallowa County Fairgrounds' operations.

Hurley's petition listed how the measure would violate Oregon law if passed because state statute specifically bans new or increased local transient lodging taxes except to fund tourism promotion, fund tourism related facilities, fund county services and finance or refinance the debt of tourism-related facilities.

Hurley's attorney, Benjamin Boyd, said the fairground doesn't meet the requirements of a tourism-related facility.

Boyd argued a review of the fairgrounds' financial records revealed only a small percent of the activities at the fairgrounds attract visitors. While Mountain High Brones and Bulls, Hells Canyon Mule Days, Juniper Jam and the Thunder Run motorcycle rally market to visitors outside the county, the majority of the events held at the fairgrounds cater to local groups.

6 **Blue Mountains Forest Plan revision continues**
WALLOWA — For 14 years the Blue Mountains Forest Plan Revision has been designed as a guiding document for the Wallowa-Whitman, Umatilla and Malheur National Forests. To date, the public is still pushing back.

Responding to the overwhelming backlash from the

public comment period, the U.S. Forest Service's Washington D.C. Office staff and Pacific Northwest Regional Forester Glenn Casamassa met with face-to-face with those who sent in written objections to the final draft of the more than 1,400 page document.

Representing the Wallowa-Whitman National Forest, one of the three included in the Blue Mountains Plan, was Forest Supervisor Tom Montoya. He said with so much opposition to the 2013 draft the Forest Service started re-engaging with the public in early 2015.

"The complaint at that point was that our planning was constrained by budget," Montoya said. "What we did in response was tell the story about what's needed to get back to historic range of variability, and I think we've addressed that."

The plan was designed by a team of Forest Service specialists, and it will be Casamassa's responsibility to sign the final version.

"People care about this part of the world and the choices we make, and the decisions that need to be made are difficult," he said. "We are at a critical juncture with respect to the land, particularly the interior West. The work that gets done on the national forest has direct effect on, and is inexplicably linked, to communities."

Commissioner-elect Bruce Dunn dies on forest field trip

7 ENTERPRISE — Commissioner-elect Bruce Dunn died suddenly Aug. 21 of an apparent heart attack while touring the Lower Joseph Creek Restoration Project in northern Wallowa County.

Kris Stein, Wallowa Mountains Office District Ranger, said Forest Service staff and members of the Forest Collaborative and the Wallowa County Natural Resource Advisory Committee had spent about an hour and a half at the site.

Stein said Dunn was facilitating a healthy conversation among people with varying opinions on how the timber stand should be managed, he said.

"Bruce asked us, 'How can we learn from what we are doing out here?' as he was reading through the monitoring items we had talked about last year. He was loving it, and he was in such fine form, being a leader and a caring instructor," Stein said.

Clint Foster, the district's silviculturist and forester in charge of planning timber sales for the Wallowa Mountains Office, said he chose the group's first stop that day because it was in an old-growth stand.

"I wanted, more than anything, to get the group's buy-in and gauge their comfort level with the (forestry) prescription," Foster said. "Bruce was in prime form, pontificating his beliefs on forest management and what we should be doing."

A professional forester worked for both the Forest Service and private industry,

Dunn moved to Wallowa County in 1986 when he was hired by RY Timber, a Boise-based company.

In 1992, Snake River chinook salmon were listed as threatened by the federal government. Dunn, along with a contingency of Wallowa County natural resource professionals and members of the Nez Perce Tribe fisheries staff, wrote the Wallowa County Nez Perce Tribe Salmon Plan, a guide for responsible land use along streams with endangered species. Since that time, Dunn worked tirelessly as a volunteer advisor to the county on natural resource issues and chaired the Natural Resource Advisory Committee for 20 years.

Wolf population rises, livestock kills continue

8 ENTERPRISE — In 2017 wolves showed the most successful reproduction since the species began migrating into Oregon from Idaho 20 years ago. According to the state's annual wolf report pups were born in 18 groups — a 50 percent increase over 2016.

According to the Oregon Wolf Conservation and Management 2017 Annual Report Northeastern Oregon habitat is still home to almost 90 percent of Oregon's documented wolves. Elsewhere in the state wolves were found living near Crater Lake, Silver Lake and on the Mt. Hood National Forest.

Released April 12, the annual wolf report lists 12 packs, comprised of four or more wolves, statewide. Nine more groups of two or more wolves and 15 individuals were also positively identified. Eleven wolf "groups" were documented as successful breeding pairs for 2017, a 38 percent increase from 2016.

The report said two new wolf pairs bred in the Mt. Emily wildlife management unit in addition to the three groups already living there. Two new packs were discovered in Wallowa County — the Middle Fork Pack in the southwestern portion of the Imnaha unit and the Noregaard pack in the Sled Springs unit. The Grouse Flats Pack was almost counted as a third Wallowa County Pack but denned north of the state line so was counted in Washington's year-end numbers.

9 **Courthouse undergoes renovation**
ENTERPRISE — Visitors to the Wallowa County Courthouse will discover a modern convenience on the main floor of the more than 100-year-old building: the addition of an elevator.

Entering the courthouse through the front door facing River Street, the elevator is to the left where the county clerk's office door once was. The new entrance to the clerk's office is just back a few yards beyond the elevator doors.

Part of a two-year, two-part renovation, the elevator was

deemed in working order before the end of March. By the second week of April, the finishing touches to the remodeled second and third floors were completed.

On the second floor, where the commissioners, staff and administrative director's office formerly were, is another ADA-accessible bathroom, a large jury room with a foyer and the victim's advocate office.

Now the second floor is completely dedicated to court staff: the district attorney's offices, circuit court clerk's offices, judge's chambers and courtroom.

The planning office, housed for decades in the courthouse basement, is now on the main floor next to the Treasurer's office and just a matter of a steps away from the assessor's and treasurer's offices.

Making the building completely ADA accessible is a ramp leading into the courthouse from Northeast First Street and the new elevator serving all four floors.

Joseph passes marijuana measure

10 In one of the tightest races of November's Wallowa County election, the City of Joseph voted to repeal its ban on the sale of recreational marijuana within city limits. The measure passed by only 21 votes, 357-336.

Chief petitioner, Sean Flanagan, owner of the Peace Pipe, which sells smoking paraphernalia in Joseph, was happy with the results. "I'm thankful for all the support we've had for the three to four years we've been working on this," he said.

Yet, the road to having a dispensary in Joseph is still a long one. On May 30, the Oregon Liquor Control Commission, which issues permits for marijuana dispensaries, announced it would be temporarily pausing the processing of recreational marijuana license applications. Mayor Teresa Sajonia said the OLCC told her it would be 10 to 14 months before a license would be processed for a potential dispensary in Joseph.

OLCC's backlog is not the only thing keeping a dispensary from Joseph's main drag of restaurants and shops.

In 2015, Joseph passed an ordinance that banned any marijuana dispensaries from being within 1,000 feet of a school, public park, public library, licensed day care center, community recreation facility attended primarily by minors, sports facility attended primarily by minors or another marijuana dispensary.

With Joseph's relatively small size — an area of .88 square miles — the ordinance limits where a dispensary could go.

As The Observer previously reported, within areas in Joseph zoned for commercial use, there are only three blocks on Main Street where a dispensary could be opened: along East Maple, Poplar and Daggett streets.

From our family to yours...

As we reflect on Christmas and the approaching new year, we thank you all for your trust and continued support. May you enjoy a happy and healthy holiday season.

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