

Small-business & Ag

HAPPENINGS

OTEC nominating committee members appointed

BAKER CITY — The Oregon Trail Electric Cooperative Board of Directors has appointed the following members to the director nominating committee for Baker and Union counties. The nominating committee handles interviewing and recommendations of qualified candidates for the 2019 OTEC Board of Directors elections. If you are a member of the cooperative and are interested in running for the OTEC Board of Directors, contact one of the committee members in your county no later than Jan. 29. The nominating committee must submit its nominations to the board secretary no later than Feb. 1.

The nominating committee for Union County Positions 7 and 8 are Donna Beverage (541-786-1492), Mary West (541-910-4546) and Russell Lester (541-910-0906). The seats are currently held by incumbents Greg Howard and David Baum. For Baker County, Position 9, the committee members are Diana Brown (541-523-3679), DeeDee Clarke (541-524-1999) and Fred Warner Jr. (541-524-2040). The seat is currently held by incumbent Charlene Chase.

A copy of the bylaws describing the terms of office, application and qualifications needed to serve on the nine-member board, along with a conflict of interest policy, are available at www.otecc.com/about/annual-meetings. Each director's term of office is three years.

Oregon's unemployment rate rose in December

SALEM — Oregon's unemployment rate rose to 4.1 percent in December 2018 from 3.9 percent in November. Oregon's unemployment rate has been close to 4 percent for the past two years. The U.S. unemployment rate also edged up two-tenths of a percentage point, to 3.9 percent in December from 3.7 percent in November.

In December, Oregon's non-farm payroll employment grew by 300 jobs, following a revised gain of 300 jobs in November. Leisure and hospitality added 1,600 jobs, health care and social assistance added 1,000, and government added 900. The industries declining the most in December were professional and business services.

The federal government shutdown did not impact Oregon's December federal government jobs tally.

Retail trade experienced a weak holiday hiring period: employment dropped 3,000 jobs between October and December. The sporting goods, hobby, book and music stores component of retail has downsized over the past few years due to changes in how customers acquire their goods and services. It employed 10,000 in December, which was a decline of 900 jobs since December 2017.

Oregon's nonfarm payroll employment increased by 30,800 jobs (1.6 percent) since December 2017. In that time, construction remained the fastest growing industry, with a gain of 4,900 jobs (4.8 percent).

DEI roundtable encourages diversity without tokenism

ISLAND CITY — Northeast Oregon Economic Development District is continuing its Diversity, Equity and Inclusion roundtable discussions for nonprofit organization volunteers, boards and staff members to learn, share and discuss DEI methods and strategies. The next roundtable will take place from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. Feb. 6 at Island City City Hall, 10605 Island Ave. The cost to attend is \$25 and includes lunch. The registration deadline is Feb. 1. Register at <https://bit.ly/2PNNzFp>.

The moderator for this roundtable is Sara Curiel Paez, who will share activities and discussions to help participants understand tokenism and work through conflicts to build multicultural organizations that are better equipped to fulfill their nonprofit missions.

Paez is a senior consultant at The Nonprofit Association of Oregon, founding member and owner of consulting firm Capacity Building Partnerships, and the director of Latina Associates of Collaborative Endeavors, a consortium of nonprofit consultants. This DEI program is available thanks to a grant from Meyer Memorial Trust. For more information, contact Kristy Athens, NEOEDD outreach specialist, at 541-426-3598 or kristyathens@neoedd.org.



Transforming Mustangs

■ Imnaha couple taking Bureau of Land Management's wild horses and training them

By Trish Yerges
For The Observer

When feral horses are rounded up by the Bureau of Land Management, horse trainers like Dawn Medley-Fowler and her ranch manager husband, Ed Medley, of Imnaha, are approved to request a few mustangs to transform them from wild to mild. It's all part of the Mustang Heritage Trainer Incentive Program to gentle up mustangs for adoption.

The Medley-Fowlers wanted to be part of this adoption process so they built the occupation into their family plan when they moved from Hillsboro to Imnaha last June. They hoped to live closer to Dawn's parents, Larry

and Norma Sherratt, of Imnaha, to raise their two girls in a peaceful country setting, and to start training mustangs in the BLM's Wild Horse and Burro Program.

They achieved all of those goals when they bought a 19-acre property about five miles down the Lower Imnaha Road and conveniently about a half mile from Dawn's folks' place. Ed Medley, who had been raised on a ranch-farm and had experience with construction, started building stalls and corrals on the new property to comply with BLM's minimum facility requirements.

Likewise, Medley-Fowler's ranching background benefited

their new lifestyle.

"I got acquainted with mustangs when I was between age seven and fifteen, living on cattle ranches with my dad, Larry, a ranch hand," she said.

About two years ago, Medley-Fowler adopted a mustang named Stonewall Black Elk ("aka Stoney") from a TIP trainer from Beatys Butte near Lakeview. As things turned out, the trainer, Jasmine Lechner Cyphert, became a good friend and a TIP mentor.

Medley-Fowler filled out an application and submitted it along with two written character references to the BLM and heard back within two weeks. The application process was thorough, she said, and participation in TIP is by invita-

See **Mustangs** / Page 2B

EPA criminal action against polluters hits 30-year low

By Ellen Knickmeyer
The Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The Environmental Protection Agency hit a 30-year low in 2018 in the number of pollution cases it referred for criminal prosecution, Justice Department data show.

EPA said in a statement it is directing "its resources to the most significant and impactful cases."

But the 166 cases referred for prosecution in the last fiscal year is the lowest number since 1988, when Ronald Reagan was president and 151 cases were referred, according to Justice Department data obtained by the nonprofit Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility advocacy group and released Tuesday.

"You don't get closer to the core of EPA's mission than enforcing the law," Jeff Ruch, PEER's executive director, told The Associated Press. "We're reaching levels where the enforcement program is lacking a pulse."

EPA efforts to prosecute polluters reached 592 criminal referrals under President Bill Clinton in 1998. Criminal referrals have been on a downward trajectory since then, especially under the Trump administration.

A supporter of deregulation, President Donald Trump as a candidate called for doing away with all but "little tidbits" of the federal environmental agency.

Asked for comment, EPA spokesman John Konkus pointed to the civil settlement of about \$800 million with Fiat Chrysler over claims the automaker rigged its diesel-powered Ram and Jeep vehicles to cheat on emissions tests.

The agency said its actions in fiscal year 2018 led polluters and potential polluters to take care

See **EPA** / Page 2B

Utility seeks bankruptcy protection over California fires

By Janie Har and Cathy Bussewitz

The Associated Press

SAN FRANCISCO — The nation's largest utility said Monday it is filing for Chapter 11 bankruptcy because it faces at least \$30 billion in potential damages from lawsuits over the catastrophic wildfires in California in 2017 and 2018 that killed scores of people and destroyed thousands of homes.

The move by Pacific Gas & Electric Corp., expected by the end of the month, would be the biggest bankruptcy by a utility in U.S. history, legal experts said.

It would allow PG&E to hold off creditors and continue providing electricity and natural gas without interruption to its 16 million customers in Northern and central California while it tries to put its finances in order.

The filing would not make the lawsuits disappear, but would result in all wildfire claims being consolidated into a single proceeding before a bankruptcy judge, not a jury. That could

shield the company from excessive jury verdicts and buy time by putting a hold on the claims.

Chapter 11 reorganization represents "the only viable option to address the company's responsibilities to its stakeholders," Richard Kelly, chairman of PG&E's board of directors, said in a statement.

"The Chapter 11 process allows us to work with these many constituents in one court-supervised forum to comprehensively address our potential liabilities and to implement appropriate changes."

State officials are investigating whether the utility's equipment sparked the deadliest, most destructive wildfire in California history, a November Northern California blaze that killed at least 86 people and burned down 15,000 homes.

State investigators have also blamed PG&E power lines for some fires in October 2017. Authorities are also looking into the cause of a blaze that destroyed thousands of homes and killed 22 people in Santa Rosa last year.

California law requires utilities to pay damages for wildfires if their equipment caused the blazes — even if the utilities weren't negligent through, say, inadequate maintenance.

PG&E, which is the nation's largest utility by revenue and is based in San Francisco, said it is giving the required 15 days' notice it plans to file for bankruptcy protection.

It said it will continue working with regulators and stakeholders to consider how it can safely provide energy "in an environment that continues to be challenged by climate change."

The announcement follows the resignation of chief executive Geisha Williams a day earlier. She leaves with a \$2.5 million severance payout, a spokesman told the Mercury News of San Jose.

In a Monday filing with the Securities and Exchange Commission, the company said the liabilities it faces from 2017 and 2018 wildfires could exceed \$30 billion, not including punitive

damages, fines and penalties.

The largest bankruptcy filing on record by a utility was Energy Future Holdings Corp. in 2014, which had \$49.7 billion in liabilities in today's dollars, according to an analysis by Kevin Kelly, director of publications at S&P Global.

Veteran New York bankruptcy lawyer H. Jeffrey Schwartz said PG&E's bankruptcy should prove to be the biggest yet, since it had about \$50 billion in liabilities at the end of 2017. That does not include claims from 2018 wildfires.

He said the utility has no other way of getting out from under the mountain of legal claims.

"The liability is too great. It's too many claims, the aggregate amount is too great, and it looks at first blush to be indefensible because PG&E knew of this risk and didn't clear the line areas as it should have," Schwartz said.

He said he expects shareholders to bear the brunt of the restructuring. Bankruptcy court has no say over the rates utility

See **PG&E** / Page 2B