

# Trial date set for Cove murder trial

**By Sabrina Thompson**  
The Observer

The date for the trial of Ronald Dwight Lee has been set for April 1, 2020. A 12-person jury will determine if there is enough evidence to support the state's claim that Lee murdered Loretta Williams at her Cove home.

The trial is expected to last one month as the state and Lee's lawyer present evidence and arguments. Judge Thomas Powers will reside over the court.

Lee was arrested and arraigned in February and charged with the Nov. 17, 2018, murder of Williams, his soon-to-be ex-wife. He has remained in custody at the Union County Jail since then. Dur-

ing the Aug. 27 hearing, Lee pleaded not guilty to the charges of murder and conspiracy to commit murder.

During the August plea hearing, the state proved it was rightfully holding Lee without bail, presenting 50 pieces of evidence to show it would be reasonable to keep him in custody. The evidence presented at the hearing included the audio of the 911 phone call Williams made and information regarding the possible weapons used.

Williams was killed the morning of Nov. 17 around 1 a.m. according to the 911 call. Williams named Lee in the call, and when police arrived at her home they found her dead.

The house's sliding glass door had been shattered and Williams was on the floor with three gunshot wounds in the head and one in the chest, according to evidence submitted to the court and the testimony of the lead investigator, Union County Sheriff's Office Det. Jason McKaig.

During Lee's plea hearing, Union County District Attorney Kelsie McDaniel, the lead attorney for the State of Oregon on this case, said the state intends to call around 80 witnesses to testify. Lee will be represented by Dean Gushwa of Pendleton, a criminal defense attorney who was appointed by the court.

# DEQ reduces county's fine substantially

**By Dick Mason**  
The Observer

A civil penalty of \$48,683 assessed to Union County in May by the Oregon Department of Environmental Quality has been reduced significantly following an appeal.

The fine, issued for violating conditions of Union County's general permit related to the U.S. Forest Service rappel base constructed at the La Grande/Union County Airport, has been reduced to \$16,258 after the appeal, it was announced at a meeting of the Union County Board of Commissioners Wednesday.

The commissioners voted unanimously to have the county pay the fine, following a presentation by Union County Public Works Director Doug Wright.

The fine was issued by the DEQ because of alleged non-compliance with the erosion

control permit it issued Union County for the rappel base project. Wright said that when a DEQ official visited the rappel base in March, he noted there were no erosion control devices at the site.

Wright said that later a concrete washout area to prevent contaminants from reaching water sources and other erosion control devices were installed by the contractor for the rappel base project, Wellens Farwell Construction of Enterprise.

An email to The Observer from Laura Gleim, a public affairs specialist for DEQ, said the installation of these devices made the settlement possible.

"DEQ reduced the penalty because Union County corrected the violations we had identified and implemented the required pollution control measures at the site," Gleim wrote.

One reason the DEQ required erosion control devices in its permit was to protect the nearby Gekeler Slough from contaminated water. Wright said, though, that even without erosion control devices the slough was not endangered by the construction project.

"The area is flat, so there was not a threat to Gekeler Slough," he said. "Runoff could not have gotten to it."

The ditch that connects to Gekeler Slough is "designated critical habitat for threatened Snake River Basin Steelhead Trout," according to a May 20 letter from the DEQ to Union County.

Wright said that Wellens Farwell Construction has volunteered to pay the fine. He said the fine will be paid by Union County and Wellens Farwell will reimburse the county for it.

The public works director

said Wellens Farwell has been outstanding to work with and he appreciates the honesty the construction company has shown throughout this process.

"It has done an excellent job of building the rappel base. It is a very good contractor," Wright said.

Construction of the rappel base was funded with a \$3 million loan Union County received from the state and a \$1 million Connect Oregon grant it received from the state. The U.S. Forest Service is leasing the building from Union County. The base, which is now operational, was completed earlier this year.

The base is for helicopter rappelling flights. Helicopter rappelling is a means of quickly delivering firefighters to remote areas. Once dispatched, a helicopter and its crew fly to the location of a wildland fire.

## K-9

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He also noted that running the K-9 program will be possible because of donations from local businesses and individuals. These include Wal-Mart, R.D. Mac, Challis Concrete, D&B Supply, Dirt Monkey Excavation, Al Frye Jr., Jeff Petershon, Tanner Hibbert and David and Marilyn Reed.

Previously, the UCSO had a K-9 unit with drug sniffing dogs. However the dog they had, Jack, retired three years ago. According to Rasmussen, Molly will be the only dog on the force, as there

isn't a need for more than one.

Molly, along with her handler, Deputy Jenen, will be available for all agencies, including the Oregon State Police and La Grande Police Department, to use. Although OSP has a drug detection dog, it doesn't have the tracking training that Molly will have.

Whenever Deputy Jensen is on duty, so is Molly.

"They have formed a really special bond," Rasmussen said.

Jensen will take care of Molly off-duty and is participating in her training in California for the next few weeks. Previously she was trained in Europe

in Schutzhund techniques, which is how most police dogs are trained, as it focuses on protection and tracking skills. The training in California introduces the dogs to the police force. Once Molly graduates from the program Nov. 1, Jensen and Molly will be certified in California. On the way back they will stop in Clackamas County and get certification to work in Oregon. For the first year, Molly will do only straight patrol, and after a year she will be trained in narcotics detection.

"She is a very affectionate and social dog," Jensen said. "She has a very high play drive and loves to work."

## VAPING

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vaping products had other impurities, including fungicides.

"Even though they may pass state standards," he said, "we don't allow those on our shelves."

Additives are used for flavor or to change the viscosity of vaping liquid. If it's too thick, for example, the vape pen can't vaporize it efficiently. The terpenes — essentially flavors derived from flowers — caught Krenzler's attention in particular. He said he was concerned products from plants could affect people with allergies, and he said the lack of research into the consumption of terpenes raises a red flag. Some products were 25% terpene. He asked how much terpene from a particular flower is safe to consume?

Without sufficient information for an answer, he said Kind Leaf yanked down goods that were not 100% cannabis because those carry the least amount of risk to consume.

"Even if it comes out that only one brand used one chemical that caused the deaths, we still would not carry the terpene derivatives until more research says it's safe," he said.

Gayda said people still buy

cartridges containing THC — that's the psychoactive ingredient in cannabis. But they're favoring products that don't contain anything else. She calls them "fresh frozen" cartridges.

"So fresh frozen is you hack the plant down right there. You freeze it, and then you steam distill it, or you turn it into a concentrate and it goes right into the cartridge. No additives, just plants," Gayda said.

Gayda said she has two friends who've vaped for years, and who were sufficiently rattled by this illness that they threw away their cartridges and went for chest X-rays. They were both fine.

She said she's also had customers bring in black market products to check. They had no labels and were bought with a credit card. Federal law doesn't allow cannabis sales on credit cards, so that tells Gayda they were bought on the black market.

"If something doesn't have a label on it, a test result, a date it was made — don't buy it.... It doesn't matter what price it is. If you think it's the best deal of your life, it may be the worst decision of your life," Gayda said.

Some black-market brands are now being linked

to the illness, like Dank Vapes. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention describes Dank Vapes as a class of largely counterfeit THC brands with common packaging.

The CDC has changed its messaging to further emphasize the role THC may be playing. CDC head Dr. Anne Schuchat outlined some of

their research.

"On the national level, out of 514 patients with exposure histories, we found that 77% reported using THC-containing products, or using both THC-containing products and nicotine-containing products," Schuchat said.

Only 16% of the patients said they'd used just nicotine.

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## SEASON

*Continued from Page 1A*

was still relatively easy to contain them.

"We were very successful on our initial attacks," Livingston said.

Due to the relatively mild fire season throughout the state, the Wallowa-Whitman National Forest had more resources at its disposal throughout the summer for regional fires since it was not having to send firefighters and equipment to other parts of the Northwest to assist with other blazes.

"There were more resources to go around," Livingston said. "We were not strapped."

Another plus, he added, was that the lightning that started many of the region's fires was accompanied by rain more frequently, robbing the lightning of some of its impact.

The biggest fire in the Wallowa-Whitman NF was the Granite Gulch Fire, which scorched about 5,550 acres, 98% of the total burned in the national forest this season. The fire, started by lightning on July 28, remained far from private lands and structures.

"I was extremely pleased with our efforts on the fire," Livingston said.

He said the fire never posed a threat to structures or private land because it was deep in the wilderness. Livingston said it had less potential to grow because the terrain provided natural barriers including large exposures of barren rock.

The Granite Gulch Fire may have improved the health of the area's forest by reducing the fuel buildup, making it less vulnerable to major fires in

the future. The burn scars created by the blaze are another plus because they will create a buffer that will make it harder for future fires to advance, Livingston said.

The area served by the La Grande-based Blue Mountain Interagency Dispatch Center, which is responsible for mobilizing fire resources in Northeast Oregon and Southeast Washington, had 219 fires this year that burned a total of 6,200 acres, the majority of which were in the Granite Gulch Fire.

Lighting caused 165 of the fires in the Blue Mountain Interagency Dispatch Center's service area, and 54 were human caused. Those caused by people included ones started by escaped campfires and equipment use, said Jerry Garrett, assistant manager of the Blue Mountain Interagency Dispatch Center.

Garrett said fire activity was light enough in Northeast Oregon and Southeast Washington that the Blue Mountain Interagency Dispatch Center was able to send two 20-person hotshot fire crews to Alaska for 14-day shifts, plus other resources.

He said Alaska was the only place in the United States that had major forest fire activity this year.

The end of fire season in Oregon removes restrictions on ODF-protected lands intended to prevent wild-fire, such as on backyard debris burning and use of certain equipment. Many city and rural fire departments in Oregon, however, still require a permit for debris burning. The Oregon Department of Forestry is encouraging everyone to check with their local fire department before starting a burn.

## COUNCIL

*Continued from Page 1A*

were concerned that the land would be developed into additional housing that could bring down the value of their own homes. This was the reason one homeowner, Shawn Tritchka, had put in the winning bid. She said it was frustrating to have won the auction only to be told that she won't be getting the land.

Tritchka stated that she was more than willing to abide by the city's

requirements.

"It looks bad. She won then we said we messed up and she lost out," La Grande City Councilor Nicole Howard said during the council's September meeting.

At that time, the topic was tabled until the council's October meeting due to confusion over the location of the piece of land. The decision on Oct. 2 to transfer the land to Island City came to a 4-3 vote. The road will now be the responsibility of Island City to manage and develop.

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