

OREGON IN BRIEF

Oregon State police looking for bighorn sheep poacher

TROY — Oregon State Police Fish and Wildlife troopers are asking for the public's assistance in finding whoever shot and killed a bighorn sheep ram in Wallowa County.

The illegal kill took place the week of Jan. 27 near Troy, state police reported. The preliminary investigation revealed someone poached the ram on the Wenaha Wildlife Area along the road leading to the feed site.

The ram was fitted with a telemetry collar and an ear tag, according to state police, and the collar and severed ear were the only items at the scene.

OSP asked anyone who may have information that will help identify a suspect or suspects to call the Turn In Poachers (TIP) line at 800-452-7888, *677 or Sgt. Chris Hawkins at 541-963-7575 ext. 4670.

The TIP program offers preference point rewards for information leading to an arrest or issuance of a citation for poaching or waste of big game mammals. The program also offers cash rewards for information leading to an arrest or issuance of a citation for poaching or waste of bighorn sheep, Rocky Mountain goat and other animals, including moose, wolves and waterfowl.

Merkley in Elgin, Baker City, Lostine next week

WASHINGTON — U.S. Sen. Jeff Merkley next week will hold town hall meetings throughout Oregon, including in Elgin, Lostine and Baker City.

Merkley during the town halls will update constituents on his work in Washington, D.C., and answer their questions and invite their suggestions about how to tackle the challenges facing Oregon and the United States.

Merkley will be in Baker City at 4:30 p.m. Thursday at the Community Connection-Baker, Main Hall, 2810 Cedar St.

The Wallowa County town hall is Friday at 8:30 a.m. at the South Fork Grange, 307 Rosewell St., Lostine.

The Union County town hall is Friday at 11:30 a.m. at the Elgin Community Center, 260 N. 10th St., Elgin.

Since joining the Senate in 2009, Merkley has held a town hall in each of Oregon's 36 counties every year. These town halls will be his 409th, 410th, 411th, 412th, 413th, 414th, 415th, 416th, and 417th as a U.S. Senator.

From Elgin, Merkley will depart to Pendleton for a Umatilla County town hall and continue west, wrapping up the tour in Albany and Eugene.

Idaho, other western states to study big game rangeland

BOISE, Idaho — Idaho has been awarded a grant to study how elk herds move through a northern Idaho migration corridor also used by grizzly bears and wolverines.

The grant, announced by the U.S. Department of the Interior on Friday, is part of \$3.2 million in funding for big game rangeland studies in 11 western states.

Idaho's research will focus on the McArthur Lake area, which serves as a link between the Selkirk and Cabinet mountains used by grizzly bears, wolverine and elk. Scientists will put GPS

collars on 40 elk to monitor their movements over two years, and then combine that data with information from a grid of 119 trail cameras. The findings will be used to map seasonal ranges, movement routes and stopover areas, according to the Interior Department.

Other states that received grants are Arizona, California, Colorado, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, Oregon, Utah, Washington and Wyoming.

Concordia University students protest announced closure

PORTLAND — Concordia University students walked out of their classes Thursday in protest of the Board of Regents' recent decision to close the 115-year-old institution this year.

The private Lutheran university's board voted last Friday to cease operations and sell Concordia's 24-acre campus in Northeast Portland.

Concordia enrolls about 5,700 students, but sources estimate only about 1,200 of them attend classes on campus. Most of the students study remotely through Concordia's online classes.

Students spoke on campus Thursday morning outside the president's residence holding signs asking "Where did my money go?" "Almost graduated" and "CU in court." The Oregonian/OregonLive reported.

On a poster calling for the walkout, students outlined a list of demands targeted at the Board of Regents: clear financial records, questions answered regarding the sudden closure, and a support plan for students, staff, faculty and the surrounding community.

On Wednesday, school officials notified the state that the closure will eliminate 1,518 jobs. It's unclear how many of those positions are full-time.

Portland man found guilty of stabbing father to death

PORTLAND — In December 2017, a Portland man knocked at the door of a pub and collapsed, bleeding from a stab wound in his back. In his last few moments, court documents say, Brian Nees told police officers as they arrived that his son had stabbed him.

Tyler Nees was convicted Thursday of murdering his father. A jury unanimously found Nees guilty of murder constituting domestic violence and unlawful use of a weapon.

KOIN News reported that in closing arguments, Tyler Nees told the judge that his brother killed their father. But documents show that DNA evidence, as well as 911 calls, pointed to Tyler Nees. Nees acted as his own attorney, had previously had several attorneys in the case and threatened to kill one of them.

Man found guilty in death of Vancouver 5-year-old girl

VANCOUVER, Wash. — A Clark County Superior Court jury on Thursday convicted Ryan Burge of killing his girlfriend's 5-year-old daughter while babysitting.

Jurors found Burge guilty of second-degree murder and manslaughter. The Columbian reported. The jury also determined that Burge was guilty of factors that made his crime particularly egregious, including that the victim was vulnerable and he betrayed a position of trust.

— Observer staff and wire reports.

Brown honors citizen-soldiers

By Alex Castle
EO Media Group

PENDLETON — National Guard soldiers from Pendleton's 1st Battalion, 168th Aviation of the Oregon Army National Guard were on a standard training mission when the news first broke of rising floodwaters along the Umatilla River last Thursday.

The crew was told to go recon in an area over the river when they witnessed the disaster that was unfolding on the ground.

"Once you get up there and realize how much devastation and damage there was, you see that it's pretty significant," Chief Warrant Officer 3 Ray Talkington said Friday.

After seeing the devastation below, the crew went into rescue mode for the next four days as floodwaters left people stranded throughout Umatilla County. Between Feb. 6-9, three helicopters from the Oregon Army National Guard rescued 54 people, 10 dogs, one cat and one rabbit from floods.

"These Oregon National Guard Members took part in the largest search and rescue operation in Oregon's history," said Stephen Bomar, director of public affairs with the Oregon Military Department. "They did an amazing job supporting the community and saving lives."

Gov. Kate Brown landed at the Pendleton National Guard Aviation Facility Friday morning and promptly presented Talkington and five others based in Pendleton the Oregon Meritorious Service Medal. Three others were also presented with Oregon Commendation Medals.

"It's always nice to get a pat on the back," Staff Sgt. Steven Kirkpatrick said.

The meritorious medals are awarded to those who show outstanding individual performance in support of the state of Oregon, while the commendation medals are awarded to those who provide an act or series of acts in support of the Oregon Army National Guard.



Ben Lonergan/EO Media Group

Oregon Gov. Kate Brown speaks Friday morning with members of the 1st Battalion, 168th Aviation of the Oregon Army National Guard during a medal ceremony at the Oregon National Guard Aviation Support Facility in Pendleton.

Talkington's performance during last week's rescues wasn't just for the state of Oregon though — it was for the community he was raised in.

"Being able to go out and help the community you live in is nice," he said. "It's very rewarding. That's the part we look forward to, not the recognition of what we get doing these interviews or getting these awards. Being able to go out and help people, that's the important part."

Kirkpatrick, who also received a meritorious medal Friday and grew up in Pendleton, was proud of how he and the rest of the crew were able to respond when they were needed most.

"You always want to be there, and that's what we're here for," he said. "A life is a life. There's not one better than the other."

Though successful, the rescue missions weren't easy.

A combination of windy weather, trees, wires and the waters constantly encroaching on any viable landing spots for the crew's helicopter made Talkington's job as pilot even more challenging.

"That was the hardest part, to actually find somewhere to land," Talkington said. "It's not the smallest helicopter in the world."

While Talkington and Chief Warrant Officer 2 Jeremiah Williams, another pilot, managed to find landing locations on their initial trips, the rising waters kept changing the landscape as some areas became covered in water and others became a muddy mess.

"Every spot you go to and every time you go there is different," Talkington said.

During other trips, such as those to Thorn Hollow where two men were trapped on a roof the first night of the floods, the crew had to be wary of blowing them off and causing more harm.

Ultimately, Talkington credited the mission's success to the communication and collaboration of the crew, which was made easier by their familiarity with one another. Talkington said he's known both Williams and Kirkpatrick for more than 15 years.

"That's what really matters and helps in times like this," Talkington said.

Arlington-based landfill took 2 million pounds of radioactive fracking waste

The Associated Press

ARLINGTON — A chemical waste landfill near the Columbia River in Oregon accepted hundreds of tons of radioactive fracking waste from North Dakota in violation of Oregon regulations that has alarmed environmental advocates. But the company won't be fined because state officials believe landfill operators misunderstood state guidelines, authorities said.

The Oregonian/OregonLive reported that Oregon Department of Energy officials on Thursday issued a violation notice to Chemical Waste Management for its landfill near the small town of Arlington for accepting a total of 2 million pounds of Bakken oil field waste de-

livered by rail in 2016, 2017 and 2019. Arlington is about 140 miles east of Portland.

With landfill officials' permission, a Montana company dumped the waste, some of which registered radium at 300 times the state's limits. On average, the waste dumped at the landfill about eight miles from the Columbia River registered radium at 140 picocuries per gram, according to Jeff Burrigh, a state nuclear waste remediation specialist.

Picocuries are a measure of radioactivity and the state's maximum level for waste stored at the landfill is 5 picocuries.

The state's Energy Department regulators said the landfill won't be fined for accepting the radioactive

waste because officials believe landfill operators were unaware of the violations.

Environmental advocates plan to pressure state leaders to determine how Oregon became "a fracking dumping ground," said Dan Serres, conservation director of the Columbia Riverkeeper group that lobbies to protect the river and its water quality.

"The big question now is what happens to this waste that has been illegally dumped in Oregon. Do they have to clean up this mess they created by accepting this waste from North Dakota?" Serres said. "The level and scale of this infraction is alarming and galling."

Ken Niles, the state energy department's assistant director for nuclear safety,

said the agency can only fine companies — ranging from \$60 to \$500 a day — under certain circumstances.

"That could change if something were to change in our knowledge," Niles said. "But the company has been taking this very seriously. They have been very cooperative and want to do the right thing."

Regulators said they determined the biggest risks would be if the waste were ingested or inhaled, if people faced direct exposure or if it emitted radon.

Burrigh said the state does not believe those issues are a risk because of how the waste is stored.

Burrigh said landfill workers avoided direct exposure.

Audit shows state tourism agency has deficiencies that need addressing

By Claire Withycombe
Oregon Capital Bureau

SALEM — The semi-independent Oregon agency overseeing tourism initiatives should be more transparent about managers' pay and strengthen controls on contracting, Secretary of State Bev Clarno said in an audit report Thursday.

The Oregon Tourism Commission — also known as Travel Oregon — is a small agency that is supposed to help boost Oregon's \$11.8 billion tourism industry. While Travel Oregon is subject to government ethics and public records and meetings laws, it is exempt from some laws that govern public spending and pay.

"Travel Oregon is not subject to many of the existing mechanisms that provide oversight, transparency, and accountability for taxpayer dollars," auditors wrote. "With continuous funding, autonomy, and exemption from some state laws, it is therefore even more important for Travel Oregon to

be independently transparent and accountable about its use of taxpayer dollars to ensure appropriate stewardship of public funds."

The agency's budget has tripled in the past decade, due in part to an increase in the lodging tax in 2016. That's where the agency gets its revenue.

Oregon, at about \$32 million per year, now has the eighth-largest state tourism budget in the country and ranks sixth among state governments spending on tourism per capita. The agency could seek more competitive pricing for services such as marketing, the auditors wrote. About half of the agency's two-year budget goes toward marketing.

Auditors looked at 77 contracts the agency entered between 2017 and 2019, finding Travel Oregon has "sufficient" procedures to oversee contracts. But some vendors didn't issue invoices that had the level of detail the contracts required, and in two cases vendors sought reimbursement for travel expenses their

contracts did not allow.

Auditors also pointed to management salaries, finding managers at Travel Oregon "are some of the highest compensated managers" compared to managers at state agencies who "oversee more expansive and complex budgets; manage large numbers of employees and contractors; and perform many diverse, technical and critical government services, including essential public health and public safety responsibilities."

Executive salaries at Travel Oregon have increased 76% since 2012. Its CEO, Todd Davidson, received gross pay of about \$31,000 a month as of June 2019.

"While the Oregon Tourism Commission has the freedom to set the CEO's compensation and the CEO to set the employees' compensation, the agency should take steps to ensure it is accountable to taxpayers for how it decides to compensate staff with public monies," auditors wrote.

