

# Commissioner: Nitrates in Boardman water a threat to life

By PHIL WRIGHT  
East Oregonian

BOARDMAN — Morrow County Commissioner Jim Doherty is making the water pollution in his county a top priority. “The nitrate issue in the Columbia Basin has always haunted me,” he said.

When he won election to the county board five years ago, he said he crafted a list of goals, and the nitrate problem was on the list.

“Shamefully that is where the ambition ended relative to the work,” he said. “But in this occupation, the best time to have done something was years ago, the next best time is now.”

When DEQ sent its notice about the whopping port fine of \$1.3 million for nitrate pollution in the upstream aquifer, Doherty said that was a call of alarm he heard to his core.

Discussion and a meeting ensued almost immediately, he said, just as it had for the past 30 years.

“Was this regulatory overreach?” he recalled. “Who were the primary

suspects? Would we come together to craft a message of solidarity?”

But Doherty said one voice was absent from that meeting.

“In my view, the greater community were the only ones not present then, nor at any time in the past,”

he said, “and I surmised, potentially bearing the biggest burden — that of real and present health concerns.”

He then set out to test what residents were drinking from the end results at the kitchen faucets.

## Tests results, residents deliver bleak picture

The top responsibility of the local public health authority and the board of commissioners, Doherty said, is public happiness and health. His fellow commissioners gave the blessing for Doherty to spend some resources for 100 expedited, if cursory, tests. Commissioner Melissa Lindsay even partnered with Umatilla County Commissioner Dan Dorran on a bi-county effort to secure a more long-range effort.



Doherty



EO Media Group, File

The Oregon Department of Environmental Quality in January 2022 fined the Port of Morrow \$1.3 million, alleging the port has applied excessive amounts of nitrate-containing water to area farmland. The port claims its wastewater violations were “unintentional” and had minor effects on human health and the environment.

“I wasted little time in reaching out to Ana Pineyro, our Public Health Emergency Preparedness coordinator, who has helped me in the past and shines most brightly as a community outreach liaison,” Doherty said.

“Morrow County is approaching 50% Hispanic representation and as such, it is vital to have someone like Ana who can bridge that cross-cultural divide.”

They hit the streets with test sample kits in hand, knocking and walking.

“I was hopeful as the first small set of samples were sent off to Kuo Testing Labs in Umatilla,” Doherty recalled.

The testing company reported it would email the results in the ensuing days, he said, so a call from the lab to his cellphone was a bit of a surprise. He said the lab technician explained Kuo Testing is duty bound to warn people to suspend using any water when test results show there is an extreme and immediate health concern.

## A hill worth dying on

Correlating responses to the question with the extremely high nitrate results is almost impossible. But Doherty said he thinks it is “abundantly fair to suggest that in those numbers, the responses we got could certainly be attributed to the increasing prevalence of high nitrates.”

Policy making is about assessing what issues to address and how serious they are, Doherty said. And in this case, he said, it’s about making a stand.

“This certainly is, ‘a hill I am willing to die on,’” Doherty said, “if only that my friends and neighbors don’t face that literal peril.”

Doherty also touched on environmental justice. He said the very people who provide the labor force for the region are the same people bearing the brunt of the nitrate problem, yet they have been “discarded” from the environmental discussions, and they must have a voice in this.

“This is the missing community,” Doherty said. “This is a barrier that we must eliminate.”

# Renovation of Eastern Oregon Regional Airport terminal begins

East Oregonian

PENDLETON — Temporary facilities arrived at the Eastern Oregon Regional Airport, Pendleton, on Thursday, May 5, to begin the \$3.9 million terminal renovation project. Commercial flights and food services will continue uninterrupted.

Airport Manager John Honemann said one of the project goals is to limit the impact on airport services, according to a press release from the city.

“We are really excited to begin construction, but it was also very important for us to make sure services are uninterrupted,” he said. “We’ve worked closely with the restaurant and with commercial air service to keep everything open as much as possible.”

The existing terminal building is more than 70 years old. A federal CARES Act — short for the Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security Act — grant for airports will fund replacing and updating aging equipment, including upgrades to heating, ventilation, air conditioning, electrical and plumbing systems, according to the press release. It also includes renovating bathrooms and the restaurant kitchen, as well as cosmetic improvements, such as paint, finishing and flooring.

The Pendleton City Council in February selected McCormack Construction Co. as the general manager and contractor.



Kathy Aney/East Oregonian

Renovations at Pendleton’s Eastern Oregon Regional Airport on Friday, May 6, 2022, require two trailers — one to provide service to airline passengers and the other to house restrooms. The temporary facilities soon will include ramps for access.

The entire project is expected to last about eight months, broken up into five phases to minimize impacts on services.

Crews from McCormack on May 5 began installing a 60-foot temporary terminal and bathrooms. Those facilities, next to the main terminal, can be accessed from the airport parking lot. They will keep commercial flights operating during the construction.

Passengers will be rerouted to the temporary facilities sometime between May 5 and May 19, when construction begins inside the terminal.

The city also reported remodeling will not affect air traffic control services, and airport administration services will operate out of

the World War II hangar. After installation of the temporary facilities, administrative staff and tenants will move out of the terminal.

During terminal construction, in-terminal access to Elvis’ Bar and Grill, the restaurant at the airport, will be closed, but the front entrance will remain open, and the restaurant will continue to operate.

In coordination with Elvis’ Bar and Grill, the time frame for the kitchen and bathroom renovation project has been identified as mid-September to mid-December. The timeline allows the restaurant to remain open through the Pendleton Round-Up in September and then shut down for renovations.

# District settles retaliation lawsuit

By JAYSON JACOBY  
Baker City Herald

BAKER CITY — A Baker City woman and her daughter who filed a federal lawsuit against the Baker School District two years ago, claiming that district officials retaliated against the daughter after she complained about alleged sexual harassment by a Baker High School volleyball coach, have settled the suit out of court and will receive \$200,000.

The money comes from the district’s “risk pool and not out of district funds,” according to a press release.

Roberta Fast and her daughter, Katrina, filed the suit in April 2020 in U.S. District Court.

They contended that the district violated a federal law prohibiting discrimination in schools — commonly known as Title IX — as well as the First Amendment and Oregon law.

As part of the settlement, both parties agreed to a statement that the school district released Thursday afternoon, May 5. It reads:

“Baker School District values its relationships with students, families, staff and the community. These relationships are critical to the District’s efforts to support student safety. We thank former District student Katrina Fast for coming forward and sharing her concerns. The District acknowledges the contribution of Ms. Fast and her efforts to effect change to protect others. Katrina serves as an example of how one person’s dedication can positively impact a community. We are committed to protecting all students in our District.”

The Fast, who filed the

suit in U.S. District Court in Pendleton, were represented by Jennifer J. Middleton, a Eugene attorney.

The central charge in the suit was that school district officials kept Katrina Fast, then a BHS junior, off the varsity volleyball team — she played on the JV team as a junior in the fall of 2019 — as retaliation for her complaints about the actions of head volleyball coach Warren Wilson.

“While the district has been advised not to respond to specific allegations, the district can share that it disputes the allegations in the complaint and looks forward to addressing and resolving those claims through the course of the litigation process,” Mark Witty, school district superintendent, wrote in an email.

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