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Idaho

Former spud shed official pleads guilty to embezzling \$1.7M

By JOHN O'CONNELL
Capital Press

BLACKFOOT, Idaho — A former financial controller of a southeast Idaho fresh potato packing plant has pleaded guilty to embezzling \$1.7 million from the business and its affiliate.

In an agreement reached Dec. 23 with Bingham County prosecutors, Russell C. Leonardson pleaded guilty to two counts of grand theft for embezzling from Aberdeen-based Idaho Select Inc. and Select

Express LLC, an affiliated agricultural transportation company.

In exchange for his plea, prosecutors dropped 70 counts of forgery against Leonardson for allegedly converting checks from his name to another name to hide embezzled funds.

Leonardson agreed to pay the companies \$1.7 million in restitution and faces up to 14 years in prison on each grand theft count, according to Bingham County Prosecutor Cleve Colson.

Colson said prosecutors have agreed to suggest that the judge accept the sentencing recommendations of a pre-sentence investigation by the Idaho Department of Correction, which is still pending and will factor in details such as Leonardson's criminal history and family background. The judge won't be bound by the recommendations. Leonardson is scheduled to be sentenced at 1:30 p.m. on Feb. 18.

"Both counts encompass the entirety of the thefts — the

entirety of what we know was taken from Select Express and Idaho Select," Colson said.

A pending civil suit, filed by Select Express and Idaho Select, provides insight into the criminal case against Leonardson. According to the civil filing, Leonardson was hired in 1997 to perform financial management functions for Idaho Select and also served as the first manager of Select Express, formed in 1998. Leonardson's job description tasked him with "establishing internal controls to protect

Idaho Select from financial predators and deficiencies."

Idaho Select's president, Scott Poulson, said in his affidavit that he frequently expressed concerns to Leonardson that his financial statements weren't thorough or timely, and that Leonardson became angry when he and Idaho Select board members suggested hiring a full-time accountant. Leonardson resigned, and Poulson hired Cooper Norman fraud investigators, who confirmed Leonardson had used Select Ex-

press credit cards and checks to pay off personal debt and make unauthorized purchases for himself and others, according to the civil filing. Restitution will cover thefts from January 2007 through July 2014.

According to the civil case, Cooper Norman obtained evidence from an auditing program that tracks missing checks and maintains a time-stamped history of any changes to financial records, in a format that can't be altered by users.

Irrigators use canal water to recharge aquifers

By JOHN O'CONNELL
Capital Press

ABERDEEN, Idaho — For decades, holding shares in the Aberdeen-Springfield Canal Co. has essentially been a contingency plan for Gaylen Van Orden, who relies on wells for a steadier source of water.

However, that surface water may finally come in handy for the Eastern Idaho farmer and other irrigators in the region who have switched to wells but still held onto their canal shares.

Aberdeen-Springfield Canal Co. recently announced a plan authorizing shareholders to inject their unused storage water into the aquifer — through a process known as recharge — to offset mandatory reductions they'd otherwise be expected to make from their well irrigation in the coming season.

Under the terms of a settlement reached last summer resolving the Surface Water Coalition's water call against junior well users throughout the Eastern Snake Plain Aquifer, groundwater users will have to cut consumption by an average of 240,000 acre-feet annually, or about 11 percent per user.

Van Orden said many members dug their own supplemental wells in lieu of using surface water — and some have removed their lateral canals — as they switched



Courtesy of Aberdeen-Springfield Canal Co.

This structure, called the Hilton Spillway, is utilized by Aberdeen-Springfield Canal Co. for conducting managed aquifer recharge. The company intends to allow members to recharge some of their storage water to help them meet a required reduction in well-water use this year, rather than curbing their groundwater pumping.

from flood irrigation to sprinklers, which require a stable water source and can't make do with delivery reductions during times of peak demand.

"A lot of people with shares in the canal system are paying even though there aren't any canals around their fields," Van Orden said, adding growers on the farthest extremities of the canal were especially apt to switch to wells.

Since the settlement was approved, Aberdeen-Springfield General Manager Steve Howser has already received requests from growers to return about 1,500 well-irrigated

acres to surface water, seeking to meet their required groundwater reduction. Howser fears it would jeopardize the canal company's ability to deliver a stable supply if many more growers were to follow suit, and he hopes shareholders will take advantage of the recharge plan to maintain the status quo.

Howser said about 17,000 acres on his system are eligible for the recharge program. He said the company would have to recharge just under 5,000 acre-feet to offset the required groundwater reduction if the full eligible acreage were enrolled.

Shareholders will have the opportunity to pool any remaining water to be recharged to help groundwater districts meet their groundwater recovery goals. Payments from the groundwater districts will be returned to the shareholders. Howser said his company also plans to line a 1.5-mile stretch of the main canal through Moreland to conserve an additional 75 cubic feet per second of storage water.

Lynn Tominaga, executive director of Idaho Ground Water Appropriators Inc., said his groundwater districts have approached other canal companies, including Idaho Irrigation District and New Sweden Canal Co., both based in Idaho Falls, suggesting they consider similar recharge options for their members. Canal companies are still mulling the possibility, he said.

Mat Weaver, deputy director of the Idaho Department of Water Resources, cautioned water users to remember that "relying on recharge is problematic because it's water supply-driven." He also noted that recharge water may not remain in the system long enough to completely compensate for water pumped from wells.



John O'Connell/Capital Press

Volunteers prepare french fries in Pocatello's Pond Student Union Ballroom during a prior Idaho Potato Conference. Free fries are a tradition at the event, hosted at Idaho State University but sponsored by University of Idaho.

Idaho Potato Conference aims to boost leader talk attendance

By JOHN O'CONNELL
Capital Press

POCATELLO, Idaho — Organizers of the 48th Annual Idaho Potato Conference, which will be hosted here Jan. 20-21, anticipate far fewer empty seats in the Pond Student Union auditorium when industry leaders speak at their upcoming event.

Top spud officials come to the Idaho State University campus from Washington, D.C., Denver and Eagle, Idaho, for the opportunity to update growers, shippers and others involved in potato production about their organizations' efforts.

Too often during past conferences, however, they've delivered their comments to sparse crowds, said UI Extension weed scientist Pam Hutchinson, who is co-chairing the event.

New during the upcoming conference, Hutchinson explained leaders from the National Potato Council, the U.S. Potato Board and the Idaho Potato Commission will present during a special "featured speaker" time slot, from 9 a.m. until noon on Jan. 20, with a half hour break. Hutchinson said the speakers have thus far spoken during the 8 a.m. time slot, when many attendees were still arriving.

During previous years, she said, other presentations have been scheduled at the same time, some offering pesticide applicator recertification credits, which aren't available to those who attend updates by the organizations.

This year, Hutchinson said there will be no conflicting sessions during the featured speakers' time slot, aside from a single presentation offered in Spanish, with no credits available.

Hutchinson said she's also considering door prizes to help draw a crowd.

"They travel a long ways and they have really excellent

information, and when your talk is at the same time as a workshop that gives pesticide applicator recertification credits, that's hard to compete with," Hutchinson said.

USPB President and CEO Blair Richardson said he's glad for the opportunity to speak, regardless of the audience size, but he's pleased with the effort to make it easier for members of his industry to attend.

"I'm excited about some of the changes we've made as a board over the last few years," Richardson said. "It's a great opportunity to visit with some of the growers, and there's nothing like being face to face with them."

University of Wisconsin-Madison plant pathologist Amanda Gevens will also be among the featured speakers.

Gevens will focus on late blight, a fungal disease that caused widespread problems in Idaho during the 2015 growing season.

"We want to take advantage of her expertise and experience in late blight," Hutchinson said. "She's published in research journals and has developed good recommendations because they have it there more than we do."

Other sessions will highlight the latest advancements in weed, disease and insect management. Hutchinson said UI is aiming to increase its focus on grower involvement in workshops and has panel discussions scheduled on pale cyst nematode control and potato virus Y.

UI will also unveil website updates, including a more comprehensive UI potato website and a youth website, focused on potatoes, developed by UI Extension scientists. Participants will be allowed to register online for the first time for the upcoming conference, and an Internet cafe will be added to provide visitors with online access.

Nez Perce Tribe opposes forest rehabilitation plan

LEWISTON, Idaho (AP) — A large-scale timber sale and rehabilitation project recently approved by the Nez Perce-Clearwater National Forest still faces opposition from the Nez Perce Tribe over environmental concerns.

The Lewiston Tribune reports the 44,000-acre Clear Creek Integrated Restoration Project is backed by members of the Clearwater Basin Collaborative, made up of county commissioners, loggers and environmentalists. The project would be implemented over several years. Its goals

include harvesting 85 million board feet of timber and improving fish and wildlife habitat.

The tribe is concerned the logging will negatively impact Clear Creek, the water source for a fish hatchery it manages. The tribe's Fisheries Division director says officials haven't yet addressed their concerns.

The Idaho Conservation League's Jonathan Oppenheimer says the organization looks forward to discussing challenges surrounding the Clear Creek project.

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2016 Overall Schedule

Monday | January 25th, 2016

1-5pm | Booth Move In
5-9pm | Early Bird Reception, @ SpringHill Suites

Tuesday | January 26th, 2016

8-10am | Booth Move In
8:30am | Spanish Session Registration @ TRCC
8:55am-2:15pm | Spanish Session @ Toyota Center
10am-5pm | Trade Show
1:30pm-5pm | Cultivar Performance Workshop
5pm-8pm | Trade Show Reception & Potato PAC Auction @ TRCC

Wednesday | January 27th, 2016

7:30am | Continental Breakfast & Registration @ TRCC
8am - 11am | General Sessions
9am - 5pm | Trade Show
11am | Keynote: What Food Trends Say About Our Society - David Sax
12pm - 1:30pm | Hosted Potato Bar @ TRCC
1pm - 4:40pm | General Sessions
6pm - 9pm | Leadership Recognition Banquet @ Location TBD

Thursday | January 28th, 2016

7:30am | Continental Breakfast & Registration @ TRCC
8am - 12pm | General Sessions
9am - 1pm | Trade Show
12pm - 1pm | Hosted Lunch @ TRCC
1pm - 4:10pm | General Sessions



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