

Local

Suspicious envelopes received

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By Wednesday, a person of interest—Lance Storm of Eugene—had confessed to the mailing, but not before conflicting reports from various government agencies created confusion regarding the details of the mailing and whether a toxic substance had indeed been included.

Early on, word spread via Grant County Sheriff Glenn Palmer's friends and family on Facebook that he had been transported to the hospital just after noon immediately after opening one such envelope.

Reports on every Portland television station were that Palmer had opened an envelope delivered to the Grant County Sheriff's office in Canyon City, and began to develop a rash across his arms.

Other staff also began to feel ill, said the same reports. The sheriff's office and jail share a centralized air system, creating concern that inmates and even more staff could be exposed. There was also concern expressed, posted the Oregon Firearms Federation, whose representative had spoken directly to Palmer, that Palmer's wife had been exposed.

The Blue Mountain Eagle reported that afternoon, "In Grant County, OSP dispatch advised of a white powder incident at the jail and Sheriff's Office. The powder was in an envelope that was opened by Sheriff Glenn Palmer. Three people were transported to Blue Mountain Hospital in John Day. The office shares a centralized AC system so there could be as many as 12 inmates and additional staff impacted. Detectives are being brought in from Ontario."

Within the hour, *The Baker County Press* also received correspondence confirming that envelopes had been received at Grant, Harney, Wasco, Jackson, Umatilla and Sherman counties with Courthouses and Sheriff's Departments targeted.

Jim Littlefield, Under-sheriff in Umatilla County advised, "At about 1 p.m., Lt. Turner from OSP advised me of a hazardous materials incident in Grant County at the Sheriff's Office and jail. The Sheriff's Office received a threatening letter with an unknown substance that has made the sheriff and some employees sick. A haz-mat team and investigators are currently on their way."

"At about 2 p.m., we discovered that we received one of the letters, (pics included) along with Harney, Wasco, Jackson and Sherman counties. Ours came to the Umatilla County Courthouse through the regular mail."

"Please be alert for any suspicious letters or packages."

Eric Schmidt, Communications Director for the Association of Oregon Counties (AOC) also sent an email alert to officials in various counties, which made its way to a handful of media outlets.

Writes Schmidt, "We know that Grant, Harney, Wasco, Jackson and Sherman Counties have received these envelopes. We understand that some people have become sick

after opening the envelopes. Please pass this warning to everyone in your county and please, please be aware of incoming snail mail."

Some of the envelopes allegedly contained a white powder and a threat letter, others allegedly contained just the letter.

Umatilla County Commissioner Bill Elfering writes that he had received notice from the Umatilla County Sheriff's Department, "detailing an envelope containing a threat letter and white powder."

The Tillamook County Pioneer also reported it had obtained the same confirmations from the AOC and Umatilla County.

The headline from *The East Oregonian* July 27, read: "Mail scare false alarm mostly—Grant County Sheriff sent to hospital after contact with white powder." And their article went on to say, "Palmer and two other people were taken to Blue Mountain Hospital in John Day for treatment and/or observation, according to a report from the Oregon Emergency Response System (OERS). In the meantime, the correctional facility next door to the Grant County Courthouse was cordoned off while hazardous material personnel worked to decontaminate the area and any others that may have come into contact with the substance."

The OERS report also states as many as 12 inmates and additional staff could be affected.

OSP then released the statement: "The Oregon State Police and multiple partners are conducting a statewide investigation after multiple government offices around the state received suspicious mail, some with an unknown substance."

"Hazardous Materials Teams and investigators have responded to these reports. This is a preliminary release and more information will be released when it is available."

"As a reminder people receiving suspicious packages or mail should be cautious of mail that has excessive postage, no return address, excessive tape to secure parcel, misspelled words, misspelled title with name, incorrect or title only, strange odors, and oily stains, discolorations, crystallization on packaging."

With Baker County Sheriff Travis Ash on vacation, Lt. Joey Jayo took the helm during the situation, confirming early on that no illness had occurred in the local office.

"OSP and the FBI have taken the lead on the investigation," Jayo said late Monday afternoon. "Most of the details are case sensitive, and we can't release them at this time."

Just after 6 p.m. on Monday, Palmer was released from the hospital, sending his thanks for all the concern.

"I am doing fine," Palmer writes. "And I appreciate all the comments and well wishes. Spent the better part of seven hours at the Blue Mountain Hospital where I was quickly stripped of my uniform and my pride. They did what they had to do and I am confident in the treatment I got was top notch. It was a



Submitted Photo.

Grant County Sheriff Glenn Palmer was hospitalized after coming into contact with the powder from the envelope.

long seven hours."

By Tuesday morning, suspicious envelopes arriving at Marion, Tillamook, Columbia, Washington and Yamhill Counties had been confirmed, raising the number of counties affected to a dozen.

Union and Willowa Counties quickly followed suit with more counties later added.

However, later on Tuesday, the story took a dramatic twist when the FBI stated, "The FBI, Oregon State Police and the U.S. Postal Inspection Service are working with affected Oregon counties to determine the origin and nature of a series of suspicious letters that started arriving in the mail on Monday, July 27th. To date, field testing by hazardous materials crews has shown *no* (emphasis theirs) toxic substance on any letter or in any envelope. In addition, at this time there is no evidence of a visible powder to be found in any of the envelopes/letters."

"There are approximately 20 known letters delivered and all were addressed to Oregon sheriffs or their offices. Law enforcement is collecting the letters and transporting them all to the FBI and/or the Oregon State Public Health Laboratory for analysis as appropriate."

"Due to the ongoing nature of this investigation, we are not releasing any further information."

Hours after the FBI's statement, the Baker County Sheriff released the following, reiterating Lt. Jayo's earlier statements: "On July 27, 2015, Baker County Sheriff's Office received a suspicious postal parcel. The parcel was unopened. Precautions were used in handling the parcel and no department members experienced any ill symptoms."

On the afternoon of the 28th, Sheriff Glenn Palmer said in an interview that the information from OSP dispatch, *The Blue Mountain Eagle* and Umatilla County was "inaccurate."

When asked where the report of a white substance came from, Palmer responded, "I have no idea where they got it. I didn't speak with them directly. There was never any white powder."

Palmer offered up his firsthand account of the events from the day before. "I got the envelope and when I opened it, I immediately felt a burning sensation in my face and arms, and a metallic taste in my mouth. My lips went numb."

Palmer said his wife drove him to the hospital. "They tested for everything," he said, "and everything came back negative."

Palmer said he continues to feel "tired" but is otherwise asymptomatic.

Palmer returned to work the next day, and so far, the cause of his symptoms is still under investigation.

Finally, on Wednesday, Oregon State Police released a statement announcing a person of interest had been identified.

That statement is: "On July 27, 2015 multiple government offices received suspicious letters which drew concern they may be contaminated with hazardous materials."

"Hazardous material teams responded to these locations as well as investigators from multiple law enforcement agencies. Preliminary testing from the hazardous material teams could not detect any harmful substances."

"On July 28, investigators identified Lance T. Storm, age 34, of Eugene, as a person of interest. He was located and interviewed regard this investigation. Storm was very forthcoming and eager to discuss the letters he mailed. Storm told investigators the communications were not intended to cause alarm and he denied the inclusion of harmful substances."

"Storm did not appear to present any violent or dangerous behavior and was not perceived as a threat to the community. He was released and the reports containing detailed information obtained during the investigation involving will be forwarded to several district attorney offices for consideration of charges."

"The following counties where letters are known to be received were Grant, Harney, Umatilla, Klamath, Lake, Grant, Jackson, Wasco, Marion, Polk, Lane, Sherman, Tillamook, Gilliam, Columbia, Linn, Jefferson, Wheeler, Union, Douglas, Baker, Yamhill, Willowa and Coos."

"The Oregon State Police was assisted by the FBI, US Postal Service, The Oregon State Fire Marshal's Office, and law enforcement agencies from counties where the letters were received."

Contents of the letters have not been released.

On Wednesday, the Oregon State Public Health Laboratory completed the preliminary testing of a sample of the letters received, including the letter mailed to Grant County. That preliminary testing showed that there were no biological toxins or powders included in or on the letters and envelopes in question. The FBI writes:

"The FBI and U.S. Postal Inspection Service are in the process of completing their portion of this investigation. Unless new information surfaces, neither the FBI nor the U.S. Postal Inspection Service anticipate pursuing federal charges in this case."

Power rate increases ahead

Baker City, Ore. – Today, the Bonneville Power Administration (BPA) announced it will increase the cost of power it provides to its not-for-profit electric utilities in the Northwest, including Oregon Trail Electric Cooperative (OTEC). The rate increase of 7.1 percent average for wholesale power and 4.4 percent average for transmission will take effect October 1, 2015.

While a non-profit federal agency, BPA's projections to spend approximately \$8 billion over the next eight years in updates to their aging transmission and generation infrastructure along the Federal Columbia River Power System (which includes 31 federal dams and one nuclear plant), paired with an additional \$782 million to fund one of the largest wildlife protection and restoration programs in the world, has pushed them up against their U.S. Treasury borrowing limit.

Moreover, the cost for balancing energy production and the environment has reached its highest level since 2010. According to a 2014 draft analysis released by the Northwest Power and Conservation Council, one-third of Bonneville's wholesale rate is estimated to be associated with its fish and wildlife programs.

"BPA has been operating on borrowed time for about 6 years now," explained Werner Buehler, OTEC's General Manager. "When you combine much needed transmission updates, conservation, soft natural gas prices, an abundance of wind and solar power and the reduced demand for the excess power BPA produces you have a need to compensate for that reduction in revenue."

Customers affected by this increase include 54 municipalities, cooperatives, federal entities, tribal utilities and public utility districts in the Pacific Northwest. OTEC serves approximately 30,500 meters in Baker, Harney, Grant and Union counties.

"Over the past eight years, OTEC's costs, unrelated to BPA power purchases, have increased, on average, one-half a percent per year allowing us to keep our charges for electric service reasonable and highly competitive with our peers," said Buehler. "As a local, member-owned and not-for-profit cooperative, we do not raise rates to generate profit. But, at the end of the day, when OTEC experiences an increase in power costs, we need to cover the cost of doing business and pass the increase along to the members who own the cooperative."

Over the next month, OTEC's board of directors will determine how much the rate increase to members will be. OTEC's members will be informed of the exact amount of the rate increase this fall through the News from the Trail billing insert, *Ruralite* magazine, via OTEC's website at www.otecc.com and through OTEC's Facebook page at www.facebook.com/OTECcoop.

Bentz to speak at Chamber

BAKER CITY—State Representative Cliff Bentz (R-Ontario) will meet with the Baker County Chamber of Commerce on Wednesday, August 5th at 12:30 p.m. at the Best Western Sunridge Inn (1 Sunridge Ln, Baker City).

Rep. Bentz will present Chamber members with legislative highlights from the recently adjourned 2015 Legislative Session. There will be a short review of important bills on various topics such as sage grouse, increasing speed limits, rural gas station self-service after hours, marijuana legalization, the low carbon fuel standard, the transportation package (or lack thereof), the gun background check expansion, minimum wage increases, mandatory paid sick leave, and other issues. Former-Governor John Kitzhaber's resignation and the 2015-17 Budget will also be discussed.

"This presentation will provide opportunity to review and discuss changes made to Oregon's laws," said Rep. Bentz.

Rep. Bentz also will ask the Chamber members for their opinion on what they would like Rep. Bentz to focus on as priorities for the up-coming 2016 Legislative Session, which will convene on February 1st.

Sex offender makes bail

BY KERRY McQUISTEN
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Convicted predatory sex offender, Travis Scott Jones, was arrested last Friday afternoon for violating a subsection of the Oregon sex offender registration law, which required Jones to list his address of residence. After arriving in Baker City just two weeks ago, Jones began residing in a home on Elm Street rather than his registered address on Valley Avenue. He has since moved his belongings out of the Elm Street home back to Valley Avenue.

Just after 3 p.m., Baker City Police arrested Jones after the District Attorney's office viewed police reports and issued a warrant. Bail was set for \$7,500. Jones posted ten percent, or \$750, and was released after being booked on the misdemeanor charge.

Jones has prior sexual assault felony convictions in Oregon and a child exploitation conviction in New Mexico.

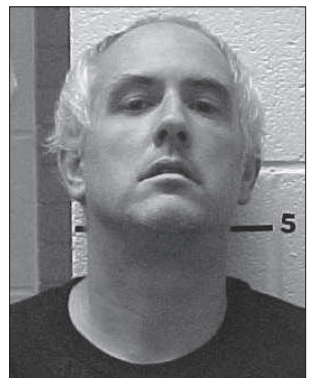


Photo courtesy of the Baker County Sheriff's Office.

Travis Scott Jones.