

# Washington state prosecuting owner of sunken vessel Hero

Boat sank on the Palix River

By NATALIE ST. JOHN  
Chinook Observer

BAY CENTER, Wash. — The Washington state Attorney General's Office has filed misdemeanor charges against the owner of the Hero, a derelict research vessel that sank on the Palix River one year ago.

Sun Feather LightDancer, of Bay Center, is charged with one count of causing a vessel to become abandoned or derelict, and one count of discharging polluted matters into state waters. The first charge is punishable by up to 90 days in jail and a \$1,000 fine. The second is punishable by up to 364 days in jail, and a \$10,000 fine.

LightDancer could not be reached for comment.

The Hero is a 125-foot wood-hulled boat built for the National Science Foundation in 1968. Designed to withstand even the toughest conditions, it was used for research and exploration in Antarctica until 1984.

According to court documents, the Port of Umpqua in Reedsport acquired the Hero through a federal surplus program in 1984 for \$5,000. A nonprofit foundation used the boat as an educational and research center until 1997. In 2000, retired Coast Guard member and fisherman Bill Wechter bought the Hero. Wechter put it in dry dock in Portland and made much-needed repairs. After the refit, he moved it to Newberg, where he gave tours and local cruises until 2003.

The boat sat idle until 2008, when LightDancer purchased it, and Wechter towed the boat to its new home in Bay Center.

In late 2012, a citizen



Natalie St. John/Chinook Observer

The state Attorney General's Office is pressing misdemeanor pollution charges against Sun Feather LightDancer, the owner of the sunken research vessel Hero. The suit against LightDancer is part of a larger effort to crack down on owners of derelict vessels.

made a complaint to the state Department of Natural Resources Derelict Vessel Program. In 2013, the Department of Natural Resources, the state Department of Ecology and the Coast Guard's Incident Management Division conducted an inspection to determine whether the boat was polluting the river.

The boat did not fare well in Bay Center. LightDancer allegedly told the inspectors he was using an onshore power source to keep the boat's bilge pump going. Coast Guard inspectors noted that "the engine room was in a state of disrepair, with parts spread across every surface. Any metal of easy value has been removed from the space." They also documented around 25 gallons of lube oil and 50 gallons of diesel were present on the boat. The inspectors found a leak in the hull that was allowing water

into a tank at the front of the boat. LightDancer was using a pump to remove water.

The boat sank on March 4, 2017, following a storm. There was immediate concern that the boat, which sits just upstream from the Bay Center Farms oyster operation, could damage local shellfish growing operations or the ecology of the river and Willapa Bay.

When an oil sheen appeared on the water the following day, the Coast Guard and Department of Ecology pumped about 1,000 gallons of oily water from the boat. They also used pads and booms to contain and absorb the oil over the next several weeks.

After determining LightDancer did not have the means to pay for the cleanup or remove the boat, the Coast Guard opened a spill liability trust fund for \$25,000 to ensure the work could be done quickly. The Coast Guard used

\$20,000 to pay Global Diving and Salvage to oversee the cleanup operation. The fund does not provide anywhere near enough to cover cleanup of the spill and removal of the boat. Ecology and Natural Resources experts now estimate the total cost to taxpayers to remove the boat from the river will be somewhere between \$453,000 and \$2.5 million.

The suit was filed by an environmental protection unit that state Attorney General Bob Ferguson formed to investigate and prosecute environmental crimes.

Derelict vessels are a persistent problem for Washington's ports and environmental authorities. Ferguson began filing criminal charges against derelict vessel owners whose boats polluted state waters in 2014. This is the environmental protection unit's fourth derelict vessel case.



Colin Murphey/The Daily Astorian

Warrenton voters in May will decide whether to renew a police levy.

## Voters asked to renew Warrenton police levy

The Daily Astorian

WARRENTON — Voters in May will be asked to renew a five-year levy to help finance the Warrenton Police Department.

The tax is 28 cents per \$1,000 of assessed property value, according to the city, or \$56 a year for a \$200,000 home. The money pays for a full-time police officer and partially finances another officer.

The existing levy expires at the end of June 2019.

The City Commission voted unanimously Tuesday night to place the question on the ballot in the May election, since, if it fails, the city would have another chance

in November. The November election, however, could have bond issues for Warrenton schools and a county jail.

The city has had a police operations levy since 1999.

Mayor Henry Balensifer noted that property taxes are not enough to cover the costs of the police department. "This will end in real cuts if we do not have this police levy," the mayor said.

Commissioners Rick Newton and Tom Dyer suggested the city may have to ask voters to increase the levy in the future to help the police department keep pace with the city's expected population growth and development.

## Knappa student removed after threatening remarks

The Daily Astorian

A student was removed from Knappa High School Tuesday after making threatening remarks.

The student told an adult he was going to get a gun, come back to school and shoot himself, Superintendent Paulette Johnson said.

"The principal (Laurel Smalley) was pretty close to where the student was when he said it," she said. "The student was gone within maybe 15 minutes."

The school district removed the student and called law enforcement, and the student left with parents to seek counseling, Johnson said.

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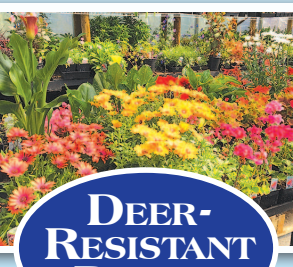
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