

Wildlife officials slow to help woman treed in forest by wolves

Records show initial hesitance to send copter

By **DON JENKINS**
Capital Press

Washington state wildlife managers initially opposed sending a helicopter or a search-and-rescue team to save a woman treed by wolves in the Okanogan-Wenatchee National Forest, according to recordings and summaries of emergency calls.

The state Department of Natural Resources pushed back and prepared to dispatch an air crew that eventually executed a swift rescue. Notes from a call between Department of Natural Resources dispatcher Jill Jones and a wildlife officer summarized the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife's position, and her position, shortly before the helicopter launched.

"No helicopter. Federally listed species. Three WDFW personnel saying so," according to call log.

"We are more concerned for her life than the listed animal," Jones told the wildlife officer. "He indicated that she is safe up in the tree. ... I told him that we do not know how safe she is. I don't know how stout the tree is, and if the limbs will continue to hold her or how long she can hold on."

Minutes later, Department of Fish and Wildlife and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service officials, at the request of Department of Natural Resources wildfire supervisor Chuck Turley, OK'd an air rescue. Within a half hour, the woman was safe in the Department of Natural Resources helicopter piloted by Devin Gooch. The wolves had scattered as Gooch flew overhead before landing in a meadow.

The swift air rescue — reaching the woman by foot would have taken two to three hours, officials estimated — ended a hectic 45 minutes in which state, federal and local agencies discussed what to do.

Department of Fish and Wildlife wolf policy coordinator Donny Martorello said Wednesday that wildlife biologists familiar with wolf behavior thought the woman was not in immediate danger. "I think from their lens they were thinking there was a simpler solution," he said.

"To tell the helicopter not to go was not the right call, and we have to own that," Martorello said. "The right call was to send the helicopter. It goes without saying we value human life over everything else."

Okanogan County, in north-central Washington, has had relatively few wolf incidents compared to Ferry and Stevens counties to the east. Sheriff Frank Rogers said the incident went "sideways," leaving him angry that the Department of Fish and Wildlife told the county's search-and-rescue team to "stand down."

The next day, a federal biologist warned deputies hiking to view the scene of the incident to not harass wolves, he said.

"I don't know who's making the calls and telling us we can't be involved. You can't

tell me not to be involved. It's my county," Rogers said. "Whether it's wolves or a guy with a gun, we're going to go."

Rogers said that he wanted deputies to do a follow-up investigation to assess the threat to public safety.

"I just don't want another incident," he said. "All we want to know is what we're dealing with."

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service spokeswoman Ann Froschauer said the federal agency has no opposition to the sheriff's office doing its own investigation. "It's certainly the role of local law enforcement," she said.

Authorities have not released the woman's name, citing her wish to not be identified. "We would love to talk to the woman," Rogers said.

Martorello said Turley, who works in the same state building in Olympia, came to his office and said the Department of Natural Resources wanted to send a helicopter. Martorello said he put Turley on the phone with Gregg Kurz, the lead carnivore biologist in the state for the federal Fish and Wildlife Service. Kurz approved the helicopter.

Froschauer said she happened to be waiting with Kurz for a meeting on grizzly bears to start when he got the call. "Gregg said absolutely go for it. There was not hesitation on our part," she said.

Before getting clearance from the wildlife agencies, Department of Natural Resources wildfire operations manager Aaron Schmidt already had approved sending the helicopter, as had the Forest Service, according to state records.

At one point, according to call logs, the agency was prepared to "launch the rotor and will deal with aftermath of WDFW later."

Shortly before the helicopter lifted off, Jones, the dispatcher, called and updated an Okanogan County dispatcher on the rescue.

"When I talked to Fish and Wildlife, they said, 'Nope. That's not search and rescue. That's just us. And no helicopter,'" Jones said.

"For goodness sakes, somebody needs to figure it out," the county dispatcher said.

"I don't know how long this girl can hang in the tree," Jones said. "... so we're finally just launching a helicopter."

The flight from Omak to the woman took 14 minutes, according to Department of Natural Resources.

Eric Gardner, the assistant director for the wildlife program at the Department of Fish and Wildlife, said the department will work to be prepared if there's a similar incident. "I know it will be a topic of conversation and area of improvement," he said.

Man who drove truck into Columbia River sentenced

Erofeeff is serving time in separate case

By **JACK HEFFERNAN**
The Daily Astorian

A man who led police on a car chase before driving a truck into the Columbia River in December was sentenced Wednesday to more than 1½ years in prison.

Timofey Erofeeff, 28, of Scotts Mills, was spotted jiggling locks on two vessels, including the Zephyr, a boat docked at North Tongue Point. Ron MicJan, who was sleeping in the Zephyr at the time, reported the incident to Astoria police, but Erofeeff left by the time officers arrived. Officers returned about an hour later when Erofeeff was spotted again.

MicJan told police he wanted to pursue charges against Erofeeff, who was on post-prison supervision for an unlawful use of a motor vehicle conviction in Deschutes County. Police contacted Erofeeff's probation officer, who advised them that Erofeeff had recently been arrested for burglary in Multnomah County and had not been checking in with Deschutes County Parole and Probation.

Officer Kevin Berry then approached Erofeeff as he sat in the driver's seat of a red Ford F-150, according to court records. Erofeeff peered into the driver's side window, shifted the truck into gear and sped off. Erofeeff turned onto a closed pier and started to accelerate. He launched the truck off the pier at an estimated 45 mph. When officers reached the



Coast Guard

Ensign Kira Adams with the Coast Guard's Incident Management Team in Astoria observes employees with WCT Marine & Construction lift a red Ford F-150 truck out of the Columbia River in December and onto a dock at North Tongue Point using a crane.

end of the pier, Erofeeff had exited the truck and began swimming north toward an island about 1,000 feet away. As the truck was sinking, debris was floating around and a large gas slick appeared at the water's surface.

After swimming about 600 feet in the icy water, he began struggling and eventually returned to the dock as he was tossed a life jacket and flotation ring.

Employees from nearby shipwright WCT Marine & Construction Inc. pulled him out of the water and into a skiff before taking him to shore about 20 minutes after he entered the frigid water. He was taken to Columbia Memorial Hospital in Astoria and treated for hypothermia and minor injuries.

When asked why he fled

from police, Erofeeff said he thought to himself, "I'm not getting arrested today," according to court records.

WTC Marine located the sunken truck and pulled it from the river the next day with a crane. Deputy District Attorney Dawn Buzzard said Wednesday that WTC Marine has been reimbursed for all or most of the cost of the cleanup through a grant.

Erofeeff was indicted on charges of offensive littering, first-degree burglary, attempt to elude police with a vehicle, reckless driving, interfering with a peace officer, third-degree escape and second-degree criminal trespass. A charge of driving under the influence of intoxicants — for methamphetamine — was later added to the indictment.

"Not to make light of it,"

said a half-smiling retired Circuit Court Judge Rick Knapp, who spent Wednesday filling in for Judge Dawn McIntosh at the Clatsop County Courthouse, "but is the offensive littering from him driving into the water?"

Buzzard confirmed that it was.

Erofeeff eventually agreed to a plea deal. He entered an Alford plea — meaning he asserts innocence but recognizes prosecutors may have sufficient evidence for a conviction — to offensive littering, third-degree escape, attempting to elude a police officer and attempt to commit a class A felony.

He was sentenced to more than 1½ years in prison, which will run concurrently with a 3½-year prison sentence he is serving from two first-degree burglary convictions in Clackamas County.

"This has been a drawn-out plea negotiation involving multiple counties," said Kris Kaino, Erofeeff's court-appointed attorney.

Erofeeff appeared at Wednesday's sentencing hearing via phone from the Coffee Creek Correctional Facility in Wilsonville and thanked those who pulled him and the truck from the river. "I just want to apologize for any, you know, trouble or burden I may have caused," he said.

Prior to his arrest, Erofeeff told officers he had permission from the Coast Guard to be in the area. He reiterated that position Wednesday.

"It was kind of a shaky situation and a misunderstanding," Erofeeff said. "I was never trying to pollute anything. I just want to move on with my life."

Erofeeff will forfeit the truck, which sustained severe damage. Toward the end of the hearing, and before that decision was made, Erofeeff asked Knapp if it would be possible for him to collect the remains of the truck.

"Yeah, good luck with that," Knapp said.

Brown says Wasco County wildfire might be arson

Associated Press

PORTLAND — Gov. Kate Brown says state investigators will help determine if a wildfire that killed a tractor operator was intentionally set.

The governor said today that the Wasco County sheriff has asked for help in finding out what caused the blaze that has burned nearly 80 square miles in the north-central part of the state.

Referring to talk in the communities involved, Brown told reporters: "Clearly, you're hearing that

there is a likelihood of arson, so our agencies are going to help in that investigation."

Doug Grafe of the Oregon Department of Forestry told KGW that local police were investigating the blaze as a suspected arson.

Authorities found one person dead Wednesday near a burned-out tractor. Investigators believe the person was likely trying to create a firebreak, or a strip of cleared land to stop the spread of fire.

The blaze near The Dalles started Tuesday and spread into a rural farming area with

vast wheat fields.

Dozens of homes have been evacuated because of the blaze.

Brown declared a state

of emergency Wednesday, marking the unofficial start to a Pacific Northwest fire season that's expected to be worse than normal.

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