

POLICE: Pendleton had zero complaints in 2014

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slow down or ask what they were doing.”

But a few times each year, departments reported, citizens make formal complaints, a process that involves an investigation into the accusation and review of policies and procedures.

Edmiston said Hermiston police take formal complaints even when it seems far-fetched. The investigation may uncover misbehavior, or a problem with a department policy, or lead to exoneration of an officer.

“I always tell people I can’t fix something if I don’t know about it,” Edmiston said. “Inasmuch as many complaints we receive come from people on the receiving end of either an arrest or a citation, we also receive complaints about officers’ driving, demeanor, etc. Additionally, we may do an internal review of an incident and discover a policy violation, which in essence can turn into a complaint with myself typically as the complainant.”

The police departments of Hermiston, Pendleton, Milton-Freewater Boardman and Stanfield and the sheriff’s offices of Umatilla and Morrow counties similarly investigate what police call “formal complaints.” Those are the kinds that require people to fill out a form and give a description of what happened and when, and who was involved.

Those forms vary somewhat from agency to agency, but are consistent overall. Stanfield police Chief Bryon Zumwalt said that is because most agencies rely on one company, Lexipol, to provide public safety policies. Smaller departments find that is cheaper and more effective than having administrators revamp policies each year based on changes in state and federal law.

And in Eastern Oregon, Zumwalt said, all the local agencies qualify as small.

Stanfield Police Department

has four employees: the chief, a lieutenant and two officers. Even a department of four, he said, handles formal complaints the same way Pendleton or Hermiston does — they go up the chain of command, and the person in charge has the final review and recommendations. Stanfield police in the last three years have had a couple of formal complaints, he said, and they are so rare the department does not track them.

Boardman police Chief Rick Stokoe gave similar figures — a total of five in the past three years. Boardman police also have an on-line complaint form.

Pendleton and Hermiston police keep a more careful count of formal complaints. According to information from Pendleton police chief Stuart Roberts, here is the number of formal complaints since 2010:

2014 - 0

2013 - 3

2012 - 0

2011 - 1

2010 - 4

Investigations revealed four complaints were unfounded, one police could not substantiate and two exonerated officers, Roberts reported. Just one was “sustained,” meaning the ruling fell on the side of the person who made the complaint.

Hermiston tracks complaints (as well as uses of force and pursuit) on a fiscal calendar. Edmiston provided figures starting with his first year in charge:

2011-2012 - 6

2012-2013 - 6

2013-2014 - 5

Edmiston did not have exact outcomes available but said about a quarter were unfounded, half were unsustained, and the other 25 percent resulted in exoneration for the officers. He said the number of formal complaints against his department have trended down in recent years.

“That could indicate we’re trying to be professional with what

we do and how we do it,” he said.

And he said he is hopeful the numbers could drop lower when Hermiston officers begin wearing body cameras in April.

“Once we fully launch those, the cameras are to hold officers accountable as much as citizens,” he said.

Umatilla County Sheriff Terry Rowan said his department also has not had many formal complaints but typically someone disputes a citation or arrest.

“A lot of those types of complaints are ones that need to be worked out in the courts,” he said.

Some complaints reveal a need for retraining, he said, and that can require disciplinary measures.

Discipline ranges from a verbal warning to termination, according to police policies. Edmiston said in his three years as chief he has sent cops home for the day without pay. He knows that hurt them financially, he said, but correcting the behavior was a must.

No local departments, though, have a formal policy for a citizen to meet face-to-face with an officer to discuss a problem. Some police departments across the nation do. And while those meetings may not end in hugs, the aim is to gain mutual respect and understanding.

Roberts and Edmiston said they have presided over such meetings, but on a case-by-case basis. Those sit-downs are rare because laws, department rules and labor contracts shield employees who could face discipline.

“In instances where I have allowed face-to-face conversations, they are generally at my suggestion,” Roberts reported. “If/when the complainant is open to the idea, I lay the ground rules and sit in on the meeting. I will allow the complainant to say what they want to say. When they have had the opportunity to explain their position, I allow the officer to respond. If it is apparent that agreeing to disagree is the ultimate outcome, I excuse the officer.”

Milton-Freewater police Chief Doug Boedigheimer said his department checks out one or two formal complaints a year, but too few to track. Still, he was one of several police administrators who said the issue of police and community relationships is timely because of the U.S. Department of Justice’s 102-page damning report on police in Ferguson, Missouri. He said he read the report and even provided copies to his officers.

The glaring problem the report revealed, he said, was the Ferguson Police Department did not want the public to know how it operated. The public has that right, he said, and Milton-Freewater makes that a priority. He said police who take a little more time with people can head off problems before they start.

“It takes that extra minute to speak to people after the call and let people know what happened and don’t just steam off to the next call,” Boedigheimer said. “Give people a thumbnail view of what happened.”

Morrow County Sheriff’s Office receives five or so informal complaints a year, undersheriff Steve Myren said. They often stem from civil matters, such as evictions, but those are not criminal, so law enforcement does not get involved. That agitates some folks, he said, and some complain that cops are not doing their jobs.

Like others, Myren said taking the time to explain helps both the police and the public. And taking complaints seriously and dealing with them are musts for small departments, even when citizens may not agree with the resolutions. If nothing else, it comes down to a matter of math.

“In a community of 1,500, half the town will know about it the next day,” Myren said.

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GMO: Critics of the legislation say current system works fine

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“The law is already on the books. It’s a question of what that authority looks like,” he said during a March 5 hearing of the House Committee on Rural Communities, Land use and Water. “There’s precedent here. ODA already does this.”

In 2013, Oregon lawmakers pre-empted local governments from restricting GMOs because such power belongs exclusively to the state, but ODA doesn’t actually regulate them, he said.

However, critics of the proposed legislation say the current system works fine.

By requiring ODA to limit biotech crops, the bills favor other types of farming, said Barry Bushue, president of the Oregon Farm Bureau.

“We don’t want anyone pitted against each other,” he said.

If a farmer enters into a contract vowing to produce seed with no trace of biotech genes, it’s up to the grower to ensure those conditions are met, Bushue said.

“The responsibility for that zero tolerance is not my neighbor’s, it’s mine,” he said.

If the ODA regulates GMOs based on geography, some farmers will want to be within more restrictive areas but others will not, said Greg Loberg, manager of the West Coast Beet Seed Co.

Conflicts between biotech, conventional and organic farmers will persist within each area, he said. “I don’t see any end to that cycle of control areas.”

Rep. Brad Witt, D-Clatskanie, said he was troubled by the prospect of legislators giving the “thumbs up or thumbs down” to specific crops, which began with the “camel’s nose under the tent” with restrictions on growing canola.

“That’s an exceedingly slippery slope I don’t want to go down,” he said. “I think that’s a horribly wrong foot to get off on.”

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