

POLICE: Victim required treatment at a local hospital

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he made Monday, according to a written statement Thursday from state police.

Scott arrested Jeffery Allen Fields, 46, of Milton-Freewater, for theft and brought him to the Milton-Freewater Police Department for processing. OSP detectives found Scott walked a handcuffed Fields to the processing area inside the police department and pushed him in the back.

“The arrestee fell forward and struck his head on a concrete wall,” the report read.

The victim required treatment at a local hospital for injuries to his scalp and vertebrae.

“Video surveillance from within the police department corroborated the evidence detectives obtained to that point,” state police also reported.

However, the agency stated it would not release the video until the investigation is complete. State police, though, did not provide an estimate on how long that could take.

State police on Wednesday arrested Scott for second-degree assault and second-degree official misconduct and booked him into jail in Pendleton, where he remained until after

Thursday’s arraignment at about 1:30 p.m.

Jail staff confirmed for the court that Scott at noon posted \$5,000 to get out, not quite 10 percent of the \$55,000 bond the arrest triggered. District Attorney Dan Primus said Scott posted bail, so the jail could not keep him. He also agreed with Hampton the amount was appropriate for the charges.

Hampton prohibited Scott from contacting Fields and from having guns and ammunition. Scott, who lives in Milton-Freewater, also agreed to waive extradition so he could take his children to see their doctor in nearby Walla Walla.

Hampton also asked Scott if he could afford his own attorney. He replied he could not. She ordered him to come to the courthouse within 36 hours to determine if he qualified to have a public defender.

Milton-Freewater hired Scott in early September 2014, according to city records, and he made about \$50,300 in 2015.

Boedigheimer in an email said Scott has been on administrative leave since Tuesday, the day after the incident, and the city will consult with its legal counsel “regarding options available to us at this point.”

WINE: Rocky, gravelly soil near McKay Creek good for growing

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has done site evaluations for two or three groups of people around Pendleton to determine the potential for growing vineyards.

With just 12-17 inches of annual rainfall, Pogue said anyone growing wine grapes in the area would first need access to irrigation water. He also advises farmers to plant vineyards on top of hills, as opposed to valleys where cold air can become trapped.

“On either end of the growing season, you have a frost risk,” Pogue said. “It would kill your fruit for that year.”

Every vineyard in the Columbia Basin is subject to frost and freezes, Pogue said. But the challenge of accumulating enough warm days for the grapes to ripen is even steeper in Pendleton.

“In an average year, you would always be holding your breath,” Pogue said.

One thing Pendleton does have, Pogue said, is the right soils. He is particularly excited about the rocky, gravelly soil found near McKay Creek — similar to the rocky, gravelly soil that now distinguishes The Rocks District of Milton-Freewater.

“I think the soil would be fabulous for growing wine grapes,” he said.

Pogue, who owns his own vineyard consulting company called VinTerra, said he would like to see someone grow wine grapes in Pendleton, but admits it wouldn’t be easy.

“In some years, you could do it no problem. In some years, it would be a disaster, and in most years, you would be anxious all the time,” he said.

A significant investment

Apart from shaky weather, starting a vineyard is also a considerable investment. Pogue said it takes as much as \$20,000 to \$30,000 per acre just to get started, including the cost of planting and installing irrigation systems.

From there, the first grapes won’t be harvested for three years. It could take up to a decade before a farmer sees any profit, Pogue said.

“You look into the economics of it, and it’s a daunting challenge,” he said. “You aren’t going to be making money for a long time.”

Steve Robertson, who owns SJR Vineyard in The Rocks District of Milton-Freewater, said time and labor add another layer of challenge.

“There’s no getting away from human beings tending the rows in the middle of wine season,” Robertson

said. “Most of that is hand-work.”

It takes a long-range vision and dedication to make it in the wine business, Robertson said. For him, growing grapes is a lifestyle.

“There’s a lot of opportunity for creativity and variance,” he said. “That excites a lot of people.”

Robertson said he believes there are excellent spots to grow grapevines around Pendleton, but it will take those first pioneering steps to establish the region.

“If the quality is there, the market is there,” he said.

Pioneering steps

Clive Kaiser, extension horticulturist with Oregon State University in Milton-Freewater, said he can only think of two vineyards attempted in Pendleton over the last decade, including Duff’s. The other was located near Blue Mountain Community College, and ran into issues with a type of weed killer that drifted over from a neighboring wheat field.

The chemical, known as 2,4-D, can’t be used in the Walla Walla AVA between April 1 and Oct. 31. However, Kaiser said there is no such moratorium in Pendleton.

“The wheat farmers use it extensively,” he said. “It’s those challenges that are really going to make Pendleton a barrier.”

Kaiser said he believes the lack of early success might deter other growers from giving it a try, but additional technology has increased the potential for progress.

As for Duff, his stepson Bob Rosselle now operates Duff Ranches, where the wheat fields take up most of his time. Duff did transplant some of the grapevines to his home in Pendleton, where he said they grow much better than they did on the farm.

Duff said he was able to recoup some of the money he put into his vineyard by selling equipment, but overall the venture was a loss. If he been able to keep it going, he said Eola Hills would have paid \$1,500 per ton of grapes at 2-3 tons per acre. Given the recent sagging wheat prices, he said wine grapes could be a tempting alternative.

Duff said there’s no question vines will grow in Pendleton — in fact, they’ll grow on a farmer’s worst ground, he said. But whether it can be profitable is yet to be seen.

“You’re not in control as much as you think you are,” he said.

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Government Accountability Office says Obama administration failed to follow health law

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Obama administration failed to follow the president’s health care law in a \$5 billion dispute over compensating insurers for high costs from seriously ill patients, Congress’ investigative arm said Thursday.

The opinion from the Government Accountability Office is a setback for the White House and bolsters Republican complaints that administration officials bent the law as problems arose carrying out its complex provisions. The finding may complicate efforts to stabilize premiums in the law’s insurance marketplaces, where about 11 million people get coverage.

The Obama administration said it “strongly disagrees” with the GAO’s conclusion.

At issue is how the administration has handled a little-known, but important program called “transitional reinsurance.” Working in the background of the law’s coverage expansion, the three-year program collects fees from employer and other private health insurance plans and channels the money to health plans

that face large claims for treating patients with catastrophic medical problems.

The law specified that the fee would collect \$25 billion from 2014-2016, and \$5 billion of that would go directly to the Treasury. But when fee collections fell short, the Health and Human Services Department failed to allocate a share of the money to the Treasury, saying it would do so later as more money came in.

Republicans cried foul and asked the GAO to examine the issue. On Thursday, Republicans got the ruling they had hoped for.

“HHS lacks authority to ignore the statute’s directive to deposit amounts (collected under the program) in the Treasury,” the GAO’s general counsel, Susan A. Poling, wrote.

The administration’s interpretation of the law “is inconsistent with the plain language of the statute,” she said.

It didn’t help the administration’s case with GAO that the original HHS plan for distributing the fee money called for paying the Treasury.

Republicans accuse the Obama

administration of shortchanging the Treasury to “bail out” the health care law.

“The administration should end this illegal scheme immediately, and focus on providing relief from the burdens of this law,” Sen. John Barrasso, R-Wyo., said in a statement. Barrasso is a leader on health care issues.

Previously, Republicans have complained that the administration flouted the law when it delayed a requirement that larger employers must offer coverage to their workers.

Responding to Thursday’s GAO opinion, the Obama administration said that the program was implemented “lawfully and in a transparent manner” and “helps to reduce premiums for consumers.”

The GAO has no enforcement power over its ruling, but congressional opponents of the health law could use the finding to write legislation that forces HHS to pay the Treasury. Generally, lawmakers of both parties respect GAO’s rulings on federal budget issues.

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