



# EAST OREGONIAN

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## Woman killed in Highway 11 crash

By **GEORGE PLAVERN**  
*East Oregonian*

One woman is dead following a multiple vehicle crash Tuesday afternoon on Highway 11 near Adams.

Authorities have not identified the victim, but said she was

ejected from her Ford Explorer after it rolled and landed upside down next to a wheat field along the northbound lane of the highway. Shawn Penninger, Pendleton assistant fire chief, said she was the only person in the SUV and died before emergency crews arrived.

Two other semi-trucks were also involved in the wreck. Both truck drivers and one passenger were not hurt.

Fire departments from Pendleton, Athena and Helix all responded, as well as the Oregon Department of Transportation and Oregon State Police. A

hazardous materials team from Hermiston was also called in to clean up about 50 gallons of diesel fuel that leaked from one of the trucks.

Highway 11 was closed into the evening near milepost 8, and

See **CRASH/8A**



Umatilla County Public Works Department operator Jerad Mitchell drives a grader while working on Midway Road on Tuesday north of Pendleton.

Staff photo by E.J. Harris

## What winter left behind

Umatilla County catching up on road damage

By **PHIL WRIGHT**  
*East Oregonian*

Jerad Mitchell rumbled along in the high seat of the dirt-covered grader, guiding the big machine to smooth the gravel bumps and dips on Midway Road north of Pendleton.

Tuesday's weather provided the Umatilla County road crew another opportunity to tune up surfaces after one of the worst winters on record. Tom Fellows, director of county public works, said it looked like Mitchell was having a good day. That meant he would complete four miles of the road work on his shift.

Umatilla County maintains about 1,700 miles of roads, Fellows said, the second-most road miles of any county in Oregon. Around 500 of those are paved. The rest are gravel.

See **ROADS/8A**



North Fourth Street just outside of Hermiston is showing signs of raveling, the breaking down of pavement, due to the winter weather.

Staff photo by E.J. Harris

### HERMISTON

## City taking HART data to heart

Snow days caused problems for new bus system

By **JADE MCDOWELL**  
*East Oregonian*

Hermiston's bus service is catching on after a snowy start.

The Hermiston HART, which started offering free rides around town at the beginning of the year, averaged 24 rides a day in January and 25 rides a day in February despite a series of snowstorms that disrupted service seven days in January and once in February.

"That's been a challenge, obviously, because we are trying to portray it as a reliable system," assistant city manager Mark Morgan said.

Morgan thought March would likely see 26 riders per day, equaling nearly 600 riders for the month. As the weather gets warmer and more people realize the bus is a free option open to anyone, ridership is expected to continue growing.

The bus is part of the Kayak Public Transit system run by the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation. The city of Hermiston contracts with Kayak for the HART bus, and the city's transit advisory committee helped put together the bus route and will submit recommendations about adjustments in the future.

Kristi Avery, who sits on the committee, said the service seems to be going "great" so far. Avery is a lead personal agent for Eastern Oregon Support Services Brokerage, which serves clients with disabilities and is the top buyer of the city's subsidized taxi tickets for senior and disabled residents.

She said the brokerage will be doing some trainings and ride-alongs with clients to help them feel comfortable riding the bus for free instead of using up their \$2 taxi tickets.

"Sometimes new things come with a little bit of anxiety," she said.

See **HART/8A**



Smithsonian Institution photo

Layer by layer, a whale's earwax accumulates into a large plug over the animal's lifetime, sealing all sorts of information in wax. The sample appears in the Objects of Wonder exhibit at the National Museum of Natural History in Washington, D.C.

## Earwax tells whale of a tale

Pendleton grad seeks insight into whales' environment

By **KATHY ANEY**  
*East Oregonian*

Scientist Sacsha Usenko gets odd looks when he tells people he studies whale earwax.

That whales even have earwax might surprise many. And one might wonder why anyone would want to study the fishy smelling stuff anyway.

Usenko, a 1997 Pendleton High School grad and associate professor at Baylor University, says there are a multitude of reasons. Before revealing them, however, he described the inside of a whale's ear.

"Just like every other mammal, whales have earwax. Whales are unique because their ear is not external — wax can't leave their body," Usenko said. "The wax accumulates in the ear canal and forms a plug."

The environmental chemist said these long, rhubarb-shaped plugs consist of alternating light and dark layers, each representing about six months of a whale's life. Dark layers form when the whale is feeding. Light layers appear during migration when the animals don't eat much.

Scientists have used earplugs for more than a century to determine whales' ages, but Usenko and fellow Baylor scientist Stephen Trumble wondered if they could find other interesting information embedded in the wax.

Turns out, there was a treasure trove. These wax plugs are akin to time capsules that tell the tale of the whale's life — encounters with pollutants and stress, as well as times of giving birth, nursing or competing for mates. The two scientists and their team got access to whale earplugs from Smithsonian Institution collections. The researchers examined the archived museum samples harvested from dead whales from as far back as the 1860s and looked at how contaminants (such as pesticides and metals) and hormones (such as cortisol and testosterone) differed from layer to layer. Usenko was ecstatic at finding a way to fill something of a black hole in knowledge about whales.

"These are animals in the sea who travel great distances," Usenko said. "We don't know a lot about them. It's hard to chase around a whale for its entire life."

The presence of cortisol, the stress

**"Studying whales through their earwax is a unique opportunity to make a giant contribution to the field."**

— **Sacsha Usenko**, scientist, Pendleton High School grad, associate professor at Baylor University

