

MILTON-FREEWATER

Watershed council nets grant for aquifer recharge

Project benefits streams and wells

By GEORGE PLAVEN
East Oregonian

Drivers who bought a salmon license plate in Oregon may be helping to boost groundwater levels around Milton-Freewater, flowing it back into the Walla Walla River and providing much-needed relief for native chinook and steelhead.

Since 2004, the Walla Walla Basin Watershed Council has teamed with local irrigation districts to recharge gravel aquifers that have documented groundwater declines for 50-plus years. The project was recently awarded a \$346,746 grant from the Oregon Watershed Enhancement Board to add five new recharge sites around the basin.

Funding for OWEB restoration grants comes from three main sources — the Oregon Lottery, salmon license plates and federal dollars from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. Proceeds from salmon license plates are specifically earmarked to benefit the endangered fish.

The Walla Walla aquifer recharge effort was one of just four proposals chosen

by OWEB to receive a share of license plate revenue in 2017. All together, the agency awarded 89 grants statewide totaling more than \$9.3 million to improve fish and wildlife habitat and water quality.

"These investments will improve habitat for sage grouse, coho salmon, steelhead and other species, while also improving water quality and supporting local natural resource jobs," said Meta Loftsgaarden, OWEB executive director, in a statement.

Groundwater declines in the shallow alluvial aquifer have been an issue in the Walla Walla Valley for decades, according to Steven Patten, senior environmental scientist with the watershed council based in Milton-Freewater.

As more farms and development moved into the area, Patten said the river became increasingly channelized to avoid flooding, which cut off flows to the historic floodplain and prevented groundwater from naturally recharging into the system.

Combined with additional wells, Patten said the aquifer was getting hit on all fronts. "What we're trying to do



Photo contributed by the Walla Walla Basin Watershed Council
The Johnson Aquifer Recharge Site near Milton-Freewater is roughly three acres in size, and has been in operation since 2004.

is simulate that lost floodplain connection through artificial means," he said.

The watershed council partnered with the Hudson Bay District Improvement Company, an irrigation district in nearby Umapine, to divert water from the river during high flows and use it in specially designed recharge sites where the water can filter back into the shallow aquifer.

Recharge sites can take two forms, either as an infiltration basin or infiltration gallery. Infiltration basins are essentially large ponds up to several acres in size, whereas infiltration galleries are like modified drain fields where the water runs through perforated pipes buried six feet underground.

Patten said infiltration galleries are especially useful underneath access roads, in

field corners or anywhere else where a pond would not be feasible.

"We allow that land use to continue while doing aquifer recharge underground," he said.

The project is permitted to divert water annually between Nov. 1 and May 15. Managers are required to maintain minimum stream flows for fish and wildlife, which range from 64 cubic

feet per second in November to 150 cfs later in the spring.

There are currently 12 recharge sites in Oregon, and the OWEB grant will add five more. Patten said the sites helped place more than 2 billion gallons of water back into the ground during the last water year, and groundwater levels have risen anywhere from a half-foot to 1 foot year over year.

Not only does that groundwater benefit wells and irrigators, but has also replenished springs that flow back into the river and its tributaries.

"Historically, about half of those (springs) have gone dry in the past 50 to 70 years," Patten said. "We're bringing them back to life, and they're flowing again year-round."

OWEB also funded a \$376,030 floodplain restoration project on Meacham Creek east of Pendleton. The grant, awarded to the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation, will enhance three miles of in-stream habitat for native fish, while reconnecting the floodplain channel to create additional spawning habitat.

Contact George Plaven at gplaven@eastoregonian.com or 541-966-0825.

Expert awaiting data on M-F murder defendant psych exams

By PHIL WRIGHT
East Oregonian

Umatilla County District Attorney Dan Primus has to wait a few more weeks before having another expert look at murder defendant Oscar Pastor Garcia Villegas's psychological evaluations.

In April, Primus raised concern to the court that Villegas may be trying to fake mental illness. Primus said he wanted another expert, James Bryan, a Portland neuropsychologist, to evaluate the raw data from previous psychological evaluations of Villegas, 26, who faces charges of murder, four counts of attempted murder and seven related felonies. Police said Villegas stabbed and killed his wife, Maria



Villegas

Villegas, 24, and tried to kill their two young children in their Milton-Freewater home. Villegas could rely on a defense of guilty but insane.

Primus and defense attorney Kara Davis were in court Thursday afternoon in Pendleton to update Circuit Judge Lynn Hampton on the situation. Villegas appeared via video from the jail. Relatives of Oscar Villegas and Maria Villegas were also in court.

Davis said she asked the state to provide her with a letter seeking the information and Jaclyn Jenkins, chief deputy prosecutor, sent a request citing state law. Davis said she found the move amusing but not convincing enough to agree to the state's demand.

She also said she found nothing in Oregon case law supporting the state's position to have the data at this time and was concerned with Byran, who is not a state-approved criminal psychologist. Even so, she said, she talked to psychologist Terry Templeman, who evaluated Villegas, and agreed to send the data to Bryan and may have already done so.

Primus said Bryan should not take long to evaluate the data and could have a report in a few weeks.

Hampton set another check on the case for June 5. Davis said by then the parties should know if Villegas is moving toward a settlement conference, a change of plea hearing or a trial. Hampton said they would set dates accordingly.

Contact Phil Wright at pwright@eastoregonian.com or 541-966-0833.

BRIEFLY

Meet and greet scheduled for principal candidates

HERMISTON — Three candidates are vying to become the next principal of Desert View Elementary School in Hermiston.

Stefani Wyant, Laura Jacobsma-Odahl and Steve Tillery have been chosen as the finalists to replace outgoing principal Michael Roberts, who will resign at the end of the school year.

The public is invited to a meet and greet with the finalists on Wednesday, May 10 from 2:45 to 4:15 p.m. at the Desert View library. Attendees are asked to stay for the entire presentation in order to meet all the candidates and provide feedback to the district's selection committee through anonymous comment cards.

Wyant began her career as a third grade teacher at Rocky Heights Elementary, is currently the assistant principal at Armand Larive Middle School. Jacobsma-Odahl has taught multiple grades at Oakridge Elementary and is now an instructional coach at the school. Tillery's extensive teaching career spans back to 1983, and he is currently a professor at Western Oregon University.

Telephone pole sparks field fire in Stanfield

STANFIELD — Umatilla County Fire District 1 responded Thursday

afternoon to a field fire at South Edwards Road and Coe Avenue in Stanfield. The fire burned a large field, but no structures were damaged and no one was injured.

The property belongs to Eldon Marcum, a firefighter with UCFD 1, who said he thinks the fire was caused by a telephone pole.

"I think one wire burned off on the transformer," he said. "This is the third year in a row I've had a fire start from that pole."

As wildfire season begins, the U.S. Forest Service offered some tips people can keep in mind to prevent fires.

Suggestions include removing dead vegetation

and other items from under decks and porches, as well as from within 10 feet of the house. People are asked to remove flammable materials from within 30 feet of a home's foundation or other structures. Clear leaves and other debris from roofs, gutters, porches and decks to prevent embers from igniting a structure, and keep lawns and plants watered, or cut brown grass low to reduce fire intensity.

For more wildfire prevention tips, visit www.firewise.org.

Briefs are compiled from staff and wire reports, and press releases. Email press releases to news@eastoregonian.com

Carol Ann Williams
Celebration of Life
May 20, 2017

Graveside Service
Helix Cemetery
11:00 AM

Potluck Following at the
Helix Community Church
403 Harrison Street • Helix, OR 97835

HERMISTON

School safety report not an endorsement

By JAYATI
RAMAKRISHNAN
East Oregonian

As the vote for a bond to fund Hermiston School District projects draws near, many citizens are still considering the benefits and drawbacks of the projects promised if the \$104 million measure is passed.

Police Chief Jason Edmiston said he has been approached by several people about the proposed safety improvements that would take place under the bond, including a rebuild of Highland Hills and Rocky Heights elementary schools.

He said many have asked specifically about a safety assessment of the schools he conducted in 2014.

The report, which Edmiston said was requested of him by Superintendent Fred Maiocco, reviews the number of incidents the police department responded to on school grounds in 2013, which includes days and hours when school was not in session. For the year, officers responded to 243 events at Hermiston High School, between 60 and 75 incidents at each middle school, and a range at the elementary schools, with 47 incidents at Rocky Heights and 17 at Highland Hills, respectively the highest and lowest number of incidents.

"I do not see anything alarming with the number

of incidents at each school," Edmiston said. "Perhaps the only peculiar number for me is Highland Hills Elementary as that number is a bit lower than I would anticipate especially with the significant traffic issues surrounding that location[...]"

Edmiston said in his report, he hoped to provide an unbiased look at schools with regard to security.

"I don't make any significant recommendations where I don't feel they're appropriate, or where I know dollar strings are attached," he said.

Edmiston said that now, with the looming bond question, he's had many people ask him about the report to inform their decisions. But he said when he was approached to write the document, there was no discussion specific to any bond.

"The intrinsic theme was to identify specific strategies to make schools safer," he said. "I 100 percent stand by the document."

But he said he's not endorsing the bond, nor did he write the document with any intention of doing so.

In the document, he touches on three main safety issues at the schools: surveillance, accessibility and territoriality.

Of the eight school campuses, Edmiston said he identified accessibility issues with two: Rocky

Heights and Highland Hills. "Some schools here can quickly be pointed out as poorly designed from a control and accessibility standpoint," he said. The schools also have access to individual classrooms on the outside of the building, which Edmiston said creates safety concerns.

He added that Highland Hills, Rocky Heights and Sandstone Middle School all have problematic parent pick-up and drop-off areas, creating traffic issues.

Edmiston said he presented all this information to the Facilities Master Planning Committee in September 2014, and at that time also recommended the district should plan for increasing the capacity of schools for future growth.

He said the report did not address how progressive the district already is in terms of taking security measures.

"I touched upon the 2008 bond solely to set the table for technology that came as a result of that," he said, noting the surveillance cameras that had been installed then. "I believe it led to a deterrent of criminal activity, or identified things that the school can handle at their level versus at the criminal level."

He also cited crisis training that all district employees have received, praising the staff for their willingness to prepare and learn.

LOCAL RESIDENTIAL | COMMERCIAL | INDUSTRIAL

ENROLLING NOW FOR SPRING 2017

Sunthurst Energy, LLC

Turning Sunlight to Savings

Your Trusted Consultant & EPC PARTNER

(310) 975-4732
sunthurstenergy.com

SOLARWORLD REAL VALUE AUTHORIZED INSTALLER

Trade Ally of EnergyTrust of Oregon

OR CCB 201975