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Forest reform bill passes House

Walden applauds effort in conference call

By **GEORGE PLAVERN**
East Oregonian

For the fifth time in as many years, the U.S. House of Representatives passed a bill Wednesday that would expedite certain forest thinning projects to lower the risk of destructive wildfires across the country.

Rep. Greg Walden (R-Oregon) hailed it as a big day for the Northwest during a conference call with reporters, saying the bill not only solves the issue of “fire borrowing” but gives agencies more leeway to thin overcrowded and

diseased forests.

Fire borrowing refers to the longstanding practice of taking money away from forest management programs to pay for fire suppression, making it even more difficult for the Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management to get ahead of the problem. Instead, the Resilient Federal Forests Act of 2017 would create a new account under the Disaster Relief Fund — administered by the Federal Emergency Management Agency — to cover firefighting costs.

“That way, work can continue on the ground that’s so necessary,” Walden said.

The federal government spent a record \$2.5 billion fighting wildfires in 2017, including 678,000 acres burned in Oregon. By eliminating fire borrowing, Walden said more work can be done to lower the size and intensity of fires moving forward.

The bill itself features several provisions to increase the pace and scale of forest restoration, Walden said. For example, thinning projects as large as 10,000 acres could qualify for a categorical exclusion, fast-tracking environmental review. That limit increases to 30,000 acres if the project is developed by a collaborative group.

See **BILL/8A**



U.S. Rep. Greg Walden speaks during a Hermiston Rotary luncheon in September in Hermiston. EO file photo



Dance teams give fall preview

ABOVE: Remington Christensen performs with his fellow Pendleton High School Rhythmic Mode dancers during the Fall Preview on Wednesday night at Warberg Court.

RIGHT: A young Junior Jam dancer performs with the rest of her group.

Staff photos by Kathy Aney



Insurance sign-up period cut in half

By **JADE MCDOWELL**
East Oregonian

Local insurance agents will be hard-pressed to keep up with demand for their services this year after the federal government shortened the enrollment period for the health insurance exchanges to 45 days.

“It’s fast and furious,” said Doug Beamer, a partner at Wheatland Financial Services in Pendleton.

The enrollment period for people to sign up or switch insurance plans runs from Nov. 1 to Dec. 15. Last year it ran twice as long, through Jan. 31. The deadline applies to anyone who buys their health insurance through the insurance marketplace set up by the Affordable Care Act because they do not get health insurance through an employer or the government.

Computer-savvy Americans can log in to www.healthcare.gov and shop for and enroll in plans on their own. But many people prefer to consult with an insurance agent before making the decision, and Beamer said with the time crunch this year they should not wait until the last minute to do so. The enrollment period also overlaps with the Medicare Part D enrollment period, which ends Dec. 7.

“Everything is power-packed into this period,” Beamer said. “We are going to work some Saturdays and we’ll stay late and work through lunch and do everything we can.”

To help speed appointments along, Beamer said people can help by getting their own login and username set up before they arrive and making sure they have their financial information readily available.

A majority of Americans receive their health insurance through their employer, or through government-sponsored Medicaid or Medicare. The rest — including those who are self-employed — can sign up for plans via the Affordable Care Act health exchange. In most cases, depending on income level, people who sign up for health insurance via the exchange can qualify for tax credits to help cover some of their premium costs.

The enrollment period open now is the only time they can sign up for a new plan or change to a different plan for 2018 unless they have a “qualifying life event” during the year such as marriage or moving to a new state. Those who already have insurance through the exchanges can have their plan automatically renewed for the next year, but the Oregon Department of Consumer and Business Services recommends that they still log on to their account to update their financial information and compare plans.

“People who do so, instead of automatically being renewed, often save money,” the department wrote in a news release.

See **INSURANCE/8A**

HERMISTON

Murder defendant asserts innocence in letters to judge as settlement nears

By **JAYATI RAMAKRISHNAN**
East Oregonian

As a Hermiston man accused of murder prepares for a settlement conference, he has sent two letters to the presiding judge in the case claiming his innocence and trying to cast doubt on the investigation.

Tyree Houfmuse, facing charges for killing Hermiston resident James Cragun in May, wrote the letters to Umatilla County Circuit Court Judge Eva Temple, both of which were then made accessible to the public in Houfmuse’s case file on the Oregon State Courts website.

Houfmuse, who is being held

in the Umatilla County Jail, Pendleton, has a settlement conference on Dec. 4.

The handwritten letters, dated Sept. 8 and Sept. 11, address Temple directly. In the first, a 12-page letter, Houfmuse tells Temple he is innocent and praises her effusively as he defends his own character.

“Honorable Judge Eva J. Temple, I am not a murderer, or some lazy dirt bag that wants to take money from the state in lawsuits that should be used for cancer and Aids foundations or educational charities,” he wrote.



Houfmuse

He also makes several accusations about people related to the case, singling out a Hermiston police officer who he claims has unfairly targeted him in the past. He goes on to accuse the officer of having sexual relationships with two of Houfmuse’s friends while on the job and protecting them from arrest to buy their silence.

After questioning several people about the claims, the *East Orego-*

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