

Hand on doomed Oregon ship texted, called wife before death

By GILLIAN FLACCUS
Associated Press

PORTLAND — A crew member on a doomed Oregon crabbing vessel that sank in rough seas, killing all three aboard, sent desperate texts to his wife just before his death saying the seas were “real big” and he was putting on his life vest, according to testimony at a U.S. Coast Guard hearing on Wednesday.

Denise Porter gave tearful testimony about a series of texts and two alarming phone calls from her husband Joshua during the third day of a weeklong hearing into the Jan. 8 shipwreck off the Oregon coast. The hearing was held in Newport, and livestreamed.

The Mary B II overturned in waves up to 20 feet as it tried to cross the Yaquina Bar near Newport after a trip to collect crabbing pots during the lucrative Dungeness crab season.

Toxicology tests found the boat’s skipper, Stephen Biernacki, of Barnegat Township, New Jersey, had amphetamine, methamphetamine and alcohol in his system, but the blood alcohol content fell below the legal limit for intoxication. A toxicology expert, Brian M. Bourgeois, testified the levels of methamphetamine indicate that Biernacki, 50, was impaired.

“I would call this mariner not fit for duty and certainly not what I would call seaworthy,” Bourgeois said.



U.S. Coast Guard, File

In this Tuesday, Jan. 8, 2019, file photo, provided by the U.S. Coast Guard, a U.S. Coast Guard boat crew responds to three fishermen in the water after the commercial fishing vessel Mary B II capsized while crossing Yaquina Bay Bar off the coast of Newport.

Chris Reilly, an attorney for Biernacki’s family, did not immediately return an email, text or phone call seeking comment Wednesday while he was in the hearing proceedings. Biernacki’s relatives have said they would not comment.

Biernacki had recently moved to Oregon and had hired Porter, an experienced fisherman from Toledo, Oregon, to work on the Mary B II for about a week during the intense start of the Dungeness crab season, Denise Porter testified.

Porter quickly noticed that Biernacki didn’t seem to know what he was doing and wouldn’t listen to Porter or take his advice, she testified. He didn’t check the tides, for example, and didn’t know how to use some equipment and kept alcohol on

board, she said. Her husband was concerned about his safety, but continued to go out because they had bills to pay and he was only supposed to work a few more days before taking a different job, she said.

“Every time we talked about it, it was like, ‘Why are you on there?’ He said, ‘We have bills to pay.’”

On the day of the shipwreck, Porter expected to be back in port by 2 p.m., she said, because bad weather was coming. He called her shortly after 2 p.m. to say he wouldn’t be home until 4 p.m. Her husband told her that Biernacki wanted to “go and do two more strings,” she said, referring to pulling up more crab pots.

A short while later, Porter texted his wife again to say the Coast Guard

was sending a boat to help the Mary B II as it tried to cross Yaquina Bar, a treacherous area where the Yaquina River flows into the ocean current.

The Coast Guard had told the crew that the boat that crossed the bar before them had trouble, she said, referring to her husband’s texts.

“In the midst of the texting back in forth he called me and said, ‘I’m scared, it’s really big out here, I’m putting my life jacket on and I’m putting my phone and wallet in my pocket,’” she recalled.

“And he said, ‘I’ve got to go’ and he hung up.”

Denise Porter, also an experienced fisherperson, began to drive to the jetty, all while texting her husband. She saw flares over the water and the lights from three boats in the heavy surf.

“I said, ‘They’re shooting up flares’ and the very last text I got from him was ‘WTF. Who is?’ That’s all he wrote,” she said tearfully.

She took off her glasses in the fine drizzle, but still could make out lights in the water and hoped one was the Mary B II.

“That’s when I texted him, ‘Are you guys through now?’ and then I didn’t get a text back,” she said.

“Then there’s a series of questions that I text him and I get no answer back and I couldn’t figure out what was going on,” she said. “And then I saw the helicopter and I knew something bad had happened — and I knew I’d never talk to him again.”

Oregon OKs largest expansion of federal free lunch program

By SARAH ZIMMERMAN
Associated Press

SALEM — Oregon lawmakers have approved the largest statewide expansion of the federal free lunch program, ensuring all students living up to three times above the poverty line will have access to free meals.

It’s the first time a state has offered to completely take on school meal costs, which can often run tens of thousands of dollars for individual school districts. The move is expected to provide hundreds of thousands of students with free breakfast and lunch.

One in seven Oregon households is “food insecure,” according to the Oregon Center for Public Policy, meaning that families have trouble putting food on the table and often don’t know where they’ll get their next meal.

At least 174,000 children have limited access to food, more than the population of Oregon’s second largest city, Eugene.

“Hungry kids don’t think about education nearly as much as having something in their stomach,” said Sen. Arnie Roblan, a Democrat from Coos Bay who helped craft the legislation.

At least 62% of students attend a school with high federal poverty rates. These schools can get federal assistance to provide free meals to all their students no matter their income levels under the 2011 Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act, a policy championed by former first lady Michelle Obama.

But even though these schools may qualify for assistance, not all of them take advantage of it because of low federal reimbursement rates. Instead, they only provide meals to those living above the federal poverty level.

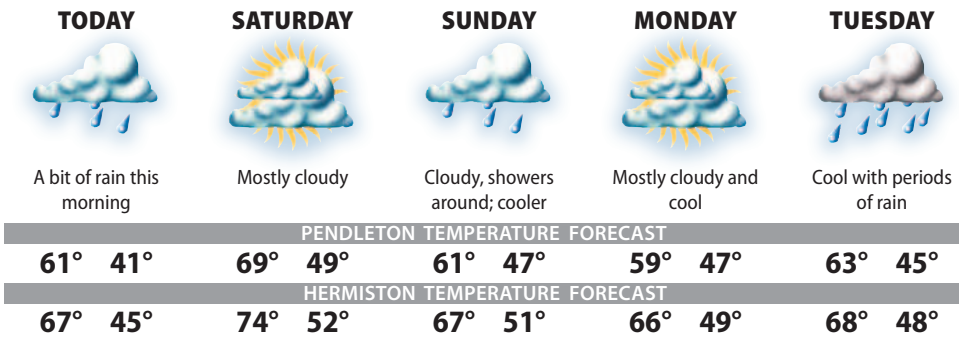
Around a third of food insecure students in Oregon, however, live above that poverty threshold meaning they’re ineligible for free meals, according to data from Feeding America.

Tim Sweeney, a superintendent in Oregon’s impoverished South Coast, said that his district runs a deficit because it chooses to take on the cost of feeding all its students. Even with federal assistance, it costs around \$25,000 a year to provide free breakfast and lunches, money Sweeney said could have gone to textbooks.

“Poverty is a huge deal here and so many students rely on schools to provide them with food and a warm place for shelter,” he said. “Food service may not be a winning game, but we know it means the world to these kids.”

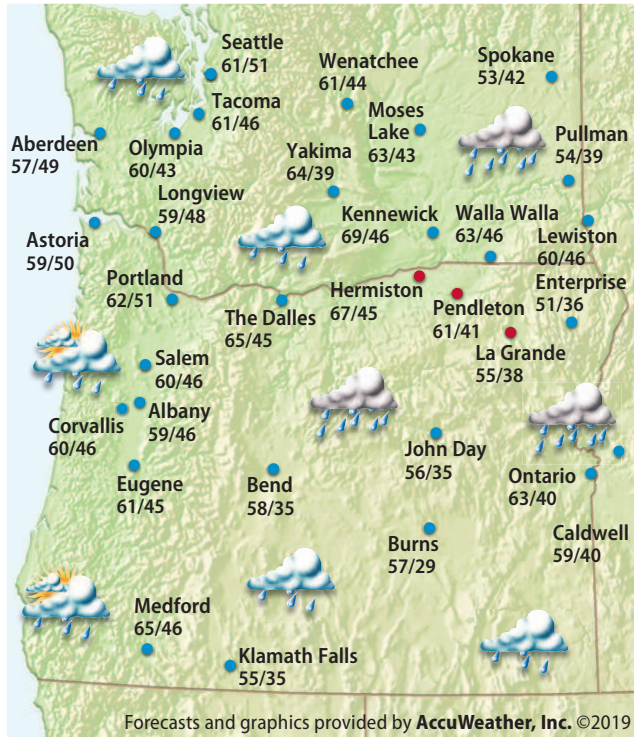
Oregon will now be the first in the nation to pick up these school districts’ school lunch tabs, allowing 761 schools across the state to provide free lunch and breakfast to approximately 345,000 students.

Forecast for Pendleton Area



OREGON FORECAST

Shown is today’s weather. Temperatures are today’s highs and tonight’s lows.



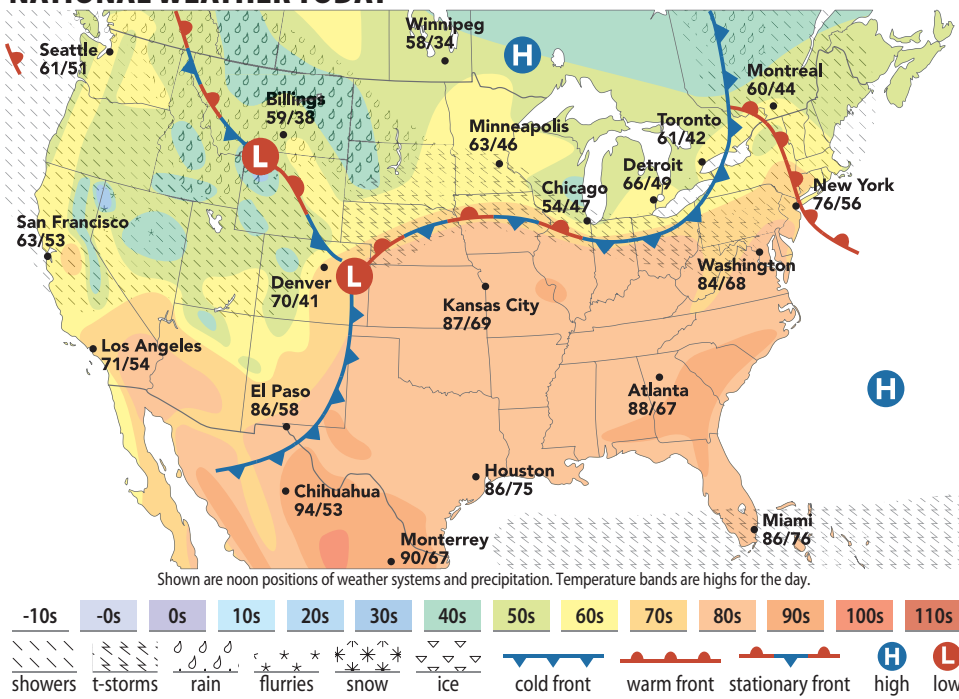
ALMANAC

PENDLETON through 3 p.m. yest.		
TEMP.	HIGH	LOW
Yesterday	62°	49°
Normals	71°	47°
Records	94° (2006)	32° (1910)
PRECIPITATION		
24 hours ending 3 p.m.	0.32"	
Month to date	0.36"	
Normal month to date	0.62"	
Year to date	8.12"	
Last year to date	6.00"	
Normal year to date	5.73"	
HERMISTON through 3 p.m. yest.		
TEMP.	HIGH	LOW
Yesterday	65°	50°
Normals	73°	47°
Records	94° (1973)	32° (2002)
PRECIPITATION		
24 hours ending 3 p.m.	0.10"	
Month to date	0.10"	
Normal month to date	0.59"	
Year to date	3.98"	
Last year to date	4.91"	
Normal year to date	4.58"	
WINDS (in mph)		
Today	Sat.	
Boardman	WSW 12-25	W 6-12
Pendleton	WSW 15-25	NNW 4-8
SUN AND MOON		
Sunrise today	5:22 a.m.	
Sunset tonight	8:21 p.m.	
Moonrise today	7:09 p.m.	
Moonset today	5:05 a.m.	
Full	Last	New
May 18	May 26	June 3
		June 9

NATIONAL EXTREMES

Yesterday’s National Extremes: (for the 48 contiguous states)
High 99° in Presidio, Texas Low 24° in Aspen Springs, Colo.

NATIONAL WEATHER TODAY



AP Photo, File

Oregon Gov. Kate Brown has sent a letter to Interior Secretary David Bernhardt, who oversees the Fish and Wildlife Service, to “clarify and correct” ODFW’s position by opposing the delisting proposal for the state’s gray wolves.

Governor reverses state’s position on wolf delisting

By MATEUSZ PERKOWSKI
EO Media Group

Oregon Gov. Kate Brown is urging the federal government not to lift Endangered Species Act protections for wolves, contradicting an earlier position taken by state wildlife regulators.

Gray wolves are currently classified as threatened or endangered across most of the country but the U.S. Fish and Wildlife has proposed delisting the species because its “thriving on its vast range” and doesn’t face imminent extinction.

The decision initially won the support of Curt Melcher, ODFW’s director, who wrote in a May 9 letter that Oregon’s wolf population is projected to continue expanding regardless of federal ESA status and that a federal delisting is warranted.

Brown has now sent a letter to Interior Secretary David Bernhardt, who oversees the Fish and Wildlife Service, to “clarify and correct” ODFW’s position by opposing the delisting proposal. Although the “suc-

cess of wolf recovery is unquestioned” and ESA listing within Oregon isn’t necessary, the state’s efforts “cannot protect imperiled wildlife beyond our borders in other states,” which necessitates federal listing, according to Brown’s May 15 letter.

“Unlike salmonids and sage grouse, the principal reason for the decline of the wolf across the Western United States was deliberate extirpation,” she said. “We are not yet far enough from that cultural history to warrant confidence that wolf recovery is inevitable.”

Representatives of the Governor’s Office and ODFW did not respond to requests to explain the discrepancy between Brown’s and Melcher’s positions as of press time.

Brown is known to meet regularly with the heads of state agencies, so it’s not likely Melcher’s support for delisting was a surprise, said Jerome Rosa, executive director of the Oregon Cattlemen’s Association. “I would find that highly unusual for her not to be aware of that.”

CORRECTIONS: The *East Oregonian* works hard to be accurate and sincerely regrets any errors. If you notice a mistake in the paper, please call 541-966-0818.

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