

Ballot:

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'Their hearts are in the right place'

Farmers balked at the proposal, stating it wouldn't be worth the effort or the ink to do a story about the initiative. Prominent La Grande hunter Steve West, of the TV show "Steve's Outdoor Adventures," said the proposition likely would fail to gather enough signatures to make it on the ballot.

"The people who come up with this, their hearts are in the right place because they're so attached to animals," he said. "The reality is they will never get enough votes to pass something like this. I just don't see any chance in hell that they even get 100,000 signatures to even get it to a ballot. It's just so out there."

West said proposals like these have an unintended side effect of uniting groups that are opposed to similar initiatives.

"If anything, my bet is this is something that would solidify and unite the ranchers, farmers and hunters," he said. "It's probably going to unite the other side just to stamp it out once and for all."

Officials from the Confederated Tribes of Umatilla Indian Reservation said they're not worried about the initiative, citing treaties that would supersede the law. They are, however, watching closely in the event the tribes



Alex Wittwer/EO Media Group

A cow and calves rest in a field Thursday, March 17, 2022, along Peach Road, La Grande. Initiative Petition 13, a controversial animal rights proposal that would affect livestock, has stalled as organizers failed to gather enough signatures to put it on the ballot in November.

need to take a reactionary approach to the proposal.

"We're continuing to watch and see how far it goes, and see what happens in July to see if they get their initiative fulfilled with the required signatures," said Jiselle Halfmoon, interim communications director for CTUIR. "Then, of course, we'll readress it, but at this time we're pretty secure in our situation."

Law experts say proposal is misunderstood

Russ Mead, a professor of law at Lewis & Clark Law School in Portland, said what the proposal says it will do and what the two

opposing factions for the proposition say it will do differ greatly.

"Oregon's animal cruelty laws have a long list of exceptions," he said. "For example, hunting and killing livestock is exempt from Oregon's animal cruelty laws. IP13 removes these exemptions. The result is not that hunting and killing livestock will be illegal if IP13 passes, it is just that when you hunt, you need to be humane. When you kill livestock, you need to be humane."

The website for IP13 states its goal is to enact legislation that would make it so that "animals

on farms, research labs, exhibitions and in the wild would no longer be allowed to be intentionally injured or killed." However, Mead disagrees with the drafters of IP13 and their proposed mission statement on the IP13 webpage. The law as it is proposed, he said, would need to be considered in courtrooms to find the exact limitations and framework.

"Anyone who says any activity will become illegal with the passage of IP13 is just flat wrong," he said. "With the animal cruelty exemptions removed, the Oregon courts will need to decide what animal cruelty is."

How animal cruelty is

defined in the law, Mead said, is open-ended.

"Animal cruelty statutes seldom define what is cruel and what is humane," Mead said. "For example, statutes do not specify that beating a dog to death with a baseball bat is cruel. Or that killing a dog by lethal injection is humane."

Mead stated if the proposal did muster up the signatures, and passed in the November ballot, the proposal wouldn't turn hunters into criminals overnight.

"The Oregon courts will need to decide what, if any, hunting and fishing practices violate Oregon animal cruelty laws," he said. "I could well see the courts finding leg-hold traps are cruel. But, I would be shocked if the courts found a father and daughter fishing with a cane pole animal cruelty."

Michelson said one of the secondary goals of the proposal is to help draw attention to exemptions in Oregon statutes regarding animal abuse, and how the animal abuse laws give protections to pets but not to livestock.

"We're one of the few states that acknowledges that animals are sentient in our state statutes," Michelson said. "Yet our animal cruelty laws largely only protect our companion animals. All the other animals, whether they're in farms or in research labs or in the wild, or in rodeos and

exhibitions, they're exempt from those same protections."

Michelson noted the ultimate goal of the campaign would be to ensure all animals in Oregon have the same rights and protections that companion animals enjoy.

"Largely, what our campaign is focused on is the right for animals not to be killed or injured, to not be neglected, and to not be forcibly impregnated or forcibly masturbated," he said. "Our focus is very intentionally on that, and so we will continue the campaign until those rights are achieved."

As of Tuesday, March 15, the IP13 Facebook page had 344 followers, and its postings attract more negative comments than supportive ones. If the proposal passes — either now or in 2024 — it likely would face lengthy legal scrutiny, according to Jacob Mannis, the deputy district attorney for Oregon who handles animal cruelty cases.

"It would require a lot of things to happen before it would become the law," he said. "I assume that there would be a round of lawsuits before anything gets enforced, and then there would have to be a law enforcement agency that would investigate, a prosecutor that would prosecute and ultimately a jury that would convict, because anybody in Oregon who's been accused of a crime has a right to a trial by jury."

Trauma:

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have become another statistic reflecting outcomes for young Black men living in such circumstances had it not been for family.

Thorpe's older brother also had joined the Army as a young man and ended up stationed at Joint Base Lewis-McChord near Tacoma.

"Then he came to Walla Walla," Thorpe said. "He talked me into coming up here and going to work at the prison. I had to look Walla Walla up; I only knew the name from a Looney Tunes cartoon."

Thorpe spent his last dollars to come for an interview. Assured a job would be his, he flew home again to make the move.

"My mom gave me the money to drive up here. I had \$19 to my name when I got to Walla Walla. I lived with my brother until I got on my feet."

That was in 2008. By 2009, Thorpe had installed his family, including four children, in their new hometown and continued to focus on building a career as a corrections officer.

The work suited him. At the time, he said, the prison had a "paramilitary" atmosphere that was attractive for its structure and clear expectations.

"I got promoted fairly quickly because I was good at my job. Everything was good. We had just bought a house."

Thorpe, 42, had been a shooting enthusiast for years, but coming to this area brought his hobby into sharper focus.

"I met some white dudes who took me out shooting," he said, laughing. "It was like love at first sight. I had never just shot for fun."

By 2016, Thorpe was hosting competitive matches and teaching classes, with an emphasis on precision shooting with .22-caliber rifles.

He first informally started Black Hammer to teach people long-range shooting skills, primarily using the range at East End Rod & Gun Club in Milton-Freewater, Thorpe said.

He teaches both rimfire and centerfire shooting, but this year the focus is on the simpler rimfire model to make the sport less intimidating and less expensive.

Thorpe even supplies a rifle and ammunition to those who want to try it out, a courtesy he calls "the Black Hammer experience."

The business now presents seasonal shooting matches.



Greg Lehman/Walla Walla Union-Bulletin

Brandon Kelly with Baylee Kelly, 9, Keegan Winters, 14, and Leam Key, 13, at a Black Hammer winter series event in February 2022 in Milton-Freewater.

Thorpe is hosting a five-part, competitive winter series that will culminate in his first two-day event on April 9 and 10.

In February, attendance at the third session was robust with about 40 adults and a handful of children moving through the course, vying to strike their targets.

Brandon Cadwell, who runs logistics and coaches shooting for Black Hammer, hustled here and there to help groups get lined out, a broad smile welcoming all.

"This year, we got affiliated with the Precision Rifle (Series), meaning some of these shooters are showing up to earn points for that," Cadwell said.

On this sunny day, that included groups like the team from Lead Farm Gun Range in Prosser.

Lee Stebar, from LaGrande, said Lead Farm members have been faithfully traveling to Milton-Freewater to participate in the Black Hammer series.

"This is pure enjoyment," Stebar said, waving a hand toward the range, explaining the challenge of multiple targets in multiple positions creates a happy tension as Lead Farm shooters try for the highest point count possible.

"It gets intense, and that's half the pleasure."

Down from Othello, Washington, David Valdez was attending his first competitive match after meeting other shooters at another event. It was a good way to spend a Saturday outdoors with new friends for not a whole lot of money, Valdez said.

"The .22 is cheaper, and it teaches the fundamentals of shooting."

Victor Mendoza from Hermiston agreed.

"It's just flat out fun, a good way to practice for relatively low cost. And this is a really nice range."

Duc Luu, a dentist at the Walla Walla prison, has known Gentry Thorpe for years and relishes being part

of the Black Hammer crew.

Events like this, which attract families and friends, "puts shooting in a positive light," Luu said.

"We all value the Second Amendment, we love the community support. This is very organized and very safe."

Target shooting under these circumstances can be a good youth activity, all the better for being an outdoor sport, Luu said.

Jimmy Cadwell, 6, could be inclined to agree. The Assumption Catholic School kindergartner participates in the "Mighty Mini" division for shooters age 10 and under, with a focus on fun over competition.

Nonetheless, when asked what he enjoys about the sport, Jimmy shot out an answer:

"Winning."

Winning at recovery

Gentry and his wife, Diedra Thorpe, now fully understand there is more than one way to win at target shooting.

The residual brain trauma from the inmate attack left Gentry Thorpe with short-term memory loss, cognitive issues, mental fatigue and poor concentration. Vertigo and migraines plague the corrections officer while periods of dark mood and flashes of anger impact the rest of the family.

"My psychologist tells me that's part of the brain injury. I was super mellow before," he said.

His wife has been a trooper, working as a para-educator at an elementary school while pursuing a master's degree in teaching and picking up the slack on the bad days, he said.

It was Diedra Thorpe who insisted her husband, a self-proclaimed "non pet person," get the service dog health providers had recommended. Thus, "Blu" has joined the family.

When Gentry Thorpe was

first injured, he "absolutely" couldn't go out to shoot, he remembered.

"I couldn't leave the house. I couldn't do anything."

About the time his psychologist suggested he try returning to his favorite sport, his speech therapist recommended the same. As Gentry Thorpe was able to return to his hobby, the mechanics of the sport retrained the focus and stamina he'd lost, much to his relief.

With the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic, Gentry Thorpe took time to promote Black Hammer in every fashion he could.

"It gave me an opportunity to post my stuff on social media, and more people who were sitting at home and doing nothing saw it. I just flooded social media and tried to break the internet with all of it."

His wife used her degree in graphic arts to help with logo

and marketing efforts, he said.

As the response started rolling in, Gentry Thorpe felt his depression falling away.

"People came, they showed up and they went shooting. And I got to socialize again. I was able to leave the house."

He plans to pay the medicine forward, he said.

"I've just tried to share what helps me with other people. I want them to have that same feeling."

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