

EAST OREGONIAN

THURSDAY, APRIL 7, 2022

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SHEARER'S FOODS FIRE

BOILER EXPLOSION STILL A MYSTERY

Former Shearer's safety manager alleges bad record at Hermiston plant

By ERICK PETERSON
East Oregonian

HERMISTON — More than three dozen people are trying to figure out why a boiler exploded at Hermiston Shearer's Foods plant on Feb. 22, causing a fire that destroyed the building and put 231 people out of work.

Scott Goff, Umatilla County Fire District No. 1 investigator, said on Tuesday, April 5, the examination of the site has been delayed. First, there was trouble because the rubble was so great it was difficult to sort through it. Also, it took time to bring together involved parties. In the past couple of days, big winds pushed back the investigation, which was the latest delay.

The examination of the destroyed Hermiston plant, which once employed 231 people, has brought people from the fire district, Shearer's, insurance carriers and representatives of involved equipment and contractors, according to Goff.

Speculation on the cause

Though the direct cause of the explosion is yet unknown, one former Shearer's Foods employee



Erick Peterson/East Oregonian

A toppled section of the Shearer's Foods plant stands Monday, April 4, 2022.

claims lax safety measures might have contributed to the explosion.

"I saw a lot of things," Stephen Dean said. "I spoke with several peers that I had that no longer work there about how many conversations I had about that place being a time bomb."

According to Dean, when he heard of the explosion and the resulting fire, the first words that came out of his mouth were, "I told you so."

He said he was surprised the fire, which destroyed the building, sent a handful of people to the hospital and left 231 people out of work, was not worse. After all, no one died.

He said he was plant safety manager, working directly with the management team. He said he "provided safety culture and influence and direct safety policy and procedure" for about one year, from early 2018 to early 2019.

The Hermiston Herald contacted the Shearer's corporate office to verify Dean's employment. Shearer's management, though, stated the company would not share employment information out of respect for employees and their confidentiality.

Dean, however, was able to present a letter of hire and his own resignation letter as evidence he had worked there.

Early in his employment, he said,

he did some in-depth looks into the facility to identify risks and hazards and found some he deemed as "high risk" and "high consequence." He was particularly worried about oil fires, he said.

While he was at the plant, Dean said, there were "a bunch of mini-fires," which were the result of material building up in ovens. In policies and procedures, he said, workers were supposed to rake out the ovens when in a safe state. According to Dean, procedures changed so workers were using compressed air to clean the ovens instead.

"You don't put compressed air onto fires," he said.

He said this is just one example of the culture at the plant. Practices were unsafe, not necessarily because any one person was directing them poorly, but because those practices shifted towards being unsafe, he said. Dean said once people start doing things one way, they pass on those habits to new workers and behaviors become ingrained.

OSHA weighs in

Aaron Corvin is the public information officer for Oregon Occupational Safety and Health, or Oregon OSHA. He confirmed that the agency is investigating the Feb. 22 explosion and fire. He stated in an email, however, OSHA does not discuss the status or details of active cases and he would share information about it once the investigation is complete.

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Uber exerts influence on Pendleton taxi debate

By ANTONIO SIERRA
East Oregonian

PENDLETON — The future of ride-hail services in Pendleton now is in the hands of city attorney Nancy Kerns.

After ride-hail giant Uber nixed a proposed ordinance that would have integrated ride-hails into Pendleton, Kerns used a Tuesday, April 5, city council meeting to ask for guidance as she prepares to reengage Uber in negotiations.

The city previously was negotiating with Elite Taxi, the city's only taxi service, and a group of residents who aspired to drive for Uber. After meeting with the two sides, the city emerged with a framework that would have allowed, on a trial basis, ride-hails such as Uber to operate during the evening hours while Elite mainly operated during the day. While the local ride-hail

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Kathy Aney/East Oregonian

Two Elite Taxi vehicles await fares Tuesday, April 5, 2022, at 332 S.E. Dorion Ave., Pendleton. City attorney Nancy Kerns is working on a proposal for a pilot project to allow Uber to operate in Pendleton.

EASTERN OREGON

Merkley touts support of rural Oregon

By ALEX WITTWER
EO Media Group

LA GRANDE — Oregon Sen. Jeff Merkley is setting his sights on fire protection and forest resilience in Eastern Oregon.

The Oregon Democrat previously promoted The Valley West Joint Chiefs project in September 2021 as a way to "ensure the safety of our communities, the resilience of our forests and the conservation of our natural resources,"



Merkley

according to a press release from Merkley's office. The project is a collaboration between the U.S. Department of Agriculture Natural Resources Conservation Service and the U.S. Forest Service.

"I am very happy to be able to announce that I was able to secure \$1.8 million for the La Grande Valley West Joint Chiefs project," he said during a one-on-one interview Wednesday, March 30. "We're talking about precommercial thinning, fuels reduction, prescribed burning (and) mowing, and all of it produces jobs in the woods, saw logs for the mill and a more fire resilient forest, which I think is a triple-win."

Forest resilience and response to drought

Last year's fire season was one of the most explosive ones yet in Oregon, though Eastern Oregon was largely spared from conflagrations and widespread damage like that seen in the southern parts of

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WALLA WALLA REGIONAL AIRPORT

Extensive remodel slated to accommodate jets

By MAX ERIKSON
Walla Walla Union-Bulletin

WALLA WALLA — The future of air travel at the Walla Walla Regional Airport is going to get faster.

Alaska Air Group, parent company of Alaska Airlines, announced last week it plans to transition from turboprop planes to full-jet aircraft for its Horizon Air services sometime in 2023.

The Embraer 175 jet aircraft will be the newest addition to the airport, replacing the turboprop Bombardier Q-400, which has served passengers for many years and is considered a good work horse aircraft for regional flights.

The Port of Walla Walla is



Greg Lehman/Walla Walla Union-Bulletin

The afternoon Alaska Airlines flight sits outside the Walla Walla Regional Airport on Friday, April 1, 2022.

preparing now for the switch, with a facilities remodel to accommodate the new planes.

The Q-400 has been in operation at the Walla Walla airport since 2008. The E-175 will have the same

76-passenger capacity as the Q-400 but with added cabins including 12 for first-class riders, 12 premium-class seats and 52 economy seats.

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