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PORT OF MORROW

Looking the other way: Part 1

State officials rarely intervened and never stopped POM as it dumped hundreds of tons of nitrogen

By ALEX BAUMHARDT, COLE SINANIAN and JAEAL CALLOWAY
Oregon Capital Chronicle

Editor's note: This is part one of a series that follows the article "Don't Drink the Water," which ran in the May 10 East Oregonian. Subsequent parts will run in next week's editions of the EO.

BOARDMAN — The state's chief environmental agency knowingly let the Port of Morrow pollute year after year, contributing to drinking water contamination for thousands, an investigation by the Capital Chronicle showed.

To protect jobs, the state Department of Environmental Quality addressed the industrial pollution with deals instead of enforcement.

Agency officials accepted the port's plans over the years that promised correction but were seldom followed.

Front-line DEQ employees tasked with monitoring the port encountered unexplained directives that gave reprieve after reprieve to the port, identified as one source in the region of nitrogen pollution. The port pumps nitrogen-laced water from its industrial complex in Boardman to farm fields, where it can convert into nitrate and seep into groundwater.

The people endangered by the environmental mismanagement are mostly low-income families with unsafe wells. They hold little power and have few allies to counter the political might of port authorities.

DEQ directors over the years had the legal authority to suspend or revoke the port's wastewater permit over repeated violations. They didn't, the Capital Chronicle found.

DEQ officials could have mandated that the port reduce nitrogen levels in the wastewater before spreading it on farms and over groundwater aquifers. They did not.

And the agency's leaders could have used stiff penalties to compel the Port of Morrow to comply. For years, they imposed none.

A combination of budget and staff cuts and powerful political and economic forces account for DEQ's weak enforcement, according to hundreds of pages of public records and dozens of interviews.

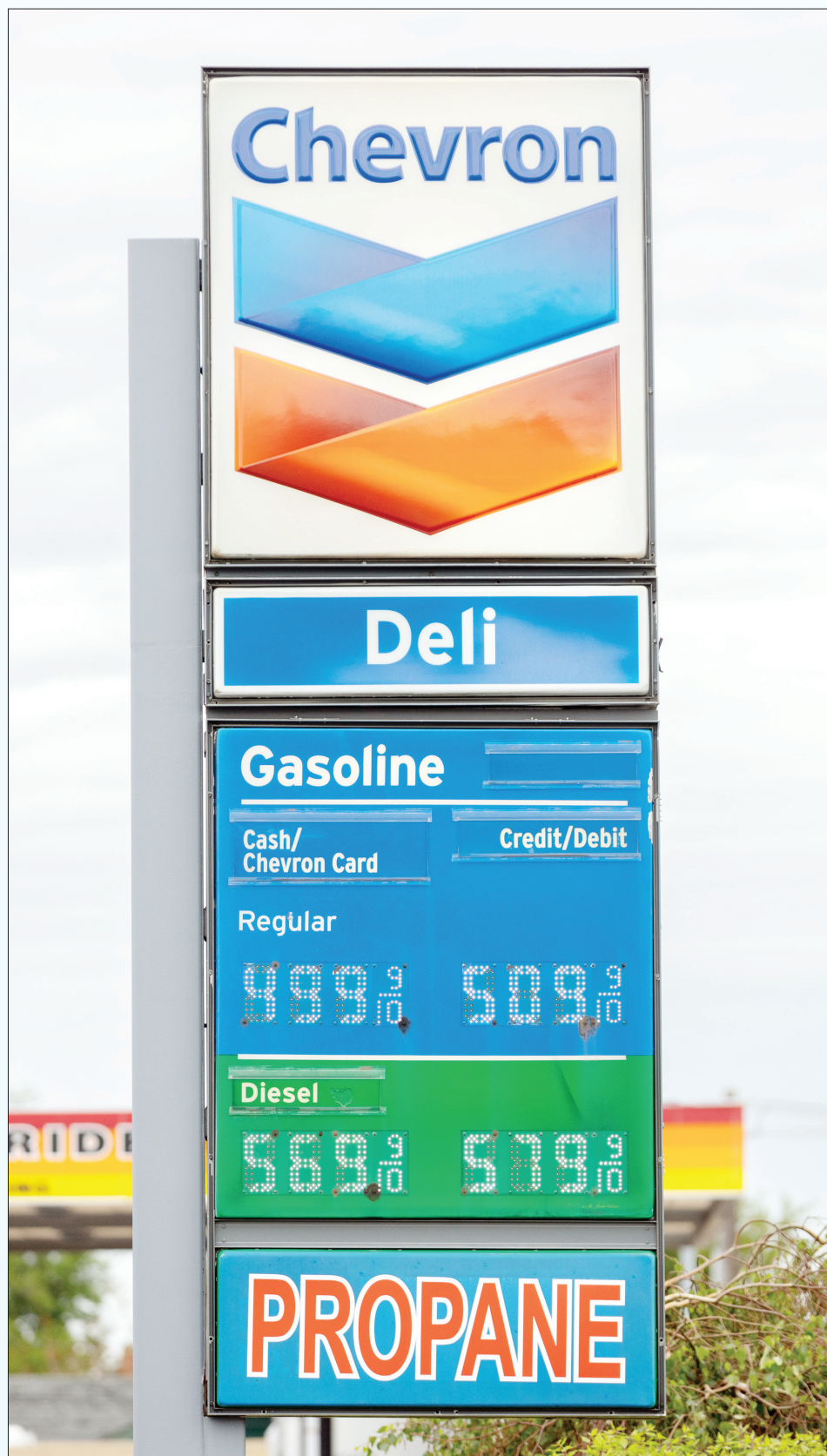
As a result, hundreds of tons of nitrogen that should never have made it out of the port's industrial

See Water, Page A9



Medelez Trucking in Hermiston and other trucking companies are surviving despite paying record diesel prices to keep their trucks on the road.
Kathy Aney/East Oregonian

Record-high diesel prices hit home



Diesel fuel prices keep hitting record highs. Dave's Chevron at 220 S.W. 12th St., Pendleton charged nearly \$5.80 per gallon for diesel on Wednesday, May 18, 2022.
Kathy Aney/East Oregonian

Medelez Trucking in Hermiston adapts under ballooning fuel costs

By JOHN TILLMAN
East Oregonian

HERMISTON — The national average price for diesel fuel set a record high of \$5.57 per gallon on Tuesday, May 17, the American Automobile Association reported. A year earlier it was \$3.17, for a 76% increase. Regular gas grew by 48% during the same 12 months. Diesel rose another cent May 18.

Yet, despite daily records, some Umatilla County trucking companies are surviving, while others struggle.

Bennie Medelez, owner of Medelez Trucking, is a top employer in Hermiston, with more than 500 employees during harvest and 225 to 250 year-round. They mainly haul potatoes and other agricultural commodities for farmers and supermarket chains. Melendez has to keep 180 big rigs on the road, plus fuel about 30 pickups and smaller vehicles.

"The situation is killing us," Medelez said. "Our fuel bill was \$20 million last year. It'll probably be \$30 million this year. It's ridiculous, if we don't get any help from the government or anywhere. We need the pipeline and drilling in Alaska. Some shippers have let us tack on surcharges, but others of course don't want to share the costs. We can raise rates only so much."

It costs \$1,500 to fill up a semitrailer, which needs to be topped off every one-and-a-half to two days. The trucks are on the road most of the time. After potato harvest in Oregon and Washington, the company hauls seed from Montana and Idaho.

"It has been a devastating thing," Medelez said. "I've been in business over 40 years, but am losing the taste for it. Fuel costs are 40% of our gross. I'm second generation, so used to working 7 days a week. My dad started it. I'm 66 now. I like what I do, but this is just heart-breaking."

His family is involved in the company, too, so Medelez wouldn't mind working only five or six days a week.

"I could find something to enjoy doing for one or two days off," he said.

See Diesel, Page A9

History in the making

Three women vie for Oregon governor

By PETER WONG
Oregon Capital Bureau

SALEM — Oregon apparently will have at least three women in the general election for governor on Nov. 8 — and two of them, Democrat Tina Kotek of Portland and Republican Christine Drazan of Canby, faced each other for two years in the Oregon House.

Kotek and Drazan emerged from record fields to win their party nominations Tuesday night, May 17, and Betsy Johnson of Scappoose, a former Democrat, plans an independent bid by qualifying for the ballot by petition.

All of them hope to succeed Democrat Kate Brown, who will have served

just 38 days shy of two full terms when she leaves office Jan. 9, 2023. Brown was barred by term limits from a third consecutive term.

According to the Center for American Women and Politics at Rutgers University, 45 women have been governor of their states or territories.

Two-thirds were elected in their own right, such as Oregon's Barbara Roberts, a Democrat elected in 1990. A few succeeded their husbands. Most others were next in line of succession, including Brown, a Democrat who was secretary of state when John Kitzhaber resigned under pressure amid an ethics scandal in 2015, just 38 days into his fourth term. Brown was elected in 2016 to the two-years remaining in that term, and in 2018 to a full term of her own.

See History, Page A9



Contributed Photos
Christine Drazan, from left, Tina Kotek and Betsy Johnson are running for governor in the 2022 general election. Drazan, a Republican, and Kotek, a Democrat, prevailed in packed fields to win their party nominations. Johnson, a former Democrat, plans an independent bid by qualifying for the ballot by petition.

