

Punches replaces Oester as area's OSU forester

By Paul Wahl
Wallowa County Chieftain

John Punches loves trees. He always has.

"I have always been an outdoors person, and one of the great passions of my life is being around growing things," said Punches who became the OSU Extension Forester for Wallowa, Union and Umatilla counties July 1.

Punches holds associate professor rank with OSU and conducts field appointments and produces educational programs on anything to do with forests.

Much of his work is done in partnership with state and federal agencies.

Punches holds a degree in forestry from Michigan Tech in Houghton, Mich., wood science from Virginia Tech and forest ecosystems from Oregon State.

Prior to coming to La Grande to replace Paul Oester, who retired, Punches spent 24 years in Roseburg, Ore. In his spare time, he enjoys mountain climbing and is a volunteer search and rescue and mountain rescue instructor.

Most of his work in Wallowa County pertains to stewardship issues and fire risk reduction on private property.

In all three counties, property owners rarely own just timberland.

"Typically, they have a home in a forest or on ag lands that has forests or they may end up being people who live in town who are interested in the forests around them," Punches said.

His job is to help implement best practices using the science OSU has developed.

Once of his primary field questions is "why is my tree dying?" He wrote one of the university's seminal works on the topic in 2008. Another topic is reducing fire risk on private property. He's also available for consultation on federal regulatory issues.

LEARN MORE



Extension forester John Punches will host a free class, "So You've Got a Forest ... Now What?" 5:30 p.m. Thursday, Dec. 6 at Wallowa Resources Stewardship Center, 401 NE 1st St, Enterprise.

The classes will feature speakers from Wallowa County who will answer the most common questions new forest owners (or those new to managing their forests) ask. The session will provide an overview of how forestland is assessed and taxed (with emphasis on how to get into the lowest-cost option), how zoning and land use planning rules impact forest management, where to get technical assistance, how to access cost-share for forest improvement and fire risk reduction, when to contact ODF or other agencies for permits or notifications and how to request help developing a forest management plan.

Similar sessions will be offered Dec. 5 in La Grande and Dec. 12 in Pendleton. Preregistration is requested. Call 541-963-1010 or register at bit.ly/2TkrO4.

"Sometimes they will say they are hearing that a particular law is changing or a new regulation is forthcoming and how will that impact me," Punches said.

One of the hot-button issues over the past few weeks with major wildfires in California has been how to avoid tragedies such as have occurred in far-northern and far-southern parts of that state.

"In Oregon, we are at risk of catastrophic fires in many areas, not quite like California, but 100 plus years of fire exclusion has done its damage," Punches said. "We're finding we can never really replicate the impact of fire in our forests in a way that really maintains the property balance."



Phoenix Gomes



Bodee Bauck



Rhylynn Compton

Halloween costume contest winners

Here are the top vote-getters in the Chieftain's First-Ever Facebook Halloween Costume contest. Third: Phoenix Gomes, Second: Rhylynn Compton and First: Bodee Bauck. Entrees were chosen from among contestants who visited The Chieftain office Halloween night. They were then placed online, and readers were allowed to vote. Sixteen contestants were part of the competition. Visit facebook.com/Wallowa.

Election crew carries its weight

Women work to keep everything fair after voting

By Steve Tool
Wallowa County Chieftain

When it comes to elections, things change over the years, but the era of the human element in ballot counting is far from over.

That job falls under the purview of Wallowa County Clerk Sandy Lathrop, who is assisted by Tracey Hall.

The clerk's office handles all aspects of county, state and federal elections. They don't do it alone.

The county has two election boards that actually take on a good portion of the work load. In the courthouse basement, a group of eight women work to facilitate the election process. Six of the women serve on a board that consists of equal numbers of Republicans and Democrats.

In action, the women get



Ellen Bishop/For the Chieftain

Nancy Hall, left, Carol Batten, Sue Womack and Elaine Isley work on ballots during the final hours of the 2018 election in the lower level of Wallowa County Courthouse.

divided into two groups of three that face each other across parallel cafeteria-type tables. Each side also has another person who serves as chair of the group.

The county has 12 voting precincts. Odd-numbered precincts sit on one side of the table with even-numbered precincts on the other side. The seated board members are staggered by party. One non-partisan member sits on the board.

"You can't have two party members sitting side by side," Lathrop said. "Not that they would do anything, but to be politically correct, you have to separate them."

Board members are paid minimum wage for their efforts but must provide their own food and beverages.

The women do not count votes. That is done by an Elections Systems and Software machine that the county purchased in 2009. Two people constantly monitor the machine when it's in use.

The board members make sure the ballots are correctly filled out, partially for the sake of the vote-counting machine. Absentee ballots are handled in the same manner.

On Nov. 3, the board,

called a counting board, opened ballots. Incorrectly filled ballots are duplicated: The information is transferred to a clean ballot to go through the machine, which is not put to use until election day. The Nov. 3 ballots are put into totes and brought back to the machine in one tote at a time on election day.

Noma McDaniel is temporary chair of the even side board while Elaine Isley is chair of the odd numbers.

Isley started her vote-counting career in the '70s in Camp Sherman, when ballots were counted by hand.

"I've been doing this here for about 20 years," she said. "I enjoy it because it's good civic duty, and if anyone wants to know how this system works I can explain it."

She said she enjoys the camaraderie of the board, but everyone is aware of their purpose.

"We're still doing our business," she said. "Everything's very accurate."

Board member Sue Womack began her tenure in 2016, shortly after retirement from Wallowa Memorial Hospital. She heard Lathrop had a need for more people and applied.

"It was a good fit for me,

and it was a good fit for her," she said. "It's fun, and it makes you feel like you're doing your civil duty."

Lathrop is glad to have the help and wants the women to know it.

"I really appreciate these ladies," Lathrop said. "They make the whole process fun. They're rock stars."

Voters had turned in only about 27 percent of ballots by Nov. 3.

By the time Nov. 6 rolled around, Lathrop and the board had their hands full. The clerk was surprised at the turnout for a mid-term election. County voters came out in droves -- 76.9 percent of eligible voters cast their ballot. The board finished its duties sometime around 2:30 a.m. Nov. 7.

"I received a letter from the secretary of state that said we had the second-highest turnout in the state," she said. "I was kind of tickled pink."

After a snafu caused by an outside printing press and the resulting public outcry, Lathrop said she learned something about Wallowa County voters.

"I think more than anything, I've learned how passionate people are about their elections."

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