

Barrels: Recovery of barrels found at bottom of Wallowa Lake nears completion

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So, although the final results of water and sediment tests are not yet in, the barrels strewn around the head of the lake are not the threat they once seemed.

Bright and early on Thursday, June 13, an entourage of vehicles and watercraft arrived at the Marina at Wallowa Lake. They included a 30-foot boat with an A-frame hoist rising over its stern, a barge-like vessel with another sturdy A-frame hoist, a truck hauling a white cigar-shaped cylinder, another truck that sported a satellite dish, and a variety of other trucks, many bearing federal or out-of-state plates. The Environmental Protection Agency, (EPA), Oregon Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) and federal Haz-mat diving contractors, Global Diving and Salvage of Seattle, had arrived to find, examine, and contain or remove the possible herbicide-laden barrel(s) reported last fall by Blue Mountain Divers. As a precaution, the City of Joseph switched its water source from the Wallowa Lake intake to well water.

In what seemed at times a painfully slow, but very deliberate, process, the diving contractor began the investigation by deploying a remotely operated vehicle (ROV) to locate and map the distribution of the drums. Blue Mountain Divers aided in the EPA and contractors in locating them by indicating the general area where their dive had found and photographed the barrels in September 2018.

The ROV used side-scanning sonar, specially-tuned video, still photographs, and GPS to precisely map the location of drums or barrels in the area generally north and west of the Wallowa Lake State Park's marina. In three days of investigation, it precisely located 72 of them. They lay in a very dispersed pattern over an area approximately 300 feet wide and 500 feet long trending northeasterly from the private dock that is close to the shore and just west of the public marina. The ROV's high-resolution photographs and video showed that twelve of the barrels appeared to be intact. Four were "mashed up like a crushed Coor's can," according to one EPA official. The remaining 55 drums appeared to sport holes or were otherwise compromised. Photographs and video confirmed that the barrel of the most concern, clearly labeled as "2,4-D or 2,4,5-T" was located in 100 feet of water about 50 feet south of the yellow and white booms that serve as a breakwater for the



CLOCKWISE, FROM TOP LEFT Most of the 70 or so barrels mapped by the ROV were located within the white rectangle on this aerial photo of the marina and private dock area at the south end of Wallowa Lake. Global Diving and Salvage divers ready their decompression chamber at Wallowa Lake. Diving into deep water at higher altitudes poses greater risks of "the bends" and decompression sickness, so the chamber was a reasonable precaution. A diver exits the water after confirming the location of the herbicide-labeled barrel at a depth of about 100 feet in Wallowa Lake. The barrel proved to contain only lake water. Technicians fine-tune the side-scanning sonar settings in the remotely operated vehicle (ROV) before returning it to the lake for additional surveys of the locations of barrels.

Ellen Morris Bishop

'UPON OPENING THE DRUM, THE CONTENTS APPEARED TO BE LAKE WATER.'

Oregon DEQ spokesperson Laura Gleim

private dock. It was among the compromised group, and appeared to be rusted, punctured. The herbicide in that barrel was long-gone.

With the suspect barrels located by GPS, Global Diving and Salvage put divers in the water on Friday and Saturday for more detailed visual inspections, including confirmation of the barrel condition, size, and orientation. Diving at the high altitude of Wallowa Lake (4,500 feet) requires additional time and precautions to avoid over saturation of nitrogen in a diver's blood, and the poten-

tially lethal condition known as the "bends" and decompression illness. Divers generally either dive for shorter periods or devote more time to decompressing on their way to the surface. This risk is a principal reason that Global Diving and Salvage brought along the decompression chamber.

Divers confirmed the location and condition of the labeled barrel, and of the other intact barrels.

On Sunday afternoon, Global Divers and Salvage, under direction of the EPA, began removing the

intact barrels of concern, and also the 2,4-D or 2,4,5-T labeled herbicide barrel. Close inspection of this barrel on the bottom of the lake revealed that it was rusted and punctured, and that it was highly unlikely that any of its original contents remained.

It was the first removed on Sunday afternoon. Haz-mat suited and qualified divers carefully loaded it into a larger, black containment, or "overpack" drum, sealed the overpack, and then hoisted the overpack barrel to the surface. After this overpack

barrel was placed on leak-proof barrier, EPA officials opened it and inspected the suspect herbicide barrel. "Upon opening the drum, the contents appeared to be lake water," said Oregon DEQ spokesperson Laura Gleim. "However, out of an abundance of caution, responders sampled the water in the drum and will submit to the laboratory for 2,4-D as well as 2,4,5-T analyses."

The last four remaining intact barrels are scheduled to be removed from the lake on Monday. They lie about 140 feet below the surface and will be a challenge for divers to work on. "At that depth," Boykin said, "a diver can stay on the bottom for maybe two minutes before they have to begin to ascend and decompress."

The overpack's contents will be inspected at the EPA site at the marina once they are in a safe area that will contain any hazardous spills. "If the barrels are clean of any contaminants, they will either go to the landfill or to a metal recycler. If further action is needed, they will be transported to an appropriate EPA disposal site, depending upon their contents," said EPA spokesperson Bill Dunbar.

The questions of "Where did the barrels come from?" "Who put them into the lake? And "How long have they been there?" may never be answered. It's common knowledge that used, empty barrels were resealed and used as floats for docks through the 1970's. Barrels were also commonly filled with rocks and used as anchors for buoys or other purposes. Greg Wiggins, who grew up at Wallowa Lake Lodge, said that in the 1950s and '60s he collected barrels that had broken loose from docks around the lake, cut holes in them, and then sank them into the lake. "It was a way of keeping everything looking pretty and pristine," he said.

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