

Oregon State Police to examine Finley Creek site

By DICK MASON
The Observer

UNION COUNTY — The Oregon State Police are turning up the heat on a local cold case.

OSP officers and OSP crime lab personnel will soon reexamine a site near Finley Creek, 18 miles north of La Grande, where the remains of an unidentified woman were found in August of 1978.

The OSP team, which will have human remains detection dogs, will be searching for anything connected to the unidentified woman who was found there in a shallow grave more than 40 years ago.

The OSP will go to the site after all the snow there has melted. Detective-sergeant Sean Belding of the OSP said his agency will be facing a big challenge.

“It will be a little like looking for a needle in a haystack,” Belding said.

Melinda Jederberg, of La Grande, a member of the Finley Creek Jane Doe Task Force, is more hopeful.

“We are very optimistic,” said Jederberg, who founded the task force in 2019.

A big reason for the confi-

dence is that task force members went to the Finley Creek site where the woman’s remains were found twice in 2021 with cadaver dogs. The task force brought a single dog once and two on another trip. Each of the two dogs indicated they found ground under which there are human remains at the same site at or near a tree.

“One dog pawed at the ground near the tree,” Jederberg said.

The task force members did not dig at the site because it is a crime scene and thus it would be illegal to disrupt it. They instead notified the Oregon State Police who later decided to investigate the site and possibly dig there.

Suzanne Timms of Walla Walla, Washington, who is assisting with the search as a volunteer, is glad that highly trained OSP investigators will soon be examining the Finley Creek site.

“They know how to collect evidence without contaminating the site. I can’t wait,” Timms said.

A daughter’s search

Timms is elated that the OSP will be investigating the



Suzanne Timms/Contributed Photo

Cadaver dog Brynn and a team of volunteers including Suzanne Timms, seated, in August 2021 investigate the area where the Finley Creek Jane Doe was discovered near Elgin in 1978. Timms believes the unidentified woman is her mother. With Timms are her relatives Jennifer Harrington, center, and Wenda Parr, left, plus Karin Anderson of Dallas, Texas, who is a member of a Reporter’s Notebook group that is producing podcasts about the search for the identity of Jane Doe.

site since she is certain the Finley Creek Jane Doe is her mother, Patricia “Patty” Otto, of Lewiston, Idaho, who has been missing since Sept. 1, 1976.

Timms first suspected that the Finley Creek Jane Doe was her mother in 2021 when she saw an image created by a forensic artist in Massachusetts, Anthony Redgrave, the operator of Redgrave Research Forensic Services. Redgrave was assisting

the Finley Creek Jane Doe group, and the image he created look very similar to that of Timms’ mother.



Jane Doe

Other details have contributed to Timms’ belief that the Finley Creek Jane Doe is her mother. The remains were found with a white shirt and red pants, which is what Patty Otto was last seen wearing before disappearing.

As part of the investigation in 1978, Lewiston police

believed the Jane Doe could be Patty Otto, and Timms’ grandparents Thomas O’Malley and Ardys O’Malley were flown from Lewiston to La Grande to identify the body. Timms said they were sure the remains were those of their daughter, because the white shirt and red pants were found with the remains at Finley Creek.

“I found records indicating that they told the Lewiston police that the white shirt and red pants looked very similar to what my mother was wearing before she disappeared,” Timms said, who discovered this information earlier this year.

Timms believes that her mother was murdered in Lewiston by her father, and then taken to Finley Creek where he buried her in a shallow grave.

The OSP’s autopsy records for the Finley Creek Jane Doe, however, do not match those of Patty Otto.

Timms believes the discrepancy is due to an error made by the OSP’s medical examiner while doing examinations of the skeletal remains for two Jane Does in his office at about the same time in 1978. She suspects he assigned his reports to the wrong Jane Does because his report for the second Jane Doe matches her mother’s

autopsy photos and dental records.

“It appears that he had the two Jane Does confused based upon documents he wrote himself,” Timms said.

A cash award

Timms said she is excited about the OSP’s plans to examine the Finley Creek site because if bones are found their DNA tests could prove that they are the bones of her mother. Currently, there are no known bones of the Finley Creek Jane Doe because they are believed to have been cremated by the state after they were found, Timms said.

A recent cash award for information on the Finley Creek Jane Doe also offers hope that new evidence may come to light.

Interest in the Finley Creek Jane Doe has picked up since Crime Stoppers of Oregon announced in March that it was offering a cash award of up to \$2,500 to help identify the murdered woman.

“It has generated a lot of calls about the case,” Jederberg said.

Jederberg, of the Finley Creek Jane Doe Task Force, said she hopes the reward and increased interest will encourage people to step forward.

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Snowpack melting faster than expected

By ALEX WITTWER
EO Media Group

LA GRANDE — Eastern Oregon’s snowpack is melting faster than expected, worsening an ongoing drought and pointing to a very dry year if conditions continue.

Scott Oviatt, a hydrologist and snow survey supervisor for the Natural Resources Conservation Service Oregon, a member of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, said snow started melt-

ing almost two weeks earlier than usual, and many sites across the state hadn’t even reached their peak available snowpack levels before melt off began in the lower elevations.

“Once the snowpack starts melting out, it’s hard to stop,” he said.

The information comes weeks after many Eastern Oregon snowpack levels were reported to be in good shape. The dramatic decline in snowpack levels coupled with the ongoing drought has caused concern among experts who are watching the snow water equivalent levels closely.

“The fact that we didn’t reach a peak value and the fact that we’re melting out early is a concern because we are losing the available water content in the snow pack (earlier) than we normally plan on,” Oviatt said. “Depending on location and elevation, we’re about two or three weeks early, and we didn’t achieve our peak, and now we’re at 70% for the Grande Ronde/Powder area and we’re dropping rapidly.”

Those who rely on water irrigation channels should be especially concerned about the rapidly melting snow. While snowmelt is generally expected to hit its zero point sometime in mid to late spring, having the water runoff begin and end earlier means that resources will become scarce as summer drags on — and a heat wave event can further impact water supplies and leave farmers and agricultural

industries dry.

Last year’s heat wave depleted water supplies and caused some farms in Oregon to run out of water entirely by late June, weeks ahead of schedule. In one instance, Plantworks, a nursery in Cove, had to purchase new water storage containers and fill them with city water in order to keep their crops alive.

“Essentially, folks that rely on irrigation water will have less available, and there will probably be some restrictions applied depending upon where they get their water and their water rights,” Oviatt said. “There will be less available surface water for instream flows to support things. There will be less available groundwater storage because we’re not recharging our system with our ground soil moisture and because we’ve been in a long-term drought and we didn’t really recover from that over this winter.”

Union County watermaster Shad Hattan agrees, stating that if the area doesn’t get significant spring rain, “it will be hard on everything. Agriculture, stream flows. If we don’t get moisture for April and May, that’s (going to be) hard on everybody.”

One silver lining to the early melt off and continuation of the drought? Fire season might be milder compared to last year.

“The biggest thing is how fast the snow we have right now comes off,” said Trevor Lewis, assistant fire management officer with the Wal-

lowa-Whitman National Forest. “If we lose our snow real quick, and it dries out fairly quickly then our grass growth isn’t as high, so we generally see lower rates of spread with our fires, even if we do have significant fuel moistures that are dryer. It really depends on how this snow comes off.”

Lewis said that last year’s slow runoff allowed for above average grass and brush growth — primary fuels for wildfires that were primed by the heat wave that pushed temperatures to record highs in most of Oregon. That grass growth meant that fires spread more rapidly, and in the case of the Bootleg Fire resulted in one of the nation’s largest wildfires for 2021.

“It’s kind of a catch-22 for us,” Lewis said. “Does it come quickly and we have a drought? Or does it come off slow and we end up getting the grass growth?”

Despite being a La Nina year, the Eastern Oregon snowpack wasn’t enough to start turning around the drought conditions in the area. As of March 31, most of Eastern Oregon remains in severe or moderate drought, and conditions are expected to worsen over the summer.

“In order to recover from that long-term drought we need successive years and we need excessive amounts of precipitation, and we’re just not getting it,” Oviatt said. “It’s not going to happen this year. We’re going to have to make some sacrifices in terms of surface water and available water.”

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