

Tribe invests in deer and elk populations

**HUNTING continued
from front page**

were held on the Grand Ronde Reservation beginning in September and ending in early December. Two hunts were for deer and two were for elk.

“Those hunts were unique to the Tribe with unique Tribal member-only dates that were restricted to just the Reservation, so not the whole Trask Unit,” said Belonga. “This is a huge step in exercising our sovereignty to implement that hunting season. The message is it comes full circle with implementing the hunts and then have the hunts be successful for two of the deer seasons and one of the elk seasons. We had four hunters exercise their right to be a leader and a role model in terms of stewardship for hunting practices in the field and Tribal sovereignty.”

Fish and Wildlife Program Manager Kelly Dirksen said it was made clear to him early on in the mid-1990s that restoration of hunting rights was going to be a Tribal priority.

“Pretty much from the time I started 20 years ago it was made clear that we wanted to restore some of the Tribal hunting rights,” said Dirksen. “So that work really ramped up in 2007 and then culminated in the Wildlife Management Plan in 2014.

“It was a real conservative season last year, but it’s the first Tribal



Lindsay Belonga

season ever. There isn’t another restored Tribe that has had anything like this so it’s pretty exciting to issue Tribal tags.”

Dirksen said the Tribe invested in the resource, something that benefits everyone whether they are Tribal members or not, for many years. He said the Tribe invests in deer and elk populations to benefit all interested parties.

Belonga said much work has gone into enhancing local wildlife populations and their habitat.

“Everything that we did to benefit deer and elk populations benefitted the entire community and not just the membership,” said Dirksen. “There is no way to give specific benefits to the membership for the Tribe’s investment.”

Providing Tribal members with their own hunting dates turned out to be the only way to tailor a benefit specifically for the membership.

“This year we let folks go a little bit early for the general season and in other cases we let them go a little bit later,” said Dirksen. “We did have to be conservative, but our hope is to get a population estimate and then try to ramp up what we can issue for tags.”

Belonga and Dirksen said the real measure of success would be if someone actually could feed their family and that happened.

“Our real hope for this first season was that someone would put meat on the table,” said Dirksen. “It was a big relief not to just put tags out and that folks harvested deer and elk.”

“The important thing for me is we were successful in the field harvesting animals,” said Belonga.

Dirksen said Tribal leadership supported Natural Resources efforts to restore hunting rights throughout the process.

“What was clear was council wanted to see it happen,” said Dirksen. “They were patient with it, but they always wanted to see it happen. They (Tribal Council) always gave us the opportunities to talk to the right folks, gave us opportunities to manage and bolster our claims for our management ability so that we could make better arguments to the state.

“They give you the means to do what you are proposing to do. It’s up to you to make it happen. When it finally did happen it was a huge moment.”

Belonga and Dirksen said that Tribal hunters recognized the privilege and acted accordingly. All 46 hunters who participated were required to take a training course that highlighted hunting stewardship before being issued a tag.

“I think there was great appre-

ciation for the opportunity,” said Dirksen. “I think it was really clear that there is some responsibility with these tags. Each hunter was basically an ambassador for the program. I think they took that responsibility very seriously. I think they clearly appreciated the chance to hunt outside of the regular state-sanctioned seasons.

“Folks were incredibly responsible and saw the enormous responsibility of getting this thing right. I’m really proud of our hunters for that.”

Belonga said hunters expressed appreciation for restoration of hunting rights to the Tribe.

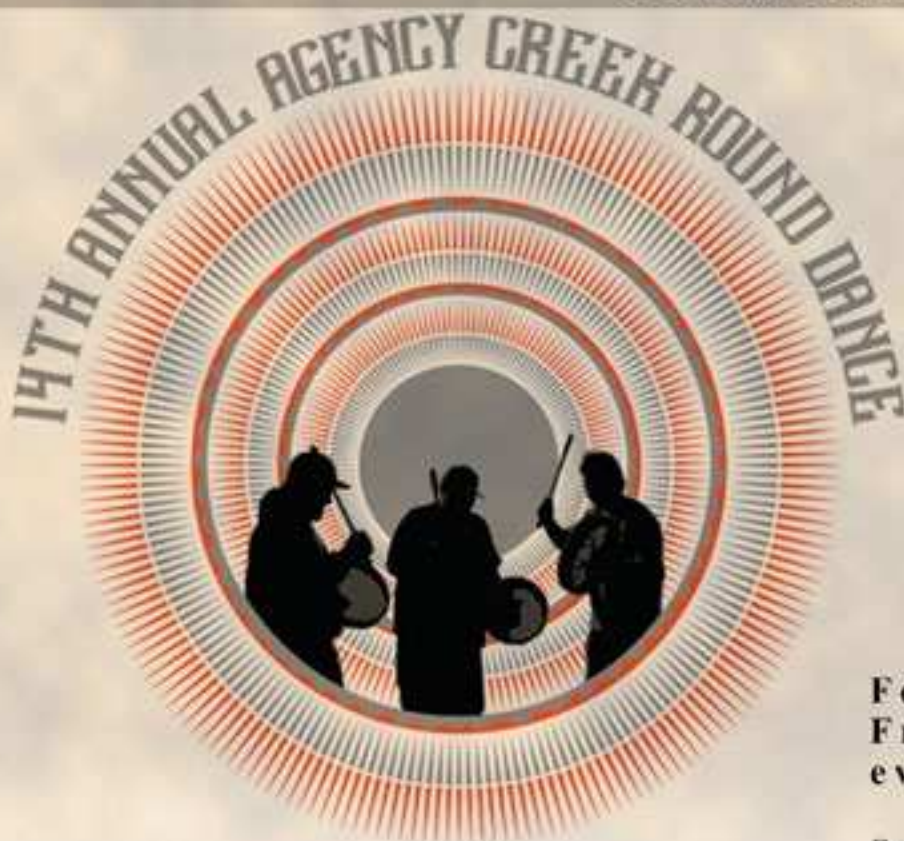
Dirksen said the membership should know that there is an ongoing push to regain and emphasize Tribal sovereignty and rights.

“There is just a continual march to restore and strengthen the Tribe and this was a huge step in that,” said Dirksen. “When we do our work we are always looking for a way that we can provide a tangible benefit for the membership.”

Dirksen said the Wildlife Management Plan gives the Tribe additional fishing rights that will be implemented in the coming years.

“There are 17 species in that management plan and all of them have some level of harvest at some point,” said Dirksen. “There is a lot of fun stuff coming down the road. We’ve taken some great first steps and we have some great people in the program.” ■

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