

STUCK

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Strus acknowledges, with the rueful chuckle of a person who wonders later what he was thinking at the crucial moment, that his judgment wasn't sound.

When the road deteriorated into something closer to a trail, and with dark coming on besides, Strus said he thought about turning back.

"I should have turned around," he said. "But the kid in me said go a little farther."

He did — just far enough to reach the spot in the road.

Strus said he felt one rear wheel sink, and when he pushed the accelerator the front end of the truck "reared up just like a horse."

Then the truck rolled in what seemed, he said, "like slow motion."

Strus said it looked as though a burrowing animal had dug into the bank, weakening the road.

Whatever the cause, he was stuck, at nightfall, in the chilly mountains.

Strus said he wasn't especially worried, though.

Although his prized truck sustained dents and a couple of broken windows, it was upright and the engine ran fine.

He had most of a tank of a gas.

And, perhaps most important, he had an eight-pack of hot dogs.

Also a bottle of orange juice.

And two beers.

But before he took stock of his situation, he sat inside the cab and gave himself a talking to.

"I just was beating myself up for making a bad decision," Strus said.



Travis Ash/Contributed Photo

Joe Strus' pickup truck landed upright after rolling off a remote road north of Keating Valley on Sunday, May 2.

Besides the food, a warm coat and some camping gear, Strus had his cellphone.

He didn't have service in the creek bottom, so he climbed the nearest hill.

He was able to send a text to his girlfriend, but he never received a reply and couldn't be sure the message had gone through.

When he tried to make a phone call he got a message that he could only make a 9-1-1 call.

Strus said he decided not to do that.

He wasn't in any immediate danger, and he figured that if his girlfriend didn't get his message, and nobody came looking for him, he could always walk out.

"I didn't want to put anybody else in harm's way to come out and look for me," Strus said.

And although he didn't think many people traveled the road where he got stuck,

Strus was nervous about leaving his pickup truck.

He had a couple of rifles and a shotgun, and with the windows broken there was no way to secure the guns.

During Monday he stayed close to the truck.

He gathered stones to build a fire ring and kindled a blaze to cook the hot dogs.

After he finished the orange juice he used the container to get water from the creek.

Strus said he wished he had a water purifier, but he said the stream was cold and clear.

Strus said he was glad his pickup ran despite rolling over. He started the engine occasionally to let the heater ward off the nighttime chill.

An automated weather station several miles to the east recorded temperatures as low as 30 degrees early Monday, May 3.

"It really got cold," Strus said.

On Tuesday morning, May 4,

he considered his situation.

He had eaten the last of the hot dogs.

Strus said he concluded that either nobody was searching for him, or they didn't know where to look.

He found a stout limb to use as a walking stick and, once the temperature had warmed, he started walking, retracing his driving route on Sunday evening.

Strus hadn't gone far when he came across a large pile of fresh bear scat on the road, almost within sight of his truck.

"He must have smelled those hot dogs," Strus said.

He had covered about two miles when he heard the burble of a motor.

It was an ATV, ridden by Brian Ratliff, a biologist for the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife who was investigating the death of a calf in the area.

Strus said he greeted Ratliff with a question:

"You guys aren't looking for me, are you?"

Ratliff was not — Strus, unable to get a text message out, hadn't been reported missing.

Ratliff told Strus to wait, then rode to a place where he could text Baker County Sheriff Travis Ash.

Strus said the sheriff, whom he knows, arrived less than an hour later and drove him to Richland.

Strus said he learned that the Forest Service has installed signs warning people not to try to drive down the road where his truck rolled.

He said he's glad that something positive came from his predicament.

Strus said Thursday afternoon that he and some friends planned to try to extricate his truck that day.

DEQ fines mine owner for release of wastewater

By Jayson Jacoby
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The Oregon Department of Environmental Quality has proposed to fine a Salem company \$8,400 for releasing about 2,000 gallons of wastewater from a mine pond into the Burnt River in southern Baker County in December 2020.

The state agency issued a notice to K&E Excavating Inc., which owns the High Bar mine along Pine Creek about six miles northeast of Hereford.

According to DEQ documents, the company has a permit to operate wastewater treatment ponds at the mine.

That permit prohibits releasing water from the ponds, according to DEQ.

Around Dec. 2, 2020, a pond at the mine overflowed, releasing an estimated 2,000 gallons of "industrial wastewater generated from (the) mining operations."

That water flowed into the Burnt River, according to DEQ.

Baker County notified DEQ about the wastewater discharge on Dec. 3, according to records.

DEQ is not proposing to issue fines for two other violations, according to agency records.

K&E Excavating failed to immediately report the discharge of wastewater from the pond, and the company failed to monitor treatment ponds daily for seepage and water levels, according to DEQ.

Kerry Kuenzi, registered agent with K&E Excavating, did not return phone messages.

Kieran O'Donnell, manager of DEQ's Office and Compliance and Enforcement, said the company has appealed the fine.

BAKER SOFTBALL

La Grande beats Bulldogs

Baker's softball team came up short against the unbeaten La Grande Tigers on Thursday, May 6, losing 17-2 at La Grande.

Sophomores Kaci Anderson and Makayla Rabourne each had an RBI hit for Baker in the third inning.

Baker coach Sonny Gulick said starting pitcher Kaycee Cuzick, also a sophomore, threw accurately, but La Grande hitters were tough.

CHILD CARE

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In an email, Wilkinson said the estimated total cost for the center is \$250,000.

- Donations included:
- \$100,000 from Saint Alphonsus
 - \$28,000 from Wilson's Cattle Company
 - \$10,000 from Intermountain ESD
 - \$5,000 from OTEC

- \$5,000 from the YMCA
 - \$5,000 from Head Start
 - \$2,000 from Chaves Consulting
- St. Luke's donated \$10,000 for sensory sidewalks.

A survey by the Eastern Oregon Child Care Resources deemed Baker County as a "child care desert," with 20% of child care needs being met.

A community health needs assessment recently conducted by Saint

Alphonsus Medical Center also recognizes child care as a central need not currently being met.

More information about the child care center is available by calling the YMCA at 541-523-9622.

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