

PENDLETON | FLOUR MILL FIRE

FARMERS, CUSTOMERS SCRAMBLE

MATTHEW WEAVER • Capital Press

PENDLETON — Pacific Northwest wheat farmers are beginning to cope with the fallout from Wednesday’s massive fire 10 that left the Grain Craft flour mill in Pendleton a “total loss.” The company is working with farmers to handle the excess supply, said Natalie Faulkner, director of communications for Grain Craft, based in Chattanooga, Tennessee.

The building was more than 100 years old, Faulkner said. Twenty-two employees worked in the mill. There were no injuries in the fire. Pendleton Police Chief Chuck Byram said the mill was a “total loss.”

The company does not disclose the production capacity of the building, Faulkner said. The extent of the damage and possibility of rebuilding are not yet known, she added. “It’s still an active situation. We are still evaluating everything, just trying to understand the cause and circumstances,” Faulkner told the Capital Press. Ben Maney, president of Oregon Wheat Growers League, farms north of Pendleton.

He doesn’t take his grain to the facility, but “a substantial amount of farmers” in the area do, he told the Capital Press. “It’s been a staple for the Pendleton community for an awfully long time, generations, and it’s always been a central location (in) town,” he said.

The fire is the latest hit for growers, after experiencing severe drought last year, Maney said. Many crops had rebounded this year with spring rains.

“A lot of farmers don’t have home storage, and they can’t store that grain on their farm,” he said. “For this heartbreaking event to happen today, it puts the community and a lot of the farmers in a tough situation. It hits the community hard.”



Kathy Aney/East Oregonian

Smoke pours from the Pendleton Flour Mills on Wednesday as firefighters work to control the blaze.

Jeremy Bunch, CEO of Shepherd’s Grain, a farmer-owned flour company, sent

an email to customers about the fire.

“We are working on a contingency plan now and getting wheat staged for move-

ment to another Grain Craft mill,” Bunch said. “Unfortunately, there will be an interruption in flour supply as we work through these details.

We apologize for the inconvenience this causes. We are working hard to minimize this flour supply interruption and will provide a timeline update

very soon.” The cause of the fire was “mechanical failure,” the police chief, told the Capital Press.

On Tuesday, dispatchers received a report of black smoke coming from the mills, “with no visible flames,” according to a police department press release. The fire department responded, extinguished the small fire and remained on fire watch.

The fire subsequently reignited at about 4 a.m. Wednesday and became fully engulfed due to the dry grain and the wooden structure, Byram said.

Employees identified the source of the fire, Byram said. “It happened in the mill itself, with one of the pieces of equipment, with a rubber bushing or housing that obviously got too hot and started the fire,” he said.

It’s the middle of harvest, Byram said, so the mill was processing a lot of flour. He didn’t have an exact figure, but said Grain Craft employees estimated there were “hundreds of thousands of pounds of processed flour in the bins.”

There is no estimated cost of damage yet, he said.

Kayaker

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That stretch of the river is classified as Class IV and V whitewater, conditions characterized by extreme difficulty and danger.

As the search efforts went cold, law enforcement and rescue personnel operated on the assumption Kollar was dead. In February, the Deschutes County Sheriff’s Office suspended the active search and recovery, scaling down its efforts, but classifying the case as a missing person case pending new information.

During the initial search in the fall, cadaver dogs picked up on Kollar’s scent in the lower portion of Lava Island Falls. But according to law enforcement and search and rescue divers with the sheriff’s office, the area of the river where Kollar’s body is believed to be is far too hazardous for divers to enter in order to look for and retrieve his remains.

“Our cadaver dogs alerted to the scent of human remains under the water,” Lt. Mike Biondi of the Deschutes County Sheriff’s Office told the Bulletin via email. “It is difficult to accurately predict how far upstream the remains would be. Generally, we believe he is

located in the lower portion of Lava Island Falls.”

“There is no safe way to search that portion of the river due to current and underwater obstructions,” Biondi said.

Biondi added that it would not be advisable for anyone to attempt to search the area further given the hazardous conditions on that particular stretch of the river.

Sean Jones, a diver with Deschutes County Search and Rescue, said he was part of the initial search effort for Kollar’s body. Jones has been diving for the search and rescue team for 21 years, and he would not advise any attempt to retrieve Kollar’s remains, he said.

“Would I advise somebody to go into Class V whitewater? No. Not under those conditions,” Jones said. “If you are talking about pure safety, it is not advisable. And would I want somebody to go in there and do it? No.”

Jones said any attempt to enter the river and retrieve Kollar’s remains could result in him and his colleagues in turn having to risk their lives in their capacity as search and rescue personnel.

“Anytime you have moving water, it’s moving at a high velocity through obstacles, you have no visibility, you have re-

duced ability to move, and you can’t stay still,” Jones said of conditions on the river. “You get blown out of position; you physically can’t hold on. So, the water moves underneath you and lifts you up and you are in the current again, and you can’t stay.”

Jones said that under certain conditions, it is physically impossible to escape once a person is stuck in the river fighting against the rushing water.

“There becomes a point where the water is moving and being so dynamic a person can’t just go into a spot and stop. And then the risk of entrapment. There are logs and rocks and holes and stuff in there and say, if your leg goes through it, and the velocity of the water is stronger than you are, you’re stuck,” Jones said.

He added that such conditions could be mitigated by a highly involved process using ropes, extra personnel and certain physical barriers used to divert water flow. However, for Jones and his colleagues on the search and rescue team, the number one priority is the preservation of life.

Kelli Wittman of Tumalo Creek Kayak & Canoe said while a lot of the river close to Bend is classified as difficult or expert whitewater, the major-

ity of deaths occur on milder water.

“Most deaths and casualties happen on Class II and Class III water because there is a lot of river etiquette or river knowledge that sometimes people either get passive about or complacent about because they are a harder paddler, or because they simply don’t know and are just getting into the sport,” Wittman said “But more casualties happen on those easier sections than those harder sections.”

Wittman said some of the most common hazards on the river are downed trees, which are always moving and could be there one day and gone the next. Rocks with holes in them are easy to get stuck in, she said, and the powerful current of the river is capable of erosion, creating voids underneath rocks that could trap people.

“In this kind of situation, you might not come out at all,” Wittman said. “We definitely try to run our lines and set up safety around those kinds of hazards so that if something were to happen our team is set up to help get you out of there.”

“It’s definitely a wild river. It always changes. It always has risks,” Whitman added. “It is not guaranteed safety.”

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Madras

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Detectives also found hazardous conditions like black mold and improvised copper electrical wiring that bypassed circuit breakers. The alleged illegal marijuana farm also used pesticides and insecticides, which can threaten residential water supplies. The grow site had a handmade water system that pulled from neighboring wells.

It’s possible the people responsible could be charged for the water theft.

“That’s probably the least of their issues,” Vander Kamp said.

Marijuana grown in Central Oregon was transported to Portland, where it was distributed nationally, according to police.

The search was tied to a coordinated search of six properties in Madras and Culver in June. And it may be affiliated with a bust in April in La Pine, though Vander Kamp said that was too early to confirm.

Many of the workers in recent busts are Chinese nationals who came to America via Mexico, Vander Kamp said. Suspects interviewed in the June raid said they were promised jobs in Chinese restaurants in the Pacific Northwest. When they arrived in Central Oregon, they worked a few days in the restaurants then were told they were being transferred to a marijuana grow site.

“We talked to one guy who did it for six months, and some of them just hang around for a few days,” Vander Kamp said.

Marijuana grown on the West Coast has cachet on the U.S. East Coast. Product that sells for \$900-\$1,200 per pound on the West Coast can be sold for three times that in states where marijuana is illegal.

The illicit product grown in Central Oregon is typically sold in the New York Metro area, Ohio and parts of Florida. After that, the money is diverted through Chinese restaurants in the Northwest and ultimately returned to China or Hong Kong, Vander Kamp said.

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