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Plea deal reached in Elliott shooting case

Charge amended to criminally negligent homicide

By Richard Hanners
Blue Mountain Eagle

A plea agreement has been reached in the case of the John Day man accused of shooting and killing a neighbor near Dog Creek Road and Marysville Road on Aug. 24, 2017.

Following a May 25 settlement

conference, Thomas Joseph Elliott pleaded guilty to the amended charges of criminally negligent homicide with a firearm and unlawful use of a firearm. Sentencing is scheduled for 10:30 a.m. June 26.

Elliott had been charged with first-degree manslaughter, a class A felony, in the shooting death of Todd Alan Berry. The criminally negli-

gent homicide charge, a class B felony, carries a maximum penalty of 15 years in prison and a \$325,000 fine.

According to Elliott's petition to enter a plea of guilty, the state and defense will jointly recommend a 60-month sentence for the homicide charge, with credit for time served and eligibility for good-time reduction. He may also request a sen-



Thomas Joseph Elliott

Earlier on May 2, Grant Coun-

ty Circuit Court Judge William D. Cramer Jr. granted Elliott's motion to suppress statements made after he was taken into custody.

Cramer ruled that "after unequivocally invoking his right to remain silent, defendant did not initiate further conversation of the crime being investigated."

The case was prosecuted by Colin Benson, senior assistant attorney general, of the Oregon Department of Justice.



FOREST HEALTH, ECONOMIC HEALTH

Magone Lake is one of many attractions on the Malheur National Forest.

Eagle file photo

Stewardship contract supports 268 jobs

By Richard Hanners
Blue Mountain Eagle

A 10-year stewardship contract on the Malheur National Forest supported 268 jobs in Grant and Harney counties from 2015 through 2017, according to a 2018 study by the University of Oregon.

On top of that, the work value of forest and watershed restoration activities came to about \$1.2 million per year, and Malheur National Forest operations added \$3 million per year, the study found. The stewardship contract also addressed economic uncertainty.

"The logs provided under the stewardship contract have been essential in keeping Malheur Lumber, the lone traditional sawmill in Grant County, operating," the university study said.

The mill invested in equipment to handle smaller-diameter logs and to produce bioenergy products, the study said. Iron



The Eagle/Richard Hanners

Mark Webb, the executive director of Blue Mountains Forest Partners, presents an update on the group's work to the Grant County Court.

Triangle established a bioenergy production line in John Day, and both Iron Triangle and Grayback Forestry purchased and renovated facilities in Seneca to process posts and poles.

Forest contract

The Forest Service awarded the stewardship contract to Iron Triangle in September 2013. The

contract's goals were to promote ecological restoration, reduce the risk of wildfire and improve economic vitality on 180,000 to 500,000 acres of forest land in Grant and Harney counties.

The Forest Service at the time estimated the value of the contract at up to \$69 million over

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Malheur forest projects lined up

From planting and thinning to fisheries and roads

By Richard Hanners
Blue Mountain Eagle

Work on dozens of forest projects is scheduled at locations across the Malheur National Forest this year. Some projects have already occurred, while others are ramping up for the busy summer season.

More than 30 Forest Service workers manned tables during a May 30 informational presentation at the Grant County Regional Airport to let the public know what's planned for forest lands this year.

"It can take two or three years before a project is actually implemented, so people forget about them," Prairie City District Ranger Ed Guzman explained.

Large forest projects covering thousands of acres can include timber harvesting, precommercial and com-



The Eagle/Richard Hanners

Jim Boethin speaks with Prairie City Ranger District hydrologist Hazel Owens and fisheries personnel during the Malheur National Forest's presentation at Grant County Regional Airport May 30.

mercial thinning, prescribed burning, tree planting, culvert replacement, road closures and fisheries or stream work.

Many projects are still undergoing planning or review under the National Environmental Policy Act, while others are ready to go. Some, particularly prescribed burning and tree planting, took place this spring.

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Board selects Uptmor as superintendent

New Grant School District administrator starts July 1

By Richard Hanners
Blue Mountain Eagle

The Grant School District 3 board announced their selection for a new school superintendent May 29. Bret Uptmor will take over for outgoing Superintendent Curt Shelley beginning July 1.

"I'm grateful for the John Day community for bringing me in, and I'm excited to serve," Uptmor told the Eagle.

The school board and Uptmor are working on the terms of a tentative agreement, which will be finalized at a future board meeting.

The board received 18 applications for the superintendent position after advertising began in mid-April. The community met the final



Bret Uptmor

three candidates in person on May 23.

"We had an excellent field of candidates for the superintendent position," board chairwoman Chris Cronin said. "After considering all that we learned about each of the finalists, the board concluded that Bret Uptmor emerged as the right candidate to lead our district."

Uptmor has been superintendent of Wallowa School District since 2011, serving about 180 students. He served as an assistant principal and principal in the Ontario School District for six years and was an industrial technology teacher for about 15 years.

Uptmor has a master's and a bachelor's in industrial technology education from the University of Idaho. He also has coached soccer and track and commented

on Grant Union's strong athletic program.

"It's fun to be in schools with good sports programs, where everyone is enthusiastic and talking about their teams," he said.

Several big changes will be awaiting Uptmor when he arrives. The seismic update project will be underway this summer at Humbolt Elementary School, with a follow-up project next year at the junior-senior high school. Applications for a new principal at Humbolt have been arriving, and Uptmor said he expects to be part of the selection process if it isn't completed in June.

Uptmor said he's aware of the recent community discussion on school security issues in Grant School District. He recalled the tremendous effort taken by Ontario School District to harden school facilities by addressing access issues.

During a tour of Humbolt Elementary in May, Uptmor noticed

areas where the wide open campus could be changed to improve security. He said he doesn't support arming teachers but has had good experience with school resource officers.

"They understand students," Uptmor said. "They're more than just police officers."

Uptmor said he spoke about trauma-informed care during his interview by the school board.

"We need to pay more attention to that — not just in John Day but across the country," he said.

He recalled how schools in Ontario held a "challenge day" where students, teachers and staff broke into groups and spoke openly about their personal concerns.

"They were tough conversations," he said.

Providing students with a sound education is key to Uptmor's education philosophy.

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