

Charges possible in cattle stranding

By **BILL BRADSHAW**
Wallowa County Chieftain

IMNAHA — An investigation is ongoing into possibly neglected cattle — many of which had young calves — in deep snows on U.S. Forest Service land in the Upper Imnaha area, Wallowa County Sheriff Joel Fish has confirmed.

Fish stated in an email on Dec. 31 that the investigation was started after learning the magnitude of the situation on Dec. 19.

“Wallowa County is moving toward seizing the Dean Oregon Ranch cattle for neglect, and we are investigating possible criminal charges,” Fish said in the email.

Fish said the Sheriff’s Office is “assisting with the retrieval of the cattle on the Forest Service grazing permits on the Marr Flat C&H Allotment. We have had deputies on snowmobiles assisting since that date.”

There have been numerous volunteers helping in the rescue efforts, as confirmed by County Commission Chairman Todd Nash and volunteers with the Wallowa County Humane Society.

Social media alert

One of the first widespread alerts came in a Facebook post by Craig Stockdale, who was one of the first to discover the cattle on the 200 Road south of Salt Creek.

“I just came upon them snowmobiling,” Stockdale said Jan. 1.

He said the post mobilized rescuers — both those out finding the cattle and those with facilities to care for the rescued livestock — and he has since taken it down.

Kathy Gisler Reynolds, a volunteer with the Humane Society, shared a post of the cattle Dec. 29. Photos posted on Facebook showed a cow up to its neck in snow and unable to move.

“I was alerted to it yesterday by the ranchers who have been out there trying to save them,” Reynolds said Dec. 30.

She listed several people who were involved in rescuing and caring for the cattle and their calves, calling some of them “heroes.”

“Some were too weak to even move,” she said of the cattle, adding that although rescuers were able to retrieve calves, a number of the adult cows had to be euthanized.

Stockdale and Anna Butterfield, who with her husband, Mark, ranches



Anna Butterfield/Contributed Photo
A snowmobiler rides alongside some cattle stranded in the Upper Imnaha area recently. Many of the cows were calving and some had to be put down after being stuck in deep snow.

northeast of Joseph, confirmed the cattle are on the Bob Dean Oregon Ranch managed by B.J. Warnock.

Dean lives in the Deep South and Warnock was not at liberty to provide contact information.

The ranch

Warnock issued a statement on the situation by email Jan. 2.

“I am not aware of any plans or attempts to seize any assets,” he said.

He also described the situation.

“Dean Oregon Ranches cows were all purchased in Oregon and Washington and began arriving on Dean Oregon Ranches property October of 2020 and continued arriving through July of 2021. The cows were a mixture of spring and fall calvers,” Warnock said.

“They were all acclimated to this climate, but not all acclimated to this specific terrain. Some do not know how to navigate canyons, so they have wandered in the wrong direction as we searched for them and brought in other groups. New cows are more difficult to gather than cows that have run on the same range for several consecutive years and know the way home. These cows are not calving in the snow; the ranch’s fall calving season was October through November. When we began gathering in September, there were 1,613 mother cows on summer range.”

He acknowledged bovine casualties in the recovery efforts.

“Despite the efforts of our crew and the community, 10 cows have been found unrecoverable,” he said, adding that “1,548 Dean Oregon Ranches mother cows were successfully gathered by Dean Oregon Ranches crew before the snow. After the snow, 34

mother cows have been gathered through the joint efforts of our crew and the community. Of those, 26 were Dean Oregon Ranches cattle; the others were owned by neighboring ranches.”

Warnock expressed his gratitude to fellow ranchers assisting in the recovery.

“We truly appreciate the effort the community has shown in this final push to gather the remaining cows,” he said. “We plan to continue aerial searches and hope to bring in the majority of the remaining 29 mother cows.”

County involved

At an emergency meeting of the Wallowa County Board of Commissioners on an unrelated matter Dec. 30, Nash — who is a rancher and president of the Oregon Cattlemen’s Association — said information on the situation at present was limited.

“The things we do know is that this was a Forest Service permit for the Upper Big Sheep Creek and the Upper Imnaha,” Nash said after the meeting. “It takes in a large area — 72,000 acres — known as the Marr Flat Grazing Allotment. They had a viable permit to go on sometime in the spring. They were supposed to have all cattle removed according to the Forest Service permit. By the 15th of October, there were still cattle that remained out there and are in very deep snow, some of them have expired. There is a rescue effort being made right now to try and rescue as many as possible. We’ve committed county resources to it. There’ve been a number of people who have volunteered or have contributed time. There’s been helicopters that have flown feed into some that were

extremely isolated and the rescue continues. Those are the basic facts that I do know.”

Nash went on to specify the county resources.

“The Road Department cleared about 10 miles of road in a heavy snowfall area on the Upper Imnaha,” he said. “They cleared about 90 trees out of the road. Compounding the heavy snowfall that came all at once, we had an event where we had rain and heavy snowfall afterward. There are trees across a lot of the access roads that they’re trying to get down right now that has exasperated those efforts to try to extricate the cattle from their situation.”

He was unsure how many cattle were involved, but was aware some had young calves.

Rancher Casey Tippett said he called the Forest Service in November after hearing reports from hunters that cattle were on land where they weren’t supposed to be, but he never heard back from the federal agency.

“Those cattle should’ve been taken off that land a long time ago,” Tippett said Dec. 30. “When they take strange cattle to an allotment, when winter hits they don’t know how to get out. The people who know that country should’ve been getting them out.”

Humane Society

Carol Vencill, president of the local Humane Society, said she, too, was unsure of the numbers, but said the snow was 7 feet deep in some places.

“Adam Stein is really the hero in all of this,” she said of the Joseph construction contractor. “It was Adam Stein who got the ball rolling.”

She said he started gathering peo-

ple to help after viewing the cattle from the air.

Warnock added his take on Stein’s assistance.

“I contacted Adam Stein to fly for the ranch and flew with him to look for cows multiple times,” Warnock said. “I am very thankful we reached out to Adam — he has been awesome through all this and his expertise in the snow and in the air has been an invaluable resource.”

Nash said various agencies have been apprised of the situation, ready to lend what aid they could. He said the Wallowa County Sheriff’s Office and the Wallowa-Whitman National Forest are aware, as well as others.

“I’ve had some discussion with the Oregon Department of Agriculture or this situation,” he said. “They’re the ones with the Brand Department a lot of the (state laws) concerning the current situation.”

Peter Fargo, public affairs officer for the Wallowa-Whitman National Forest based in Baker City, said in an email Dec. 31 that the county, the Sheriff’s Office and volunteers not only had been rescuing cattle, they “have been hauling hay and water with snowmobiles, side-by-sides and helicopters. The priority of the operation is first on everyone’s safety and then saving as many cattle as possible.”

He said the Forest Service instructed the permittee and ranch manager to remove all the cattle in October.

Fargo estimated there were 70 head of cattle still on the allotment Dec. 21 and, as of Dec. 30, there were up to 25 animals still unaccounted for. Tom Birkmaier, president of Wallowa County Stockgrowers, said he has heard the numbers are higher, but couldn’t say exactly how many.

But mostly it’s people in Wallowa County who are putting out the effort to rescue the stranded cattle and calves.

“There’s a lot of people who are quite concerned,” Nash said.

Birkmaier, who ranches on Crow Creek where he and wife, Kelly, have been caring for some of the rescued calves, was emphatic in his concern for the situation.

“Several factors created a near-perfect storm that led to an unfortunate series of events impacting a group of cattle in southern Wallowa County. Apparent mismanagement, extreme weather events and lactating cows with young calves all played a part.”

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Our most sincere gratitude to all the people that help make this such a worthwhile cause.

**From the bottom of our hearts –
THANK YOU!**

**Lucie Immoos, Christie Winegar
& Dolores Young**