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County declares drought emergency

By STEVEN MITCHELL
Blue Mountain Eagle

CANYON CITY — The Grant County Court declared a drought emergency Wednesday, April 6, and called on Gov. Kate Brown to declare a state emergency, which would open the door to state and federal aid.

The county also declared a drought emergency in 2021. So far this year, Brown has issued drought declarations in 10 counties. Under a state declaration, Grant County could get state and federal resources to deal with the water shortage.

Serious drought conditions are expected to worsen in Grant County and across the West, with higher-than-average temperatures and a reduced chance of rain, causing the county to face economic hardship and heightened wildfire risk, county officials said.

According to the National Integrated Drought Information System, a multi-agency drought monitoring system, roughly 85% of Grant County is currently under extreme drought conditions.

Extreme drought is the second-worst category in the national monitoring system. In regions facing extreme drought, pastures are brown and barren, hay yields are low, prices are increasing and producers are selling cattle to avoid expensive supplemental feed and pasture.

Eric Julsrud, Grant County's watermaster, asked the county for a drought declaration.

Julsrud said a drought declaration allows the Oregon Water Resources Department to approve temporary transfers of water rights, emergency water use permits and the use of existing water rights options available locally.

A drought permit allows users to replace water outside the existing water right temporarily. The most common drought permit allows someone to use groundwater as a substitute for an existing water right.

A temporary transfer of water rights allows a user to modify the type of use, place or the area of a water diversion under the existing water right.

Julsrud said county landowners he has spoken to are concerned.

"I'm hearing it's bad," he said.

Local ranchers, according to Julsrud, are telling him they have never seen creeks, rivers, and reservoirs so low.

What the ranchers have seen on the ground indeed lines up with the U.S. Geological Survey. The agency reported that as of Friday, April 9, most of the streamflow levels in Grant County are low compared to the historical daily streamflow for this time of year. Moreover, the USGS reports more than half of Oregon's stream levels are below average.

For his part, Julsrud said that while he is not a hydrologist, he believes conditions could be as severe as — if not worse than — they were last year.

He said that the county is seeing low stream levels and lower precipitation overall.

"Those problems," he said, "manifest themselves into bigger and bigger problems."



Eric Julsrud

CONDUCT UNBECOMING

Newly released documents disclose discipline against ex-Grant County deputy for relationship with jail inmate



Blue Mountain Eagle, File

The Grant County Jail in Canyon City.

MOST OF THE COMPLAINTS REVOLVED AROUND ABIGAIL MOBLEY AND HER HUSBAND, UNDERSHERIFF ZACH MOBLEY, WHO REMAINS SECOND IN COMMAND OF THE GRANT COUNTY SHERIFF'S OFFICE.

By BENNETT HALL
Blue Mountain Eagle

Abigail Mobley, the former Grant County sheriff's deputy at the heart of the "sex talk" scandal, committed no fewer than eight violations of the department's code of conduct ranging from abuse of her position to conduct unbecoming an officer and neglect of duty, according to public records recently unsealed by a judge after the ex-deputy sued to keep them secret.

For those transgressions, Mobley was given a 30-day unpaid suspension starting on Nov. 26, 2020, the records reveal. On Dec. 26, the day after the suspension ended, Mobley resigned from the Grant County Sheriff's Office.

The disciplinary action was the culmination of a 21-month investigation into Mobley's inappropriate relationship with an inmate at the Grant County Jail, where she worked as a corrections deputy. During the probe, Mobley was on paid administrative leave from her job at a cost to Grant County taxpayers of well over \$100,000 in salary and benefits.

The documents containing this information were among a trove of public records requested by the Blue Mountain Eagle in October 2020 as part of a follow-up to a story on the "sex talk" scandal published the month before. After some delay, county officials were preparing to release the information, but on March 9, 2021, Mobley filed a motion in Grant County Circuit Court for an injunction to block the release of the records.

The case concluded on Feb. 3, 2022, when Judge Thomas B. Powers issued a



Abigail Mobley, the former Grant County deputy at the heart of the "sex talk" scandal.

judgment of dismissal in which he ruled that most, but not all, of the requested records should be released.

The documents that were released contain additional revelations about allegations of misconduct by Mobley and other Grant County Sheriff's Office employees during the tenure of Sheriff Glenn Palmer. Palmer left office at the end of 2020 after losing the election to current Sheriff Todd McKinley.

At the same time, however, some questions still remain unanswered.

Scope of the investigation

In early 2019, after a number of allegations had been raised about possible misconduct by members of his staff, Palmer, following standard procedure for such situations, turned to an outside law enforcement agency to investigate the claims.

In March 2019, investigators from the Deschutes County Sheriff's Office met with

Grant County District Attorney Jim Carpenter, acting in the role of county counsel, in Carpenter's Canyon City office.

In their report, which was among the documents ordered released by the judge, the investigators summarize the allegations they were asked to look into.

Most of the complaints revolved around Mobley and her husband, Undersheriff Zach Mobley, who remains second in command of the Grant County Sheriff's Office. The complaints included allegations that:

- Abigail Mobley had been having a relationship with Grant County Jail inmate Darren Mortimore, who was serving four consecutive six-month sentences after pleading guilty to charges of strangulation, fourth-degree assault and menacing.

- Abigail Mobley had sexually harassed Deputy Brandon Hutchison by contacting him via Facetime and making inappropriate sexual comments.

- Zach Mobley, after being notified by a jail employee that Abigail Mobley had been overheard having a recorded phone conversation with Mortimore, retaliated against the employee by ordering him to take two days of vacation time. Furthermore, it was alleged that Mortimore had been transferred from the Grant County Jail to a facility in California, where he was wanted for a parole violation, before he had served his full sentence in order to get him away from Abigail Mobley.

- Zach Mobley, after being informed by Hutchison that Abigail Mobley had sexually harassed him, responded by asking "Did you get a bang out of it?" and took no action on the sexual harassment complaint.

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Local seniors back at the table

John Day, Prairie City centers resume in-person activities

By STEVEN MITCHELL
Blue Mountain Eagle

JOHN DAY — As the pandemic ebbs and state mask mandates fade in the rearview mirror, Grant County's senior centers in John Day and Prairie City were able to reunite for in-person gatherings last week after more than two years.

The John Day Senior Center opened its doors on Monday, April 4, for lunch at noon, while Prairie City followed suit at the same time on



Steven Mitchell/Blue Mountain Eagle

Nadine Smith, left, of Mt. Vernon enjoys lunch with friends at the John Day Senior Center on Thursday, April 7, 2022. Smith said during the senior center's closure she found other ways to connect with others.

Wednesday, April 6.

While the senior centers had grab-and-go meals

and made deliveries during the past two years, seniors in Prairie City and John Day

were finally able to — if they chose to — sit down for lunch.

Rose Coombs, Prairie City Senior Center's treasurer, secretary and correspondent, said it was nice to sit down with others without a mask and without having to stay 6 feet apart.

One change, according to Coombs, is that now instead of eating family-style at the table, the seniors are served cafeteria-style.

Which, she added, is not a bad tradeoff.

"That's OK," Coombs said. "We'll put up with that."

Chris Labhart, president of the John Day Senior Center board, said it was nice to

get together with people he had not seen in nearly two years in a place where everyone felt comfortable.

Labhart said the John Day Senior Center typically serves up to 30 congregate meals on Mondays and around 40 on Thursdays.

The senior center, Labhart said, prepares roughly 40 to 60 meals for delivery and grab-n-go on Mondays and Thursdays.

Labhart said the seniors enjoy getting together for more than just in-person meals. The center hosts bingo, bridge and other social activities.

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