

ODOT faces regional labor shortage

By DICK MASON
The Observer

LA GRANDE — A labor shortage has Oregon Department of Transportation officials juggling schedules and resources in Eastern Oregon as the winter season's icy grip tightens.

The department's Eastern Oregon region, which is composed of Morrow, Umatilla, Union, Wallowa, Baker, Grant, Harney and Malheur counties, has 300 total positions. The region now has 38 vacancies, about 25 of which are permanent and seasonal road maintenance positions, according to Ken Patterson, the manager of ODOT's Area 5 region.

The vacancies mean some ODOT

crews may have to do more with less as they work to keep Interstate 84 and state highways clear of snow and ice.

"We will do as much as we can with the people we have," Patterson said.

The employee shortage is linked to a falling number of seasonal workers, who are hired to work from November through April.

"Our No. 1 concern going into winter is seasonal labor," said Rich Lani, the manager of ODOT's District 12, which covers Umatilla and Morrow counties and the northern half of Union County.

Stricter regulations

ODOT's labor shortage is more difficult to address today than it was two

years ago because of a new state regulation that makes the process of earning a commercial driver's license more time-consuming.

The additional regulations make it harder to find potential employees who are ready to begin driving snowplows and trucks. ODOT is hiring people without CDLs and then helping them earn the accreditation. However, a number of employees leave ODOT after receiving their CDLs because they are now able to land higher paying jobs elsewhere.

"Having a CDL gives you more options," explained Ace Clark, manager of ODOT's District 13, which includes all or portions of Union, Baker and Wallowa counties.



Ace Clark/Contributed Photo

An Oregon Department of Transportation snowplow clears a roadway in Baker County.

Group works to recover MIA remains

By MICHAEL KOHN
The Bulletin

BEND — Americans who join the U.S. armed forces are given a promise. Their remains will be brought home should they fall in battle while fighting overseas.

Bend resident Derek Abbey leads one group that intends to make good on that promise.

Abbey is the chief executive officer and president of Project Recover, a nonprofit organization that scours the Earth for the remains of American service members missing in action in all wars and military conflicts since World War II.

Recovered or still lost, they are equally remembered on Veteran's Day.

More than 80,000 American service members are considered missing in action by the Department of Defense. Around 72,000 of those MIA service members fought in World War II; another 7,000 fought in the Korean War, and nearly 1,600 fought in Vietnam.

"The numbers drive us more towards World War II missions, but we focus on where the information takes us," said Abbey, a Bend resident for the past three years. "We are evidence and science focused so that is

what drives us."

In addition to running the nonprofit, Abbey has participated in more than 15 missions to search for the remains of service members. His next trip is to the jungles of Palau where the U.S. fought Japanese forces in pitched battles over the far-flung Pacific archipelago.

Dick Tobiason, a retired Army lieutenant colonel and Vietnam War vet who lives in Bend, said there are several American groups that look for MIA Americans, and Project Recover is among those doing crucial research and recovery work.

"Everyone that looks for them improves the chances of recovery," said Tobiason, who is leading the Veterans Day parade Friday in Bend.

Project Recover relies on donations to operate. One of its biggest donors is the Friedkin Group, a privately held consortium that operates a number of businesses including Toyota distribution. Abbey believes that even though the nonprofit is run by just a few people, it's every American's mission to bring home service members killed in combat.

"We make a promise that we will do everything we can to return them if they fall in battle, and that promise doesn't have an expiration date," said Abbey. "Not everyone can take



Project Recover/Contributed Photo

An archaeologist inspects material found at a potential MIA site deep in the jungle of Palau.

off to the jungles and waters around the world so we do that on behalf of all Americans."

Project Recover, which began as the BentProp Project, has located, documented, and conducted the recovery of dozens of service members since it began operating nearly three decades ago. The organization has worked in more than 20 countries and territories, including Korea, Kuwait, Vietnam, Denmark, and Micronesia, among other places.

Much of the work is done with cutting-edge technology, including torpedo-shaped robotic submersibles that can dive deep underwater to search for

planes and shipwrecks. Once a wreck is located, team members scuba dive to the ocean floor when possible to try and identify the plane. After amassing information about the plane, they then try to identify the crew.

Surviving families of the MIA service members and pilots are informed of the discovery. Remains and personal items are repatriated when possible. To date, Project Recover has repatriated the remains of 15 Americans that had been missing in action for decades.

Abbey's field teams include an archaeologist, and all information is shared with the host nation. Any human remains that are found are brought to the Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency labs in Nebraska or Hawaii, where researchers use DNA and other methods to try and identify the MIA service members.

"Fifteen MIA cases have been closed," said Abbey. "These service members were repatriated back to their families and received full military honors upon their return."

For those families who have received word that their MIA relative was located, it can be a life-changing experience. That is what happened to Casey Doyle, a lieutenant colonel in the U.S. Marine Corps whose grandfather went missing in World War II

when his B-24 aircraft was shot down over Palau. Doyle said his father and grandmother spent their lives wondering about their loved one, sometimes considering the possibility that he could still be alive somewhere.

"While loved ones always hold to any hope that the MIA might be alive, it can be incredibly painful to think that the service member might choose to not come home. That idea can fester into life-altering changes," said Doyle.

Project Recover spent years locating the crash site of the B-24 and eventually found the remains of Doyle's grandfather.

"Although it has been more than 10 years since my grandfather was properly returned and buried next to his wife, I still find it hard to put into words my family's and my gratitude," said Doyle. "They literally changed the history of my family. They healed wounds that had only grown, not diminished, for my family over the many years since my grandfather disappeared."

Even after a great discovery, the work still continues. Sites located and documented by Project Recover associated with more than 100 MIAs remain open, awaiting recovery efforts or official identification, Abbey added.

WHAT'S HAPPENING

SATURDAY, NOV. 19 Cowboy Christmas Coronation Dinner

• 5 p.m., Trowbridge Pavilion, Grant County Fairgrounds, 411 NW Bridge St., John Day

The 2023 Grant County Fair and Rodeo court will be crowned at this gala affair, which features a tri-tip dinner, a no-host bar and music by DJ Chris Gibson, as well as live and silent auctions. The cost for dinner is \$18 per person or \$34 per couple. For more information, call Whitney Richey at 541-228-4604 or Mindy Winegar at 541-620-8058.

THURSDAY, NOV. 24 Community Thanksgiving dinner

• 1-4 p.m., John Day Elks



Lodge, 140 NE Dayton St., John Day

Volunteers will dish up a free Thanksgiving dinner to all comers at the John Day Elks Lodge. The traditional menu will include turkey, ham, mashed potatoes and gravy, green bean casserole, sweet potatoes, rolls, stuffing, cranberries and pies. Those who are disabled or homebound can call the lodge at 541-575-1824 to request deliveries. Leave a message with your name, address, phone number and how many meals you will need.

FRIDAY, DEC. 2 Carrie Young Memorial Dinner and Auction

• 5 p.m., John Day Elks Lodge, 140 NE Dayton St., John Day

The 30th annual Carrie Young Memorial Dinner and Auction will feature a donation-only dinner of spaghetti, salad and bread as well as live and silent auctions to raise money to provide Christmas presents and necessities to Grant County senior citizens and assisted living residents.

SATURDAY, DEC. 3 Blue Mountain Hospital Bazaar

• 9 a.m. to 3 p.m., Trowbridge Pavilion and Keer-

ins Hall, Grant County Fairgrounds, 411 NW Bridge St., John Day

Hosted by the Blue Mountain Hospital Auxiliary, this annual event will feature a wide array of holiday gift items, many of them hand-crafted. Lunch, pie and coffee will be available. A portion of the proceeds goes to support projects of the Blue Mountain Hospital District.

FRIDAY, DEC. 9 Holiday Showcase

• 6:30 p.m., Grant Union High School, 911 S. Canyon Blvd., John Day

This 24th annual event will feature special performances by Grant Union Gold

and Body, Fitness & Dance.

SATURDAY, DEC. 10 Ugly Sweater Christmas Bazaar

• Monument Senior Center, 269 Main St., Monument
Wear an ugly sweater to be entered into a drawing. Tables are available at a cost of \$15. To reserve a table, call Jeanne Strange at 541-934-2001.

Timber Truckers Light Parade

• 6 p.m., Main Street, John Day

The annual parade of log trucks, big rigs and work vehicles decked out in festive holiday lights will begin at former Grant Western Lumber Co. site just west of John

Day, then travel east on Main Street to Third Street Extension before looping back around to the Elks Lodge, where a chili feed and awards ceremony awaits the participants and their families. This year's theme is "Christmas Memories," and entrants can sign up at the former Grant Western Lumber site from 2 to 5:30 p.m., The entry fee is \$10. For more information, call Leslie Traylor at 541-620-4032.

Do you have a community event you'd like to publicize? Email information to editor@bmeagle.com. The deadline is noon Friday for publication the following Wednesday.

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