

The Heppner

Morrow County's Home-Owned Newspaper

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## Air ambulance service just minutes away



Members of the press, hospital staff, local doctors, EMT's and representatives of the Morrow County Medical Board inspect Aero Medical's fixed wing air ambulance on the occasion of its visit to the Lexington airport last Wednesday.

by Marie Struthers  
At first sight the Cessna 421 looks small but the job that it does as one of Blue Mountain AeroMedical's two fixed wing air ambulances is very big. Based at Grand Rhonde Hospital, the little plane can accomplish the flight from LaGrande to Lexington Airport in 31 minutes. This time can vary depending on weather conditions but the plane was right on time last Wednesday afternoon when representatives from the Morrow County Medical Board, local EMT's, doctors, hospital staff, and members of the press gathered to meet it at the airport.

On board were Greg Sanders, Flight Service Coordinator for Grand Rhonde Hospital and a flight paramedic; K.J. Schrank, RN, a critical care nurse and EMT-3; and Mike Barry, pilot. In response to many questions, the crew described the capabilities and limitations of the two Cessnas employed by AeroMedical.

The smaller plane has a maximum range of 4 hours (or 800 miles) and travels about twice as fast as a helicopter making the trip from LaGrande to Portland in about 1½ hours. According to pilot Barry, 3 miles visibility and a 1,000 foot ceiling are minimum requirements. Together with the condition of the landing site, this information determines whether a flight will be attempted. The second plane, a Cessna 441 Conquest, is both larger and faster. The Conquest can and does make flights to Montana and Nevada.

Inside, the C421 is equipped to transport one patient and three passengers in addition to the pilot. The staff on board can be adjusted to accommodate almost any kind of medical emergency including cardiac care and severe trauma. Transport to any appropriate hospital within range is routine and cooperation with ambulances and helicopter services such as Portland's "Life

Flight" facilitates transfer of patients to the hospital after AeroMedical's arrival at the airport.

Likely candidates for transport by fixed wing ambulance include hunting accident victims, burn patients, cardiac emergencies, or any patient that cannot be adequately stabilized at available facilities. In nearly all cases an attending physician determines whether a patient's condition warrants transport by air. Frequently, land transport is quicker and safer, particularly during severe weather conditions or when the destination hospital is quite near.

Once AeroMedical is called in, the appropriate plane is dispatched quickly, staffed with health care personnel to meet the specific needs of the patient to be transported. Although not for casual use, it is nice to know that the little plane that does the big job is there for the real emergencies.

## Plan ahead for Town & Country '89

Town and Country Days has been scheduled for the week of January 9, 1989 with the banquet to be held on Friday the 13th. These dates were set at the recent Town and Country Steering Committee meeting, chaired by Wayne Evans.

The theme for this year's event will be "Our Future, Our Country, Our Kids." Included may be a panel discussion by county high school students about their concerns, followed by a question and answer period.

A wine tasting event for Thursday evening will be repeated, with Soroptimists hosting this year.

Many organizations are cooperating to put on Town and Country Days, including Morrow County Wheat Growers League,

Morrow County Livestock Growers, Morrow County CattleWomen, Morrow County Grain Growers, Umatilla National Forest, Kinzua Corporation, OSU Extension Service, Small Woodlands Association, Morrow SWCD, Heppner Chamber of Commerce, the Port of Morrow, Willow Creek Park District, the Elks Club, and ICABO.

Commodity meetings will be held on Friday, January 13. The SWCD, the Livestock Growers, the Wheat League, the CattleWomen and the Small Woodlands Association will meet at the Elks. All are welcome to sit in on their meetings.

The next planning meeting for Town and Country is scheduled for Tuesday, October 4, 7:30 p.m., Extension Conference Room.

## United Way kickoff Sept. 22 - 23

The United Way of Morrow County 1988-89 campaign officially begins this week with kickoff celebrations in two communities. Thursday, September 22 in Boardman, there will be free Pepsi, hot dogs and balloons in front of Kegler's Sentry Market from 3 p.m. to 5 p.m. Friday, September 23

there will be free hot dogs, Pepsi and balloons between the Post Office and the Shoe Box in Heppner. The Heppner booth will be open from 11 a.m. to 1 p.m.

Brochures and other information will be available. Everyone is invited to stop by and enjoy the refreshments.

## News stories claim Willow Creek Dam unsafe



Senator Hatfield speaks during dedication of Willow Creek Dam, July 1983

Editor's note:  
The following copyright story appeared in Sunday's edition of The Eugene Register-Guard.

by Lisa Strycker  
of The Eugene Register-Guard.

A massive dam built five years ago with a novel construction technique is dissolving at the city limits of Heppner, threatening to wipe out the north-central Oregon community with a catastrophic flood it was designed to prevent.

U.S. Army Corps of Engineers documents examined by the Register-Guard indicate that the agency is well aware of the problems at the dam, but officials have given no warning to the 1,500 residents who stand to lose life and property in a torrent of water that could be unleashed in a dam breach.

"We have a potential hazard here and all the components are present that could cause a breach," said corps lake scientist Doug Larson, who has extensively studied the Willow Creek project. "Whether or not this occurs depends on whether or not the corps decides to do something to prevent it."

To date, the corps has spent more than \$500,000 studying the dam's problems, but a promising solution that would cost about \$150,000 was shelved because of a lack of funding, according to staff memoranda.

Preliminary results from corps-financed studies indicate that the innovative dam, built in layers of concrete instead of being poured into a concrete form, is being dissolved by water and by toxic chemicals originating in the nutrient-enriched reservoir behind it.

While corps documents and scientists warn of the threat of a dam failure, corps engineers insist that the dam is safe at present.

"I would agree that there appears to be some dissolution of the concrete," said Dennis Hopman, chief of the concrete and dam safety section of the Portland district corps office. "But it's stable and safe now."

Still, engineers want to closely monitor the structure and conduct studies to find out how much of the concrete is dissolving, where it's dissolving and whether it's compromising the dam's strength in the long run.

"We're not jumping to conclusions," Hopman said. "We're looking at it. Any prudent person would. We are approaching this the same way we would look at any other type of potential problem that we have within our dam safety program."

Corps scientists are primarily concerned about the processes underlying the decay, arguing that what's happening to the dam shouldn't be happening.

"Nobody who designed and constructed this dam was aware of what would happen," said Larson, who has a doctorate in limnology, the science of lakes. "If they had been aware, they either would not have built the dam or would have done something to avoid these problems."

Concerns about the structural integrity of Willow Creek Dam are expressed in a number of corps documents, including a 1987 memorandum from the corps' chief of the engineering division to the chief of the operations division in the Portland district, which is responsible for the dam.

"Water quality at Willow Creek Lake has been identified as both a public health issue and a dam safety

issue," according to the memo.

"We urge you to fund remedial action during fiscal year 1988 and not to place this program on the shelf."

No such action was financed for 1988, but the studies continue.

Although they can tell the dam is leaking, Heppner residents know very little about the troubles besetting their community's largest landmark, and they resent being left in the dark.

"We can see it's disintegrating but they're not telling us anything," complained Ed Hiemstra, whose back yard looks out on the dam's wet face. "They were looking for a sparsely settled area they could experiment on with this new type of dam, and now we're stuck with it."

The Willow Creek project is the world's first dam to be built entirely with roller-compacted concrete. It sits just upstream of Heppner on Willow Creek, a tributary to the Columbia River.

From the start, the 169-foot dam leaked like a sieve between the one-foot layers of compacted concrete. A \$2 million grouting project four years ago stopped some of the flow. But recently, the dam began showing signs that the seepage may be promoting decay of the concrete itself.

To determine whether the structural integrity of the dam is at risk, studies are under way on the geochemistry, microbiology and hydrodynamics of the dam's seepage waters.

Privately, corps staff members complain of bureaucratic irresponsibility and foot-dragging at Willow Creek. Officially, the corps maintains it has taken the proper steps to monitor the dam and to ensure its safety.

As much as 82 metric tons of the dam's 900,000-ton structure are leaching out of the concrete and washing downstream every year, according to estimates prepared for the corps. Although the annual dissolution rate represents a small fraction of the total dam mass, scientists warn that decay may be occurring in narrow zones and could result in localized weakening.

The degradation threatens the dam's "structural integrity" and raises questions about the "health and safety of the public and the employees of the project," according to internal memoranda written by corps staff in 1986 and 1987.

The corps was warned that problems would result if the dam was built. In 1973, a Washington State University scientist under contract with the corps conducted a pre-impoundment study of the Willow Creek area. The predictions that environmental engineering professor William Funk made then have all come true and worse.

He foresaw that because of chemicals and manure associated with agriculture and cattle production in the Willow Creek watershed, the reservoir would be enriched with nutrients that would feed a profusion of blue-green algae. He predicted the algae would bloom, die, sink to the bottom of the reservoir and decompose, in the process depleting oxygen from the depths and creating poisonous and corrosive substances, such as hydrogen sulfide and ammonium.

He could not predict because neither he nor anyone else knew exactly how a roller-compacted dam would behave-how severely the water chemistry would erode the dam.

Besides the potential for corrosion of the concrete surface exposed to the reservoir, the leaks between layers in Willow Creek Dam provide additional surfaces where corrosion can take place.

That seepage within the concrete, scientists now know, provides a watery breeding ground for bacteria which can generate sulfuric and nitric acids that are even more corrosive to the vulnerable concrete than hydrogen sulfide.

"People didn't believe me when I told them what was going to happen there," said Funk, who now directs the state of Washington Water Research Center. "You've seen the big caverns like Carlsbad and Oregon Caves. What happens is there's been enough acid in the soil for the breakdown of the limestone so it creates big caverns. I'm not saying the dam is going to have big caverns in it. I am saying it will break the concrete down. They're going to have to stop the breakdown of the dam."

The corps used the newly pioneered technique of roller-compacted concrete at Willow Creek to save time and money. The \$34.7 million dam was constructed between 1981 and 1983 with only about one-fourth the materials and about two-thirds the cost typical for a conventional concrete dam of the same size.

"There were fairly substantial dollar savings between the cheapest normal way of constructing the dam versus the roller-compacted concrete," said William Branch, chief of the hydraulics and hydrology branch within the corps engineering division in Portland.

In its efforts to save money, the corps has bought itself a problem of potentially huge proportions.

At first, Willow Creek Dam appeared to suffer most from leakage. After it was filled in 1983, the leakage was close to 3,000 gallons per minute, seeping through the concrete and pouring off the face of the dam in torrents. A major grouting project greatly reduced the flow to a steady stream of about 150 gallons per minute.

But in 1985, corps employees noticed a rotten egg smell in the inspection tunnel that runs the length of the dam. Lethal hydrogen sulfide gas was seeping from the reservoir into the concrete in such concentrations that corps employees were required to wear gas masks when working in the dam's gallery.

The corps immediately began studying the cause and effects of the hydrogen sulfide and other chemicals, including explosive methane, that appeared to be produced in the oxygen-depleted deep lake water.

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## Market Report

Commodities of the Morrow County Grain Growers

Monday, Sept. 19	
Soft White	
Sept	\$4.45/\$4.47
Oct	\$4.48/\$4.50
Nov	\$4.51/\$4.53
Dec	\$4.54
Jan	\$4.54
Barley	
Sept	\$1.07 T
Oct	\$1.08 T
PIK	99%
New Crop - Aug. 89	\$3.85

## Weather Report

By City of Heppner

Sept. 13 - Sept. 19

	High	Low	Prec.
Tues.	80	50	.0
Weds.	87	50	.0
Thurs.	79	47	.0
Fri.	65	38	.0
Sat.	61	36	.01
Sun.	73	47	.20
Mon.	60	41	.15

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