

McEwen sentenced in health care fraud case

Robert John "Bobby" McEwen, 51, of Heppner was sentenced on several counts of health care fraud and theft after a settlement conference last month. McEwen's sentence included probation time, 150 days of jail time, and a hefty amount of restitution to the State of Oregon.

Morrow County Circuit Court Judge Lynn Hampton presided over the proceedings. Because the State of Oregon was the plaintiff, the Morrow County District Attorney was not involved in the case, and Oregon Dept. of Justice attorney Elizabeth Ballard prosecuted on behalf of the state.

McEwen originally faced 31 counts each of Making a False Claim for Health Care Payment and Theft I, both considered Class C felonies. He was convicted of only five counts of each, a total of 10 felony counts, after pleading guilty to those charges. The additional 26 counts of each charge were dismissed.

McEwen also originally faced two charges each of Unlawfully Obtain Public Assistance or Attempt/Aid/Abet, as well as Obtain/Attempt/Aid or Abet/Dispose Food Stamp Benefit; all four of those charges were dismissed.

While the Morrow County DA's office was not directly involved in the case, DA Justin Nelson told the Gazette the main issue in the case seemed to be McEwen's sentence, or rather, his physical ability to serve a sentence.

"The State requested a prison sentence, while the defendant was asking for probation based upon his medical issues," Nelson said. "During the settlement conference it was becoming clear that the court was going to impose the probation sentence based upon the medical needs of Mr.

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Local Easter egg hunts April 15

Sunrise service planned for Easter morning

The Heppner Easter egg hunt, sponsored by the Heppner Elks Club, will be held on Saturday, April 15, beginning at 10 a.m. at the Heppner City Park next to the Heppner library.

The Easter Bunny will make his appearance at 9:30 a.m.

Ione's annual Easter



egg hunt will be held Saturday, April 15, at 10 a.m.

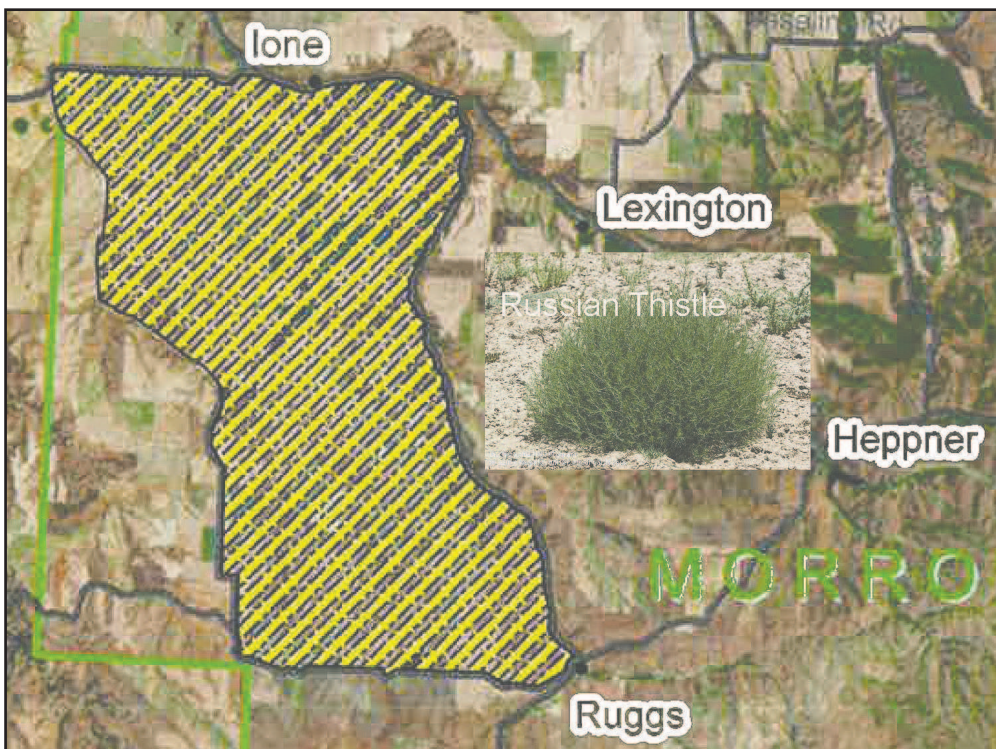
in Ione City Park. Children up to the fourth grade are invited.

On Easter morning, April 16, a community Sunrise Service will be held at the football stands at the fairgrounds at 7 a.m.

For other local services, see PAGE THREE.

Group seeks Russian Thistle eradication within 100,000 acres

Producers and others band together for aggressive effort



About 100,000 acres in Morrow County will be targeted in the thistle reduction program.

By David Sykes

A group of eight direct-seed wheat farmers, along with several researchers, have come together with an ambitious goal to completely eradicate the Russian Thistle weed from a 100,000-acre section of Morrow County. The thistle competes with crops and is especially tough to control on conservation-friendly direct seeded farm ground. Some of the group attended last week's county commissioner meeting, and asked for help in the five-year project.

Ione farmer John Rietmann was head spokesman for the group, and said at this time they are putting together a proposal for the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) for funding of the thistle eradication and control program. Rietmann said signing up participants was crucial to apply for the USDA grant to show that people and organizations were behind the effort. So far the eight farmers of the group are John Rietmann, Bill Jepsen, Mark McElligott, Dick Snider, Joe McElligott, Joel Peterson, Keith Morter and Clint Carlson. If the project moves forward, assisting them will be Larry Lutchner of OSU Extension and Stewart Wuest of the Agricultural Research Service of USDA. Dave Pranger of

the weed district would also be heavily involved.

At the meeting Rietmann said they were asking the county to commit to an aggressive weed control on the 175 acres of county roads and rights of way within the project boundaries.

"We need 100 percent participation inside the zone," Rietmann said, and he asked if the county would commit to total eradication on its roadways within the 100,000-acre area. He said the USDA grant would be \$7 million but the local group has to come up with a "dollar to dollar" match in money and in-kind donations.

In emphasizing the importance of the program, Rietmann said success could mean the continuation of direct seed farming or eventual abandonment and back to tillage. The thistle is particularly tough to kill in direct seeded ground because the conservation-friendly method is meant to disturb as little soil as possible, thus minimizing erosion. These methods apparently provide a better environment for the thistle. He added that direct seed farmers have invested time and money into the method, which is good for the environment.

"If we are to continue to have direct seeding, we have to control Russian

Park vandalism concerns city council

By David Sykes

The city of Heppner is concerned about vandalism at the parks, and Hager Park has been hard hit lately. Both basketball rims at the Bob Kilkenny memorial basketball court have been damaged and the city recently removed them for repairs.

The city council spend quite a bit of time Monday night discussing the vandalism and how to stop it. Several councilmembers suggested getting a trail camera and placing it at the park. A camera was placed at the Main Street park by



New city manager Edie Ball (right) gives report to council at her first meeting. -Photo by David Sykes

the library and seems to have cut down on acts of vandalism, especially after

several youth were caught on camera doing damage.

One councilmember who lives near Hager Park says she has been trying to keep an eye on the park and what is going on there, but has not been able catch the vandals. She suggested an increase in police patrols around the area.

Public Works Director Chad Doherty said the hoops were broken because older kids are actually getting up and standing on the rims as well as swinging from the rims. The rims are lower than a regular 10-foot basket, which gives the older and heavier kids more access to doing damage to them. There are also reports of high school kids and adults on the teeter totters and also riding bikes on top of the picnic tables. Doherty urged people to keep their eyes open and report suspicious activity to the police.

There was no estimate when the hoops were to be repaired; however, it was noted that the Howard and Beth Bryant Foundation was paying to have them

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conservation efforts. The purpose of this venture is to educate, cooperate, and incentivize best practices to maintain a positive conservation method, reduce costs to producers and slow or stop the development of herbicide resistant varieties," he said.

The county commissioners were generally in favor of project, realizing it would increase the road department's spraying budget.

"Before we sign on we need to know the dollar amount," said commissioner Jim Doherty. "Looks like a fantastic project, but we need to know how much. If we are going to make this project work the county's current contribution isn't going to be enough," he said.

"If this comes through this is an opportunity of a lifetime to make a real change in this county's farming practices," Doherty said.

In other business the commission agreed to provide \$250 for this year's youth fishing derby at Cutsforth Park. Kirsti Cason of the Public Works Department said the derby has become more popular over the years. This will be the derby's 12th year and Cason said it has grown from the original 20-30 youth when they started to last year's 120.

Cason said the event has become not just a youth activity but a "family activity," with people of all ages enjoying coming to the park. She said they try to make sure every participant receives some sort of award. She also praised the fish and game department for making sure the pond at the park was well stocked.

"Last year we had a three-pound, 19-inch large trout caught," she said.

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Demolition training in Boardman next week

The Oregon Air National Guard's 142nd Explosive Ordnance Disposal Flight will conduct routine demolition and pyrotechnic training April 20-22 at the Naval Weapons System Training Facility in Boardman.

Training will take place during the day and in the center of the facility. Safe-

ty precautions have been taken to ensure the tests pose no threat to people or property, but residents are warned that dust clouds, smoke, airborne flares and ground vibrations may occur during that time.

Questions, contact Naval Air Station Whidbey Island, 360-257-2286.

Wyden plans County town hall next week

Portland, OR—U.S. Senator Ron Wyden will hold a town hall in Morrow County next Saturday, April 22. The town hall meeting is planned for 10 a.m. in the Riverside Jr/Sr High School auditorium, 210 Boardman Ave NE, Boardman.

Wyden's Morrow County stop is one of 11 town halls scheduled for Eastern and Central Oregon the week of April 17-23. The meetings in Deschutes, Harney, Grant, Baker, Malheur, Wasco, Sherman, Morrow, Union, Wallowa and Umatilla counties will increase to 815 the number of town halls Wyden has held to fulfill his commitment of annual town halls in each of Oregon's 36 counties.

"It's clear from the strong turnouts so far at this year's town halls that participatory democracy is alive and well throughout Oregon," Wyden said. "I am looking forward to hearing directly from residents of central and eastern Oregon about solutions we can work on together to preserve and protect the Oregon way of finding common ground."



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