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Navy, county talk Bombing Range

Fire control top concern

By David Sykes

Fighting and controlling wildfires on the Navy Bombing Range in North Morrow County was the top issue of discussion during a recent meeting between county commissioners and Navy representatives. Seven representatives from the Navy and the Army were at a May 17 commissioner meeting in Boardman to meet with the county.

Fire control on the Bombing Range was a topic of discussion at a county commission meeting this month.

Navy Fire and Emergency Services Chief Sean Merrill said with the abundance of moisture this year, which grows more vegetation, the Navy is bracing for more potential fires on the bombing range this season. Merrill said there are six sailors stationed at the range trained to fight fires at the 47,000-acre facility. He said equipment at the range includes six trucks, two 1,500-gallon water tanks, with two more being added, and a leased tractor and disc to cut fire lines in the event of a blaze. Merrill said the sailors have annual training, and there is also a mutual aid agreement with the Hermiston Fire Department, Oregon Military Dept. and Yakima Army Training center.

"We also have a good relationship with Marc Rogelstad," he said. Rogelstad is Chief of the Boardman Rural Fire Department.

Commissioner Jim Doherty said years ago livestock would be run on the western part of the range to reduce vegetation and fire risk.

"The question has come up if cows are compatible with squirrels," he said, referencing the Washington Ground Squirrel on the Bombing Range being declared endangered. He questioned whether, if cows did not disturb the squirrels, it would be possible for the Navy to lease out a portion of the range to cattle grazing once again. Range Commander Captain Geoffrey Moore said safety is a big factor with unexploded ordinance and there is extremely restricted access, as well as the "conservation demands" placed on the Bombing Range ground.

Commissioner Don Russell said up to about 12 years ago there would be reimbursement if local fire departments assisted with fires on the range, and asked if that might be reinstated. Merrill said it was Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) that did the reimbursement and he did not see that happening again. He said the reciprocal agreement with the Hermiston Fire Department is a no-cost agreement for mutual help. Boardman, which has no agreement, will help with fires only up to the edge of the Bombing Range, but will apparently not go onto the property.

Senator Ron Wyden's Field Representative Kathleen Cathey was also at the

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MCSD restructures admin team

HEPPNER—The Morrow County School District has restructured its administrative team in an attempt to "continue to be proactive and efficient in providing the highest quality education for all its students," according to Dirk Dirksen, district superintendent.

Erin Stocker has been promoted to executive director of human resources. She will continue as principal at Irrigon Elementary School for the next school year while assuming additional district-level responsibilities. She has taught for 13 years in the district and been the principal and director of human resources for four. Kaira Rysdam will be vice principal at IES.

Marie Shimer has been hired as the director of educational services. She has been the principal at Riverside High School since 2013 and was the assistant principal for two years before that. Shimer has a background in curriculum and staff development and has worked with several special programs. The district will post for the RHS principal position.

Matt Combe will remain director of facilities for the district. Currently the principal at Heppner Elementary and Heppner High School, Combe has been an administrator for 11 years in Heppner. He was the alternative education coordinator for eight years and taught for three. He will continue as the principal of HHS. Dieter Waite will become principal of Heppner Elementary.

Jack Johns will become the district's director of special education, a change from his current role as special education consultant. Johns has more than 20 years of experience as a special education director and has been a special education consultant for nine years, including the last three in MCSD.

"We are pleased with the new structure of our district administrative team—all of these individuals will continue to be important assets in serving students in all three of our communities," Dirksen said.

All changes will be effective July 1, 2017.

Flags wave in fallen soldiers' honor on Memorial Day

Volunteers Judy Buschke and Darlene Lovgren place flags on the graves of veterans in Heppner in preparation for the Memorial Day holiday this past weekend. *-Photo by David Sykes*

Amazon may change tax payments

Looks at switch from CREZ to SIP

By David Sykes

In a move to stabilize and bring more certainty to its property tax payments, Vadata, the Amazon.com subsidiary that builds and operates the internet giant's data farms at the Port of Morrow in Boardman, may change the way it pays property taxes, a company spokesman told a Morrow County Commission meeting last week.

Mike Grella, Director of Economic Development for Amazon Web Services, attended the meeting along with a team of company tax, data and legal experts, and said the company wants to talk to the county about a possible Strategic Investment Program (SIP) agreement instead of its current Columbia River Enterprise Zone (CREZ) agreements.

Both types of agreements and payments are monies paid by companies instead of regular property taxes. The tax breaks are used as incentives to attract new businesses and jobs to the county. The main difference from the county perspective, is the SIP money is paid into the county general fund and distributed through decisions of the county budget committee. Under money paid through CREZ agreements, the funds are paid directly to the CREZ and distributed through decisions made by a six-person appointed board, made up of two representatives each from the City of Boardman, Morrow County and the Port of Morrow. Currently the county has other SIP agreements with wind farms located in the county, and also with PGE covering its recently-completed Carty gas-fired electrical generating plant. The CREZ currently has a variety of tax reduction agreements with several port businesses including Amazon, Tillamook Cheese and ConAgra Lamb Weston.

Vadata, an Amazon.com subsidiary that owns data farms like this at the Port, is thinking of switching from its current enterprize zone agreement to a Strategic Investment Program (SIP) agreement, the company told county commissioners last week. *-Contributed photo*

"We want certainty," Grella said about the possible switch to a SIP, which offers a 15-year property tax exemption not changing throughout the life of the agreement. He told the commission, "We want a certain tax amount we can budget for. A fixed dollar amount."

Grella said the current three- to five-year CREZ agreements are "tremendously complex" to calculate, and are constantly changing as their computer equipment ages and "falls off" the taxing schedule.

Grella hinted that Amazon may have bigger plans for investment at the Port, thus their need for "scalability."

"If over the next five to seven years we think we are going to build six more buildings, then end up building 15, we want to have a secure revenue stream," he said, which

-See AMAZON TAXES/PAGE FOUR

Heppner schools reader board up at Columbia Basin

Heppner schools now have an electronic information reader board installed in front of Columbia Basin Electric Co-Op. Thanks to the support of Columbia Basin Electric and Morrow

-See READER BOARD/ PAGE THREE

Heppner, Ione to celebrate commencement

Baccalaureates Wednesday

This week marks a major milestone for both Ione and Heppner seniors, as both high schools plan commencement ceremonies for their graduating classes this week.

Ione baccalaureate will take place May 31 at 7 p.m. at Ione Community Church. Graduation ceremonies will take place Friday, June 2, at 7 p.m. at Ione High School.

In Heppner, baccalaureate will take place May 31 at 6 p.m. at St. Patrick's Catholic Church. Graduation ceremonies will be held Saturday, June 3, at 2 p.m. in the Heppner Jr./Sr. High School gym.

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