

Local Physician pleads guilty to tax evasion

Kenneth Wenberg, 72, a medical doctor from Heppner, pleaded guilty Feb. 12 to a single count of tax evasion. The government demonstrated it could prove Dr. Wenberg failed to report income resulting in a tax loss of approximately \$187,000, according to a press release from the United States Attorney's Office of Oregon.

According to court documents, Dr. Wenberg created nominee entities to hide assets and income he personally earned while serving as a physician at the Morrow County Health District (MCHD) in Heppner and Urgent Health Care Center (UHCC) in Hermiston. Dr. Wenberg instructed MCHD and UHCC to make payments for services he performed directly to what prosecutors called sham entities to avoid income tax liabilities.

Dr. Wenberg opened numerous bank accounts and purchased real property in the names of his nominee entities. He opened the two companies, including Opal Butte Health Services, in 2000 the same year he entered into agreements to

start providing services for both MCHD and UHCC.

In an indictment from 2017, Wenberg was charged with three counts of tax evasion, one for each year from 2012 through 2014.

Dr. Wenberg also paid for his and his family's personal living expenses out of the nominee accounts, the Attorney's Office said. Dr. Wenberg failed to report his income to the IRS, despite knowing he owed taxes, the Attorney's Office added.

Wenberg faces a maximum sentence of five years in prison, a \$250,000 fine and three years of supervised release. He will be sentenced on June 6 before a U.S. District Court Judge.

As part of the plea agreement, Wenberg has agreed to pay restitution to the IRS in the full amount of the tax loss as determined by the court after sentencing.

This case was investigated by IRS-Criminal Investigation and was prosecuted by Assistant U.S. Attorneys for the District of Oregon.

Following the guilty plea Morrow County Health District CEO Bob

Houser released the following statement: "Dr.

Wenberg has worked for and with MCHD for over 30 years. He has been an independent practitioner and since the late nineties, early 2000 the district has had a contract with Opal Butte Health Services, INC. for the services provided to the district by Dr. Wenberg. He has and continues to be helping in covering the ER (Emergency Department) at Pioneer Memorial Hospital. Morrow County Health District pays Opal Butte Health Services for Dr. Weinberg's service. Each year, Opal Butte is issued a 1099 by the district for the monies paid them as is legally required. It is not the responsibility of the district to oversee Opal Butte to ensure they pay their taxes.

"Currently Dr. Wenberg has a medical license to practice in the state of Oregon. If that changes either before or after sentencing, the district would then have to deal with the effects of that decision. Currently the district is considering its options in this matter," Houser said.

1969 New Year's baby turns 50



The first baby born at Heppner's Pioneer Memorial Hospital in 1969 just turned 50. Jerry Alan Blanckaert, born Feb. 2 that year was the first baby born in the new year. His family said they enjoyed telling people he was a New Year's baby even though he wasn't born until Groundhog Day.

Information regarding his birth from the Heppner

Gazette-Times Feb. 13, 1969 issue is reprinted below:

Happy family is this threesome. Jerry Alan Blanckaert, born Feb. 2, is the center of interest for father and mother, Sgt. and Mrs. Jerry Blanckaert of Condon. As the first baby born in Pioneer Memorial Hospital in 1969, Jerry, Jr. won many prizes for himself and his parents. The Blanckaerts, whose home is in Denver, Colo., have been in Condon for 29 months where he serves at the Air Force Station. Young Jerry is their first son. While collecting prizes around town Friday, Sgt. Blanckaert said that he had a surprise in store for his wife. He had arranged for Mrs. Dorothy Beuchat of Denver, mother of Mrs. Blanckaert, to fly out for a visit and met her in Pendleton Friday evening. (G-T Photo).



Jerry Alan Blanckaert
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Vehicle fire spreads to nearby house

A vehicle that caught fire in Irrigon on Feb. 13 quickly spread to the single-wide house trailer next to the location where it was parked. Irrigon Fire Department, Irrigon Ambulance, Morrow County Sheriff's Office, Boardman Fire and Umatilla Fire all responded to the scene when the call was received shortly after 7 p.m.

According to the press release, nobody was home at the time of the fire and there were no injuries. After the investigation by the Morrow County Sheriff's Office was completed, Joseph Palmer, 20, from Irrigon and Echo was arrested and charged with Reckless Burning and Criminal Mischief II.

**ALL NEWS AND ADVERTISEMENT DEADLINE:
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Nation's first wind, solar and battery facility to be built in Morrow County

PGE partnering with NextEra on wind farm north of Lexington

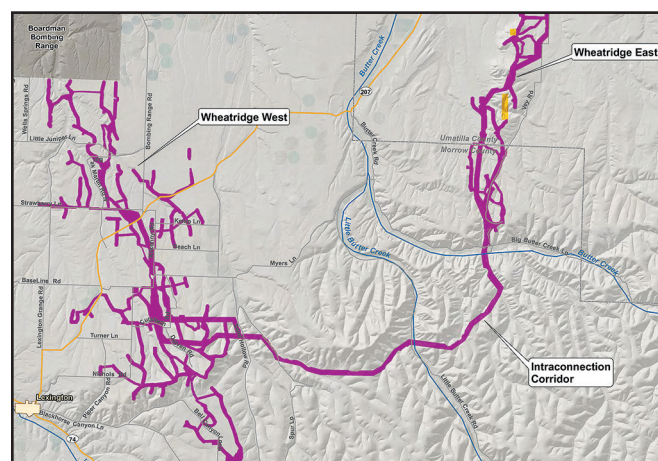
Portland General Electric Company, PGE, and NextEra Energy Resources, LLC, has announced plans to construct a new energy facility in Morrow County combining 300 megawatts of wind generation with 50 megawatts of solar generation and 30 megawatts of battery storage. The new project, called the Wheatridge Renewable Energy Facility, will be the first of this scale in North America to co-locate and integrate these three technologies.

Power from the facility will be generated by 120 turbines on a wind farm to be located just north of Lexington. Wheatridge will provide up to 300 jobs during construction of the wind site and up to 175 jobs during construction of the solar and storage sites. Approximately 10 full-time employees will operate the combined facilities once they're commissioned for service, a PGE spokesman said.

Swaggart Wind Power of Ione began development and permitting of the Wheatridge wind farm in 2009. The project was then acquired by a NextEra Energy Resources subsidiary in 2017. NextEra and PGE expanded the project scope to include solar generation and battery storage.

PGE will own 100 megawatts of the wind project. A subsidiary of NextEra Energy Resources will own the balance of the project and sell its output to PGE under 30-year power purchase agreements. NextEra Energy Resources' subsidiary will build and operate the combined facility.

The wind component of the facility will be operational by December 2020 and qualify for the federal production tax credit at the 100 percent level. Construction of the solar and battery components is planned for 2021 and will qualify for the federal investment tax credit. The



Above is a map of where the new wind farm towers will be built in Morrow County north of Lexington. Batteries such as these at a NextEra facility in Arizona will soon be coming to Morrow County.



tax credits help reduce the cost of the project over time, thus reducing costs to PGE's customers.

PGE expects to invest approximately \$160 million for its owned portion of the project.

The Wheatridge project was the prevailing bid submitted in response to a request for proposals for renewable resources PGE issued in May 2018. The agreements signed by PGE and NextEra Energy Resources' subsidiary will be subject to review by the Oregon Public Utility Commission. The agreements are also subject to approval by NextEra Energy management, which is anticipated in March.

"This is great news for Morrow County's residents and businesses. This project will benefit our communities through jobs, property taxes and community support. We have a long, positive history of working with PGE, and they have been a good community partner. We look forward to working with them to make this project a success," said Don Russell, Morrow County

Commissioner.

"We are excited to hear this news. These types of renewable Oregon-based projects are critical to the growth and economy of the region, including Morrow County and Port of Morrow. PGE is one of the businesses located at the Port of Morrow Industrial Park, and we have appreciated PGE's partnership and continued investment in Morrow County," said Ryan Neal, Port of Morrow general manager.

"We're pleased to work with Portland General Electric on the Wheatridge Renewable Energy Facility, an exciting opportunity to combine wind, solar and energy storage. This venture will allow PGE's customers to benefit from more renewable energy over more hours of the day and create substantial economic value for the communities that host this project, many of whom stand to benefit for years to come," said Armando Pimentel, president and CEO of NextEra Energy Resources.

Upgraded sensors being installed in dam

Starting in mid-February, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Portland District, will install new sensors in the foundation of Willow Creek Dam, which will provide early warning if the dam's performance changes over time. The current status of the dam does not indicate any problems.

Corps contractors will work from within the interior "gallery" of the dam to install replacement instrumentation in the dam's foundation, by drilling new holes through the concrete dam and into the rock below. The Corps expects installation to be complete by the end of March.

The new sensors will

measure and record the pressures at the base of the dam over time, replacing and modernizing existing dam safety monitoring equipment installed during original construction in 1983. These upgrades will enable USACE to continue to monitor the general health of the dam and ensure public safety.

The Corps' top priority at Willow Creek Dam is reducing flood damage to downstream communities like Heppner and reducing risks to public safety. Regular inspections, conducted every 10 years, are a critical part of the effort to reduce those risks. The most recent inspection, in 2017, showed

that the risk associated with Willow Creek Dam meets risk guidelines and there are no immediate concerns. Long term monitoring of the dam's foundation by the new sensors is particularly important in reducing flood risk.

Willow Creek Dam is located in Morrow County, Oregon, directly upstream from the City of Heppner. The Portland District operates the project for flood control and irrigation, and other benefits include recreation, sportfishing and wildlife. The dam also provides space for sedimentation (trapping of sediment from upstream sources).

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