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County talks strategy on nitrate drinking water problem

By David Sykes

Morrow County has begun mapping a plan to attack the problem of high nitrate levels found in drinking water around the Boardman area. The contamination is showing up in wells used for drinking water, and is not a problem for treated city water.

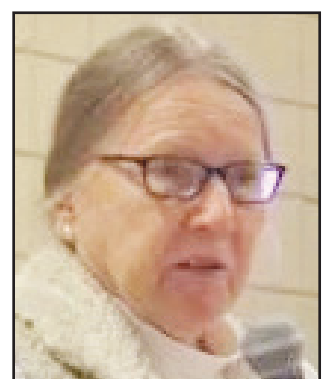
At last week's county commissioner meeting, nearly one-and-a-half hours was spent hearing from experts and others, not only of Morrow County's nitrate problems, but also those of the Yakima Valley, which is experiencing similar contamination.

A recent \$1.3 million fine by the Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) on the Port of Morrow for excess nitrate application to farmland, spurred the heightened renewed interest in high nitrates levels in north county. While nitrogen does exist naturally in the soil, higher levels, sometimes caused by animal waste, or, in the case of the port recycled water from food processing plants, can cause serious health problems when consumed by humans, especially pregnant women and their unborn babies.

As part of last week's meeting, commissioners heard results from a recent survey done by county health department officials and others, including Commissioner Jim Doherty, who went door-to-door in the Boardman area asking questions about water usage. They asked if people were drinking or buying their water, did they have nitrate filters, health concerns that mimicked nitrate symptoms, and was anyone at the residence pregnant?

The county also paid for some water testing in

the area. Twenty-seven of those test results were provided to the Heppner Gazette-Times, and, out of those, only two were under the safe drinking level of 10 mg/l or milligrams to a liter. The testing was done by KUO, a commercial water testing lab in Umatilla which reported the highest measurement of nitrate was 51.2 mg/l. Doherty said in a letter to the editor in this week's paper he was "surprised" when he was contacted directly by the lab. "The lab technician indicated that if, and when, the results pose an extreme and immediate health concern, that they are duty bound to reach out and forewarn the unsuspecting consumer, so



Jean Mendoza of Yakima speaks to commissioners

that they might suspend any usage of the water for fear of medical concerns," Doherty says in his letter.

As part of last week's meeting, Doherty invited Jean Mendoza of Yakima to speak to the commissioners. Mendoza has extensive experience researching and studying a similar nitrate ground water contamination problem in the Yakima Valley. She has served on the groundwater management board there and is currently a member of the Friends of Toppenish Creek.

Mendoza says the contamination there can be traced to five large dairies

in the area and that her group has experienced "push back" from industry groups about how to solve the contamination. She said commercial farming fertilizers have also contribute to the nitrate contamination in drinking water. Mendoza said while the contamination is well documented and does exist, there has been no "political will" to correct the problem.

Also speaking to the commissioners was Emily Roberts, CEO of the Morrow County Health District. Roberts had been asked to partner with the county Health Department (two separate entities), and provide funding for well water testing. She said the Health District had already set aside money to do testing on the 1,500 private drinking wells she has identified all across Morrow County, and not just the Boardman area. She said at \$140 per test the district wants to make testing an annual process and something long term. In addition to nitrates, the tests would also reveal the presence of arsenic and coliform. "As part of the District's mission to achieve a healthier Morrow County, the District proposes to initiate a free well water testing program countywide in partnership with Morrow County," the Health District said in its proposal letter.

Also at the meeting was JR Cook, the founder and director of the Northeast Oregon Water Association. He is an expert on water usage in the area especially in what is known as the Lower Umatilla Basin Groundwater Management Area (LUBGMA) where the high concentrations of nitrates are mainly found. The area

spans about 352,000 acres covering northern Morrow and parts of Umatilla counties, including Hermiston, Boardman, Irrigon, Stanfield and Echo. The state has been aware of the high nitrate concentrations since at least 1989 when the LUBGMA was established. Cook said humans were not always the cause of high nitrate levels in drinking water.

In addition to water testing, commissioners also talked about various filtration systems available that remove nitrates from drinking water. They range all the way from under sink filters that only service one faucet in the house and are available for around \$200, up to more expensive ones that fit on wells and filter all the water. Those can run up to \$4,000. Commissioner Don Russell said he lives in the affected area and when his water tested at 15.2 parts per million, he purchased an under the sink model from Amazon that reduced the nitrate level to 1.2 parts per million. He said he installed the filter himself and it did not require any special plumbing skills. He added that he tests his water every two to three years.

It was also brought up that cooking with high nitrate water can be a health risk, and boiling does not remove the contaminate. Mendoza earlier said giving high nitrate concentrated water to animals can also be bad for their health. Doherty and county Communicable Disease Coordinator Ana Pineyro, when going door to door, one of the questions they asked was how many people purchased their drinking water. Many people did, at a cost of between \$80 up to \$300 a month for bottled water.

Lexington celebrates 2nd annual May Day



May Day Grand Marshal, Asher Schonbachler, waits for the start of the parade in Lexington on Saturday

-contributed photo

Lexington has experienced another great year for their May Day Celebration. Though the weather was less than optimal, they pushed forward and had a great day. It was a day full of excitement, family, friends, neighbors and newcomers.

Grand Marshal Asher, aka "Super Blue Thunder" had a glorious day. He started the day off with receiving his very special costume made by some local 4-H sewing club members. He sported the look all day, wielding his blue lightsaber and laughing at every turn.

Asher and his mom started the pack for the first 5K run/walk, which had a great group turn out. The Lexington Fire Department also put on a great breakfast to fuel everyone for the day ahead.

There were kids' activities including a bouncy house that thankfully could still be done with the wind that was blowing. The community rallied in many ways to ensure it was safe and fun for the kids. Home-town Tacos, Pappy's, and Quality Concessions provided a wonderful variety of food as well as some great Kettle Corn from Olde Tyme Kettle Korn. Pioneer Memorial Hospice also had an activity that was greatly appreciated.

There were many donations of pies, desserts and raffle items to help raise money for Asher. That part was a huge success and we raised well over what we originally planned so that we could buy the special chair for

him.

The town appreciates everyone that came out for the event, as well as all the participants in the parade. The community members that worked hard to pull this off leading up to and during the event were amazing. The last minute "can you do?" or "I need help" requests were answered readily with no question or complaint.

There was lots of extremely positive feedback on the day and what appreciation for what Lexington is trying to establish for the town and residents. "It is all about community, family and celebration. Folks came and stayed, visited while kids ran and bounced and played games. Friends and family played corn hole and the laughter and friendly banter was a great thing to witness," stated Mayor Juli Kennedy.

"As the mayor of Lexington, I want to thank all of you for your support. The council and I are excited for the things we have done and look forward to what great things our community will continue to do in the future," continued Kennedy.

"Finally, on behalf of Asher's family, which includes parents, sisters, grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, and friends we give our heartfelt appreciation for everyone involved in this event. To say how amazing our community is would be an understatement," Kennedy told the Gazette. Mayor Kennedy is also grand marshal Asher's grandmother.



Cori Jo Lindsay to perform in Cinderella

Cori Jo Lindsay, the daughter of Joe and Leanne Lindsay, will perform as Cinderella in the ballet "Cinderella" at the Bob Clapp Theatre at Blue Mountain Community College, Pendleton, at 7 p.m. on Thursday, May 26, and Friday, May 27, and Sunday, May 28, at 2 p.m.

Cori Jo, who attends Baker Web Academy/homeschool, has been in ballet since she was three.

Those who wish to purchase tickets may email Cori Jo's mother, Leanne, at leanne.lindsay@icloud.com, and indicate how many adults and how many children before Sunday, May 15. She says she can get tickets, so people don't have to make an extra trip to Pendleton or risk the show being sold out.



Cori Jo Lindsay



See page 10 for May Day Photos

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