

EMERGENCY

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 mended rate which is 10 parts per million or 10 mg per liter. At 50 and above that can cause quite a bit of health issues," Gray said. "Pregnant women and children up to six months can be seriously affected by this. If we save one child it's worth it," he said in advocating for the declaration.

Gray also touched on the cultural issue of the water contamination. "I want to make sure we are still looking at the children, especially when we are looking at the equity aspect of this with our Spanish speaking residents and making sure they get a fair shake out this," Gray said. "It makes me worried," he said of people's lack of education on the problem, "especially when people are boiling the water thinking that is going to get rid of the issue and all that does is condense that nitrate and make it even worse."

On the advantage of having the emergency declaration, Gray said the declaration does help the county get more support from the state, and, as an example, also allows him more leeway in making purchases of needed goods and services. "The process gets pushed to the side and gives me more leeway to get that stuff in faster and not go after the lowest quote," he explained. He said the emergency also allows the county to get the state money. "We have already used the money the county has put aside for the (well) testing so if we want to get more testing done we need more help from the state. That way they will help to cover some of the costs."

Lindsay said before voting in favor of the declaration she wanted answers over concerns about state control over Morrow County's response. "My biggest involvement was with COVID. I appreciated the help we received," she said about when she was main driver of the county's pandemic response. "The state was in control, and we needed to retain local team work and control and not have the state step in and take this over. The last thing we want is to have Governor Brown running our response to this. It needs to be local boots on the ground. Any risk that we are going to give up that control?" she asked.

Gray assured everyone control of the nitrate emergency response will stay in local hands. "It starts and ends at the local level. Even if the feds were to come in from FEMA (Federal Emergency Management Agency) they are not in control of this disaster," he said. "This is our disaster. If it is either FEMA or the state, they are support that is all that they are. We always will maintain that control," he emphasized.

One person in the audience said during Covid, "You had the government throwing things out there like the mask mandates. Does the government have the right to push anything else on this?" Doherty responded saying he was in contact with Governor Kate Brown. "Governor Brown got ahold of me the other day and said let us know what we can do to help," Doherty said. "She didn't say I'm going to come and run the county. We need the help wherever we can get it."

Questions over hasty special meeting

Several other commu-

nity leaders questioned Doherty on his need to call the special meeting and rush into an emergency declaration. "I have just spent 60 days doing outreach and collaboration and I wondered where we have been for 30 years," Doherty responded. "The pros and cons of the declaration; I am hoping it saves lives. The downside of it (declaring an emergency) I'm less worried about," he said.

JR Cook, founder and director of the NE Oregon Water Association and one who has been involved with nitrate issues in the area for many years, was concerned about a negative impact the emergency declaration would have on his and others ongoing efforts to mitigate the long-time problem of nitrate in the water. Cook said the other groups working on this issue for so long, should have been consulted and involved before Doherty just moved forward with the emergency declaration. "We believe this effort should have been, at a minimum, communicated to the LUBGWMA (Lower Umatilla Basin Group Water Management Area) Committee and sub-committees that are working hard on our dime to work out a detailed plan as well as short term actions," Cook said. He added, "We have been working with OHA (Oregon Health Authority), DEQ and both counties (Morrow and Umatilla) on a plan which includes short and long-term action items, as well as a clear pathway to vetted science and data sets to inform current and future decisions," Cook said.

"It is all positive. No negative impact," Doherty replied to Cook's concerns. And once again he brought up the racial and cultural issue. "I was on the original committee, and we spent six years on it. We did two plans, and I don't think either one of them was in Spanish," he added.

Bill Antilla, president of Three Mile Canyon Farms, the largest agricultural operation in the county, also voiced concern about a possible negative impact of the emergency declaration. "JR's (Cook) point is a good one. Does the emergency action impact these other efforts in a negative way?" Antilla asked. "It would seem a seven-day delay would allow us to better understand this important issue and get better alignment around solutions. I am a bit confused by this sudden, rushed meeting outside of the normal process," Antilla wondered. "If Commissioner Lindsay is ready to vote. I'm ready to enact it," is all Doherty said in response.

Boardman City Planner Carla McLane also wanted to know why no other local agencies were consulted or engaged before the emergency declaration was pushed. "Has the LUBGWA been engaged? How have local and regional partners been asked to participate in this emergency declaration?" she wanted to know.

Debbie Radie, vice president of operations at Boardman Foods, a large food processor located at the Port of Morrow, said she agreed with the comments whether the emergency action is needed and what are its impacts. "I am wondering what a state of emergency declaration gives our county in terms of resources that we do not already have or could have with the efforts we have going on in our own county?"

Radie wondered. Doherty said testing alone has not gotten any resources and only the emergency action is now getting action. "I can tell you those 70 tests we did surely didn't get any of those resources or efforts. And this is all that is driving this to happen."

Doherty said when going door to door around Boardman he found the affected people who understand the water is tainted were spending around \$80 a month on purchasing water. He said they were also told about filtration systems that could be bought to remove the nitrates "We told them about the whole house filters, which frankly for most of them their house isn't worth what the whole house filter would cost," Doherty related.

Irrigon City Manager Aaron Palmquist wanted to know why the communities of Boardman and Irrigon were not approached about providing water instead of going the emergency declaration route. He said a lot of the affected areas were close to city water systems and maybe there could be help there. Doherty said a lot of these communities are 60 feet away from a city system and maybe the county could find some money to tie into the city systems. Doherty said the idea of water districts has also been talked about.

Another question being asked, Doherty said people have been approaching him wanting to know if his motives to push though the emergency declaration are politically driven. "I sure wouldn't be out there walking the streets on a Sunday when I could be in church getting saved," he said of his efforts going door to door.

Doherty's past no votes on emergencies

Doherty also received criticism from fellow commissioner Lindsay on his previous opposition, including two no votes on emergency declarations supporting her efforts during her fight against the COVID pandemic in the county.

"I don't wish to go down as opposing a motion at this point," Lindsay said. "I'm a fan of the emergency declaration. I pushed really hard to get Boardman declared one when we had the wind damage and nobody wanted to do it, and I took it upon myself as the chair to push for that," she said of Doherty's history of not wanting to support emergency declarations. "Same with the COVID pandemic." Lindsay recalled when she was spearheading the county's efforts against the pandemic and did not receive Doherty's support. "Commissioner Doherty, you voted against the last two declarations of covid. Why?" Lindsay asked. "Was there concern about something out there you were worried about. Was there information I should know of why you would be an opponent? When it's simply doing good. I want to know where we are headed because there is a lot of public concern around this," Lindsay said of the current nitrate emergency declaration before the commission.

Doherty responded, implying he did not think last year's COVID pandemic was a "true emergency" and of course this one was. "That is a fair question, and you can go back and pull up the record," Doherty said. "After the initial declaration and the follow up declaration, as we got further down the pike, it got to

where this allowed us to do some things that didn't rise to level of a quote-unquote emergency but allowed us to do some things. And I was a little uncomfortable accessing folks for money for something that didn't rise to the level of quote-unquote emergency," he said in explaining his opposition to last year's COVID emergency declaration. "I don't think there is anyone in this room or this county who wouldn't say this (nitrate problem) is above and beyond an emergency," Doherty said. "That is the best explanation I can give you and I am happy to have Roberta (the court secretary) pull up the record on that. That's a fair question," he said.

The record shows that at last August's commission meeting Doherty had panned the emergency process, not wanting to enact it for the benefit of the COVID pandemic because he wanted more information before he would vote yes. Doherty had pressed Emergency Manager Gray, saying he wanted more information and specific data before he would vote in favor of an emergency declaration. "I need something empirical," he said at the time. "When people ask me why are we doing this (emergency declaration)? I say because they said it (COVID) is bad. How bad? I don't know how bad. Bad with a capital B." Doherty said at the time he was frustrated with what he heard as only anecdotal and hearsay reasons driving the emergency declaration request, so he voted no.

And once again, at another later December commission meeting again dealing with the COVID pandemic, Doherty yet again spoke against declaring an emergency, this time mockingly saying he would ask the county attorney if they could just enact a "perpetual state of emergency" for the county. "Let's just make it perpetual," Doherty said of the renewed emergency declaration for COVID. "Let's just make it that Morrow County is perpetually in a state of emergency that allows us to do these things." Doherty said then he didn't see an emergency with the pandemic, was opposed to the first COVID declaration, and was still opposed to it. "These things have to mean something and at this point I fail to see the necessity. So, I'm a no vote," he said. He said since the county just keeps authorizing emergencies, he would talk to County Counsel Justin Nelson about just making the emergency declaration ongoing. Doherty never did not follow through on his threat to do that, however.

Gray said he had discussed Doherty's previous actions against emergency declarations with the commissioner. "We actually did discuss Chair Doherty backing out of the last two declarations," Gray related. "Because I wanted him to know anytime I'm bringing something forward it is a concern," Gray said of his commitment to this emergency declaration process. "I'm the emergency manager and if he throws something at me and it looks like an emergency that is going to harm the residents of my community, I'm going to run with it and do what my job is, which is trying to fix whatever problems we have. If this (nitrate issue) wasn't that big a deal, I wouldn't be that concerned and you would not see an emergency declaration in front of you," Gray ex-

plained of his support for the declaration.

However, at last Thursday's special meeting, it was Lindsay who this time expressed her doubts about an emergency declaration and the need to hastily enact one. "I'm unclear on this declaration on what those resources (from the state) will look like," she told Doherty and Gray. She also wanted to know why a special meeting had to be hastily called. "Why today versus Wednesday? And just be able to gather a little more as far as goals and objectives. What do we get today versus next Wednesday at a normal meeting?" she wanted to know. "What comes to the table? Are we getting something in the next five days that causes us to do this today versus a Wednesday meeting?" she asked.

Lindsay emphasized however, that in the end, the "Safe drinking water of our constituents is number one and all the other issues that have come my way in the last two hours are number two. But what are we bringing to the table doing this expeditiously today versus a Wednesday? I would like to get those answered," she said.

Doherty said he called the special meeting because he did not have the opportunity to put this on the agenda at a regular commission meeting. "This is a big-ticket item," he said. Adding he gave concerned members of the public 24 hours to know what the county was doing. Doherty said postponing the emergency declaration decision until the next Wednesday's commission meeting would have just given more time to an already bad situation. "One thing it does give us is seven more days of an emergency that should have happened a long time ago," he said of his reason for haste. "When you are out there in the streets you wish it would have happened a long time ago," he added.

Doherty said he had a meeting the previous day, Wednesday, with 37 representatives of state agencies in attendance. "Everyone there, every one of them was leaning in saying we have some things that will help with this," Doherty recalled. He said the state veterinarian was even in on the meeting saying he wanted to talk to the local veterinarians on what is going on with the livestock there drinking the contaminated water, and what can happen to them. "I don't know what waiting seven days is going to do other than waiting seven days," Doherty said. "Paul (Gray) has water ready to go out this weekend to people who shouldn't be drinking the water," Doherty emphasized.

Trucking in drinking water

Gray said emergency management people were "looking at bringing bottled water in tomorrow." We are working on getting some water distribution trailers

Forest offices reopen

All Umatilla National Forest offices are now fully open for walk-in visitors. Office hours are generally Monday through Friday from 8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., however some of Ranger District offices do offer expanded hours to accommodate local community needs. Additional information is available on the Forest website.

The press release stated, "We are excited to offer in-person customer service

set up with a small team." He said they would find a location for the water trailer early next week so people could come in and fill up jugs that could be taken back to the house and used for drinking and cooking. Gray said they were also looking at water delivery needs for home bound people. "We are going to have some type of volunteer system hospice or some other agency to get the people the resources they need," he said. He said all of their efforts would be on the Morrow County side of the line, even though the nitrate problem is also present in Umatilla County.

Tim Seymour of the regional Oregon Emergency Management department was also at last Thursday's meeting and told commissioners "if you declare an emergency today you are telling the state this is a top priority and we will do what we can to help you and we will do that to the best of our ability. If today you do not declare a state of emergency, then we will pump the brakes a little and wait," he explained. "That doesn't necessarily mean we won't continue to provide support. We have regional people, me included, out here in eastern Oregon working with the public health department and emergency manager," Seymour said. He added if the emergency declaration were not enacted that day, "It definitely slows down the speed that we are going to do things. That says a lot about the importance of the declaration," he explained.

"When I started researching nitrates, it starts how the blood stream can carry oxygen in your system," Gray stated. "Women who are pregnant and children six months or younger can be severely affected by nitrates. We can wait a week. I am ok with that. Or we can jump on this today and actually get clean water for these people to start drinking probably by tomorrow," he declared.

Gray also emphasized they were not just talking short term solutions like providing bottled water. "This is not just us working on a short-term solution. This is what is going to happen immediately. We will be working with the state to get more testing done. We will be looking at money for filter systems to put into these homes," he said. Gray said they are planning for short and long term and getting the state out of here as quickly as they can and putting the county "where we are not going to have to ask for anymore assistance."

After the long discussion the commissioners voted 2-0 in favor of declaring a state of emergency.

once again to our communities. On behalf of the Umatilla National Forest, please accept our gratitude for your flexibility during the time we provided services virtually. The Umatilla staff greatly appreciate all the creative ways that you have worked with us as we all navigated through this historic last couple of years. And now that our office doors are officially open, stop by to visit us. We would love to see you."



Tim Seymour
Oregon
Emergency
Management