

Nitrate bill passes out of committee

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 says he wrote the Interior bill to include key priorities for Oregon. The Morrow County project would be among 22 community-initiated projects for Oregon supported through the bill, which tops out at more than \$35 million in spending for the state. Key areas targeted by the bill include wildfire management and smoke preparedness, drought resiliency and conservation, and the water crisis in the Klamath Basin.

Other area projects supported by the bill would include \$3 million for the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation to install a wastewater treatment plant that will produce recycled water for non-potable uses such as irrigation; \$1.33 million for the Oregon Trails Coalition for recreational trail work at the U.S. Forest Service, including Umatilla National Forest; and \$610,000 for the University of Oregon to expand its ALERTWildfire camera system, which uses cameras throughout Ore-

gon to provide firefighters and first responders with real-time footage to spot and track wildfires.

The bill passed through committee last week, setting it up for full Senate action in the fall.

The federal funding comes through the FY24 Senate Interior, Environment and Related Agencies Appropriations bill, which encompasses funding for the Department of the Interior (DOI), U.S. Forest Service (USFS), and Environmental Protection Agency (EPA).

The bill also fully funds payments to counties through the Payment in Lieu of Taxes (PILOT) program, which are estimated at a total of \$515 million nationwide.

“At my town halls in each of Oregon’s 36 counties this year, I heard firsthand from folks about what matters most to them, including the need to take on wildfire, smoke, and heat threats, modernize our water infrastructure to stand up to prolonged drought, and

protect our state’s iconic public lands and waters,” Merkley said. “As chair of the Senate Interior Appropriations Subcommittee, I am in the driver’s seat to deliver on these priorities for Oregon, and the bill I wrote includes critical funding for environmental programs, community-initiated projects, and Tribal communities that will benefit Oregonians in every corner of the state for years to come.”

Merkley is the only Oregon member of Congress from either chamber since Senator Mark Hatfield to serve on the Appropriations Committee, which is one of the most powerful on Capitol Hill.

Now that the Interior bill has cleared the Appropriations Committee, it next heads to the Senate floor for a full vote before it can be conferred with its counterpart bill in the U.S. House of Representatives. The final, merged legislation must then be passed by both chambers before it is signed into law.

County chip seals portion of Blue Mountain Scenic Byway



Photo of completed chip seal on the Blue Mountain Scenic Byway. *-Contributed photo*

Morrow County Road Department has completed the chip seal resurfacing on 22 miles of the Blue Mountain Scenic Byway. The portion of the road that was chip sealed travels through both the Heppner and North Fork John Day Ranger Districts and was funded through the Great American Outdoors Act.

While the chip seal is complete, Morrow County Road Department will be back onsite in August to apply road striping to the newly resurfaced road. During that time, the public can expect periodic delays and traffic will be managed by flaggers and pilot cars. Signs will be posted at each end of the project and as needed in work zones. Additional information regarding the timeline for this work will be posted on the Umatilla National Forest website and social media pages when available.

The Blue Mountain Scenic Byway is a pop-

ular 145-mile route that travels from near Arlington to Granite. This road is also a major portal to both the Umatilla and Wallowa-Whitman National Forests, offering numerous opportunities for scenic views and recreation. In 2022, contractors chip sealed the portion of road that crosses the North Fork John Day Ranger District (33.6 miles). These chip seal projects reduce risk to public safety, protect the roadway, and extend the life of this scenic route for 10-20 years.

The funding for the Blue Mountain Scenic Byway chip seal project is part of a \$285 million investment on National Forests that is made possible by the recently created National Parks and Public Land Legacy Restoration Fund, established in 2020 by the Great American Outdoors Act. Nationally, the funds will allow the Forest Service to implement more

than 500 infrastructure improvement projects essential to the continued use and enjoyment of national forests lands this year.

In addition to the Blue Mountain Scenic Byway chip seal project, the Umatilla National Forest received funding to replace the Crooked Creek Trail Bridge on the Pomeroy Ranger District, which is anticipated to be installed later this year. The Forest will continue to share updates on these GAOA projects as construction begins.

Additional projects may be implemented on the Umatilla National Forest and will be announced as funding is allocated. For more information on these projects in the Pacific Northwest Region, visit the regional GAOA website.

Additional information about the Umatilla National Forest is available at <https://www.fs.usda.gov/umatilla>.

County commission hears update

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 Lindsay said Morrow County’s payments this year will total about \$23,000.

“Basically, it’s prevention and treatment for people who have opioid use disorders,” she said, asking if the commissioners had had any conversations about how the county is going to use those funds and, if not, whether CCS could participate in those conversations.

Morrow County Commissioner Roy Drago Jr. said this was the first he had heard of it.

“As you’re talking, I was thinking that, yes, you are the people we should be talking to,” said Drago.

Morrow County Counsel Justin Nelson and Morrow County Finance Director Kevin Ince said the county had already received several small payments but had not yet allocated those funds, which might require a supplemental budget.

Morrow County Board of Commissioners Chair David Sykes said CCS would definitely be involved in determining how the funds were spent.

“You have a host of options, but the two key words are prevention and treatment,” said Lindsay.

She suggested asking the county’s mental health and addiction advisory board to identify options on how the funds could best be spent.

“That doesn’t mean that CCS has to receive them. Maybe you want to do something in the schools,” she said. “Maybe you want to buy Narcan.”

“I’ve got a lot of ideas,” she added. “I’d like to do some work with Judge Diehl around the increase in property crimes and the people that are coming in that are no longer going into the system because of Measure 110.”

“We’d love to hear your suggestions,” said Drago. “You’re dealing with it every day and know where we can probably get the most bang for the buck.”

Lindsay also reminded the commissioners that payments from the various settlements would be coming in over the next 20 years.

“So it’s not a one-time program. You can change the program if you don’t like what the results are,” she said, “but you are receiving a set amount of funds for 20-plus years.”

Lindsay also addressed the topic of psychiatric acute care. There has been no acute care available in Eastern Oregon for about two years. Currently, when someone needs psychiatric acute care, they have to be transported to the west side of the state. She said that

is taxing for law enforcement, as well as difficult for the individual being transported.

“We have been on a mission to bring acute care back to the east side,” she said.

To that end, CCS acquired Aspen Springs in Hermiston, which is now in the process of being remodeled. The Aspen Springs Psychiatric Hospital was a 16-bed facility that opened in Sept. 2020 in Hermiston but closed after just seven months due to staffing issues. CCS purchased the building last fall for \$4.6 million.

The hope now is to have the remodel completed and to have staff hired and trained to start taking in clients around the first of November. CCS will need about 35 staff for the building.

The plan for the facility is to have four seclusion and restraint beds, six acute care beds and six long-term beds. The facility will be licensed as class one, which includes the ability for seclusion and restraint, as well as involuntary medication.

“That seems so much better,” said Sykes. “When somebody’s in crisis, taking a long drive probably isn’t the best thing for them or the driver.”

In addition, Lindsay and Savannah Marker, the new administrator of Aspen Springs, said it’s difficult to get acute care patients into beds quickly far from home. Often, patients have to wait up to two weeks to be placed, since west-side facilities prioritize patients from their own emergency rooms.

“You’re never going to get somebody in a day,” said Lindsay. “If you do, you need to go buy a lottery ticket.”

She also gave an update on Columbia River Ranch in Boardman. She said a two-bedroom home on the property, known as The Bunkhouse, is currently being remodeled so it can be put back into use. It hadn’t been used for a couple of years. She expects the re-

model to be done in the next month or so, and CCS will then rent The Bunkhouse out to individuals who have mental health issues.

“Two beds, so that will be nice,” added Lindsay. “It is difficult for our population to find rental units sometimes.”

She said many of CCS’s open positions in Morrow County have been filled, but two key positions, one in Heppner and one in the north end, remain open. Waitlist times in the county are decreasing. They were out five or six weeks for appointments in Boardman, but that’s now down to about three weeks.

“When we get that vacant position filled, then it should drop down to under two weeks,” she said.

She added that under two weeks is the expected standard, but that it has not been the national average over the past few years with the exodus from the behavioral health workforce.

“Along those lines, we have to see the folks in person,” Lindsay said. “We provide crisis services. We work in the schools. A lot of the exodus was due to telehealth, which is great, but we’re not able to provide telehealth services.”

“I don’t think the sheriff’s office wants to call a clinician by video at 2 a.m. and do an assessment by video at 2 a.m.,” she added.

Lindsay also reminded the board of commissioners that Morrow County adopted the Zero Suicide Initiative a couple of years ago.

“We realize that it’s probably not possible that we will end all suicides in Morrow County, but that is to say that not one is acceptable,” said Lindsay.

CCS has incorporated elements of the national Zero Suicide Initiative across the entire organization, making sure even the board of directors, as well as the staff, has training on Zero Suicide.

“We have made a lot of improvement from where we started at our baseline to where we are today,” said Lindsay.

Heppner Housing Authority to meet

The next meeting of the Heppner Housing Authority for Heppner Senior Center will be Tuesday, Aug. 8, at 4 p.m. in the St. Patrick’s

Senior Center dining room. For more information, contact KayRene Qualls at 541-980-2836.

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