



the HEPPNER GAZETTE TIMES

50¢



VOL. 143 NO. 49 8 Pages Wednesday, December 06, 2023 Morrow County, Heppner, Oregon

BOC talks solar projects and weed control

By Chris Sykes

During the special meeting of the Morrow County Board of Commissioners in November, various discussions were held regarding mitigation projects related to the Sunstone Solar Project.

Tamra Mabbott, in collaboration with Administrator Matthew Jensen, referred to a memo they had drafted providing an overview of the Sunstone Mitigation Project. The Sunstone Solar Project, which encompasses a proposed 9,500-acre solar project in Morrow County, requires a mitigation project to minimize its impact on the local agricultural community. To quantify the project's impacts, Sunstone provided an Economic and Agricultural Impact Analysis (EAIA) conducted by ECONorthwest. Sunstone is proposing this mitigation project, which is the first of its kind, to obtain an exception to Oregon Statewide Planning Goal 3.

Kevin Gray, the General Manager of MCGG, discussed the potential consequences that the Sunstone Solar Project may have on the Cooperative and its members. He stated that the loss of nearly 10,000 acres would result in a significant reduction in wheat production, estimated at 200,000 bushels, as well as a decline in crop input sales. Gray estimated that MCGG would suffer an annual revenue loss of \$15-20 million. He proposed utilizing mitigation funds to improve the North Lexington concrete elevator, which requires



Image of a solar panels similar to what would be used for the Sunstone Solar Project. - Contributed Photo

electrical updates, repairs, productivity upgrades, and increased storage capacity. Upgrading the elevator would save travel expenses for farmers by providing a closer alternative to elevators in Boardman.

Christopher Clark, the Senior Siting Analyst at ODOE, acknowledged the uniqueness of the Sunstone Mitigation Project in terms of its scale and the type of land being used. Unlike other projects on Exclusive Farm Use (EFU) land, this project involves arable, cultivated land. Clark mentioned ongoing wildlife mitigation studies and the efforts made by the project applicant to quantify the project's impacts.

Logan Stephens, the Senior Director of Project Development at Pine Gate Renewables, expressed the current goal of narrowing down priority projects to provide a more detailed analysis. Sunstone Solar requested guidance from the County on how to respond to ODOE.

Leslie McLain, a Land Use Planner at Tetra Tech, referred to the ECONorthwest analysis, which de-

tailed the impact of removing 10,000 acres of dry-land wheat production. This analysis covered direct job losses, indirect impacts on retailers selling to farmers, and the broader impact on the community. Sunstone aims to offset these financial losses through the mitigation project.

In other business, Kevin Payne, the District Manager of SWCD, mentioned being approached by Pine Gate Renewables to suggest potential mitigation projects. After consulting with local farmers, he identified weed treatment as a major concern. Payne proposed the option of a precision weed sprayer, which could be provided as a service by SWCD, offered as a cost-share program, or incentivized through rebates for landowners who purchase their own sprayers. The adoption of this new spraying technology could offset some of the losses caused by the solar project and improve productivity and efficiency. Another suggestion by Payne was the use of weed seed mills in combines to prevent the spread of unwanted seeds.

SWCD also expressed interest in conducting a feasibility study for a groundwater recharge project around Willow Creek. This project would capture winter and spring surface water, injecting it into the groundwater to make it more available during the later part of the season. Options for data monitoring, such as weather stations, were also proposed to provide real-time updates and alerts to users. Finally, SWCD suggested offering financial incentives for technology upgrades in equipment to enhance communication and functionality, thereby improving efficiency. Virtual fencing was another idea put forward to improve regenerative grazing and livestock movement patterns.

J.R. Cook, a Land and Water Consultant for NOWA, shared information about a mitigation trust account co-managed with the Mid-Columbia Water Commission. NOWA proposed providing a permanent water source solution through a water recharge program, pumping water from the Columbia River to improve groundwater access for approximately 150,000 acres. Funding from Sunstone would assist in retrieving water more efficiently and reallocating groundwater resources.

Craig Reeder, a consultant, discussed the goal of improving groundwater quality affected by nitrates. The plan involves removing polluted water, allowing it to dilute, and replenishing aquifers with clean water.

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ODFW is seeking assistance in elk waste case in Lexington

The OSP Fish and Wildlife Division is seeking public assistance in locating the person(s) responsible for the waste of two Rocky Mountain Elk in Morrow County. On Nov. 27, 2023, troopers responded to a call of two elk that had been left partially to waste in a dry creek bed near Lexington. Due to the recent cold weather, it is believed the elk may have been killed in the past week. The Elk were found with no skin, except on their heads. A reporter for the Gazette called the OSP and F&WD, but they did not have any more information or leads. There is a reward program for those who turn in poachers called the Turn in Poachers Program (TIP) which is a collaboration between state and local authorities and involves the Oregon Hunters Association. The TIP program offers preference point rewards for information leading to an arrest or issuance of a citation for the unlawful take/possession or waste of big game mammals. The TIP program also offers cash rewards for information leading to an arrest or issuance of a citation for the unlawful take/possession or waste of the



Two elk found dead in dry creek bed near Lexington, Oregon - Photo by ODFW

following fish and wildlife species. Cash rewards can also be awarded for habitat destruction, illegally obtaining hunting or angling licenses or tags, lending or borrowing big game tags, spotlighting, or snagging. The reward program as follows.

Preference Point Rewards:

- 5 Points: Bighorn Sheep
 - 5 Points: Rocky Mountain Goat
 - 5 Points: Moose
 - 5 Points: Wolf
 - 4 Points: Elk
 - 4 Points: Deer
 - 4 Points: Pronghorn Antelope
 - 4 Points: Bear
 - 4 Points: Cougar
- CASH REWARDS**
Oregon Hunters Association (OHA) Cash Rewards

- \$2,000 Bighorn Sheep, Mountain Goat, or Moose
 - \$1,000 Elk, Deer, or Antelope
 - \$600 Bear, Cougar, or Wolf
 - \$300 Habitat Destruction
 - \$200 Illegally obtaining Oregon hunting or angling license or tags
 - \$200 Unlawful Lending/Borrowing Big Game Tag(s)
 - \$200 Game Fish & Shellfish
 - \$200 Game Birds or Furbearers
 - \$200 Spotlighting
 - \$200 Snagging/Attempt to Snag
- Oregon Wildlife Coalition (OWC) Cash Rewards**
- \$500 Hawk, Falcon, Eagle, Owl, Osprey
 - \$500 Cougar, Bobcat, Beaver (public lands

only), Black bears, Bighorn Sheep, Marten, Fisher, Sierra Nevada Red Fox
\$1,000 Species listed as "threatened" or "endangered" under state or federal Endangered Species Act (excludes fish)
Oregon Outfitters & Guides Association (OOGA) Cash Rewards
\$200 Acting as an Outfitter Guide for the Illegal Killing of Wildlife, Illegally Obtaining Oregon Hunting or Angling Licenses or Tags, or Illegally Offering to Act as an Outfitter Guide as defined in ORS 704.010 and 704.020.

Candlelight vigil held for burned vehicle



Image of the candlelight vigil ad from ORA's Facebook page.

By Chris Sykes

On November 29th, a candlelight vigil was held at the intersection of Mountain View Drive and Pioneer Lane in Boardman to honor the Oregon Rural Action (ORA) pickup truck that belonged to Rafael Romero, a community organizer for ORA, which caught fire on November 27th. No individuals were harmed in the incident, but ORA representatives suspect it may have been an act of violence.

Currently, there is no evidence to confirm whether this was a criminal act. Firefighters acted swiftly to extinguish the flames, preventing further damage. The initial investigation conducted by the Boardman Fire Rescue District deemed the fire suspicious but could not determine the

exact cause. ORA, an organization based in La Grande, has been actively advocating for measures to address groundwater nitrate pollution in Morrow and Umatilla counties. In response to the incident, ORA released a statement urging local and state authorities to conduct a thorough investigation and ensure the safety of their employees.

Morrow County Sheriff's Deputy Andrew Martin is currently leading the local investigation with Oregon State Police and fire marshals from the Oregon State Fire Marshals doing their investigation. They plan to collaborate on their reports, and Deputy Martin expects to provide updates by the end of the week.

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Zinter awarded Firefighter of the Year



Chief Steve Rhea (L) presenting Katilyn Zinter with the Firefighter of the Year award. - Contributed Photo

The Heppner Firefighters vote each year on their choice of firefighters within the department that has gone above and beyond the call of duty for the year. This includes taking on tasks that are not normally assigned to them, doing exceptionally well on the tasks that are assigned to them, and proving their skills within

the department. This year Katilyn Zinter received Heppner Volunteer Firefighter of the Year. Katilyn is the new training officer for the fire department. She has started the fire academy within the department and started training within the department to keep them up to date on new training.

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