

Operation Wildfire burns through local drug dealers

By PHIL WRIGHT
STAFF WRITER

The Blue Mountain Enforcement Narcotics Team arrested more than five dozen suspects to take down drug trafficking organizations last Wednesday in Operation Wildfire.

Pendleton police Chief Stuart Roberts, head of local anti-drug team's board, said the goal was to dismantle drug dealing operations in Umatilla, Morrow, Union, and Gilliam counties.

"The reason this is called Wildfire is because it just took off," he said, "took off like a wildfire."

BENT usually works its way up the chain of command in a criminal organization. But Roberts said the team was in a lull on a big case and decided to revisit the notion of "knock and talks" — knocking on doors of possible drug activity and seeing if people will talk.

"We've kind of gotten away from that because of so many big cases to work," he said.

The focus in last week's bust was on places reported as drug houses. Local police departments have a hard



The Pendleton Convention Center served as a command and processing center for Operation Wildfire, a significant BENT drug bust that seized large amounts of drugs and involved at least 65 arrests.

Staff photo by Kathy Aney

time making those cases, Roberts explained, because the drugs and offenders are not always at the home. But those nuisance sites affect the livability of a community and involve the local offenders, which police and

neighbors know.

"That was kind of where all this started," he said.

Roberts reported the investigation used 116 undercover drug purchases. Police would hit one house, Roberts said, and find clues

that led them to another name, another place, and the investigation burned along. The work resulted in police seizing two guns, 5.9 grams of cocaine, 22 fentanyl pills, 39.5 grams of heroin and 1,447.5 grams

— about 3.2 pounds — of methamphetamine. BENT detectives and county prosecutors presented the evidence to grand juries, which handed up 63 secret indictments.

BENT units rolled with

those Jan. 16 and arrested 65 suspects from around the region, including as many as 16 already in county jails or state prisons. The team also obtained five search warrants. Roberts said police conducted those searches the week before to minimize risks to the public and in anticipation of last week's efforts.

Several suspects were small-time dope slingers, but Roberts said a few were dealing in larger amounts, and police earlier in the week arrested suspects that were more troublesome.

Operation Wildfire also netted more arrests than the targets on the indictments. Roberts said police found other offenders who were violating probation, for example, and seized more drugs.

The team used the Pendleton Convention Center as its base of operations, and staff from the Umatilla County Jail were on hand to book and process suspects. He said BENT could not conduct this kind of enterprise without relying on law enforcement partners.

Operation Wildfire is not finished. Roberts said police are tracking down another 10 or 11 suspects.



A remote control operator decouples a rail car in July 2012 while taking apart a train at the Union Pacific Railroad Hinkle Locomotive Service and Repair Facility and Freight Classification Yard near Stanfield.

EO file photo

Hinkle Rail Yard affected by Union Pacific layoffs

By JADE MCDOWELL
NEWS EDITOR

Hermiston's Hinkle Rail Yard is part of a round of layoffs by Union Pacific Railroad.

Union Pacific notified its mechanical employees this month that 140 positions would be eliminated in early February, according to spokesperson Hannah Bolte. She said in an email that the company was not providing "location-specific information," but confirmed that the Hinkle facility was affected.

She said that the workforce reduction came about due to the completion of Positive Train Control installation and a reduction in Union Pacific's locomotive fleet

under Unified Plan 2020, a new operating plan that "streamlines operations as we ensure Union Pacific remains a strong, competitive and vibrant company."

Positive Train Control is a technologically advanced safety system Union Pacific has been working to implement. It can automatically stop trains to prevent accidents, such as derailments and collisions.

Located within the rail yard is the Hinkle Locomotive and Service Repair Facility. Union Pacific's website states the 100,000-square-foot repair facility employs 235 people and provides repairs of locomotives, inspections and "the service track fuels and readies nearly 90 locomotives a day."

City taking input on skate park plans

By JADE MCDOWELL
NEWS EDITOR

The city of Hermiston is looking for input on a planned skate park.

Skateboarders, neighbors of the proposed park and others are invited to give their opinions on Thursday from 3:45-5:15 p.m. at Hermiston High School.

The city aims to build the park on South First Street, just north of the high school and across the street from the building that houses Hermiston Police Department and Umatilla County Fire District. While the city already owned a part of the undeveloped property across from the public safety building, in 2017 it made a deal with Mitco Investments to lease more land, allowing for a larger design, parking and landscaping.

Local skaters were first



Staff photo by Jade McDowell

The city of Hermiston wants to build a skate park across South First Street from the building housing Hermiston Police Department and Umatilla County Fire District.

asked to give their input on the project in 2015, but the park was put on hold after an Oregon Supreme Court ruling that opened cities up to more liability for public use of parks. The legislature passed a bill protecting cities in 2017, and money for the skate park was included in the city's 2018-19 budget.

The city has retained California Skateparks, a skate park design and construction company, and representatives from the company will be on hand Thursday to discuss various design options for the park.

For more information, call Hermiston Parks and Recreation at 541-667-5018.

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