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Berkshire Hathaway now owns all Pilot Travel Centers; Love's Travel Stops & Country Stores celebrates 60th

By **Jerry Bohnen**
OK Energy Today
& **Mike W. Ray**
Southwest Ledger

OKLAHOMA CITY – Pilot Travel Centers in Oklahoma are now owned entirely by Berkshire Hathaway. Billionaire Warren Buffet's company announced recently it acquired the remaining 20% in Pilot Travel Centers across the nation. It means the 750 travel centers around the U.S. are 100% owned by Berkshire Hathaway.

Oklahoma has 11 Pilot Travel Centers: two in Oklahoma City and one each in Ardmore, Atoka, Checotah, Edmond, Muskogee, Roland, Sayre, Tonkawa and Tulsa.

The final sale was made by the Haslam

family; terms of the sale were not disclosed. The Haslams, one of the most powerful families in Tennessee, had owned 67% of the Knoxville-based \$31 billion (sales) Pilot Flying J.

The Pilot Travel Centers company was founded in 1958 and merged with Flying J in 2001.

Pilot is the largest operator of travel centers in North America. Berkshire Hathaway launched its initial acquisition efforts in 2017 and January 2023 by spending \$11 billion to buy out the majority stake in Pilot Travel Centers owned by the Haslams.

The purchase extends Berkshire Hathaway holdings across the nation. Its business activities already include



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freight rail transportation (BNSF), Acme Brick Co., W&W/AFCO Steel based in Oklahoma City, food (including Kraft Heinz and Dairy Queen), clothing, jewelry, furniture, manufacturing, utilities and energy,

Duracell, insurance (including GEICO) and reinsurance.

In a related matter, Oklahoma-based Love's Travel Stops & Country Stores is celebrating its 60th anniversary this month.

Starting from a single

store in Watonga, the company founded by the late Tom Love and his wife Judy has grown to 637 stores in 42 states. And even after six decades, the fuel-and-food convenience store company is still family owned.

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Oil/gas well plugging program progressing in Oklahoma

By **Mike W. Ray**
Southwest Ledger

OKLAHOMA CITY – The Oklahoma Corporation Commission is making progress on plugging abandoned oil and gas wells with state and federal funds.

The launch of the Biden administration's program to seal hundreds of abandoned wells – part of the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act signed into law Nov. 15, 2021 – was delayed temporarily while the commission awaited clarification from the Interior Department on the project details.

"After we got all the details narrowed down, we moved forward," Matt Skinner, the commission's public information manager, told *Southwest Ledger* on May 31, 2023.

The commission negotiated contracts for plugging 106 abandoned wells in Fiscal Year 2023 under the IIJA, at a cost of \$2.1 million, Skinner said.

Those included 11 wells in Kingfisher County and 11 in Nowata County; 10 each in Cotton, Cleveland, Garfield and Okmulgee counties; nine in Wagoner County; seven each in Tillman, Grant and Canadian counties; four in Creek County, three in Washington County, two each in McClain and Payne counties, and one each in Rogers, Pottawatomie and Garvin counties.

The IIJA program started in April 2023 and four wells were plugged by May 18 at a cost of \$80,495, or an av-

erage of about \$20,125 each, Skinner said.

As of Jan. 24, commission ledgers show, 597 wells are under contract to be plugged or already have been plugged with IIJA funds, while 385 other wells are under contract or already have been plugged using state funds.

In addition, plugging orders have been issued for 1,884 abandoned wells, allowing the Corporation Commission to use state or other funds to plug them, said Robyn Strickland, director of the commission's Oil & Gas Conservation Division. Another 18,542 abandoned oil/gas wells have not yet gone through the legal process allowing them to be plugged, commission spokesman Trey Davis said.

The commission staff prioritized the wells that are plugged in the IIJA, and wells leaking methane in low-income areas take priority, Brad Ice, field operations manager of the Oil and Gas Conservation Division, told the commissioners in May 2022.

The commission has enlisted 30 private contractors to seal abandoned wells in the state well-plugging program, and 24 contractors have signed on for the IIJA federal program, Davis said. "Some pluggers are approved to plug orphaned wells from both lists," he added.

Oklahoma received an initial payment of \$25 million from the U.S. Department of Interior to begin plugging and remediating abandoned wells. Phase 2 will be considered later this year. The Oklahoma Corporation



Provided

State and federal funds are being used to plug abandoned oil/gas wells such as this one.

Commission has requested additional funding in Phase 2," Davis said.

Wells are classified as abandoned when no individual or company responsible for them can be found, Skinner said.

The OCC's fund for plugging abandoned wells is underwritten with a fee paid by current oil and gas operators in the state: .095 of 1% of the gross value of all natural gas and/or casing-head gas produced in the state that's subject to the gross production tax.

Bond forfeitures also are earmarked for plugging wells, Skinner related. The operator of a well is responsible for paying for any damage and

for remediating the site, he said. An operator is required to post a bond to cover the cost of plugging a well if the operator goes out of business; that bond is \$25,000 per operator (not per well), Skinner said.

While Pennsylvania, Texas, Oklahoma, New Mexico and California all have a large number of abandoned wells to plug, so does Canada.

That country's principal oil-producing province, Alberta, reported "cleaning up" 9% of its inactive oil and gas wells in 2022, reducing the total to 83,000 from 91,000 a year earlier, provincial energy regulator said recently.

Altus city attorney appointed associate district judge by Governor

From staff reports

OKLAHOMA CITY – Altus City Attorney Sommer Robbins was appointed associate district judge for Jackson County by Governor Kevin Stitt.

"I am glad to have Sommer serving Jackson County as the associate district judge," the governor said in his Jan. 25 announcement. "Her experience with Oklahoma's legal system and excellent reputation makes her the best candidate for the job."

Robbins has served as the general counsel for the City of Altus since 2021, reviewing contracts, preparing amendments to ordinances, and providing legal guidance to department heads, while concurrently serving as a municipal



Sommer Robbins

pal prosecutor.

Before joining the City of Altus she was an assistant district attorney for Jackson County, primarily prosecuting crimes against children, violent felonies and crimes involving controlled dangerous substances. In her private practice, Robbins handled adoption work, paternity custody cases, divorces, property transactions, estate planning, and probate proceedings.

"I'm grateful to Governor Stitt for the opportunity to serve Jackson County," Robbins said.

"Throughout my life, I have learned there is nothing more satisfying than having the ability to change lives for the better and to protect our community from harm. I'm looking forward to working alongside members of my

community to uphold the principles of fairness and justice."

"Sommer is smart and has been wonderful to work with," Altus City Manager Gary Jones told *Southwest Ledger*. "This is a loss for Altus but a gain for this judicial district. She will make an excellent judge."

Robbins obtained a bachelor's degree in agricultural science from Oklahoma State University and earned her law degree from the University of Oklahoma.

She succeeds former Associate District Judge Rafe Hall, who was appointed by Gov. Stitt last August to serve as District Judge for the 3rd Judicial District. That district encompasses Greer, Harmon, Jackson, Kiowa and Tillman counties.

OPINION

Challenging the sitting president: 'Is democracy still America's sacred cause?'

By **James Finck, Ph.D.**

During his Valley Forge speech earlier this month, where he stated this election is about whether democracy would survive, President Joe Biden asked, "Is democracy still America's sacred cause?"

Biden believes former president and Republican frontrunner Donald Trump wants to end democracy while his campaign aims to preserve it. Now, Biden may be calling for democracy, but Trump is currently removed from primary ballots of Colorado and Maine. Even more, Democrats have blocked members of their own party from challenging the president in some primaries.

Holding primaries and challenging a sitting president are uncommon. Historically speaking, there have been four eligible presidents who were not renominated, the last of which being in LBJ in 1968.

Normally, incumbent presidents are not challenged and many states declare them winners without holding primaries. Yet, recent times are far from normal. Trump has several pending court cases. And, on the Democratic side, according to ABC News, Biden has the lowest approval ratings (about 33%) in the past 15 years. With numbers like this, it seems only right that other Democrats challenge Biden for the presidency.

In at least eight Democratic state primaries, one or more candidates challenging Biden are missing from the ballot. Currently, the two leading Democratic challengers, Minnesota Congressman Dean Phillips and Marianne Williamson, author and

founder of Project Angel Food, are missing from the ballot. Earlier Robert Kennedy Jr. threw his hat in the ring but when it was rejected, he decided to run as an Independent.

It is difficult to call anyone a contender as Democrats have not held debates, and states are ignoring candidates on their primary ballots. Even if the Democratic Party allows these challengers to run, they will face an uphill battle, but not an impossible one.

In several articles, I have said that the political craziness of 1968 is very similar to our own. When it comes to challenging a sitting president, once again, this comparison holds true.

In 1968, incumbent President Lyndon B. Johnson was preparing for a second run (it would be his third term as he completed John F. Kennedy's term after his assassination, but by law a president can serve for 10 years.)

Like Biden, LBJ's approval ratings were incredibly low, under 40%. Johnson's biggest issue had been the war in Vietnam, which he claimed America was winning. However, 1968 began with the Tet Offensive which killed more than 2,600 American soldiers. Because of Johnson's handling of the war, the student movement (student activists aiming to promote political, environmental or social change) began calling for Robert Kennedy, the younger brother of slain President John F. Kennedy, to challenge Johnson in the primaries.

Johnson and Robert Kennedy were famous political rivals. Kennedy wanted to replace Johnson and change his policies. Not knowing

if he could win, and worried that an attempt might not only hurt his future chances but also divide the Democratic Party, Kennedy refused to run.

The student movement found another champion in U.S. Sen. Eugene McCarthy of Minnesota, who was critical of Johnson and his war policies. McCarthy did not believe the nation could survive four more years under the Johnson administration.

Knowing the odds were against him, students still rallied behind McCarthy. Many cut their hair and put on nice clothes to "Get Clean for Gene" and canvased neighborhoods. As always, the first primary was held in New Hampshire. To everyone's surprise, McCarthy came in a close second, Johnson 49% to McCarthy's 41%.

With blood in the water, Robert Kennedy also decided to challenge Johnson. On March 16, Kennedy threw his hat into the ring.

To the surprise of Kennedy, McCarthy and the nation, Johnson announced on March 31 that for the good of the nation in a time of crisis he would no longer seek the nomination of his party.

For only the fourth time in our nation's history, a sitting president would not be renominated, opening the door for Kennedy. Yet, McCarthy had a head start and many of the students had already committed to him. It would take until May 7 for Kennedy to win his first primary in Indiana.

Kennedy and McCarthy went back and forth winning states, neither gaining a clear advantage. They also had to face a new challenger in Hu-

bert Humphrey, Johnson's vice president, who took up Johnson's fight after he left the race. The Democratic Party was clearly split as the more liberal wing and students fought between McCarthy and Kennedy and the moderate Democrats supported Humphrey.

It went that way until the California Primary on June 2. After Kennedy's win, he, too, was assassinated. Once again, the nation was in crisis as a second Kennedy had been shot down. As the nation mourned, McCarthy suspended his campaign for a while, opening the door for Humphrey.

I have often heard that if Kennedy had not been shot, he would have won the primary and beaten Nixon. I am not as convinced. The primaries were about to head south where Kennedy was not as popular. We will never know as Kennedy died in California and Humphrey was able to capture the nomination at the Chicago convention only to lose to Nixon in the general election. While this election was marred with tragedy, it did demonstrate the democratic process in action.

It is rare to challenge a sitting president, but under the right circumstances it may be necessary. While Johnson was not happy with the outcome, at least the challengers were allowed to stand up and say there can be a different path. Yet, in our current election, instead of a candidate, democracy may be what's assassinated.

James Finck is a professor of history at the University of Science and Arts of Oklahoma. He may be reached at HistoricallySpeaking1776@gmail.com.

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Insurance commissioner reviews 2023

By **Glen Mulready**

OKLAHOMA CITY – Last year I was sworn into my second and last term as your state Insurance Commissioner. I am grateful for your continued trust and the unique opportunity it is to serve my fellow Oklahomans.

Last year was also an eventful year from an insurance standpoint. From severe weather to changes in the insurance market, the Oklahoma Insurance Department was here through all of it. I want to highlight some of our work from 2023 and discuss what's in store for this year.

As we state in our vision, OID's top priority is to protect Oklahoma consumers. Last year

our Consumer Assistance division assisted with 13,157 phone calls and 2,784 complaints, resulting in 327 external reviews and \$8,295,011 recovered for consumers. Our Anti-Fraud division also assisted with 1,414 complaints.

With the Life Insurance Policy Locator we matched Oklahoma beneficiaries with \$49 million in life insurance benefits – that they didn't know they had! Additionally, through all the winter weather, wildfires, hail and tornadoes, we were ready to provide assistance and answer insurance questions.

My team and I get out in the communities we serve and meet consumers and insurance

industry professionals. We arranged "Coffee with the Commissioner" and attended "Mix and Mingle" events across the state, where we met with chambers of commerce, licensed agents, Rotary Club chapters and other organizations to learn ways we can better serve the community.

In September we set up a booth at the Oklahoma State Fair to inform thousands of consumers about our services while having fun in the process. In addition to these events, our Medicare Assistance Program was active, giving 303 community presentations and engaging in 19,254 one-on-one client contacts, leading to 27,164 people reached.

If you'd like to host an event with us, visit <http://www.oid.ok.gov/> speaker or call our office at (800) 522-0071.

In 2023 we looked for new ways to reach consumers and licensed producers. We launched campaigns like "Here to Help," "Ask OID" and "Winter Weather" to provide guidance on what Oklahomans should know about insurance.

We brought you 13 new episodes of the "Mulready Minutes" podcast, where we featured informative guests to share perspectives and information on topics such as Medicare Open Enrollment, captive insurance and the different divisions at OID.

Our team also pro-

duced six episodes of the Medicare Monday webinar, and we hosted our first Insurance Day, where we connected with 125 industry professionals on issues affecting the insurance industry in Oklahoma and across the country.

As a reminder, you can keep up with the latest news and events with us by following us on social media and subscribing to email news updates at oid.ok.gov/subscribe.

We expect 2024 to present unique challenges and opportunities, but our commitment to serving Oklahomans will not change. We will keep you informed by bringing you new podcast episodes, webinars,



Glen Mulready

campaigns and events in your own community. Check out our 2023 Annual Report for more information on all the work we do at OID.

We help Oklahomans in their time of need, and if you need assistance or would like to file a complaint, please contact us at 800-522-0071 or visit oid.ok.gov.

Filing period for Chickasha council set for Feb. 4-7

From staff reports

The candidate filing period for people interested in serving on the Chickasha City Council is less than a week away.

Candidates may file their declarations of candidacy between 8 a.m. and 5 p.m. Feb. 4-7 at the Grady County Election Board office, 315 W. Pennsylvania Ave. in Chickasha.

Mayor Chris Mosley announced he will not seek reelection. Other council positions open for election this year:

- Kea Ginn, Ward 1.
- Rick Croslin, Ward 2 (an appointee who has already said he will not seek election to that seat).

tee who has already said he will not seek election to that seat).

- Dr. R. P. Ashanti-Alexander, Ward 3.
- Vice Mayor Zach Grayson, Ward 4 (has already announced he's running for mayor)

Chickasha City Council has 4 wards, with 2 representatives from each ward.

The election is set for April 2. Winners will be sworn into office April 15.

Two other cities in southwest Oklahoma will have their municipal elections Feb. 13. Those cities are:

Walters

Candidates Sherri L. Flanagan, Larry Perez and Clint Thurman are running for the Ward 3 seat on the Walters City Council.

Altus

Candidates Michelle Clement and Cody Nelson are competing to fill the Ward 4 slot on the Altus City Council, which is currently vacant. The winner will complete the former council member's unexpired term, which ends in April 2027.

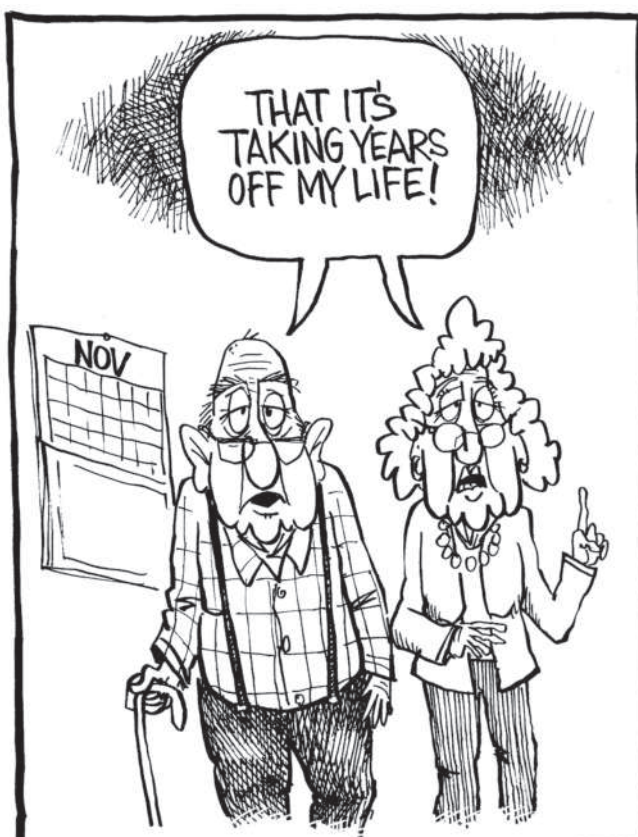
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CCIDA learns about tax increment financing districts

By Eric Swanson
Southwest Ledger

LAWTON – The Comanche County Industrial Development Authority recently got a crash course in tax increment financing (TIF) districts, economic tools which provide incentives for private development.

Richard Rogalski, executive director of the Lawton Economic Development Authority, explained how TIF districts work during the CCIDA's Jan. 22 meeting. The board did not take action following the discussion.

State law allows cities, towns and counties to

create TIF districts to spur private development, according to the Oklahoma Department of Commerce. The government borrows money to invest in the development, typically in the form of incentives or public improvements, and repays the loan by capturing part of the property taxes that the development generates.

School districts and local governments do not lose any tax revenue when a TIF district is created, according to the Department of Commerce. Those entities – also known as taxing jurisdictions – receive the same amount of revenue that they had

before the TIF district was created.

The government may use only the tax revenues from the TIF district to repay the loan. Once the loan is paid off, the TIF district expires and 100% of its tax revenues are distributed to the taxing jurisdictions.

Developing a project plan

Developing a project plan is essential to creating a TIF district, Rogalski said. The project is not the development itself, but the public improvements the government would undertake to support

the development.

In drawing up a project plan, officials should consider what improvements are required to prepare a site for development, Rogalski said. He added that a project plan should include any financial incentives and administrative expenses, as well as infrastructure costs.

"You want to look for what it takes to create this infrastructure center, or this industrial center, for this project," Rogalski said. "What would it take to get a project there? You estimate that and then you do a project plan to earn that money, more or less."

Under state law, a review committee must study any proposal to establish a TIF district and host a public meeting on the subject. The committee then submits a recommendation to the board looking at establishing the TIF district, which decides whether to move forward.

Repaying project costs

Rogalski said proposals to establish a TIF district should begin with a specific project. "Even if it's a small project, at least your costs to create the project plan will be paid back – whatever

infrastructure you did for that one," he said. "Then you're like, 'OK, now I'm ready to do something else, because I've got this ground ready.'"

Rogalski said the county has opportunities to create a TIF district, but it would need to begin with a developer who is interested in opening a business in a rural area. He added that the county does not have to own property to set up a TIF district.

"It just has to be in an unincorporated area, but then you can build that TIF district to make that happen," he said.

County sets agreement with diversion program committee

By Eric Swanson
Southwest Ledger

LAWTON – Comanche County is taking steps to tapping a state fund that could help the county pay for expanding its drug diversion programs.

The Comanche County Board of Commissioners voted Jan. 22 to approve a memorandum of understanding between the commission and the Comanche County Diversion Program Advisory Committee. The agreement establishes the parts they will play in the

county's application to the Oklahoma Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services' Community Safety Investment Fund.

The Department of Mental Health has awarded approximately \$440,000 to Comanche County for substance abuse and mental health programs, said Comanche County Attorney Kyle Cabelka. "My office is drafting an RFP (request for proposals) to submit to the Department of Mental Health," he said. "They are, essen-

tially, the gatekeeper of these funds."

Cabelka said the request, which is modeled on Oklahoma County's RFP but on a smaller scale, is due by the end of February.

Criminal justice reform

Nearly eight years ago, Oklahoma voters approved two state questions aimed at reforming the state's criminal justice system. State Question 780 reclassified simple drug possession and

minor property crimes from felonies to misdemeanors, which were no longer punishable by a prison sentence.

A related measure, State Question 781, directed the state to invest the savings from implementing SQ 780 into a fund that could help counties pay for mental health and substance abuse programs.

But the Oklahoma Legislature did not make the savings from SQ 780 until 2023, when lawmakers approved a bill directing the Department of Mental Health to put \$12.5

million in the state's County Community Safety Investment Fund, according to the Oklahoma Policy Institute.

Cabelka said Comanche County plans to use its share of those dollars to expand existing drug diversion programs.

"That is community sentencing, drug court, mental health court," he said. "We're wanting to establish a veterans court and then also expand pretrial release, which, as at least two of you all know, the county is highly involved in."

Cabelka said once the Department of Mental Health approves the funding, a special committee will look at the county's existing programs and decide how to spend the money to improve those programs.

"I do think if we get this money, the ideas that we have should be a significant help to substance abuse/mental health treatment here in the county," he said. "And hopefully, it will expand the work that we all have been putting in on reducing our jail population."





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City aiming to complete '22 audit by late March

By **Eric Swanson**
Southwest Ledger

LAWTON – The city's audit for fiscal year 2022 may be ready for the Lawton City Council to review within a couple of months, according to Finance Director Joe Don Dunham.

"The '22 target date: Presented to the council by March 31," he said during the council's Jan. 23 meeting.

The annual audit is due by the end of that calendar year. For instance, the FY '22 audit should have been submitted to the council by Dec. 31, 2022, and the audit for FY '23 was due by the end of last year.

The city changed banks and switched to a different accounting software system in 2022, which caused delays in completing the audits for FY 2022 and '23.

Dunham told the council earlier this month that the finance department had finished paperwork for the '22 audit in December 2023 and turned that information over to the city's financial consultants. However, he said, the consultants were experiencing difficulties stemming from the city's switch to new accounting software, which meant the city would miss its Jan. 23 deadline for finishing the audit.

The city's financial consultants,

Crawford and Associates, had finished uploading the city's general ledger accounts into their reporting software as of Jan. 17, Dunham said in a written report to the council.

"They are currently working to ensure all the beginning fund balance accounts are in balance and setting up all the transfer entries to close funds which were closed during the FY 2022 budget year," he said.

FY '23 audit

The finance department has completed many of the tasks associated with preparing the FY '23 audit, Dunham told the council Jan. 22. He said that audit should be ready for the council by June 30, and the FY 2024 audit should be finished by Dec. 31.

Mayor Stan Booker said more people were involved in preparing the audits than he ever imagined.

"I'm wondering how we're ever going to get it turned in by Dec. 31, the way this is going," he said.

Dunham said meeting the Dec. 31 deadline will be a challenge, but it's not impossible.

"It's a challenge Lawton has not met in the past, but it can be done," he said.

The audit for FY '22 was 383 days past due as of Jan. 17, and the audit for FY '23 was 18 days late. The delays could affect the city's credit rating.

Four entities team up to expand Elgin health care

By **Eric Swanson**
Southwest Ledger

Lawton Community Health Center, Comanche County Memorial Hospital, the City of Elgin and the Elgin Economic Development Authority are teaming up to expand health care services for Elgin-area residents.

Those services will include a new primary care clinic, an urgent care clinic, imaging, a lab and space for rotating specialty services, hospital officials said in a Jan. 24 news release. Officials said all four entities involved in the project have signed a contract to move forward.

"The Elgin Economic Development Authority is providing the land for the expansion," they said. "LCHC will be responsible for developing and building new facilities that will better serve with more capacity for the families in and around Elgin."

The primary care and urgent care clinics will be the first phase of the project, which will be located south and west of LEV Coffee Shop in Elgin. The Elgin Economic Development Authority owns the site.

Hospital officials estimated the first phase would cost more than \$2 million. They added that the

plans are still being refined, so it was difficult to estimate the cost with any precision.

Partnership

Elgin Mayor JJ Francais has proposed waiving water and sewer installation fees for the project as evidence of a partnership between the city and the hospital.

"We have not voted to waive those fees, but I hope we will shortly," he wrote in an email to a *Southwest Ledger* reporter. "It is my goal to show federal and state partners that Elgin is committed to building out the Mid-Town Medical Park."

Francais said city officials would like to see about 16 acres south and west of LEV Coffee Shop become a medical park.

"Currently, a dentist from Chickasha is constructing a new facility on the northeast corner of the park," he said. "We have an additional facility that should be announced soon, and our hope is that the hospital builds two buildings: a primary care facility (first phase) and a standalone ER (second phase.) We are also pursuing additional businesses that would be interested in locating inside a medical park."

City to seek bids for road repaving projects

By **Eric Swanson**
Southwest Ledger

LAWTON – Lawton will seek bids for 30 projects on the city's list of streets that would benefit from repaving.

The Lawton City Council directed city staff on Jan. 22 to begin the bidding process for items 11 through 40 on the "On Target, On Time" street project list. That list does not include King Road, the access road leading to Lawton Fort Sill Regional Airport.

King Road is also a candidate for repaving, but the city will seek bids for that project separately because the council wants to complete it as soon as possible.

In a related development, the

council voted to extend the section of U.S. Highway 62 that will receive a facelift. The original "On Target, On Time" list called for repaving U.S. 62 from Northwest 82nd Street to the spot where the Oklahoma Department of Transportation takes over maintenance, but the amended list extends that project to Northwest 79th Street.

The "On Target, On Time" list consists of 41 street segments that qualify for repaving using the mill and overlay technique, in which a milling machine removes the top layer of asphalt from a road. That layer is then replaced with fresh asphalt.

The city is aiming to complete all 41 projects on the list by Thanksgiving 2024.

State gets mixed marks from American Lung Association

From staff reports

OKLAHOMA CITY – Oklahoma's Tobacco Settlement Endowment Trust recently received two high marks from the American Lung Association.

Thomas Larson, TSET's Director of Public Information and Government Affairs, said the Tobacco Helpline got an 'A.' Larson says the Tobacco Helpline provides strong messaging that the "Tobacco Stops With Me" campaign "educates Oklahomans about the dangers and deceptive marketing practices of Big Tobacco."

Also, TSET has received an increase in registrations for those looking to quit tobacco, and that 40% of those registered remained tobacco-free at

the seven-month mark.

The Sooner State also received two "F" grades for lax smoke-free workplace laws and for not ceasing flavored tobacco sales. Larson added that there aren't any bills to strengthen these laws this session.

He suggested that the public needs to push the Legislature to create stronger smoke-free workplace laws and to end the sale of flavored tobacco products. Oklahoma's smoke-free air statute is "full of exemptions, like for standalone bars, restaurants with a smoking room, [and] 25% of hotel rooms can be smoking rooms," he said. "So, there are some really big holes in our smoke-free air law that legislators could go back and address."

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Six Chinese nationals guilty of marijuana trafficking

By **Mike W. Ray**
Southwest Ledger

OKLAHOMA CITY – Federal prosecutors here convicted two Chinese nationals of drug trafficking conspiracy, secured guilty pleas from four other Chinese nationals charged with marijuana distribution, and have drug charges pending against two others.

The cases underscore the testimony of state Attorney General Gentner Drummond in his Jan. 10 appearance before the U.S. House Committee on Homeland Security.

“Throughout Oklahoma, law enforcement comes into daily contact with foreign nationals who entered our country illegally or remain here illegally — or both. This is all too common in Oklahoma’s illegal marijuana grow operations,” he said.

These “illegal foreign actors” burden Oklahoma – at the local and state level alike – with additional costs that cannot fully be quantified, he said. “For instance,” Drummond related, “the Oklahoma Department of Corrections reports that it currently houses nearly 500 illegal immigrants convicted of various violent crimes.”

Law enforcement officers “report that the foreign nationals most often involved in these illegal enterprises come from China and Mexico,” Drummond noted.

Last May the FBI raided a marijuana farm near Wetumka that was licensed by the Oklahoma Medical Marijuana Authority, and counted 19,661 plants, officials reported. The FBI also discovered more than \$100,000 in vacuum-sealed cash and seized a pistol on the premises.

Jeff Weng, 46, of China and Brooklyn, New York, was the former manager of the marijuana

farm, and Tong Lin, 28, of China, was a management intern at the grow operation. Both were convicted earlier this month by a Western Oklahoma U.S. District Court jury on a charge of conspiracy to possess and distribute more than 1,000 marijuana plants.

The presiding judge will pronounce their sentences later this year.

Weng and Lin face mandatory minimum sentences of 10 years in federal prison and fines of up to \$10 million each. At sentencing, the U.S. will seek to forfeit the Wetumka grow property and the cash that was confiscated during execution of a federal search warrant in connection with the case.

“Oklahoma has one of the largest illegal marijuana industries in the United States, and the FBI recognizes the devastating impact these illicit operations have on our economy and the safety of our communities,” said FBI Oklahoma City Special Agent in Charge Edward J. Gray.

The Jan. 18 guilty verdicts in Oklahoma City’s federal court “are just a small piece of the long-running, multi-agency investigation into a prolific criminal enterprise, one that is responsible for supplying large quantities of illegal marijuana to violent gangs across the country.”

OKC businessman was a key witness

A key witness against Weng and Lin was Brandon Ye, 43, the owner of a company in Oklahoma City that makes kitchen counters and cabinets.

Appearing for the prosecution, Ye testified that he collected marijuana from 20 different Oklahoma grow operations for shipment out of state; he said he was paid \$15 per pound. All of those marijuana farms were



Provided

This vehicle, disguised as an Amazon delivery van, was used in a “black market” marijuana distribution operation.

operated by Chinese nationals, Ye testified through a translator.

Testimony revealed that the drug conspirators drove delivery vans disguised as commercial vehicles, including one that appeared to be an Amazon delivery van, to the Wetumka marijuana farm 10 to 15 times between December 2022 and March 31, 2023.

Between 150 and 200 pounds of marijuana was picked up each time from the Wetumka grow, and Tong Lin helped load the fake Amazon delivery van with marijuana, jurors were told.

Ye testified that the marijuana was transported to a “stash house” in northwest Oklahoma City, and every Friday the marijuana was moved from the stash house to a warehouse at his business, Arch Granite & Cabinetry in Oklahoma City.

There, more than 2,000 pounds of marijuana at a time was loaded into a semi-truck trailer, which transported the marijuana from Oklahoma to the East Coast. Over approximately seven months, upwards of 56,000 pounds of marijuana – 28 tons – was transported out of Oklahoma via semi-truck.

“A license under state law to grow marijuana is not a license to traffic

tons of ‘black market’ marijuana inside or outside Oklahoma,” Western District U.S. Attorney Robert J. Troester said.

The FBI began tracking the fake Amazon van in December 2022 after an Oklahoma City police officer assigned to an FBI task force reported in an affidavit that during surveillance on the stash house, a Mercedes-Benz Sprinter van disguised as an Amazon delivery van backed into the driveway of the residence. Some “Asian men” unloaded several “full, black bags” from the rear of the van before the vehicle was driven away.

Federal officials initiated legal measures last May to seize the property near Wetumka and eight other properties in the state. Addresses of the other properties were listed as Rush Springs, Alex, Oakland, Elk City, Watonga, Foster, Piedmont and Oklahoma City.

Six Chinese nationals arrested at the Alex, Oakland and Watonga marijuana grow operations have been indicted in Oklahoma City federal court, and five of the six have pleaded guilty.

5 Chinese nationals also indicted with key witness

Brandon Ye, who was

born in China but said he has lived in the U.S. since 2000, pleaded guilty Aug. 25, 2023, to possession of marijuana with intent to distribute and to possession of a firearm in furtherance of a crime.

He could be sentenced to 20 or more years in federal prison plus stiff fines. In addition, he has agreed to forfeit property he owns, including a house in Oklahoma City, a 2018 Tesla, the 2018 Mercedes-Benz van disguised as an Amazon delivery vehicle, a 2021 Ford van, a Ford F-250 pickup, a 9mm pistol, and \$68,900 cash.

Ye also agreed to abandon “any right or title” to a house in south OKC, a 2017 Freightliner semi-truck, a 2015 Hyundai trailer, and a 2019 Dodge commercial van.

Five other Chinese nationals were indicted along with Ye on May 3, 2023, on charges of participating in illegal marijuana distribution.

• Mingxuan Xie, 35, was driving a semi-trailer truck that was stopped on Feb. 22, 2023, by Indiana State Police who seized 2,700 pounds of marijuana that was traced to Ye’s Arch Granite & Cabinetry store in Oklahoma City.

Xie was being held in the Clay County jail in

Brazil, Indiana, in December. A federal judge ordered U.S. Marshals to retrieve Xie from Indiana and deliver him to the Oklahoma City federal court “for arraignment, hearings, and subsequent disposition” of criminal charges, and then return him to Clay County.

• Andy Zheng, 51, pleaded guilty last August to possession of marijuana with intent to distribute. He has not been sentenced yet.

• Le Xu, 35, pleaded guilty last September to possession of marijuana with intent to distribute; forfeited “any right, title or interest” to a 2019 Dodge commercial van and \$53,424 cash; and awaits sentencing.

• Hui Chen, 42, pleaded guilty last July to possession of marijuana with intent to distribute; agreed to forfeit right, title or interest to any property and cash seized by the government during the investigation; and has not yet been sentenced.

• Shulong Luo, 33, was arraigned in November on a charge of drug conspiracy and awaits trial. The federal government also filed a forfeiture motion to confiscate any property he may have acquired as a result of his alleged criminal actions.

Alex marijuana raid nets 3,500 plants, 2 guilty pleas

By **Mike W. Ray**
Southwest Ledger

OKLAHOMA CITY – Two Chinese nationals arrested during a raid last year on a marijuana farm near Alex were indicted in federal district court here on two charges.

Jian Hui Wu, 52, and Quan Li Sum a/k/a Dhengli Sun, 58, both pleaded guilty Nov. 8 to drug conspiracy and possession of firearms in the furtherance of a crime.

A federal search warrant executed May 16, 2023, at the marijuana farm, which consisted of more than 20 grow houses, netted \$31,522 in cash, more than 13,500 marijuana plants, two pistols and a rifle.

Investigators reported that of the 13 individuals who were detained on the property during the search, “not a single person could tell law enforcement how to legally grow, transport, and distribute medical marijuana according to Oklahoma state law.”

Additionally, a “co-operating defendant” said the Alex marijuana farm was being used “in furtherance of ‘black market’ marijuana distribution.” The informant would drive to the Alex grow operation twice a week for eight months, and on each visit would pick up approximately 100 pounds of marijuana that would be transported out-of-state for sale. The informant admitted they did not have a medical marijuana transporter license.

Neither Wu nor Sum has been sentenced yet. Meanwhile, prosecutors have filed a forfeiture motion on everything that was seized during the raid.

Federal charges also were filed in two other rural Oklahoma marijuana raids.

• Qifeng Ye, 49, and Ziquang Lin, 46, were charged in Oklahoma City federal district court with drug conspiracy: possession of 1,000 or more marijuana plants at a marijuana farm at

Oakland, a couple of miles west of Madill in Marshall County.

Lin pleaded guilty last November. He admitted he worked at a licensed medical marijuana farm between Dec. 1, 2022, and May 18, 2023, and “distributed marijuana to unauthorized buyers.”

He has not been sentenced yet, but has agreed to forfeit any right, title and interest to the Oakland grow operation plus \$35,474 in cash and \$46,000 in money orders that investigators seized.

Ye’s case is still pending, court records indicate.

• Zheng Fu Zheng, 60, and Wei Lin, 38, were indicted last June for drug conspiracy in connection with a marijuana farm at Watonga.

An Oklahoma City police officer assigned to an FBI task force reported that a search warrant was executed last May at a marijuana grow operation in Watonga. The facility was housed inside a warehouse of more

than 170,000 square feet.

During the search, officers seized more than 400 pounds of processed marijuana and approximately 42,000 marijuana plants. They also confiscated \$102,000 in cash, a 2017 Mercedes-Benz automobile and a forklift.

Also found were U-Haul rental truck receipts. From interviews with 23 workers encountered during the search, the officers learned that the trucks were used to transport marijuana plants from California to Oklahoma – a violation of federal and state laws. “Oklahoma is a seed-to-sale state, meaning that marijuana must be grown and sold in Oklahoma to be legal,” the task force officer wrote.

Wei Lin pleaded guilty in October, Zheng pleaded guilty in December, and both await sentencing.

Prosecutors have taken steps to forfeit the Watonga grow facility, the cash, the car and the forklift.

DID YOU KNOW...

The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development considers those who pay more than 30% of their income on housing to be “housing-burdened”? The department recommends having at least 70% of income available for expenses beyond housing.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, 52% of renters and 23% of homeowners in the U.S. were housing-burdened in 2022. Both figures are lower than they were in 2010 but higher than they were in 2019 and 2021.

In all 50 states, the percentage of housing-burdened renters is higher than that of housing-burdened homeowners.

In Oklahoma, 47.5% of renters and 19.3% of homeowners were housing-burdened in 2022. In Texas, the rates were 53% of renters and 22.8% of homeowners. In 2022, Florida, Nevada and California had the largest shares of housing-burdened renters.

Also that year, nearly one-third of homeowners in both California and Hawaii were housing-burdened. California had the largest share: 31.1% of homeowners. West Virginia had the smallest share: 14.2%.

Hearing set on challenge to Oklahoma blacklist law

By **Mike W. Ray**
Southwest Ledger

OKLAHOMA CITY – A hearing is scheduled Feb. 6 in Oklahoma County District Court on a motion to dismiss a lawsuit that challenges the constitutionality of the Oklahoma Energy Discrimination Elimination Act.

The litigation focuses on House Bill 2034, which requires the State Treasurer to maintain a list of financial institutions that “boycott” oil and gas companies.

The legislation forbids state government entities from doing business with financial institutions the State Treasurer deems to have environmental, social and governmental rules that discourage investment in companies engaged in fossil fuel exploration and/or production.

State Treasurer Todd Russ wants Judge Sheila Stinson to toss out the lawsuit that Dr. Don Keenan filed Dec. 21, 2023. Russ maintains that Keenan has no legal standing to sue. Former State Rep. Collin Walke,

Keenan’s attorney, disagrees.

Dr. Keenan, a Glenpool resident, is “an Oklahoma taxpayer and a beneficiary” of the Oklahoma Public Employees Retirement System, Walke points out.

Keenan served in the U.S. Army and Air Force for 19.5 years; was employed by the Oklahoma Employment Security Commission in 1985-96 as a disabled veterans employment representative; then worked as the human resources director at Tulsa’s Sinclair refinery. He was twice elected president of the Oklahoma Public Employees Association.

As a former Sinclair employee, Keenan “has no objections to oil and gas operations and believes they are important and critical to the world’s economy,” Walke wrote. But as a retiree vested in OPERS, Keenan “objects to the Legislature using pension funds to score political points.”

“This is clearly a test case for the Legislature, and this court should not permit the Legislature to run roughshod over clearly established constitutional law,” Walke asserted.

Barclays banned from Texas bond market

From staff reports

AUSTIN, Texas – Attorney General Ken Paxton announced Jan. 26 that Barclays will no longer be permitted to underwrite Texas’s municipal bonds.

He said he imposed the ban because the bank failed to respond to requests for information about its “net zero” carbon emissions commitments. Barclays failed to answer questions about its pledges to cut greenhouse gas emissions, Paxton said.

Barclays is the latest firm to be banned because of its environmental, social, and governance policies that purportedly “discriminate” against the oil and gas industry. Like Oklahoma, Texas has a law banning such firms from doing business with state agencies and investments if they are considered to be hostile to the oil and gas industry.

A Barclays spokesman declined to comment, according to Reuters news agency.

Paxton’s office stated it identified Barclays as being a member or affiliate of a net zero alliance, an association whose goal is to reduce planet-warming greenhouse gas emissions that began gaining traction around a United Nations conference in Scotland in 2021.

“This raised concerns that Barclays’ activities may require it be classified as a ‘fossil fuel boycotter’ under Texas law,” the statement said.

“When asked for more information

concerning its ESG commitments, Barclays elected not to respond to the questions and acknowledged that by doing so it would likely forfeit its ability to contract with Texas governmental entities,” the statement continued.

A Texas finance chief keeps a list of financial firms deemed to place ESG considerations over purely financial factors when investing client funds.

In accordance with Texas law, the Attorney General’s Public Finance Division issued an All Bond Counsel Letter explaining that, “Until further notice, we will not approve any public security issued on or after today’s date in which Barclays purchases or underwrites the public security or is otherwise a party to a covered contract relating to the public security.” Additionally, the letter continues, “As of today, we have not heard from any of the remaining banks under review that they will not be able to respond to our inquiries.”

Texas and Oklahoma are among the states that have mounted a conservative challenge to a Biden administration rule allowing socially conscious investment of employee retirement plans.

The Texas and Oklahoma laws, as well as similar measures enacted in several other states, were patterned after “model” legislation promoted by the American Legislative Exchange Council. ALEC is a corporate-funded organization that writes suggested legislation for Republican-controlled states.

BlackRock remains on state’s blacklist

By **Mike W. Ray**
Southwest Ledger
& **Jerry Bohnen**
OK Energy Today

OKLAHOMA CITY – Although it has major investments in two regulated Oklahoma utility companies and at least three Oklahoma energy companies, BlackRock remains on the “blacklist” of financial institutions that state investments and funds are forbidden from doing business with.

House Bill 2034, the Energy Discrimination Elimination Act of 2022, requires the state to divest from any financial company that boycotts the energy industry.

That measure requires the state treasurer to maintain and provide to each state governmental entity a list of financial institutions that boycott energy companies; those institutions are ineligible to receive state contracts.

“The energy sector is crucial to Oklahoma’s economy, providing jobs for our residents and helping drive economic growth,” said State Treasurer Todd Russ. “It is essential for us to work with financial institutions that are focused on free-market principles and not beholden to social goals that override their fiduciary duties.”

Russ initially notified 13 financial institutions in May 2023 that they were ineligible for state contracts as a result of the new law. He issued a revised list last August that was shortened to six companies – but BlackRock was at the head of the list.

Southwest Ledger contacted the Treasurer’s Office for an explanation why, since BlackRock has major investments in several Oklahoma companies.

• A new U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission filing by Chesapeake Energy revealed that BlackRock owns 11,227,586 shares in the Oklahoma City-based oil and gas firm; those shares constitute 8.6% of the company’s entire shares. The filing came a week after Chesapeake announced its intention to merge with Southwestern Energy of Houston but maintain its headquarters in Oklahoma City.

• BlackRock owns 3.9 million shares – 13.9% – of Vital Energy, a Tulsa-based independent energy exploration and production company formerly known as Laredo Petroleum.

• Another recent SEC filing showed that BlackRock, whose headquarters are in New York, also owns a little over 48 million shares – 9% – of ONEOK.

ONEOK is a transporter of natural gas and natural gas liquids, and has added refined products and crude oil transportation to its natural gas and NGL assets.

• BlackRock owns a little over 8 million shares – 14.5% – of ONE Gas, parent company of Oklahoma Natural Gas Co., the largest natural gas distributor in Oklahoma.

• BlackRock also owns nearly 24.9 million shares – 12.4% – of Oklahoma Gas & Electric Co., which provides electricity to more than 887,000 customers in natural gas, coal, wind and solar generation facilities.

In response to an inquiry from the Ledger last May, BlackRock wrote that it is “a leading investor in the Oklahoma energy sector. On behalf of our clients, we invest over \$15 billion in public energy companies based in Oklahoma and \$320 billion in public energy companies globally. We invest billions more in renewable energy firms.”

BlackRock also wrote that it “offers our clients the choices to help them achieve their investment objectives.”

The company criticized boycott lists – such as the one mandated by HB 2034 – because they “raise costs for Oklahoma

taxpayers and reduce returns for fire-fighters, teachers, and state employees seeking to retire with dignity.”

BlackRock is considered the world’s largest asset manager, with \$9.1 trillion in assets under management as of the third quarter of 2023, according to a report filed with the SEC.

BlackRock a signatory to Net Zero initiative

Jordan Harvey, the treasurer’s chief of staff, noted that BlackRock is one of more than 315 signatories to the Net Zero Asset Managers initiative launched in December 2020. The international group has \$57 trillion in assets under management.

“They all agree to support the goal of net zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050 or sooner,” she said. “If you read their reports over the last three years, their intent is to divest from the fossil fuel industry” and thereby starve it of operating cash.

Alliance members commit to “work in partnership with asset owner clients on decarbonization goals, consistent with an ambition to reach net zero emissions by 2050 or sooner across all assets under management.”

BlackRock’s shareholder reports “align them with this net zero alliance,” Harvey said. “Their entire purpose is compliance with the Paris climate accord of 2015.”

A major goal of that accord is to substantially reduce global greenhouse gas emissions, to limit the global temperature increase to well below 2° Centigrade above pre-industrial levels and to pursue efforts to limit it to 1.5° Centigrade, and thereby reduce the effects of climate change.

BlackRock is “buying shares to give them a seat at the table,” Harvey said. “This gives them a bigger stick to talk with, or divesting if BlackRock wants to use their nine trillion dollars of influence to encourage other organizations to divest from the fossil fuel industry.”

If financial companies that are on the state’s blacklist “want to reverse course, Treasurer Russ is constantly evaluating their actions and behavior,” Harvey said. For example, Vanguard “pulled out of the alliance,” she said.

Companies on the state’s blacklist have an opportunity to clarify their activities, and a step-down period is in place before complete divestiture is required. The law does not apply to indirect holdings in actively or passively managed investment funds or private equity funds, or if a sale would result in a financial loss for the state.

The treasurer is required by law to update the list annually but not more often than quarterly. Russ’ next deadline is this May.

ESG is ‘political environmentalism’

State Rep. Mark McBride (R-Moore), principal author of HB 2034, defended his measure.

“This legislation ultimately protects all Oklahomans from the overreach of companies that think they can govern our population through the use of political environmentalism,” McBride said. “Fossil fuels such as oil and gas are a major contributor to the livelihood of many Oklahomans as well as our overall economy. This critical industry employs thousands of Oklahomans and adds tremendously to our tax base. We must protect our assets as a state.”

Environmental, social, and governance standards prioritize environmental investments and favor green energy projects over oil and gas investments. Critics, such as McBride and Russ, say the policies ignore legally mandated fiduciary responsibilities and often don’t align with a client’s personal values.

Devon Energy CAO retires, new officer appointed

From staff reports

OKLAHOMA CITY – After 20 years of service, Devon Energy’s senior vice president and chief accounting officer, Jeremy Humphers, has announced he will retire March 8.

John Sherrer is set succeed him as Vice President, Accounting & Controller becoming the company’s principal accounting officer.

Executive Vice President and CFO Jeff Ritenour commended Humphers on his two decades with the company.

“On behalf of the entire organization, I would like to thank Jeremy for the meaningful contributions he made during his 20-year career with Devon. Jeremy led the accounting organization with technical excellence, fostered innovation, leveraged technology, and exemplified

Devon’s value of integrity. Jeremy will be greatly missed by his Devon colleagues, and we wish him the very best.”

Ritenour also lauded Sherrer’s work.

“We are excited to announce the promotion of John Sherrer to Vice President, Accounting & Controller,” Ritenour said. “John has been a member of Devon’s accounting team for 12 years and is a proven leader of successful teams. John’s deep technical knowledge and experience will serve as an excellent foundation as he takes on this new role.”

After earning accounting degrees from Oklahoma State University, Sherrer joined Devon in 2011 serving in various accounting roles. Most recently, he served as leader of the company’s Financial Accounting group. Prior to joining Devon, Sherrer spent six years in public accounting with KPMG.

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Biggs gives cold weather cattle tips plus warnings

From staff reports

STILLWATER – Dr. Rosslyn Biggs, beef cattle extension specialist with Oklahoma State University, recently highlighted how producers can care for cattle in cold weather and fighting off internal parasites.

Due to increased possibility of injury, older cows and baby calves will need extra nutrition and shelter during colder weather. However, bulls should not be forgotten in this weather, as injuries can negatively impact breeding. Biggs emphasized the need for proper bedding for these animals to get them warm and out of the wind.

Cattle should be well fed before cold weather hits, and farmers should have backup plans for any water issues. Biggs also recommends having a calving kit ready at all times. These should consist of medications, trash bags, colostrum, a veterinarian's number and other essentials.

Turning to the topic of internal parasites, Biggs says that anthelmintic (dewormer) resistance is a growing concern for producers. OSU's Extension Office is evaluating levels in Oklahoma cattle herds through ongoing studies. This research helps to develop parasite management strategies to preserve the effectiveness of medicines while maintaining cattle production going



Rosslyn Biggs

forward.

Biggs said they OSU is currently looking at 50 different cattle groups across the state, with each consisting of 20 head of cattle. Producers will use routing dewormer, then OSU will collect fecal samples to analyze dewormer effectiveness.

"We are trying to make sure that if you are using a product, it is effective," said Biggs.

Producers can also sign up by contacting their local extension educators or Dr. Rosslyn Biggs directly at rosslyn.biggs@okstate.edu.

Lucas receives AFBF's Distinguished Service Award

From staff reports

For the value he gives ag producers at Capitol Hill, Congressman Frank Lucas (OK-03) recently received the American Farm Bureau Federation's Distinguished Service Award.

Lucas was presented the award during AFBF's annual convention in Salt Lake City, Utah, earlier this month.

AFBF established this award in 1928 to honor individuals who have devoted their careers to serving the national interests of American agriculture. Lucas was nominated by the Oklahoma Farm Bureau.

As a fifth-generation Oklahoman and farmer, Lucas has been a defender of agriculture for more than 40 years. He holds a bachelor's degree in agricultural economics from Oklahoma State University, and he used this degree to bring the perspective of

the American farmer to Capitol Hill.

Elected to Congress in 1994, Lucas is the longest-serving member of the House Agriculture Committee. He served as chairman from 2011 to 2015, playing a crucial role in the 2015 Farm Bill. He has also served in the Oklahoma State House of Representatives, focusing on agricultural issues.

Lucas praised the AFBF for their informative role in the nation's agricultural scene. Regarding the award, he said, "It's like having your family say you've done a really good job for them."

Oklahoma Farm Bureau President Rodd Moesel commended Lucas. "He's so rare because he is a real farmer and rancher. There are very few of those left in Congress. He really understands our issues and is able to take those messages to Congress."

CARE program brings increased support for ag

From staff reports

The Oklahoma Association of Conservation Districts announced new financial support from General Mills for the Conservation & Agriculture Reach Everyone (CARE) program. CARE is a venture in partnership with the Oklahoma Black Historical Research Project Inc.

In addition to improving soil health, water quality, and the viability of working lands in Oklahoma, CARE aims to increase farmer/rancher participation in conservation planning and programs by providing resources and assistance to socially disadvantaged veteran producers. The program has positively impacted more than 7,000 producers since its 2017 inception.

Sarah Blaney, OACD executive director, added that the CARE program will greatly benefit in outreach from the General Mills partnership.

"Being a CARE champion has brought a lot of benefits," CARE's Milford Roberts said. "We've been able to learn a lot about farming as well as attend meetings in other states to learn additional benefits from other farmers. We've also been able to plant grass as well as remove trees to make our acreage even stronger. The program has given us about \$12,000 gain per year."

Jay Watson, General Mills' director regenerative agriculture, said "At General Mills, we know the influence local organizations have to reach farmers and help advance regenerative agriculture in their communities. We strongly believe in the purpose of the CARE program and support their efforts to ensure everyone has access to the resources and assistance required to help restore the health of our planet and improve farmer livelihood."

For more details, visit <https://www.okconservation.org/care>.

Scamming robotexts increased in late 2023

From staff reports

NEW YORK – Scammers are slowly but surely switching over to robotexts, according to Robokiller.

In December, Robokiller, the award-winning spam call and text blocker app, reported that robotexts increased by 37%, up 6% since November, and robo-calls decreased by 25%.

Spammers took advantage of the holiday season by tricking consumers into clicking fraudulent links as people are expecting deliveries. These links may look like they come from well-known delivery companies, but in reality, they are just scams. Additionally, scammers are using bank scams and debt collector scams to steal money this season.

At an estimated average of 10 robocalls per person, Oklahomans appeared particularly vulnerable to robocalls during the holiday season.

By downloading the Robokiller app, consumers can largely

prevent spam texts and spam calls from being an annoyance or worse. Robokiller's new personal data protection feature allows consumers to remove their information from data broker websites that scammers use to find targets.

Robokiller is available for download in the Apple App Store and Google Play.

The President & CEO of the Duncan Chamber of Commerce is a full-time position reporting to the Chamber Board of Directors charged with the overall operation, financial direction and stability of the Duncan Chamber of Commerce.

The successful candidate will have a degree in administration or a business-related field or equivalent work experience.

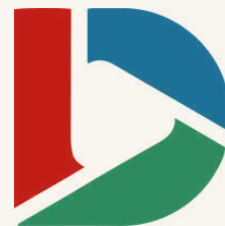
This position requires knowledge of business and management principles involved in strategic planning, resource allocation, leadership techniques, and coordination of people and resources.

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Please submit a letter of application indicating experience applicable to this position, resume, and names, addresses and telephone numbers of three professional references. Applications will be accepted until position is filled.

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Email: tsleeper@fb247.com



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U.S. Drought Monitor Oklahoma

January 23, 2024
(Released Thursday, Jan. 25, 2024)
Valid 7 a.m. EST

Drought Conditions (Percent Area)

	None	D0-D4	D1-D4	D2-D4	D3-D4	D4
Current	67.23	32.77	14.52	1.67	0.00	0.00
Last Week <i>01-16-2024</i>	65.81	34.19	15.01	1.67	0.00	0.00
3 Months Ago <i>10-24-2023</i>	27.88	72.12	49.29	33.91	13.47	0.00
Start of Calendar Year <i>01-02-2024</i>	55.32	44.68	21.64	3.08	0.00	0.00
Start of Water Year <i>09-26-2023</i>	34.29	65.71	46.76	30.93	12.91	0.00
One Year Ago <i>01-24-2023</i>	2.04	97.96	89.12	81.01	57.90	11.77

Intensity:

- None
- D0 Abnormally Dry
- D1 Moderate Drought
- D2 Severe Drought
- D3 Extreme Drought
- D4 Exceptional Drought

The Drought Monitor focuses on broad-scale conditions. Local conditions may vary. For more information on the Drought Monitor, go to <https://droughtmonitor.unl.edu/About.aspx>

Author:

Brian Fuchs
National Drought Mitigation Center



droughtmonitor.unl.edu

