

TIMES RECORD

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Wolf Pen Gap Trail Proposals Draw Skeptics

FOREST SERVICE PLANS OPEN FOR PUBLIC REVIEW, BUT POLK COUNTY OFFICIAL WONDERS IF THEY REALLY LISTEN

By Wanda Freeman

TIMES RECORD • WFREEMAN@SWTIMES.COM

The U.S. Forest Service is inviting feedback on eight proposals for managing the Wolf Pen Gap off-highway vehicle trail system near Mena, but local leaders are skeptical about the Forest Service's methods and openness to feedback.

According to a news release, the Forest Service began working on a management strategy for the popular 42-mile trail system in mid-2010, after the Ouachita National Forest issued a decision designating motor-vehicle travel routes within the 1.8 million-acre forest.

Tracy Farley, a spokesman for the national forest,

said the initial decision was withdrawn after the Forest Service determined the public wasn't sufficiently involved in its development, so Ouachita spent the past two years revisiting the plan. Several meetings, field trips and workshops were held in Mena, including "a lot of interaction, all the way through," she said.

"When we went out with the proposed action, we anticipated no changes," Farley said. "But then with the decision to revisit it, there were a lot of changes."

Scientific data formed the foundation of the new slate of alternatives because sedimentation was a major concern of the Forest Service, she said.

Polk County Judge Brandon Ellison said the Wolf Pen Gap trail system is very important to the local economy.

"The University of Arkansas at Little Rock did an economic-impact study in 2010, when this came up, and it was astounding the tourism it generates, the dollars it brings in. ...

We need Wolf Pen Gap. We need it to be open."

According to the study, which Ellison emailed to the Times Record, nonlocal off-highway vehicle day visitors spend an average of \$50 to \$75 per day, while nonlocal OHV overnight visitors spend an average of \$120 to \$210 per night.

SEE WOLF PEN PAGE 8A

Killer Receives 30 Years

HUSBAND ADMITS STRANGLING WIFE

By Jeff Arnold

TIMES RECORD • JARNOLD@SWTIMES.COM

A Fort Smith man who initially claimed he killed his wife in self-defense was sentenced to 30 years in prison Thursday after pleading guilty to first-degree murder in Sebastian County Circuit Court.

Brent Dan Cotta, 33, strangled his estranged wife, Cassie Leigh Cotta, 24, Dec. 30 at their Fort Smith home, before dumping her body off of Gun Club Road in Van Buren.

After initially denying any knowledge of her whereabouts when Cassie Cotta's mother, Pearl Cook, reported her missing to Fort Smith Police on Dec. 31, Brent Cotta eventually confessed, although he claimed he accidentally killed her in self-defense.

In court Thursday, deputy public defender Cash Haaser told Circuit Court Judge James Cox that his client intentionally choked Cassie Cotta to death on Dec. 30.

SEE SENTENCE PAGE 8A



B. Cotta



C. Cotta

SCHOOL PREP



Deanna Spears, a music teacher at King Elementary School in Van Buren, hangs a "music on the map" display in her new classroom Thursday. This will be Spears' first year as music teacher.

RACHEL RODEMANN • TIMES RECORD

WEEKLY REPORT

Drought Worsens In State

CONDITIONS 'EXCEPTIONAL' IN 44 PERCENT OF ARKANSAS

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

LITTLE ROCK — Almost half of Arkansas is mired in an exceptional drought, the worst of four categories assigned by the U.S. Drought Monitor, which released its weekly report Thursday.

Corn growers are harvesting, and finding that, despite irrigation, some ears are smaller than in an ordinary year. That means lower yields for growers.

Soybean plants are entering a growth phase in which they need plenty of water, an increasingly scarce commodity for some farmers.

The U.S. Drought Monitor map shows 44 percent of Arkansas to be in exceptional drought, up from 34 percent a week before. Eighty percent of the state is in extreme or exceptional drought.

Rain fell in parts of the state Thursday, with some

areas getting more than an inch. But the National Weather Service said Arkansas, along with most of the Midwest, needs long periods of rainfall to begin to make up the moisture deficit.

Farmers have been irrigating their crops throughout their growth cycle, spending a tremendous amount of money on diesel to power their water pumps.

Keith Perkins, the Lonoke County extension agent for the University of Arkansas System Division of Agriculture, said soybeans are at a critical developmental stage and are trying to flower.

"With it hot and dry and most soybeans in the reproductive state, it is hard to keep up with the water demands of the plants," Perkins said.

Phil Sims, chairman of the Pope County extension service, said irrigated soybeans are looking fair, but the plants that farmers can't reach with water "are mostly burning up."

SEE DROUGHT PAGE 8A

EPA URGED TO WAIVE FUEL RULE

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Business Partnerships Bolster Fort Smith Schools

By Chad Hunter

TIMES RECORD • CHUNTER@SWTIMES.COM

Partnerships with local businesses, some dating back 30 years, are motivating students and bolstering Fort Smith schools financially.

"We would not be able to be the school we are without the partnerships," Carnall Elementary School Principal Michela Wiley said. "They use their own time to come help my school, so I really appreciate them."

On Thursday, school leaders met with their 200-plus

business partners for an annual planning conference at Ramsey Junior High School. Carnall Elementary, with 273 students, has fostered a relationship with three businesses, Walmart on Zero Street, Arkansas Oklahoma Gas and Arkansas Best Federal Credit Union.

"It's significant for our school," Wiley said. "We're a small school. We're about 83 percent free and reduced (meals). What the partners give to us is financial support and physical support. They're like our cheerleaders. They're always there to

support us. We celebrate a lot at Carnall, and they help us celebrate."

In its 30th year in Fort Smith, the Partners in Education program is designed to facilitate mutually beneficial relationships between businesses and schools.

"AOG does the BUG (Bringing Up Grades) club that helps motivate our kids to do better in school every quarter," Wiley said. "Walmart and ABF do job shadowing so our kids can see what the real world looks like out there."

SEE PARTNERS PAGE 8A



CHAD HUNTER • TIMES RECORD

Walmart training coordinator Elaine Greene, right, takes part in a planning session Thursday in Fort Smith during an annual Partners in Education meeting.

GETTING STARTED

IN THE NEWS

Annan Resigns, Blasts Allies

BEIRUT — Kofi Annan announced his resignation Thursday as peace envoy to Syria and issued a blistering critique of world powers, bringing to a dramatic end a frustrating six-month effort that failed to achieve even a temporary cease-fire as the country plunged into civil war. FULL STORY, 4A

UA's Bumpers College Strengthening Relations With Panama

By Peter Urban

STEPHENS WASHINGTON BUREAU
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WASHINGTON — Sixty years after it first established relations with Panama, the University of Arkansas is preparing to strengthen its

ties to the Central American nation.

Representatives of the school will be in Panama City to sign a formal pledge today to assist the Panama Ministry of Agriculture over the next five years.

"We are looking for col-

laborative ways we can work with them to help their agricultural extension service," said Mark Cochran, vice president for agriculture at the UA System.

Among other things, the Dale Bumpers College of

Agricultural, Food and Life Sciences plans to develop a college curriculum for a vocational-agriculture high school run by the Panama Ministry, Cochran said.

In 1951, the Fayetteville land-grant institution was the first in the nation to as-

semble an agricultural foreign mission. Between 1951 and 1956, 24 people from the school traveled to Panama to help establish a similar teaching, research and extension program there.

Cochran said a large number of Arkansas alumni in

Panama — including the nation's president Ricardo Martinelli — have played key roles leading up to the signing ceremony.

Martinelli graduated with a bachelor of business administration degree in 1973.

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