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## **Bear cubs saved from starvation by loggers, and Tribal and state employees**

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**By Dean Rhodes**

*Smoke Signals editor*

Three black bear cubs soon will be on their way to a Texas zoo after being saved from almost certain starvation by loggers and state and Grand Ronde Tribal employees.

Grand Ronde Fish and Wildlife Program Manager Kelly Dirksen said he was contacted by Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife wildlife biologist Don Vandebergh, who is based out of Portland, about a Stimson Logging Co. logging operation occurring immediately south of Tribal lands in western Yamhill County.

The falling crew from subcontractor Cross and Crown Inc. accidentally came upon a bear den in a hollowed-out log on Tuesday, Feb. 18, that was occupied by a sow and her cubs.

“They had no indication earlier that a den was in the area,” Dirksen said. “They looked inside the large hollowed-out log and a set of eyes was looking out.”

The fallers left the area and called Vandebergh, who contacted Dirksen to see if Grand Ronde Natural Resources Department staff could help determine the status of the compromised den. Everyone feared that the nearby logging operations spooked mother bear into abandoning her cubs.

Dirksen set up three trail cameras to determine whether mother bear was returning to her cubs, as well as try to determine the condition of the cubs.

“One was right at the opening and the two others were at angles that captured the opening of the log,” Dirksen said.

On Wednesday morning, the video footage showed that momma bear returned at about 5 a.m. and left 80 minutes later.

“She should be with them all night,” Dirksen said. “Hibernating, providing food and warmth to the cubs.”

The cubs, which were probably born in January, had their eyes open, were fully covered in fur and were tiny, Dirksen said.

“We were concerned they were not going to make it,” Dirksen said. “We told Don that we know the end of this story. There was cutting all around here. Bears don’t have a backup plan. I would question if she had another place to take her cubs even if she returned.”

But Vandebergh convinced Dirksen into giving momma bear one more night to return to her cubs.

On Thursday morning, Dirksen, Grand Ronde Tribal biologist Nate Breece, Oregon State Police Senior Trooper Adam Turnbo and members of the falling crew returned to the den. After checking the footage from Wednesday night, which did not show a return visit from mother bear, Dirksen said it was time to save the cubs, who were crying.

“The writing was on the wall,” Dirksen said. “There was no reason she was going to come back.”

Dirksen and Breece climbed into the log, passing the three cubs – two females and one male -- up as if putting out a fire in a bucket brigade, and members of the falling crew tucked the cubs into their jackets, keeping them warm until they reached Turnbo’s truck. Turnbo, meanwhile, stood guard just in case mother bear was nearby or returned.

“Those guys put a lot into trying to protect those cubs,” Dirksen said. “Kirk Luoto and his crew probably did more than most to save these guys.”

The cubs were placed in a makeshift cardboard nest created by Natural Resources Department staff members. The nest included a used fire crew sleeping bag to keep the cubs warm and comfortable.

Turnbo drove the cubs to ODFW’s Corvallis-area wildlife health lab, where they were temporarily cared for by veterinary staff, lab biologists and a fourth-year veterinary student from the University of Minnesota, said Wildlife Communications Coordinator Michelle Dennehy.

The bear cubs were then moved to the Oregon Zoo on Friday, Feb. 21. “The zoo can offer the continuous care the cubs need,” she said.

Oregon Zoo Media and Public Relations Officer Hova Najarian said the cubs will be picked up by Austin Zoo & Animal Sanctuary employees and driven to their new home.

Patti Clark, executive director of the Austin Zoo, said her facility has always been a rescue facility and is home to mostly very young and older animals. The bears will occupy an enclosure space that is now empty after the recent deaths of two cougars from old age. It includes a pool and inside dens.

Clark said Austin Zoo employees have been at the Oregon Zoo since Sunday, Feb. 23, assisting with the care and feeding of the bears.

Dirksen, who has more than 20 years experience with timber sales in the Grand Ronde area, said this is the first time that he remembers bear cubs being orphaned by logging operations, but the situation occurs annually for wildlife officials.

“ODFW deals with orphaned bears every year and typically we place bear cubs two to four times a year,” Dennehy said. “Cubs can be orphaned for a variety of reasons, such as mother is killed ... hit by a car or killed by a hunter although hunting regulations prohibit killing sows with cubs. Sometimes we see people picking up and taking home young bears or other animals who they wrongly believe to be orphaned.”

Dennehy said it is uncommon for the situation to occur with logging involved. “But it does occasionally,” she added.

The Oregon Zoo also is currently nursing three orphaned cougar cubs. The zoo’s keepers have cared for the trio since early January, when an eastern Oregon hunter killed their mother.

The cougar cubs will eventually be sent to the North Carolina Zoo in Asheboro, N.C.

“ODFW’s staff worked to get the cougar kittens to the Oregon Zoo and final placement in North Carolina,” Dennehy said.

Dirksen said the response to the orphaned bear cubs was exemplary by all participants. He complimented the logging crew, which stopped working once they realized they had happened upon an occupied bear den and called it in promptly to state wildlife officials.

He said the incident is a good example of state-Tribal cooperation on the ground, from Tribal staff assisting understaffed Fish and Wildlife Department employees to working with Oregon State Police for transportation.

“We all know what a softie Kelly Dirksen is where baby animals are concerned, but it must have been quite a sight to see those tree fallers being so careful of those little cubs,” said Grand Ronde Public Affairs Director Siobhan Taylor.

“It speaks to the conservation awareness of Stimson and their employees, as well as the intergovernmental cooperation between the state Department of Fish and Wildlife, State Police and the Grand Ronde Tribe. All of them worked together to properly observe the situation and save the cubs.”