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Jeff Merwin

Deschutes County has selected **Jeff Merwin** to serve as its new Solid Waste director, following a nationwide recruitment. Merwin replaces current director Tim Brownell, who will retire March 21.

Merwin has served as compliance and infrastructure manager at Deschutes County SolidWaste since April 2023. During that time, he played a key role in the construction of the new Negus Transfer Station in Redmond. He also helped lead work on the Knott Landfill renewable natural gas project and the county's landfill siting project.

Before joining Deschutes County, Merwin served as the Crook County landfill manager for five years.

Merwin earned a bachelor's degree in public health from Oregon State University. He also completed additional graduate work in environmental health and occupational safety.

As Solid Waste director, Merwin will oversee waste disposal and recycling operations at Knott Landfill and the rural transfer stations in Deschutes County, including the Negus Transfer Station in Redmond, the Northwest Transfer Station near Sisters, the Southwest Transfer Station between Sunriver and La Pine, and the Alfalfa Transfer Station near Alfalfa.



Nathanael Werner

Nathanael Werner, AIA, NCARB, has joined **SAJ Architecture** as a project architect. A senior-level architect licensed in Oregon and Washington, Werner has nearly 20 years of K-12 school, commercial, housing and hospitality experience. He is currently working on the Irrigon Junior/Senior High School and supporting SAJ's multifamily housing team. An active community member, Werner is currently enrolled in Leadership Bend and is an Architects in Schools volunteer.



Krista Appleby

Deschutes County has hired **Krista Appleby** as the county's new building official. She started in her new role on March 10.

As building official, Appleby will help protect public safety by making sure work in the county and the cities of La Pine and Sisters meets Oregon statewide building codes. Her day-to-day work will include overseeing plan reviews, permitting and inspections for a variety of construction projects, from home remodels to new commercial construction.

Appleby has worked in the Building Safety Division of the County's Community Development Department since April 2017. She served as a fire and life safety commercial plans examiner, a lead plans examiner and most recently as the assistant building official.

Appleby is a licensed architect in Oregon and Washington. Before joining Deschutes County, she worked on a variety of building projects at architectural firms in Montana, Oregon and Washington. She has a bachelor of architecture from Montana State University in Bozeman, Montana, and is the current board president of the Oregon Building Officials Association.

Economic Development for Central Oregon (EDCO) announces the hiring of **Wendy Morgan** as its new Venture Catalyst director, a key role that leads the organization's Start initiative and advances entrepreneurship as a driver of economic growth across the region.

In this role, Morgan will focus on building and strengthening Central Oregon's entrepreneurial ecosystem, helping scalable startups succeed at a higher rate and contributing to long-term job creation. She will work directly with early-stage companies to prepare them for debt and equity funding, provide pitch coaching and strategic guidance, and connect founders with the professional expertise and resources needed to grow.

Morgan will also play a central role in EDCO's signature startup programs and events, including Central Oregon PubTalks and the Bend Venture Conference.

Her responsibilities include supporting company recruitment, coaching presenting founders, facilitating due diligence processes, and working closely with fund managers and partners to ensure strong outcomes for both investors and participating companies.

She offers a unique blend of innovation leadership and commercialization expertise. She has dedicated her career to helping early-stage companies gain traction through customer discovery, go-to-market strategy and investor readiness. Most recently, she served as Innovation Impact Catalyst Manager at Oregon State University's Advantage Accelerator, where she mentored a portfolio of startups and worked to increase the number of research-based ventures entering the market. Her work strengthened connections between founders, industry partners and funding opportunities.

Morgan is also the founder of a venture-backed immersive training company, where she secured funding through federal grants, accelerators and private investment. She has collaborated with organizations such as Cedars-Sinai and the National Science Foundation to support innovation and commercialization efforts. As a certified NSF I-Corps instructor and experienced mentor, she is known for her practical approach to helping founders validate ideas and build scalable businesses. Her background spans health tech, edtech and workforce development, with a focus on impactful, market-ready solutions. Based in Central Oregon, she is deeply connected to the regional startup ecosystem and is passionate about helping entrepreneurs grow and succeed.

Les Schwab Tire Centers (Les Schwab) recently announced the appointment of **Tom Nolan** as chief executive officer and chairman of the board, effective April 7, 2026. Nolan, an experienced executive and current member of the Les Schwab Board of Directors, will succeed Mike Broberg, who is stepping down after nine years with the company, including the last three as CEO. Broberg will remain in his role through early April to support a smooth transition. Nolan has been a member of the Les Schwab Board of Directors since September 2025.

Nolan brings more than two decades of consumer and retail leadership experience across brand-driven, customer-centric businesses. Most recently, he served as Chief Executive Officer of Kendra Scott, a leading jewelry and lifestyle brand. While there, Nolan led the expansion of the company's retail business to more than 165 stores, drove significant e-commerce and wholesale growth, and repositioned the brand around experiential retail, community engagement and philanthropy. Earlier in his career, he held senior leadership roles at Ralph Lauren and Condé Nast, building deep experience at the intersection of brand, operations and consumer engagement.

Economic Development for Central Oregon (EDCO) has received a \$50,000 grant from the Meta Data Center Community Action Grants Program – Prineville Data Center to support Crook & Jefferson Innovate, a project to strengthen rural entrepreneurship and expand economic opportunities in Central Oregon.

EDCO's Crook & Jefferson Innovate project will assess the entrepreneurial ecosystem in both counties by identifying active and emerging entrepreneurs, evaluating barriers related to digital access and business support, and mapping existing resources. The effort will highlight gaps and recommend targeted solutions to strengthen the region's entrepreneurial infrastructure.

The project will directly engage entrepreneurs and partners to gather input on challenges and support needs. Advisory committees will guide outreach and validate findings, resulting in county reports with actionable recommendations.

Rural communities often face unique challenges, including limited broadband infrastructure, fragmented business support services and barriers for historically underrepresented founders. By identifying gaps and opportunities in the entrepreneurial ecosystem, EDCO aims to create a roadmap to strengthen entrepreneurship and expand economic opportunity for the region's approximately 51,000 residents across both counties.

The initiative also aligns with EDCO's broader efforts to support innovation and entrepreneurship across the region, including through the Central Oregon Innovation Hub, a regional effort to expand resources, mentorship and capital access for innovative and high-growth, traded-sector startups.

EDCO was one of several organizations selected to receive funding through the 2026 Meta Data Center Community Action Grants Program – Prineville Data Center. Through the program, Meta funds projects that put technology to use for community benefit by addressing critical needs, helping people build strong and sustainable communities, and improving local STEAM (science, technology, engineering, arts and mathematics) education.

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Travel Oregon Receives Travel + Leisure Global Vision Award for Pioneering Accessibility Initiative

by GRACE BRIGGS

The Oregon Tourism Commission, dba Travel Oregon, has been named a recipient of the 2026 *Travel + Leisure* Global Vision Award, one of the travel industry's most prestigious honors recognizing organizations dedicated to the future of sustainable travel. The award recognizes Travel Oregon's groundbreaking work to make Oregon the first state in the nation to earn "Accessibility Verified" status, ensuring travelers with disabilities can explore the state with confidence. Travel Oregon will be featured among this year's 24 global honorees in the April 2026 issue of *Travel + Leisure*. A full list of award winners is available here.

Every year, *Travel + Leisure* presents its Global Vision Awards, recognizing individuals, products, destinations and organizations pioneering sustainable and inclusive travel. These honorees are focused on the future of travel, dedicated to ensuring the next generation can continue to explore the world without damaging it along the way. "What unites all these luminaries is a mission to lessen the negative impacts of travel while boosting the many benefits that seeing the world can bring to both individuals and the communities they visit," said *Travel + Leisure* news editor, Paul Brady.

Travel Oregon was recognized for its statewide leadership in rethinking how destinations serve a broader range of travelers, setting a model for how tourism can evolve to be more inclusive while supporting the long-term success of local communities.

Travel Oregon earned this recognition through its partnership with Wheel the World (WTW), which assessed more than 750 hotels, restaurants and tourism businesses in 43 communities across all seven of Oregon's tourism regions—evaluating mobility, visual, hearing and cognitive features so travelers with disabilities have the tools to plan trips tailored to their needs.

"Being recognized by *Travel + Leisure* with a Global Vision Award is a tremendous



MAURITANIA | PHOTOS COURTESY OF TRAVEL OREGON

honor, and a reflection of Oregon's deep and ongoing commitment to welcoming all travelers—a commitment we consider both a moral and economic obligation," said Kevin Wright, VP of Brand Stewardship at Travel Oregon. "Our Accessibility Verified designation opens the door to new visitors, offers deeper connections to Oregon's people and places, and builds upon a statewide tourism landscape where inclusion is meaningful and central to the visitor experience."

Unlike programs based on self-reporting or ADA compliance, WTW's Accessibility Verified program uses a structured, on-site evaluation process backed by physical measurements across multiple dimensions of accessibility, providing the detailed and reliable information that travelers with disabilities need when planning a trip. Verified listings are available at traveloregon.com and wheeltheworld.com.

Learn more about the Accessibility Verified designation at traveloregon.com/accessible-travel.

About Travel Oregon:

The Oregon Tourism Commission, dba Travel Oregon, is a semi-independent state agency whose mission is to inspire travel that uplifts Oregon communities. Collaborating with stakeholders to align as stewards of Oregon, we work to optimize economic opportunity, advance equity and respect the ecosystems, cultures and places that make Oregon... Oregon. Travel Oregon aims to improve Oregonians' quality of life by strengthening the economic impacts of the state's \$14.2 billion tourism industry, which employs more than 130,000 Oregonians.

traveloregon.com



EarthCruiser Expands Production of Proven MOD Composite Camper Platform

provided by EARTHCRUISER

EarthCruiser is expanding production of its MOD composite camper platform, applying nearly two decades of expedition vehicle engineering to scale the design through a distributed builder network.

The move reflects a broader shift underway in the recreational vehicle industry. As inventory rises and buyers increasingly scrutinize build quality and long-term durability, manufacturers are being pushed to rethink how vehicles are designed and produced.

Founded by Lance Gillies and Michelle Boltz, EarthCruiser grew out of the founders' own experience traveling in remote regions where vehicle reliability is critical.

The company developed its first fully composite expedition vehicle in 2008, using structural concepts designed for extended travel in remote environments. That engineering approach predates the recent surge of interest in "overlanding," a segment that has increasingly become a focus for the broader RV industry.

In 2018, Gillies and Boltz entered their own vehicle in the Budapest-Bamako rally, a GPS endurance event running from Europe to West Africa along terrain that loosely follows the historic Paris-Dakar route.

The rally covers thousands of kilometres of rough roads, desert terrain, and remote travel where reliability is essential.

Gillies drove while Boltz served as co-driver and navigator. "Engineering decisions are easy to make in a workshop," said Gillies. "The real test happens thousands of kilometres from the nearest support."

The vehicle used in the rally was not a prototype. It was a standard EarthCruiser built using the same composite structural philosophy first developed by Gillies and Boltz more than a decade earlier.

That same vehicle remains in service today. "We still use that truck regularly," Gillies said. "Same structure, same philosophy. It continues to do exactly what it was built to do."

Over the past two decades EarthCruiser has produced hundreds of expedition vehicles and composite camper structures using variations of the same design approach. The company is now applying that experience to a broader range of products, including the MOD composite camper platform.

Unlike traditional RV construction methods that rely on multiple panels, fasteners and seal joints, the MOD camper uses a one-piece composite structure designed to reduce potential failure points while lowering overall weight.

EarthCruiser's current production model focuses on engineering and structural



MAURITANIA | PHOTO COURTESY OF EARTHCRUISER

composite production while experienced builder partners complete final vehicle builds closer to customers.

The distributed approach allows EarthCruiser to scale production efficiently while maintaining a focus on structural design and engineering.

"We've spent years building vehicles intended to operate far from help," Gillies said. "Now we're applying that experience to simpler, lighter products that more people can use."

EarthCruiser plans to continue expanding its composite camper platforms and builder network over the coming year.

earthcruiser.com

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