

Personnel mentioned in this report

McDonald County Sheriff's Office ("MCSO") Administration

Robert M. Evenson, Sheriff of McDonald County and chief executive of MCSO

Captain Christopher Allison, commanding the Patrol Division, MCSO

MCSO Patrol Day Shift 1

Sergeant Rebecca Ernest, supervisor of day shift 1 and assistant patrol commander.

Deputy Travis Sheppard, patrol deputy assigned to day shift 1.

MCSO Race Detail

Corporal Kenen L. Martinez, supervisor of night shift 1.

Deputy Eric Bennett, patrol deputy assigned to night shift 2

McDonald County Emergency Management ("MCEMA")

Director Gregg Sweeten ¹

Emergency Manager (Operations) Zachary Payton ²

Freeman Ambulance Service-McDonald County ("FAS")

Michael Ross, RN, BSN, EMT-P, Director of Freeman Ambulance Service

Justin Jarvis, an emergency medical technician with FAS

Pineville Police Department

Officer Daniel Hudson, patrol officer

Officer Steve Hollis, reserve/part time patrol officer

Officer Ryan Drake, reserve patrol officer ³

Officer Justin Miller, patrol officer

Officer Qwill Tyree, patrol officer

Stella Rural Fire Protection District

Chief of Department Kurt Williams

Washburn Fire Department

Firefighter / E.M.T.-B Sea Sattler

White Rock Fire Protection District

Chief of Department Jason Bowman

1 Sweeten also is the elected Mayor of Pineville and is active on the Pineville Fire Protection District ("PVFPD")

2 Payton is also a Captain on the PVFPD and an EMT-B with FAS

3 Drake is the Fire Chief of the PVFPD and a paramedic with FAS

Background on The Big Sugar Classic

The Big Sugar Classic is a biking race composed of a twenty-five mile, a fifty mile, and a one hundred mile race. The race bills itself as a "world-class gravel race" that is held near the end of the cycling season.

While the twenty-five mile portion of the Big Sugar Classic does not come into Southwest Missouri, the fifty mile course and one hundred mile course run through and predominantly feature McDonald County, Missouri before exiting the County and State to return back into Benton County, Arkansas.

This Race owned by Life Time Fitness and presented by Mazda proclaimed on its website to be sold out with price per ticket. It is believed from the

Twenty-five mile: \$100

Fifty Mile: \$150

One Hundred Mile: \$190

Reviewing the results, 93 men and 48 women entered the 100 mile elite race. Another 720 entered the Big Sugar 100 Mile Race, and 758 entries into the 50 Mile Race for a grand total of 1,619 cyclists on McDonald County roads on October 19th, 2024.

The athlete's guide to the Big Sugar Classic notes "the majority of the course will be on gravel and dirt roads. Some of these roads receive little to no maintenance throughout the year and can be quite primitive in nature. There are also many blind corners while traversing the course....Riders are therefore encourage to prepare their bikes, their bodies, and their minds to be ready for any and all possible conditions".

Background on McDonald County, Missouri

McDonald County, Missouri, ("The County") nestled in the extreme southwest corner of Missouri, is the Missouri border with both the States of Arkansas and Oklahoma. McDonald County, with a population of 23,000 people, population wise is significantly smaller than Benton County, Arkansas 319,000 people or even the Benton County city of Bella Vista, which contains 30,000 people. For comparison purposes, 1 in 24 people in McDonald County on October 19th, 2024 was a bicyclist competing in the Big Sugar Classic.

The County's executive and legislative body, is a three member "county commission" fully empowered by Missouri State Statutes to conduct the business of the County and is composed of a Presiding Commissioner, a Eastern Commissioner and a Western Commissioner.

The County's law enforcement is partitioned into county / unincorporated areas jurisdiction and municipal jurisdiction. The McDonald County Sheriff's Office holds concurrent jurisdiction in the municipal areas along with the city police departments. For this report only the McDonald County Sheriff's Office and the Pineville Police Department will be discussed as the bike race course led only through the Pineville City Limits and unincorporated areas of McDonald County, Missouri.

The County's Fire and Rescue is divided into municipal fire departments, traditional rural fire protection association boundaries and voter approved tax districts referred to as Fire Protection Districts. For this report, the City of Noel Fire Department, White Rock Fire Protection District, Pineville Fire Protection District, Stella Rural Fire Protection District, and the Washburn Fire Protection District will be discussed as the race course ran through each Fire Department's response areas at some point.

The County's Emergency Medical Services provider is Freeman Ambulance Service-McDonald County, which is a part of the non-profit Freeman Health Systems. While there is no other ambulance provider in the county, a fire responder system has been established in the county and Freeman Ambulance relies on mutual aid partnerships during heavy call volume. Due to the County's relative distance from major or community hospitals, there is a reliance on air ambulances for medical evacuation for major illness and injuries.

Lastly the County's road network is a mix of with Interstate 49, United States Highway 71, Missouri State Numbered Highways, Missouri State Supplemental Routes, County maintained roads, municipal and village maintained streets, and named private lanes in which private individuals themselves own, control, and maintain.

Events Prior to October 19th, 2024

On September 30th, 2024, McDonald County Sheriff Robert M. Evenson, after speaking with the McDonald County Commission obtained approval to offer a special over-time opportunity to deputies of the McDonald County Sheriff's Office, as the commission voted to approve two (2) deputies to work the Life Time® Big Sugar Classic. These two (2) deputies would be assigned especially to handle calls for service that originate from the bike race, including but not limited to "including traffic violations by bicycles and cars, parking complaints and littering complaints."

The email from Sheriff Evenson noted, "This group is historically not as bad as the ones that we had a few weeks ago, so other than our local people being upset, I don't anticipate too many problems."

The problems noted in the email were regarding a bike race that occurred on September 7th, 2024 from the Gran Fondo Hincapie Race. A group of concerned citizens met with the McDonald County Commission, Sheriff Evenson, McDonald County Emergency Management Director Gregg Sweeten, and Missouri State Highway Patrol Sergeant Chad Clark, who commands the State Highway Patrol in McDonald County. Among the concerns noted by the concerned citizens was Arkansas Law Enforcement blocked all but one lane of traffic and half of another lane causing vehicles to go off road, litter, scheduled rest stops caused delays to residents, distressed pets and farm animals, and public urination from the cyclists. The problems with the Hincapie race was widely noted on social media and anger among various residents was apparent.

Indeed, the County Commission held meetings with Sheriff Evenson, Lieutenant Xiong of the Benton County, AR Sheriff's Office, more bicycle race organizers, and more concerned citizens regarding the anger, frustration, and sense of lawlessness that came with the bicyclists throughout the month of September.

Against this backdrop, on October 9th, 2024, Sheriff Evenson again sent another email department-wide noting that "No one had signed up" for the paid over-time opportunity. Eventually, Corporal Kenen L. Martinez and Deputy Eric Bennett agreed to work the Big Sugar Classic Bike Race for the extra pay with several deputies citing cyclists' refusal to obey traffic regulations, the racers' poor attitudes, and local anger at the aforementioned behavior of the cyclists as their reasons for not wishing to volunteer for the rare over time opportunity.

Problems arise early

As Corporal K.L. Martinez and Deputy Bennett notify McDonald County 911 that they are on duty and tasked specifically for the bike race both are informed by Sheriff Evenson that he had made it very clear to the organizers of the Big Sugar Classic that no roads were going to be blocked. Indeed Sergeant Rebecca Ernest, commanding the day shift on October 19th, 2024 as well as the Patrol Division's assistant commander, had informed Corporal Martinez and Deputy Bennett over the two-way radio on the "County Private" channel that no roads were to be blocked.

However, as Deputy Bennett arrived in the area of Missouri Supplemental Route H and Goodin Hollow Road, he observed Pineville Police Officers Daniel Hudson, Steve Hollis, Ryan Drake, Justin Miller, and Qwill Tyree standing on the side of the road of Goodin Hollow Road and Missouri State Supplemental Route H. Deputy Bennett relayed the information to the assembled Pineville Police Officers and was told in reply by one of the assembled officers "I don't answer to Becky [Sergeant Ernest]."

Neither Corporal Martinez nor Deputy Bennett were unaware in the initial briefing that Pineville Police and Pineville Fire Protection District personnel would be participating in any form in the Big Sugar Classic.

Further, while Missouri Supplemental Route H at Goodin Hollow Road lies in the incorporated city limits of Pineville, Missouri, it is a Missouri Department of Transportation Lettered Highway which requires a Planned Event Application permit no less than two weeks prior to the event and no more than six months before the event. No permit request was ever filed or granted for the Big Sugar Classic according to Jennifer Williams, District Communication Manager for the Southwest District of MoDOT.

Further, no part of Goodin Hollow Road actually lies within the city limits of Pineville, Missouri, and is a county-maintained road in which officers of the Pineville Police Department lack jurisdiction to enforce the ordinances of the city of Pineville or the authority to close.

Race officials attempt to close traffic on Missouri West State Highway 90

As the initial racers began to approach Missouri State Highway 90 at the Goodin Hollow intersection, various race officials attempted to block the intersection to allow cyclists to travel the intersection and had to be told multiple times by Deputy Bennett that they lacked the authority to do this action as well as that cyclists were required to obey the traffic regulations of Missouri, including stopping at stop signs. Despite this, it appeared that race officials kept attempting to block traffic when it appeared Sheriff's Office personnel were busy or not noticing.

Pineville Police Block Traffic on Missouri Supplemental Route H

On his way to Big Sugar Creek Road, Corporal Martinez was actually prevented from turning onto Missouri Supplemental Route H Highway by Officer Justin Miller of the Pineville Police Department to permit race participants onto Missouri Supplemental Route H for several minutes.

Pineville Police Summoned to Urinating in Public

Around 1030 A.M. Pineville Police were notified of a call of a cyclist who was urinating in public near the low water bridge at Big Sugar Creek Road and East 8th Street in Pineville, however, the individual was not located.

Washburn Fire advises a need for traffic control / Other FPDs contacted

Around 1030 A.M. A member of the Washburn Fire Protection District inquires with McDonald County 911 if anyone is responding to Whistling Springs and Fletcher Ridge Road for traffic control via the "County Fire / East Fire" frequency. Neither Sheriff's Office deputies nor Emergency Management personnel were previously aware of Washburn Fire personnel's involvement in the race. Corporal Martinez contacts Emergency Manager Zachary Payton and inquires if anyone else is working the race. Stella Fire Chief Kurt Williams and White Rock Fire Chief Jason Bowman state neither Fire Protection District has personnel assigned to the race. Eventually, it is determined that Washburn Fire Protection Personnel should be the last of the previously unknown agencies with personnel assigned.

More complaints from Whistling Springs and Fletcher Ridge Road

At about the same time Sheriff Evenson notifies Corporal Martinez, that complaints are coming to him personally from the Fletcher Ridge Road area of traffic blockages from vehicles illegally parking and cyclists taking the entire width of the roadway. Corporal Martinez informs Sheriff Evenson he will start driving towards Whistling Springs. At about the same time, the owner of the Red Mule Barn Package Store calls Corporal Martinez and requests law enforcement assistance as the roads are impossible to traverse due to cyclists and illegally parked vehicles. Corporal Martinez is slowed by cyclists taking both sides of Big Sugar Creek Road, including two (2) motorbikes that are accompanying the racers, driving recklessly on Big Sugar Creek Road in an attempt to obtain video and photos of the racers.

Sheriff Evenson is blocked from traveling on Missouri Supplemental State W in Pineville.

Around 1050 A.M. Sheriff Evenson, in his personal vehicle, and is traveling on Missouri Supplemental Route W at the square in Pineville, is stopped by a race official who has erected a barricade on the Pineville Square. Sheriff Evenson demands the organizer remove the barricade and permit him to pass to which the organizer again refuses to allow him to pass. Sheriff Evenson identifies himself and the race official backs down and permits him to continue on his way. As is the case with Missouri Supplemental Route H at Goodin Holloway, despite being inside the city limits of Pineville, Missouri State Supplemental Route W is a state-lettered highway, maintained by the Missouri Department of Transportation and requires a permit issued by the Missouri Department of Transportation to close temporarily.

Multiple Accidents on Shiloh Road

At 1043, Freeman Ambulance Service and Stella Rural Fire Protection District personnel are notified of a bicycle wreck that has occurred at the intersection of Fairview Road and Penitentiary Bend. Stella Fire personnel who had no prior arrangements with race organizers, had instead apparatus and personnel at a benefit color run. Stella Fire Chief Kurt Williams responds in Stella Fire Engine 1 to Fairview Road along with Freeman Ambulance Service personnel. Corporal Martinez, at Water Fork Road and Missouri Supplemental Route E Highway, responds taking Shiloh Road to get to Fairview Road.

However, Corporal Martinez's response is delayed due to dozens of racers who refuse to yield the right of way and even are in his lane of traffic despite having emergency lights and siren activated. So brazen are the actions of various cyclists that tragedy is barely averted when one cyclist comes within five yards of hitting Corporal Martinez's patrol vehicle head-on despite slow driving on the rough road.

Another cyclist, again in Corporal Martinez's lane of traffic, loses control after pedaling too fast for the road and slides into another cyclist. Corporal Martinez's response to the initial accident is delayed when Corporal Martinez stops to check on the slide-off and receives a cursing and profane suggestions amidst "I'm fine".

Finally, at 1104 A.M. Corporal Martinez arrives at Shiloh Road, four-tenths of a mile from the Fairview Road, Shiloh Road, and Chase Ridge Road intersection with what he believes is the bike wreck that was called in, only to discover it was a second bike wreck from a male individual who lost control of the vehicle on the rough road and hit an embankment. At 1114 A.M. Corporal Martinez requests personnel from Stella Fire respond to assist in patient care but is informed no additional personnel are available. Emergency Manager (Operations) Zachary Payton offers to come and assist and the offer of assistance is accepted. A Registered Nurse who lives in the area drives up on the wreck and begins patient care.

While attending to the patient, a female cyclist traveling at a high rate of speed blows past screaming to "move the vehicle" [County patrol vehicle with emergency lights active]. Several others almost strike the patrol car head-on, parked, emergency lights active and clearly visible for fifty yards, and on the right half of the roadway.

Freeman Ambulance Service Director Michael Ross and EMT-B Justin Jarvis upon their arrival load the patient into the Ambulance and begin transport to a landing zone at the Stella Rural Fire Protection District Station in Longview to rendezvous with an incoming medical helicopter.

Third Wreck

As Freeman E.M.S. was loading up the patient from wreck "B", several cyclists began informing emergency services personnel of yet another wreck on Shiloh Road, one hundred yards to the North, involving a bike vs a rural mail carrier in his mail route vehicle.

Corporal Martinez, the Good Samaritan RN, and Emergency Manager Payton arrive on scene of the third wreck and it is determined that he is ambulatory and can be transported via private vehicle if needed. However, as with wreck "B" there are several near misses from errant cyclists nearly hitting vehicles and emergency service personnel. Both Payton and the R.N. treat the patient and Missouri State Highway Patrol Corporal Morris arrives to take the accident report.

Stella Rural Fire Department Personnel and Freeman Ambulance Service resources exhausted.

As with the third wreck, Stella Fire Protection District Personnel had no personnel available to respond due to prior commitments and emergency calls. Additionally, a medical call not related to the Big Sugar Classic was dispatched which due to both on-duty Freeman Ambulances being assigned to calls, necessitated a request for mutual aid from the Bella Vista Fire Department for an ambulance. Additionally, Deputy Travis Sheppard responds to assist Stella Fire with the landing zone, making one of the two regular shift deputies unavailable for calls.

Corporal Martinez attempts to determine the race's progress.

At 1239 Corporal Martinez requests Director Gregg Sweeten ascertain from race officials the progress of the race. Corporal Martinez is subsequently informed by Emergency Manager Payton that race officials can only monitor the last racers and had no information on how many have completed the race or where the majority of the racers currently are.

Corporal Martinez responds to assist Deputy Bennett.

Around 1250 P.M. Deputy Bennett inquires if Corporal Martinez is responding to the Whistling Springs area to assist him with traffic-related complaints. Corporal Martinez agrees to respond to assist. Corporal Martinez stops briefly to speak to Deputy Bennett about the vehicles illegally parked, in front of no-parking signs and informs Deputy Bennett he will have the race organizers announce that they have a short window to remove the vehicles or have them towed.

Fourth Bike Wreck

At 1251 P.M. Washburn Firefighter / E.M.T.-B Sea Sattler requests McDonald County 911 strike tones for an ambulance to respond to Whistling Springs for a neck injury as the result of a bike wreck. Corporal Martinez and Emergency Manager Payton both respond to assist Washburn Fire Personnel. After arriving on scene, the patient decides she wishes to go to the hospital by private vehicle and declines additional care.

Removal of Vehicles

After determining the patient was no longer in need of any additional care, Corporal Martinez spoke to a member of the Whistling Springs Brewing Company who made the announcement via public address system. Eventually, within the allotted time, all illegally parked vehicles depart the area, including one vehicle with a dog locked in the vehicle.

Indecent Exposure

While awaiting the removal of all illegally parked vehicles, a cyclist came up to twenty yards away from Corporal Martinez's patrol vehicle and ten yards away from Deputy Bennett's patrol vehicle and began urinating in public in which there also three (3) local citizens close by observing the behavior of the cyclists. The cyclist was checked for outstanding warrants and sternly warned future behavior in the future would result in arrest. This incident occurred near the checkpoint for the cyclists participating in the race.

Helicopter's Reckless Flying

Deputy Bennett was advised that one of the helicopters participating in the event was flying recklessly and so close to ground level that it frightened a herd of goats and sent them through a fence. Deputy Bennett is assigned to begin an initial investigation and Sheriff Evenson contacts the Federal Aviation Administration to begin a complaint.

Cyclists begin illegally directing traffic.

Deputy Bennett and Corporal Martinez were present at Whistling Springs when an unknown cyclist began stopping traffic at Whistling Springs and Fletcher Ridge Road. When asked what he was doing, the cyclist informed the deputies belligerently that he was waiting for his friends to catch up. The cyclist was informed he was to allow traffic to continue to pass unabated and he too was expected to follow the traffic laws. The cyclist was also informed he lacked any authority to stop, block, or detain traffic on a county road.

Corporal Martinez completed his detail at 1600 hours.

Deputy Bennett completed his detail at 1700 hours.

However, other complaints from citizens include but are not limited to; Illegally blocking or rerouting traffic including U.S. mail carriers, illegally parking vehicles, blocking county roads, and indecent exposure.

Critical Issues Surrounding the Big Sugar Classic Gravel Race

It is perhaps only by kind providence that tragedy was averted on October 19th, 2024. While four (4) accidents were reported, no fatalities were reported.

However.

It seems not by the design of the race organizers but rather by pure luck. Critical issues that were noted as follows

- A. The coordination and flow of information from race organizers to public safety officials was a critical failure.

Organizers of the Big Sugar Classic-Gravel began well-intentioned by meeting and discussing needs with the McDonald County Sheriff's Office and the County Commissioners, however, the flow of information apparently stopped sometime thereafter. The Sheriff, Chief Deputy, Patrol Sergeant, Corporal supervising the race detail, and Deputy assigned to the race detail were all unaware of the participation of the Pineville Police Department as well as their role in blocking off roadways. The Missouri Department of Transportation was also unaware of the race organizers' plans to do their own traffic control on a state-lettered highway.

Moreover, outside of Pineville Police and Fire officials, who were contacted the day before the race, it seems little if any contact was made with other agencies with responsibility for those areas the Race's course was in. Indeed, the Stella Rural Fire Protection District, where the majority of the serious incidents occurred, was not contacted at all prior to the start of the race. Neither was the White Rock Fire Protection District. Both agencies, hold responsibility for nearly half of the course route. Washburn Fire Protection district was, but their participation only became known when Washburn Fire Personnel requested traffic control assistance via "County Fire / Fire East" and not that they were in fact running the first aid station at the Whistling Springs Checkpoint.

Had race organizers been more diligent in providing information on what they required, what they had, and what they had in mind, it seems likely much of the major issues could have been avoided.

Additionally, the lack of a dedicated command post in McDonald County, where half the race was held, meant public safety officials were denied information that could have been crucial in a more serious incident. As noted, when asked where the vast majority of the participants actually were, only where the end of the line could be given with any accuracy.

B. Open hostility between the cyclists and the local community.

While the organizers themselves cannot be held responsible for 1,600 individual and unique participants, the outright open and hostile atmosphere between many of the cyclists and residents of McDonald County, have created conditions that make hosting this event again in the future generally unwanted. Residents being unable to travel down roads they pay taxes for, cyclists exposing themselves and urinating on private property, the elected Sheriff being unable to travel into Pineville on a state highway, emergency personnel almost being struck by dozens of racing cyclists while attending to an injured one, cyclists tying up a county's entire ambulance service and a fire protection district's entire available personnel, a helicopter flying so low it frightens livestock into fences and causing injury to animals, mail being delayed because race officials won't allow U.S. mail carriers to pass.

Many community members feel strongly and have voiced their opinion on social media and to their elected representatives that the race is unwanted, a serious depletion of available resources in a smaller rural county that has limited resources as it is and cyclists appear to feel just as strongly about the local community, with the author of his report own Aunt stating "All the nasty McDonald County rednecks making threats against cyclists."

The Big Sugar Classic advertises itself as a "ultra-endurance cycling challenge...the majority of the course being on gravel and dirt roads...and can be quite primitive in nature" as a alluring fact to the endurance cyclist enthusiast but to many of the individuals who reside on these roads which "receive little to no maintenance throughout the year" they prefer these roads not receive maintenance as to ward off traffic and outsiders.

C. Complete unfamiliarity with McDonald County

The organizers of the Big Sugar Classic appear to be unfamiliar with the resources, communities, terrain, and characteristics of McDonald County. While primitive roads makes for a seductive appeal to a gravel cyclist, in much of the remote area of McDonald County the course took cyclists through, any traumatic injury would be an hour transport or more by ground ambulance. Many of those same remote areas also have terrible cell phone reception. Residents have made adjustments to live there. It is harder for tourists and individuals unfamiliar with the area to do the same.

While all of this is a problem for the cyclists, it also is a problem for area residents as well, especially when their ambulances and first responders are unavailable working special events for organizers that have not made appropriate accommodations and/or assume that everything will be fine.

Perhaps one of the best examples of the organizers' unfamiliarity with McDonald County is on the Athlete's guide, under area hospitals, it lists both the Pineville Medical Clinic and OCH Noel Family Clinic, however, neither are open on Saturdays, of which October 19th 2024 fell on a Saturday.

While McDonald County is a tourist destination due to the Elk River and its many campgrounds and river outfitters, it is possible to plan and is planned during the summer tourist season to have additional personnel, apparatus, and plans in place during peak times. It is worth noting most of these campgrounds are near a major highway and are easily accessible to emergency vehicles.

The unfamiliarity with McDonald County can be cured with open and frank conversations with the various stakeholders in the community to ensure a safe, successful, and well planned event.

Conclusion

As aforementioned, no fatalities occurred during the Big Sugar Classic gravel bike race. As of the completion of this report, no participants are missing or been reported missing. The injuries sustained by those participants appear to be thankfully minor to moderate with no serious, life threatening injuries reported.

However, event organizers could and should consider the incidents that occurred at this event to better plan, organize, and prepare for any future events, especially any that occur within McDonald County, Missouri.

Respectfully submitted

Corporal Kenen L. Martinez

Deputy Sheriff #22 / Evening Shift Supervisor

McDonald County Sheriff's Office

Date