

Lewis County Prosecutor Says Halt on Death Penalty Sends 'Wrong Message'

By Stephanie Schendel sschendel@chronline.com | Posted: Wednesday, February 12, 2014 4:27 pm

Lewis County Prosecutor Jonathan Meyer said the governor's announcement of the moratorium on all death penalty cases in Washington was poorly timed and would not impact his decisions as prosecutor of whether or not to pursue capital punishment in the future.

Gov. Jay Inslee announced Tuesday that no death-row inmates will be executed while he is in office. His decision was an unexpected one as the governor had not previously highlighted capital punishment as an issue.

"I think that it certainly sends the wrong message," Meyer said Wednesday.

The decision of whether or not someone is sentenced to death is up to the judges, jurors and appellate courts — not the governor, Meyer said.

"To me, that is the entire checks and balances of the system," he said.

The decision of capital punishment should be considered on a case-by-case basis, the prosecutor said. It is not the governor's place to make a "blanket statement" on the issue, he said.

"He substituted his judgement for that of the prosecutors, judges and jurors who make the decisions," Meyer said.

Meyer is not alone. Other prosecutors have made similar remarks in the wake of Inslee's decision.

"You're not changing the law; you're postponing it for another day," King County Prosecuting Attorney Dan Satterberg told The Seattle Times Tuesday.

Overall, Inslee's decision came as a shock, Meyer said, not only to him, but to other prosecutors throughout the state. Meyer, like other prosecuting attorneys he has spoken to since Inslee's announcement, did not have a "heads up" regarding Inslee's moratorium and could not forewarn victims' families who might have been impacted by it ahead of time.

One of Meyer's first major decisions when he took off in 2010 was whether to pursue the death penalty for John A. Booth, who was later convicted of two counts of first-degree murder for the deaths of David "DJ" West Jr., 16, of Salkum, and Tony E. Williams, 50, of Mineral; one count of second-degree murder for the death of David West Sr., 52, of Salkum; one count of first-degree

attempted murder for the shooting of Denise R. Salts, now 52, of Randle, one count of first-degree extortion and one count of first-degree unlawful possession of a firearm.

Ultimately, Meyer decided against it because Booth was already facing life in prison due to the state's three-strike rule for violent offenders.

The second time the question of capital punishment arose followed the July 2012 arrest of Rick A. Riffe, the former Mossyrock man who was convicted last year of the 1985 murders of an elderly Ethel couple, Ed and Minnie Maurin.

Given Riffe's age and poor health, Meyer said at the time pursuing the death penalty would be "counterproductive."

Last June, however, Meyer told The Chronicle he'd "strongly consider" the death penalty for Raul and Cathy Sarinana, both formerly of Lewis County, who are currently on death row in California for the murder of their 11-year-old nephew.

Both were convicted by two separate trial juries in June and July 2006 for the death of their nephew, Ricky Morales, in Riverside, Calif. The couple is also accused of murdering Ricky's brother, Conrad Morales, less than six months prior in the Randle trailer where the couple formerly lived.

Since the couple was sentenced to death in California, Lewis County never filed charges against them for Conrad's murder. If California courts do not uphold the couples' convictions or sentence, the Lewis County Prosecutor's Office will file charges against them and the couple will be extradited to Washington, Meyer said.

The prosecutor also said that for offenders serving life sentences without the possibility of a death penalty, such as Booth, there is no disincentive to kill another person, like another inmate or a corrections officer.