

Wrong-way driver sentenced on DUI

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A man who drove 22 miles in the wrong direction while drunk last year on Interstate 15 must undergo alcohol counseling and be under state supervision for 15 years.

James M. Baldwin, 61, was sentenced Tuesday in Dillon district court to 15 years with the state Department of Corrections for felony drunken driving and bail jumping, with all the time suspended. Baldwin, who has had numerous drunken driving convictions in several states over more than three decades, was ordered into the WATCh program, an intensive alcohol treatment program at Montana State Hospital at Warm Springs.

"It's pretty clear that your problem is alcohol," Judge Loren Tucker said to Baldwin, who was wearing a striped jail suit and shackles around his ankles.

Baldwin pleaded guilty in July to felony drunken driving and bail jumping in Beaverhead County as part of a plea agreement with county attorney Jed Fitch. He also pled guilty to drunken driving in Butte-Silver Bow for an arrest two weeks prior to the Beaverhead County incident.

In April 2009, Baldwin, traveling southbound in the northbound lane of Interstate 15, was pulled over by a sheriff's deputy. Baldwin had entered the freeway in Divide late one night and drove past several oncoming vehicles before officers brought him to a stop.

After his arraignment, Baldwin skipped bail and fled to New Mexico, where he has a trailer. He was brought back to Montana by the bail bondsman after prosecutors moved to revoke his bond.

Fitch recommended a 13-month DOC commitment that includes the alcohol counseling, as well as the five-year suspended sentence for the drunken driving and 10 years for bail jumping, and \$2,250 in fines and court fees. The sentence will be served concurrently with a similar sentence in Butte-Silver Bow for the drunken driving there.

Fitch said Baldwin over the past decades has been convicted of drunken driving in Montana, as well as Texas and Nevada. He said the WATCh program is the last hope of helping him kick his drinking problem.

Tucker said while Baldwin was not intending to harm someone while driving, it was incredibly reckless.

"I don't think you're an evil man, but it's important to recognize the horrible dangers that you've caused people," he said.

Baldwin said he was going through a tough time last year but said he has struggled with alcohol for a long time. He said he was looking forward to getting treatment for his drinking.

"I've been drinking most of my adult life and I'd like to try to turn it around," he said.