

Forecaster retires after 39 years with weather service

By Kathy Aney
East Oregonian

PENDLETON (AP) — Veteran weather forecaster Dennis Hull predicts sunny days ahead.

The prediction, defying the gray inversion clearly in view outside our windows, is a metaphor for his retirement that began Thursday. Hull retired after 39 years with the National Weather Service, almost 20 of them in Pendleton.

Much has changed over the decades. On Tuesday, January 2, Hull took a lingering look around the center's NASA-esque control room. Several fellow forecasters sat in the cool glow of three or four computer monitors apiece, scrutinizing weather data in a variety of forms, examining maps that overlaid one another, zooming in and out and gazing at looping satellite images.

A low-tech pair of binoculars sat on a window sill. Outside was a panoramic view of the Blue Mountains. Once in a while, Hull said, someone will get up from their desk and peer through the binoculars at lightning or gathering clouds or a bluebird sky. Inevitably, a coworker will jokingly yell,

"That's cheating."

This data-rich environment contrasts Hull's early days on the job in Montana, Mississippi, Utah and Kansas.

"When I first started, paper maps (18 inches by two feet) came out of a fax machine," Hull said. "We posted them on the wall and stood back."

Meteorologists typed their forecasts onto punch tape and sent them out on the teletype.

Technology steadily evolved during Hull's career. The advent of Doppler radar helped forecasters more closely pinpoint storm activity by calculating motion and detecting the intensity of precipitation. A deadly tornado that swept into Mississippi when he worked as a forecaster there still haunts him, because Doppler weather radar would likely have given people time to take precautions.

"The storm killed a dozen people about two miles from where I lived," Hull recalled. "It was rocking and rolling. We drove around later and saw a refrigerator up in a tree. If we'd had Doppler radar sooner, we could have saved some people."

These days, though the weather is more severe, the number of weather-related

fatalities has dropped, he said.

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Hull, who grew up on a Montana farm, got interested in weather during his boyhood because it played such a big role in farming. He remembers giving daily weather briefings to his high school French teacher. In college, he first studied electrical engineering, but switched to meteorology after being fascinated by an intro-to-meteorology class.

Hull arrived at Pendleton in 1998. Most recently, Hull served as warning coordinator meteorologist, interacting with storm spotters, the media, emergency management officials and others. He also made presentations at local schools and outdoor schools. Because of his outreach, people often

recognize him on the street and engage him about the weather.

Hull said that weather forecasting, despite the avalanche of data, remains a bit of an art. There is beautiful drama and unpredictability in the weather, Hull said. As an example he compared data transmitted from a weather station located at the Pendleton NWS headquarters to information generated from another station half a mile away on a runway at the Eastern Oregon Regional Airport. On some days, cool air pools on the runway while the air is warmer only half a mile away at the NWS office.

"There may be a five-degree difference in half a mile," Hull said, "and we're making a forecast for thousands of square miles."

Mother Nature's power never fails to awe Hull. When stationed in Salt Lake City in the late 1980s, he watched air roll off the desert and pick up moisture as it blew across the lake.

"Then, bang, it was a full-blown storm when it hit the mountains," he said.

Hull said he will miss camaraderie and collaboration with his colleagues and public partners, but welcomes

the next chapter. He plans to continue his role as a part-time school bus driver for the Mid-Columbia Bus Company. In the summertime, he aims to get outdoors for a full slate of gardening, hiking and biking, and more time with his wife, Mary.

Hull will continue to pay attention to the weather because it is interesting. He doesn't have a favorite weather condition, though he admitted disliking fog and dust storms. The meteorologist doesn't believe in wasting time complaining about the weather.

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"It is what it is," he said.
Editor's note: Dennis Hull has provided weather and climate summaries for Sisters to The Nugget for many years. We wish him well in his retirement.

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