

Establishments plod on amid shutdowns

■ Regional eateries lay off staff, aim to bring them back

By Phil Wright and Bill Bradshaw
EO Media Group

LA GRANDE — Some restaurants in La Grande began shutting down Tuesday in the wake of the latest order from Gov. Kate Brown to fight the spread of the novel coronavirus. Ron Bruce, owner of Bud Jackson's Eatery & Taps, said this is a rough situation.

"I had to lay everybody off," he said.

Depending on the day, Bud Jackson's had between 22 and 24 employees, Bruce said, and roughly 80% worked 40 or more hours a week.

"They want to come back," he said.

Bruce bought the place in November 2019 and business was fine until the COVID-19 outbreak.

"We were having a pretty good deal going," he said. "Changing the menu and making quality food and raising the quality here."

Brown on March 16 ordered the ban on dining in. Monday she issued harsher restrictions, requiring Oregonians to stay home unless necessary.

Most restaurants that decided to remain open are doing so with limited staffs and serving takeout or drive-through orders. Depending on the restaurant, hours, the method of ordering, the exact service and method of payment may vary.

Even takeout, Bruce said, is not going well, and other La Grande restaurant owners he spoke with Tuesday said they were shutting the doors for now.

Wallowa County restaurants also are trying to continue feeding their



Photo by Bill Bradshaw/EO Media Group

Cindy Ellis at Heavenly's Hamburger in Enterprise takes an order from Ray Zanutta of Wallowa on Monday at the takeout window. Heavenly's is one restaurant that, although it does not allow on-site consumption, still sells takeout.

customers.

Eva Barnes, owner of Sugar Time Bakery, Enterprise, had allowed people to come in to place their orders but now restricts that to call-in orders with curbside service. But she hasn't lost her sense of humor in it all. Barnes' most recent offering at the bakery is a large sugar cookie decorated with, "Stay Happy, Stay Healthy."

She said numerous businesses, the local hospital and medical professionals are counting on her establishment for breakfast and lunch. She said they seem to appreciate her efforts.

"It's almost like it adds a little normalcy to life, they say," Barnes said.

She noted she's had to lay off all but her assis-

tant manager, but as soon as circumstances return to normal, she plans to rehire.

"As soon as I can reopen, that'll definitely be my plan," she said.

Cindy Ellis, owner of Heavenly's Hamburgers, Enterprise, said she, too, has had to limit service largely to the takeout window. She hasn't yet had to lay anyone off, but she's "working toward that now." She said she's likely going to have to cut hours, though she plans to keep everyone working at least part time.

"They're all going to get something," she said. "The few employees I have, I need to keep them."

But the future for the Enterprise restaurant remains in question.

"If I don't have any cus-

tomers, I don't have any money" to pay employees, Ellis said.

Teresa Sajonia, owner of Ember's Brewhouse in Joseph, said her establishment is maintaining normal hours while serving takeout and curbside. Customers can pay by credit or debit card.

"We're trying to keep everybody fed the best we can," Sajonia said.

She said she's had to lay off most of her staff — nine people — and only has two part-timers working during rush periods.

But when the crisis is declared at an end, "every one of them will be coming back," she said.

Sajonia said she's trying to strike a balance between continuing service

and stopping the possible spread of disease.

"We want to make this as positive as possible," she said. "We want to protect ourselves, but also keep open and serve the community the best way we know how."

Heavenly's Ellis has a similar philosophy.

"I act as though I have coronavirus so I don't spread it," she said. "I just keep my distance."

Bruce over at Bud Jackson's said he is sticking it out. Each day he is down at the establishment painting and cleaning, he said, and everything from door knobs to napkins is sanitized.

The place is clean and ready for business, he said, just as soon as the governor gives the green light.

■ OLCC rule change allows curbside alcohol pickup

By Michael Kohn
EO Media Group

SALEM — The Oregon Liquor Control Commission approved emergency rules that will allow bars and restaurants to make curbside deliveries of alcoholic beverages.

In addition to curbside delivery, the commission also approved an emergency rule that will allow same-day delivery of alcoholic beverages until 2:30 a.m. The commission put the rules in place at a monthly meeting on Thursday, according to a press release.

The emergency measures were permitted by the OLCC commissioners as a way to ease economic hardship faced by the hospitality industry, which is struggling amid rules put in place by Gov. Kate Brown to stop the spread of the highly contagious coronavirus that causes the disease known as COVID-19.

"We are giving these tools to businesses to help them survive in these challenging times," said Matt Van Sickle, public information officer for the OLCC.

Last week, Brown ordered bars and restaurants to conduct takeout or delivery-only options to encourage social distancing and prevent people from mingling in public places.

The rules affect businesses that already have an off-premise license, which is a license that allows patrons to purchase alcohol and then take it somewhere else for consumption. The term curbside refers to a location 100 feet away from the place of business. Previously, delivery to a curbside location was not permitted.

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H-2A labor concerns continue across U.S.

■ U.S. ag relies on more than a quarter-million H-2A workers each year

By Carol Ryan Dumas
EO Media Group

U.S. farmers who rely on workers from Mexico are growing anxious over the coronavirus' impact on border crossings after the U.S. Embassy in Mexico last week suspended processing of routine visas.

The U.S. State Department and USDA quickly announced they would prioritize the processing of visas for returning H-2A workers from Mexico. But farmers worry if that will be enough or if there will be further obstacles to incoming workers at a critical time for pruning, planting and harvesting of winter crops.

South Carolina peach farmer Chalmers Carr has been relying on foreign workers for 22 years. Last year, the number of those workers peaked at 817, he said during a conference call hosted by American Farm Bureau Federation.

"The importance of the H-2A worker to our farm is very important. And it is to our industry in the Southeast ... as every commercial peach operator is an H-2A user," he said.

He currently has 390

H-2A workers on his farm with 68 en route from the Mexico border. Those workers account for only 55% of his needs.

"This is a critical time of year where crops are going into the ground," he said.

In addition to peaches, he also grows bell peppers and broccoli, he said.

"So if these crops are not planted in a timely manner, then it's going to have a ripple effect all the way through the supply chain," he said.

His peach harvest starts around May 10 and continues through the first of September, and it's the same for every peach grower in Georgia and South Carolina.

If anything were to happen with the border closing between now and May 19, he would have to make decisions on walking away from crops in the field that are either planted or permanent, he said.

Farmers in the southwest corner of Arizona supply the vast majority of the U.S. and Canada with winter vegetables such as lettuce, broccoli and cauliflower, John Boelts, a produce farmer in the area, said.

Many vegetable crops grown across the country have a very short window for harvest. Crops such as iceberg or romaine lettuce only have a four to five day

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Hines Meat Co. to expand to Pendleton

By Brett Kane
EO Media Group

PENDLETON — On Martin Luther King Jr. Day last year, the Pendleton city staff got together to see what they could do to improve the city's downtown area.

One of the proposals that came out of the discussion was to bring in a big-game butcher, something the city has seen come and go through the years. The idea was a popular one among staff and it is finally taking shape.

Pendleton's Urban Renewal Program granted La Grande-based Hines Meat Co. a \$100,000 loan last week to open a location in Pendleton.

"We wanted to attract a big-game butcher," said Pendleton City Manager and Urban Renewal Program Executive Director Robb Corbett. "We've lost a couple of wild game kill shop-type businesses and we reached out to Hines Meat. They had an interest in expanding to Pendleton."

Jake and Paige Hines, owners of Hines Meat Co., had been seeking an opportunity to expand the business over the last couple of years. The Pendleton City Council reached out to them in February about expanding to Umatilla County, and after applying for the city's Jump Start loan, the couple began making preparations



EO Media Group file photo

Paige and Jake Hines opened Hines Meat Company in La Grande in June 2016 to answer a growing demand from local hunters and producers. The couple will open a second location in Pendleton later this year.

to open their new shop in the secondary Pendleton Grain Growers building on Emigrant Avenue.

The Jump Start program provides assistance to businesses seeking to locate, renovate or expand in Pendleton's urban renewal district, which covers a large section of Pendleton between the Umatilla River and the railroad, and between the east and west ends of the city.

Jake Hines has run his La Grande butcher shop since June 2016, and offers on-site slaughter, custom cutting and a retail meat shop.

"The Pendleton City Council contacted us about it and we drove down, saw the property we would end up buying and were able to work it out," Jake Hines

said. "We've also been working with the reservation for the last couple of years, too. We still hope to do something with them eventually."

The Jump Start loan will provide Hines Meat Co. with money to purchase equipment, such as walk-in freezers and coolers.

"La Grande people bring in their wild game, and they turn it into meat products. They'll be doing that here, too," said Charles Denight, associate director of the Pendleton Development Commission. "The products made (in Pendleton) will also be sold in La Grande and the products made in La Grande will be sold in Pendleton."

Jake Hines says he will transfer two man-

agers down to the Pendleton store once it is ready to open, and will be hiring seven new Pendleton-area employees. With construction underway, the Pendleton branch was projected to open in July, but the recent COVID-19 outbreak could force a delay. Denight said the company is trying to be open and ready for business by the time the 2020 Pendleton Round-Up kicks off.

"I'm always pushing for sooner and sooner," Jake Hines said. "We're not sure how long this is going to last, but we're definitely not taking it lightly. We're playing things by ear. We're really excited, but we're also really nervous. It's a big leap for us. We're very excited to move in that direction."