



Photo by Katy Nesbitt/For the Capital Press

Kristy Athens started Genuine Wallowa County Provisions in Enterprise to provide fresh, local food to customers’ front door.

Delivering freshness

Pandemic sparks idea for home food delivery service

By Katy Nesbitt
For the Capital Press

ENTERPRISE — In the spring the world was shaken by a global pandemic that either sent people home to work or left them unemployed. The shutdown shuttered restaurants and left local producers with nowhere to distribute their food.

In the far northeastern corner of Oregon, a unique online marketplace was expanded to allow those producers to sell their crops and products and have them delivered to customers’ doorsteps.

About a year ago, Kristy Athens started an online gift shop called Genuine Wallowa County featuring locally made products. Her five-year plan was to add locally grown food to the online store’s offerings, but the pandemic put that plan on a fast track.

“A couple local producers asked if I would sell food on my website,” Athens said. “They were interested in not having

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Kristy Athens, founder of Genuine Wallowa County

to do their own laborious deliveries.”

Mary Hawkins of Hawkins Sisters Ranch, Theresa Stangel of Stangel Bison Ranch and Beth Gibans of Backyard Gardens started meeting with Athens in January. COVID-19 pushed the idea to the front burner in a hurry.

“It became clear that it was a really good time to offer food delivery to people’s houses so they don’t have to endanger themselves by going to a grocery store,” Athens said. “Meanwhile, restaurants were closed and local producers had nowhere to sell their food. If there is ever a time to be resilient as a county, it’s during a pandemic.”

In 2015, Athens, a writer drawn to the food justice movement, graduated with a master’s degree in food

systems from Marylhurst University in Portland.

“I work in economic development and was looking for ways to put those things together,” Athens said. “What I really wanted to do and hopefully still will is create a larger scale incubator farm. Wallowa County has a very strong brand as far as tourism and I think we could use that brand as far as local food production is concerned.”

As the outreach specialist for Northeast Oregon Economic Development District, Athens came across a 2006 economic study. One of the recommendations was to create a Wallowa County brand.

The online gift shop cultivated Wallowa County brand recognition, and GWC Provisions brought food delivery into the mix.

The results from a poll on a community Facebook page were overwhelming. She realized she had a market.

Athens said she started with pre-sale memberships and fundraising for supplies. She received small grants from the Eastern Oregon Workforce Board and Slow Foods Wallowa as well as investments from community members to buy a refrigerator and freezer, design a website and cover other startup costs.

GWC Provisions meat and produce are either delivered to customers’ doors or dropped off in insulated bags at Main Street Motors in Enterprise, a central location for most people in the county.

Athens sells items such as chicken, bison, goat, vegetables and fruit, Jor energy bars and Sei Mee Tea and Joseph Creek Coffee. She’s even started selling some of the bounty from her garden — items that don’t compete with her vendors.

Vendors receive 80% of the retail price, and \$1 of every sale goes to one of the county’s two food

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New funds will help workers hurt by pandemic

By Dick Mason
EO Media Group

LA GRANDE — Northeast Oregon residents who lost their jobs due to the COVID-19 pandemic now have an increased number of opportunities to get job skills training.

The Training and Employment Consortium has received two Dislocated Worker grants from the federal government. The funding is to help anyone who lost their jobs because of the coronavirus pandemic in eight Eastern Oregon counties, including Union, Wallowa and Baker.

“We are trying to make more people aware of this. We want to get the word out,” said Lynn Trice of La Grande, region pro-

gram manager for the Training and Employment Consortium, which is part of WorkSource Oregon.

Money from the grants will pay for training to obtain certificates and licenses for jobs. Trice said the goal of the TEC staff is to provide grant funding to as many people as possible. Credentials in career fields with many employment opportunities include health care, building contracting and commercial transportation.

Dislocated Worker grant money also covers job training and short-term vocational training, which benefits both the employer and the employee, Trice said.

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Struggling merchants, insurers battle over pandemic coverage

Estimates predict the insurance industry will pay out \$107 billion in pandemic-related claims

By Michael Liedtke
Associated Press

NEW YORK — Restaurants, bars and other merchants struggling to stay afloat during the coronavirus pandemic are desperately reaching out for a lifeline from insurers that in turn contend they are being mis-

cast as potential saviors. Shutdowns and crowd restrictions imposed by state and local governments to limit the spread of the virus have resulted in more than \$1 trillion in estimated losses so far for thousands of rapidly sinking small businesses.

That has prompted a flood of claims under business interruption insurance policies that have been almost universally rejected for a variety of reasons, including boilerplate provisions inserted by insurers after the SARS outbreak in 2003 to exclude disrup-

tions caused by virus and bacteria.

“This is an existential threat,” said John Houghtaling, a New Orleans attorney who is representing restaurants and other businesses seeking about \$8 billion in losses that he estimates they will suffer during the pandemic. “A lot of people who did the right thing and bought this coverage thinking they would be thrown a lifeboat if disaster struck are now being told, ‘Sorry, let the Coast Guard come and get you instead.’”

So many lawsuits have been filed against insurers in the U.S. that a Thursday, July 30, hearing has been scheduled before a federal judicial panel in Washington to decide how to manage them all in the months — and possibly years — ahead. The

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Mysterious seed packets from China baffle officials

By Sierra Dawn McClain
Capital Press

SALEM — Agriculture departments in at least 27 states are warning residents to report any unsolicited packages of seeds that arrive in the mail appearing to come from China.

The packages, officials warn, might contain invasive plant seeds, insect species or pathogens, some of which may be invisible to the naked eye.

Officials in Washington state, Virginia, Kansas and Louisiana have issued statements during the past few days about residents receiving in the mail packages of seeds that they did not order.

According to local news reports, residents in Utah, Arizona and Ohio have also received seeds. Chanel Tewart, spokeswoman for the Idaho State Department of Agriculture, told the Capital Press Monday the agency has also received about 20 reports from Idahoans who received seeds. “Please, do not open



Image from the Washington State Department of Agriculture

States are warning people not to plant the seeds they received in unsolicited packages and appear to have come from China. Some packages say they contain jewelry.

the seed packet,” Chris McGann, spokesman for the Washington State Department of Agriculture asked the Capital Press to tell readers. “It may contain insect pests or pathogens. These things could

be inside any type of seed, and since they entered the United States without agricultural inspection, they pose a higher risk.”

In a statement, WSDA warned the seeds could introduce disease to local

plants or harm livestock. Researchers warn the packages, if opened, may pose a risk to agricultural industries and the environment.

Photographs from WSDA show the seeds appear to have been mailed

in white pouches marked on the outside with Chinese lettering and the words “China Post.” But Monday, the Ohio Department of Agriculture released photos showing seeds have also come in yellow envelopes.

The Kansas State Department of Agriculture’s statement said some of the packages were misleadingly labeled saying they contained jewelry. According to the Louisiana Department of Agriculture and Forestry, some residents reported packages labeled saying they contained toys or earbuds.

Officials say it is not yet clear why the seeds were sent and agency leaders have not yet tracked whether the people receiving packets fit a specific demographic or regional pattern.

Even the number of people receiving seeds is not yet clear, officials say. In Washington state, for example, some people have been reporting it to USDA, and others to various

branches of WSDA, making it difficult to track the total number.

“We don’t have a good way of counting how many people are impacted yet. But I know we did get more reports over this weekend,” said McGann of WSDA.

In the first few days, people in some states were advised to put seeds in Ziploc bags and throw them away, while others were told to keep the sealed packages and await further instructions.

A USDA spokesperson told the Capital Press anyone who receives an unsolicited package of seeds from China should immediately contact their state plant regulatory official or APHIS state plant health director.

“Please hold onto the seeds and packaging, including the mailing label, until someone from your state department of agriculture or APHIS contacts you with further instructions,” the USDA spokesperson directed.