

HUNT

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safely. The organs the cougars escaped with included the elk's heart, which disappointed Anderson.

"I've always wanted to eat an elk heart," she said. Anderson took the elk after a few days of dealing not only with challenging terrain but also cold, windy conditions. The wind blew constantly and sometimes reached speeds of about 40 mph.

Elk were abundant but not as common as the pronghorn antelope, which were everywhere. Anderson's party also encountered a bull moose with a female and a calf.

"We didn't want to get near them because they will charge," Anderson said.

Anderson learned her name had been drawn for Hunting with Heroes last spring. News of her selec-



Nicolina Anderson/Contributed Photo

Nicolina Anderson of La Grande hefts the head and antlers of the elk she harvested in October 2020 in Wyoming.

tion came out of the blue.

"I did not know my name had been put in," said Anderson, explaining that Jeff Grende, a family friend, had done this without telling her.

Grende said he often nominates veterans he thinks would enjoy participating in Hunting with

Heroes. The North Powder outdoorsman said he likes helping veterans overcome challenges to have successful hunts, and he does not foresee a day anytime soon that he will stop volunteering for the program.

"I always have a great time and it is so rewarding," he said.

COVID-19

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The death toll in Union County now stands at five.

In its weekly report published Wednesday, Nov. 25, OHA confirmed one person had died in connection to the outbreak at the Wildflower Lodge Assisted Living Community, La Grande.

"Our hearts go out to the family and friends who have lost a loved one and are grieving" said Carrie Brogoitti, Union County public health administrator. "As we begin the holiday season with rapidly rising case counts in Oregon, this difficult news is a reminder that efforts to slow the spread of the virus are still needed."

The state of Oregon as a whole experienced a record-breaking week for COVID-19 deaths. OHA announced the highest single-day reported deaths so far on Tuesday as the virus claimed the lives of 21 Oregonians, followed by 20 more deaths reported on Wednesday and 15 on Thanksgiving day.

As of Friday, 66 people in Oregon died of COVID-19 since the start of the week, raising the statewide death toll to 885.

Super spread

Union County recorded 85 new cases between Sunday, Nov. 22, and Friday, Nov. 27, after gaining 107 the week before. Total cases in the county have risen more than 56% since the start of November, and the total number of cases since the pandemic began now stands at 771.

More than one in three cases in Union County during the pandemic have been recorded in November alone.

According to the weekly COVID-19 report from OHA released Wednesday, outbreaks continue to affect Union County. Wildflower Lodge Assisted Living Community's outbreak grew from 36 to 48 cases, while the workplace outbreak at Grande Ronde Hospital gained two new cases, rising to eight total.

However, CHD has repeatedly warned a significant number of the cases in Union County are attributable to community spread and cannot be traced back to a known source.

"Case counts continue to increase and many people who test positive are not sure how or where they became infected. Because of this, taking precautions to protect yourself and reduce the spread of COVID-19 are vital," CHD stated in a press release.

Between Nov. 18-26, Oregon did not go a single day without reporting at least 1,000 new cases of COVID-19 and has thrice exceeded 1,500, including on Thanksgiving day when the state reported 1,514. OHA reported 826



Phil Wright/The Observer

Brother Bear Cafe in downtown La Grande remains open for takeout Friday, Nov. 27, 2020, under the "freeze" mandate to stop the spread of COVID-19.

cases Friday, but said that was likely an undercount due to the Thanksgiving holiday.

More than 12.5 million Americans — 70,832 of them Oregonians — have tested positive for COVID-19 through the course of the pandemic.

Relief and suffering

During a press conference with the governor on Wednesday, OHA Director Patrick Allen announced Oregon could expect to see the first doses of a COVID-19 vaccine sometime in December.

"We will prioritize the first doses for front-line health care workers, then as we receive more shipments we will expand eligibility to vulnerable populations like nursing homes, people with developmental disabilities, essential workers, and then to the wider population," Allen said.

While the promise of a vaccine in the near future puts a possible end to the pandemic in sight, that end likely remains distant. The U.S. Food and Drug Administration has yet to grant an emergency use authorization for a vaccine, and Robert Redfield, director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, has said publicly a vaccine likely won't be widely available to the general population until at least March.

Allen acknowledged the negative impact COVID-19 has had on Oregonians' mental and behavioral health, citing a CDC survey from mid-July that found more than 50% of adult Oregonians were experiencing symptoms of depression and anxiety.

Substance use also has increased, Allen said, noting that in March sales of cannabis products spiked by nearly 40%, and sales at liquor stores almost doubled. Allen also said Oregonians were delaying or foregoing medical care for four or more weeks at a rate of roughly 4 in 10 in October, and requests for assistance with housing and food insecurity issues have sharply increased during the pandemic.

"The hard reality is this," Allen said, "there

is no normal while the virus rages unchecked and the touchpoints of daily life — going shopping, having dinner out with your friends, working out — could make you sick. There is no healthy economy while COVID-19 circulates widely in public places."

Staying frozen

Brown announced in a press conference Wednesday afternoon that the state would adopt a new "data driven" approach to COVID-19 restrictions. Under the new approach, 21 Oregon counties met metrics that would categorize them as experiencing "extreme risk," the most severe of four categories. Union, Baker, Grant and Umatilla counties all fell into the extreme risk category.

"It's been a long year — and one that has been exceptionally challenging for Oregonians," Brown said. "Not only have we been dealing with this pandemic, we also suffered through a heartbreaking and historic wildfire season. So many families have lost so much this year. Unfortunately, now, more than ever, is the time we must double down on our efforts to stop COVID from spreading."

The OHA plans to reevaluate the situation in each county again on Monday, Nov. 30, measuring their status against predetermined metrics that vary depending on the county's size.

Counties with a population of less than 30,000, such as Union County, are categorized as extreme risk if 60 or more cases are reported in that county over a two-week period. Union County had 85 cases between Sunday and Friday and 107 the week before.

As counties move from extreme risk into lower categories, restrictions become less stringent. However, even low-risk counties, where restrictions are less severe, are limited to gathering of no more than 10 people, faith institutions are capped at 75% capacity and indoor dining at eating and drinking establishments is cut to 50% capacity, among other things.

RESORT

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"It's going to be a very tough year for us financially," Johnson said. "Day tickets are our main source of revenue. I've heard some people say we're just trying to push season pass sales, that is not the case at all. The reason we're doing passholders only is that passholders generally make up about 25% of our daily skier visits. So the reason we're starting with just passholders is so we can gauge and make sure we're not going over capacity."

The first two week-

ends of the season will be open only to season pass holders as Anthony Lakes people it can safely have on the mountain. Then the resort will open up for day tickets sales, selling a limited number each day to ensure they stay within the mandated capacity.

Several local lodging and small business have partnered with Anthony Lakes in an effort to support one another during the pandemic and are giving out vouchers to be used at the ski resort.

"Everyone is feeling this, not just us," Johnson said. "We're in a position where, yeah, we're going to take a huge hit,

but we've set ourselves up to be able to survive one winter like this... We're setting aside 20 tickets each day for anyone who shows up with a receipt from a locally owned small business, ideally a restaurant or a retail shop, for \$40 or more."

While the COVID-19 pandemic has upended almost every aspect of daily life, Johnson reminded people that finding recreational and exercise outlets is important, saying, "if we were any other business, it would make sense not to open this year," but he felt it was necessary to provide a safe way for people to get outside.

LOOSEN

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many of Brown's restrictions will end in Oregon counties that haven't been as hard hit by the coronavirus.

But most of Brown's restrictions likely will remain in place Dec. 3 in 21 counties — including Union, Baker and Umatilla counties. The governor has deemed these counties at "extreme risk" of rampant viral spread. The restrictions overall, however, won't be as stringent.

Among the new, lighter restrictions: Outdoor dining will be allowed at bars and restaurants, and large religious institutions will be able to quadruple their indoor gathering sizes.

Brown is easing many public health safety measures despite the worsening COVID-19 crisis in Oregon. The governor has fielded public criticism and been under intense pressure from industry groups — including in the form of a lawsuit — to ease her restrictions ever since she announced them earlier this month. The restrictions are part of a two-week statewide freeze that is in effect Nov. 18 through Dec. 2.

On Nov. 13, the day Brown announced the two-week freeze, new daily cases of the coronavirus were averaging a record-setting 900 per day in Oregon. Wednesday, the coronavirus' spread had only continued to balloon, with Oregon averaging more than 1,250 cases per a day.

In response to a reporter's question, Brown said the freeze wasn't meant for

the "long haul."

"It is not a sustainable place for Oregon to be in," Brown said. "I'm in the business of frankly saving lives, but also preserving livelihoods. And moving forward with these metrics, what we are trying to do is balance both things."

Brown also acknowledged it didn't seem right to heavily restrict Oregon counties, such as Wallowa County, that haven't seen many infections relative to the rest of the state.

"A one-size-fits-all approach did not make sense moving forward," Brown said.

Starting Dec. 3, "extreme risk" counties will fall under the following rules:

- Brown will allow restaurants and bars to reopen for outdoor dining only. Capacity will be limited to 50 people per establishment, and group size to six people. State public health officials are strongly encouraging take-out.

- Gyms will be allowed to lead outdoor fitness activities. Capacity will be limited to 50 people outdoors, per establishment.

- Religious organizations will be able to hold services at 25% capacity or with up to 100 people indoors, whichever results in a smaller number. Outdoors, up to 150 people will be allowed to gather. Brown's restrictions under the two-week statewide freeze limit faith-based organization to gather-

ings of no more than 25 people indoors or 50 people outdoors.

- Social get-togethers will continue to be limited to six total people, with a recommendation that no more than two households gather at a time.

- Grocery stores, retail stores and malls will be limited to 50% capacity. Currently, stores are limited to 75% capacity, which has worried some health experts given that Black Friday and the crowds of shoppers it typically attracts fall under the 75% capacity limit and not the upcoming 50% limit. When it does go into effect a week into the holiday shopping season, this new restriction will mark one area where Brown is tightening requirements.

Multnomah County was supposed to be under a four-week freeze, set to expire in mid-December. But Brown's newly revised plan will replace that freeze.

Public health officials will use COVID-19 numbers for Monday, Nov. 30, to determine which counties fall into the "extreme risk" category and the most aggressive restrictions. Currently, public health officials estimate that will be about 21 of Oregon's 36 counties.

Other counties will be deemed "high risk," "moderate risk" and "lower risk" — and they will face varying degrees of lesser restrictions.

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