ELK

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herds has been to cut the number of tags for rifle hunts, which are controlled hunts with limited tags awarded through the lottery system.

"Currently the controlled rifle season is the one place we have the ability to adjust hunter harvest, and they have taken almost all the tag reductions in the last 25 years," said Jeremy Thompson, district wildlife biologist for ODFW's Mid-Columbia area who is managing the review of elk archery hunts. "The ultimate goal of this proposal is to be able to make management actions equitable for all users."

In choosing which units to propose the change from a general to a controlled archery season, ODFW officials considered the elk populations in those units, as well as hunter density and hunter displacement, which are based on a 2020 public survey of hunters.

Units where the bull ratio — the number of bulls per cows — have not met the state's goals in three out of five years are proposed to change from general to controlled archery hunts in 2022.

The Nature Conservancy/Contributed Photo

A herd of elk cross the Zumwalt Prairie in Wallowa County. The Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife is proposing significant changes to elk-hunting rules for archers in Northeastern Oregon.

"We have tried to craft a solution that addresses the problems we are seeing in some units, while continuing to retain as much general season opportunity as possible," Thompson said.

ODFW is proposing to change from a general to a controlled elk archery hunt in some other units because although those units are meeting bull ratio goals, the bull elk harvest is near what biologists consider the unit's capacity. In some units, archery hunters have been taking as many or more branch-antlered bulls than rifle hunters have, according to ODFW.

Two Baker County archery hunters, Bob Reedy and Keith Jensen, said they have concerns about the potential effects of ODFW's proposed changes.

Reedy, who lives in Baker City and also owns an archery shop, disputes ODFW's contention that switching from a general to a controlled season for elk is necessary to deal with declining elk populations and bull ratios.

"I think a lot of this us about the state mismanaging the animals," Reedy said.

He contends the state could either temporarily ban hunters from killing bulls, whether they use bows or rifles, or change the bag limit to prohibit hunters from shooting spike bulls. By restricting hunters to harvesting only mature, branch-antlered bulls, Reedy said the state could boost bull ratios in units where they're below state objectives.

"If they want better bull ratios, stop shooting so many bulls," he said.

Jensen, who also owns an archery shop, in Bowen Valley just south of Baker City, said he concedes ODFW's point that for the past few decades rifle hunters, not archers, have borne the brunt of cuts in elk tag numbers.

But Jensen said he's worried ODFW's proposed "piecemeal" approach — moving to controlled archery seasons in some units but continuing with a general season in others — would push many hunters to units with a general season, leading to overcrowding.

Both Jensen and Reedy also said they believe ODFW is failing to acknowledge that predation, by bears, cougars and wolves, is contributing to declining elk numbers in some units.

ODFW is asking hunters to submit comments on the proposed changes, which the Fish and Wildlife Commission is scheduled to discuss during its June 18 meeting.

The commission will make a decision on archery seasons for 2022 during its September 2021 meeting.

More information is available online at myodfw.com/articles/big-game-hunting-season-review.

Comments should be emailed to odfw.wildlifeinfo@state.or.us no later than April 15. There will be additional opportunities to comment before and during the commission's June 18 meeting.

PROJECT

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and safe," said Wildman, who works for the La Grande-based engineer firm Anderson Perry & Associates Inc.

Replacing the eight aging pumps not only will reduce the potential for overflows but also reduce annual pump repair costs, which have been rising dramatically. The sanitation district's annual maintenance expenses, of which pump restoration is a major part, have jumped $35,000 a year each of the past five years, Wildman said.

The area served by the sanitation district includes all of Island City and a number of parcels of land zoned for commercial and industrial use in the vicinity of the city.

Ten miles of pipe are in the Island City Area Sanitation District's system, portions of which are in need of major repair work. Wildman said inspections using small remote control vehicles have detected 20 sites for repairs.

The $2.26 million project also will pay for the purchase of a system that will be easier to maintain. The system now requires operators to step down into the vicinity of the wastewater to make adjustments on electronic control panels. Wildman said the upgraded system will have its control panels above ground to allow for adjustments to be easily and safely made.

The sanitation district will pay for the upgrade with a $1.96 million loan from the Oregon Department of Environmental Quality and with $300,000 from the district's reserve fund. The interest rate for the DEQ loan will be 1%, and the city will pay it off over a 30-year period. Wildman said $500,000 of the loan is potentially forgivable if the district follows proper criteria.

Regardless of the size of the debt, the district will have to raise its rates to have enough revenue to pay back the loan.

Island City's rates, which are now $40 a month, will have to increase to $45-$50 a month, Wildman said. This will leave the district's rates below the state average of $51 a month. The state average Wildman cited is based upon a 2020 League of Oregon Cities report.

Wildman said the district has not raised sewer rates since 2006. He said the average rate of inflation since then has been about 2% a year, meaning if the rate kept up with inflation, the cost now would be about $54 a month.

Howton said the district's sewer rate increase will likely be made in one step. Those receiving sewer service, she said, will be notified several months before the increase takes effect.

Additional information about the project is available at Island City Hall, 10605 Island Ave. The office is open from 9 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Monday through Thursday, and 9 a.m. to 1:30 p.m. Friday.

VIRUS

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bumping the total there to 687.

The Oregon Health Authority also reported statewide there were 402 new cases of COVID-19 bringing the state total to 159,037.

More than 19% of Union County's 26,841 residents have received at least one vaccination, according to the OHA, with 2,202 residents fully vaccinated and 2,390 more in progress. Wallowa County's vaccination rate is nearing 22%, with 1,566 vaccinated (631 in progress, 935 fully vaccinated) out of a population of 7,151.

Statewide, about 19.2% of the population has been at least partially vaccinated.

Meeting president's goal

Oregon would need up to double the doses of COVID-19 vaccine it now receives to fulfill President Joe Biden's seven-week sprint to allow all adults to be offered inoculation, Oregon health officials said Friday.

Gov. Kate Brown and top state medical experts held a press call Friday to say they hoped to meet Biden's timeline, but would move cautiously. Brown said she welcomed Biden's "audacious announcement."

"I will do everything I can to make it happen," she said.

Oregon's staggered priority groups wouldn't match Biden's deadline until July 1.

States have the central authority over public health, and Brown said the present plan would stay in place until there was a guaranteed supply before she would unleash additional demand onto the already strained system.

Oregon officials were only recently told they would receive 200,000 doses per month, up from the previous 120,000 doses. But Oregon Health Authority Director Pat Allen said meeting Biden's schedule could take as much as doubling the doses.

"It would need to be an increase on that kind of order of magnitude," Allen said. "Maybe 300,000."

ONLINE
Visit this story at www.lagrandeobserver.com for local vaccination clinic information.

Part of the math problem has to do with the vaccines themselves. Until recently, Oregon was only receiving the Pfizer and Modern vaccines, each of which requires two shots given about a month apart.

The state has received the initial shipments of a new vaccine from Johnson & Johnson that requires a single shot.

Brown and Allen both said their caution came from not wanting to set off the kind of policy whiplash that hit Oregonians in mid-January.

When the Trump Administration announced the immediate release of a large stockpile of additional doses, Brown dropped her carefully crafted priority tier policy. She announced everyone in Oregon age 65 and over would be eligible for shots.

Trump officials said within 48 hours that there was no stockpile of new doses.

The governor had to reverse herself and put eligibility restrictions back in place.

Biden in a national address Thursday said he wanted the vaccination program to be far enough along to allow for small celebrations of July 4.

"If we all do our part, this country will be vaccinated soon, our economy will be on the mend, our kids will be back in school, and we'll have proven once again that this country can do anything," Biden said.

Though Oregon officials have a much higher level of confidence in Biden's streamlined transport system and increased manufacturing of vaccine, Allen said supply needed to be on the way first.

"We know the previous administration made previous announcements it was unable to fill," Allen said.

Oregon is limiting shots to health workers, residents of nursing homes, educators and daycare workers, and most recently, all residents age 65 and older as of March 1.

The next eligible group can seek shots March 29. It's a long list that includes adults age 45 and older with specific medical issues, agricultural and other food processing workers, homeless people, residents of low-income housing, those displaced by last year's wildfires and wildland firefighters.

Pregnant women age 16 and over were recently added to the group.

OHA has not been able to give estimates on how many people will become eligible on March 29.

May 1 — the date that Biden wants eligibility to be offered to all adults nationwide — is currently listed as adding front-line workers (those who deal daily with the public), those living in multigenerational households, and those age 16-44 with certain medical conditions.

Brown's plan calls for everyone age 45 and older to be eligible June 1. On July 1, all adults would be able to seek shots.

Dr. Dean Sidelinger, the state's top infectious expert, said officials were looking at studies from around the country about school reopenings. Some indicate Oregon's mandate for students to be spaced 6 feet apart when they return to the classroom could be cut to 3 feet. No policy change is in the pipeline, despite requests to Brown from school districts.

Allen said the vaccination effort involving seniors was going well statewide, though he noted some counties were ahead of the goal to have 75% of eligible seniors inoculated, while other counties lagged behind.

Brown praised the support of Oregon's congressional delegation for Biden's $1.9 trillion stimulus legislation, which includes $1,400 direct payments to Americans, aid for COVID-19 distribution, unemployment aid, and funds to buttress state and local budgets strained by the pandemic.

Rep. Cliff Bentz, R-Ontario joined all House Republicans in opposing the bill, saying it was too expensive and included too much non-pandemic related spending. The rest of Oregon's congressional delegation — all Democrats — supported the bill.

Risk levels improve

New COVID-19 risk levels for Oregon's 36 counties showed continued improvement in the latest two-week report, signaling more areas will be able expand business and dining occupancy starting Friday, while allowing for more activities.

"We are largely seeing case rates decline across the state, with the most counties in the Lower Risk level since the framework was introduced in November," Brown said in officially announcing the new levels on Tuesday, March 9. They went into effect Friday.

In all, 13 counties lowered their risk level ratings, while three showed worsening trends to move up a level. Only Coos and Douglas counties remain on the extreme risk level, which once contained well over half of Oregon's counties.

Union County remained in the moderate risk group, along with Baker County.

Statewide, Oregon reported 4,615 cases between Feb. 26 and March 6. The statewide average was 108.9 cases per 100,000 residents and the positive test rate dropped to 3.2, indicating that numbers statewide should continue to drop.

— EO Media Group staff contributed to this article.

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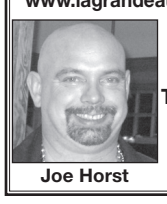
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