

STATE NEWS BRIEFS

Oregon hires arborist after outcry about excessive tree cutting

PORTLAND — Oregon is hiring a Pacific Northwest-based arborist to review the state's removal of trees in wildfire burn areas after recent concerns that the operation has been hasty and excessive.

The Oregon Office of Emergency Management announced Monday, May 17, that Galen Wright has been hired as an independent contractor to review the hazard tree effort, Oregon Public Broadcasting reported.

Wright is president of Washington Forest Consultants, Inc. He is tasked with providing a full assessment of Oregon's program and his recommendations are due in June.

"As this adaptive and evolving emergency response operation continues to make significant progress, Oregonians deserve to have confidence in the good work underway," said Mac Lynde, the Oregon Department of Transportation's head of the three-agency Debris Management Task Force. It has been coordinating the tree-removal program in the aftermath of the 2020 wildfires that burned over 1 million acres.

The state is in the midst of the effort to cut down an estimated 140,000 burned trees that could be dangerous to people on state roads or burned properties.

Transportation officials told a legislative panel two weeks ago that it would bring on an independent arborist after several workers publicly voiced concerns about the hazard tree program. They have said the operation, led by a contracting firm out of Florida, has irresponsibly marked trees for removal that weren't dead or dying.

Woman sues, saying landlord coerced her into sex to avoid eviction

EUGENE — A lawsuit filed by a woman who rented from a Bell Real Estate subsidiary alleges the property owner harassed her then coerced her into having sex with him to avoid eviction.

The woman claims the company did nothing when alerted to the situation, The Register-Guard reported.

In a federal lawsuit filed in U.S. District Court for the District of Oregon in Eugene in March, a woman living in Lane County claims Pinewood Properties owner and manager Richard Sorric coerced her into a sexual relationship to keep her home then retaliated and asked for back rent when she refused to keep having sex with him.

The newspaper and The Associated Press do not identify survivors of sexual harassment or abuse without their consent. The lawsuit uses a pseudonym "because of the sensitive, humiliating and stigmatizing nature of the factual allegations" in the case,

according to a complaint footnote.

She started renting from Pinewood Properties in November 2018 and moved out of the property over a year ago, said Meredith Holley, her attorney.

Attorneys representing Bell Real Estate, Pinewood Properties and Sorric deny nearly all of the woman's claims in legal filings and say her lawsuit fails to state a claim and was filed too late for damages.

Sorric "absolutely and categorically denies the defamatory allegations made against him in the plaintiff's Complaint," Jeffrey Daly, one of his attorneys, wrote in an email.

Daly added that Bell also has "denied all wrongdoing in this matter, and will continue to do so."

Bell Real Estate is now suing her for back rent and other costs.

Assault suspect dies in shooting involving deputy

ROGUE RIVER —

A person suspected of domestic assault has died in a shooting involving a deputy in southwestern Oregon, according to a news release from the Jackson County Sheriff's Office.

At 11 a.m. Tuesday, May 18, deputies were sent to a domestic assault in progress near Rogue River, the news release sent by spokesman Mike Moran said.

Before deputies arrived, the suspect had left in a vehicle, according to the sheriff's office. The suspect returned several minutes later and "subsequently the deputy reported shots fired," the news release said.

The suspect died at the scene.

The deputy was not hurt, the news release said.

The Jackson County Major Assault Death Investigation Unit, led by Medford police, will investigate the incident.

Moran said the names of the people involved will be released after relatives are notified. Details of what happened will be released after an initial investigation is complete, he added.

— Associated Press

Oregon health officials update mask guidance

By SARA CLINE

The Associated Press/Report for America

PORTLAND — Under updated mask guidelines in Oregon, which were released Tuesday, May 18, businesses can now choose whether or not customers will still be required to wear a mask.

But in order to do that, customers must provide proof that they have been fully vaccinated.

"If (businesses, employers and faith institutions) have a process to review vaccination records and show that people are fully vaccinated, they're free to serve customers in that manner," said Dr. Dean Sidelinger, the state's epidemiologist. "If they don't want to, or cannot implement a system like that, they can continue to operate under the OHA (Oregon Health Authority) guidance that requires masks and physical distancing."

Everyone — vaccinated or not — is still required to wear a mask while on public transportation and in schools, hospitals and clinics, homeless shelters, correctional facilities and long-term care facilities.

In addition, mask requirements are no longer applied to anyone who is outdoors, although health officials recommend that people continue to wear a mask in crowded areas and in large gatherings.

However, businesses, employers and faith institutions can choose to no longer require masks and physical distancing for fully vaccinated people, defined as individuals who received their second COVID-19 vaccine dose at least two weeks prior.

But if a business decides to allow fully vaccinated people to not be required to wear a mask, those individuals must provide proof of their status in the form of a vaccination card or a photo of the card on their phone. In addition, the business must review the proof.

If businesses decide not to implement a "policy for checking the vaccination status of customers

and employees," then everyone in that building will still be required to wear masks.

Many have questioned how businesses will be able to check the authenticity of vaccination cards. Some worry that proof will be forged.

"We hope that Oregonians will not lie or cheat and put others at risk by forging a vaccine record if they are not vaccinated," Sidelinger said. "Individuals who choose not to (get vaccinated) or don't want to share that they have already been vaccinated can wear a mask and keep their distance while being served by the business."

Oregon's new mask guidance comes after the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention announced last week that individuals who are fully vaccinated against COVID-19 could stop wearing masks and stop physical distancing in most public spaces.

"(Last) week's announcement from the

CDC emphasizes the point that safe and effective vaccines are the very best way to protect people from getting and spreading COVID," said Patrick Allen, the director of the Oregon Health Authority. "That's why it's safer for life to look more like normal for people who are fully vaccinated. And why people who haven't had a chance to get vaccinated should do so as soon as they can."

Oregon's Gov. Kate Brown pointed to the CDC announcement as "another sign that as more people become fully vaccinated, the closer we are to ending this pandemic."

Oregonians have been required to wear masks — inside public spaces such as grocery stores, shops, gyms and restaurants and outside where people cannot remain 6 feet apart from others — since last summer.

Brown said she is hopeful that the state's economy will soon reopen if people continue to be

vaccinated and reach goals she set earlier this month.

On May 18, Brown announced that five Oregon counties have reached the county vaccine threshold — 65% of the county's population who are 16 or older have received their first COVID-19 vaccine dose.

By reaching that target Benton, Deschutes, Hood River, Lincoln and Washington counties will move to the state's lowest risk category allowing for increased capacity — 50% — in restaurants, theaters, gyms and other indoor entertainment spaces.

Brown also set a state vaccination goal of 70% for residents 16 or older who have received their first vaccine dose. When the state reaches the vaccination target, Brown said most of Oregon's restrictions, including capacity limits, will be lifted.

Currently, nearly half of Oregon's eligible residents have received at least their first vaccine dose.

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