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U.S. Air Force pilot Jim Bieker with his daughters, Hannah, left, Ella, and wife, Kate, gather at McChord Air Force Base May 26, 2021, to mark his final flight with the Air Force. A Cove native, he flew over the Grande Ronde Valley during the flight.

Pilot greets parents with flyover

Jim Bieker, who grew up in Cove, winds down Air Force career

By DICK MASON
The Observer

LA GRANDE — Jim Bieker was 6 years old when he boarded a Cessna aircraft for a flight around the Grande Ronde Valley about four decades ago with his family.

The child's life course may have been set by the time the plane landed.

"I had become fascinated with flight. I have been fascinated with it ever since," said Bieker, who grew up in Cove.

Bieker's aviation fascination spurred him to later begin a 22-year career with the U.S. Air Force, one now winding down as he will retire in July. He made his last Air Force flight Wednesday, May 26, and his parents, Chuck and Jeanette Bieker of La Grande, will never forget it.

Their son, a lieutenant colonel, made a La Grande flyover in a C-17 Globemaster III aircraft while on a four-hour training flight with a fellow Air Force pilot. The flyover was at 6,000 feet and could be heard throughout La Grande at about noon May 26.

"It was a good chance to fly over and say 'hello,'" said Bieker,

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INSIDE • CONGRATULATIONS CLASS OF 2021



Alex Wittwer/The Observer

La Grande High School student Moss Morris works on a mug during an art class led by Rich McIlmoil on Thursday, May 27, 2021. While there is some concern, most local educators say the pandemic hasn't had a major impact on the education of their schools' students.

Impacted learning?

Local educators do not think pandemic has had major impact on learning

By DICK MASON
The Observer

UNION COUNTY — The jury is still out, but there is reason for optimism.

This is the belief a number of local public school leaders have with regard to the impact the COVID-19 pandemic has had on the education of their students. The pandemic forced the state to close schools in March 2020 through the end of the 2019-20 school year to in-person instruction, allowing them to teach classes only online.

Since the start of the 2020-21 school year, the Cove, Elgin, Imbler, North Powder and Union school districts have been offering in-person instruction to all students each day for much of the school year. The La Grande School District has had a harder time getting to the point where it could offer in-person instruction to all students due to how state metrics apply to larger school districts.

La Grande elementary students have been receiving in-person instruction for much of the school year — but students in grades seven to 12 had to take all of their classes online until early 2021, and it was not



Alex Wittwer/The Observer

La Grande High School art teacher Rich McIlmoil assists a student with an art exercise during class Thursday, May 27, 2021.

until early April that all of these students were allowed to be on campus every school day.

La Grande Middle School Principal Kyle McKinney said as more in-person instruction has been provided, attendance has increased at his school and that the number of students who are failing classes is down. He believes this is indicative of how much better in-person instruction is for most students compared to that provided online.

The principal noted though

that because teachers have not been able to meet with students in-person as much as they would in a normal school year, they have not been able to cover as much material. This means they have had to focus more on major curriculum concepts to prepare students to be able to succeed at their next grade level in the 2021-22 school year.

McKinney said that through the efforts of teachers, students will eventually catch up

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More money needed to avert wildfires

Sen. Jeff Merkley wants \$1 billion to make forests less vulnerable

By JAYSON JACOBY
Baker City Herald

WASHINGTON, D.C. — U.S. Sen. Jeff Merkley said this week that he will lobby the Biden administration to spend at least \$1 billion more per year for logging, prescribed burning and other work designed to make federal forests in Oregon and elsewhere less vulnerable to wildfires during a future when climate change is likely to heighten that threat.

"Forests are the heart of Oregon's identity," Merkley, a Democrat, said during an online press conference Thursday, May 27. "We have got to do a lot to restore our forests, to make much more substantial investments in forest management."

Merkley said he hopes to push his campaign for more aggressive forest management from his position as chairman of the Senate Interior, Environment and Related Agencies Subcommittee, which he has held since February 2021.

Merkley convened an appropriations hearing on May 26 where he advocated for the federal government to boost spending on forest management.

Vicki Christiansen, chief of the U.S. Forest Service, the federal agency that manages much of the public forests in North-eastern Oregon, testified before the subcommittee.

Merkley said one of his chief goals is to double federal spending, from \$40 million to \$80 million, for "collaborative" projects on national forests.

Those are projects that Merkley said are designed to bring together traditional "rivals," such as environmental groups and timber industry representatives, to work together to promote solutions that both support.

Merkley said that in the

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Farm to Table Loan Program makes local meat more accessible

By LISA BRITTON
Baker City Herald

LA GRANDE — When meat prices rose in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, Ken Olson wanted to help local consumers purchase products from local producers.

Olson is the chief executive officer of Old West Federal Credit Union, which has branches across Eastern Oregon, including John Day, Baker City, La Grande, Prairie City, Union, Pendleton, Hermiston and Burns.

"He has a big heart for our communities and rural areas," Bob

Kavanaugh, vice president of business development and member experience at Old West, said of Olson.

The USDA reports that, in 2020, supply of meat products was affected by temporary closures of meat-packing plants due to COVID-19. The low supply in turn drove up prices in the grocery store.

Kavanaugh said Olson challenged an Old West team to brainstorm a solution that would make local beef more accessible — especially when money is tight.

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Baker City Herald, File

Old West Federal Credit Union's Farm to Table Loan Program aims to make it easier for residents to buy locally raised meat.

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	44 LOW		79/47
	Partly cloudy		Partly sunny

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2 sections, 16 pages
La Grande, Oregon

Email story ideas to news@lagrandeobserver.com.
More contact info on Page 4A.



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TUESDAY VINTAGE CAR COLLECTOR GEARS UP FOR RIVERFEST

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