

## IMPACT

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in terms of the content they have been taught, but it could take a year or more to accomplish this.

"I wish I had a crystal ball," said McKinney, who will retire at the end of June.

InterMountain Education School District Superintendent Mark Mulvihill, like McKinney, said the pandemic has shown many students fare much better with in-person instruction as opposed to online education. Mulvihill noted throughout the school districts served by the IMESD, educators are finding that for most students in-person instruction is more effective. Mulvihill said attendance improves and students begin earning better grades.

One reason is that some students are at distinct disadvantages when it comes to learning online. Mulvihill noted some students do not have access to high-speed internet because of where they live. Also, many children are from

single-parent families or those in which both parents work full time and the students may not get the help they need while doing online classwork at home.

"It is no surprise that kids need to be in school to get a good education," said Mulvihill, whose ESD district serves Union County's six school districts plus many more in Umatilla, Morrow and Baker counties.

Union School District Superintendent Carter Wells believes his students are doing well since they have been receiving in-person instruction each day for most of the 2020-21 school year.

Unfortunately a number of Union students who were in high school when the pandemic hit in March 2020 are still feeling the impact of the loss of in-person instructional time.

Wells said some students did not adjust well to online only instruction, which reduced the number of credits they earned last spring. The superintendent noted that high school students will have to make up

for the loss of these credits in order to graduate on time.

"It will be difficult," he said.

North Powder School District Superintendent Lance Dixon believes his students are emerging from the pandemic in solid shape academically.

"I do not think it has had a lot of impact," said Dixon, whose district has offered in-person instruction for much of the 2020-21 school year.

He noted that the number of students failing classes is less than 2%, which is about what the school district's average has been.

Dixon noted that one thing that has helped students this spring is the return of high school athletic competition in all sports, one overseen by the Oregon School Activities Association. The superintendent said this has given high schoolers an outlet for pent-up energy and frustration and helped many students maintain their focus on their classes.

"If they had not brought back sports when they did,

there would have been a lot more problems," he said. "We may have had more students take jobs. They would have still been enrolled but not engaged."

La Grande High School Principal Brett Baxter said the majority of his school's students have adjusted well to the challenges they have faced.

"Our students are strong and resilient," he said.

Baxter agrees that the return of sports this spring has given students a boost. This occurred after there were fall sports practices.

"There had been a long drought of outside activities. It was very timely," he said.

Cove School District Superintendent Earl Pettit said he has not detected drop off in academic performance. He believes that any loss caused by the move to online learning in the spring of 2020 has been erased.

Pettit, whose smaller school district has been able to offer in-person education this year, said, "We have caught up over the past school year."

## BEEF

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"Food insecurity is a real thing," Kavanaugh said. "We came up with a strategy to help our local communities purchase meat in bulk."

The program is called the Farm to Table Loan.

Loan amounts are available from \$500 to \$4,000.

When someone inquires about the loan, Kavanaugh said they meet with an Old West staff to discuss the loan amount and pay-back details.

Storing meat can be a challenge for some families, too, so a freezer can be financed into the loan as well.

The 12-month loans are interest-free.

Kavanaugh said Old West introduced the program several months ago, and will relaunch it around June 1.

To initially promote the program, Old West held a raffle for "Get a Freezer, Give a Freezer Full of Beef."

When Union County rancher Charlie Rohlf found out about the loan program,



Alex Wittwer/The Observer

**Rancher Riley Martin feeds his cattle from the back of a tractor at the family's North Powder farm Monday, April 5, 2021. Old West Federal Credit Union is trying to make it easier for residents to buy locally raised beef.**

he donated half a beef to fill the second freezer. Billy Bob's Butcher Shop in Elgin processed the meat at a reduced cost.

Union County Sheriff Cody Bowen drew the winning ticket for Brett Baxter, the principal of La Grande High School.

Baxter chose the Union Food Bank to receive the freezer full of beef, and Old West posted a video of the delivery on Facebook.

Kavanaugh said the loan program is also supported with a grant from

the Northwest Credit Union Foundation.

### How it works

Once a loan is approved, the borrower specifies where he or she wants to buy meat (beef, lamb, chicken, pork, etc.).

Kavanaugh said Old West cuts a check to the butcher. The loan recipient hands over the check and receives a supply of fresh meat.

When the program was about to launch, Kavanaugh called meat processors around Northeast Oregon.

At Billy Bob's Butcher Shop, co-owner Kaleen Smith was quick to praise the idea.

"He said, 'Is there a need?' I said, 'You're already behind the ball,'" Smith said.

She said the shop has offered its own type of loan program to help people purchase meat. And, she said, meat prices are continuing to rise.

"Not everybody had the money up front," she said.

She's telling customers about the Old West program, and helping connect consumers with producers, too.

"I'd advise people to look into it," she said of the bank loan.

Rohlf said it costs about \$1,200 for half a beef, which includes cutting and wrapping.

When meat supply dwindled in the grocery stores, he had more locals seeking out meat from his ranch.

The Old West program, he said, will help people buy good-quality meat and support the local economy.

"They're helping producers, the local butcher shops, and the local community," Rohlf said.

## FLYOVER

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who lives in Eatonville, Washington, and works out of McChord Air Force Base near Tacoma, Washington.

Bieker also did flyovers May 26 over Pendleton and Nyssa to greet his brothers, Dave and John, during the four-hour training flight. Dave Bieker is an elementary school teacher in Nyssa. He took his students outside to observe the flyover.

After his flight and landing at McChord Air Force Base, Jim Bieker was greeted by his wife, Kate, and their daughters, Hannah and Ella, who sprayed him with water while someone from the Air Force came up from behind and dropped several gallons of ice water on him. Bieker said he was not surprised by the dousing.

"It is a tradition for pilots after their last flights," he said.

Bieker said he will miss serving in the Air Force.

"What I really liked were the many wonderful people I got to meet," the pilot said.

Bieker, who graduated from Cove High School in 1993, has fond memories of growing up in Cove where he said some of the favorite things he did was work in cherry orchards and ride motorcycles with friends.

Bieker's Air Force experience includes eight years on active duty and 14 years as a reservist.

While in the reserves, Bieker has had to make training flights, like the one he made on May 26, every



Contributed Photo

**Lt. Col. Jim Bieker shows his daughters, Hannah, left, and Ella, the inside of the cockpit of a C-17 Globemaster III aircraft May 26, 2021, at McChord Air Force Base near Tacoma, Washington. They are shown in the aircraft after Jim Bieker, a Cove native, completed his final Air Force flight, which included a La Grande flyover.**

couple months. The C-17 Globemaster III he co-piloted is a military transport plane for troops and cargo. Bieker said when flying the plane it takes him about 40 minutes to go from Tacoma to Nyssa and back.

Bieker has been a pilot for Delta Airlines for 11 years, flying primarily domestic flights. He plans to continue flying for Delta for years to come. He does not hesitate when asked what it is about flying that captures his imagination.

"It is fun to see the world from above," he said.

Bieker credits his Air Force training with putting him in a position to land his job with Delta. He said he never tires of flying, and it is unlikely he ever will because "I have a job which never feels like work."

## FIRES

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2018 federal farm bill he included authorization to double spending on forest collaboratives — which he described as the "antidote to the timber wars."

But the next step — indeed, the vital step — is to actually include that money in the Forest Service's budget.

During the May 26 hearing before the subcommittee, Merkley urged Christiansen to include that money in the agency's budget request for the fiscal year that starts Oct. 1, 2021.

"This is an amazing opportunity," Merkley said.

### Backlog of projects

Two collaboratives are underway in the Blue Mountains, one in the southern part of the range, the other in the northern section, on the Wallowa-Whitman and Umatilla national forests.

Last year, the U.S. Department of Agriculture allocated \$2.7 for the latter collaborative during the current fiscal year, which started Oct. 1, 2020.

Forest Service officials have said that the \$2.7 million will help the two national forests start chipping away at a backlog of projects that are ready as soon as money is available.

Although the details of the work vary depending on the area of the Blue Mountains involved, the general concept is to cut some of the trees, primarily smaller-diameter ones, that are growing in higher densities than was historically the case in the northern Blues, Steve Hawkins, deputy fire staff officer for the Wallowa-Whitman, said in a 2020 interview.

Those smaller trees, most notably grand and white firs, have encroached over the past century or so in places that used to be dominated by ponderosa pines and tamaracks, in part due to the exclusion of fire, which historically killed most of the firs when they were relatively small.

Ponderosa pines and tamaracks, which generally grow in widely spaced stands rather than in thickets, are much more resistant to wildfires than the grand and white firs that have become much more prevalent over the past several decades.

Although Merkley promotes the additional \$40 million for collaborative projects, his ultimate goal is even more ambitious.

He said he believes the federal government needs to spend at least \$1 billion more each year on forest restoration work nationwide.

### 'We have to do more'

In Oregon alone, Merkley said, forest improvement work, including thinning and logging, that has already gone through the environmental

review process could treat 2 million acres at an estimated cost of \$388 million, were the money available.

One way to increase the chances of bolstering budgets, Merkley said, is by ensuring that the federal government does not return to the practice known as "fire borrowing."

That term refers to the federal government transferring money from Forest Service and other agency budgets to cover firefighting costs, leaving less money for projects designed to reduce the size of wildfires and thus the cost to fight them.

Fire borrowing was necessary in several years over the past decade as millions of acres burned annually across the West.

Merkley said that although Congress ended fire borrowing in 2018, the changes made then will expire at the end of the current fiscal year — Sept. 30, 2021 — unless it's reauthorized.

"We cannot go back to the fire borrowing of the past," Merkley said.

On May 28, Merkley lauded Biden's budget request for 2022 that includes \$2.45 billion to ensure fire borrowing doesn't resume.

The president's budget request also includes the \$80 million for collaborative forest projects that Merkley promotes.

During the May 27 press conference, Merkley recalled driving the length of Western Oregon in September 2020 following the fires that burned more than 1 million acres, destroyed towns such as Detroit, east of Salem, and killed 11 people.

"It was unforgettable to me," Merkley said of the experience of driving for hours and never escaping the cloying smoke that persisted in much of Oregon for more than a week. "I've never seen anything like this."

Merkley also talked about the 2020 fires during Wednesday's appropriations hearing before his committee.

"Whether they have lost a loved one, business or home to a wildfire, had to pack their most valuable belongings and anxiously awaited go orders, or were trapped inside by a thick blanket of hazardous smoke, nearly every family in the West has been impacted by wildfires in one way or another," he said. "It's impossible to thrive if your community is being ravaged by these blazes. That's why any plan to boost America's infrastructure, create jobs and protect lives and our economy must include responsible forest management strategies that can help us stay ahead of wildfire risks."

Merkley said the threat of severe fire seasons is likely to increase due to climate change. "Fire seasons are getting longer, forests are getting drier," he said. "We have to do more on the forest management end."

## 2021 EASTERN OREGON PHOTO CONTEST

**Official Rules:**  
 Photo Contest open now and closes at 11:59 pm Sunday, June 20, 2021.  
 Staff will choose the top 10. The public can vote online for People's Choice from 12:01 am Monday, June 21 through 11:59 pm Thursday, June 30.  
 Digital or scanned photos only, uploaded to the online platform. No physical copies.  
 Only photographers from Oregon may participate.  
 The contest subject matter is wide open but we're looking for images that capture life in Eastern Oregon.

Entrants may crop, tone, adjust saturation and make minor enhancements, but may not add or remove objects within the frame, or doctor images such that the final product doesn't represent what's actually before the camera.

The winners will appear in the July 8th edition of Go Magazine; the top 25 will appear online.

Gift cards to a restaurant of your choice will be awarded for first, second and third place.

**Submit all photos online at: [lagrandeobserver.com/photocontest](http://lagrandeobserver.com/photocontest)**