

VACCINE

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To better gauge the campus community's response toward vaccinations, the university conducted a COVID-19 vaccination survey in February that produced mixed opinions. Just fewer than 900 individuals participated in the survey.

According to Oregon Public Broadcasting, 65% of students voted "no" and 30% voted "yes" to requiring vaccinations in the fall. However, 75% of faculty were in favor and 22% were against.

While faculty mostly favored the requirement and students generally opposed it, that created difficulty for the school's board of trustees to balance the community's thoughts with statewide trends.

"The science is very clear that the vaccine is effective and it's safe," said Board Trustee Brad Stephens during a board meeting last month.

"I don't know how I feel about them mandating the vaccine," said EOU student Tori Reynolds. "Why are you basing someone's ability to get a higher education on whether or not they want to get a vaccine?"

The university will not add the COVID-19 vaccination to its list of required vaccines, alongside the measles vaccine.

"Any information we gather from students will be confidential," Seydel said. "That is not information that is posted anywhere, just like the current students' immu-



Alex Wittwer/The Observer, File

Monty the Mountaineer, Eastern Oregon University's mascot, welcomes students and faculty alike as they enter the gymnasium Tuesday, May 4, 2021, to receive a dose of a COVID-19 vaccine. The school announced Thursday, June 3, that students, faculty and staff will be required to receive the COVID-19 vaccination to be on campus next fall.

nizations records."

Last month, Eastern Oregon updated its face covering requirements on campus for the remainder of the semester to allow students and staff to gather outdoors without masks, void of any social distancing. However, the university said students in small groups of eight or fewer can gather indoors without masks, so long as they can show proof of vaccination.

According to the Oregon Health Authority, 34% of Union County is vaccinated. That number is well below the state average, which eclipsed 50% toward the end of May.

"I think it depends on where most of the students come from," said EOU student Isabella Evans. "Depending on their backgrounds, a lot of people tend to not want to get the vaccine."

Eastern has been holding vaccination clinics on campus periodically

throughout the month of May and into June. More than 100 individuals attended the first clinic at Quinn Coliseum May 4, where the Moderna vaccine was administered.

When the FDA will approve the numerous COVID-19 vaccinations remains to be seen. No vaccine is fully approved, but Pfizer, Moderna and Johnson & Johnson were all granted emergency use authorization. All three have applied for full approval, a process that can take several months to a year, according to the FDA.

Until full approval, Eastern Oregon University will be moving forward with the mindset that one or more of the vaccines will be fully approved by the fall term, as with many other schools across the state.

"We remain committed to providing all students with the greatest educational opportunities possible in preparation for success after graduation," Insko said.

FIRE

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blackening 12 acres. The annual average is 105 lightning-sparked blazes. In 2019 the Wallowa-Whitman had 67 lightning fires, which burned 27 acres.

It was the second consecutive tranquil fire season on the Wallowa-Whitman, even as major blazes were spreading across hundreds of thousands of acres elsewhere in the West.

"In really dry years we often don't get as much lightning," McCraw said.

The situation is similar on other public land in the state's northeastern corner, primarily sagebrush steppe for which the Bureau of Land Management is the chief firefighting agency.

On private and state land, where the Oregon Department of Forestry handles much of the firefighting, lightning sparks 70% to 75% of fires on average in Northeastern Oregon, said Steve Meyer, wildland fire supervisor at the state agency's Baker City office.

"We've had summers when we're setting records for fire danger but we don't have much of a fire season because we don't get the lightning," Meyer said.

Although lightning is famously fickle in where

it strikes, Livingston said advances in meteorology have made it much more feasible to forecast thunderstorms, with a fair degree of geographical accuracy, at least a few days, and even up to a week, in advance.

Livingston said lightning detectors can pinpoint strikes, which at least gives fire crews — and the mountaintop fire lookouts, of which more than a dozen still are staffed each summer in Northeastern Oregon — a likely set of places, after the storm passes, to search for the telltale tendrils of smoke.

"It helps us get resources out into an area ahead of time, to focus on areas where we're most likely to have lightning fires," Meyer said.

Human-caused fires, by contrast, are inherently more frightening, officials said, because people can go almost anywhere. And unlike with lightning, there are no sensors to show where a person carelessly tossed a cigarette or left a smoldering campfire or drove through a patch of desiccated grass, where hot mufflers and catalytic converters can ignite the tinder.

"With human-caused fires you never know," Meyer said. "It can be anywhere."

The inherent unpredictability of human-caused fires — when they might happen, as well as where — is one reason the Forest Service

and Oregon Department of Forestry institute restrictions on campfires, the use of chain saws and other activities when fire danger is high or extreme.

Livingston said despite the many factors that determine the severity of a fire season on a specific national forest, he's fairly confident that the 2021 season will be another damaging one.

"It's safe to say we're going to have a long, difficult season — it's just a matter of where," he said.

Wilderness fires could return after 2020 hiatus

Over the past two decades, fire managers have allowed more than a dozen lightning-sparked fires to burn naturally in the Eagle Cap Wilderness, Oregon's largest wilderness at 365,000 acres.

The goal is to allow fire to perform its natural functions, including reducing the amount of fuel on the ground and potentially reducing the severity of future blazes.

The Wallowa-Whitman suspended this program in 2020 to allow crews, who were trying to avoid spreading COVID-19, to focus on other blazes.

Livingston said lightning fires in the Eagle Cap this summer could potentially be monitored rather than doused as soon as possible.

BUDGET: School Board to vote on June 21

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in part because of the COVID-19 relief money.

Panike said that if about 80 of the 140 students return next year, the school district will be able to operate about two years before its reserves are drawn to the point that reductions in staff and programs would be needed.

A number of the students who left the district are being homeschooled or are now attending online learning academies. George Mendoza, La Grande School District superintendent, said it will not be known for some time how many will return to the La Grande School District.

"Time is needed to determine what the long-term impact on student enrollment will be due to the COVID-19 pandemic," he said in his budget message.

Panike said on Friday June 4, that if the \$9.3 billion 2021-23 education budget the state Legislature's House passed June 3,

after being approved by the Senate, is signed by Gov. Kate Brown, the La Grande School District will have to draw significantly from its reserves. He explained the proposed Oregon school budget would leave the La Grande School District \$1.35 million short of what it expects it will need to cover rising employee costs and failing enrollment.

The school district is financially prepared for this, Panike said, because the district's 2021-22 budget was built on the assumption that the Legislature would pass a \$9.3 billion education budget for the 2021-23 biennium.

A large portion of the COVID-19 relief funding the school district will receive comes from the federal government's Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund. These ESSER funds must be spent within three years and some must be used for specific purposes, Mendoza said.

The La Grande School District's budget calls for

about six full-time positions to be added and for 5.5 other nonclassroom teaching positions to be trimmed in part by not hiring people to fill some open positions. No employees would be laid off.

The positions to be added would include that of a student success coordinator, a woods and construction teacher, an English language learner position, an English language learner paraeducator, plus a behavior teacher who assists students with behavior issues and a behavior paraeducator.

The La Grande School Board will conduct a hearing on the proposed budget at the beginning of its June 21 meeting. The public will be able to comment on the budget or ask questions of the board and school staff at the hearing, which will start at 7 p.m. at Central Elementary School.

The school board will vote on adoption of the budget following the hearing.

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Email unioncounty@hcao.org

Annual Union County Crops & Conservation Tour

2021 Tour Cancelled

La Grande, OR (May 12, 2021) – The 44th Union Co. Crops and Conservation Tour was cancelled in 2020 and again in 2021. The Planning Committee decided to cancel the tour this year due to continued uncertainty of Covid-19 and concern for public health and safety. Alternative options were considered, but the committee agreed that offering a modified version of the tour would not provide the same experience as the traditional format. It was important to the committee members and supporters of the tour to keep the traditional aspect intact as it has been successful for 43 years straight. Although Covid-19 disrupted the long-tradition, the committee will host the 44th annual tour next year.

The planning committee would like to thank the many dedicated tour sponsors (see below for 2019 sponsors), volunteers, 4-H and FFA members, livestock and crops producers, and community members for their continued support over the last 40+ years. The committee fully expects to host a traditional tour in 2022 which will be held during the same traditional week (second week after the Eastern Oregon Livestock Show). Mark your calendars for the "third" 44th annual Union Co. Crops and Conservation Tour!

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