



SUZANNAH MOORE-HEMANN
CHAMBER CHAT

Practice a little mindfulness when shopping

I wanted to spend this month talking about the chamber's most recent push: the Support Local Task Force. I know, I know. What a stupidly boring name. That name does not sound exciting. The conversations really are, though, and so far, we've had phenomenal turnout, even with "Zoom fatigue" being an actual thing.

I see a lot of overlap in faces from other organizations, but the people who attend have great ideas and a true passion for the region. It's almost like they all live here and have a vested interest in the local economy, right? I definitely want to see more shoppers and business owners get involved, but, hey, I'm also happy with who we have right now, too.

Sometimes during these meetings, I do feel a little guilty. And, I'll admit, for good reason. Sometimes I do shop online. Sometimes I enjoy getting out of the valley for shopping, dining and plainly and simply, for a change of scenery. The concept of "supporting local" just never seemed as important as getting exactly what I wanted or needed. Fast forward to today, 2-1/2 years into chamber life, and supporting our local businesses and our local economy has become increasingly important to me.

Why? Obviously, part of it is because our members are what help make my job and work possible. They trust me enough to invest in me (apparently I've been in this position long enough to assume I'm synonymous with the chamber). But also, I don't know, because I know our members and businesses are friends and neighbors. They are the ones who truly make our community what it is.

I love living in this valley. I love personally knowing so many business owners — how special it is to call some of them friends, watching them develop, have families, grow. I love who the businesses employ and seeing them whenever I'm out and about. I guess, maybe, it's the people to whom I've become deeply committed.

So, ask yourself, are there ways you could shift your habits to support locally? And, if you don't get something locally, why not? Call your local chamber office and let me know. Literally. Call me and have this conversation with me.

I recently received a call from a lady in Olympia, Washington, who shared some of her experiences with me about a recent trip to Union County for work. If someone from the other side of another state can call me, so can you. Or just stop by — anyone who knows me knows I love chatting. She provided fascinating, excellent feedback. We visited for about half an hour, and it was quite inspiring. Not all of her experiences were stellar, but she did love the beauty of the area and wanted to share to make it better.

That's really what the Support Local Task Force is all about — looking at what we currently have and finding ways we can empower residents and businesses to continually increase support for one another. To make things here better.

The most interesting thing about this "supporting local" concept... is how easy it is to do it. Almost easier than a click of a button. Almost. But it's worth it. Every time you spend ten dollars here in the county, you just invested in the long-term vibrancy and vitality of our community. Every time you do a shoutout raving about your favorite store or your newest locally sourced goodie, you're contributing to a flourishing local economy.

Think about how much power you wield to make life in Union

See, **Shopping**/Page 2B



COMING UP SHORT

Carlos Fuentes/The Observer

A 2021 Northwood Grande sits on a mostly empty lot at Thunder RV on Tuesday, June 15, 2021. As of June 15, the company only has four RVs on the lot.

Eastern Oregon RV dealers facing shortage of product to sell

By **CARLOS FUENTES**
The Observer

LA GRANDE — In an average year, the Thunder RV parking lot can have as many as 45 RVs, ranging from truck campers to fifth wheels to travel trailers.

But these days, there are four RVs sitting in the mostly empty lot at the Island City dealership. The shortage has lasted a full year now, with no end in sight, according to Thunder RV salesman Mike Weinkauff said.

"The shortage started last summer right after COVID-19 shut everything down," he said. "I think it's because people are getting cabin fever and wanting to go out more."

Thompson RV, based in Pendleton, has also seen a large increase in demand over the last year. According to Thompson RV Manager Corrin Thompson, part of the shortage can be attributed to the Thompson RV being the biggest dealer of Outdoors RVs in the world.

"We're totally sold out for the year," she said. "We're actually preselling RVs up to 16 months in advance now. Someone might come in today and want to order an RV, and they won't get it until the end of 2022."

The increase in recreational

vehicle demand is not just local. According to the RV Industry Association, RV sales in the US have significantly increased during the pandemic, with total 2021 RV shipments projected to reach more than 576,000 — 18% higher than the 2017 record.

However, not all dealerships are seeing the same sales trends.

"According to the national trend, we should be seeing a huge increase in sales, but we've actually seen about 50% less sales this year than normal years," Thunder RV owner Caleb Samson said. "The demand is just far bigger than the supply, and we can't replace them at the same rate as we're selling them."

According to Samson, the company ordered 80 RVs several weeks ago, but does not know when they will arrive.

Northwood Manufacturing, which produces most of Thunder RV's supply, is based in La Grande and works with 66 dealerships in Oregon and surrounding states, nearly all of which are also facing a shortage.

"We would love to increase the number of RVs that we're making, but there's several mitigating factors," Lance Rinker, the director of purchasing and

marketing for Northwood Manufacturing and Outdoors RV, said.

According to Rinker, the two biggest factors of the shortage are labor shortages and increased material costs. Both Northwood and Outdoors each employ about 215 employees, 68% of the 315 employee capacity. This number has not risen in recent years.

Northwood and Outdoors each manufacture roughly 230 RVs every month, a number that has not risen with the increased demand. Rinker estimates that manufacturing prices have risen nearly 20% since the onset of the pandemic, partially due to higher fuel prices and lumber shortages.

Retail prices have risen with increased manufacturing costs. Weinkauff said that Thunder RV prices have risen 10% in the last year. Prices range from \$25,000 for a basic truck camper to nearly \$100,000 for high-end fifth wheel RVs.

With no end in sight, Weinkauff said he is optimistic that business will continue to stay busy.

"Well, they're building them as fast as they can, and we're selling them just as quickly," he said. "It's gonna take some time to catch up."

Region's power production in flux

Alternative power sources in California upending energy market

By **STEVEN HAWLEY**
Columbia Insight

PORTLAND — A draft power plan for the Pacific Northwest, due for release this summer, outlines challenges for defenders of hydropower, as well as opportunity for those who say it's time for some dams to go.

The report, from the Northwest Power and Conservation Council, forecasts power demand in the region will remain flat or slightly decline through 2030.

Climate change will make both hydropower production and salmon recovery more challenging. Renewables will continue to proliferate, and the price of solar will continue to drop.

That last development places some daunting new challenges in front of utilities in the region.

The bulk of power produced in the Columbia River Basin comes from 31 dams whose power output is marketed and sold by the Bonneville Power Administration. Less than half of it is put to use by consumers inside the Pacific Northwest. The rest is sold south



John Locher/Associated Press, File

Mirrors, in foreground, reflect sunlight onto a power tower at the Ivanpah Solar Electric Generating System near Primm, Nevada, on Aug. 13, 2014. The site uses over 300,000 mirrors to focus sunlight on boilers' tubes atop 450 foot power towers heating water into steam which in turn drives turbines to create electricity.

via high-capacity power lines known as the Western Intertie Network to electricity-hungry cities in Southern California.

These "secondary," outside-the-home-territory transactions were once a reliably lucrative arrangement for the BPA. On the open market for electricity sales, midday demand sent prices soaring.

The federal power marketing authority could meet California's needs, still keep the lights on in Seattle and Port-

land, and collect handsome profits from its California ventures. This windfall, in turn, was used to buy down rates for what the BPA calls its "preference" customers inside the Pacific Northwest.

This customer base is comprised of public utility districts and rural electrical co-ops around the region, who rely on long-term "firm" power contracts with the BPA.

Leaders get firsthand look at dam issues

Rally highlights efforts to protect lower Snake River dams

By **MATTHEW WEAVER**
Capital Press

LEWISTON, Idaho — Leaders of national and regional farm organizations rallied around efforts to protect the four lower Snake River dams June 16, taking part in a day-long briefing on the role the structures play in the Pacific Northwest economy.

Among those joining the group were Zippy Duvall, president of the American Farm Bureau Federation — the nation's largest agricultural organization — and Chandler Goule, CEO of the National Association of Wheat Growers.

Farmers shouldn't let their guard down when it comes to Rep. Mike Simpson's call to breach the Snake River dams in the name of salmon recovery, Goule warned.

Simpson's \$33.5 billion concept is gaining momentum in Congress heading into the mid-term elections, Goule said.

Simpson, a member of the House Appropriations Committee, has not proposed any legislation, but he will work to insert the money into an appropriations bill without instructions to breach the dams, Goule said.

"If that money gets appropriated, then that gets him a much stronger hand to come back and actually get the dams torn down," Goule said.

Simpson used a similar tactic on another issue 10 years ago, Goule said.

"He already knows politically that strategy is going to work," Goule said.

It would likely be in next year's appropriations, Goule said. The bill would have to go through the House and Senate, and the president would have to sign it.

Duvall, Goule and 43 others representing ag organizations, co-ops and related businesses were hosted by the Idaho Grain Producers Association and the Idaho Farm Bureau.

Tour participants took a boat through a navigation lock and toured the dam complex, seeing fish ladders and juvenile and adult fish, and toured the Lewis-Clark Terminal, owned by CHS Primeland, the Pacific Northwest Farmers Co-op and Uniontown Co-op.

Agricultural advocates say breaching the dams isn't the "silver bullet" for salmon recovery that environmentalists claim, noting that mortality rates on the Snake River are similar for salmon elsewhere on the West Coast.

"I didn't see today the problems that (Simpson) described. ... I didn't see the science that supported that," said Duvall, of the American Farm Bureau Federation.

Duvall compared Simpson to a doctor who calls for a heart transplant when some medicine will do.

"If we think about the \$34 billion and just take a portion of it, put it in research and development of the other problems that might be facing the salmon, we can fix that problem with a little medicine rather than transplanting a heart," Duvall said.

Breaching the dams would make the lower Snake River "completely unnavigable," and require adding 38,000 more rail cars or 150,000 more trucks to replace barges, Goule said.

About 60% of Washington's and Idaho's wheat is shipped by barge, according to the Lewis-Clark Terminal. It takes 5 1/2 hours to load one 3,600-ton barge, the equivalent of 120 truckloads of wheat.

A proposed transportation credit or subsidy under Simpson's plan could also potentially be out of compliance with World Trade Organization regulations, Goule said, adding that it could be considered trade-distorting, undercutting export competition.

See, **Power**/Page 2B

See, **Dams**/Page 2B