

Oregon minimum wage increases July 1

By **MIKE ROGOWAY**
The Oregonian

SALEM — Oregon's low-est-paid workers will be earning more beginning Thursday, July 1 — as much as \$14 an hour for some.

It's the sixth of seven increases the Legislature mandated in 2016, which have steadily raised the state's hourly minimum from \$9.25. Oregon will have one of the highest minimum wages in the nation when the new rates kick in Thursday, but the rate varies considerably depending on where you work.

Oregon lawmakers took an innovative approach, mandating different minimums for different regions of the state, so the \$14 hourly minimum applies only to the three counties in the Portland metro area.

Employers in Deschutes and other so-called standard counties will pay \$12.75 an hour. Those in Union, Wallowa and other nonurban counties will pay \$12.

The difference is meant to account for lower costs of living outside the metro area.

The nation's highest statewide or districtwide minimum wage is in Washington, D.C., at \$15 an hour. Washington state's hourly minimum is \$13.69. Massachusetts' is \$13.50, and California's is \$13. Many cities or counties have higher minimum wages than their states.

When Oregon's higher minimums kick in, the wage floor in the Portland area will have climbed by more than 50% since 2016. That works out to nearly \$10,000 more annually for a full-time worker earning the Portland area's higher minimum wage.

The minimums rise again in July 2022, topping out at \$14.75 an hour in the Portland area, \$13.50 in Deschutes County and \$12.50 an hour in Union and Wallowa counties. Subsequent increases will be tied to inflation.

The federal minimum wage, meanwhile, has been stagnant at \$7.25 an hour since 2009. There is a general agreement in Congress that the national minimum should rise, but Republicans and Democrats have been unable to agree on how much and how quickly.

That reflects a perennial debate among economists over how much higher minimum wages inhibit job growth, the fear being that employers will hire fewer workers if they must pay them more. There's no debate, though, that it's easier to raise wages when the economy is strong.

Oregon's succession of minimum wage increases coincided with a long stretch of economic growth, when the state's jobless rate was at historic lows — dependably below 4% in the months before pandemic recession hit.

And even as the minimum wage rose, the number of Oregon workers earning the minimum steadily declined from 7.3% in 2018 to 6.6% in 2019 and just 6.1% last year. Some 123,000 workers statewide earned the minimum in 2020, according to the Oregon Employment Department.

That could suggest that employers were raising wages to attract workers during the strong economy, not only because the state was mandating higher pay.

Of course, the pandemic changed everything. Many low-wage workers lost their jobs last year when bars, restaurants and other hospitality sectors cut back or shut down. That meant fewer workers in those industries, and fewer workers earning the minimum.

And now, with employers facing a labor shortage, there is evidence that wages are rising for a new reason — employers racing to reopen after the pandemic are paying more so they can staff up quickly and capitalize on the economic rebound.



Alex Wittwer/The Observer

Caroline Barnes removes a frame for inspection at a cluster of hives kept in Cove on Tuesday, June 22, 2021. The La Grande resident has nine hives throughout the region, and the honey from those bees produced nearly 60 gallons of honey in 2020.

La Grande beekeeper selected for statewide accelerator program

By **CARLOS FUENTES**
The Observer

LA GRANDE — Most people see honey simply as a sweet add-on to their afternoon tea or a spread on their toast. But for Caroline Barnes, honey is more than just a packaged syrup on market shelves — it's a way of connecting with nature and finding the beauty in our everyday environments.

"There's nectar of 20,000 flowers in a teaspoon of honey, and that's just the product of the amazing tasks that bees do for us," Barnes said. "It's such a beautiful product, and uniquely flavored, that's what really got me interested in it."

Barnes, who moved to La Grande in 2006, has been beekeeping for 17 years. Her business, Circle A Bees, is mostly a one-person operation, but the bees do most of the work. In 2020, Barnes accumulated a total of 60 gallons of honey.

In March, Barnes was one of 10 Oregon women selected for the first Farm2Food accelerator program, sponsored by the National Association of State Departments of Agriculture Foundation.

The purpose of the accelerator is to help women entrepreneurs and farmers gain skills in marketing, product development, packaging and pricing via a series of virtual workshops. The program, facilitated by the Oregon Department of Agriculture and funded by the 2019 Oregon Speciality Crop Block Grant Program, began in May and will end in September.

"I feel very honored to have been selected to be a part of this program," Barnes said. "They put a lot into creating the program and I'm really grateful. It's a lot of work, but it's really great to hear the stories of the other women who are involved."

Barnes was the only participant selected from Eastern Oregon. The program involves watching videos, reading articles and completing interactive activities and assignments. There are four modules in the program, which take anywhere from three to six weeks to complete.

According to NASDA, U.S. farmers are expecting \$522.5 million in crop losses due to COVID-19. The Farm2Food accelerator program was specifically designed to help female farmers who face these losses.

"Women farmers, who typically have small-scale farms, could be at risk of going out of busi-

ness if they cannot adapt to the new conditions of the pandemic," NASDA's website states. "We are helping women farmers become more resilient during this crisis through diversifying the products they sell and helping them explore new markets."

Barnes was first drawn to beekeeping through her father, who maintained several hives into his 90s.

"I was intrigued by the bees and their abilities to maintain hives and how they communicate and just all the things they do," she said.

However, Barnes, who hails from Colorado, wasn't always interested in beekeeping. She obtained a bachelor's degree in civil engineering from Colorado State University in 1983, followed by a few years in Alaska studying arctic engineering. Several years later Barnes moved to Bainbridge Island, Washington, and earned a master's degree in water resource engineering from the University of Washington in Seattle.

It was in Washington that Barnes discovered her passion for beekeeping.

"My dad was scaling down his hives when I was in Washington, and he gave me some of his hive bodies, and that's what

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A medley of mustangs

Horse ranch rescues the overpopulated

By **BILL BRADSHAW**
Wallowa County Chieftain

IMNAHA CANYON — It's not the average horse that you'll find at Dawn and Eddy Medley's ranch in the Imnaha Canyon. In fact, it wasn't so long ago many of the horses were running wild as mustangs throughout the West.

"I love doing this because they (the mustangs) have no choice," says Dawn Medley, co-owner of Medley's Mustangs. "They lost their families, and that's what these horses are all about — family. I want to be able to connect them to a 'family' and to love them for as long as they live."

Medley's Mustangs is an operation just downriver from Imnaha that helps train and adopt out mustangs gathered from the overpopulated herds descended from once-domesticated horses brought to the New World by the Spanish. They've since reverted from their domesticated state to become feral animals — and their numbers are growing like crazy.

"The herds can double in four to five years if not managed properly," Dawn says. "You could have 1,000 to 1,200 horses where they say you could only manage 150 to 250 horses. Horses eat (available forage) straight down to the ground, unlike cows, where they'll leave some of the grass. (Horses) are pretty hard on the ground."



Bill Bradshaw/Wallowa County Chieftain

Dawn Medley reins in "Girlfriend," Medley's wildest mare at Medley's Mustangs, the ranch she runs in the Imnaha Canyon with her husband, Eddy Medley, on Thursday, June 10, 2021. Girlfriend was only a couple of weeks out of the wild. The Medleys train wild horses and adopt them out to new owners.

Roaming largely on land managed by the federal Bureau of Land Management, regular attempts are made to cull the herds and find owners and trainers to take them under the BLM's Wild Horse and Burro Program. The Medleys' nearly 18-acre operation is one of those where they currently have a half-dozen or so horses.

"We originally started in September of 2018," Dawn says. "I became a (Trainer Incentive Program) trainer and we got our first (mustang) in October, so through the Bureau of Land Management, I'm basically a self-contractor. The BLM partners up with the Mustang Heritage Foundation and they help fund the program throughout the United States."

Overpopulation and slaughter

It's the rapid growth of the herds that makes for an issue involving both the government and horse lovers.

"They can double in four to five years," Dawn says.

For example, she says, at the Beatys Butte Herd Management Area near Lakeview the last gather was in 2015. The BLM gathered 100 horses, removed 50 and returned 25 mares using fertility control. She adopted one in 2015.

In another herd, 1,500 were gathered in 2015 and returned only 100 — 60 studs and 40 mares to the range.

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Wyden: Expect feds to mobilize firefighters

Senator says new norm assumes multiple fires at once in several states, requiring more money

By **PETER WONG**
Oregon Capital Bureau

SALEM — U.S. Sen. Ron Wyden says he is awaiting an announcement by President Biden's administration about a mobilization plan for firefighters and equipment for widespread forest fires in the West.

The Oregon Democrat told reporters Saturday, June 26, that such a mobilization plan is likely to require more money as well. He based his observation on a June 17 hearing of the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee, which heard a presentation by Chief Vicki Christiansen about Biden's 2022 budget request for the U.S. Forest Service.

That budget year starts Oct. 1.

"I do think it will take additional resources," Wyden, who sits on that committee, said. "I think in a matter of days, the Biden administration will be outlining the steps that I have touched on that constitutes its strategy against this grave threat."

"I believe what we will hear about is making sure there are personnel available in the West to fight multiple fires at the same time. This is a departure from the past. Usually we have one big fire and other western states would chip in to help the state that was hit the hardest. Now, we are talking about something that is unprecedented: Big fires simultaneously throughout the West."

Wyden led the committee for about one year, from 2013 to 2014, when he took over the tax-writing Finance Committee, which he now leads again after Democrats became the Senate's majority party with Vice President Kamala Harris the tie-breaker in a 50-50 chamber.

Wyden continues to sit on the Energy and Natural Resources Committee as the No. 2 Democrat behind Chairman Joe Manchin, of West Virginia. Senate rules allow one committee chairmanship per member.

Budget details are decided by the Appropriations Committee; Oregon Sen. Jeff Merkley leads the subcommittee that oversees the Forest Service.

Wyden spoke on a weekend when temperatures exceeded 100 in virtually all of Oregon, and drought affects most of the state.

Wyden and Merkley toured Oregon twice in the aftermath of the 2020 Labor Day wildfires, which affected all four metropolitan areas on the westside — Portland, Salem, Eugene and Medford — with wildfire smoke or worse. (The Alameda fire swept through communities south of Medford and destroyed an estimated 2,500 homes, the largest concentrated loss statewide.)

Wildfires also burned on the central coast, Central Oregon, and near Roseburg and Grants Pass.

Wyden says he expects one element of the response plan to be cooperation among the agencies responsible for forest firefighting. "Local, state and federal firefighters are going to be tightly coordinated in

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