

THE OBSERVER

SERVING UNION AND WALLOWA COUNTIES SINCE 1896

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COVID-19

Area teen among state's youngest fatalities

By **LIZZY ACKER**
The Oregonian

UNION COUNTY — The Oregon Health Authority on Thursday, Aug. 12, announced a 19-year-old woman had died from COVID-19. The Union County woman is one of only four Oregonians younger than 20 to die with COVID-19 since the pandemic began, and she appears to be the third person in her extended family to die from the virus in a matter of weeks.

According to the health authority, the teen tested positive for coronavirus July 27 and died Aug. 10 at Providence Portland Medical Center. She had underlying conditions, according to the state. The death is the 29th in Union County since the pandemic started last year.

A family member, reached on Facebook, declined to comment. But people who know the family told The Oregonian/OregonLive that the young woman was the granddaughter of a Union County couple who died from COVID-19 within days of each other.

The Oregon Health Authority last week reported two COVID-19 victims from Union County whose ages and dates of death match: a 78-year-old man who died July 31 and a 78-year-old woman who died Aug. 4.

A GoFundMe page set up in response to the deaths of the elderly couple said the couple's daughter and granddaughter had also been hospitalized with COVID-19. People familiar with the family said their granddaughter was a recent graduate of Union High School.

It is unclear if any of the family members were vaccinated, although someone who appears to be part of the extended family posted on Facebook: "Trying to support your wife and

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Alex Wittwer/The Observer

Squad leader Devin Frasier with the Grande Ronde Rappelers prepares to fight a fire northwest of Mount Emily in La Grande on Wednesday, July 21, 2021.

Fire risk in Eastern Oregon at all-time high, according to fire officials

By **ALEX WITTWER**
The Observer

LA GRANDE — Simon Driskell stood outside the Grande Ronde Rappel Base under a thick cloud of morning smoke last month as the air was filled with leftover particulates wafting in from the Bootleg Fire raging in Southern Oregon. He summarized the fire situation in Eastern Oregon with one word — "explosive."

Nearly 50 wildfires have been reported in Eastern Oregon since Aug. 5 — with approximately two-thirds of those events attributed to lightning storms over the weekend according to data from the Blue Mountain Interagency Dispatch Center. In an ordinary year, most of those blazes would register less than a quarter of an acre. This is not an ordinary year.

"It's imperative," Driskell said of fighting fires early. "If we can stop it at an acre, we've done our job. If you never hear of us, we're doing our job perfectly."

The elite group of firefighters



Alex Wittwer/The Observer

Tulley Bloom, left, sends out a text while Andrew Goshgarian prepares to don his flight helmet before deploying to a fire on Monday, Aug. 9, 2021.

is tasked with fighting hard-to-reach blazes via helicopter insertion.

They fight fire with metal; their tools of the trade are chain

saws, shovels and Pulaskis — axes with an attached hoe behind the blade. There's no water, save for their rations of water bottles. There is only a

small team — the first load has only four souls — at the heart of a fire.

See, **Fire/Page A5**

Union County sees slight population increase

Latest census figures show a 1.7% increase

By **DAVIS CARBAUGH**
The Observer

UNION COUNTY — The Census Bureau released the 2020 census on Thursday, Aug. 12, revealing that Union County grew in population by 1.7%.

The population expanded from 25,748 in 2010 to 26,196 in 2020, an increase of 448 residents. Union County is listed as the 23rd largest county out of the 36 in Oregon, while its 1.7% popula-



Alex Wittwer/The Observer

Mount Emily Recreation Area overlooks the city of La Grande on April 18, 2021. The 2020 census revealed a population growth of 1.7% in Union County since 2010.

tion increase was the fifth smallest growth in the state.

"The census is very important because it is

what guides us for the next 10 years when it comes to funding and income needs, among other things," Union County Commis-

MORE INSIDE

Population gains in the Portland metro region, central Oregon and the Willamette Valley drove Oregon's growth over the last decade, according to newly released 2020 U.S. census data. **Page A6**

sioner Donna Beverage said.

The 2020 census was the 24th census to be taken in the U.S. and marked the first time that individuals could respond online.

Local numbers

The population census from April 1, 2020,

reported that the city of La Grande's population stands at 13,026, a slight decrease from the 13,082 reported in 2010. Of that 2020 calculation, 88.6% are white and 52.8% are female.

Portland State University released a database that showed Cove saw a drastic increase, jumping 12.3% from 552 to 620. North Powder saw another rather large population increase — 14.8%.

Union increased by only 1.5%, and Elgin saw a 0.4% rise in population. Imbler was the single city in Union County to decrease in population according to the census,

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WEATHER Full forecast on the back of B section

	Tonight 66 LOW Hazy and smoky	Sunday HOT 98/60 Hazy and very hot
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