United States Department of Agriculture/Contributed Photo

Visitors meet elk herds up close on June 23, 2012. Biologists with the U.S. Forest service and Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife are studying the effects of climate change on Rocky Mountain elk populations using a sample herd in Starkey.

ELK

Continued from Page A1

Rising temperatures are impacting vegetation growth for a number of reasons, Brown said. Snowpacks in mountains are melting earlier and faster each winter and early spring. Previously, snowpacks would melt slowly, allowing rivers and streams to maintain strong flows longer.

"Winter snowpacks before provided a steady, slow delivery of water to the region during the spring and summer," Wisdom said.

Slow melts of winter snow meant that moisture needed for the growth of grasses and forbs was available longer, giving cow elk more time to consume them and develop fat reserves needed for successful pregnancies and lactation.

Another climate change factor that may be hurting elk is that much more of the precipitation the region is receiving is now in the form of rain rather than snow. The change is hurting elk because rain runs off faster from the region in streams and rivers, unlike snowpacks, which slowly disperse moisture as they melt.

"Replacing snow with rain is not good for elk," Wisdom said.

Groundbreaking work

Biologists understand how changing weather patterns impact the growth of grasses and forbs because of extensive studies conducted at the Starkey Project site in the 1990s by Coe and research biologist Bruce Johnson, now both retired. The biologists measured plant growth at plots there throughout the year and determined how changes in temperature and precipitation in the region impacted it.

Wisdom admires how forward thinking Coe and Johnson were when they did their study in the 1990s.

"It took a lot of foresight," he said. "This was before climate change was a major issue."

The plant study conducted in the 1990s by Coe and Johnson was followed by Brown and Coe's study from 2015 to 2019. Brown and Coe measured plant growth at the same plots used in the 1990s study.

The Starkey Project, based at a 25,000-acre fenced facility, is a joint wildlife research project conducted by the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife and the U.S. Forest Service at the Starkey Experimental Forest and Range, 28 miles southwest of La Grande.

The project is designed to measure the population response of deer and elk to the intensively managed forests and rangelands of the future. Research at the Starkey Project began in 1989.

Research done at the Starkey Project is one reason scientists understand how critical it is for cow elk to develop fat reserves needed for successful pregnancies and to raise their young. The Starkey Project site is one of the places that body fat levels of cow elk were measured during a breakthrough study by John and Rachel Cook, a husband and wife team of biologists who were working for the National Council for Air and Stream Improvement.

The Cooks compared levels of body fat in cow elk to their pregnancy rates and their lactation levels. They did this with elk that were easy to handle because they were comfortable around humans after being raised at the Starkey Project site by the Cooks.

"They did groundbreaking work," Wisdom said.

Mountains of animal, plant and atmospheric data have been collected at the Starkey Project site the past three decades. It includes temperature statistics indicating that in the past three decades the average monthly temperatures there has risen 2-1/2 to 3 degrees. Such temperature jumps are concrete and disturbing evidence of a changing world, Wisdom said.

"Climate change has already occurred," he said. "It is not hypothetical."

NEON

Continued from Page A1

to medical facilities, run errands as needed and other means of service.

"We're just trying to fill those gaps that are hard to fill, especially when you're stuck at home," Avila said.

Families in need

There is no needs-based testing for families looking to utilize the NEON program, which aims primarily help families that are greatly affected by a loss of income due to staying in quarantine.

The intake forms specifically state that the family needs to be in isolation due to COVID-19 or contact with someone that has COVID-19. The program seeks to help families that do not receive sick time through their job or are losing significant income because of testing positive for COVID-19.

"It's limited to people who are in isolation or quarantine, not just generally folks that need help unfortunately," Avila said. "But, we can help people sign up for the vaccine or help navigate resources and help them figure out how they can get rental assistance and other things."

In order to request financial assistance in the form of grocery gift cards, families can reach out to the county's WRAP services at 541-962-1610 or covidwrapsvcs@union-county.org, which will connect them with Northeast Oregon Network.

The Observer, File

Northeast Oregon Network, a nonprofit based in La Grande, provides support to families whose incomes are impacted by a quarantine or isolation by offering grocery gift cards and other services.

However, Avila said the majority of families come directly through case investigation and contact tracing.

"One of the questions they ask is if you need services to be able to stay in quarantine," Avila said. "That's when a referral might get made. They might, with your consent, send your information to our coordinator, Sandy, and she might reach out directly."

COVID-19 spike

With the recent COVID-19 spike, more and more families are affected by hardships related to loss of income from staying in quarantine. Northeast Oregon Network is aiming to help families in need financially, but the scope of their assistance has been limited since the start of the pandemic.

"There were other times where we could pay bills and things like that, but we had budget constraints to work with and we aren't able to do that anymore," Avila said.

The nonprofit seeks to aid families dealing with the repercussions of the pandemic, with around-the-clock responses.

"We want people to feel safe when they quarantine," Avila said, "and we're also trying to stop the spread by making sure families quarantine."

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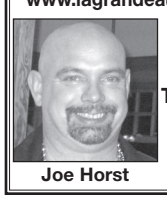
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A demonstrator holds up a sign in opposition to vaccine mandates at the medical freedom rally in La Grande on Saturday, Aug. 28, 2021. Over 200 people took part in the rally, with several speakers voicing their opinions to the crowd.

PROTEST

Continued from Page A1

organize the event alongside the Union County Freedom Alliance and other community groups.

"We were happy with the amount of folks we had come out here," Hove said. "We're going to pursue this and continue to be more forthcoming."

The rally started at 10 a.m. and extended past noon, with members of the demonstration congregating on the sidewalk and City Hall steps with signs and flags. Blake Bars, an organizer from the Union County Freedom Alliance, got the day started with a prayer and statement to the crowd at hand.

"In order to be the best we can be for other people, we have to take care of ourself," Bars said. "We have to do what's right for our own bodies, our own minds and our own souls."

Bars, the owner of Nature's Pantry in La Grande, argued that mask and vaccine mandates are not the only way to deal with the virus.

"There are many ways to go about this that lead to far less death and destruction than the path that was chosen," he said.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reports that the Pfizer-BioNTech and Moderna mRNA vaccines are roughly 90% effective against symptomatic and asymptomatic infection with SARS-CoV-2. The data comes from the HEROES-RECOVER Cohorts, which measured the effectiveness of the vaccine among health care workers and frontline personnel on a weekly basis.

Union County's vaccination percentage by population stands at 51.5%, which is the 26th highest percentage out of 36 counties in Oregon. The FDA approved the Pfizer vaccine on Aug. 23, but many skeptics spoke out against the vaccine at the rally.

Simmons, the final speaker of the day, voiced his questions on the origin of the virus as well as the government's intent in enforcing mandates. Simmons served as a member of the Oregon House of Representatives from 1997 to 2003 and was the 62nd Speaker of the Oregon House of Representatives from 2001 to 2003.

Alex Wittwer/The Observer

A girl holds a sign promoting medical freedom at the rally in La Grande on Saturday, Aug. 28, 2021. During the month of August, Gov. Kate Brown announced mandates that require mask usage at public schools and COVID-19 vaccinations for for teachers and staff and health care workers.

"This community needs to be able to come behind the elected officials that you have here and help them stand firm," he said.

Health care workers speak out

Other speakers at the rally included local teachers and health care workers in opposition to the vaccine requirement at their place of employment.

Kathy Kirby, a nurse at Grande Ronde Hospital for roughly 40 years, stated that the vaccine requirement goes against her belief in choosing your own medical preferences. She also pointed out at that the vaccine mandate could force her into retirement.

"I have compromised a lot over 40 years, but this goes beyond what I'm willing to give up," she said. "It breaks my heart that they're taking away what I love to do."

Just over 70% of health care workers in Union County are vaccinated, a number that is 15th highest out of the counties in the state.

Employees divided on vaccination

Community members who are directly affected by the vaccine mandate spoke adamantly at the rally in front of the large crowd.

"The argument is not about vaccines, it's about your ability to have sovereignty over your body," said Chris Leavitt, a La Grande Middle School counselor.

As a result of the recent surge in COVID-19, Brown announced a vaccine mandate that entails all teachers, staff and volunteers at schools. The deadline to receive the vaccine is Oct. 18.

Leavitt spoke to the crowd and said that the issue is political in nature, stating that the mandates are not about protecting the community or saving beds at the hospital. The Oregon Health Authority's update on Aug. 27 reported that there are currently 40 available ICU beds out of 663 total in Oregon.

At one point in the rally, a woman who said she was an employee at Grande Ronde Hospital but declined to give her name stood across the street and held a counter-protesting sign that read "See you in the ICU."

Continuing the conversation

According to Hove, the rally was planned late Aug. 25 and put into place with little time to prepare. Hove hopes that the rally can unite several groups and organizations, as well as public officials, to combine forces under one common cause. He stated that more rallies will take place in the near future.

The rally garnered a large turnout with little planning, which Hove says could result in finding a larger venue for future demonstrations. The participants were careful to stay out of the street and remain close to City Hall.

"We're going to move forward with this movement," he said. "This is just the beginning."

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