

OUR VIEW

Issues remain after deadline pushed back

The news that more than half of Oregon’s state employees will get an extra six weeks to get inoculated against COVID-19 was welcome, but the question of what happens after the deadline remains unanswered.

Gov. Kate Brown pushed back the earlier October deadline and set Nov. 30 as the final date state employees must be vaccinated. The decision affects more than 20,000 workers.

Yet many people — including many in the health care industry — have no intention of getting vaccinated for a variety of reasons, and that could mean the state will face a new crisis on top of an already spiraling COVID-19 surge.

Now, more than a quarter of all health care workers in Umatilla, Union and Morrow counties remain unvaccinated. All those workers would be fired or forced to resign under the governor’s vaccination mandate.

Dr. Jon Hitzman, Umatilla County’s public health officer, said last week the situation is like a game of chicken.

“Who’s going to relent first?” he asked.

That we’ve reached this point in what is a once-a-century pandemic is beyond troubling. It is sad.

Yet, here we are. If neither side budes — and so far, the governor hasn’t indicated she plans to back down — then the small towns scattered across Eastern Oregon will encounter a new medical emergency because there will be fewer qualified people to attend to those with the virus and people injured or in need of serious care.

In a sense, the area’s hospitals are caught in the middle — a not uncommon situation since the pandemic began — as they must comply with the state mandate but, at the same time, need qualified people to operate effectively.

Ultimately, much of the final consequence of this situation is out of the hands of residents of the region. We can sympathize with health care workers, or we can feel they should all follow the governor’s mandate but, in the end, it will be an individual decision thousands of workers have to make.

So, the real question is what measures and fail-safes are elected leaders across the region proposing to overcome a sudden loss of thousands of qualified workers? What will be the state’s role if the region faces a mass exodus of health care workers? Have local elected leaders reached out to state leaders about the issue? If so, what plan is in the works?

We can’t afford to wait around and see who blinks first. We need actionable plans in case we lose a great number of workers.

EDITORIALS

Unsigned editorials are the opinion of The Observer editorial board. Other columns, letters and cartoons on this page express the opinions of the authors and not necessarily that of The Observer.

LETTERS

• The Observer welcomes letters to the editor. We edit letters for brevity, grammar, taste and legal reasons. We will not publish consumer complaints against businesses, personal attacks against private individuals or comments that can incite violence. We also discourage thank-you letters.
• Letters should be no longer than 350 words and must be signed and carry the author’s name, address and phone number (for verification only). We will not publish

anonymous letters.
• Letter writers are limited to one letter every two weeks.
• Longer community comment columns, such as Other Views, must be no more than 700 words. Writers must provide a recent headshot and a one-sentence biography. Like letters to the editor, columns must refrain from complaints against businesses or personal attacks against private individuals. Submissions must carry the author’s name, address and phone number.
• Submission does not guarantee publication, which is at the discretion of the editor.

SEND LETTERS TO:

letters@lagrandeobserver.com or via mail to Editor, 911 Jefferson Ave., La Grande, OR 97850

Lawsuit is about equal treatment



JAMES
DUNLAP

OTHER VIEWS

My family’s cattle ranching heritage dates back to California’s Gold Rush. Today, my wife, Katie, and I are still going strong, and one day we hope to have a ranch of our own that our daughter can inherit.

We also want our daughter to inherit a country where government treats people equally. COVID-19-related federal farm loan forgiveness does just the opposite, treating people as members of their racial group.

Right now, we live and tend cattle on my parents’ ranch in Baker City. At the same time, we’re buying equipment and building our herd, so we’re ready to start our own farm when we can afford to buy property.

We’ve taken out federal loans to pay for equipment and cattle, which we’re repaying with income from other full-time jobs — Katie works in sales, and I have a job as a railroad engineer. Between our second jobs and the ranch, we easily put in 100-hour workweeks.

As demanding as that has been, it was nothing compared to the pandemic. Meat packinghouses shut down last year, affecting our supply chain. Now we have rising fuel prices, no seasonal workers willing to help with our cattle, and the worst drought in Eastern Oregon’s history.

On top of all that, we have a new baby and more than \$200,000 in outstanding loans. It sounds ludicrous, but the reality is that the

government considers us good enough for federal farm loans, not loan forgiveness, because we have the wrong skin color.

Katie and I heard about the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021, and we were excited because the COVID relief funding included \$4 billion in loan forgiveness up to 120% of USDA loan amounts.

That would have been life-changing for us.

Then one day, while I was on the tractor — where I listen to news and podcasts — I heard that the loan forgiveness was only for “socially disadvantaged farmers,” which, in the government’s eyes, are racial minority farmers and ranchers.

My first thought was, “Socially disadvantaged farmers? Isn’t that anyone like us who has an FSA loan?”

Farm Service Agency, or FSA, operating loans are designed for people who have already been turned down by other lending institutions and cannot get traditional financing anywhere else. We are in our mid-30s, we didn’t have a lot of cash, and we were still building up equity, so the FSA was our only choice.

If Congress decides to forgive these loans, I’ll cheer them on. But there’s no logic behind the use of race to make that decision.

I may be a rancher, but I also have a history degree and a passion for the bedrock principles of our nation’s founding: fairness, justice, liberty.

This loan forgiveness is everything but.

It’s discriminatory and violates the Constitution’s guarantee of equal protection before the law.

To be sure, racial discrimination for any reason is unacceptable. In this case, the government insists it’s making up for the USDA’s past discrimination against Black farmers and ranchers. But the government has already paid billions of dollars to do just that. In any case, past discrimination cannot be remedied with more discrimination.

I credit my wife for what happened next. She and my daughter were shuttling me around to do routine chores, and I told her how farmers in other states are suing to end the USDA’s discrimination. I wanted to do the same in Oregon, but suing the federal government seemed too daunting, time-consuming and expensive.

“I can’t,” I said.

“Yes, you can!” she shot back.

“Because right now, you still have a voice in this country and the opportunity and the right to speak your voice.”

The next day, I contacted Pacific Legal Foundation, and soon afterward, Katie and I filed a federal lawsuit.

To be perfectly clear, our lawsuit is not about money, or loan forgiveness, or the hardworking people who would have received it. It’s about equal treatment for all farmers and ranchers and fighting back when the government does the opposite.

For us, it’s also about setting an example for our daughter so that she might someday embrace and exercise her right as an American to stand up and speak out for her beliefs.

James Dunlap is a rancher residing near Baker City.

SUBSCRIPTION INFORMATION

SUBSCRIBE AND SAVE

NEWSSTAND PRICE: \$1.50
You can save up to 55% off the single-copy price with home delivery.
Call 800-781-3214 to subscribe.

Subscription rates:
Monthly Autopay\$10.75
13 weeks.....\$37.00
26 weeks.....\$71.00
52 weeks.....\$135.00

THE
OBSERVER

An independent newspaper founded in 1896

www.lagrandeobserver.com

Phone: 541-963-3161
Toll free (Oregon): 1-800-781-3214
Email: news@lagrandeobserver.com

Periodicals postage paid at Pendleton, Oregon 97801
Published Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays (except postal holidays) by EO Media Group, 911 Jefferson Ave., La Grande, OR 97850 (USPS 299-260)

The Observer retains ownership and copyright protection of all staff-prepared news copy, advertising copy, photos and news or ad illustrations. They may not be reproduced without explicit prior approval.

COPYRIGHT © 2021

STAFF

Regional publisher.....Karrine Brogotti
Regional circulation director.....Kelli Craft
Interim editor.....Andrew Cutler
News clerk.....Lisa Lester Kelly
Reporter.....Dick Mason
Reporter.....Davis Carbaugh

Multimedia journalist.....Alex Wittwer
Home delivery advisor.....Amanda Fredrick
Advertising representative.....Juli Bloodgood
Advertising representative.....Amy Horn
National accounts coordinator.....Devi Mathson
Graphic design.....Dorothy Kautz
Page design.....Martha Allen

A division of

eoMEDIA

group