SNOW

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Monday morning, Dec. 20, showed 34 inches of snow depth and a snow water equivalent of 7.5 inches, which is about 14% above average. The seven-day outlook is for 2-1/2 more inches of snow water, which is the more important measurement for predicting spring and summer water supplies.

Emigrant Springs, at 3,800 feet, is southeast of Pendleton and northwest of La Grande. With 12 inches of snowpack, including 6 inches of new snow, the site is 52% below average with

1.8 inches of snow water equivalent. The five-day forecast predicts another 7 inches will fall.

Bowman Springs, at

4,530 feet, is west of La

Grande. Snowpack is 10 inches and 100% of the average. The site is forecasted to receive 6 more inches in the next five days. Lucky Strike, at 4,970 feet and south of Pilot Rock, has a snowpack of 7 inches, which is 72% of

normal. Six inches are predicted to fall in the next five Spout Springs Ski Area sits at 5,000 feet west of Elgin and has a snowpack of 31 inches. Eighteen

inches are forecasted to fall

Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian, File

Vehicles traverse Interstate 84 on Friday, Dec. 10, 2021, near Meacham. The National Weather Service's Climate Prediction Center reports Northeastern Oregon should expect a 50& to 60% chance for above-average snowfall and a 50-60% chance of lower-than-average temperatures due to the La Nina conditions.

in the next five days. The Milk Shakes site

border east of Walla Walla

on the Oregon/Washington

has 42 inches of snowpack with 24% snow/ water equivalent. This is 10% above average, and 18 inches are predicted to fall in the next five days.

On the Union County side of the Wallowa Mountains just up the hill from Cove, Moss Springs, at 5,760 feet, has recorded 25 inches of snowpack with 6.6 inches of snow water equivalent — 93% of normal for this time of year. Eleven inches of new snow is predicted to fall in the next five days.

In Wallowa County, Mount Howard, at 7,900 feet, has 20 inches of snow with 4.6 inches of snow water equivalent, putting it at 75% of normal. Just over the ridge at Aneroid Lake, 7,400 feet, conditions are drier. The site has recorded a snow water content of 4.1 inches, which is 58% of average. The next five days should see 22 inches of new snowfall.

Across Eastern Oregon, watersheds are still reporting lower-than-average numbers for snowpack. The Grande Ronde-Burnt Powder-Imnaha Basin is at 96%, the Malheur Basin is at 94%, John Day Basin is recording 90%, and Harney Basin is at 91%, while the highest for the region, the Umatilla-Walla Walla Basin, is at 100%.

DELIVERY

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The delivery will cap a career during which Varney has walked about 57,000 miles while doing his 10-mile route, the equivalent of circling the Earth more than twice.

The "globe trekking" has not taken a toll on Varney he has called in sick about as often as history buffs discover envelopes with old postmarks from ghost towns in Northeastern Oregon. Varney estimates that he has missed just five days since starting work as a letter carrier in 1998.

"I feel like we are a team and I would be letting the team down if I missed work," he said.

More than postal customers

La Grande Postmaster Kelly Carreiro said Varney is remarkably dedicated.

"He's a real workhorse. If his name is on the schedule, he will be at work," he said.

Varney is a workhorse who is as popular with his customers as a Kentucky Derby winner at Churchill Downs. Carrero said Varney is so well liked that many times when people on his route call La Grande's post office to complain about something, they make a point, without being asked, of emphasizing that Varney is not linked to anything

they are complaining about. "They really care about him," Carreiro said.

Varney has 850 homes and businesses on his route. "They are my extended

family," he said. It is a family the letter

carrier hands more than mail to — he also offers a hand of assistance when possible.

For example, he has changed light bulbs for people facing physical challenges and provided encouraging words to those who appear upset or lonely. He also has helped people get access to their food. Varney recalled that once a woman greeted him with a jar of pickles. He mistakenly thought it was a gift.

"Then, she said, 'I've been waiting for you all day. Will you open this?" Varney said.



Dean Varney returns to his truck after delivering a package on Second Street in La Grande on Tuesday, Dec. 21, 2021.

The letter carrier was touched when a senior on his route, who was moving to an assisted care center, insisted

away party. Varney said he is keenly aware that mail carriers can be the only people many homebound individuals get to communicate with.

that he attend his going-

"We are the one point of contact some people have during the day," he said.

The mail carrier also enjoys speaking with the younger people on his route. Varney noted that recently an 18-year-old told Varney he is the only postman he remembers having.

"I told him, 'I remember when your mom and dad brought you home from the hospital," he said.

Military career

Varney joined the postal service after a 12-year career in the U.S. Army as a helicopter pilot. He was first stationed in Fairbanks, Alaska, where he made many flights to rescue people climbing 20,000-foot Mount McKinley, the tallest moun-

tain in the United States. He later was transferred to the Middle East where he flew a helicopter during Operation Desert Storm, when the United States was part of a coalition that pushed Iraqi forces out of Kuwait. Varney never found himself under enemy fire but he was threatened on flights by shrapnel from exploding SCUD missiles that flew at his helicopter.

Varney, who saw some of his friends killed during Operation Desert Storm, emerged from the military unscathed, but with a strong

attracted him to the postal service.

"I had 12 addresses in nine years while in the military. This job gives me an opportunity to go back to the same home every night," he said.

Varney said serving as an Army helicopter pilot has few similarities to working as a mail carrier.

"They both have cerebral challenges but other than that they are worlds apart," he said.

Some told Varney that working as a mail carrier would be stressful, However, he said that the tension he experienced as a military helicopter pilot, where he sometimes flew at treetop level in the dark while wearing night vision goggles, was far greater than what he has experienced as a letter carrier.

"I'm not feeling the stress," he said.

A rough beginning

Varney has delivered mail on his route — named City Route 4 — for 12 years. Prior to taking over the route from Lyle Jensen, who is now retired and still lives in La Grande, Varney was a substitute carrier, filling in for all of La Grande's five city routes. The position was particularly challenging because Varney often found himself doing routes he was

unfamiliar with. "That was much more difficult than what I'm doing

now," he said. The world is a different place than it was when Varney first started as a letter carrier, and the items delivered by postal workers reflects this. He said that,

ages each day. Those days are gone forever.

"Today that number is unheard of," he said.

Varney said on average he delivers four times the number of parcels he first did - and during the Christmas season, he delivers well over 200 parcels a day. He also said the number of packages he delivers has jumped since the COVID-19 pandemic started.

"The pandemic put online shopping into a whole new gear," he said.

The huge increase in packages is making the job of mail carriers more challenging because their trucks are not big enough for a large quantity of parcels. Carriers often have to make return trips to the post office to pick up packages while doing their routes. It also means that it takes longer to load trucks because packages must be packed in a precise manner to make efficient use of space. Varney said he has enormous respect for the professionalism and dedication La Grande's mail carriers have shown in dealing with the

"We have an amazing staff," he said.

A 'bittersweet' day

Varney said he picked Christmas Eve as his last day for two reasons.

"I didn't want to leave at the peak of the season, and I wanted to give myself a Christmas present," he said.

Varney is looking forward to spending more time with his family, including his wife, Michelle, and daughters, Shylinn and Emily. Varney noted that Shylinn and her husband, Michael Baty, are expecting their first child in January. It is Varney's first grandchild.

Varney, who lives in Imbler, is also looking forward to operating a small hobby farm and traveling with his wife. Despite what he has to look forward to, he knows that he will feel a wide range of feelings on Christmas Eve.

"It will be bittersweet. I am leaving my team, partners and an old neighborhood," he said, "but I will be starting a new chapter of

HOSPITAL

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Having worked in the medical field since 1987, she stated that hospital employees understand the spectrum of reasons why patients might be in the hospital on Christmas Day — from mothers in labor to emergency situations.

"We're here as a team to help these guys and help relieve some of their stress the best that we can and hopefully get them back home to their families," Schatzlein said.

In the laundry services department, holiday work schedules are planned ahead of time. However, employees work together to make the best of the situation for each other. Kim Clark, a laundry services employee who has been at Grande Ronde Hospital for 12 years, volunteered this year to take the shift of someone who worked last Christmas. "We try to give the

people with small kids time to spend with their children," Clark said. "Everybody is willing to work with each other in that respect."

Robin Talley, a phlebotomist in the hospital lab, volunteered to work on the holiday for the first time in her four years at the hospital so another employee could enjoy the holidays during her child's first Christmas.

"I thought that since I don't have kids, I'd pick up the shift and work," Talley said.

According to Talley, employees who work together on holidays bond over the shared experience — she referred to this year's group as "the dream team."

Every department at the hospital differs, as some work on call

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throughout the holidays. This is the case for Fritz Flowers, a biomedical technician who has worked at Grande Ronde Hospital for five years.

"We all take turns and rotate," Flowers said of the technical services department. "On holidays we usually have a reduced staff, but we still have to be prepared for everything, just like any other day.'

Biomedical technicians provide preventative maintenance on all hospital equipment throughout the building and at the hospital's clinics. The staff rotates who is on call every weekend and holiday throughout the year, which Flowers says is part of a bigger, collective cause.

"We're all here for the same reason, it doesn't matter what department," he said.

Flowers noted that working on holidays and providing the same quality service day in and day out is an essential part of working in a hospital.

"Everybody has the same end goal," Flowers said. "We have some great people here and amazing community support."

For hospital workers across the country, the pandemic has created unprecedented times. After a long year, the tireless efforts of those at Grande Ronde Hospital persist into the end of 2021 with bright hopes for 2022.

"People get sick and you can't predict that, so we all have to be here to help them medically and to make sure that they can get the best treatment possible," Schatzlein said. "We all understand that, the ones who have to work. It's part of our job and it's part of our focus."

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