

HAPPY NEW YEAR!

THE OBSERVER

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BAKER COUNTY

Campaign aims to protect bighorns

Illness continues to threaten future of Baker County's two bighorn sheep herds

By JAYSON JACOBY
Baker City Herald

BAKER CITY — As the helicopter flew over the ridges and canyons of eastern Baker County recently, Brian Ratliff was seeing more bighorn sheep than he expected.

But the news wasn't exclusively of the good variety.

It was the sheep Ratliff didn't see during the flight over the Lookout Mountain unit — lambs — that define the continuing threat to the future of Oregon's biggest herd of Rocky Mountain bighorns.

Ratliff, the district wildlife biologist at the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife's Baker City office, counted just four lambs during the aerial census.

All of those lambs, born in 2021, were in small groups of sheep in the northern part of the unit, which is bordered on the north by state Highway 86 and on the south by Interstate 84.

The scarcity of lambs shows that a bacterial infection remains widespread in the Lookout Mountain unit and puts the long-term health of the herd in peril.

ODFW biologists believe all of the 65 to 70 lambs born in the unit in spring 2020 died due to the same strain of Mycoplasma ovipneumoniae bacteria.

It was first detected in the Lookout Mountain herd, which included about 400 bighorns, in February 2020 when dead sheep were found near the Snake River Road above Brownlee Reservoir.

Lab tests of tissue samples from dead sheep confirmed the strain of bacteria, the first time it had been found in bighorn sheep in Oregon.

Half a herd

During an aerial count in late 2018, biologists counted 403 big-

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LOOKING AHEAD

City, county officials hopeful for what is to come in 2022

By DAVIS CARBAUGH and DICK MASON
The Observer

UNION COUNTY — Coming off another difficult year in which COVID-19 impacted the way we go about everyday life, many are ready to turn the page to 2022. While the omicron variant presents yet another unknown, local public officials are optimistic about the coming year.

"My hopes are definitely for less COVID and that we can get past this pandemic that we're in right now," Union County Commissioner Donna Beverage said. "Hopefully a lot of our businesses that have been struggling can get back on their feet."

Beverage is not the only one ready for the pandemic to ease in the coming year, as 2021 saw an array of mandates that came and went. Union Mayor Leonard Flint said he is eager for COVID-19 to disappear from the scene.

"I would like to see life get back to normal again after two years," he said. "It has been a long haul."

Cove School District Superintendent Earl Pettit hopes that COVID-19 will not be the disruptive force it has been.

"I hope that we are able to focus on school and education. We have spent the past two years focusing just on operating. I would like to see us move forward again," he said.

While 2021 saw varying opinions on mandates and other matters throughout the county, Beverage believes local government can be united in serving the constituents to the best of their ability.

"Hopefully we can have less partisan politics and more talking about what issues are important to us as Americans," she said.

La Grande School District Superintendent George Mendoza said he would like people to continue to treat each other with



Alex Wittwer/The Observer

Ashley O'Toole, left, and Tyson Brooks set up the New Year's Eve ball and sign on top of the Phoenix Apartments building on Depot Street in La Grande on Sunday, Dec. 26, 2021.

dignity, respect and compassion. The educator also hopes that COVID-19 will have less of an impact on our lives.

"We're in a historically difficult time. Hopefully, 2022 will bring back opportunities for normalcy," he said.

Projects in 2022

Elgin Mayor Risa Hallgarth is looking forward to the city of Elgin boosting its infrastructure in 2022.

"I hope that we can get to a lot of the projects we have grants for. I also hope that 2022 is a better year for everyone," she said.

Hallgarth referred to projects such as road paving work and the replacement of a bridge.

Island City Mayor Dave Comfort said he is eager for upgrades to be made in the Island City Area Sanitation District's collection system, which pumps wastewater to La Grande for treatment. The sanitation district has received a loan from the Oregon Department of Environmental Quality for this work.

The past year in Union saw the opening of the Catherine Creek Community Center, a local venue that preserved the historic

former Union Methodist Church. Beverage, a board member of the community center, stated that the building will continue to host more events and be utilized by the local community. For instance, the Elgin Opera House plans to host several of its traveling shows at the Catherine Creek Community Center in 2022.

"Seeing that move forward and being used more and more every day is exciting," Beverage said.

Draws for the community

Another renovation on the horizon in Union County is the Liberty Theatre, which is approaching a potential opening in 2022. Ashley O'Toole, board chair of the Liberty Theatre Foundation, noted that the progress on the historic venue is nearing the finish line.

"The overall progress of the theater is reaching that point where we're making the decision about finish work — floor covering, light fixtures," O'Toole said.

The downtown La Grande theater has

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Study: Nearly 1 in 5 Oregonians have no plans to get vaccinated

By FEDOR ZARKHIN
The Oregonian

SALEM — Nearly half of Oregonians know someone who died from COVID-19, yet their familiarity with the disease doesn't make them more likely to get vaccinated against it, University of Oregon researchers have found.

That's just one of the illuminating bits of information to be gleaned from the research, which is based on responses from a representative sample of more than 700 Oregonians.

The researchers' findings about unvaccinated Oregonians are particularly pertinent now, given that the highly contagious omicron variant is expected to sweep the state in the coming weeks.

Dr. Benjamin Clark and Robert Parker, from the University of Oregon's Institute for Policy Research and Engagement, surveyed 722 Oregonians on a host of COVID-19 sub-topics. The researchers tried to get to the bottom of, among other



Alex Wittwer/The Observer, File

Demonstrators outside of La Grande City Hall protest against vaccine mandates on Saturday, Sept. 18, 2021.

things, people's perceptions of the virus, who is and is not getting vaccinated, and the impact of disinformation.

Their findings, published last week, showed that while vaccinations have climbed in recent months, there are stubborn pockets of resistance that appear unlikely to budge.

"Despite a high vaccination

rate, parts of Oregon will struggle more than others in the coming months," the researchers wrote.

There are signs, though, that vaccination numbers could continue to climb. Namely, the share of Oregonians who say they definitely won't get shots dropped to 18%, down 4 percentage points since the researchers' last survey, in spring. The difference falls

REVISED PROJECTIONS

A new projection from Oregon Health and Science University shows COVID-19 hospitalizations peaking at about 1,250 in mid-February, driven by a surge in the omicron variant. That's a significant drop from earlier forecasts. Page A6

just outside the sample's margin of error, so there is a chance the results don't reflect a significant change in attitudes in the real world.

The greatest vaccination challenge, per the researchers, centers on the rural-urban divide. The researchers' statistical analysis confirms that counties with the lowest vaccination rates have the highest COVID-19 death rates. Those counties also happen to be exclusively rural and include Lake, Malheur, Harney, Grant and Gilliam counties.

About 1 in 3 rural Oregonians hasn't had even one shot of the vaccine, compared to

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WEATHER Full forecast on the back of B section

Friday -2 Low Bitterly cold	Saturday 24/14 Cloudy and cold	Sunday 23/20 Very cold
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Email story ideas to news@lagrandeobserver.com. More contact info on Page A4.



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OSAA WRESTLING CHAMPIONSHIPS ON THE MOVE

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