

# ODOT cautions drivers to obey road closures

By BEN LONERGAN

East Oregonian

MILTON-FREEWATER — Vaun Miller had been dodging winter weather for four days, trying to make it home Jan. 2 to Milton-Freewater following a trip to San Diego.

But an early January snowstorm spelled trouble for the 72-year-old Miller, bringing his drive to an end about 2 miles short of his home.

“I stopped — and the next thing I know a gust of wind hit me and it swirled and took me off the side of the road,” he said.

While the highway had been closed for hours before, Miller said he didn’t encounter a barricade when leaving Pendleton and a few gas station employees he had talked to were unaware of a closure at the time. Miller said he recalls seeing a barricade parallel to the highway at the road’s usual closure point — the intersection with Highway 331 — but thought the sign referred to a closure of Highway 331 based on the way it was positioned.

“So on I went,” he said. “And within 3 miles it was getting crazy, crazy, crazy winds — I would guesstimate at least 60 (mph).”

Despite the inclement weather, Miller pushed on. He said he encountered several other vehicles and was traveling about 20-25 mph for most of the distance. As he was approaching milepost 24, the wind kicked up higher, and Miller said he slowed to a stop as he was no longer able to see the road. The next thing he knew, the wind pushed his car into the gully.

“I had a few people stop and ask me if I was OK,” he said. “And then it was about an hour before (Oregon Department of Transportation) got there.”

Robin Berheim, district operations coordinator for ODOT in Pendleton, was responding to a stuck snowplow in the area when she came across Miller and gave him a ride home to Milton-Freewater.

“I was real surprised

when she said, ‘Oh, you know it’s closed,’” he said.

The next morning, snow had buried Miller’s car to its roofline.

“It was buried for four days and we couldn’t find it,” Miller said.

## Conditions among worst in 28 years

While Miller returned a week later to dig out his belongings from the car, it was not until Wednesday, Jan. 26, that he was able to free his vehicle. Miller said he spent several days digging and received some help from passing motorists as he tried to free the car in the weeks since.

“I hate even thinking about what we would’ve found the following day had she not gotten to that car,” said Robert Cash, ODOT transportation maintenance manager in Pendleton.

Berheim said road conditions the night of Jan. 2-3, were among the worst she had seen in her 28 years with the department. High winds and heavy snowfall resulted in snowdrifts several feet high and obscured visibility.

“It was almost the whole length of Highway 11,” she said. “I’ve seen it probably that bad around the Athena area, but I’ve never seen it go from one end to the other.”

According to Tom Strandberg, ODOT Region 5 public information officer, the department reported more than 20 abandoned or stuck vehicles and tow trucks were brought in the following day to help clear the road so snow removal could resume.

“We were worried sick about what we would find the following day with all of those vehicles that weren’t following the road closure,” Cash said.

Cash said the high wind speeds meant plow operators were forced to plow into the wind, putting them against the road’s direction of travel. He added this practice is usually not a problem when the roads are closed, but the number of people ignoring the closure meant plows would have to stop and back up to allow for oncoming traffic.

“Generally speaking in



Photos by Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian, File  
An abandoned vehicle sits in a roadside snowdrift on Friday, Jan. 14, 2022, near milepost 24 on Highway 11. Oregon Department of Transportation staff picked up the vehicle’s driver, Vaun Miller, 72, of Milton-Freewater, after the car became stuck in the snow Jan. 2.



An Oregon Department of Transportation truck on Monday, Jan. 3, 2022, blocks Highway 11 near its intersection with Highway 331. Roads were closed in much of Eastern Oregon due to winter weather.



A road closed sign on Monday, Jan. 3, 2022, blocks access to Spring Hollow Road at its intersection with Highway 11 in Adams.

the evenings and wee hours of the night we don’t have a lot of traffic and most of the traffic we do have is locals who understand the closures — that night it just seemed like we had a nonstop parade of vehicles,” Cash said.

The road closure, which began at roughly 4:45 p.m. and lasted 24 hours, came about as high winds and heavy snowfall made it too dangerous for ODOT employees to maintain the road to safe conditions, according to the department.

“We closed the highway and started putting signs

out,” Cash said. “Once we got the closures put up, I told my crew that we were going to get off of that section of road.”

## Follow signs, stay safe

Cash urged people to obey road closure signs where posted and check tripcheck.com frequently when inclement weather arrives.

While ODOT was struggling with staffing shortages heading into the winter months, Cash said more people would not necessarily have helped reopen

the highway any quicker, but rather equipment limitations were a more prominent concern.

“Our resources are so thin,” he said. “We have 450 lane miles to take care of with five snowplows.”

In addition to plow concerns, Cash said the depth of some of the snowdrifts necessitated bringing in snowblowers from Elgin, Meacham and Bend to help clear the highway completely.

“Just being able to get enough equipment in to open up the highway as

quick as possible was a challenge,” he said. “That all took time.”

ODOT encouraged drivers to be cognizant of road conditions and be prepared for inclement weather when traveling in the winter months.

Berheim advised drivers thinking of going past road closures to think about the consequences of their actions on their safety and the safety of those working.

“They’re putting themselves at risk,” she said. “And anyone who has to go retrieve them.”

# Project to protect watershed from fire proceeds

By JAYSON JACOBY

Baker City Herald

BAKER CITY — The Wallowa-Whitman National Forest continues to plan a project designed to reduce the risk of a wildfire spreading through Baker City’s watershed.

“This is an important project for the people of Baker City,” said Kendall Cikanek, Whitman District ranger. “Protecting people’s drinking water is right at the top when you’re defining high-value areas.”

The 10,000-acre watershed is on the east slopes of the Elkhorn Mountains west of Baker City. Almost the entire area is managed by the Wallowa-Whitman. The watershed is closed to public entry to protect water quality, although the city allows big game hunting, with a permit, when the fire danger isn’t high.

In addition, one road open to the public — Forest Road 6510, which climbs to Marble Creek Pass — bisects the watershed.

Both Forest Service and Baker City officials have for more than a quarter century



Sue Holtz/Contributed Photo, File

Smoke rises from a lightning-sparked fire in the Baker City watershed in August 2019.

sought to reduce the risk of wildfire in the heavily forested watershed.

City officials worry that a large blaze could cause ash and mud to pollute the streams and springs that the city diverts into its water supply pipeline. The watershed supplies almost all of the city’s drinking water. The city has one supplementary well — which is fortified with water from the watershed — and a second well is scheduled to come online later in 2022.

A fire, in addition to forcing the city to rely on other water sources for a

period, could also lead to the city needing to build a water filtration plant, which would likely cost more than \$10 million.

(The city doesn’t mechanically filter its drinking water. The water is disinfected with chlorine and with ultraviolet light to protect against bacteria and parasites such as giardia and cryptosporidium.)

“The Baker City watershed is a major asset to the city of Baker City and our community,” said Michelle Owen, the city’s public works director. “We are partnering with the U.S. Forest Service to make

the watershed less susceptible to a catastrophic wildfire. Removing excessive fuels and providing for fire breaks along the pipeline road are really the city’s top priorities and in line with the city council’s goals. This type of a project has been discussed for many years and it’s great that there is finally some real progress being made.”

There hasn’t been a large fire in the watershed for more than a century, but such a blaze likely is overdue, based on a study of fire scars on old trees in the watershed conducted by researchers from the University of Washington in the mid-1990s.

In the late 1990s the Wallowa-Whitman spent more than \$2.2 million to cut trees and light prescribed fires to create fuelbreaks on the fringes of the watershed. Most of the work was on the south end and along the road under which is buried the city’s water pipeline,

with a goal of giving fire crews a place to head off a blaze moving toward the watershed.

The project the Wallowa-Whitman is working on now would expand on those efforts, Cikanek said.

He hopes to distribute to the public what’s known as a “scoping letter” by the end of February.

That letter in effect introduces the watershed project and gives its basic outline.

Cikanek said the field studies for the project have been done, and the next major step for the

Wallowa-Whitman is to write an environmental assessment, a document that examines the project in detail and studies its potential environmental effects.

A 1969 federal law, the National Environmental Policy Act, requires federal agencies to conduct such environmental studies.

Cikanek said his goal is to finish the environmental assessment for the watershed project in early 2023. Once Wallowa-Whitman officials have approved that, work could get started, barring legal challenges.

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