

FOOD

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monetary goal.

The month-long event is a part of a larger statewide month of giving initiative, which targets food insecurity in Oregon. Eastern partners closely with Community Connection of Northeast Oregon, which assists in distributing the food throughout Union County. The food drive also gives back to students and faculty at the university who could benefit.

A big emphasis for Gekeler has been student involvement, which she says has been instrumental in coming up with new ideas to collect donations.

“They are so hands-on,” she said of the students. “When we were thinking about different ways to raise funds, they were involved in the planning and the building, and they are incredible.”

Students have participated in the food drive in a number of ways, including gathering donations outside of Safeway every Friday.

Regan Braden, a junior at EOU, noted that asking for donations was a bit of an unusual experience at first, but seeing the community’s involvement firsthand has been a promising experience. Braden played a big role in organizing the food drive’s donation efforts.

“I think it shows how amazing this community is,” Braden said. “As a person who was asking for donations and speaking with the people who were contributing, they were all very willing and very interested in it.”

Gekeler and Braden noted that a dollar donation equates to four pounds of food that can be donated. Communicating this equation has helped them promote their efforts and also created a shift toward monetary donations during the food drive.

“A lot of people maybe don’t have four pounds of food to easily donate in their pantry, but most people have a dollar or change in their car they can add to our donation fund,” Gekeler said.



Alex Wittwer/EO Media Group

Organizers and volunteers with the Eastern Oregon University annual food drive pose for a group photo outside Loso Hall on Thursday, Feb. 17, 2022. The group is nearing its goal of collecting 1,000 pounds of goods and \$5,000 in cash to donate to local food banks.

“Student involvement is an important element of this fundraiser because they directly benefit from its proceeds. A portion of the proceeds and donations goes to the county’s food bank while a portion goes to EOU’s food bank. On top of this direct benefit, the drive is a good opportunity to get EOU students connected to the community.”

Student body president Alexa Jamison

In addition to gathering donations on campus and in La Grande, Eastern athletics programs are involved in the food drive — the event has become a competition to see who could raise more donations. At the basketball games on Feb. 12, the teams raised \$500 on raffle tickets. The football team gathered upward of 750 pounds of food, while the basketball teams gathered enough money for 780 pounds of food.

“It’s just so amazing to see how we can all come together for a good

cause,” Braden said. “I think it really just shows the love and good in the community.”

Student body president Alexa Jamison helped organize student efforts for the food drive, from garnering volunteers to fundraising events.

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bank. On top of this direct benefit, the drive is a good opportunity to get EOU students connected to the community.”

Coming from a background in a big city, she noted that the month-long fundraising effort has illuminated the sense of community in La Grande.

“I think that it shows how caring the EOU and La Grande communities are,” Jamison said.

Raising awareness

Another on-campus initiative to raise funds for the food drive involves a direct deduction from employees’ paychecks. Faculty members can choose an amount, large or small, to deduct from their compensation by the month or one time. The system aligns with Community Connection and puts the donation directly to use in Union County.

Gekeler noted that the food drive accomplishes two important tasks, spotlighting an awareness of food insecurity in Union County and the importance of looking out for your

neighbors.

“There are people hungry in our community and we’re responsible for each other,” she said. “I think in the last two years or so, people are really getting on board more than ever.”

The food drive also takes place in the winter, which is considered a peak time for food insecurity. Gekeler, who has a background in social services, noted that limited job opportunities and colder weather during the winter months contribute to the trend.

“In the winter months, food insecurity gets significantly worse,” Gekeler said. “Having the Union County Warming Station as another area I touch on, we see that people are struggling in the winter more than ever.”

Since its establishment more than 20 years ago, the food drive has collected more than 180,000 pounds worth of food donations.

“I always focused on a theme of basic household food security, meaning some certainty of supply,” Grigsby said. “As far as

wealth in this country, there is no reason why anyone should be worried about their next meal, or actually even going hungry.”

EOU food drive volunteers throughout the month will continue to collect donations outside of Safeway and Grocery Outlet on Fridays as well as organize on-campus collections. Donation pickups can be coordinated by emailing Gekeler at kegekeler@eou.edu, and students looking to get involved can contact Jamison at aspres@eou.edu. EOU’s student-run emergency food bank can be reached at 541-786-3663.

“I think as employees of EOU, our job is to work with the students and help them,” Gekeler said. “They’re learning so many things from their professors that are going to prepare them for their careers. Efforts like this prepare them as human beings. We want to have that next generation of compassionate leaders who are going to go out and change the world and rally the troops.”

DROUGHT

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Farther south, the North Fork John Day River at Monument is recording 83% of its 30-year median. The basin has one stronghold for water: Camas Creek near Ukiah at 346% of the median.

The Grande Ronde-Burnt-Powder-Imnaha Basin is averaging between 83% and 95% of the 30-year median with one anomaly: Bear Creek, outside of Wallowa, is at 216%.

Snowpack has been holding up, despite the lack of precipitation in the last five weeks.

In the Blue Mountains between La Grande and Pendleton, Emigrant Springs has 45 inches of snowpack and is 148%



Alex Wittwer/EO Media Group

A dwindling snowpack rests atop Mount Harris, near Imbler, on Friday, Feb. 18, 2022. Several weeks without significant snow or rain are creating concerns of another drought year.

above average with 10% snow water equivalent.

High Ridge Snotel east of Pendleton has 52 inches

of snowpack, 5% below its average, but with 33% snow water equivalent. Milkshakes Snotel on the Wash-

ington state line has 71 inches of snowpack, which is 87% of normal with 35% snow water equivalent.

In the Wallowa, Mount Howard has 27 inches of snowpack, 25% below average with 32% snow water equivalent. On the south side of the range, Moss Springs Snotel is recording 49 inches of snowpack, which is 15% below average with a snow water equivalent of 32%.

In Baker County, Schneider Meadows Snotel is recording 22% below normal precipitation and has 55 inches of snowpack with a 33% snow water equivalent.

While the snowpack and water levels look pretty good right now, Northeastern Oregon is facing down the barrel of another drought year, according to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. According to www.drought.gov, Wallowa County was down

0.69 inches of precipitation in January. The entire county is considered to be in severe drought status, and 44.36% of the county is experiencing extreme drought conditions.

Union County is down 0.27 inches of its average precipitation. The entire county is considered to be under severe drought conditions while 4.3% is experiencing extreme drought. And Umatilla County is down 0.2 inches of precipitation from a normal January. This puts all of the county under severe drought conditions, with 33.77% considered to be under extreme drought conditions.

The extended forecast for Northeastern Oregon calls for 33% to 40% below normal precipitation with a 40% to 50% chance of above normal temperatures.

MASKS

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“The number of cases are still significantly higher than they have been for most of the pandemic, but the decline over the past week provides relief for hospitals operating under severe strain.”

Gov. Jay Inslee of Washington said that he would order indoor-mask mandates dropped March 21, a day after Oregon’s projected date. Inslee said his order would include schools.

New Mexico dropped indoor-mask mandates immediately on Feb. 17. California announced plans to move COVID-19 from pandemic to endemic status, meaning it would be handled as a major but manage-

able ongoing risk.

“We’re going to live with this,” California Gov. Gavin Newsom told the New York Times. “We’re not in denial of the hell that has been the last two years. This is not like World War II, where we can have a ticker-tape parade and announce the end.”

OHSU’s forecast showed a strong trend toward significantly lower infections, hospitalizations and eventually, deaths.

OHSU said Oregon masking rates have remained among the highest in the nation, with surveys showing roughly 80% of residents have continued to cover up indoors.

Oregon was one of the last states to drop outdoor-mask mandates when Brown lifted the restriction in November.

Graven said the forecast was starting to show state residents have started gathering indoors again with people outside of their households.

“Those rates have begun to tick up,” the OHSU statement that accompanied Thursday’s forecast said.

Graven cited Denmark as an example of where omicron seemed on the way out, only to rebound because of the public getting ahead of pandemic policies.

“They gave up on public health measures at what they thought was the peak — and it turned out not to be the peak and they had even more people hospitalized,” Graven said.

The highly contagious omicron variant was first confirmed in Oregon on Dec. 14.

BOND

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The proposed athletic and academic center has been a popular topic since Wednesday, Jan. 12, when the La Grande School Board unanimously passed a resolution giving voters a chance to approve or reject a bond for the facility in the May election.

Passage of the proposed bond would not raise the total school taxes paid by property owners, Justice said, because of the recent refinancing of the 20-year \$31.5 million bond voters approved in 2014 for capital construction and maintenance.

The building would be a pre-engineered metal structure that would be available for public use and would meet Americans with Disabilities Act standards, which the current Annex building does not.

The aging Annex building is adjacent to the district’s maintenance, facilities and grounds structure — built in 1911 — that would also be torn down if the bond is approved by voters. The district’s maintenance, facilities and grounds would be moved to a 10,500-square-foot structure the school district would rent on Adams Avenue at the Adams Professional Plaza.

The school district is

facing a deadline because in December 2021 it was awarded a \$4 million Oregon School Capital Improvement Matching grant from the state for the building of the academic and athletic center.

The school district will receive the \$4 million matching grant only if voters approve the new \$4.845 million bond. Voters would have to approve the bond in May because this was the election date specified by the school district in its application for the grant.

Joseph Waite, the La Grande School district’s facilities manager, said if voters approve the bond, construction of the new multi-use building could start as early as the spring 2023.