

# COUNTY

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renovations of its sewer system.

“That will really kick-start their program,” he said.

The fairgrounds are in dire need of a new sewer line connection, which would allow sewage to run from the facilities to the city of La Grande’s system. The fairgrounds facilities have been without functioning restrooms since its septic tank went out several years ago, creating problems in costs associated with rentable portable toilets and the overall capacity to host events.

The project, which would run a line across Interstate 84 and the Grande Ronde River via the Second Street overpass, is estimated to cost approximately \$2 million. The Union County Fairgrounds received approximately \$270,000 in state funding earlier in the year, but still faced a large deficit.

Anderes was also happy that Eastern Oregon University received \$4 million for



Alex Wittwer/EO Media Group, File

**Mike Gibson screws the lid on a spent container of aviation fuel at the La Grande/Union County Airport on Wednesday, July 14, 2021. Union County officials were disappointed that House Bill 4154, which would have provided \$400,000 to the Union County Airport to expand its fuel storage capacity, was unsuccessful during the 2022 legislative short session, which ended March 4.**

the restoration of the university’s grand staircase on the north side of Inlow Hall, which has been closed for more than a decade because of its deteriorating condition.

Anderes said that restoration of the staircase, built in the late 1920s, would make the connection between EOU and the La Grande community even stronger.

“It will be a physical bridge between Eastern and

the community,” he said.

Anderes also said he would like the staircase’s renovation to lead to a revival of traditional ceremonies like Evensong at EOU. Evensong was an event held on the EOU staircase that honored students for outstanding academic achievement until it was discontinued in the early 1970s.

On the other side of the ledger, Anderes said

he was discouraged to see that House Bill 4154, which would have provided \$400,000 to the Union County Airport to expand its fuel storage capacity, was unsuccessful.

The added capacity, he said, is needed for aircraft being used to fight wildfires. Anderes said having additional storage capacity would mean aircraft crews would never have to wait for fuel to arrive before making their next flight while combating a wildfire.

Anderes said that more storage capacity is needed now in part because an increasing number of the aircraft used to fight wildfire are jets that use more fuel.

The \$400,000 HB 4154 would have provided would have paid for the purchase of a 10,000-gallon Jet-A fuel truck, according to Union County Public Works Director Doug Wright. The vehicle would have been used to transport fuel to aircraft.

“It would have been a great thing for the region,” said Commissioner Matt Scarfo.

Beverage said the legislation that would have provided the money for the increased fuel capacity was doing well before it got into the Legislature’s Ways and Means Committee where it died. She suspects that politics, not lack of support, may have been the reason the legislation did not pass out of the Joint Ways and Means Committee.

“It was very frustrating,” Beverage said. “It would have helped all of Eastern Oregon.”

Beverage was also disheartened by the outcome of House Bill 4127. The bill would have increased by \$1 million the amount of funding the state provides to ranchers to compensate them for livestock lost to wolf attacks and pay for nonlethal means of keeping wolves away from livestock.

The state already compensates ranchers for livestock lost to wolves, but Beverage said it is not enough. She said Union County always receives more applications for compensation for wolf depredation than it can provide.

She also noted the number of livestock local ranchers are losing to wolves is increasing. She pointed out that Union County paid \$14,000 to ranchers for livestock losses due to wolf attacks in 2020 and \$30,000 for losses in 2021.

Beverage believes the wolf bill failed because legislators in Western Oregon do not appreciate the impact that wolves have on ranchers in Eastern Oregon.

“We need to educate people about where food comes from,” she said. “They do not know how much hard work goes into bringing food to us.” Scarfo agreed with Beverage.

“It seems like our wolf problem is getting worse,” he said. The bill not passing “was very disappointing.”

Overall, however, Anderes said the legislative session went better for Northeastern Oregon than it had in recent years, in terms of being recognized by legislators on the western side of the state.

“I think they took more of an interest in our needs and wants,” he said.

# GAS

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to offload their oil shipments. In the U.S., thousands of oil workers were laid off, and the number of active drilling rigs plummeted from 700 in January 2020 to approximately 200 rigs according to reporting by The New York Times.

Prices for gas in spring 2020 went down drastically, with gas prices falling below \$2 a gallon nationally for the first time in decades.

“In the spring of 2020 it was incredible; we saw demand for oil and gas fall to dramatically low levels that we hadn’t seen since the 1960s,” Dodds said. “And now here we are, two years later, and people are returning to their normal routines, going back to work, going back to school. We are consuming more gas around the globe, but the production is not back where it was

pre-pandemic. Production hasn’t kept up, so that’s the main driver of higher prices.”

As the price of gas rises, manufacturing businesses are faced with the tough choice of having to increase prices to offset transportation costs. Patrick Raimondo, plant manager for Behlen Country, Baker City, said the company is waiting for a few weeks to decide how to handle the cost increases.

“As of right now we’re holding off on doing any surcharges for our customers,” Raimondo said. “As these prices increase, it is going to affect us down the road, just from the additional costs. We’re just trying to see how it goes over the next couple of weeks and having conversations and open communications with our customers just to make sure we’re all on the same page.”

## A global economy

The U.S. has continued to bring oil rigs back online. By

January 2021, 374 rotary rigs were operating in the United States, according to the EIA. By Dec. 31, 2021, in response to rising prices, that number rose to 586. That’s still a far cry from the 700 rigs operating pre-pandemic.

In Russia, ongoing sanctions have locked the country out of foreign banks and goods and have caused the Russian ruble to plummet to nearly half its value at the beginning of February 2022.

According to J.P. Morgan, almost 70% of Russian oil is struggling to find buyers even though it is being offered at a record \$20-per-barrel discount in comparison to national oil suppliers, as of March 8.

“What happens halfway around the world can and does also have an impact on oil prices,” Dodds said. “There’s much more at play than just what’s happening in the U.S.”



Alex Wittwer/EO Media Group

**Diane Miller replaces a diesel fuel pump nozzle at a Chevron gas station on Island Avenue, La Grande, on Thursday, March 10, 2022. Miller paid more than \$140 to fill up half a tank, and she said it was the highest price for diesel she’s seen on her three-week trip from Washington to Arizona and back.**



Leon Werdinger/Wallowa Land Trust

**A photo from the Wallowa Land Trust shows a Wallowa County farm. As part of the supplemental budget approved in the 2022 short session, lawmakers invested \$5 million in the Oregon Agricultural Heritage Program, which is tasked with preserving farmland.**

# FARMLAND

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is set up on the front end to ensure we’re keeping those properties whole.”

With such easements and rights, property owners retain ownership of their land but agree to conditions that allow for preservation.

In 1973, according to a report by the American Farmland Trust, Oregon became the fourth state to embrace land use planning. The Oregon Land Conservation and Development Commission, born from that legislation, adopted statewide land use planning goals, which it uses to review local plans to ensure they are consistent with those goals.

“We are lucky in the state of Oregon that we have strong land use laws,” Beamer said. “But despite that, we are losing agricultural land at a rapid rate.”

One example: Columbia County commissioners are considering siting a biodiesel plant on more than 800 acres at Port Westland,

an area that’s currently home to 40 farms, including two blueberry farms, a mint farm and a grass-fed cattle operation. The plan has sparked strong local opposition.

Besides losing land to residential and industrial development, some properties have been split and sold to newcomers who want a hobby ranch or farm — not a viable operation, Beamer said. According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Oregon lost nearly 440,000 acres of farmland to development between 2007 and 2017, the most recent data available.

That’s much larger than the entire Portland area and greater than all of Oregon’s 10 largest cities put together, according to the Coalition of Oregon Land Trusts.

The number of mid-sized farms — between 50 and 1,999 acres — also has diminished. The most recent data show that Oregon had more than 35,000 farms in 2012 on nearly 16.3 million acres. The number of farms grew to nearly 38,000 five years

later but their holdings dropped to 15.9 million acres.

“The amount of farmland lost in Oregon keeps growing,” Beamer said. “It’s a disturbing trend.”

She called the funding of the heritage plan a “huge victory.”

The money is part of the current two-year budget cycle, which stretches to July 1, 2023. She suspects there will be more demand than funds.

The money will compensate farmers and ranchers for voluntarily protecting their land and its natural resources, keeping the property intact. The heritage program also will pay landowners for implementing soil and water conservation practices that enhance existing habitat.

In addition, the program will help landowners pass their land to the next generation and it will work with organizations involved in land conservation.

Federal data show that Oregon’s farmers are getting older, with an average age of 60 years in 2017, up a half a year from 2012.

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