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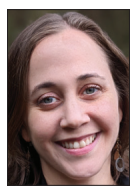
Evening light sets over Crow Creek Road, Wallowa County, on the road from Zumwalt Prairie on Sunday, May 23, 2021. Two Eastern Oregon nonprofits have joined Earth Day Oregon, including Greater Hells Canyon Council and Wallowa Land Trust. Earth Day Oregon is scheduled for April 22 and will include a fundraiser by Wallowa Land Trust at the Wallowa County Chamber of Commerce office in Enterprise.

EARTH DAY

Continued from Page A1

specific projects for the fundraiser, but money raised will be used to help maintain ongoing operations and contracts with local landowners for their continuing involvement with Wallowa Land Trust.

Earth Day Oregon, founded in 2019, is a revitalization of previous efforts to localize Earth Day in the state, according to Kelly Stevens, executive director. The first Earth Day was held on April 22, 1970, and it has become a global event celebrated across dozens of countries.



Stevens

“It’s not the first time Earth Day has happened in Oregon, certainly,” she said, “but I would say that we really see an opportunity to make it a day, make it a time for bringing the state together and to have a really inclusive version of Earth Day.”

Earth Day Oregon has a variety of nonprofit organization partners — ranging from land trusts to food bank donations. A majority of those organizations are in the Portland metro area, but Stevens has been focusing on expanding the campaign to include more rural com-

munities and nonprofits.

“When people look at our website, when they see who our partners are, they’re going to see opportunities with conservation nonprofits, including two in Eastern Oregon,” she said. “And they’ll also see groups that are working to end poverty, spur local economies and reduce inequality. And then, also, preserve our forests and our oceans and things like that. What we’re really excited about at Earth Day Oregon is this more holistic view of what we can all do together every April.”

Stevens said the campaign has doubled the number of nonprofits outside of the Portland metro area that had allied with Earth Day Oregon. Roughly one-third of the nonprofits are from areas outside Portland, she said.

“As Oregonians, we’ve got a pretty good-sized state, but no matter where we live, we all care about the beauty of this state and our communities,” she said. “By supporting the nonprofit partners and the many business partners in Eastern Oregon, people are ensuring that Eastern Oregon stays beautiful and those ecosystems are healthy and people are able to still work those rural lands, and have vibrant local ecosystems and vibrant local economies.”

COVID

Continued from Page A1

samples taken during the week ending March 3. A spokesperson for her agency cited delays in “collating and providing” the data, adding that more recent results would be available Wednesday.

The nearly three-week old OSU results don’t show that the BA.2 variant, which is substantially more transmissible than the omicron variant, is prevalent in Oregon. But that could change, given that Oregon’s pandemic trends have generally lagged the rest of the country by several weeks, Sutton said.

More recent data available to OSU reflected the same trends, with BA.2 appearing in some Oregon communities but not yet becoming dominant, said Tyler Radniecki, one of the university’s key researchers for the program.

And, so far, the wastewater analyses have shown a consistent decline or plateau in “viral concentration,” a measure of how much virus is in a sample relative to the number of people who use the wastewater system. That means the analyses are mirroring the continued swift decline in case counts from testing.

The average case count on March 22 fell to 233 new reported cases a day, lower than at any point since July, before the delta wave.

Tracking trends

If there is going to be a surge, wastewater testing should, in theory, show the upward trend before official case counts start to climb. While research results vary, Sutton said, “viral concentration” in wastewater samples can start showing increases as many as seven

days before official case counts start to rise.

Some of the fundamental principles of wastewater monitoring for COVID-19 in Oregon have shifted since it began in 2020. Back then, officials assumed there would come a time when there would be no COVID-19 in Oregon, Sutton said. Under that scenario, wastewater surveillance would have served as an early warning that the virus had returned. Now, the virus is present everywhere. That means testing has a slightly different purpose — to identify climbing cases and prevalence of variants.

Wastewater testing can provide early warning of an impending surge because people can shed virus in their feces before they even know they’re sick.

That means that within several days of a person shedding virus, a testing lab could theoretically identify that virus in the wastewater, said Dr. Ken Williamson, an expert with a Washington County company that participates in the OSU testing program. By contrast, it can take as long as two weeks between someone getting infected and registering their illness in official case counts, he said.

Radniecki, the OSU researcher, said wastewater testing is immune to the biases involved in clinical testing and case surveillance. When it comes to regular swab testing, official case counts only capture people motivated to get checked for COVID-19 at a location that reports the results to health officials. But wastewater testing catches everyone who uses a public wastewater system.

“If you flush, you participate,” Radniecki said.

Will there be a surge?

Like much of the rest of the country, Oregon is wondering if the BA.2 subvariant of omicron will bring a flood of cases to the state.

“I mean, I wouldn’t be surprised,” Sutton said, when asked if Oregonians should expect cases to climb in coming weeks.

But Sutton added that existing immunity among Oregonians due to vaccinations or from infections during the recent omicron surge likely means it won’t be as severe as what Oregon has already seen.

It’s clear that the BA.2 variant’s presence is growing nationally. More than a third of last week’s COVID-19 cases in the U.S. were the BA.2 subvariant, according to U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. In the region that includes Oregon, nearly four in 10 cases were likely of the BA.2 variant, according to the agency’s estimates.

University of Washington COVID-19 forecaster Ali Mokdad agrees Oregon will likely be spared a BA.2 surge. Oregon’s cases will continue to fall through the summer, he predicted, with potential increases cases coming in the winter, when immunity from vaccines and infections wanes.

Mokdad said Oregon and the U.S. as a whole are facing substantially different circumstances than Europe. In Oregon, many people have natural immunity from infections during the omicron wave, helping protect large swaths of the population from the BA.2 subvariant.

“We’re in a much better place than the Europeans,” Mokdad said.

ANIMALS

Continued from Page A1

in six consecutive election cycles before it finally passed. It was voted down five times. If our initiative does not pass this November, we want to make sure it’s on the ballot again in 2024.”

‘Their hearts are in the right place’

Farmers balked at the proposal, stating it wouldn’t be worth the effort or the ink to do a story about the initiative. Prominent La Grande hunter Steve West, of the TV show “Steve’s Outdoor Adventures,” said the proposition likely would fail to gather enough signatures to make it on the ballot.

“The people who come up with this, their hearts are in the right place because they’re so attached to animals,” he said. “The reality is they will never get enough votes to pass something like this. I just don’t see any chance in hell that they even get 100,000 signatures to even get it to a ballot. It’s just so out there.”

West said proposals like these have an unintended side effect of uniting groups that are opposed to similar initiatives.

“If anything, my bet is this is something that would solidify and unite the ranchers, farmers and hunters,” he said. “It’s probably going to unite the other side just to stamp it out once and for all.”

Officials from the Confederated Tribes of Umatilla Indian Reservation said they’re not worried about the initiative, citing treaties that would supersede the law. They are, however, watching closely in the event the tribes need to take a reactionary approach to the proposal.

“We’re continuing to watch and see how far it goes, and see what happens in July to see if they get their initiative fulfilled with the required signatures,” said Jiselle Halfmoon, interim communications director for CTUIR. “Then, of course, we’ll readdress it, but at this time we’re pretty secure in our situation.”



Alex Wittwer/EO Media Group

Cattle graze the field at a ranch on Airport Lane, La Grande, on Thursday, March 17, 2022. Initiative Petition 13 organizers say the ultimate goal of the campaign would be to ensure all animals in Oregon have the same rights and protections that companion animals enjoy.

Law experts say the proposal is misunderstood

Russ Mead, a professor of law at Lewis & Clark Law School in Portland, said what the proposal says it will do and what the two opposing factions for the proposition say it will do differ greatly.

“Oregon’s animal cruelty laws have a long list of exceptions,” he said. “For example, hunting and killing livestock is exempt from Oregon’s animal cruelty laws. IP13 removes these exemptions. The result is not that hunting and killing livestock will be illegal if IP13 passes, it is just that when you hunt, you need to be humane. When you kill livestock, you need to be humane.”

The website for IP13 states its goal is to enact legislation that would make it so that “animals on farms, research labs, exhibitions and in the wild would no longer be allowed to be intentionally injured or killed.” However, Mead disagrees with the drafters of IP13 and their proposed mission statement on the IP13 webpage. The law as it is proposed, he said, would need to be considered in courtrooms to find the exact limitations and framework.

“Anyone who says any activity will become illegal with the passage of IP13 is just flat wrong,” he said. “With the animal cruelty exemptions removed, the Oregon courts will need to decide what animal cruelty is.”

How animal cruelty is defined in the law, Mead said, is open-ended.

“Animal cruelty statutes seldom define what is cruel and what is humane,” Mead said. “For example, statutes do not specify that beating a dog to death with a baseball bat is cruel. Or that killing a dog by lethal injection is

humane.”

Mead stated if the proposal did muster up the signatures, and passed in the November ballot, the proposal wouldn’t turn hunters into criminals overnight.

“The Oregon courts will need to decide what, if any, hunting and fishing practices violate Oregon animal cru-

elty laws,” he said. “I could well see the courts finding leg-hold traps are cruel. But, I would be shocked if the courts found a father and daughter fishing with a cane pole animal cruelty.”

Michelson said one of the secondary goals of the proposal is to help draw attention to exemptions in Oregon statutes regarding animal abuse, and how the animal abuse laws give protections to pets but not to livestock.

“We’re one of the few states that acknowledges that animals are sentient in our state statutes,” Michelson said. “Yet our animal cruelty laws largely only protect our companion animals. All the other animals, whether they’re in farms or in research labs or in the wild, or in rodeos and exhibitions, they’re exempt from those same protections.”

Michelson noted the ultimate goal of the campaign would be to ensure all animals in Oregon have the same rights and protections that companion animals enjoy.

“Largely, what our campaign is focused on is the

right for animals not to be killed or injured, to not be neglected, and to not be forcibly impregnated or forcibly masturbated,” he said. “Our focus is very intentionally on that, and so we will continue the campaign until those rights are achieved.”

As of Tuesday, March 15, the IP13 Facebook page had 344 followers, and its postings attract more negative comments than supportive ones. If the proposal passes — either now or in 2024 — it likely would face lengthy legal scrutiny, according to Jacob Mannis, the deputy district attorney for Oregon who handles animal cruelty cases.

“It would require a lot of things to happen before it would become the law,” he said. “I assume that there would be a round of lawsuits before anything gets enforced, and then there would have to be a law enforcement agency that would investigate, a prosecutor that would prosecute and ultimately a jury that would convict, because anybody in Oregon who’s been accused of a crime has a right to a trial by jury.”

Island City Lions Club

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