

Sixth graders take their learning outdoors

By **LISA BRITTON**
Baker City Herald

CAMP ELKANAH — Jean Ann Mitchell ended the botany lesson with a snack.

But not just any snack — this one was bright yellow, full of petals, and in abundant supply across the meadow.

“Those are each flowers,” she said, picking apart the dandelion head as the students leaned in for a look.

Each of those petals is edible — and nearly every sixth grader tried at least a taste of the common flower.

Then the bell rang and the kids made their way to a different type of meal — homemade macaroni and cheese prepared to feed kids after a morning of outdoor school activities.

Sixth graders from South Baker Intermediate School and Haines Elementary arrived at Camp Elkanah, near Ukiah about 70 miles northwest of Baker City, on Monday, May 23, for this year’s outdoor school.

They stayed two nights, and returned home May 25.

This year Camp Elkanah staff organized the schedule, programs, volunteers and handouts.

In Oregon, outdoor school opportunities have been funded by lottery dollars since the passage of Measure 99 in 2016.

The purpose of that measure was to establish a permanent fund so every Oregon school student had the opportunity for a week of science-based education.

The Oregon State University Extension Service is responsible for distributing the funds.

“Suddenly, everyone needed outdoor school, and there’s not enough out-



Sixth grade students from Baker City and Haines attend outdoor school at Camp Elkanah, near Ukiah, Monday through Wednesday, May 23-25, 2022. Phil Richerson, left photo, a hydrogeologist with the DEQ office in Pendleton, teaches students about how surface water can be contaminated — and how humans can minimize their mess. Right photo, students sort through puzzle pieces to build models of dinosaurs.



Photos by Lisa Britton/Baker City Herald

door school providers,” said Kaitlin Gustafson, program director at Camp Elkanah.

Out in nature

At first, a school would rent the facility and then organize its own programming.

“What (OSU) heard from school districts is that this is a lot of work,” she said.

So now Camp Elkanah provides the experience.

Gustafson and her husband, Josh, live full-time at Camp Elkanah with their family. In addition to outdoor school, they provide summer camps and retreats. The facility is busy from April to November. This was the fifth week they welcomed a school.

“It’s a really cool opportunity to get involved in the community,” she said.

Plus, she said it’s nice for kids to be in nature.

“You’re outside, no screens. They’re actually interacting with each other,” she said.

In 2020, as the coronavirus prompted schools to close, she said some outdoor schools went online and livestreamed programs.

“We didn’t go online,” Gustafson said.

In response to the hardship faced by outdoor school providers, OSU developed grant programs in December 2020 to help improve accessibility and inclusivity.

Gustafson said the grants they received are

funding two new accessible restroom facilities, and will revamp two cabins.

Students study multiple subjects

The spring of 2021 brought day camps back to Camp Elkanah, with schools coming from La Grande, Union, Umatilla and Irrigon.

This spring, they’ve welcomed two schools every week for overnight experiences.

“We provide the structure, content, food and lodging,” Gustafson said. “The schedule changes based on group size and when presenters are available.”

School staff members are responsible for man-

aging the students.

For the Baker School District students, day one involved challenges — a zip line, climbing tower, swing and team-building ropes course.

On day two, small groups rotated through six stations: entomology, fishing, weather, dinosaurs, botany and DEQ.

“We piece together who’s available,” Gustafson said.

As people return to more normal work schedules, she said calendars are filling up quickly for those who usually teach at outdoor school. The weather has been tough, too.

“This spring has been especially challenging with the weather,” she said. “We had everyone inside

at times — we had to get out of the snow.”

But Tuesday, May 24, was a sunny day that found everyone outside, looking at trees and plants and inspecting water samples collected from the creek. At the DEQ station, Phil Richerson and John Dadoly taught about surface water and groundwater.

“How we make a mess, and how can we minimize that mess?” Richerson said. “How can we live our lives but leave as small a mess as possible?”

These two have been frequent presenters at Camp Elkanah.

“We’re probably going to talk to 900 or a thousand kids this year,” Richerson said.

Regional partnership in the works

John Day, Burns, Lakeview aim to share costs of public projects

By **JUSTIN DAVIS**
Blue Mountain Eagle

JOHN DAY — A potential partnership between the cities of John Day, Burns and Lakeview is taking shape — slowly, but it is taking shape.

Known as Regional Rural Revitalization Strategies (or R3 for short), the partnership is centered on combining and sharing resources that would allow the communities to better cover costs related to filling housing needs and other public improvement projects.

These strategies will allow the small cities that make up the partnership to “hunt as a pack” by providing asset management services that pool staff, capital equipment and financing across multiple jurisdictions, according to an R3 white paper released in February.

In Burns, City Manager Nick Brown says the city council has had discussions pertaining to R3 but hasn’t gotten to a vote on the partnership yet. He adds that the scope of the partnership has been narrowed by the council.

“Burns City Council thinks R3 has a lot of positive attributes, especially shared resources to get projects done that would have been difficult to do alone,” Brown said.

Talks about forming a partnership came about during discussions Brown had with John Day City Manager Nick Green about similar goals the two cities have. Those discussions evolved into ideas about sharing a city planner and sharing costs, which led to the idea of the R3 partnership. Both Burns and John Day then reached out to Lakeview to gauge its interest in joining the partnership.



Blue Mountain Eagle, File

John Day City Hall is shown on Friday, May 20, 2022. The city is looking into a partnership with Burns and Lakeview that would allow the three communities to pool staff, capital equipment and financing across jurisdictions.

Brown says the agreement “started as an idea about the efficiency of local government.” The downside, according to Brown, is that the communities in the partnership are so far apart.

Lakeview has put R3 on its list of priorities, according to Town Manager Michelle Perry. The town has been awarded a series of grants to build a water treatment plant and renovate McDonald Park. Because of supply chain issues and rising costs, those projects have taken precedence over the R3 partnership in the town.

“We’re starting to clear some of those things off our table, so we’ll probably pick up R3 again and do some revisions on that,” Perry said.

At this time, Lakeview hasn’t had detailed discussions about R3.

“We’re still in the concep-

tual part of development for R3 and what that’s going to look like,” she said.

John Day is a little further along in adopting the R3 partnership than Lakeview and Burns. The city council has reviewed the adopting resolution and has agreed to proceed with the partnership after finalizing the scope with the other two communities.

The timeline for finalizing the partnership is up in the air at this point, however, because Green, John Day’s city manager, is leaving that post in June.

“Depending on what the council decides to do with the replacement city manager, that will determine our ability to participate in R3 because there has to be a city manager to direct the activities of the agency from each of the three com-

munities,” Green said.

At its May 10 meeting, the John Day City Council appointed Community Development Director Corum Ketchum to the position of interim city manager for a six-month trial period.

Green says there are no known partnerships of this type in the state. R3 would be a precedent-setting agreement between the three communities and an experiment other cities would be closely monitoring to see if it can work.

Brown said the community of Hines has expressed interest in joining the R3 partnership, and the communities of Ontario, Nyssa and Vale have discussed forming a similar partnership sometime in the future.

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