

EONI

Continued from Page A1

access to fiber in the Northwest is unmatched and we're proud to be joining in that effort."

When the deal becomes final, Mutch, the president of EONI, said he will retire and Crews will remain and help lead the company under the Ziplly banner.

"This was an opportunity for Jeff to continue to be part of the team with lots of additional resources and assistance from Ziplly," Mutch said. "Our service areas overlap a ton, if not entirely, so it made sense. It turned out to be the most compatible and cooperative situation for us that we could find."

Mutch said when the announcement was made to staff June 7, the response was mostly positive.

"I think three-quarters of them were positive and the others had questions," he said. "What we've told them is hang around, give it some time and you'll see things are going to be good."

Mutch and Crews started EONI in 1996. The company serves approximately 3,000 customers in Baker, Union and Willowa counties and employs 15 people, including the two owners.

Mutch said EONI staff will have the opportunity to remain on with Ziplly.

"It was important to us that the employees had an opportunity as well," he said.

Both Crews and Mutch said keeping up with all of the advancements in broadband and mining federal programs for available funding is challenging for a small, rural company.

"Realistically, I can't get my head around the amount of money the federal government is putting out to close the digital divide on rural broadband," Crews said. "It's very hard to navigate those programs. We've gone down that road a ways before. You really have to have a couple of full-time people to navigate these federal programs."



Isabella Crowley/The Observer

Jeff Crews, co-owner and vice president of Eastern Oregon Net Inc., works at his desk on Tuesday, June 7, 2022, in La Grande. Ziplly Fiber plans to acquire EONI, and Crews will stay on during the transition.



Isabella Crowley/The Observer

Kelly Mutch, co-owner and president of Eastern Oregon Net Inc., works at his desk on Tuesday, June 7, 2022, in La Grande. Mutch said he plans to retire when Ziplly Fiber acquires EONI.



Isabella Crowley/The Observer

Eastern Oregon Net Inc.'s office sits at the corner of Jefferson Avenue and Chestnut Street in La Grande on Tuesday, June 7, 2022. Ziplly Fiber's La Grande office is just a block away on Adams Avenue.



Isabella Crowley/The Observer

An Eastern Oregon Net Inc. truck sits in the garage Tuesday, June 7, 2022, the day Ziplly Fiber announced plans to acquire the La Grande-based company.

to fast and reliable internet is fundamentally important for families and businesses," said Harold Zeitz, chief executive officer of Ziplly Fiber. "So, when we looked around the Northwest and saw what Jeff and Kelly had created, it was no surprise to us to learn that they also believe in 'The Internet Done Right.' Our values were aligned years before we chose to make our joining forces a reality."

Mutch said it was that aligned vision between the two companies that made it easier when the idea of the purchase was first broached.

"The timing's good, the sit-

uation is good and the outcome for employees is good," he said. "We know there are customers who've had a less than ideal relationship with Ziplly and that's why they are our customers and (Ziplly knows) that too. We both agree that this is an opportunity to make both of us better."

Ziplly Fiber has been busy with fiber construction projects in more than 80 towns across the Northwest, including communities in Union and Willowa counties, since it began its aggressive fiber expansion efforts in the summer of 2020.

"Ziplly's whole thing is build

fiber and super-fast broadband at an affordable level to as many customers as they could, and the same for us," Mutch said. "There's a lot of money out there for building broadband available, and for us to take advantage of that would have been a bit more difficult. The challenges were really steep for a very small company, but by going with them, we could continue to do that and increase the resources available to us to be a part of that when it happens."

Crews said he is excited to see what the future holds with Ziplly.

"While this transition is happening, the EONI team is still going to be led by me and I'm still here to make sure this flies right," he said. "I'm not moving. I'm not going anywhere."

When Mutch's time with the company ends, he said, it will come with "mixed emotions."

"This is the best team, the best group of people we've ever had. This is really, truly a great team," he said. "It's difficult to leave, because they're family. This is my daytime family. Never expected to be doing this as long as I have. I could not have imagined doing this for 26 years. I have given it my all but I need to be realistic and pragmatic about it and realize it's someone else's turn. I have really enjoyed doing this."

EOU

Continued from Page A1

of its board of trustees.

Mendoza grew up in Central Mexico and in 1968 moved to Union County for a year when he was an international student at Union High School for a year. He came to Union after meeting a group of Eastern students who were in Mexico attending a summer education program the school was conducting there.

Mendoza became a good friend of one of the students, Robert Sheehy, who invited him to come to Union and stay with his family for a year while attending Union

High School. Mendoza, who had already earned a high school diploma in Mexico, went on to graduate from Union High School in 1969.

The youth, who had thought college was out of reach because his family was of modest means, then enrolled at Eastern after receiving a scholarship that covered his tuition. Mendoza graduated from Eastern in just three years and later earned a doctorate in chemistry from Washington State University.

He was next hired by Dow Chemical, which he worked for in Midland, Michigan, for 26 years before retiring. Mendoza was so successful at Dow Chemical that in

1989 he received Eastern's Distinguished Alumnus award for his work with the company.

A fortunate decision

Mendoza, after his career with Dow, was hired as a chemistry professor at Eastern in 2004 where he taught through 2014, before being appointed to a position on Eastern's board of trustees.

Today, he credits much of his success in life to attending Eastern.

"Going to Eastern totally changed my life," Mendoza said.

He noted that he had a job with a telephone company in Mexico when he



The Observer, File

Eastern Oregon University students prepare to receive their diplomas during an outdoor commencement on the La Grande campus in 2017. The school's graduation returns to Community Stadium on Saturday, June 11, 2022, at 9:30 a.m.

first came to Union County and that he had considered making that his career. Mendoza was at a fork in

the road in the late 1960s and he is thankful he decided to pursue a higher education.

"I walked into a dream," he said.

The 10th child in a family of 15, Mendoza was the first in his family to attend college. Since then, 70% of his nephews and nieces have followed in his footsteps.

"I showed them that it could be done," he said. "They realized then that education was the door to the middle class."

Mendoza, who now lives in Haines with his wife, Sherry, wants to make EOU's graduates appreciate how fortunate they are to have attended Eastern.

"Hopefully, I can convey just how special Eastern is," he said.

TRAILS

Continued from Page A1

trail that needs work," said Dan Sizer, who owns Go Wild.

The trail is also part of the Blue Mountain Trail, a 530-mile route in Eastern Oregon.

Sizer said the idea for this trip came from a conversation about "regenerative tourism."

"It's a give-back mindset to tourism," Sizer said.

It is the first such trip Go Wild has offered.

"This is our pilot program," he said.

The cost is \$450, which includes gear, meals, transportation, live music and pre- and post-parties.

"You'll show up with a tent set up, a cot, a pad on your cot, and a cocktail waiting for you," he said.

The only specific supplies to bring are boots, good work gloves and lunch snacks.



Wallowa Mountain Hells Canyon Trails Association/Contributed Photo

Volunteers with the Wallowa Mountain Hells Canyon Trails Association work with the Forest Service to maintain trails in this updated photo. On June 17-19, 2022, one of these projects is offered as a "work vacation" with Go Wild: American Adventures. For details and cost, visit www.gowildusa.com/volunteervacations.

The camping experience, Sizer said, could be described as "glamping" — glamorous camping.

"The cooking will be a highlight — that's what Go Wild is known for," he said. "We're taking the modern culinary craft movement to the backcountry."

The group will leave Baker City at 8 a.m. Friday,

June 17. The day includes trail work in the afternoon, then cocktail hour and a campfire dinner.

The main work day is Saturday, June 18. Sizer said maintenance will include cutting small trees out of the trail, trimming back bushes and clearing rocks.

"The point is to get folks

out and have a good time," Sizer said. "We can find something for anyone to do."

And it's OK to enjoy the view.

"Take breaks, enjoy the scenery, have fun doing trail work," he said.

Sunday, June 19, includes breakfast, cleaning up camp and an after-party.

For more information, or to register, go to www.gowildusa.com/volunteervacations.

Trail work

The trail work will be facilitated by members of the Wallowa Mountain Hells Canyon Trails Association, which started in 2017.

"Our mission is to help the Forest Service maintain the trails," said Mike Hansen, executive director.

The association works with the Forest Service to identify "deferred maintenance trails."

"Those are the ones they haven't gotten to in three

years or more," Hansen said.

He said the group has worked on about eight projects since March in the Hells Canyon area.

The Go Wild excursion will continue work they've already started.

"Any help his group can give us is really welcome," Hansen said.

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