OTEC

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"I would say 80% of what's in there was already being done as prudent utility practices," he said.

Reducing risk

A key part of that effort, he said, is trying to prevent a common cause for both power outages and for sparks that can ignite wildfires — a tree or tree limb falling onto a line.

To reduce that risk, OTEC maintains corridors along its transmission lines that are cleared of trees close enough to potentially fall into a line. These rights-of-way are generally 120 feet wide, Wirfs said.

Naturally, the transmission lines at highest risk are those that pass through densely forested areas. Local examples include the line that runs from Baker City through Sumpter Valley and on to Granite, and the line leading to Anthony Lakes.

Wirfs said those lines, which were previously inspected every other year, as the PUC requires, will now be patrolled annually.

OTEC's plan also explains how the utility makes changes during the fire season — generally July 1 through Oct. 15, depending on conditions — that are designed to reduce the risk that a power line damaged by a tree or other cause will ignite a fire.

Transmission and distribution lines are equipped with "reclosers," Wirfs said. Those are electronic devices that are designed to restore power to a line within a second or two if the "fault" — for instance, a tree limb that hits the line but then falls to the ground — is brief.

Oregon Trail Electric Cooperative

Oregon Trail Electric Cooperative crews install an iron power pole in Grant County.

The purpose, Wirfs said, is to ensure that a small problem, such as a single limb that strikes a line but doesn't damage it, doesn't result in a long outage.

Outside the fire season, reclosers are set to operate up to four times in rapid succession, Wirfs said.

But on lines in higher risk areas, such as forests, reclosers are limited to operate just twice during the fire season.

The reason, Wirfs said, is that if a fault remains on the line, the more often a recloser operates and reenergizes the line, the greater chance it might spark.

Limiting the recloser to two operations reduces that risk, he said. That also increases the chances that a fault that doesn't damage the line will result in an extended power outage, but Wirfs said that tradeoff is necessary to reduce the fire threat.

The fire-related settings for reclosers is not a new policy for OTEC, Wirfs said.

Intentional power shutoffs

The mitigation plan also addresses "public safety power shutoffs" — when a utility intentionally turns off power to a transmission line during periods when the fire risk is extreme.

Wirfs said OTEC has not had to do so. He called that a "last resort" situation.

OTEC's plan lists the criteria the cooperative would use to determine whether to order a public safety shutoff, one of which is "immediately predicted winds of 50 mph or higher within the vicinity of OTEC facilities subject to shutoff."

Fortunately, Wirfs said, winds of that strength are rare in OTEC's territory.

Moreover, he said a survey of the cooperative's tree-caused power outages showed that most — 10 of 13 — happened during the winter or otherwise outside fire season.

Both last year and again earlier this summer, OTEC sent letters to members who have service in areas at high risk for wildfire to alert them to the possibility, however remote, of intentional power shutoffs.

About 2,200 members — around 8.5% of OTEC's total — have service in those areas, said Joe Hathaway, the cooperative's communications manager.

OTEC's wildfire mitigation plan states that the cooperative's dispatch center monitors weather forecasts and each day assigns a risk level. When the National Weather Service issues a red flag warning — meaning that any fire that starts could spread quickly — OTEC delays routine work on transmission lines. The cooperative might delay such work on other days when thunderstorms or other severe weather is possible, but a red flag warning is not in effect.

RAIL

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Whitman College in Walla Walla or if you want to go to Eastern Oregon University, how do you get here if you're not driving? And what does that do to the quality and ability of that school to survive?" Hamilton said.

Economy, environment and equity

According to AANW, passenger rail is an ideal option for addressing what they call the "three Es"" — economy, environment and equity.

Passenger trains provide benefits to the economy and taxpayers. On average, overnight visitors traveling to Eastern Oregon spend $102 per day as a solo tourist and $282 per day as a group, according to the Economic Impact of Travel in Oregon 2021 report. Easy travel options help strengthen local economies, according to AANW.

"Travel means business," Bilka said.

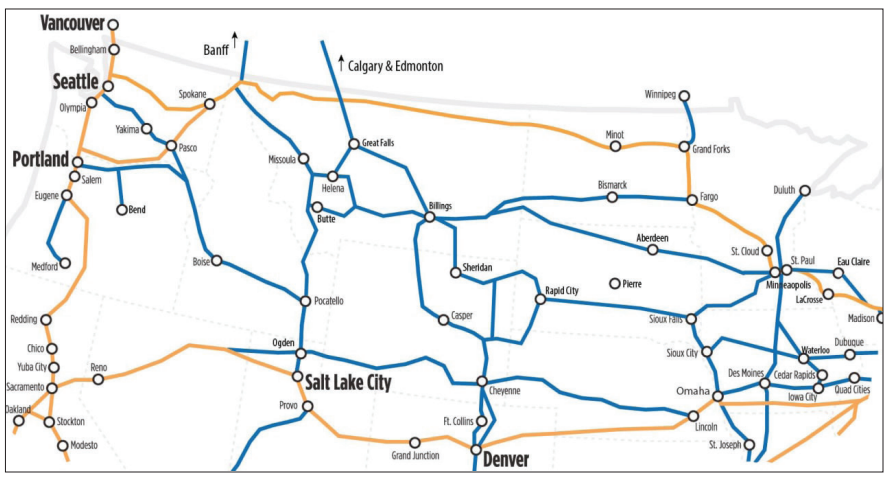
This also is the case for rural communities. For example, Meridian, Mississippi — which has a population of 39,000 people — invested $7.5 million in a new Amtrak Station. This has brought $200 million into a three-block radius of the station during the last 20 years.

Trains also can provide more mobility for significantly less cost. During the presentation, Bilka referenced a recent decision by the state of Virginia to invest in a new statewide passenger and freight network rather than expanded highways.

Adding one additional lane to 52 miles of highway was estimated to cost $12.5 billion and was not expected to reduce road congestion, so the state opted to invest in rail instead.

The rail project is estimated at $3.7 billion — a third of the cost.

Rail transport provides environmental benefits, such as emitting less greenhouse gases, increased fuel efficiency and reducing highway pollution caused by congestion.



All Aboard Northwest/Contributed Graphic

A map depicting All Aboard Northwest's vision for what passenger rail lines could look like for Eastern Oregon and the surrounding area.

Lastly, passenger rail lines help with equity. There is a large portion of the United States that is not supported by passenger rail.

Bilka joked about Amtrak's "Connect US" map because it does not really connect the U.S. if not all states — including most of Oregon — are not serviced.

A common critique

A common concern raised in conversations about passenger trains is whether the mode of transportation should exist if it cannot run without government subsidies. Many critics point to the fact that Amtrak operates at a net loss.

"If you think about it, every form of transport on the planet is subsidized one way or the other," Hamilton said. "So, the question is how is it subsidized and to what extent? Consider how much money you as taxpayers put into highways, how much money you put into the air traffic control system, you put into all the other forms of transportation."

According to Hamilton and Bilka, the purpose of Amtrak is not to make money, but to provide a service.

Next steps

The Greater Northwest Passenger Rail Summit is scheduled for Aug. 22-23 in Billings, Montana. At this meeting, the Federal Railroad Association will share how states can apply for funding. Bilka and Hamilton said this is the time for communities to start advocating for passenger rail access in their communities by reaching out to local and state governments.

The Oregon Department of Transportation will need to submit an expression of interest to stay informed about the process and apply for the grant funding when it becomes available, according to AANW.

"This year is an amazing opportunity because, again, there is $66 billion on the table. And they're all going to be sent out in grant forms, which means local states, communities, tribes, interstate organizations, have to apply for it," Hamilton said. "And we know that other states are going to be applying, so the first thing you need to do is you need to be asking your elected officials, specifically your governor, your state DOT, your state legislatures, to submit an expression of interest."

HAIL

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The hailstorm destroyed 30% of his 40-acre fall wheat crop, 70% of his 80-acre spring wheat crop and 70% percent of his 50-acre barley crop.

Ricker's 80-acre peppermint crop also took a major hit, but he is not sure yet how extensive his losses will be.

He was set to soon begin harvesting his peppermint until the hail struck and wiped out much of the crop's leaves. Now, Ricker plans to water his peppermint extensively over the next two weeks to see how much regrowth he can generate.

Ricker also said the timing of the storm was terrible because his crop was ready to harvest.

"I was ready to start collecting with my combine," he said.

Ricker said this was the worst hailstorm in recent memory.

"It is the worst I've seen," said Ricker who has been farming for 23 years, all in the Grande Ronde Valley.

RELAY

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Relay stemmed from Steele's passion for humanitarian support. She has been involved with the nonprofit organization Far Reaching Ministries for over a decade, and has traveled to South Sudan several times in the last five years. While there, she saw the impact of a ruinous civil war, ethnic massacres, famine and continued humanitarian emergencies on the country's most vulnerable population — children.

"When you see that level of need, you can't get it out of your mind," she said.

Back in the states, Steele looked for a way to raise money for relief efforts around the world. It was her brother, Clayton Collins — a seasoned marathon runner with a knack for developing race courses — who had the idea to use a race as a fundraising effort.

Together, Steele and Collins, along with their spouses and two longtime friends, registered Doomsday Racing as a nonprofit and got to work.

The first year, the board planned the race to be more than 200 miles long — a two-day relay that lasted through the night. Doomsday board members and volunteers fondly reminisce about the many animal encounters that participants have had over the years when running early in the day or late at night — from raccoons to elk.

"One guy came to me just terrified, he said a cow had chased him," Steele recalled.

This is the third year the relay has followed the shorter, 82-mile course. In the final leg of this year's race, each team member ran a portion of a trail course that the board marked out across the Anthony Lakes Ski Resort.

This year, 24 teams participated in the relay, each with between one and six runners of various skill levels and ages.

For Steele and the Doomsday Racing team, the day kicked off at 3:30 a.m. Teams began showing up an hour later. By then, volunteers from La Grande's Calvary Chapel were busy flipping pancakes, frying up sausages and brewing coffee to help fuel relay participants for the day.

As the clock approached 5 a.m., some team members began warming up, while others decorated their cars — using colorful paint markers to write their team name under the light of phone flashlights and headlamps.

Runners for the relay's first leg took their places at the top of the hour, and with a countdown from the morning crowd, they were off, headlamps bobbing onto the Ukiah-Hilgard Highway.

Over the next several hours, racers traversed their way to Anthony Lakes. Team cars stopped at designated transition markers along the way to pick up and drop off runners for each leg.

As the sun began to rise, Gail Kimberling cheered on her granddaughter, Kasey, as she approached the first transition point.

"Good job," Kimberling said, high-fiving her granddaughter. "Five and a half miles."

Kimberling and the Carrion On team is one of several multigenerational teams that comes back to run the relay each year. Last year, Kimberling, a long-time runner and the cross country and track coach at Pine Eagle High School, wasn't able to race. She had broken her toe, and due to an infection, almost had to have it amputated.

This year, Kimberling was back on the course with her daughter and grandchildren — and all her toes.

"I love people like that," said Steele of Kimberling. "They inspire me. I'm like, 'hey, that's what I wanna be when I grow up.' "

During the relay's first year, John Pace was one of the oldest participants, while his granddaughter, Ahnica Shoemaker, was the youngest runner. Now, their family members make up two teams in the yearly event. Pace and Shoemaker both agreed that for them, it's a priority to support a local relay that is working to raise money for non-commercial causes.

"We decided this is the one we wanted to do, and we've stayed with it every year," Pace said.

Although several teams like Kimberling's have been faithful relay participants since the start, the race draws newcomers as well. A few of this year's teams were made up of employees from some of the race's corporate sponsors. Steele estimated that around three-quarters of teams will sign up again.

"I know that's why they run with us," she said. "They want to be able to support and this is a way that's very doable for them, and their runners and it just fits well."

The Elkhorn Relay was even able to carry on during the pandemic. During the summer of 2020, the board began submitting permits, unsure of whether things would get shut down. With a COVID safety plan in place and over 90 miles of the Elkhorn mountain range in which to social distance, runners were able to participate in the relay. Steele said that year felt particularly special.

"There were a lot of tears at the finish line," she said. "I think a lot of it was just that people had been so lonely and were excited to get out and do something as a community again and do something they love."

In the past few years, Doomsday Racing has donated proceeds from the race to a feeding program in South Sudan, run by Far Reaching Ministries. The nonprofit has also donated funds to Send Hope Now, an organization that runs aid programs and projects in India. According to Steele, the proceeds support the program's orphanages for HIV-positive children, providing funds for medical needs, food, clothing, education and career support.

"I know that what we do is only going to impact a small corner of the world or a small amount of suffering," Steele said. "Maybe that's all you can do, but it's something."

Beyond the relay's philanthropic goals, Steele noted that the folks involved in the race are enough of a reason to keep it going each year.

"The running community's pretty dang awesome," she said. "You always have a really good time, just being part of this race and meeting all these people."