

# Wasco to Wyden: Send houses, health and money

By Gail Oberst  
For Columbia Gorge News

U.S. Sen. Ron Wyden chatted live online with Wasco County residents May 2, offering to help with problems that ranged from supporting clinics by attracting professionals and replacing expensive medical equipment to housing for low and middle-income residents. The problems — and the solutions — are all connected, Wyden said.

Creating anchor industries, including specialty health care, attracts professionals and staff, brings wages into the area, and encourages developers to build homes, Wyden suggested. "I'm all in. Let's get to it,"

he said several times during the hour-long discussion. After hearing visitors speak, he offered help from his office to navigate roadblocks to success.

Many of the challenges in Wasco County were already present but ramped up by the pandemic, residents told Wyden.

Wyden said the federal stimulus funds — \$3.2 million to The Dalles, \$130,000 to Dufur, \$94,000 to Maupin, \$89,000 to Mosier, for example — will provide a "booster shot" to Oregon communities impacted by the pandemic.

Sue Knapp, a Maupin city councilor and board member on the White River Health District, talked about the rural community's attempts

to build a new health clinic and attract health providers, especially behavioral, dental and school-based health professionals.

Wyden said his office would help the district's Deschutes Rim Clinic gain status as a Rural Health Clinic, connecting it to additional state and federal aid.

David Warden, new executive director of the Mid-Columbia Health Foundation, which helps support Mid-Columbia Medical Center, asked Wyden for help raising money for \$1.3 million in state-of-the-art cancer technology. After thousands of treatments over the past 10 years, Warden said the older equipment needs to be replaced.

Nate Stice, a community health and housing advocate, added the importance of building affordable homes for the people who come to Wasco County to work.

"There's a growing crisis of affordability," Stice said of Wasco County. He's unofficially tracked housing trends in the area and said prices for rentals have skyrocketed.

Sharon Thompson Thornberry agreed that affordable housing competition is fierce. She had recently applied to rent an apartment that had 43 other interested renters.

"Units are snapped up quickly," Stice said.

Vaccinations are key to addressing the pandemic fallout, Wyden said. Next

in importance for Wasco County is creating economic anchor businesses — large projects in medical centers could draw both developers, businesses and employees, as well as the promise of residents.

"Something like this could be an economic multiplier," Wyden said, referring to health clinic and cancer technology projects.

Lisa Farquharson, The Dalles Chamber of Commerce president admitted there are urgent challenges, both physical and financial in Wasco County. Buildable land is limited, and the city's Urban Growth Boundary may not soon expand, she said. In addition, most businesses

are focused on survival and recovery during the pandemic, which recently resurged in Wasco County, sending its restaurant operations back outdoors. Finding workers under the circumstances is nearly impossible.

"We either need to open the businesses, or get assistance," Farquharson said.

Wyden asked her to send his office a list of businesses on the edge, to help them with available assistance.

"We've been talking about pieces that are interrelated — health care, housing, business needs, health," Wyden said. "This discussion is to be continued."

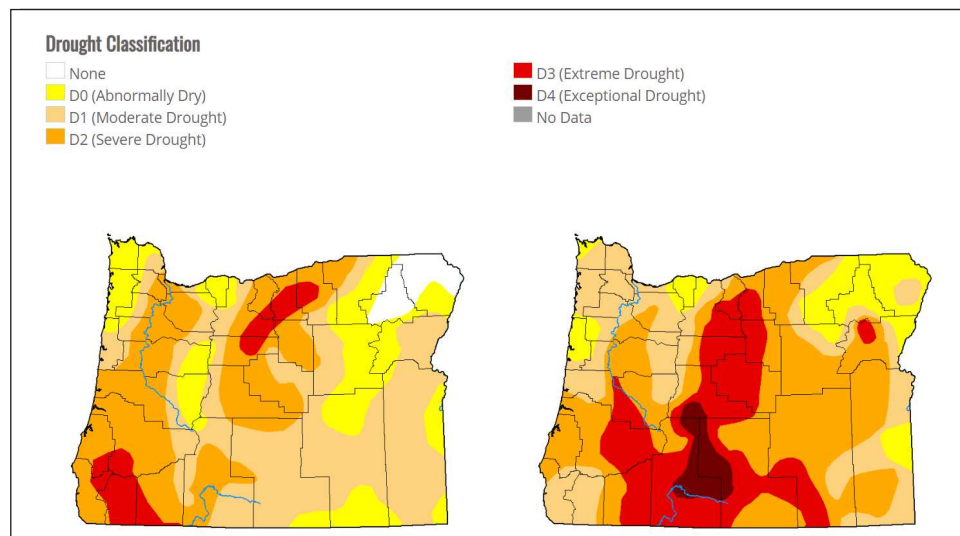
# Drought, wildfire risk forecast for Gorge

By Mark Gibson  
Columbia Gorge News

Most of Oregon will see drought conditions and high fire danger this summer, and portions of Wasco County are already in "extreme drought," according to a May 5 report to the Wasco County board of commissioners by Ed Townsend, science and weather officer with National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration/National Weather Service in Pendleton.

Hood River County is also experiencing drought conditions, although with less severity than drier portions of Wasco County. Most of Klickitat County is also in drought.

Drought conditions expanded in April, with abnormally dry to extreme drought conditions in the county, Townsend said. April 2021 was the 11th driest on record, March 2021 the ninth driest, Townsend reported. Only three out of the last 16 months saw above normal precipitation, he added. "Areas of north central Oregon, including Wasco County, have seen below normal snowpack and below



United States Drought Monitor maps show increasing drought severity in Oregon from May 5, 2020 (left) and May 4, 2021. Yellow areas are abnormally dry, with tan areas in moderate drought, orange severe and dark purple areas of exceptional drought. Wasco County is experiencing abnormally dry, moderate and severe drought.

normal precipitation dating back through the winter of 2020, causing both meteorological and hydrological drought."

"Drought is expected to persist through at least July 31," he said, and little relief can be anticipated in August. "The predicted conditions will result in above normal potential for large wildland fires across the area in June,

July and August," he warned. "It looks like its going to be a pretty hot and dry summer."

As a result, Wasco County prepared a drought declaration for the second consecutive year.

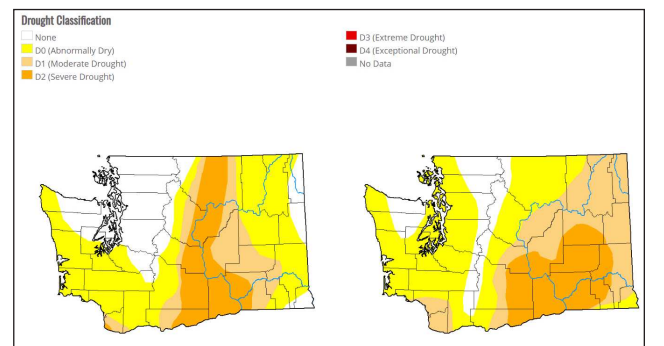
The declaration will allow a variety of emergency land and water use changes, and open the door for farmers, ranchers and orchardists to receive emergency grants

and loans from federal programs.

"This has been rolling toward us from the east, and now it's here," said Commission Chair Scott Hege.

### Wildfire risk high

Dry conditions will also spark an increased risk of wildfire throughout the



In Washington state, Klickitat County is also abnormally dry with areas of moderate and severe drought.

county, noted Angie Brewer, Wasco County planning director. She noted the county has produced a video presentation, available on the county website, detailing the county's fire risk and encouraging home owners in the county to create a "defensible space" around their homes.

Brewer noted that in addition to the video presentation that summarizes wildfire rehabilitation and preparation work done over the last year and ways to prepare for wildfire, the county was in the process of reviewing related policies, codes and federal funding, and would be returning to the board in the near future to consider additional wildfire measures

that could be taken. "We've seen some scary trends in wildfire risks and behavior in our county," Hege noted. "Now is the perfect time to prepare for the wildfire season. Take the time now, look into these resources and build this defensible space. That is what you want, you want to know there is a good chance your home can be defended. A month from now, its going to get dryer and scarier."

Commissioner Kathy Schwartz noted "there are a lot of ways to reduce risk overall," and also encouraged community members to prepare now for the wildfire season beginning in July.

## City seeks Rand Road comments

HOOD RIVER — Hood River residents have until May 20 to participate in a survey about plans to build affordable homes and apartments on the city-owned seven-acre site along Rand Road, at the west end. The city will include community comments in its development plans, due for completion in June.

The survey, in both English and Spanish, is at cityofhoodriver.gov/planning/780-rand-road-housing-development-strategy.

Once initial preferences are complete, the city will seek a developer to propose specific infrastructure and housing construction. Construction could begin as early as summer 2022.

The council has narrowed its preferences to four

alternatives, all of which mix low-income apartments and middle-income owner-occupied homes on the site. The alternatives also suggest places for parks and open spaces, wetland management, transit shelters, energy-efficient construction and sidewalks. All of the alternatives include 100 rental apartments. Alternatives include varying numbers of town houses and affordable owner-occupied homes. The city council's preferred alternative No. 4 includes developing adjacent Hood River County property at the same time.

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