

Eastern Oregon: Miles and miles to reach members

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It's 1,500 miles of highway and nearly that many OSEA members.

And the OSEA members are no different than any other LaGrande, Pendleton, Baker or Enterprise resident when it comes to independence and love of their region.

But the miles between cities provide some similarities in the difficulty of providing service both for OSEA Employee Representative Peter De Luca and for state employees in this corner of the state. It's all in OSEA District Five.

This report will give some idea of what it is like covering the territory, meeting the members, handling grievances under nearly all the 45 agency contracts OSEA administers, dealing with branch managers and driving the long miles between towns.

TUESDAY -- If you leave Salem real close to 8 a.m., you'll make the 1 p.m. meeting at Eastern Oregon Hospital and Training Center in Pendleton with no room to spare. DeLuca needed to confer with a psychiatric aide and with psych aide and District 5 Director Joe Roche before he went into a pre-dismissal hearing. That hearing, in front of EOH personnel officer Heather Evans and two supervisors lasted 45 minutes.

On this day, Special Assistant Tom Gallagher and Employee Representative Ken Allen also were in Pendleton meeting with the hospital's BURC. Eastern Oregon Hospital will join three other Mental Health Division agencies in a coalition for agency bargaining. In the afternoon, DeLuca, Allen and Roche met hospital administrators and consultants on psych aide training both from out of state and from Teaching Research in Monmouth, a division of the State System of Higher Education.

The administrators wanted to provide staff development "for the staff as opposed to the staff." They recognized that the hospital's services were not being delivered because of poor training and they wanted to run their ideas by the representatives of the union. Allen said he was familiar with a similar program now underway at Fairview Hospital, a similar but larger institution in Salem.

DeLuca and Allen were concerned about the effect this training might have on the longtime employee after years of neglect by management. A totally new requirement -- management admits to such -- has been introduced to keep one's job; what happens if, at this late date, the employee can't successfully complete the training? The answer was that most do, that counseling would be provided for those who were having trouble and that an employee could go through the program twice before action would be taken.

Before DeLuca could call it a day, he had to make sure that all needs were being met both at the Highway shops and at the state office building in downtown Pendleton. On this occasion, there were no apparent needs for service.

WEDNESDAY -- Off to LaGrande and a meeting with OSEA member Pamela Walker who has filed a grievance based on flextime.

After meeting Walker and before going into the branch manager's office, DeLuca met with his contacts. The contacts, job representatives or individual OSEA members who are aware of what is going on in their offices, are essential to the success of any road trip. For their field representative who must make several stops in a day, some in towns 50 to 70 miles apart, it helps to know quickly where the trouble is, if any, and what kind. After a swing through the multi-agency Department of Human Resources office, DeLuca knows who he will have to see and now can concentrate on the position he is going to present to Adult and Family Services branch manager Lowell Chally on behalf of Walker.

Walker wants to come to work at 7 a.m.

so she can ride to town with her husband from their ranch 30 miles outside of town. That would give her an hour of relative calm to do the typing that there always is plenty of for her to do. However, it would mean leaving work at 4 p.m. Chally denied the grievance at his level for this reason.

That afternoon, DeLuca met with two members of the Eastern Oregon State College faculty. EOSC president Rodney Briggs has summarily dismissed four faculty members and reassigned some others. College faculty members have no bargaining representative or contract. DeLuca helped physical education professor and basketball coach Pasco Arritola with the grievance procedure in the state system's and the college's policy manual. But, without a collective bargaining agreement, he could make no estimates regarding the success of such a procedure.

It is self-evident that highway maintenance work must be done out on the highways. Because of that, and because highway maintenance workers are more interested in coffee than conversation in the mornings, the best time to meet with them is in the late afternoon. Proposition 13, limiting the amount of property tax local governments could raise, which had just been passed in California was a point of departure for conversation for some maintenance workers in the LaGrande Highway shops. The land, its beauty and its recreational opportunities, are a big concern of many who work in the highway shops here. They are aware of a large influx of new residents. They wonder what sort of work they are doing and they are aware that this pressure is driving up the price of land and buildings.

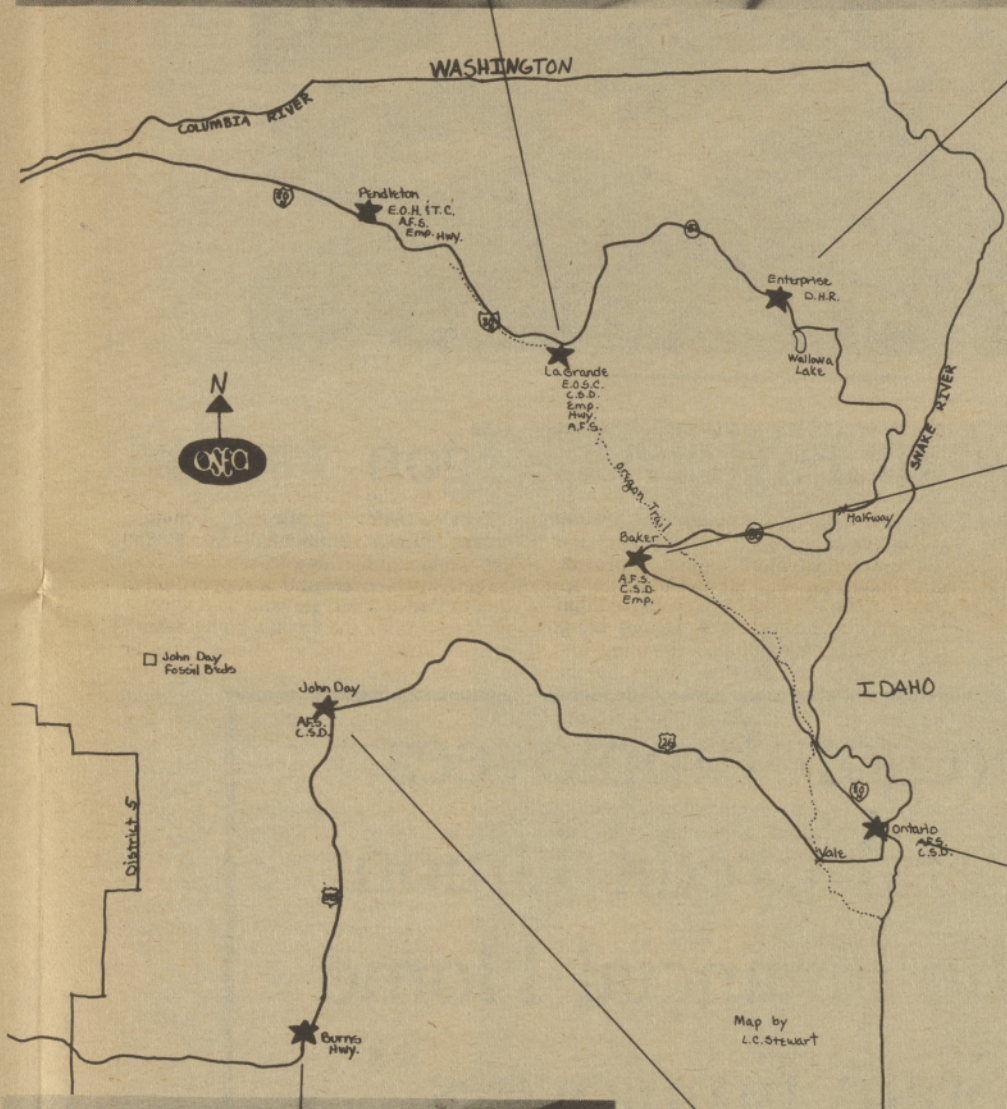
THURSDAY -- Taking government service to the people means opening offices in some remote and beautiful places in the state, like Enterprise. And providing a full range of services, both directly to the client and in support, often means that workers have to do a greater variety of tasks than would be necessary in a larger office where greater specialization is possible. Enterprise, for example, is a satellite office in which clerical specialists doing the work of a higher classification -- because there is work that needs to be done.

For the passenger, who had never been to most places in eastern Oregon Thursday was probably the most spellbinding -- spruce forests to high chaparral with mountain-backed meadows everywhere. For the rep, however, it really must be regarded as time-consuming periods away from the membership. There is a lot of ground to cover and not too many people.

At this time, there is a lot of concern whether employees in outlying areas will have to pay for parking and whether they have a right to flextime. In the first instance, OSEA maintains that employees probably will not have to pay for parking and, yes, the governor stipulated flextime is for all state employees. An increasing number of new employees, all of them CETA employees, concerns OSEA members in eastern Oregon.

FRIDAY -- In a conversation with DeLuca, several AFS employees in John Day pointed out that management, particular in faraway Salem, doesn't understand the problems of servicing clients. It's not unlike DeLuca's own caseload. Similarly sized caseloads require more work in eastern Oregon than in an urban area. There's the question of travel, often up into the hills and on dirt roads, and there are people without phones requiring a face-to-face meeting and a long drive there and back.

Despite the problems, one is left with the feeling that eastern Oregonians are proud to be eastern Oregonians and not likely to change willingly. However, they believe that management -- and their union -- should recognize their special needs and the special problems they must overcome to do their job. They shouldn't be penalized for living and working in eastern Oregon.



See 'OSEA in Eastern Oregon' on pg. 8 for identification

