

Pendleton Round-Up canceled over virus

Event draws over 17,000 people

By ANTONIO SIERRA
East Oregonian

PENDLETON — For the first time since World War II, the Pendleton Round-Up, a rodeo so ingrained into Pendleton history that it's become synonymous with the city, will not hold its annual event.

The last two times the Round-Up took a year off from activities — 1942 and 1943 — the U.S. and the rest of the globe were gripped by war. More than 75 years later, the boards of directors for the Round-Up and Happy Canyon were trying to plan events around the COVID-19 pandemic.

Sitting in an empty Round-Up arena on Friday, the arena's grass a verdant green from the thunderstorms that recently rolled through town, Round-Up Publicity Director Pat Reay, Happy Canyon Publicity Director Kenzie Hansell, and Erika Patton, Happy Canyon and Round-Up general manager, explained how they were all disappointed, but they needed to put the safety of their audience and volunteers first.

Reay said there wasn't a specific event or development that led to the decision, but rather the persistence of a virus that has seen its spread accelerate this week.

During a month where more than 200 people in Union County contracted the coronavirus at an Island City church, the challenge of trying to coordinate a rodeo that can pack upward of 17,000 people in the grandstands and concourse proved too daunting.

Shutting down the rodeo and all its accompanying events for the year didn't come from a lack of trying.

"Our original plan was the show was going to go on as planned," Reay said.



Colt Gordon, of Comanche, Oklahoma, hangs onto OLS Tubs' 'Little Muffin' for an 89-point ride to win the saddle bronc event at last year's Pendleton Round-Up.

Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian

The boards for the Round-Up and Happy Canyon began meeting in March after Gov. Kate Brown said any large events needed to either be canceled or significantly modified to meet social distancing rules.

According to a press release, the boards went as far as to draft and submit a "comprehensive operational plan" that outlined the group's "safety protocols" to the governor's office.

But as it became clear that the Round-Up and Happy Canyon wouldn't be able to operate with all of its usual traditions, both boards agreed it was time to look ahead to 2021.

This year was supposed to be a watershed one for the Round-Up.

The association was making plans for the rodeo's 110th

anniversary, which would be marked in part by the opening of a brand new facility to house the Round-Up's growing retail, ticketing and administrative operations.

Although still a non-profit that largely relies on 1,500 volunteers to coordinate and execute rodeo week, the Round-Up has also turned into a multimillion-dollar operation.

Without the ability to put on a four-day rodeo, the association is setup to take a financial hit.

In tax forms covering 2017, the Round-Up reported nearly \$3 million in program service revenue, with more than half coming from ticket sales. But the Round-Up's overall revenue scheme is buoyed by \$2.2 million in royalties, which mostly comes from the association's

licensing deal with Pendleton Whisky.

The Round-Up has used its growing money streams to hire more year-round personnel and renovate facilities.

New grandstands, concessions and dining areas gave way to outright expansion beyond the rodeo grounds.

The Round-Up bought a vacant grocery store property south of the grounds and is in the midst of building its new, \$3.6 million administrative building, including a Dutch Bros. location, on the now bare land. The association also methodically bought properties west of the Round-Up grounds to donate to Blue Mountain Community College for an agricultural education facility/indoor arena. The \$13 million project is set to start construction in 2021.

Patton said the Round-Up's one-year hiatus has already forced it to lay off its part-time staff, and there may be more budget decisions to make in the future. But she said the Round-Up's new building is still on track to complete construction by the end of July, and the Round-Up Association is in the process of planning a socially distanced grand opening.

The one-year pause on the rodeo not only affects the Round-Up, but also provides another setback for a local hospitality and tourism industry already battered by the pandemic.

A web of businesses, nonprofits and community groups rely on the thousands of people the Round-Up brings to town in September to bolster them through the rest of the year.

As a way to lessen the blow to these groups, the Round-Up and Happy Canyon are starting the LET 'ER BUCK CARES fund.

Patton said the Round-Up is prepared to honor requests for ticket refunds, but customers will also have the option of taking the ticket proceeds and donating them to the fund.

While Round-Up and Happy Canyon leaders expect some frustration within the community, local leaders praised their decision.

Reay and Hansell emphasized that the CARES fund was about helping the region, as business and groups in Hermiston, Walla Walla, Washington, and Tri-Cities have all benefited from the Round-Up's popularity.

Mayor John Turner called it a "difficult, but courageous decision" that he supported, even as he admitted a lack of Round-Up would be a blow to the local economy.

Chuck Sams, the commander for the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation's COVID-19 Incident Command Team, said it was also the right call to make.

Both Sams and Walla Walla Chief Don Sampson had expressed concern about holding a Round-Up this year, and Sams said the Happy Canyon Night Show alone would make it difficult for tribal members to participate while still complying with state or tribal rules on social distancing.

Sams said the presidents of the Round-Up and Happy Canyon will still meet with the reservation's Board of Trustees on Wednesday to discuss ways to better communicate and coordinate with each other.

Despite a historic setback, the officials from Round-Up and Happy Canyon vowed to return in 2021, hopefully with the virus in the rearview mirror.



Thank You!



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ALCP is still here for you and we will continue our efforts to assist in dressing school children in need of clothing in our community.



Jane Cartwright handing out free clothing at Warrenton Elementary School

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Julie Elizabeth (Paulsen) Hitchman
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