

Tracing: ‘Decision was not taken lightly’

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The Astorian has reported that a similar dispute played out in May after an outbreak at Pacific Seafood.

“OHA and Clatsop County Public Health see the response in a little different way of how we would handle it versus how they would,” Michael McNickle, the county’s public health director, said.

The health authority will conduct the rest of the interviews with workers at Pacific Seafood with the help of an interpreter. The workers from Moldova speak Romanian.

McNickle said the health authority decided to allow workers identified as contacts to go between the plant and the rental housing where they are living in a cohort, while limiting their interaction with other workers and with the community.

The county said the local office of the state Department of Human Services will provide any wraparound services.

“This decision was not taken lightly, and it is a joint decision because of the nature and size of this potential outbreak,” McNickle said.

County Commissioner Mark Kujala, who represents Warrenton on the Board of Commissioners, was critical of Pacific Seafood’s approach.

“Clatsop County’s got to be able to do their job and they need to do it in a timely manner because that’s what contact tracing is all about. You do it right away and you can limit the amount of exposure that someone that might be infected (and) doesn’t know it has in the community. That was our goal from the very beginning,” he said.

“And I think we had some real disagreements about exactly what the quarantine means. And I think we also didn’t quite understand how you could cohort and continue to work before you have contact trace or an interview or complete an investigation. So those are some, I think, fundamental issues.

“And I believe the Oregon Health Authority believes the same as we did and felt that we were right in our position. And then I think that they kind of backed off of that and have kind of modified that position.”

In May, an outbreak at Pacific Seafood in Warrenton was tied to 15 coronavirus cases, 11 workers and four contacts. Another outbreak at Bornstein Seafoods in Astoria was linked to 23 local cases, 19 workers and four contacts.

The two outbreaks make up the bulk of local virus cases during the pandemic.

An outbreak at Pacific Seafood plants in Newport reported in June was tied to 180 cases, according to the Oregon Health Authority, the second-largest workplace cluster in the state after the Oregon State Penitentiary.

“We certainly don’t want to stop people from working and we care about our businesses here in Warrenton,” Kujala said. “But we simply wanted to get this con-

tact tracing and investigation completed and feel confident that everything that we’re getting provided from the company is verified before going back as business as usual, knowing that we’ve had two outbreaks already.

“And knowing that there’s a major one in Newport that had ramifications far beyond the plant itself.”

Disclosure

Pacific Seafood publicly disclosed the new case on Friday after being contacted by The Astorian.

The seafood processor said it was notified on June 29 that a new hire tested positive. According to the company, the worker was at the Warrenton plant for one shift completing orientation.

John King, the general manager at the plant, said in a statement that the orientations are in compliance with Oregon and federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention guidelines and include “physical distancing, extra sanitation and full personal protective equipment, including face coverings, plastic face shields, smocks and gloves.

“We continue to complete daily health screening and temperature checks for all team members.”

‘... WE ALL HAVE TO REALLY REALIZE THE MULTIPLE LAYERS THAT HAVE TO BECOME ALIGNED TO REALLY PROTECT THE PUBLIC.’

Don Bohn | county manager

The company said workers who are part of the H-2B program are tested for the virus after arriving in the United States.

“Pacific Seafood has invested significant resources to develop strict programs and protocols that exceed federal CDC guidelines for essential businesses when it comes to our H-2B visa workers,” King said. “All incoming H-2B workers are tested for COVID immediately upon arrival in the United States, a standard that is not required but we believe is in the best interests of our team and local communities.

“The workers were tested by Signature Health in Portland at our expense.”

The Astorian has pressed the county Public Health Department to disclose more information about virus cases, particularly details that

might help explain who is at most risk for exposure when positive cases are announced.

The Public Health Department had disclosed on June 30 that a man in his 40s living in the northern part of the county tested positive for the virus, but did not identify him as a Pacific Seafood worker. County leaders said Friday they did not mention Pacific Seafood for medical privacy reasons, and that it was up to the company to disclose the information.

‘Uncharted waters’

County Manager Don Bohn said on Friday that addressing potential outbreaks at food processors is a partnership between the county, the Oregon Health Authority, the Oregon Department of Agriculture and the businesses.

The Department of Agriculture oversees food processors.

“This has been uncharted waters since March,” Bohn said of the county’s response to the pandemic. “We have an amazing public health staff who is doing yeoman’s work to respond to the positive cases, as well as doing everything that they can to do public education and outreach.

“And I think the county has done a very good job of managing that. But, you know, we all have to really realize the multiple layers that have to become aligned to really protect the public.

“And that requires individuals to do their part. That requires businesses to do their part. It requires the availability of all of the equipment and PPE. There’s just so many different layers to this.

“And so, what all of us know in this pandemic is that we need to rely upon each other to do our part. And so that’s what we’re working on right now with the state to make sure the state and the county are of a single mind about how we’re going to handle these essential businesses to make sure that as they do their work, that we still can protect the community.

“And that is still a work in progress.”

Warrenton Mayor Henry Balensifer said it is common practice for seafood processing plants to hire workers from other states and countries. He has suggested new operational guidance for the plants and potentially limiting outside workers.

“There was a workforce shortage before COVID and it doesn’t seem like a lot of people jumping to go work for the plants,” he said. “I trust that they will be taking all measures of precaution, both at the feds and the state to ensure they are tested and allowed to come into the states and aren’t a health risk.

“And if they don’t, I’ll have some pointed questions to ask.”

CORONAVIRUS RELIEF

Money for small businesses given to larger companies

By CHRISTOPHER RUGABER and JOYCE M. ROSENBERG
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The government on Monday identified roughly 650,000 mostly small businesses and nonprofits that received taxpayer money from a program that likely helped prevent the job market meltdown from growing worse but that also benefited some politically connected firms.

Recipients covered a broad swath of industries, with some that were less directly impacted by the coronavirus pandemic, such as manufacturing and construction, receiving a greater proportion of the loans than the hard-hit restaurant, bar and hotel industries. Many law firms and private equity companies also obtained loans.

Businesses owned by politicians also borrowed from the Treasury Department’s Payroll Protection Program, including a minor league baseball team owned by the family of the governor of Ohio. A large franchisee of Wendy’s, Taco Bell and Pizza Hut restaurants, whose CEO is a major donor to President Donald Trump, received loans totaling between \$15 and \$30 million.

The program launched April 3 and as of June 30 had handed out \$521 billion. The Treasury identified just a fraction of the total borrowers Monday, naming only those companies that got more than \$150,000. Those firms made up less than 15% of the nearly 5 million small companies and organizations that received loans.

Economists generally credit the program with helping prevent the job market meltdown from being much worse. Employers added

7.5 million jobs in May and June, a solid increase though it left the economy with nearly 15 million fewer jobs than before the pandemic. The paycheck program probably drove some of that gain.

And research by Tomaz Cajner, an economist at the Federal Reserve, and seven colleagues found that companies with fewer than 50 workers before the pandemic saw their hiring rise 12% in May, while jobs grew just 5% in larger firms, suggesting the paycheck program helped fuel rehiring.

THE PROGRAM LAUNCHED APRIL 3 AND AS OF JUNE 30 HAD HANDED OUT \$521 BILLION.

But the program was only intended to carry the economy through a short interruption from the coronavirus pandemic, which is now threatening to have a longer-lasting impact. The Treasury initially required the loans to be spent within eight weeks of being received, though that was later lengthened to 24 weeks.

Many small businesses have already run through their paycheck program money and still face sharply smaller demand, as consumers remain wary of returning to their older habits of shopping, visiting gyms, or eating out. Texas, Florida, California, New York and others have reversed their reopenings, closing down bars and delaying the onset of indoor dining.

“The biggest issue is that PPP is short-term help,” said Adam Ozimek, chief econ-

omist at Upwork, a freelancing platform. “And now we’re dealing with a mid to long-term problem.”

A survey by the National Federation of Independent Business found that as of mid-June, 14% of small businesses that borrowed from the paycheck program expected they would have to lay off some workers when their loan ran out.

The paycheck program provided loans of up to \$10 million for small businesses to help them recover from the government-ordered shutdowns and revenue losses caused by the virus outbreak. The average loan amount for the entire program was \$107,000, the Treasury Department said in a broad summary of the program.

The loans can be forgiven if the businesses mostly use the money to continue paying their workers. The program initially was set to expire June 30 but was extended last week to Aug. 8, with \$132 billion still available.

The recipients employed 51 million people before the pandemic began, Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin said, or about 85% of all workers at companies with fewer than 500 employees. The government won’t know how many of these jobs were actually saved until companies apply to have the loans forgiven, a process that is just beginning.

A senior administration official said Monday that some small companies “will need additional support” in the coming months.

The public may never know the identity of more than 80% of the nearly 5 million beneficiaries to date because the administration has refused to release details on loans under \$150,000.



Thank You!

Assistance League of the Columbia Pacific® (ALCP), decided it was, unfortunately, necessary to cancel one of our major fundraising events in May which would have been our 13th annual Golf Ball Drop event.

There is nothing more important than appreciating the people and businesses who supported our efforts to put this event together. We want to take this time to thank all the donors that contributed to the Golf Ball Drop prior to its cancellation and they are listed below:

Bridgewater Bistro	High Life Adventures	Ft. George
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Pacific Power • US Bank • Columbia River Bar Pilots		
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Thank you so very much for your continuing support! We cannot do what we do without your help.

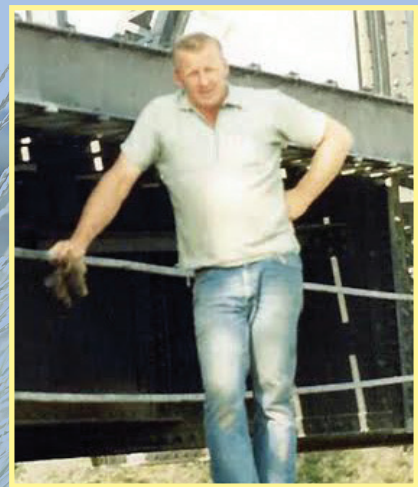
Assistance League of the Columbia Pacific is a non-profit, all volunteer organization whose philanthropic programs promote the well-being and self-esteem of children and teens throughout Clatsop County.

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To learn more or get involved, please visit www.assistanceleague.org

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