



Tom Banse/Northwest News Network

From left, Oregon State University researchers Andrew Williams, Katherine Lasdin and Susanne Brander collected mussels and whelks in Yachats in 2019. Before the coronavirus, Brander conducted research in the lab and in the field. But pandemic restrictions have forced her to adapt.

Coronavirus threatens researchers in Oregon

By JES BURNS
Oregon Public Broadcasting

During the early days of the coronavirus pandemic, whether or not you had a backbone could have been the difference between life and death. At least if you were a lab animal.

“(Oregon State University) would let you take care of fish during the shutdown, but invertebrates were not considered to be, I guess, important enough,” said Susanne Brander, an ecotoxicologist at Oregon State University.

She studies how microplastics and chemical pollutants affect sea life — including the lowly spineless mysid shrimp that plays a big role in the ocean food web.

Not being able to access her lab was a big problem, so she had to come up with a solution on the fly.

“The best place to put them was my basement,” she said.

The 10 gallon tanks lived there for several months — thanks in part to her own junior lab assistants.

“My kids were happy to feed them a couple times a day and help me out,” Brander said.

By summer, the shrimp were back home on the Corvallis campus, but things were not back to normal — and they still aren’t. Fewer researchers can access the lab at the same time and all the work stations have been spaced out.

Like so many professions across the Pacific Northwest, scientific advancement has run headlong into the disruptions of the pandemic. Their work to understand and help solve some of the most important environmental and social problems the region faces — like climate change, pollution and homelessness — has taken a hit.

Disruptions in access to facilities and research materials are common, but the real concern for Brander is money. Much of her lab’s research — staffing and supplies — is funded by grants.

“It’s hard because it’s not as if you can ask a funding agency that’s giving you a grant for more money. So you have to kind of stretch it out and make it work, even though you’re missing a three or four months chunk of time,” she said.

Funding agencies are giving extensions on deadlines to get research projects done, but not more resources to do the work.

While concerns over funding and productivity are widespread, in some cases, the interruption of the research itself is the most acute loss.

Every summer, the non-profit Klamath Bird Observatory monitors migratory bird

populations in rural southern Oregon using a crew of budding scientists from all over the world. But this year, as the pandemic was breaking out, they came to a stark realization.

“We cannot be vectors into rural communities where we do this work,” said director John Alexander.

The observatory told its crew to stay home and, consequently, for the first time in 25 years the bird counts didn’t happen.

“It’s a huge setback when you have these long term datasets to miss a year of data,” said science director Jamie Stephens.

The stakes are high, she said. A recent study found that the U.S. and Canada have lost 3 billion birds in the past 50 years, and the Klamath Bird Observatory’s long-term data provides the backbone for policy changes that could help reverse the trend.

“It’s just incredibly urgent right now. It’s just all getting a little behind when we don’t have time to get behind. We need to be taking actions like a decade ago,” she said.

The same goes for research connected to ocean and climate change. Ed Dever, of Oregon State, oversees the Ocean Observatories Initiative, an off-shore array of stationary sensors and underwater gliders that measure physical and chemical conditions off the Pacific Northwest — things like ocean acidification and low-oxygen dead zones (called hypoxia), which are already hurting Oregon’s fisheries and are expected to continue to get worse. The goal is to collect data over a long period of time to understand how ocean conditions are changing in response to climate and other factors.

“Our data set is at its most useful if it’s not broken up,” Dever said.

But keeping the flow of data coming requires regular upkeep of instruments buoyed out in the middle of the ocean, which is not most the hospitable of places for electronics. Batteries die. Extreme weather damages equipment. Sensors get crusted over with marine life.

The initiative requires crews to service all the instruments twice a year.

“A lot of the work that we do is off oceanographic research vessels, a pretty enclosed environment. And it is a place where, if COVID-19 got loose, a lot of people could get sick pretty quickly,” he said.

The spring work cruise was canceled, and bit by bit the data stopped coming in.

“One of the things we’re really interested in is the development of hypoxia over the Oregon and Washington shelves, and that mainly is a seasonal phenomena that happens at the start of summer. We were pretty bummed to not have things working at their best at the start of summer,” Dever said.

Ross: State lifted ban on commercial evictions

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lawyers argue Atlas has pursued. Atlas’s lawyers argue that Ross has also refused to sublease space, blocking new projects at the plaza such as a Chipotle Mexican Grill and an expansion of Providence Health & Services’ Warrenton clinic.

Lawmakers in Salem extended a ban on residential evictions until next year. But despite a push from hotels, restaurants and other small businesses, the state lifted the ban on commercial evictions.

Atlas claims Ross wracked up more than \$70,000 in unpaid rent during the moratorium. The back-due rent during the moratorium is not part of Atlas’ lawsuit but comes due by April.

The fight between Ross and Atlas is part of a larger trend of national retailers temporarily

closing locations during the pandemic and not fully paying rent.

Less than one-third of retail companies paid at least 75% of rent in June, according to a study in September by the National Retail Federation and financial adviser PJ Solomon. That figure nearly doubled to 65% in July. Nearly three-quarters of retailers who missed payments planned on paying at least half of back-due rent, according to the study.

“Genuine rent relief through this unprecedented period, whether it is landlord- or government-driven in the future, will hopefully provide sufficient runway for many of these retailers to maintain liquidity long enough to continue serving their customers and paying their employees until the pandemic’s most severe effects have retreated,” Jeff Derman, managing director at PJ Solomon, said in a statement about the study.

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