

Hypoxia: ‘We’re getting more extreme events’

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By midsummer, the winds that started the upwelling process were still going strong at a time when scientists would normally expect to see a shift and a corresponding rise in oxygen levels.

At the end of August, oxygen levels in the ocean off Oregon and Washington were as close to zero as scientists had seen all year. The hypoxic zone was approaching 8,000 square miles, still growing just 6 miles offshore. The low-oxygen zone — Jack Barth, an oceanographer with Oregon State University, thinks of it as a ribbon on the sea floor — stretches from Seattle to around the Cape Blanco and Coos Bay area.

Scientists are waiting for the first fall storms to roll through and flush coastal waters and mix oxygen deep down.

“That’s when we get to really say, ‘OK, finally the hypoxic event is over,’” Chan said.

Detailed mapping

This year’s hypoxia season has emphasized the need for more detailed mapping, Chan and Barth said.



Ron Baldwin

Scientists are tracking low-oxygen levels off the coast.

Both men happened to be out collecting data in separate areas around the same time this year. They were able to match what they were seeing with additional information collected by the

National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration to show the low oxygen levels extended from Oregon into Washington.

“We just have to be out there all the time map-

ping this,” Barth said. “And we’ve got to do a good job of communicating where it’s not so bad and where it’s hurting. That way we can more sustainably use the ocean.”

Chan deployed 38 dissolved oxygen sensors with commercial crab fishermen this year to expand tracking of low-oxygen areas. The fishermen zip-tied the sensors to crab pots and sent them down at fishing grounds, providing Chan with up-to-date information about important areas.

He plans to send the sensors out again next season. These kinds of partnerships need to continue and expand, he said.

Even though oxygen levels will jump up with the arrival of fall storms, questions remain about the organisms that had weathered low oxygen conditions for months this year.

In recent years, commercial crab fishermen still saw strong landings after a bad hypoxia season. In waters near the surface, the ocean is still very productive, scientists note, but the long-term effects of the low oxygen conditions on marine life in the bottom third of the water is unknown.

“Dead zone” — a phrase many people use when discussing hypoxic events — is not a scientific term.

“It makes it sound like the Oregon Coast is a dead wasteland,” Chan said.

“That’s pretty far from the truth. There’s still a lot of resilience.”

Fallout

Still, Chan wonders: Did crab have to spend extra reserves to survive this stress or are they completely fine when oxygen levels rise again? Were animals able to move away and find high-oxygen refuges, or did they get stuck and how did that affect growth and survival?

Land-based communities are experiencing the fallout from the rise of more extreme climate change-related events, Barth and Chan noted. People can see how the summer heat waves hit trees and plants this year. They actively experience the impacts of massive wildfires and long-term drought.

But from a viewpoint along U.S. Highway 101, the ocean looks exactly the same.

What people need to realize, Barth said, is that “all the climate change things we’re seeing on land and in the atmosphere — the heat and the fires and the increased hurricanes — the same thing is happening in the ocean: We’re getting more extreme events.”

Workers: Many extra unemployment benefits have expired

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Labor pool challenge

Central Oregon’s ready labor pool used to be one of its key attractions for new businesses seeking to set up shop, said Roger Lee, Economic Development for Central Oregon CEO.

“Our region’s ever-expanding population due to steady in-migration, workforce and human talent availability was our leading strength in attracting new employers and growing businesses already located here,” Lee said. “For many of our client companies, full staffing is the biggest impediment to operations and growth.”

At Nosler, a Bend and Redmond ammunition manufacturer, in order to keep up with demand, the company has added shifts to its production line, which is breaking records, making and shipping to keep up with the pandemic demand to dealers and distributors, but with fewer workers.

The company has added more staff already and offers overtime to keep up with demand. Currently, the company has 62 positions open and those vacancies are affecting production.

“We’ve been interviewing for employees since September 2020,” said Donelle Snider, Nosler’s human resources director. “We have

experienced some attrition, but also have increased our workforce production.”

Like many other businesses, Nosler has cast a wide net on various platforms to attract new workers. At WorkSource Oregon, Mike Derrickson, the central Oregon health care recruiter, said he’s coached many employers on how to reach job candidates.

In this tight labor market, available employees often get contacted within minutes of posting their resume. Many employers snag employees for an interview and make immediate job offers, Derrickson said.

“It’s been something else,” Derrickson said. “I have a lot of job seekers who come and I help them with their resume or enroll in classes, make the introduction to an employer and before I’m done, they’re hired by another company.”

“We’re seeing employers reacting very quickly.”

Employers offering less than \$15 an hour, especially in hard-to-fill industries like leisure and hospitality, are often outbid by employers paying more, said Chris Petty, the Express Employment Professionals franchise manager. Wages have risen in the past year, and employers are willing to train.

“Industrial jobs started nine months ago at \$14 an hour and now are going for

\$18 an hour,” Petty said. “Clients are understanding that they have to pay to get the talent.”

There are so few workers these days, Petty said that a five-hour job fair drew 18 applicants. That was a month ago, Petty said.

Talk to Samuel Lambert, Mid Oregon Personnel vice president, and he’ll tell you that it’s because the government has paid people to stay home.

“The government is paying people not to go to work,” Lambert said. “That’s where all the workers are. We had more applicants when the unemployment was not so readily available.”

Many of the federal unemployment programs expired on Labor Day weekend, according to the Oregon Employment Department. Roughly 81,000 people will no longer receive unemployment benefits.

Petty said he’s heard that companies have expanded their search beyond their communities and now are offering remote work to people. And some people are opting for the freedom of self-employment by becoming Uber, Lyft or Door Dash drivers, said Petty.

Workers returning to the fold

But the employment picture is looking up for

employers, Petty said. In just the past couple of weeks, more prospective employees are seeking work. They’re keeping interview appointments.

At St. Charles, Berry said the hospital system, which is the largest employer in the region with more than 4,500 workers, has hired 111 people already and has 115 workers who have accepted positions. Until the new hires come on board, the hospi-

tal has staffed its ranks with traveling nurses, members of the Oregon National Guard for nonmedical services and the state has sent in clinical assistance.

“But our journey is not over,” Berry said. “We have more work to do.”

Between the nurse residency program and a certified nursing assistant program partnership with Central Oregon Community College, another 60 medical personnel are

now in training for future employment. The hospital and college have doubled enrollment in the program that allows for employees to get paid and train for a certified nursing assistant position.

“We’ll have to be creative on how we recruit,” Berry said. “We have to stretch ourselves to look at the problem (of staffing) differently. We’re looking internally on how to grow our own staff.”

Port: Lack of applications

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temporary basis,” Isom said. “You would go back to your list, and oftentimes, those employees who were on call or part time have decided to take other jobs or they’re not interested in the work.”

“So that can be a bit of a challenge, more so on the on-call side, because we are so seasonal, we can’t have those folks working full time in the off months.”

Among full-time positions, the Port laid off multiple employees last summer, and while some were brought back, the agency is working with half of the typical maintenance staff and has several vacant administrative positions.

“When you look at our full-time staff, it’s really more of a business decision and, ‘Do you have the resources available?’ ... On the part-time or on-call side, it is generally difficult to hire, and we have ongoing postings for positions that we have not been able to

fill,” Isom said.

Isom said the Port has seen a lack of applications, and people who do apply are often inexperienced.

As for why the Port and many other organizations are struggling to find workers, Isom, who serves on the Knappa School District Board, believes that limited child care and school options during the pandemic have made families reevaluate their financial and workplace situations.

“There’s a number of factors, and it’s hard to quantify how much each factor comes into play,” he said. “It’s different based on what community you’re in, or what types of jobs you are hiring for.”

The rise in new virus cases over the summer has dampened the Port’s optimism of escaping the financial tolls of the pandemic and the labor shortage soon.

“I think earlier this summer there was a lot of optimism and it felt like things were getting better ... but

with the emergence of the delta variant, it’s obviously thrown a wrench in things,” Isom said. “It has felt like the last month or two, we’ve kind of had to take a step backwards.”

“I’m hopeful that as we move forward, that things can return back to normal, or at least some semblance of normal.”

While Isom appreciates the work of Port staff during the labor shortage, he recognizes the situation is not viable for the Port or employees.

“In the shorter term, you can move the pieces and make it work, but that can only last for so long,” he said. “At some point, you risk employee burnout. You can’t expect people to, on a long-term basis, be putting in a bunch of overtime.”

“Sometimes that is overtime from hourly employees or we have salaried staff in the office that put in a lot of extra time as well. That’s just not sustainable over the long haul.”

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