

Rural America watches pandemic erupt in cities as fear grows

By GILLIAN FLACCUS
Associated Press

DUFUR — The social distancing rules repeated like a mantra in America’s urban centers, where the coronavirus is spreading exponentially, might seem silly in wide-open places where neighbors live miles apart and “working from home” means another day spent branding calves or driving a tractor alone through a field.

But as the pandemic spreads through the United States, those living in rural areas, too, are increasingly threatened. Tiny towns tucked into Oregon’s wind-swept plains and cattle ranches miles from anywhere in South Dakota might not have had a single case of the new coronavirus, but their main streets are also empty and their medical clinics overwhelmed by the worried.

Residents from rural Alabama to the woods of Vermont to the frozen reaches of Alaska fear the spread of the disease from outsiders, the social isolation that comes when the town’s only diner closes, and economic collapse in places where jobs were already scarce.

“Nobody knows what to do and they’re just running in circles, so stay away



In this photo taken March 20, 2020, cattle rancher Mike Filbin, front, and his friend, Joe Whitesell, behind, prepare to herd cattle at Filbin’s ranch in Dufur.

from me is what I’m saying,” said Mike Filbin, a 70-year-old cattle rancher in Wasco County, Oregon, one of the few parts of the state that has yet to see a case of COVID-19.

“Right now, we’re pretty clean over here, but we’re not immune to nothin’ — and if they start bringing it over, it’ll explode here.”

To make matters worse, some of the most remote communities have limited or no internet access and spotty cellphone service.

That makes telecommuting and online learning challenging in an era of blanket school and work closures, and it eliminates the possibility of the FaceTime card games and virtual cocktail hours that urban Americans have turned to in droves to stay connected.

The routine ways that rural Americans connect — a bingo night, stopping in at a local diner or attending a potluck — are suddenly taboo.

“Rural people are reliant

on their neighbors and have more confidence and trust in their neighbors,” said Ken Johnson, a senior demographer at the Carsey School of Public Policy and professor of sociology at the University of New Hampshire. “Now you have people who are supposed to self-isolate themselves. What does that mean when people you depend on, in order to help you, are going to put themselves and their families at risk? I don’t know what that will do in rural America.”

Neil Bradshaw, the mayor of Ketchum, Idaho, is starting to see the answer in his own community.

The rural resort town has struggled since the arrival of COVID-19, and he fears if the virus lingers too long, it could devastate it. The town is nestled next door to the tony skiing destination Sun Valley Resort and is known as the second-home haven for dozens of celebrities.

It’s also become the epicenter of Idaho’s caseload, with at least 35 cases and known community spread of the virus. At least 14 of the cases are among health care workers, forcing the town’s small medical workers to bring in replacement staffers from nearby cities.

“Our town thrives on people coming to town, and for the first time in our history we are discouraging visitors,” said Bradshaw, of the town of 2,700 people. “Initially, people had different levels of adoption, but there’s tremendous community pressure that we’re all in this together. We’ve gone from being a vibrant town to a ghost town.”

Others worry about outsiders bringing the disease to truly remote areas that aren’t equipped to deal with it. Across the nation, there are over 51,000 general intensive care beds in urban

counties, compared with just 5,600 in rural counties, according to data compiled by The Associated Press.

Those beds serve a smaller population than in urban areas, but it would still take fewer people in rural areas to overwhelm a typical hospital. In fiscal year 2018, the average rural hospital had eight ICU beds, compared with 20 for a typical hospital in an urban area.

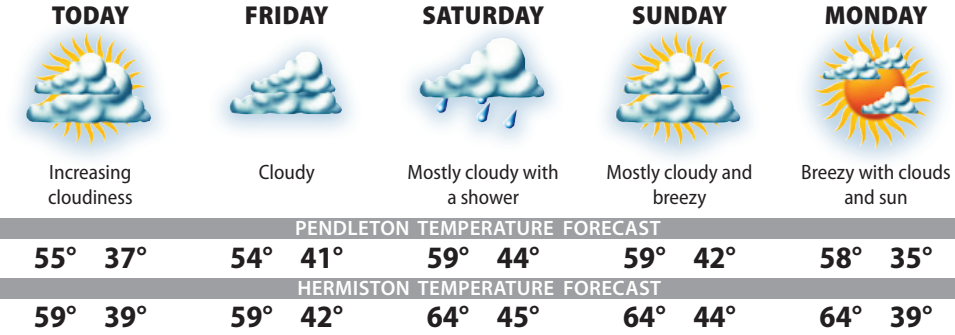
In Alaska’s Point Hope, an Inupiat whaling village at the edge of the Arctic Ocean nearly 700 miles north of Anchorage, tribal leaders have been preparing and discussing potential issues, such as air travel into town. The state’s limited road system doesn’t reach the community of 900 people, which relies on planes for much of its connection to the outside world.

This week, one of the two airlines that serve Point Hope will begin restricting flights to cargo and passengers with medical or other essential needs.

Still, residents worry the recent deaths of two elders will bring out-of-town mourners for the funerals.

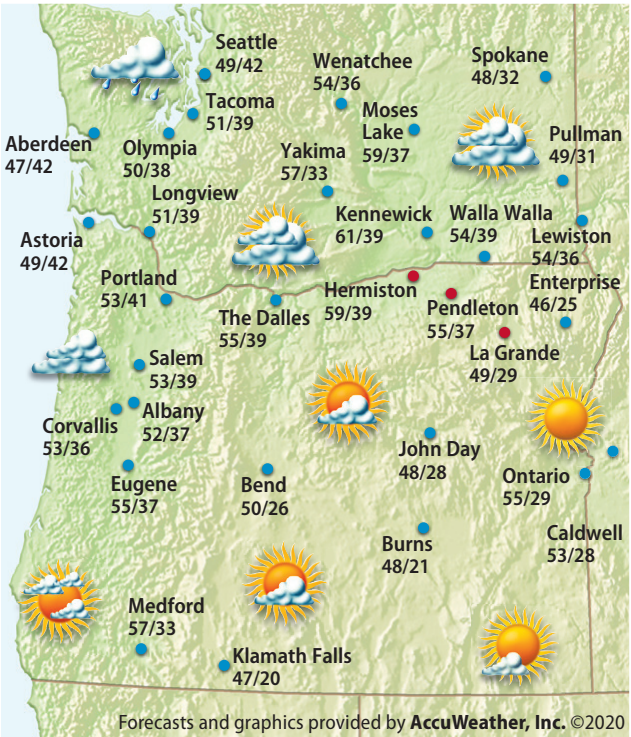
“We have all kinds of different people who come into our village,” said acting Mayor Daisy Sage. “This coronavirus is serious.”

Forecast for Pendleton Area



OREGON FORECAST

Shown is today's weather. Temperatures are today's highs and tonight's lows.



ALMANAC

PENDLETON

through 3 p.m. yest.

TEMP.

HIGH

LOW

Yesterday

50°

38°

Normals

57°

37°

Records

78° (1960)

12° (1913)

PRECIPITATION

24 hours ending 3 p.m.

Trace

Month to date

0.61"

Normal month to date

1.13"

Year to date

4.67"

Last year to date

5.89"

Normal year to date

3.68"

HERMISTON

through 3 p.m. yest.

TEMP.

HIGH

LOW

Yesterday

52°

38°

Normals

60°

36°

Records

77° (1960)

15° (1996)

PRECIPITATION

24 hours ending 3 p.m.

Trace

Month to date

0.12"

Normal month to date

0.74"

Year to date

0.48"

Last year to date

3.56"

Normal year to date

3.01"

WINDS (in mph)

Today

Fri.

Boardman

WSW 10-20

WSW 8-16

Pendleton

W 8-16

WSW 8-16

SUN AND MOON

Sunrise today

6:46 a.m.

Sunset tonight

7:16 p.m.

Moonrise today

8:07 a.m.

Moonset today

9:43 p.m.

First

Full

Last

New

Apr 1

Apr 7

Apr 14

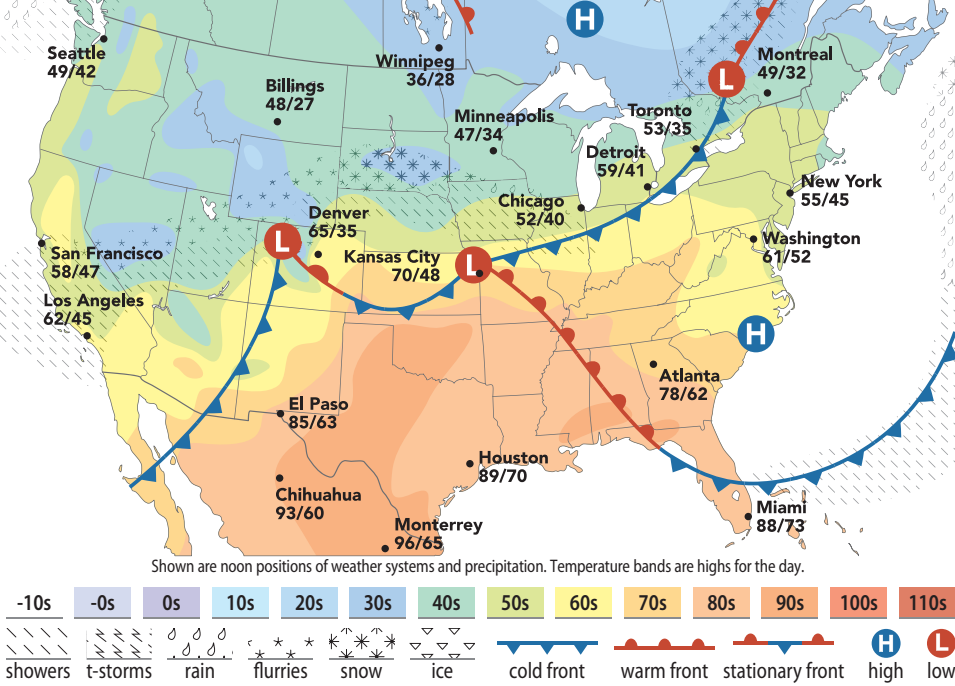
Apr 22

NATIONAL EXTREMES

Yesterday's National Extremes: (for the 48 contiguous states)

High 101° in Falfurrias, Texas Low 1° in Clayton Lake, Maine

NATIONAL WEATHER TODAY



Wallowa County motels, RV parks dispel rumors of COVID-19 refugees

By BILL BRADSHAW
EO Media Group

ENTERPRISE — Rumors that Wallowa County is being flooded with visitors fleeing the COVID-19 pandemic in more populous areas appear to be just that — rumors.

Several motels and RV parks in the upper Wallowa valley said they have either fewer bookings than normal — or at least no hordes.

Spokespeople at Enterprise motels, the Wilderness Inn and the Ponderosa Motel, confirmed that.

Jaden Hazzard, general manager at the Wilderness Inn, said it has fewer than normal bookings.

Kelly Noble, manager at the Ponderosa Motel, said the few customers they have are families taking advantage of school closures to break free of being cooped up at home.

“They decided to take the time with their families and go hiking,” Noble said. She said her customers aren’t taking the so-called coronavirus flight too seriously.

“Folks who are travel-

ing think it’s somewhat of a joke,” she said. “They’re just bonding as a family.”

Noble said the Ponderosa staffers have strict protocols in place to do their best to prevent the spread of any contamination. When a customer leaves a room, staffers air it out for three hours before even entering. Then they use a disinfectant spray similar to that which hospitals use to kill both airborne and surface germs. They also use a hospital-grade sanitation procedure for laundry, she said.

Noble said she believes those at highest risk of infection — particularly the elderly — are generally staying home.

Todd Morrow, owner of the Log House RV Park and Campground — Enterprise’s lone RV park — said he, too, has seen no evidence of people fleeing. He said his bookings are down considerably from previous years and the few customers he does have are locals who regularly book.

Raylene O’Connor, co-owner with husband Mike of the Bronze Antler Bed & Breakfast in

Joseph, said their four-room establishment is empty and they’ve blocked their online booking system until early April.

“We’ve pretty much closed because of the coronavirus,” she said.

Marcy Hamilton, owner of 5 Peaks RV Park in Joseph, said although her park is empty right now, she’s expecting things to pick up soon. She has just a couple reservations booked for the middle of April and more for May.

But she’s noting that the closure of state and federal campgrounds may be a mixed blessing for private parks.

“I would imagine that those of us in the county are going to pick up with full-time RVers because, after all, where are they going to go?” she asked. “Unless we’re mandated that we can’t take them, I’m going to take them because I need the money and they need a place.”

But how to limit the spread of the novel coronavirus?

“We’ll have to wear gloves handling money, I guess,” she said.

BRIEFLY

Crater Lake, Mount Rainier, other national park sites close

PORTLAND — Crater Lake National Park, Mount Rainier National Park and several other national park sites across the Pacific Northwest have temporarily closed to the public, responding to the coronavirus outbreak that has spread across the United States.

Crater Lake made the announcement on Tuesday morning, while Mount Rainier and Olympic national parks closed on Tuesday afternoon. Park officials said rangers will remain at the parks to enforce the closure

and protect the parks.

“The health and safety of our visitors, employees, volunteers, and partners at Crater Lake National Park is our number one priority,” park officials said in a news release.

Other park closures in Oregon include the Lewis and Clark National Historical Park and John Day Fossil Beds. In Washington, North Cascades National Park closed campgrounds and facilities, as well as some trailheads and access roads.

National parks around the country were also closing Tuesday, from Yellowstone to the Great Smoky Mountains.

— Associated Press

CORRECTIONS: The *East Oregonian* works hard to be accurate and sincerely regrets any errors. If you notice a mistake in the paper, please call 541-966-0818.

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Production Manager: Mike Jensen
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