

Biologists monitoring sickness in bighorn sheep

Bighorn sheep in Lookout Mountain unit have been seen coughing, biologists say

By JAYSON JACOBY
EO Media Group

BAKER CITY — A bacterial illness has spread through Baker County’s biggest herd of bighorn sheep, but a state wildlife biologist said it won’t be clear until later this year how severe the death toll is likely to be.

Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife employees continue to monitor sheep in the Lookout Mountain unit in eastern Baker County, said Brian Ratliff, district wildlife biologist at the agency’s Baker City office.

Ratliff said he and other biologists have seen bighorns coughing — something the sheep rarely do unless they’re suffering from pneumonia — throughout the range of the Lookout Mountain herd.

With close to 400 sheep, it’s the largest herd of Rocky Mountain bighorns in Oregon.

The state also is home to California bighorns, mostly in the central and south-east parts of the state. Baker County has a herd of Cali-



EO Media Group file photo

Baker County is home to two bighorn sheep herds, the California subspecies of bighorns in the Burnt River Canyon and the Rocky Mountain subspecies in the Lookout Mountain Unit.

fornia bighorns in the Burnt River Canyon between Durkee and Bridgeport.

Until this winter, the Lookout Mountain herd had apparently been healthy.

But on Feb. 13 ODFW received a report of a dead bighorn ram lying on the Snake River Road near Connor Creek, about 18 miles north of Huntington.

Ratliff said samples from the sheep were tested, and a lab confirmed the animal had been infected with a strain of *Mycoplasma ovipneumoniae* bacteria that had not been found before in bighorns in

Oregon.

There are more than 50 strains of that bacteria, and they have varying levels of lethality.

The test results prompted ODFW to cancel the two bighorn hunts scheduled this summer and fall in the Lookout Mountain unit.

Those hunts included three tags — two for Oregon hunters and one for a nonresident.

Ratliff said ODFW has confirmed 10 to 12 bighorns have died, the most recent being found on April 5. Of the carcasses that were fresh

enough to be tested — two had decomposed too much — all were infected with the same strain of bacteria.

Biologists don’t know — indeed, they might never confirm — how the herd was infected, Ratliff said.

Two people who have domestic sheep in the Lookout Mountain unit volunteered to have some of their animals tested, but results are pending.

Even if the domestic sheep are carrying the bacteria, that wouldn’t be conclusive proof that the bighorns were infected by contact with

domestic sheep, Ratliff said.

He said ODFW will pay to test domestic sheep, and he encourages owners to call the agency at 541-523-5832.

Ratliff said ODFW also tested one llama, which did not have the bacteria.

ODFW will continue to monitor the Lookout Mountain herd through the summer.

The agency’s strategy will depend on how many sheep die, Ratliff said.

One option that has proved successful in other bighorn herds infected with viral diseases is the “test/cull” strategy.

The goal is to test as many bighorns as possible and fit them with identifying collars.

Sheep that are infected would be euthanized to prevent them from sickening other bighorns.

Collaring the sheep would allow biologists to capture those animals later and test them again. That’s important, Ratliff said, because some sheep are likely to be “intermittent shedders,” meaning they carry the bacteria but shed it only some of the time.

Those sheep might test negative, but then later begin shedding and possibly infecting other bighorns, he said.

Intermittent shedders might also need to be euthanized to protect the herd.

The Lookout Mountain

herd was established in the early 1990s when a few dozen bighorns were captured elsewhere and released along Fox Creek. The animals have thrived in the steep canyons on the breaks of the Snake River.

“It’s been the healthiest herd in Oregon,” Ratliff said.

The only previous concern among Lookout Mountain bighorns was a minor rash of pneumonia that lasted a couple of months in 2012, he said. Those illnesses were caused by a virus rather than a bacteria, but it was a mild type that killed few bighorns, Ratliff said.

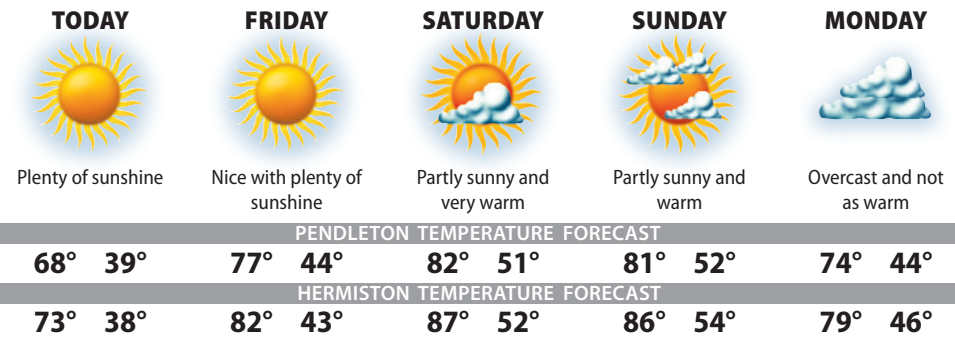
Although the Lookout Mountain bighorns aren’t known to mingle with the Burnt River Canyon herd — the two generally are more than a dozen miles apart — ODFW is monitoring the Burnt River bighorns for coughing or other signs of pneumonia.

So far the biologists haven’t seen any such evidence, Ratliff said.

Like the Rocky Mountain subspecies, the California bighorns are vulnerable to a variety of bacterial and viral infections that can lead to fatal pneumonia, Ratliff said.

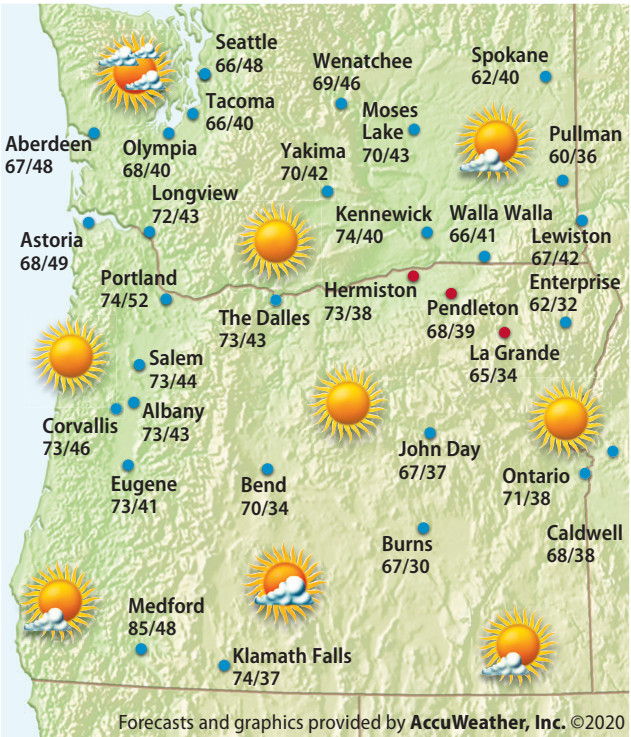
“Bighorn sheep are susceptible to a lot of things,” he said. “They’re not the strongest species out there.”

Forecast for Pendleton Area



OREGON FORECAST

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



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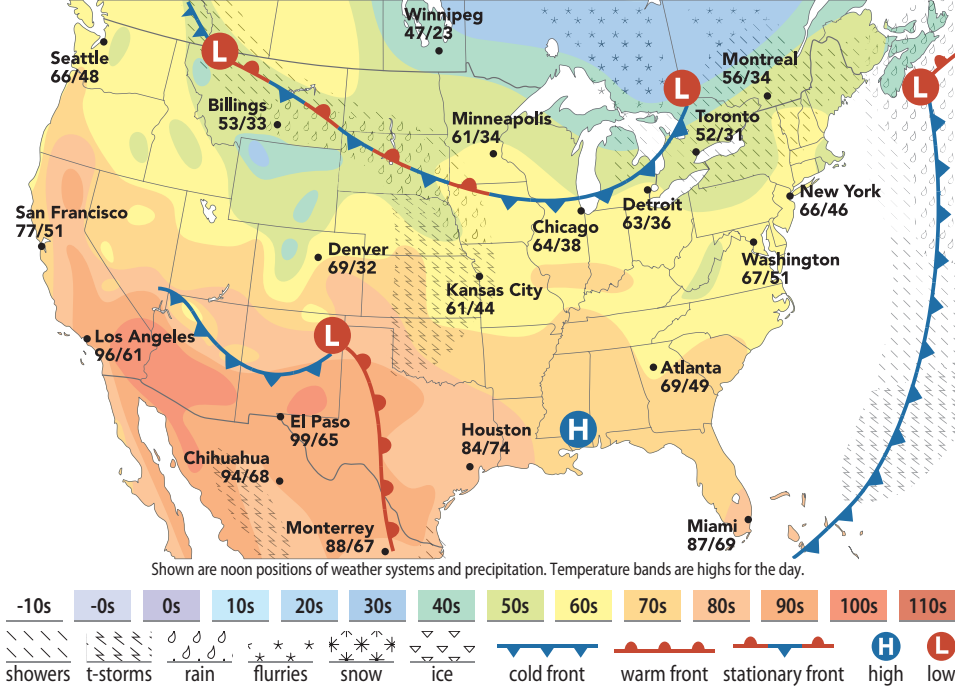
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NATIONAL EXTREMES

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

High 107° in Palm Springs, Calif. Low 16° in Bridgeport, Calif.

NATIONAL WEATHER TODAY



Former deputy pleads not guilty to attempted rape, other charges

By STEVEN MITCHELL
EO Media Group

JOHN DAY — The former Grant County Sheriff’s Office deputy who was arrested on attempted rape and other charges maintained his innocence recently.

Former Grant County sheriff’s deputy Tyler Smith pleaded not guilty April 30 to seven charges in a Grant County Circuit Court proceeding conducted by teleconference.

Smith, who was discharged by the sheriff’s office in January, was indicted Sept. 27, 2019, on charges of first-degree attempted rape, a class B felony, and attempted first-degree sex abuse and fourth-degree assault, class C felonies — all constituting domestic violence. The indictment accuses Smith of attempting to engage in sexual intercourse with his

spouse on Aug. 31, 2018, “by forcible compulsion” and while knowing she was pregnant.

He also faces four class A misdemeanor charges of second-degree child neglect, accused of leaving two children under the age of 10 unattended at a John Day residence on Sept. 4, 2019, and Sept. 5, 2019, according to information filed in court Sept. 10, 2019, by Grant County Special Deputy District Attorney Gretchen M. Ladd Dobler.

The felony and misdemeanor cases will be tried separately. The six-day felony trial is scheduled to begin Oct. 19. The two-day misdemeanor trial is scheduled to begin Nov. 4.

Hearings for pretrial



Smith

motions are scheduled for May 14 and Aug. 14.

Senior Judge William D. Cramer Jr. said should social distancing rules still be in place in October, the trial might need a larger venue, such as the Grant County Fairgrounds, where people can be 6 feet apart. He said he has not yet discussed this with Grant County officials.

Smith worked for the John Day Police Department from November 2014 until May 2016 when he was hired by the sheriff’s office.

Smith was arrested Sept. 9, 2019, but he had already been placed on administrative leave Aug. 9, 2019, for an unrelated issue, Grant County Human Resources Manager Laurie Wright said. Grant County District Attorney Jim Carpenter said Smith had been placed on leave “for issues related to the performance of his duties as a sheriff’s deputy.”

BRIEFLY

First penitentiary inmate tests positive for COVID-19

WALLA WALLA, Wash. — The first inmate in the Washington State Penitentiary has tested positive for COVID-19, according to the state Department of Corrections website.

No further information was available this afternoon, but DOC staff said they will work to get information about the inmate.

The Department of Corrections has reported positive tests for two employees of the Washington State Penitentiary and eight at the Mill Creek Regional Performance Center on Pine Street to date.

A total of 36 DOC workers and 24 inmates statewide have tested positive for COVID-19.

People holding coronavirus parties in Southeast Washington

WALLA WALLA, Wash. — Some people are intentionally flouting health recommendations by exposing themselves and others to COVID-19 in Walla Walla County, officials said.

Meghan DeBolt, director of the county’s

Department of Community Health, told the *Union-Bulletin* this week that contact tracing has revealed some people are attending parties with the idea it is better to get sick with the virus and get it over with.

New positive test results in the county have resulted from such gatherings, she said.

“We ask about contacts, and there are 25 people because: ‘We were at a COVID party,’” DeBolt said.

She called the parties irresponsible and unacceptable.

Walla Walla Police Chief Scott Bieber noted that disobeying Gov. Jay Inslee’s March 23 “Stay Home, Stay Healthy” order is illegal.

“We’re not going to overreact,” he said. “But we’re going to contact people who tested positive and follow up with a phone call, making them aware of the potential gross misdemeanor offense of disobeying the governor’s orders. If we find intentional violations, we will refer them to the city attorney.”

As of Monday, Walla Walla County has 94 residents, including some Tyson Fresh Meats employees, who have been diagnosed with COVID-19. One person has died of the disease, according to health officials.

— Walla Walla Union-Bulletin and wire services

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