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UMATILLA RIVER FLOODING: ONE YEAR LATER



Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian, File

Floodwater inundates the Riverview Mobile Home Estates in the Riverside neighborhood in Pendleton on the evening of Feb. 7, 2020.

WINTER STORMS

Flooding not in sight after recent storms

Snowpack levels in the Blues nearing normal for this time of the year

By **BRYCE DOLE**
East Oregonian

PENDLETON — After last week's winter storms covered Umatilla County in snow, followed by sunshine and warmer temperatures early in the week, many residents rightfully grew wary wondering if floods could once again be on the horizon.

So far, however, conditions look sturdy, safe and residents can rest assured, according to Umatilla County officials.

"We'll see small rises in the rivers and the streams," Marilyn Lohman, a hydrologist for the National Weather Service in Pendleton, said of the upcoming snowmelt. "But they aren't expected to be anywhere near any flood stages at this time."

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LESSONS LEARNED

Communities are using experiences from 2020 flood to improve flood prevention procedures

By **ANTONIO SIERRA, JADE MCDOWELL and BRYCE DOLE**
East Oregonian

PENDLETON — Helicopters buzzed overhead as Pendleton City Manager Robb Corbett helped the sandbagging effort at Riverview Mobile Home Estates on Feb. 6, 2020.

Corbett later realized that the helicopters, which were en route to rescue efforts further up the Umatilla River, were an indication that the situation was about to be much worse than the river runoff city staff were preparing for.

Overall, Corbett said he was pleased by the way the city responded to the floods. But a year after Pendleton's Riverside neighborhood was briefly subsumed into the swelling waters of the Umatilla, Corbett said his staff continue to meet on how the city can improve its flood prevention procedures.

One of the key talking points is the city's changing climate. Corbett said people could call it what they want, but the region's

weather patterns are changing. 2020 marked the second year in a row that Pendleton had weathered a significant flood, following the McKay Creek floods of 2019. Two years later, Corbett said the city was still working on mitigation efforts for McKay.

"We are planning for the worst — there are new weather patterns that we are now dealing with — and hoping for the best," he said.

Corbett said these events used to be considered anomalous, but Umatilla's water level was 30% higher than any levels in the city's recorded history. Should they get too much higher, Corbett said the water risked flowing over the Pendleton River Parkway, threatening the thousands of people who live in the flats.

City officials may not have been able to prevent the flood, but they would have been able to react to it earlier if they had checked water gauges upstream from Pendleton. Corbett said the city is now tracking a wider variety of sources to anticipate any future flooding.

The city is also encouraging more residents to sign up for AlertSense, the city's electronic notification service that sends out texts and emails during emergencies.

The flood not only destroyed homes and displaced dozens of Pendletonians, it also breached one levee and seeped through another, eroded roads and exposed sewer lines.

Public Works Director Bob Patterson

said most of infrastructure damage has been repaired, but it will likely take years to finish updating their mitigation efforts.

One of those long processes is updating the floodplain map. Corbett said both floods revealed areas that were outside the floodplain that ended up underwater.

Watching the snow as it fell on the afternoon of Thursday, Feb. 11, Corbett said he now looks at precipitation with a sense of wariness.

"I can't think of a rainstorm or snowstorm again and not be nervous," he said.

West Umatilla County rebuilds more carefully

While flooding was less severe on the west side of Umatilla County, it highlighted needs that some communities are trying to fix.

In Echo, the city and property owners abutting the Umatilla River have been working to identify opportunities for physical mitigation, such as berms, in an effort to redirect high water away from homes and farms that got hit in February 2020. They have formed the Mid Umatilla River Coalition to work together in lobbying state and federal agencies for permission to complete projects, and are searching for funding opportunities.

Umatilla School District Superintendent Heidi Sipe said the damage to the school

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VACCINATIONS

Umatilla County faces delays as vaccine rates fall

By **BRYCE DOLE**
East Oregonian

PENDLETON — Vaccine efforts in Umatilla County are on standby after a shipment of doses was canceled earlier this week due to inclement weather. The delays forced health officials to postpone a drive-thru clinic in Pendleton as the county fell to the second lowest in Oregon for COVID-19 vaccinations per capita.

Now, as eligibility expands to Oregon seniors over the age of 75 on Monday, Feb. 22, making thousands of additional county residents able to receive the vaccine, health officials are eagerly anticipating further shipments.

However, the state has yet to provide a concrete timeline for when the next promised shipments should arrive, raising concerns that further delays and a bottleneck effect could be possible, according to Joe Fiumara, the county's public health director.

"I'm telling people that it's a tentative date," Fiumara said of the upcoming

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Easterday Dairy moving forward despite company's trouble

By **GEORGE PLAVEN**
Capital Press

BOARDMAN — Plans to revive Oregon's second-largest dairy remain unchanged, despite the new owners — a prominent farm family based in Southeast Washington — facing allegations of fraud by Tyson Foods.

Easterday Farms purchased the dairy, formerly Lost Valley Farm, in 2019. The family registered a new

business in Oregon, called Easterday Dairy LLC, which is now seeking state approval to reopen the dairy in rural Morrow County with up to 28,300 total cattle.

But Oregon regulators say they are proceeding with caution and watching closely amid an unfolding scandal involving Easterday Ranches, the livestock arm of the family's multi-pronged agricultural operation.

Easterday Ranches supplies cattle

for a beef plant run by Tyson Fresh Meats near Pasco, Washington. In January, Tyson sued Easterday Ranches for \$225 million, accusing the ranch of faking invoices and charging the company for more than 200,000 cattle that, in fact, did not exist.

Both Easterday Ranches and Easterday Farms have since filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection. Easterday Farms is the family's farming business, growing 22,500 acres of potatoes,

onions, corn and wheat in the Columbia Basin.

In a statement to the Capital Press, Cole Easterday, one of the owners of Easterday Dairy, said the company is still working to secure a Confined Animal Feeding Operation, or CAFO, permit from the Oregon Department of Agriculture and Department of Environmental Quality to reopen the dairy

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