

Lessons: Emergency manager urges residents to be ‘two weeks ready’

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district’s athletic complex behind the high school and berms along the Umatilla River there are “almost completely restored.”

The school district was allowed to rebuild the berm built along the river to keep the fields from flooding, and Sipe said they built it not just bigger, but smarter — designed not only to keep the water out during most flooding, but to allow the water a way to drain out of the fields if the river breaches the berm again. Sipe said that should prevent a repeat of the 4-foot deep lake that lingered for days after the river receded.

“That said, I’m fairly certain people thought they did it right last time,” she said. “I doubt they thought they did a halfway job.”

In Hermiston, last year’s flood spurred the city to move infrastructure at Riverfront Park out of harm’s way. When the park was built in 2005, planners put the playground, restrooms, welcome kiosks and parking lot at the north end of the long park — directly in the path the river takes when it overflows its banks at the location.

The city plans to move the playground and parking lot to the south end of the park this summer, and the restroom at a later date. Parks and Recreation Director Larry Fetter



Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian, File

The playground at Riverfront Park in Hermiston sits in disarray on Feb. 27, 2020, following flooding from the Umatilla River less than a month before.

said the new location may see some standing water during future flooding, but shouldn’t be in the path of the rushing water that causes the most damage.

One disaster provides training for the next

Umatilla County Emergency Manager Tom Roberts said past floods taught the county lessons that could be used in 2020, and the 2020 flood helped identify more gaps to be filled before the next crisis.

“At the end of planning

exercises, we take a close look at where there is room for improvement,” he said. “We do the same thing after a disaster.”

An example of a “gap” the flood identified was the need to pre-stage emergency supplies at more locations around the county. Roberts said while the emergency management department had plenty of sandbags and shovels, for example, they were stored in one location that took time to mobilize to everywhere they were needed. He said he is work-

ing with some communities to create staging areas to store supplies closer to where future flooding may occur.

One unknown when planning for disasters is how much nonprofits and individual volunteers will step up to help, Roberts said, and the 2020 flood drew an “unreal” level of community support that will help the county have more confidence about a response for future events. He also said the support Umatilla County received from the emergency management community

was unprecedented.

“We had 13 different emergency managers rolling through our center the first few weeks after the flood, lending their expertise. ... That model really helped set the stage for other disasters (in 2020),” he said.

While government agencies are working on an updated hazard mitigation plan, Roberts said improvements won’t all happen overnight, especially as the pandemic continues to complicate efforts. He urged everyone to be “two weeks ready” with food, water and other supplies in case of future disasters.

“If people can use these lessons to better prepare themselves, that’s one less item we have to worry about, one less person we have to worry about,” he said.

Flood control is a fight between humans and nature

Kate Ely, a Umatilla Basin hydrologist for the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation, said one thing that has been notable in her research is the number of people living in a floodplain who would like to move elsewhere.

Within the last 25 years, she said, the Umatilla River has experienced “several extraordinarily high peak flows” that, given historical tracking of the river, should have each been expected to

occur once every 25 to 500 years.

Those living in a floodplain have the highest risk from these increasingly common occurrences, as the floodplain is an integral part of a river system. Humans try to build levees to prevent water from spreading across its natural flood plain, she said, but the cost of maintaining those levees is often more than the homes they are trying to protect.

“I worry that more levees will be built to fight a losing battle against a river doing its work naturally to drain the watershed,” she said. “Time and time again people try to control a river with engineering methods knowing the river will eventually win and society will pay the cost.”

Marilyn Lohman, a hydrologist with the National Weather Service in Pendleton, also said now is a good time for people to assess where they live and the risks to their property as high water events become more frequent. She said counties and cities should also be looking at what adjustments they might need to make to their hazard mitigation plans.

“There’s a lot of people looking at a lot of these issues around the area, and maybe their expertise can be drawn into help counties and cities, and better prepare their infrastructure,” she said.

Vaccines: ‘I really don’t want to postpone again’

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vaccine shipments. “The reporting I got from (the Oregon Health Authority on Friday, Feb. 19) is that they are still having issues getting shipments out, and they’re not able to be very firm on when our shipment will get here.”

The doses are shipped from Tennessee, where winter conditions have halted vaccine distribution, creating widespread delays and forcing hundreds of vaccine sites across several states to cancel, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

The state has informed the county to expect the promised doses to arrive “sometime between Feb. 22 and Feb. 24,” Fiumara said. The county, however, is planning the vaccine event it postponed this week for Wednesday, Feb. 24, and if the promised shipment arrives that day, the health department will have to postpone yet another event.

“I really don’t want to postpone again,” he said. “At that point it just gets really, really messy.”

To add to the confusion, state officials also informed Fiumara that because of this week’s delay, the shipment of vaccine already planned for next week will also be delayed, pushing it back near the end of the week when the county had already planned two more vaccine events.

“That puts all three of our events next week on edge,” he said, adding that the county will revisit scheduling the events on Feb. 22 when they hope to have



Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian, File

Vehicles line the parking lot at Hermiston High School as teachers wait to receive their first dose of the COVID-19 vaccine on Jan. 29, 2021.

tracking information on when to expect more shipments.

The hodgepodge of delays and cancellations comes as Umatilla County drops to the second lowest vaccination rate of any county in Oregon, with approximately 785 people vaccinated per 10,000 people, according to data from OHA as of Thursday, Feb. 18.

Fiumara said a combination of factors have caused the low totals, including small shipments from the state, the county’s comparatively small Phase 1a population and the frequency at which it exhausts its allocated supply, like it did by Feb. 19.

“I don’t like it, but I’m not surprised by where we’re at,” he said. “We kicked this out about as fast as we could.”

Fiumara said he expects totals to level out as the county is able to vaccinate more elderly residents,

which make up a greater portion of the population than teachers, health care workers and other individuals who have already been eligible to receive a vaccine.

“At the very least, we shouldn’t fall further behind,” he said. “Hopefully we can gain some ground, but it all depends on what (the state) gives. We’re giving it out, but it just isn’t arriving as fast as we would like.”

The delays could also force the county to postpone providing second doses to residents as well, Fiumara said, pushing them past the designated six-week time frame.

Residents have already reached out to the health department saying they have reached the six-week mark for their second dose, Fiumara said. But the health department had already exhausted its supply and couldn’t vaccinate them.

“The assumption by most is that it shouldn’t hurt

anything,” he said of receiving a second dose after the six-week period. “But we don’t know if it will have a lower-efficacy rate. At the same token, it could be higher. The fact is that there’s no known data, so we try to hold to that (six-week) date as close as we can.”

Next week, the county is expecting to receive increased shipments of vaccines due to changes on the federal level. Barring further inclement weather delays, the county should receive 300 doses that would have arrived this past week and a new allocation of 700 prime doses — 300 of which will go directly to Mirasol Family Health Center in Hermiston.

In addition, the county’s Safeways, in Pendleton, Hermiston and Milton-Freewater, will continue to receive 100 doses each. It’s possible that pharmacies like Safeway will see increased allocations in the coming weeks due to shifts at the federal level, Fiumara said.

“We’re told this is what we should plan for and expect,” he said of the new shipments. “There may be some of these weeks where we get more, and if we get more, that’s just better for everybody.”

Fiumara said the increased supply of vaccines should continue for about a month, and perhaps beyond that point. He said officials have seemed so confident that it prompted the health department to schedule events through April, so that if residents miss an availability one week, they know roughly when they can receive the vaccine next.



George Plaven/Capital Press, File

Wastewater lagoons are emptied at the former Lost Valley Farm as part of cleanup operations. The facility’s cleanup was completed before the Oct. 31, 2020, deadline established under a legal agreement with Oregon regulators.

Dairy:

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near Boardman.

“Though the situation with Easterday Ranches and Easterday Farms is unfortunate, Easterday Dairy LLC’s commitment to our current CAFO permit and our permit application is unchanged,” he said.

Cole Easterday declined to comment on the lawsuit or bankruptcy filings.

The 7,228-acre dairy has already undergone a turbulent past. As Lost Valley Farm, it opened in early 2018 and was shut down within a year after racking up more than 200 permit violations under previous ownership, including open-air lagoons overflowing with liquid manure.

Easterday Farms bought the property, including buildings and infrastructure — but not the cows — for \$66.7 million in 2019. The family promised to invest \$15 million in the dairy, upgrading its wastewater treatment system and correcting environmental deficiencies that led to Lost Valley’s demise.

“It’s a state-of-the-art dairy,” said Cody Easterday, president of Easterday Farms, during a tour and interview in July 2019. “It just needs to be finished, and it needs to have the correct management.”

Easterday Dairy applied for a CAFO permit in June 2019. Oregon’s CAFO program is jointly administered by the state Department of Agriculture and Department of Environmental Quality to ensure operations will not pollute “waters of the state.”

According to its permit application, the dairy would have 9,700 mature dairy cows, 8,600 dairy heifers and 10,000 additional non-dairy cattle kept on site. Those animals would produce an estimated 5.4 million cubic feet of liquid manure, 5.9 million cubic feet of solid manure, and 11.7 million cubic feet of processed

wastewater annually.

The dairy would recycle all that nitrogen-rich manure by using it as fertilizer on 5,390 acres of surround farmland, a process known as land application. It would additionally have storage capacity for more than 10 million cubic feet of manure in lagoons for up to 111 days, and year-round storage for more than 13 million cubic feet on an impervious soil pad.

Wym Matthews, CAFO program manager for ODA, said the Easterday Dairy application is under review and agencies are working toward issuing a draft permit that would then be available for public review.

“There is quite a bit of back and forth between the agencies in developing the permit,” Matthews said. “One of the things, because this proposed site is located in a groundwater management area, it’s a new source of nitrogen in an area that already has known concerns about nitrate levels in groundwater.”

Stephanie Page, natural resources program director for ODA, said the lawsuit and bankruptcy potentially add another layer of complications. She said the agencies are working closely with the Justice Department about their authority going forward, and are continuing to gather more information.

“I think we’ve all been on the same page in terms of not wanting to jump to conclusions,” Page said. “We’re just continuing to evaluate the info we’ve gotten about the business structures, and how they’re separate but also making sure we understand how they’re interrelated.”

ODA spokeswoman Andrea Cantu-Schomas said officials want to let the legal process play out before drawing any conclusions about the dairy’s viability.

“At this point, they are allegations,” Cantu-Schomas said. “They are concerning, but we want to proceed with fairness and transparency.”

Storms: Weekly briefings planned for flood preparations

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Snowpack levels in the Blue Mountains are nearing normal levels for this time of year after the hillsides were blasted with snow last week, according to Lohman. But the snow, for the large part, was a dry snow due to the cold front, making conditions less conducive to flooding.

“The snow that fell was more powdery, which means it had a lower water content,” Lohman said.

Short-term conditions over the next two weeks are also looking optimistic, Lohman said, with occasional weather systems forecast to bring light precipitation. Through March, the weather service is expecting

cooler than normal temperatures and seasonal precipitation.

However, conditions can change daily, Lohman said. The weather service is continuing to monitor for signs of possible floods, and residents who may be at risk of flooding events should keep a watchful eye and consider preparing themselves in case conditions suddenly shift.

“It’s that time of year to keep abreast of the changes in the weather,” Lohman said. “Maybe stay up-to-date on changing conditions and make sure that you are prepared. If something were to happen, what would you do? Maybe start thinking ahead.”

Last week, Lohman and a group of officials from Umatilla and Walla Walla counties met to discuss the current conditions and prepare for the possibility of future floods. Among those attending were county and city officials as well as those from law enforcement, the National Weather Service, the Bureau of Land Management, the Army Corps of Engineers, and the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation.

“I really sympathize with all these folks that have gone through last year’s (flood) and are still dealing with it, and then we get 17 inches of snow, and they think — where in the world is that going to go?” said Umatilla

County Commissioner Dan Dorran, who attended the meeting on behalf of the commissioners.

Officials plan to hold weekly briefings throughout the winter and early spring to be more proactive and plan for possible floods.

“What we’ve learned from the floods in the past couple of years has helped us to be better prepared and more vigilant and aware of the possibilities, thus we are able to help our entire community,” Umatilla County Emergency Manager Tom Roberts said in a press release regarding the meeting and current conditions. “Each of us should also be prepared individually, which is also very important.”