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Counties bring vaccines to agricultural workers

By **BRYCE DOLE**
East Oregonian

PENDLETON — Officials in Umatilla and Morrow counties are ramping up vaccine efforts after receiving approval from the state on Monday, March 22, to broaden eligibility to agricultural workers immediately in an effort to help a workforce hit disproportionately hard by the pandemic.

In Morrow County, officials from the Oregon Health Authority are working with county officials at a four-day mass vaccination clinic

at the Sage Center in Boardman through Saturday, March 27.

The clinic, which is a “pilot project” for similar statewide efforts, is intended to offer 1,200 doses specifically to farm and food processing workers this week, according to Morrow County Commissioner Melissa Lindsay.

In Umatilla County, health officials have started reaching out to agricultural and food processing facilities, hoping to bring vaccines to people who are both hard to connect with and often can’t take time off work.

“We are trying to aggressively get enough vaccines and set up (opportunities) for the farmworkers to get vaccinated,” Umatilla County Commissioner George Murdock said.

The efforts come in response to an announcement from Gov. Kate Brown last week, saying the state would speed up its vaccination timeline to meet the Biden administration’s goal of having all Americans eligible for a vaccine by May 1.

However, counties that had sufficiently vaccinated all other eligible groups could apply to expand eligi-

bility to agricultural workers, along with other populations at high-risk of COVID-19, ahead of the state’s distribution timeline.

Umatilla and Morrow counties are among 20 counties statewide that has received approval from the state to vaccinate other groups. Most of the counties that received approval lie east of the Cascade range. Counties that have yet to apply will wait until Monday, March 29, to offer vaccines to people in Phase 1b, Group 6.

The approval allows the counties to enter the vaccine priority

list Phase 1b, Group 6. Those eligible include adults with underlying conditions between the ages of 45 to 64, seafood and agricultural workers, unhoused people, people displaced by wildfires, wildland firefighters, women who are over the age of 16 and pregnant, and people living in low-income, senior congregate and independent living facilities.

Vaccines for the vulnerable

The change in Morrow and Umatilla counties is especially

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COVID-19

Risk levels continue to improve for Oregon

By **GARY A. WARNER**
Oregon Capital Bureau

SALEM — Oregon’s new COVID-19 risk levels show improving conditions around the state as officials expect to pass the 1 million shot mark on vaccinations.

“We are seeing the light at the end of the tunnel get a little brighter,” Gov. Kate Brown said Tuesday, March 23, in a statement.

Counties are assigned one of four risk levels based on the spread of COVID-19 infections: extreme, high, moderate and lower. The higher the level, the more restrictions on activities, businesses and gatherings.

The new risk levels will go into effect Friday, March 26.

Overall, the news was good as none of the state’s 10 most populous counties is in the extreme risk category and just three are high. The rest are moderate or lower risk.

In January, 27 out of the state’s 36 counties were rated as extreme risk, including most of the population centers in Oregon.

All three Portland metro counties remained in the moderate risk category.

The three-county Central Oregon area saw Deschutes County’s numbers of cases and infection rates continue to drop, just not enough to move it into the lower risk category. Jefferson County, which up to a month ago had some of the worst infection numbers in the state, improved enough to drop two levels, from high to lower. Crook County saw a slight uptick in numbers, but not enough to move it out of its lower risk rating.

Northeast Oregon counties were mostly stable. Baker County moved from moderate to lower risk, joining Morrow, Gilliam and Wallowa, which were already in the least restrictive category.

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Housing projects

CTUIR plans new housing developments on the reservation

By **ANTONIO SIERRA**
East Oregonian

MISSION — Whether it’s a city government or sovereign nation, every community in the 97801 ZIP code is trying to figure out how to address its housing shortage.

But at a March 17 joint meeting between the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation Board of Trustees and the Pendleton City Council, the tribes shared news that it had three projects in the works that could make a serious dent in its housing backlog.

In an interview after the meeting, CTUIR Planning Director JD Tovey said a recent housing analysis showed the reservation needed 350 units of housing over the next 20 years.

Tovey said the Umatilla Indian Reservation has plenty of land for high-income residents to build homes, as well as low-income housing options. What the reservation is lacking is middle income housing.

One of the CTUIR’s solutions is a new housing development called Nixyaawii, a Umatilla word for home that is also used for the Tribes’ governance center and charter school.

Nixyaawii is a first-of-its-kind project for the CTUIR, which is using the project to develop for-sale homes. Home buying can be tricky on the reservation since the Tribes’ land can’t be bought, but Tovey said the CTUIR is able to work around that by issuing 99-year leases on the land, a setup that mortgage lenders would recognize as the equivalent of buying the property outright.

“It will be just like owning a house,” he said.

Nixyaawii, which will only be open to tribal members, will encompass about 50 housing plots located south of the school. Tovey said the Tribes may build some spec homes, but the Tribes



Kathy Aney/East Oregonian

Rafael Miguel Gonzalez, of DSC Manufactured Homes, works on a manufactured home on Mission Road just east of the Mission Market.



Kathy Aney/East Oregonian

These three new manufactured homes are among those being built in Mission just east of the Mission Market on Mission Road.

are looking to lease the plots to members, who will then build their own houses on the land.

After receiving coverage in the *Confederated Umatilla Journal*, Tovey said about 25 people have

contacted the CTUIR to sign up for a mailing list to get updates on Nixyaawii. The CTUIR hopes to open the development in 2022.

North of the charter school, the Tribes are planning Timine Way

North, a market-rate rental project meant to serve the CTUIR’s growing workforce.

A planned mixture of apartments and townhomes that could range from 30 to 40 units, Tovey said tribal members will be preferred tenants at the complex, but the development could also serve as temporary housing for professionals who have just moved to the area or intend to work on the reservation for a few months before moving on.

Rounding out the Tribes’ housing projects is the Lucky 7 Trailer Park renovation effort. After the Umatilla River flood heavily damaged Lucky 7 last year, the Oregon Legislature granted the CTUIR about \$1 million to help replace the affordable housing that was lost to the river.

The Tribes are now in the midst of replacing the park’s trailers, a

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A green thumb in helping others

‘Kale master’ finds joy in helping fledgling gardeners

By **KATHY ANEY**
East Oregonian

HERMISTON — Joe Hodge is an apartment dweller with a green thumb.

The Hermiston man went from neophyte gardener to award-winning master gardener in a span of 10 years. In 2012, though he lacked a backyard, Hodge decided to try gardening so he secured a plot at the Hermiston Community Garden at Good Shepherd Medical Center.

Since his gardening experience consisted of weeding

his parents’ flowerbed during boyhood and tending a tomato plant or two as an adult, Hodge peppered veteran gardeners with questions, read up on plant cultivation and jumped in with both feet. He winces at some of his rookie mistakes.

“I had to learn about plant spacing that very first spring,” Hodge recalled. “I planted too close and suddenly all these plants were almost on top of each other.”

Tomatoes, for example, bush out quickly and need about 3 feet of clearance. Hodge kept learning and eventually earning his master gardener certification. He started sharing his knowledge with beginners. In July, Oregon State University

Master Gardeners honored Hodge with a statewide award.

Hodge shakes off the adulation like confetti stuck in his hair. His gardening prowess, he says, is merely the lucky result of discovering a passion. He helps others realize they can do it too.

Taking a unique path

Hodge’s path to this present moment includes attending West Point and serving 10 years in the Army as an officer in the Tank Corps. He started as the human resources manager for the transportation office at the Walmart Distribution Center in Hermiston when it opened



Kathy Aney/East Oregonian

Master gardener Joe Hodge harvests kale on March 15, 2021, at the Hermiston Community Garden.

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