

Fires: Low elevation areas saw less precipitation than higher

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is predicted for late April and early May.

“The question is for the rest of this spring, will there be enough precipitation to hamper the drought outlook we are seeing in the area?” he said.

The Umatilla County Board of Commissioners voted unanimously earlier this month to declare a drought disaster and asked Gov. Kate Brown and U.S. Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack to do the same. Baker and Union counties have already declared a drought.

One bit of good news is two sources of increased funding for the state’s fire suppression efforts. Hessel said short-term funding through the Oregon Legislature’s emergency board gave the department money to bring on some seasonal employees early this year and stage a pair of single engine air tankers in The Dalles, within “striking distance” of Northeast Oregon.

A larger funding package, waiting approval by the full Legislature, is Senate Bill 762, which includes recommendations from the governor’s wildfire council. If approved, \$150 million will be distributed among



Smoke clogs the air as a result of a 7-acre grass fire on East Punkin Center Road outside of Hermiston on June 24, 2020.

several state agencies for fire suppression, mitigation on private and public land, and to look at land use zoning and smoke impacts.

Hessel said ODF’s funding is split between the state’s general fund and landowners who pay an assessment on their acres for fire protection. This year, the north-

east district will support 20 engines and a hand crew in Wallowa, Baker, Union and Umatilla counties, two single engine air tankers and a Type-2 helicopter stationed in Pendleton, and a detection plane based in La Grande.

The Umatilla National Forest fire staff is anticipating an above average fire

year, as well.

“The good snowpack at higher elevations are something we appreciate, but the presence or lack of precipitation in June can also set the stage for what type of fire season comes at us here in Northeast Oregon and Southeast Washington,” said Darcy Weseman, a public

affairs officer for the Umatilla National Forest.

Fire suppression staffing will be similar to last year, Weseman said, with 10 engines and six hand crews, along with several staffed fire lookouts.

“One constant that we deal with every season is that our workforce is often asked to fulfill resource requests for fires in other parts of the nation, through engines, hand crews and incident management team support,” she said.

These requests are filled based on local fire danger, and forest staff has historically been a large contributor to these sort of efforts, Weseman said, as fire resources often see multiple assignments across the Western United States.

Higher elevation snowpack is still holding up well in the Blue Mountains and the Wallowas where mid- and late-winter snowstorms pushed the snowpack well past the 100% mark. However, many of the lower elevation areas of the Umatilla and Wallowa-Whitman national forests did not get the snow, nor have those areas received any spring rain, according to Nathan Goodrich, a deputy fire staff officer for the Wallowa-Whit-

man National Forest. He said conditions aren’t good from a rancher’s standpoint, because there is little grass for livestock, but good for fire suppression, because there will be fewer fine fuels to start fires, like cheatgrass.

“Because they had different storm patterns the desert could be active in May and June,” he said.

The dry conditions have one other positive for land managers — opportunity to meet spring prescribed burning targets. Steve Hawkins, a fuels program manager for the Wallowa-Whitman National Forest, said some aspects of the forest are fairly dry, especially large fuels like downed logs.

The south end of the forest is dry and 2,000 acres have been burned on the forest already, Hawkins said, including 1,500 just this past week ahead of rain and snowstorms predicted over the past weekend.

“Near Baker City we’ve been way down on precipitation for the last two months, but one event can change things,” he said.

No prescribed burning has begun on the Umatilla National Forest yet, Weseman said, outside of pile burning on the North Fork John Day Ranger District.

Demand: Vaccine clinic April 30

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Fiumara said from the information he has been given, it appears the CTUIR has administered about 5,000 doses of the two-dose Pfizer vaccine so far, and yet only 2,819 Pfizer doses given to Umatilla County residents are listed on OHA’s website, suggesting that some data from CTUIR clinics has yet to make its way to the state. Fiumara also noted, however, that the CTUIR opened up its latest clinic to all of its ceded territories across 11 counties, meaning not everyone vaccinated by the Tribes is a Umatilla County resident.

“We think our rate is higher, but we don’t know how much higher,” he said.

What public health officials do know is that the county’s vaccination rate so far is nowhere near the point needed to stop transmission of COVID-19 in the county, as evidenced by Umatilla County’s rising cases and hospitalizations. Umatilla County (population 81,160) was placed on a two-week warning period after passing the 100 cases per 100,000 people over a 14-day period mark that would put it back into high risk. OHA reported 114 cases total for Umatilla County over the past two weeks, all but guaranteeing the county will return to high risk in another week.

As Umatilla County Public Health and area hospitals, medical clinics and pharmacies work to increase the local vaccination rate, the county did get some good



Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian, File

Susan Hilliard, left, receives her second dose of the Moderna COVID-19 vaccine during a drive-thru clinic operated by the Umatilla County Public Health Department in Pendleton on March 26, 2021.

news over the weekend — Oregon counties were once again cleared to begin administering the Johnson & Johnson version of the vaccine.

The vaccine was paused temporarily in the United States after six women out of nearly 7 million people vaccinated experienced dangerous blood clots. Since then, panels of experts at the state and federal level has determined the benefits of continuing with the vaccine far outweigh the risks.

Fiumara pointed out that many over-the-counter medications sold in grocery stores have higher risks of serious side effects.

“It’s still, relatively speaking, a very safe vaccine,” he said.

Before the pause, he said, the county heard from many Umatilla County workers, particularly in agriculture and food processing, that

they would only take the Johnson & Johnson vaccine, because it only requires one dose. The county has about 800 doses of the vaccine on hand now, and Fiumara said it remains to be seen whether the demand has changed at all.

During the county’s Friday, April 30, clinic at 2260 S.W. Court Ave. in Pendleton, Umatilla County Public Health will have all three vaccine options — Pfizer, Moderna and Johnson & Johnson — available for anyone ages 16 and up (the Pfizer shot is the only version available to people ages 16 and 17).

“We’re hoping that will generate some additional demand, but we’re very nervous that the pause (on Johnson & Johnson) may have impacted the way people see the vaccine,” he said.

Seat:

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probably from Republicans more than anyone else, to recognize that there are a lot of Republicans in the state of Oregon (who) have been underrepresented in the U.S. House,” Southwell said.

The 2nd Congressional District is the lone district held by a Republican and is the largest in Oregon, covering roughly two-thirds of the state. The historically conservative region has not had a Democratic House representative in four decades.

Some local officials say they are worried that the addition of a congressional seat and the redistricting that follows the once-a-decade census could lead to more competitive districts that hurt Republican chances of representing the region.

George Murdock, the commissioner of Umatilla County in the northeast-

ern part of the state, said his “greatest concern is that our district could be gerrymandered in order to further diminish representation for a portion of Oregon that reflects ideology, values and interests much different than the remainder of Oregon.”

Political gerrymandering, the drawing of legislative and congressional districts in a way that helps the majority party maintain its hold on power, may be more difficult for Democrats after a deal they struck with minority Republicans.

Democrats agreed to give up their advantage in redrawing the state’s political boundaries for the next 10 years in exchange for a commitment from Republicans to stop blocking bills in the Oregon Legislature with delay tactics.

With the agreement, Democrats and Republicans each will have three members on the state’s redistricting committee. A party-line vote will be insufficient to pass new maps, which essen-

tially grants Republicans veto power to block any map of legislative or congressional districts from passing.

If lawmakers don’t reach agreement on U.S. congressional district boundaries, it would be settled by a panel of five judges, one from each of the state’s current congressional districts. The Oregon Secretary of State would decide the new boundaries of state legislative districts if the Legislature fails to do so.

As with other states, redistricting in Oregon will be affected by the delay in community-level census data, which will not be distributed to states until August or later.

July 1 is the state’s deadline to draw new districts.

That prompted state legislative leaders to file a petition with the state Supreme Court asking for an extension to the statutory July 1 deadline. After the court agreed, the Legislature has until Sept. 27 to complete the redistricting process.

Shoes:

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the hospital, who engaged with the accountant’s story. “That someone might not believe them or that someone might say, ‘Oh, but you know, he supports you.’ It’s just sad that they have to weigh the positives and negatives. That should be something that’s not OK.”

The accountant’s story is not unlike the many stories she hears through her job at the hospital, Reker said.

“These are choices faced by real people in really horrible situations,” said Kathryn Chaney, the executive director of Domestic Violence Services. “The outcome isn’t always great. That’s why programs like ours exist — to help people from those circumstances.”

For both participants and event organizers, one word became central to each conversation — empathy.

“So often when you have a good friend or family member that keeps going back to an abusive relationship, you get frustrated or angry or you just don’t get it,” said Chaney, who has worked in services regarding domestic violence and sexual assault for nearly 30 years in multiple states. “That’s natural. But we developed this program to help people understand what these kind of circumstances are and what the choices are. This kind of activity gives people insight to those difficult choices.”

Jeanne Bedolla, a project coordinator with Domestic Violence Services, said the event shows the vulnerable

MORE INFORMATION

Proceeds from the seventh annual “In Her Shoes” experiential walk outside of Good Shepherd Hospital in Hermiston went to Domestic Violence Services’ shelters in Pendleton and Hermiston, as well as its advocacy centers in Boardman, Heppner and Milton-Freewater. The nonprofit organization also offers safety planning, peer groups, parenting classes and other support services and operates a 24-hour crisis line (800-833-1161). For more information, call 541-276-3322, 541-567-0424 or visit www.domesticviolenceservices-or.org.

situations victims experience after suffering from abuse. She saw this firsthand when she helped her sister move back home to Oregon from Denver, Colorado, when her marriage turned abusive.

“They’re basically groomed at that point to think they’re not worthy or that they can’t do better,” she said. “This (event) kind of shows people what limited resources people have. You can say, ‘Just go here or go here.’ But those people either don’t know about it, or they don’t have the family or friends for support depending on what their situation is. Sometimes it gets them into the world of drugs, and that’s a whole other story. It’s just a vicious cycle, unfortunately.”

Bedolla said the nonprofit is now looking to set up programs in middle and high schools to raise awareness about the various forms of abuse, including dating and cyber abuse.

Reker said events like “In Her Shoes” are important ways to show the barriers victims face to get help.

“There’s just not awareness of what sorts of services are available, what people have to go through

to be able to get help, all the barriers there are — police, court, Child Protective Services,” she said. “If you don’t have an advocate in that process, it’s almost impossible. So these are just really important awareness events.”

Caitlin Cozad, the marketing and communications director at the hospital who attended the event, agreed with Reker, adding that the event illustrates how common various forms of abuse are.

“A lot of times, people see physical abuse because they can actually see it,” she said. “But there’s emotional abuse, there’s verbal abuse, which are intangible. And there needs to be more resources out there for families who are victims of domestic violence — physical, verbal, emotional.”

Reker said she believes that engaging with the scenarios in the event can decrease stigmas surrounding victims.

“It’s not as black and white as, ‘This person’s beating you, so leave the relationship,’” she said. “There’s so many factors. It’s not that simple. And unfortunately, in our area, there’s not that many places that people can go.”



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