

Irrigation supplies holding on locally

McKay Reservoir is 42% full, Cold Springs Reservoir at 12% capacity

By KATY NESBITT
For the East Oregonian

PENDLETON — While much of Oregon’s irrigators are in dire straits, water users in Umatilla and Morrow counties have not been greatly affected by this summer’s drought.

Sean Kimbrel, Bureau of Reclamation Umatilla field office manager, said McKay Creek Reservoir was slightly above average for this time of year.

“Water storage in Umatilla County is in better shape than the rest of Oregon,” Kimbrel said. “Irrigation districts have close to a complete water supply.”

According to the Bureau of Reclamation, Pacific Northwest Region Umatilla River Basin Storage and Flow Diagram, McKay Reservoir is 42% full.

McKay Dam has 65,534 acre-feet active storage capacity plus 6,000 acre-feet of space exclusive for flood risk management above the normal full pool.

McKay Reservoir typically peaks the third week of May. This year, the maximum stored water was 64,176 acre-feet, a bit below last year’s maximum of 69,242 acre-feet.

“Irrigation water supplies will be close to if not completely fulfilled this year from reclamation facilities to contracted water users in the Umatilla River Basin, which is much



Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian, File

Boaters on June 2, 2021, recreate on McKay Reservoir outside of Pendleton. According to the Bureau of Reclamation, Pacific Northwest Region Umatilla River Basin Storage and Flow Diagram, McKay Reservoir is 42% full.

better in comparison to the very limited irrigation water supplies across the rest of Oregon as a result of drought conditions,” Kimbrel said.

One of the reasons the reservoir is still around average for late August is because the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation haven’t released water for fish yet.

“CTUIR is about to ramp-up fish water releases in the Umatilla,” Kimbrel said.

While the Cold Springs Reservoir is below average right now at 12% capacity, it is fulfilled by winter-time diversions from the Umatilla River with minimum flows maintained for fish, which are exchanged with summertime pumping from the Columbia River,

Kimbrel said.

Morrow County’s Willow Creek Reservoir outside of Heppner is managed by the Army Corps of Engineers primarily as a flood control facility. Its downstream use is primarily irrigation.

Tom Conning, public affairs specialist for the Corps’ Portland District, said the reservoir is filled with snowmelt and rainfall. Its peak storage is between April 1 and May 15. This year’s drought has greatly affected its levels.

“At this point of the year, it should be close to full, but it’s 90% below full,” he said.

Conning said Willow Creek is far lower than it is even in the winter months.

“After Labor Day it starts to draw down to

allow a larger pool to catch large storm events,” he said. “By Feb. 1 it starts to refill, while releasing any excess water coming from a storm.”

To supply irrigators with summer water, Conning said the Corps coordinates with the Oregon Water Resources Department to adjust inflows versus outflows.

“Once we hit 2,047 acre-feet we start to lose the ability to release more than what is coming in,” he said. “We are pretty close to that now at 2,051.”

Willow Creek is a popular fishing and camping destination and the minimum acre-feet level is maintained for fish managed in the reservoir by the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife, Conning said.

Umatilla County reports two COVID-19 deaths

The county is 2 COVID-19 deaths shy of its all-time pandemic record for deaths reported in a single month

By BRYCE DOLE
East Oregonian

PENDLETON — Umatilla County reported two COVID-19 deaths Monday, Aug. 30, raising the county’s death toll this month to 19.

One of the victims was 21 years old, according to the county.

The latest disclosure puts the county two COVID-19 deaths shy of its all-time pandemic record for deaths reported in a single month. That record was set in July 2020, when the county became the epicenter of high infection rates in Oregon.

The newly reported deaths come as the latest surge in COVID-19 cases, driven by the highly infectious delta variant, continues to rock the county, state and the nation. The county on Aug. 30 reported 78 new cases.

The county’s 116th victim is a 21-year-old man who tested positive Aug. 17 and died Aug. 21 in his home. He had unspecified underlying health conditions. Aside from a newborn boy from Umatilla County who died in January, he is the county’s youngest COVID-19 victim.

Young people in Umatilla County are getting sicker and are being hospitalized more often amid the delta surge than at any other point in the pandemic, county health offi-

cial and hospital employees have said.

On Aug. 10, a 29-year-old Umatilla County woman with COVID-19 died. The week before that, the state reported a 35-year-old Morrow County woman and a 19-year-old Union County woman died after contracting the virus.

The county’s 117th victim is a 51-year-old woman who tested positive Aug. 11 and died Aug. 27 at Providence St. Mary Medical Center, Walla Walla. She had unspecified underlying health conditions.

Hospitals across Oregon over the past month have filled to the brim with COVID-19 patients, and Umatilla County hospitals also saw record numbers of residents admitted after testing positive this month. The vast majority of patients were not vaccinated against COVID-19, hospital spokespersons have said.

Roughly 42% of all Umatilla County residents have been vaccinated against COVID-19, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Though cases have declined slightly from record-breaking levels two weeks ago, the county has reported more than 400 cases for five consecutive weeks, a total that dwarfs all previous pandemic surges.

In early July, the county was reporting less than 70 cases per week. For more than five months, the county reported at least 100 cases in a week just once.

Since the pandemic began, Umatilla County has reported 11,475 COVID-19 cases, according to county data. Roughly one in seven residents have tested positive.

Pendleton man represents himself in Walla Walla group assault case

The judge lowered Charles Thompkins’ bail from \$150,000 to \$100,000 and also kept a 10% cash equivalency available

By JEDIDIAH MAYNES
Walla Walla Union-Bulletin

WALLA WALLA — A Pendleton man accused of gathering up a group of people and attacking three men in Walla Walla represented himself in court Thursday, Aug. 26, and wound up having a judge enter a plea for him after a tense exchange of words.

Charles Thompkins Jr., 63, was originally scheduled to be arraigned Aug. 23 but he requested a change of representation in Walla Walla County Superior Court.

Nicholas Holce, who was Thompkins’ court-appointed attorney, was kept on as a standby legal consultant while Thompkins elected to represent himself primarily.

“Charles Thompkins, is that your true name?” Judge Brandon L. Johnson asked to start.

“Yes,” Thompkins responded. “That is the name by which this court recognizes me.”

Thompkins read from a book in his lap and some written notes and claimed his right to have an arraignment within 14 days had already been violated because it had been 20 days since his initial arrest.

Throughout the hearing, Thompkins held up the fact that he’s innocent until proven guilty and that the local justice system was already causing him undue harm, in his opinion.

“I’ve already suffered,” Thompkins said. “I’ve had so much community support that

people are beginning to wonder what’s really happening,” Thompkins said.

Johnson refuted several points by Thompkins, but acknowledged that his support appeared strong.

The judge lowered Thompkins’ bail from \$150,000 to \$100,000 and also kept a 10% cash equivalency available.

But Thompkins held that he should be released, which Johnson said didn’t seem reasonable.

“There’s no doubt of the community support,” Johnson said, motioning to about 10 people in the hearing for Thompkins. “But one of the other concerns is the seriousness of the charges.”

Thompkins is charged with first-degree robbery, three counts of first-degree assault, first-degree burglary — all Class A felonies — and criminal mischief — a Class C felony — as well as harassment, a gross misdemeanor.

Johnson repeatedly asked Thompkins how he wished to plead, but Thompkins didn’t answer.

“My rights are being violated in this court,” Thompkins returned. “These are violations and trespasses on my rights.”

“We’re here for your arraignment — so do you want to plead guilty or not guilty?” Johnson asked again.

“Let me ask you this: Are you going to give me a fair trial, Mr. Johnson?” Thompkins asked.

“My name is not Mr. Johnson in this court,” Johnson replied.

Thompkins apologized and Johnson ended up entering “not guilty” pleas on all counts on behalf of Thompkins.

Thompkins’ trial date is set for Oct. 19, with a pretrial hearing Sept. 29.

He still was listed on the Walla Walla County Jail roster as of Aug. 29.

Round-Up spruces up



Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian

Andrew Nelson, right, and Preston Bucher help fellow members of Boy Scouts of America Troop 700 paint the North Grandstand at the Pendleton Round-Up Grounds on Saturday, Aug. 28, 2021. Troop 700 was among the many volunteers to turn out for the Round-Up’s annual work party in preparation for the September event.

LOCAL BRIEFING

‘Dining Dollars’ coupons, gift cards to encourage visits

HERMISTON — A program to encourage visits to the city’s restaurants soon begins under a partnership between the Hermiston Chamber of Commerce and city of Hermiston.

With a theme of “Giving Back to the Hermiston Community,” \$50,000 in funding the city received through the American Rescue Plan Act will be used to provide coupons for

residents to use at any eating establishment in the city.

To administer the program, the chamber has created “Dining Dollars” coupons for local participating restaurants, purchased bulk gift cards from chain restaurants and purchased prepaid Visa cards for restaurants that don’t fall into either option.

Dining Dollars vouchers and restaurant-direct gift cards will be in \$10 increments.

Utility holders will receive 20% of the Dining Dollars and restaurant-direct gift cards. The Hermiston

Chamber will distribute the remainder through Feature Fridays, Facebook promotions and other public activities and events.

Distribution of coupons and gift cards will begin within the next two weeks. Watch the chamber’s online and other communication channels for more information.

The program will run through December and beyond. All Direct Dining coupons will expire Dec. 31, while chain restaurant and Visa gift cards may have extended expiration dates.

— EO Media Group

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