

# Spike:

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Last week, Oregon saw a decline in COVID-19 cases for the third straight week. Umatilla County's cases had followed that trend, dropping below 400 weekly cases for the first time in more than a month. But by the end of last week, the county's cases began to tick upward, topping out with the second-highest weekly total since the pandemic began — 505.

## 'Cases have spiked quickly'

Yellowhawk Tribal Health Center recorded 72 new cases last week. In a statement, interim Yellowhawk CEO Aaron Hines mentioned Round-Up when talking about the surge in new cases.

"This emergency declaration is needed to help protect our community," he said. "We knew that a surge in positive COVID-19 cases was possible following the Pendleton Round-Up. What we've seen from this past week is that the cases have spiked quickly."

While the tribes have largely aligned their COVID-19 rules with the state in recent months, they're hearing to the early days of the

pandemic by going further in their restrictions. On the same day the tribal trustees declared a public health emergency, the incident command team prohibited social gatherings of six people or more from two different households and capped attendance at Nixyaawii Community School events at 75.

The CTUIR has organized several mass vaccination events and engaged with tribal members directly about getting the vaccine, but the tribes' 47% vaccination rate remains below its 70% goal.

The board on Sept. 2 announced it was requiring all COVID-19 screeners and staff at Yellowhawk, the Umatilla Tribal Fire Department and the CTUIR Education Department to get vaccinated by Sept. 30. But at the meeting Sept. 27, the board of trustees unanimously voted to extend that deadline to Oct. 31. Unvaccinated staff in those departments will be required to get tested for COVID-19 on a weekly basis and wear a face mask during work hours until then.

Yellowhawk has reported a total of 569 cases and four deaths over the course of the pandemic. Although the agency is seeing a significant



Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian, File

**A sign near the Nixyaawii Governance Center on the Umatilla Indian Reservation warns drivers to wash their hands in an attempt to curb the spread of COVID-19 in March 2020.**

number of breakthrough cases, 80% of cases are attributed to non-vaccinated patients.

## Lack of cooperation means inaccurate count

Joe Fiumara, the county's public health director, said the county has traced 49 COVID-19 cases back to Round-Up events so far.

"What's disheartening is that people who had symptoms chose to partake," he said. "That's something people don't seem to understand — if you have symptoms, please stay home."

The Pendleton Round-Up and Happy Canyon took several measures to heed state and local health guidelines and mandates. Contractors and staff were "subject to wear a mask when not actively engaged in the events," and guests over the

age of 5 were "requested to wear a mask" if they were not having food or beverages, the organizers said in a Facebook post. The event had hand sanitizer, hand washing stations, medical personnel, ambulance coverage and "increased" medical room size and coverage.

Signs recommending masks were posted throughout the event and reminded attendees of the potential risks of COVID-19: "By your participation in the event, you are accepting the potential risk of COVID-19 exposure."

But masks were few and far between at the event. And there was no proof of vaccination or negative COVID-19 tests required to enter the Round-Up Grounds.

"I was disappointed in the lack of support from the Round-Up staff, volunteers,

in showcasing the masking and encouraging the mask-wearing," Fiumara added. "And I'm worried we may be looking at the price we're going to pay for that."

The 49 cases are surely an undercount, Fiumara added. Many attendees who have fallen ill and know others who have are not cooperating with health officials. That means, for now, it is almost impossible for the county to determine how large the outbreak is.

Hines and Fiumara said they were expecting to see a case spike following the Round-Up. But the latest spike is quicker and steeper than they anticipated.

"My concern is that we will end up with more deaths out of this," Fiumara said. "And many of them likely could have been avoided. We don't know how vaccinated the crowd was."

For months, Umatilla County's vaccination rate has remained among the lowest statewide. Because of that, county officials have voiced concerns about the Round-Up's potential as a super-spreader event for months — particularly after the the Pendleton Whisky Music Fest outbreak, which kicked off a delta variant crisis that has

seen more residents hospitalized and die with COVID-19 than any other pandemic surge.

August became Umatilla County's deadliest month since the pandemic began, with 22 residents dying with COVID-19.

But no officials took any action to stop the Round-Up. Instead, county officials noted the economic benefits of the event, which brings millions of dollars to the local business economy that has struggled without large events over the past year.

The latest surge has prompted the county health department to retool staff from other roles to track the rapid spread of infection. Aside from that, Fiumara said he is not planning to propose any public health recommendation to the board of commissioners. Still, he said this situation was avoidable.

"It's hard to want to put economic restrictions in place when part of what's driving it is people who knowingly had symptoms and attended a social event like this," Fiumara said. "I don't know how you stop that, short of putting a guard at the door. It's just not who we are."

# Run:

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The winners of the 5k and 10K received medals, while second and third place received certificates. Everyone who participated received a green T-shirt emblazoned with the Oregon Women for Agriculture slogan: "Almost everything starts on a farm or ranch."

This was the second time the Eastern Oregon Women for Agriculture hosted the race. Previously, the run was organized by Greg Spike and included a 5K, 10K, 25K and 50K for those brave enough to venture into the realm of ultra marathons.

When the race started to fizzle out, Bethany Woodall, Gina Tyhuis and Gina Gray asked to take over to help support women in agriculture. According to Tyhuis, women own 39% of all farms and ranches in Oregon.

Nicola Feik, whose family farm started in 1847 and whose grandmother was a founding member of the western chapter of Oregon



Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian

**Amanda Woodland runs along a ridge Saturday, Sept. 25, 2021, during the Echo Sage Trail Run at the Sno Road Winery vineyard in Echo. The annual 5K and 10K trail run serves as a fundraiser for Eastern Oregon Women for Agriculture.**

Women for Agriculture, has been involved since she was 4 years old and said they worked to acknowledge the role women have played in agriculture throughout the state's history.

"We're carrying on their legacies," she said.

Additionally, she said the organization works hard to get people more familiar with their food, where it comes from and to make sure agriculture is legislators recognize the importance of agriculture.

To do this, the organization partnered with

Oregon Agriculture in the Classroom to help bring farming and ranching into more clear focus. EOWA also spreads "farm facts" and are collaborating to put up informational signs along farms to explain the crops local farms are growing.

The money raised from the run went straight into the local organization's annual scholarship fund, which will provide scholarships to three women pursuing agriculture degrees in the Baker, Malheur, Morrow, Umatilla, Union or Wallowa counties.

Each applicant has to fill out an application and write a 500- to 1,000-word essay focused on the biggest problems facing agriculture and how they plan to be a part of the solution. Decided by a scholarship committee that ranks the essays on points, the top applicant receives \$1,000, second place receives \$750 while third receives \$500.

Woodall, Tyhuis and Gray hope to continue expanding the race and would like to get cross-country teams more involved.

"It's a challenging course," Tyhuis said, "they would be huffing and puffing."

Plus, the more participants who run, the better they can continue to fund agriculture education and spread the knowledge of how food is made.

"There is a lot of people that just don't understand what we do, and or how or why we do it," Woodall said. "There are too many people in this world that don't know where their food comes from. We are trying to help correct that."

# Navy:

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She continued climbing the ranks, eventually joining the command teams on the USS Jackson and the USS Omaha, both Independence-class littoral combat ships. She was promoted to master chief in July, and once she returns to duty, she will join the command team for the USS Lenah Sutcliffe Higbee, her first destroyer as a commander.

Named after a superintendent of the Navy Nurse Corps who served during World War I, the Lenah Higbee is a new ship that was christened in April from its shipyard in Pascagoula, Mississippi. Pashkevich said she'll travel to see the ship. From there, she and the rest of the crew will take the ship down through the Panama Canal and onto San Diego. And from California, it's on to the next deployment in the South China Sea.

Obtaining the rank of master chief puts Pashkevich in rarefied air as it means she's now among the top 1% of enlisted maritime forces. It's also relatively rare for a woman to achieve that rank in a military that's diversifying but still dominated by men. According to the U.S.

Department of Defense, only 14% of senior enlisted personnel are women.

Pashkevich understands the significance of her achievement, and she not only wants to be a role model to future women who might aspire to command, but also to show them that it's possible.

"It's not that it's hard," she said. "It's just at some point in time, you know, not everybody wants to continue to deal with it"

Rising up the ranks through the Navy has come with sacrifices, Pashkevich said, and she's thankful for her family for supporting her through it all. When she's not deployed, Pashkevich resides in San Diego with her partner, Thomas Martin. She also has two daughters, one of whom followed her footsteps into the Navy.

While she may not have anticipated such a long career in military service, what's kept her going after all these years is the sense that she gets to help people for a living.

"That's basically what my job is now," she said. "Making sure that the command is moving forward, and that we're completing the mission and that I'm taking care of everybody along the way."

# BMCC:

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"Growing up in the Bitterroot Valley, we hiked, camped, fished and ran around on motorcycles," he said. "We didn't know how good we had it. We worked hard and played hard."

Browning's family moved to Idaho when he still was in high school, the state where he would complete his first career track and get a start on a second.

Setting aside the advice from the grocer, Browning translated his early start in radio into a career in television, eventually becoming an anchor and news director for local Boise TV stations. Once content to climb the TV news ladder, Browning realized if he wanted to advance career outside the bounds of broadcast journalism, he would need a degree. So at age 39, Browning enrolled as a freshman at Idaho State University.

After obtaining a bachelor's degree in mass communications, Browning went from covering Idaho government to joining it as the chief communications and legislative officer for the Idaho State Board of Education. Browning entered the world of community college administration under the recommendation of a board member he worked with, who told him to take a look at a vice president of communications position at North Idaho College.

A move to Coeur d'Alene followed, and up until that point, most of Browning's

work had come in the specialized field of communications. When the president of North Idaho College suggested he would make a good college president, Browning initially dismissed it.

"I just thought that was the worst thing in the world," Browning said. "And then we really started talking about what the role of the president is and what the president does. I started to look at it through a different lens of the kind of work that I really enjoyed doing, which is in the community, and storytelling. I started to think back on all the roles I've had, from morning radio, to television anchor and reporter to the state board office. It really is about telling or finding someone's story, and then telling it or telling the story of the agency I was with, the college I was with. That really is the ultimate extension of (the job) is to be the lead storyteller for that institution."

In 2016, Browning took on a new role as an administrator at the College of Western Idaho, a community college established in 2009 in Nampa to serve Boise's rapidly growing suburbs. In the meantime, he continued to advance his education, obtaining a master's degree from the University of Idaho and enrolling in a doctorate program at Idaho State.

Two hundred miles away in Pendleton, the BMCC president positions wasn't expected to open for some time. In March 2019, Blue Mountain hired veteran college administrator Dennis Bailey-Fougner to lead the college. But in February,

Bailey-Fougner abruptly resigned, citing ongoing health issues. For the second time in three years, BMCC was in need of a president.

From his perch in Idaho, Browning liked the idea of moving back to small town life in Pendleton. He applied, and after learning he had locked down an interview, he was ecstatic. But BMCC's interest in Browning didn't end with an interview, with the college's board of education announcing his hiring in June. His first day on the job was Tuesday, Sept. 7.

## The future of BMCC

Browning emerged from a field of finalists with more traditional backgrounds. Two finalists had been presidents and some could pitch themselves as more reflective of the college's diversifying student body.

But what stood out to Jane Hill, the chair of the BMCC board at the time of his hiring, was his ability to score high with all of the college's various constituencies.

"There's no formula for hiring the perfect candidate," she said. "There's so many variables that matter. He had that combination of qualities that made employees feel confident and at ease. And that made the board feel like this guy has a sense of not only the range of things that need to be done, but what's important among them."

Pete Hernberg, the president of the faculty union, said he was initially skeptical of Browning's candidacy after looking over his resume and seeing a lack of classroom experience. But he was won

over after Browning spoke with instructors and offered specific solutions to the college's challenges.

Browning takes over a very different college than the institution managed by his predecessors. From 2012 to 2020, BMCC enrollment fell from 4,142 to 1,561. The downward trend was supercharged by the pandemic, but the college already had been struggling with the effects of a strong economy and increasing competition from Walla Walla Community College, Columbia Basin College in Pasco and Baker Technical Institute.

The resulting loss in revenue led to the college eliminating 23 positions in 2020 under Bailey-Fougner and another 16 in 2021, some of those cuts coming under the

protests of staff. All of these developments are happening as the demographics of Blue Mountain are shifting. As Latinos make up a larger share of the student body, the college is beginning to discuss if its staff and services are reflective of that.

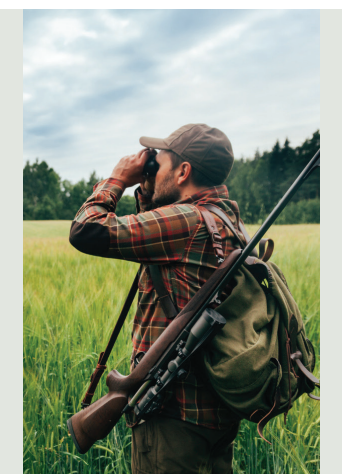
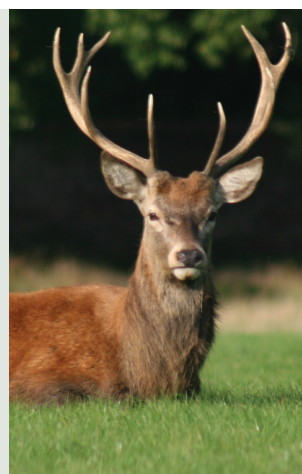
Browning said BMCC is not only competing with other colleges for students but an economy where people can get a well-paid job without the benefit of a college education. One of his first priorities will be to stanch the enrollment bleed. He said his hope is to have fall enrollment not drop any more than 1 or 2%.

Browning just closed on a house in Pendleton as he and his wife Kym get settled in Eastern Oregon while his three adult sons are scattered across Utah and Washing-

ton. He still loves to hike, fish and camp, and he and Kym already are making a mental list of all the outdoor opportunities in the region they'd like to take advantage of in the coming years.

Browning said his job as president will be to acknowledge the challenges that lie ahead while projecting optimism in Blue Mountain Community College's future.

"Everybody says, 'What's your biggest challenge right now,' and I think it is to help people understand that you've been through hell, and we're not at the end yet," he said. "But I believe we've got a structure and the sizing in place that makes us sustainable for the amount of enrollment that we've got. And that we're gonna get through it together."



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