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SPECIAL DELIVERY

Area bikers bring toys to hospitalized children

By **BRYCE DOLE**
East Oregonian

HERMISTON — The parking lot of Good Shepherd Medical Center in Hermiston nearly was silent. It was an overcast and crisp Saturday, Dec. 4, and the hospital spokesperson was standing alone out front, hoping people would show up.

Then Santa Claus came rumbling in on a motorcycle.

With Mrs. Claus in the sidecar, he led a parade of at least 100 motorcyclists as they thundered from Echo to Hermiston, revving their engines loudly for the 18th annual Echo Toy Run. The bearded and tattooed bikers donned leather jackets and chaps, jeans and bandanas while carrying stuffed animals and toy trucks for hospitalized children.

“Bikers are some of the most generous people out there and, given a chance, respectful,” said Santa, otherwise known as Phil Spencer.

The event brings toys to children who are in the hospital over the holidays. What’s leftover is given out to sick youths throughout the rest of the year and to the Hermiston Police Department for its Christmas Express program.

Norma Sanchez, who works in the labor delivery department at Good Shepherd, said the hospital hasn’t been able to give children toys due to pandemic protocol. She said she was thrilled to see the gifts were packaged so they could be cleaned



Photos by Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian
Bikers carrying toys stride through the parking lot Saturday, Dec. 4, 2021, as the Echo Toy Run arrives at Good Shepherd Medical Center in Hermiston.

and given to local youths. “It’s Christmas, they would love that,” she said.

The ride continues in memory of Alan Sells, the event organizer for 15 years before he died in August 2019 near Plymouth, Washington, when a car hit him while he was riding a Harley-Davidson motorcycle. Now, Sells’ daughter, Amanda Silvani, runs the event.

“We couldn’t let it die,” Silvani said, adding, “It’s amazing to see how giving people are.”

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Santa Claus, also known as Phil Spencer, leads the Echo Toy Run out of Echo on Saturday, Dec. 4, 2021, en route to Good Shepherd Medical Center in Hermiston.



Alex Wittwer/EO Media Group

A sapling that had succumbed to the dry conditions sits dead in the ground Nov. 30, 2021, at the Donovan Tree Farm in La Grande. Scorching summer heat waves and persistent droughts damaged the new plantings of Christmas trees, killing off most saplings and seedlings.

Drought scorches trees, affects Christmas tradition

By **ALEX WITTWER**
EO Media Group

LA GRANDE — A scorching summer and persistent drought in Oregon has stressed young saplings and seedlings of Christmas trees from the Willamette Valley to Eastern Oregon. Those environmental conditions have exacerbated an already strained industry that was just starting to recover from a Christmas tree shortage that was decades in the making.

Due to a large surplus in trees in the early to mid 2000s, many Christmas tree growers had one unprofitable year after another, leading the farmers to seek out other avenues of revenue as prices plummeted for their product.

“Between growers not planting — that stayed in the businesses — the number of trees that were going into the ground from 2006 to 2007 wasn’t enough to sustain the demand that would be out there 10 years in the future,” said Greg Smith, owner of Molalla Tree Farms, which grows Christmas trees on nearly 200 acres in Clackamas County. “So, in 2015, you started seeing the market tighten up for supply, and then people have been planting again, but we’re still — it’s such a long process to grow a Christmas tree. It’s a 10-year project to get a marketable tree.”

Smith had lost many of his younger saplings and seedlings this year due to the high temperatures in the summer that pushed the mercury to more than 110 degrees in some parts of the state. Drought, rising gas prices, labor shortages and heat waves conspired to reduce the already low supply of Christmas trees this year, and the effects of the heat wave are just the beginning.

“We lost basically our entire plantings this year, now we’ve got another big hole that’s going to suck up any excess that would have been in the future,” Smith said, speaking about the Christmas industry as a whole.

Oregon leads the U.S. in Christmas tree production, with exports exceeding \$100 million

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Jack Cooper deposits a gift in a donation bin Saturday, Dec. 4, 2021, during the Echo Toy Run at Good Shepherd Medical Center in Hermiston.

‘Right now, it’s all hope’

Coronavirus cases have dropped in Eastern Oregon

By **BRYCE DOLE**
and **DAVIS CARBAUGH**
EO Media Group

PENDLETON — In many parts of Eastern Oregon, coronavirus infection rates have fallen to the lowest levels in months, according to state data and regional public health officials.

But with the omicron variant now having reached the United States, prompting travel restrictions while scientists worldwide have sounded an alarm, regional health officials are urging caution as families gather for the holidays.

“My advice for the typical Umatilla County resident would be, yes, this is something we may have to deal with

down the road,” Umatilla County Public Health Director Joe Fiumara said of the omicron variant, which scientists say has the potential to be more transmissible and less susceptible to existing vaccines due to a high number of mutations. “It’s not something that will have to be dealt with today or tomorrow, but it might be next week.”

Average daily coronavirus cases in Umatilla County have fallen to the lowest levels since April, the Oregon Health Authority reported. In Morrow County, case rates in recent weeks have fallen to among the lowest in Oregon.

“Casewise, we’re in about as good of a position as we could have ever hoped to be,” Fiumara said. “Over the last several weeks, our numbers have plummeted. And it’s a good thing.”

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Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian, File

Registered nurse Lexie Futter, left, prepares Raylene Ellis to receive her COVID-19 booster shot Oct. 29, 2021, during a vaccination clinic at the Pendleton Convention Center.



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