



Photos by Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian

A caravan of motorcycles departs Saturday, Dec. 4, 2021, from Echo for the annual Echo Toy Run to Good Shepherd Medical Center in Hermiston.

## Toy Run:

Continued from Page A1

The mob of bikers parked and dismounted their bikes. They marched toward three large bins and tossed in toy trucks and stuffed unicorns. They laughed hearty laughs and chatted as the gifts piled up, nearly overflowing from the bins.

As a former employee of the hospital emergency department, Silvani recalled a young girl who was once miserably ill. Silvani found the girl a

toy that had been tucked away after the toy run. That toy instantly changed the girl's day, she said. That's why Silvani said she thinks the event is essential.

Several people remarked on how the event shows the inherent kindness among bikers, dispelling stereotypes. Spencer said he joined the toy run when Sells started it 18 years ago. He started being Santa the year that Sells died. Since then, he's led the procession through town, alongside his wife, Beth.

"It's an honor," he said.

The group this year was so big it stretched nearly from Stanfield to

Hermiston, at least two bikers said. Sam Bursell, a retired truck driver, said the community was more accommodating this year than ever before, pulling to the side of the road and allowing the group to pass.

"There's a lot of love here," said Bursell, who sports a long white beard.

Bursell kept a stuffed dog, bear and a lion in tow on his way to the hospital, that's what he would have wanted. Bursell said the event exemplifies how giving and caring Sells was.

"He started a legacy," Bursell said, "and it's still going on."



Beth Spencer, dressed as Mrs. Claus, and her husband Phil Spencer, dressed as Santa Claus, pose for photos with bikers Saturday, Dec. 4, 2021, during the Echo Toy Run at Good Shepherd Medical Center in Hermiston.

## Drought:

Continued from Page A1

Tim Donovan, who runs the Donovan Tree Farm in La Grande with his wife, Loraine Donovan, said the drought compounded the problem regarding the shortages.

"There was a glut of trees 15 years ago and the price went really low," Tim Donovan said, "and assuming a certain amount of farms converted into wine production, so that changed the supply balance, and this summer with the drought certain trees turned red and aren't on the market."

The Donivans have been running a tree farm since their first planting in 1979. Their 3.5-acre property is filled with trees of varying ages and species. Many of the younger trees had been scorched by the summer heat wave, leaving the saplings to resemble the sickly tree from the animated TV classic "A Charlie Brown Christmas." Older trees largely survived the onslaught of record-breaking temperatures, though a few trees succumbed to the heat while other trees saw only a smat-



Photos by Alex Wittwer/EO Media Group

Kevin Lyon, of Enterprise, carries a Christmas tree from the Donovan Tree Farm in La Grande on Nov. 30, 2021. An unusually dry year has caused a number of new plantings and seedlings to die off, which could mean shortages in the decades to come.

tering of reddened needles and crispy branches.

Loraine Donovan described this year's weather conditions as highly unusual, and said the heat and drought prevented the trees from developing root structures that would help them weather the dry conditions.

"We lost a lot of the seedlings we planted this spring, and I'm sure that was the case for other growers too,"

she said. "We went through and spot watered every tree, including every seedling five times through the summer, but we still lost a large percentage of this year's seedlings — half of what we planted."

Oregon leads the nation in Christmas tree production, with exports fueling an industry worth just more than \$100 million, according to statistics from the

National Agricultural Statistics Service. According to the Capital Press, Oregon grows nearly one-third of all U.S. Christmas trees. Most of the Christmas tree farms reside in or near the Willamette Valley where conditions are prime for pines.

According to Loraine Donovan, trees in Eastern Oregon take longer to grow than those in the Willamette Valley, with the aver-

## Hope:

Continued from Page A1

Since the peak of the delta variant surge that followed the Pendleton Round-Up, weekly cases in Umatilla County have declined for more than two months. Last week, the county reported just 41 cases total, according to Fiumara. Compare that to September, when the county reported more than 500 cases in a week — a number health officials said at the time was surely an undercount.

Union County is experiencing a similar trend, with 124 cases reported throughout November, a significant drop from August, when the county tallied 568 cases as the delta variant rocked Oregon's health care system. Weekly average case counts dropped into single digits for most of November. The weekly average of three cases on Wednesday, Dec. 1, marked the lowest average in Union County since July 18.

Lowered numbers have been a cause for guarded optimism among county officials.

"We're really happy the numbers are down," Union County Commissioner Donna Beverage said. "No one really knows what will happen in the future, so we have to be cautious."

However, as long as vaccination rates across the region remain among the lowest in Oregon, health officials voiced concern that infection could sweep through the region again if the omicron variant proves more transmissible or deadly.

"As long as there is a reservoir for infection to happen, it will happen," said Dr. Jon Hitzman, Umatilla County's public health officer. He added: "Despite our best efforts, we remain one or two steps behind this virus."

The omicron variant, which was in Europe before it was first reported in South Africa, has caused considerable panic worldwide. Last week, several countries immediately banned foreign travelers altogether as reports about the variant spread. Even the stock market took a brief but notable tumble in the wake of the news of the variant.

Three cases of the variant have so far been reported in the United States, but offi-

cialists expect those numbers to increase in the coming days and weeks, the New York Times reported. With the upcoming influx of travel around the holidays, President Joe Biden announced Dec. 2 that international travelers are required to take a COVID-19 test within 24 hours of their departure for the United States. The mandate for masks on public transport also extended through March 18.

The variant's arrival also prompted the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention on Nov. 29, to change its messaging on booster shots, saying people 18 and older "should" get a booster when they can.

Scientists expect to know more about the variant in the coming weeks but also say there is no reason to believe omicron is able to completely evade the vaccine's protection, but it's possible the vaccine could be less protective.

Hitzman and Fiumara said it is best that residents practice patience as officials act quickly to learn more.

"It's way too early to even begin to project how dangerous this is," Hitzman said.

Hitzman would not go as far as to discourage residents from gathering during the holidays, resigning to the fact people will do what they want regardless of what he says. He said he will be gathering with his family — who are vaccinated — for the holidays, but added they will not be having their annual Christmas party.

"Individual freedoms don't remove our responsibility for taking care of our neighbors," Hitzman said.

Beverage reflected a similar sentiment, noting holiday travel caution should be a decision every individual considers carefully.

"We want to be cautious, but I would say that's an individual decision," she said. "If someone feels at risk meeting at a large family gathering, they should be cautious and make their own decision."

Meanwhile, Hitzman and other Eastern Oregon health officials are pushing for the same precautions they have for months: Mask up while indoors, stay home when ill, and get vaccinated.

"This is a beatable virus, but it's going to take everyone," Hitzman said, adding, "Right now, it's all hope."



Reddened needles signify a dead tree scorched by the summer heat waves and drought at the Donovan Tree Farm in La Grande on Nov. 30, 2021. Though most of the adult and market-ready trees survived, the unusually dry and hot conditions this year damaged a few.

age growth time of 10-12 years for an Eastern Oregon Christmas tree, as compared to the eight to 10 years in the Willamette Valley.

"We're a lot higher and drier, and they're a lot more temperate and moist," Loraine Donovan said.

And while the Willamette Valley is poised to exit its drought starting next year according to National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration data, the dry conditions for Eastern Oregon will persist for at least one more season. That means local Christmas tree

growers will continue to struggle with their crops in the years to come.

"We're just going to have to replant more next spring and hope we don't have another weather cycle like that," Loraine Donovan said.

Still, the Donivans contend they have more than enough trees to supply buyers in the Grande Ronde Valley looking to cut down their own tree for Christmas. Tim Donovan said the farm has "more than we did last year."

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