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**INSIDE**

**PENDLETON'S BACKFIRE STATION SEEKS MORE FUNDING PAGE A3**



## LONG WINTER AHEAD

Labor shortage makes snow removal more difficult for ODOT

By **DICK MASON**  
*The Observer*

**LA GRANDE** — A shortage of road maintenance employees could create delays in removing snow this winter in Eastern Oregon.

"Fewer people will be running plows. Anytime you have fewer operators it means that work will take longer," said Oregon Department of Transportation spokesperson Tom Strandberg.

Craig Sipp, manager of ODOT's Region 5, which encompasses a high percentage of Eastern Oregon, agreed. "If we have back-to-back storms, it may take us longer to get to some of the secondary highways," he said.

Sipp said ODOT's Region 5 has approximately 12 unfilled road maintenance positions, significantly more than what is average for this time of year.

### Open positions

Statewide, ODOT has 167 road maintenance positions now open. There were 86 openings at the same time in 2020 and 29 in 2019 during the same period. Strandberg said ODOT's Region 5 has seen openings for maintenance staff steadily rise since 2019.



An Oregon Department of Transportation snowplow clears snow Friday, Dec. 10, 2021, along the Old Oregon Trail Road near Meacham.

Strandberg said it is not known if the COVID-19 pandemic is partially responsible for the employee shortage. Strandberg said 99% of ODOT's employees in Oregon complied with the state's COVID-19 vaccine mandate, which took effect in October. This meant 99% of ODOT's employees either were vaccinated or filed for and received an exemption for health or religious reasons.

He said it is unknown if some of the employees who

retired this year did so because of concerns about the state vaccine mandate.

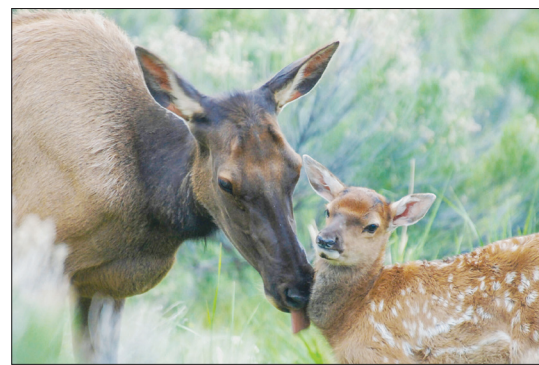
ODOT always adds to its road maintenance staff in the winter, Strandberg said, and many of those hired are seasonal employees. He said that despite the labor shortage, travelers can expect to see ODOT maintenance crews clearing snow night and day.

"We will be keeping equipment on the road as much as possible," he said.

Ace Clark, ODOT's manager of District 13, which includes Union and Wallawa counties and most of Baker County, said it has been difficult to hire road maintenance staff because there is so much competition now for employees due to a regional and nationwide labor shortage. With everyone competing for employees, many employers are boosting their compensation packages.

See Winter, Page A9

Vehicles traverse Interstate 84 on Friday, Dec. 10, 2021, near Meacham. The Oregon Department of Transportation reports it has few people operating snowplows this winter in Eastern Oregon.



U.S. Forest Service/Contributed Photo, File

A study looking into predator-prey interaction at the Starkey Experimental Forest and Range in Union County finds coyotes are eating the remains of elk at cougar kill sites.

## Starkey researchers consider reasons for decline of mule deer

By **KATY NESBITT**  
*For EO Media Group*

**STARKEY** — A study looking into predator-prey interaction at the Starkey Experimental Forest and Range in Union County revealed fascinating insight into more than predation on deer and elk, such as the dynamics between competing carnivores.

To answer why mule deer are declining at Starkey and across Northeastern Oregon, researchers are looking at possible contributors, including the role of predators. According to OSU associate professor Taal Levi, who served as an advisor to a study led by Joel Ruprecht, a Oregon State University wildlife science doctoral student, the study included collaring a sampling of carnivores, monitoring deer and elk kills sites via game cameras and analyzing scat to determine what predators living within the 40 square mile experimental forest and range were eating.

The Starkey forest is encompassed by a fence that keeps deer and elk confined to the area, which allows unique types of research.

"Getting at the answer is a little bit challenging because mule deer compete with elk and are preyed on by multiple species," Levi said.

Of the bears, cougars, bobcats and coyotes collared and monitored, Levi said the most interesting results occurred between cougars and coyotes.

"We learned that while coyotes tend to avoid cougars, they are strongly attracted to cougar kill sites," he said.

Analyzing their scat provided further evidence that coyotes are eating elk. Levi said coyotes don't typically kill elk past their young calf stage, but video recordings showed more than 90% of cougar kills were scavenged by coyotes.

This method of eating out is not without its challenges for the opportunistic coyotes, Levi said 7% of the dead coyotes discovered during the study were found at cougar kill sites, and between 20% and 23% of the Starkey coyotes were killed by cougars.

"There's a risk to getting a 'free lunch,'" Levi said.

### Bobcats keep clear of cougar kills

While looking specifically at the impact of predators on ungulates, Ruprecht said the study provided a unique opportunity to learn something new about carnivores.

"Generally predators are studied solely on how they influence prey, but how they influence and interact with each other was my interest," Ruprecht said.

See Deer, Page A9

Predator study reveals more than effects on ungulates

## Help with digital inclusion may be on the way for Morrow County

Infrastructure set for early 2022

By **ERICK PETERSON**  
*East Oregonian*

**MORROW COUNTY** — Businesses and local government officials are lining up behind a push to improve internet access in Morrow County.

Aaron Moss, fellow with Lead for America and AmeriCorps, said better digital inclusion — ability of individuals and groups to access and use information and communication technologies — is a need he is working to help fulfill in the county.

"Our primary goal is to build out infrastructure to the unincorporated, most

remote areas and homes in the county," he said.

Moss, who said he has been with Lead for America since July, lives in Heppner.

"I am stationed at the Morrow County Commissioners Office and will be working closely with the county government to convene a broadband action team of stakeholders and partners throughout the community," he stated in an email to EO Media Group. He said he is working on "expanding broadband access and digital skills as well as improving the affordability of internet services within the county."

The Tillamook Creamery Association in partnership with Land O'Lakes is sponsoring the work, Moss said, and

has assistance from government officials.

At the height of coronavirus quarantines that closed schools, some students in Morrow County had a difficult time learning from home because of spotty internet connections. Similar problems existed for people who were trying to connect with their doctors. Moss explained the pandemic has highlighted the importance of internet access in education, health care and work life, "with rural communities facing unique barriers to connectivity." Parts of Morrow County lack reliable internet connection, he explained, and some parts have no connection.

See Digital, Page A9



Angie Hanson/Contributed Photo

Keller and Mack Sweeney study with Colbie Patterson in 2020. The three young students were part of a class in Heppner. When schools were closed, they and other students met in a place where internet connection was reliable.