



Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian

An Oregon Department of Transportation snowplow clears slush from the highway shoulder Friday, Dec. 10, 2021, along Interstate 84 near Meacham. ODOT is advising a lack of road maintenance employees could create delays in removing snow this winter in Eastern Oregon.

Winter:

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“It is hard to recruit when everybody is paying more. It is hard to compete,” Clark said.

ODOT’s problem is compounded by the fact the road maintenance employees it needs must be skilled drivers with commercial driver’s licenses. ODOT will provide the training needed to earn a CDL, but Clark said he would rather hire drivers who have experience operating heavy equipment before they start working in bad weather conditions.

Clark noted all inexperienced drivers will be paired with experienced ones initially to help them develop skills.

“We will be taking them on training rides,” he said.

He said it is possible the transportation department could bring in road maintenance employees from other parts of the state this winter to help with snow removal.

Another concern of Clark’s is keeping a supply of replacement parts available for snowplows. This is important because replacement parts may be difficult to get quickly due to supply chain issues.

“We have been trying to stock up,” he said.

Clark said he has talented workers who have multiple skills and is optimistic things will go relatively smoothly this winter.

“We are very fortunate because we have very good employees,” Clark said.

Safety first

Sipp said anyone interested in working for ODOT this winter should contact the department.

“We want people to look to us for employment,” he said. “We want people who will enjoy doing this every day.”

Ken Patterson, area manager for ODOT’s Region 5, said motorists should be patient this winter since there may be times when snow will not be cleared as quickly as expected. He encourages people to avoid driving when conditions are poor.

He said drivers should monitor ODOT’s road cameras on its Trip Check website to make sure road conditions are good before they start a trip. Patterson noted many additional cameras on Interstate 84 between La Grande and Pendleton have been installed within the past two years.

Strandberg also pointed out the department the past two years has added about a dozen message boards between La Grande and Pendleton. The message boards alert drivers to upcoming conditions, including the presence of snow, ice, fog, slow traffic and accidents. Strandberg also urged drivers to be patient and

noted it is never a good idea to pass a snowplow, especially because ODOT now has winged plows with blades on both sides. He said drivers who find themselves behind plows are actually in a good position.

“The best place you can be in a storm is behind a snowplow,” Strandberg said, adding one caveat — drivers should never get too close to snowplows because they do make stops.

This winter, ODOT crews again will be following the agency’s Winter Levels of Service guidelines, which prioritize the roads that receive the most service. The guidelines indicate I-84 receives the highest priority in Union County, Strandberg said.

Regardless of where one is driving in this region, Patterson said it is important to understand state road department maintenance employees “take personal pride in what they are doing” and care enormously about safety.

“We all have friends and family who are also traveling and we want them to get to where they are going safely,” he said.

“WE WANT PEOPLE TO LOOK TO US FOR EMPLOYMENT. WE WANT PEOPLE WHO WILL ENJOY DOING THIS EVERY DAY.”

— Craig Sipp, manager of ODOT’s Region 5

Digital:

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This is a problem, Moss stated, because of the “uncertainty of COVID-19 variants and the possibility of a future date when people once again are pressed to depend on the internet for school, medical services and more.”

Angie Hanson, a grandmother of two boys, was among the people who noticed the problems resulting from unreliable internet access. Local children were not able to attend online school from their homes, so she organized a home school in the Gilliam and Bisbee Building in Heppner. There, around a dozen local children, including her grandsons, could connect with classes online.

These students, Hanson said, would work on their online classes from 7:30 a.m. to noon on school days. A former educational assistant, she would help them.

“I couldn’t see these kids slip through the cracks,” she said.

All of these children were neighbors or family members with one another, she explained, so they already were in close contact with one another and their communal schooling was not increasing their chance of coronavirus exposure. Not everyone, then, was able to be part of Hanson’s solution to the connection problem.

Moss credited County Commissioner Melissa Lindsay for playing a major role in supporting digital inclusion and understanding the troubles. Lindsay acknowledged the inability for students to connect virtually to their classes.

“A lot of kids were learning from cars in a parking lot,” she said.

Others, such as Hanson’s class, were meeting together with adult leadership, she said. Such students would have been better served if they had access to reliable internet, as enjoyed in other cities, she said.

Lindsay also said she heard from elderly people who were leery of going to in-person doctors. Virtual appointments could have helped them, she said, but they skipped appointments because, in addition to not wanting to visit a doctor face-to-face, they could not connect to the internet. Therefore, they went without medical care, the commissioner said.

This is why, Lindsay said, the county started a broadband task force that included the Morrow School District superintendent and other experts and affected local individuals.

Moss said a “backorder of fiber” is causing delays, but he anticipates work to start early next year with the laying of new line.

Eventually, he said, he will be looking for volunteers to help with this project, but for now he and others will be working with local chambers of commerce, electric cooperatives, internet service providers and city governments to create new infrastructure.

He added that another part of the plan involves raising awareness of the emergency broadband benefit.

“There are a lot of affordability programs out there that currently are unknown by people in the county,” he said.

Also, he said, he anticipates public classes to educate people on working from home and seeing doctors online. These efforts, however, are likely to happen after infrastructure is underway.



Aaron Moss/Contributed Photo

At a broadband town hall Nov. 10, 2021, in Hepper, people discuss the need for better internet. Aaron Moss, center, introduces his work on expanding broadband access.

Deer:

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The research showed little interaction with the other two carnivore species in the study — black bears and bobcats. Based on photos, kill site investigations and the lack of elk found in their scat, Starkey bobcats never scavenged on cougar kills.

Ruprecht said bears visited half of the cougar kill sites monitored, but only about one-third of the bear scat surveyed contained elk. No bears were found killed by cougars, leading researchers to believe there was little competition between those two predators.

“They are scavenging, but not like coyotes,” Ruprecht said. “My guess is because they use so many other food sources there is less motivation to incur the risk by potentially encountering a cougar.”

One of the takeaways, Ruprecht said, was why certain species do scavenge.

“There is risk involved and decisions are made under imperfect knowledge of the proximity of a cougar,” Ruprecht said.

In some cases the coyote knows the cougar is there, Ruprecht said, incurring a lot of risk.

“An animal who is starving is going to take more risk to get a meal,” Ruprecht said.

Study expands on previous Starkey research

Another reason coyotes may be more prone to scavenge is they are a pack animal while bears and bobcats are not.

“It’s the ‘many eyes, many ears’ hypothesis,” Ruprecht said. “They take

turns scavenging and take turns keeping watch — and they communicate to alert others of a potential risk or hazard.”

Levi said the study is part of a larger body of work the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife and the U.S. Forest Service are conducting that includes population dynamics and nutrition as well as the drastic culling of Starkey’s three elk herds, through hunting and trans-planting.

Mike Wisdom, Starkey ungulate ecology team leader with the Forest Service, said the predator research related to earlier research from the 1990s and 2000s that indicated interference competition between deer and elk.

“One species might intimidate another into being displaced,” Wisdom said.

A series of analyses and publications indicated elk used the landscape in a way that met their needs while mule deer were avoiding elk. Over time, elk changed their use of the landscape, and mule deer moved to other areas elk were not using.

“It became a concern in the fact that mule deer are declining in large areas at Starkey, throughout Eastern Oregon, and across other areas of the U.S.,” Wisdom said.

Increasing elk populations might be causing



Jim Ward/Contributed Photo, File

Research at the Starkey Experimental Forest and Range in the Blue Mountains of Northeastern Oregon is looking into the predation on deer and elk. Mike Wisdom, Starkey ungulate ecology team leader with the U.S. Forest Service, suggests reducing the prey base of elk there could mean cougars switch to eating more mule deer.

displacement and reduction of mule deer populations as well as the carrying capacity of the landscape to support them nutritionally.

Now that the elk population is a fraction of what it was a few years ago, Wisdom said there are a lot of different possible outcomes — improved nutrition and body condition, behavioral use of the land, direct interaction with elk and changes in predation.

“Predators could dissipate and lessen their use, particularly cougars, but if we reduce that prey base of elk there may not be a positive response — cougars may just switch to eating

mule deer,” Wisdom said.

Darren Clark, Starkey

Wildlife Research Program leader with the Oregon

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