

# EAST OREGONIAN

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Kathy Aney/East Oregonian

National Park Service Director Chuck Sams, flanked by Alan Crawford and Andrew Wildbill, makes his way around the longhouse Friday, Dec. 24, 2021, during a special honor song presentation at the Annual Christmas Celebration Pow Wow in Mission.



Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian, File  
Umatilla County Commissioner John Shafer receives his second dose of the Moderna COVID-19 vaccine from registered nurse Kelsi Reyes during a vaccination event April 30, 2021, in Pendleton. New data in late December could jump the county's vaccination rate from almost 59% to just shy of 71%.

## County officials say revised stats will show much higher vaccination rate

By ANTONIO SIERRA  
East Oregonian

UMATILLA COUNTY — Umatilla County could see its vaccination rate jump without administering another dose of the COVID-19 vaccine.

Alisha Lundgren, the assistant director of Umatilla County Public Health, said the Oregon Health Authority recently contacted the county with new data that factored in residents who received their COVID-19 vaccines out-of-state. The new additions meant the state's data, which shows only 56.8% of county residents 18 and over have received at least one dose of the vaccine, would jump to 70.9%.

As of 4 p.m. Wednesday, Dec. 22, the OHA website still showed the 56.8% rate while the U.S. Centers for Disease Control shows a similar 58.9% vaccination rate. Lundgren said she expects OHA to update its statistics soon, but she couldn't share the official data because it belonged to the state.

While vaccinations administered on the Umatilla Indian Reservation haven't always been factored toward the county rate, Lundgren said the state already has made efforts to start including them in before the latest update.

"Our OHA data team who manage our data are working on implementing what we would describe as a 'bi-directional data exchange through federal systems,'" according to Rudy Owens, public affairs specialist with the Oregon Health Authority. "This will allow us to incorporate data that captures the COVID-19 vaccine doses administered in other states into our data." Owens also said this is not happening soon.

"We are still working with the vendor for our vaccine registry, known as ALERT IIS, to move this forward and implement it," he explained. "We expect this would happen sometime during in the first quarter of 2022."

For county officials, the public release of the updated vaccination rates will be a vindicating moment.

"We've been beating this drum since Day 1," county Commissioner John Shafer said.

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# SAMS TAKES THE HELM AT NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

By ANTONIO SIERRA  
East Oregonian

PENDLETON — Before he can settle into his job leading one of the largest national park systems in the world, Chuck Sams still needs to pack.

Calling from his Riverside home, Sams said he has to clear out his soon-to-be-former house as he and his family look to complete the move to Alexandria, Virginia, a suburb of Washington, D.C., some 2,600 miles away from Pendleton.

"We're going from 3,200 square feet to 1,100 square feet," he said. "It's a challenge, but we'll figure it out."

In his first interview with the East Oregonian since he was confirmed and sworn in as the director of the National Park Service, Sams summarized the past four months, from the time President Joe Biden announced his nomination to the day U.S. Secretary of the Interior Deb Haaland swore in Sams at the base of the Lincoln Memorial.

"It's a front-row seat to the U.S. Constitution," he said.

Sams said he already had built up a rapport with several senators through his previous nonprofit work, making it easier for him to build support for his confirmation. At a time when the U.S. Senate is starkly polarized, the only bump to a confirmation vote by unanimous voice vote was the attempt Sen. Dan Sullivan, R-Alaska, made to delay the vote. But Sams quickly met with Sullivan and allayed his concerns enough to move forward with the vote.

Throughout the entire process, Sams received vocal support from the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation. Sams, an enrolled member of the



Kathy Aney/East Oregonian

National Park Service Director Chuck Sams chats with Andrew Wildbill on Friday, Dec. 24, 2021, during the Annual Christmas Celebration Pow Wow at the longhouse in Mission.

CTUIR, worked in tribal government through early March, and the tribes posted a series of congratulatory messages as Sams advanced through his nomination and confirmation. On Friday, Christmas Eve, the tribes

hosted Sams once more at its annual celebration at the Mission Longhouse, honoring him with a song.

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# Eastern Oregon U reacts to omicron

College officials cautious about potential booster requirement for staff, students

By ANDREW CUTLER  
East Oregonian

LA GRANDE — Officials at Eastern Oregon University are keeping their options open about instituting COVID-19 booster shot requirements amid a sharp national spike in coronavirus cases driven by the highly transmissible omicron variant.

Tim Seydel, EOU's vice president for university

advance-ment, said the university in La Grande is not yet requiring boosters but has been having conversations about a requirement, especially in light of the University of Oregon's Twitter announcement on Dec. 20 that it would require booster shots as omicron reached Oregon, saying students, faculty and staff should get the extra dose "as soon as they are eligible."

"Our focus probably right now is continuing to watch

what's happening, monitoring the situation, and recommendations from health officials statewide and of course, locally," Seydel said. "There's no requirement right now for students or employees to have a booster as we start with our winter term. We're going to continue to monitor to see how the situation evolves."

Seydel said with so many moving parts and differing projections, Eastern Oregon officials continue to meet on a weekly basis with the Center for Human Development to stay abreast of COVID-19's impact locally.

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Seydel



Alex Wittwer/EO Media Group, File

Hanna Saunders, a freshman accounting student at Eastern Oregon University, La Grande, studies in EOU's library on Oct. 28, 2021. Officials at the college are keeping their options open about instituting COVID-19 booster shot requirements amid a sharp national spike in coronavirus cases driven by the highly transmissible omicron variant.

