



Kathy Aney/East Oregonian

**National Park Service Director Chuck Sams waves to supporters Friday, Dec. 24, 2021, at the Annual Christmas Celebration Pow Wow at the longhouse in Mission. Sams received backing from members of the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation during the process of becoming the director.**

## Sams:

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Sams said he was grateful for the tribes' support and started listing mentors such as Antone Minthorn, Les Minthorn and Frenchy Halfmoon who not only encouraged him to get an education and work his way through tribal government, but to look beyond it.

"I recognize I didn't get to where I am on my own," he said. "I stand on the shoulders of ancestors who came before me."

While Sams' confirmation won many plaudits around the country, expectations also are high.

Many national parks intersect with land where American Indians were removed or excluded to establish the parks, and tribal leaders told High Country News they hope to work with Sams' administration to secure access to those lands.

Sams said the Biden administration already has put in work in that effort, with the president signing an executive order meant to strengthen nation-to-nation relationships between the federal government and tribal nations. Sams added he and Haaland are open to continuing discussions with tribes on co-management agreements.

"Many of these lands are not just (connected to) one particular tribe: There are a number of tribes who have usual and accustomed rights and privileges to the landscape," he said. "So you have to go into

these consultations with that understanding, figuring out how tribes can bring traditional ecological knowledge to the table and be able to implement that. The administration has been very clear that they want to use that."

One of the few areas where Sams faced public scrutiny from senators during his confirmation hearing was the issue of the backlog in deferred maintenance built up at the 423 of national parks, monuments and sites, with senators asking Sams what he would do about the park infrastructure in their home state.

Sams will have an extra \$6.5 billion to use toward park maintenance created through the Great American Outdoors Act passed by Congress in 2020 in addition to additional funds expected through the recently passed infrastructure bill.

"The staff at National Park Service have worked very hard to look at how we even calculate the number of projects we have to do, including the cost," he said. Therefore we're able to really look at it strategically and (ensure) that money is distributed across the 50 states and U.S. territories so that we can tackle this issue."

Another issue Sams inherits is reports of harassment and discrimination within the service's rank and file. A 2017 survey revealed 40% of park service staff reported experiencing harassment during the past year, according to High Country News. The service commissioned



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**National Park Service Director Chuck Sams addresses guests and participants Friday, Dec. 24, 2021, at the Annual Christmas Celebration Pow Wow at the longhouse in Mission. The tribes held a celebration to honor Sams at the event.**

a follow-up report to investigate the issue further, called "NPS Voices Report." But in a November letter to Sams, a group called Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility accused the park service of burying the report and encouraged Sams to take action and remove toxic employees from the service.

Sams said the park service has

been doing work in the past three years to address the issues raised in the report, but he promised to do more.

"I want to be very clear: I hear what the field is saying," he said. "I'm looking forward to going out in the field this next year. The National Park Service staff are working hard to set up a number of opportunities for me to get to both

large and small parks so that I can hear directly from the staff, and the rangers themselves, about what's going on and see what we can do to strengthen that. Morale is an extremely important issue."

On Christmas Eve, Sams celebrated his accomplishment with his tribes. In the days that follow, the country will expect him to make good on that accomplishment.

## Omicron:

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The school instituted a vaccination mandate in October that requires all of EOU's on-campus staff and students to be fully vaccinated for COVID-19 or to have an approved religious, philosophical or medical exemption. Seydel said on-campus vaccination rates for employees and students is between 75-80%. The school has spent the holiday break reminding students and staff to be safe if they were traveling.

"When we start up again, all unvaccinated students, if they can't, don't have proof, then they'll get tested," he said. "And then we'll continue monitoring them and our employees. If they're vaccinated we already have their proof. And then if they're unvaccinated, then we'd have them continue to do their weekly or daily health checks."

### Omicron's rise

The rapid rise of the omicron variant has stirred considerable panic since news about the highly transmissible strain caught international attention in late November. The Oregonian reported on Dec. 23 the state's COVID-19 omicron hospitalization peak won't be nearly as bad as forecasters predicted earlier this month, but still could overwhelm the health care system within weeks with about as many people needing hospital beds as did during the delta wave. Oregon Health



Alex Wittwer/EO Media Group, File

**An Eastern Oregon University student walks across the campus Oct. 28, 2021. While the University of Oregon announced it would require students, faculty and staff to receive booster shots due to the omicron variant, Eastern Oregon University continues to weigh that option.**

& Science University revised its omicron surge projections, down from about 2,400 people hospitalized at the peak of the upcoming surge to about 1,200, provided Oregonians take steps to prevent the spread of infections.

The peak, which is expected to hit in early February, could exceed 1,700 if Oregonians' behavior doesn't change, though it always has in the past when infections have started to climb, OHSU data analyst Peter Graven told The Oregonian.

But while the downward revision could be heartening, the predicted wave of hospitalizations still could rival or exceed Oregon's peak in early September. "The risk of overwhelming

hospital systems is real," Graven told The Oregonian. "We're seeing a dire situation."

### Changing on-campus activities

As the omicron surge unfolds nationwide, Seydel said Eastern Oregon does not anticipate a change in on-campus activities.

"Eastern put protocols in place and worked to have students in class on campus, even at limited capacity," he said. "That really worked well for our students, and we want to keep doing that."

Seydel said the school has been successful in keeping case counts low this fall, an indication that EOU's protocol is working and that students making sure they're monitoring themselves.

"If they're not feeling good, they're getting over to our Student Health Center and getting tested," he said.

Seydel said Eastern Oregon will continue to hold vaccine clinics during the winter term to further encourage the extra shot. During two recent clinics held on campus, approximately 80 booster shots were given, according to Seydel.

"We've had four clinics already, and we're planning to hold another one in January. And at the last one, we had just a lot of booster shots, which again is another really good indicator," he said. "We had a lot of students and employees going in to get their booster."

## Stats:

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Given Umatilla County's shared border with Washington, Shafer said it was logical that many county residents would seek vaccinations north of the state border. Milton-Freewater residents or veterans who get their medical care through the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs could go to Walla Walla to get the shot. Hermiston and Umatilla residents could get the shot in Tri-Cities by traveling 40 minutes or less.

Shafer said the county grew especially frustrated when state officials would use Umatilla County as an example of a county that needed to do better in vaccinating its population during press conferences. Shafer said the state was aware the county was missing out-of-state data from its count.

Lundgren said the potential statistical boost from out-of-state vaccinations should give residents more confidence that their neighbors are vaccinated. She added the updated number will not include minors. Children as young as 5 years old are eligible for the vaccine.

Despite the anticipated update to Umatilla County's COVID-19 statistics than previously understood, the county is not out of the woods quite yet. The county still is short of OHA's 80% goal and the omicron variant is starting to sweep the country. Although Umatilla County's daily case count remains low compared to the delta variant wave over the summer, Shafer said the public health department is working hard to encourage residents to get the booster shot to further protect themselves from the latest variant.