

COVID-19:

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weekly average of 546.8 cases. Umatilla County has the third highest average, at just more than 402 cases. Crook County is fourth with an average of 337 cases, followed by Jefferson County at 331.9 cases per 100,000.

Sherman County, with fewer than 2,000 residents, has the highest positive test rate at 33.3%, based on a rise from zero to three cases. Umatilla County has the second highest positive test rate at 29.1%, followed by Deschutes at 22.7%, Union at 21.7%, and Tillamook at 19.8%.

The seven-day average of new infections in the U.S. topped 267,000 on Dec. 29, a new record.

Omicron in Eastern Oregon

There has yet to be a verified case of the omicron variant of the coronavirus in Umatilla County, according to Alisha Lundgren, assistant director of Umatilla County Public Health. But she said we can be sure it has moved into Eastern Oregon.

Lundgren on Dec. 30 said up to 13 cases of the variant had been discovered in Oregon to that point.

“That signifies that it is present in our state,” she said.

For the variant to be verified, it must be sequenced, though, she said, and researchers do not sequence many cases. Lundgren said, 90% of all new COVID-19 cases can be attributed to omicron in Oregon, Washington and Idaho. This percentage is likely the same in Eastern Oregon, too, she said.

As a result of the variant, Lundgren said she expects to see more hospitalizations because of how transmissible omicron is, though not necessarily severe cases filling intensive care units.

While omicron is more infectious than other variants, she said, it is potentially less severe than the delta variant. But it will take time to research omicron before its severity is known. She said she expects scientists will have more information in the coming weeks.

In the meantime, she said, people should continue to do the same things they were doing before the onset of omicron, including getting vaccinated, wearing masks, employing social distancing and limiting gatherings.

“I know that a lot of these (actions) are things that we’ve been talking about since the beginning of the pandemic, so it doesn’t seem like anything new, but they are helpful strategies and considerations for individuals and families as more illness starts spreading,” she said.

Lundgren added winter weather may trouble our efforts, though, and people gather together indoors.

“This has an impact,” she said.

To deal with the danger of omicron in increasing cases, Umatilla County Public Health

has made adjustments, according to the assistant director. It has reached out to the Oregon Health Authority for additional support on contact tracing and case investigation. Umatilla County Public Health also has tried to interview COVID-19 cases more efficiently.

OHA orders 12 million test kits

The high-speed spread of the omicron variant is driving the spike, along with a stubbornly slow decline of the delta variant that peaked in September.

Omicron now accounts for a majority of new cases in the United States, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Cases are expected to continue to rise in Oregon, with positive test rate at 15% on Dec. 30, which is three times the standard OHA says is a manageable level of spread.

The health authority that day said it had ordered 12 million at-home antigen rapid test kits, which can show results in 15 minutes. Local public health agencies and partner organizations will distribute the tests free of charge. The first kits should arrive in Oregon this week.

“Oregon learned during the delta surge that we must be prepared for the unpredictable — we knew we had to be ready for future variants so we could continue to protect the most vulnerable in our communities while keeping our schools, businesses and communities open,” Gov. Kate Brown said in a statement.

Pharmacies around the state have reported selling all available kits and mail orders are backlogged into next month. Some stores in Pendleton have taken to moving the kits behind the pharmacy counter to limit how many a person can buy at one time.

Scientists studying the omicron strain said it is the most contagious version of COVID-19 since the start of the pandemic. While early reports show individual cases are less likely to result in hospitalization or death, the sheer number of new cases will swamp hospitals and emergency responders.

Omicron is more likely to cause “breakthrough” cases in vaccinated people, the CDC has reported. But people who have received a booster shot to go along with earlier vaccination have significantly lower chances of experiencing severe illness or death.

Oregon Health & Science University has projected the omicron spike will peak in Oregon around Feb. 9. The OHSU recent forecast lowered the peak number of hospitalizations in Oregon from 3,000 to about 1,200, near the level seen when delta peaked in early September.

Despite skyrocketing case reports, the state stepped into a three-day information void, Dec. 31 through Jan. 2, in observance of the New Year’s Day holiday.

— *Hermiston Herald editor/senior reporter Erick Peterson contributed to this article.*

time in suburban Riverside.

Moving to Pendleton became a unique next step, not only because of its distance from where they had lived but also because Pendleton is a fraction of the size of the communities they once called home.

But Amity Kirkland wanted to be closer to her family, and a fire department job in Pendleton was open. So the Kirklands moved again with the hope Pendleton is a place where they can put down roots.

Manny Kirkland said he likes working in the same community he lives in and enjoys being a member of the department. Amity Kirkland having family in Union and Tri-Cities gives the couple a base of support. They hope to raise their 2- and 4-year-old daughters in Pendleton. A podiatrist by trade, Manny Kirkland said the expectation is for Amity to resume her career once his probationary period ends at the one-year mark.

In his off time, Manny Kirkland and his family like to enjoy the outdoors, something Eastern Oregon offers in spades. And even though he now finds himself in Duck and Beaver country, Kirkland has retained a critical part of his home state identity: being a fan of University of Kentucky basketball.

New year brings new transportation laws

Local control for speed limits, free IDs for homeless

East Oregonian

SALEM — A series of new transportation laws went into effect Saturday, Jan. 1, in Oregon.

The Oregon Department of Transportation in a press release Dec. 30 announced it is responsible for implementing the laws, which break down into the following categories:

Increasing safety and local control

- House Bill 3055 allows some local governments to set speeds on their roads. ODOT has the statutory authority for setting the speed limit on all roads in Oregon, but HB 3055 allows ODOT to delegate its authority for speed setting to a city or county for roads under their jurisdiction.

ODOT Director Kris Strickler in the press release said reducing speed limits in conjunction with better road design changes and increased enforcement can improve road safety of our roads.

“We don’t have to accept the loss we see on our streets,” he said. “This legislation allows ODOT to remove a major impediment to adopting safer speeds and increases local control

over local roads.”

- HB 3125 allows Oregon driver’s license and ID card holders to register up to two people at DMV2U. Oregon.gov, age 18 and older, as emergency contacts for situations where they can’t communicate.

With online information, cell-phones and social media, there is a risk a family could learn someone was in an emergency before law enforcement can contact the family, according to ODOT.

Only Oregon law enforcement personnel will be able to access the emergency contact information.

Improving access and equity

- HB 2498: This bill enhances the safety of Oregonians who are deaf or hard of hearing by creating an option to add a notification to their driver’s license and vehicle registration card.

Chad A. Ludwig, executive director of Bridges Oregon, said in the press release this is a significant milestone to build trust and cooperation between more than one million Oregonians with hearing loss and our law enforcement.

The indicator will be voluntary, and drivers can sign up any time through DMV2U.Oregon.gov.

- HB 3026: Beginning later in 2022, this law benefits people experiencing homelessness. They will no longer need to pay a fee to receive, renew or replace their identification cards. ODOT will be developing

rules and partnering with homeless service organizations to certify an individual’s eligibility for the waiver and provide a form to bring to DMV to apply. More information on how this program will be administered will be available soon.

HB 2985: The legislation directed ODOT to diversify specific advisory committees to reflect the racial, ethnic and ability composition of Oregon.

“To ensure all Oregonians have their voice heard in the process, we intend to apply this direction not only to the committees listed in the measure but across ODOT’s various advisory committees as recruitments for new members are conducted,” the press release stated.

Reducing greenhouse gases

- HB 2165: Rebates will remain in play for Oregonians looking to switch to an electric vehicle.

This legislation removed the sunset on funding Oregon’s Charge Ahead EV rebate program, funded through a vehicle privilege tax created by passage of HB 2017 (transportation funding package). The program originally was set to expire in 2024. The eligibility and value of the Charge Ahead rebates were modified to make the program more accessible. Electric vehicle adoption has lagged state goals, but has recently jumped with a 70% increase in registration in 2021 compared to 2020.



Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian

A backhoe clears snow drifts Monday, Jan. 3, 2022, from a section of Mission Road near Nixyaawii Community School in Mission.

Winter:

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than the 1979 record of minus 12. Temperatures warmed on Jan. 3, with the low of 7 and a high of 41.

Hermiston on Dec. 31 had a low of 19 and a high of 34, but temperatures in the largest town in Eastern Oregon fell Jan. 1 to a high of 24 and a low of minus 8.

In a Jan. 3, interview, Umatilla County Sheriff’s Office Sgt. Dwight Johnson, the manager of the office’s search and rescue team, said he was fatigued after responding to calls all night in the Milton-Freewater area.

Originally from Montana, Johnson said the conditions the night of Jan. 2 were amongst the worst he’s seen in his career. Snowplows and heavy equipment from the Oregon Department of Transportation and Umatilla County Public Works aided the county team, but members still occasionally got stuck as rescue crews attempted to reach county residents.

Out of all the calls, Johnson said they only needed to transport one resident: a woman who got stuck in the snow during a grocery run.

Umatilla County Emergency Manager Tom Roberts said that while the county had responded to snow drifts, mostly on the east side of the county, he hadn’t heard reports of major property damage.

“We’re hopeful that Mother Nature will play nice,” he said. “But we know that in past years we know she’s played not-so-nice.”

Regardless of the historical severity of the recent spate of winter weather, the inclement conditions shut down schools and services across the region.

West Umatilla County school districts — Hermiston, Umatilla, Stanfield and Echo — resisted closure, but all Morrow County schools and most east side districts canceled classes Jan. 3, the first day



Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian

Snow drifts cover Helix Highway, Monday, Jan. 3, 2022, near its intersection with Adams Road in rural Umatilla County.

back from winter break. The closed K-12 schools were joined by Blue Mountain Community College, which canceled in-person classes on all of its campuses, and all state offices in Umatilla County outside of courts.

Even if residents wanted to travel to these closed places, they might have a hard time finding a way to get there.

ODOT closed Interstate 84 east of Pendleton along with Highway 11 between Pendleton and Milton-Freewater at various points of the day. Both Roberts and ODOT spokesperson Tom Strandberg encouraged residents to stay home, traveling only if necessary.

Strandberg said there were points on the evening of Jan. 2 where ODOT had to call off plows because road visibility meant the plows were moving too slow to effectively remove snow and ice. Even with so many roads closed he discouraged residents from going around road closure barriers, an issue that has happened in the past.

“We just want people to be safe,” he said.

Based on forecasts, the weather won’t get any less busy in the coming days.

Marilyn Lohman, a forecaster with the weather service’s Pendleton office, said more precipitation is anticipated for the region, and it could come in the form of rain and snow or a mix of the two based on the specific location. Lohman said the area should see a break on Jan. 4, but a warm front with moisture is due for Eastern Oregon by midweek.

Where the moisture and cold air will meet exactly still is unknown, but Lohman said drier conditions will return next weekend paired with colder temperatures.

Although heavy precipitation and warmer temperatures created conditions for significant flooding in the county in 2019 and 2020, Roberts said the county only is anticipating minor street flooding at this point, but conditions could change.

Firefighter:

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Bluegrass State’s second largest city, his wife, Amity, grew up in Union. Their relationship became geographically possible when she moved out of state to attend Eastern Kentucky University, but as luck would have it, that’s not where they met.

The pair met while both were vacationing in Daytona Beach, Florida, on spring break. The couple eventually married and started a family as they pursued different career tracks — Manny Kirkland in firefighting and Amity Kirkland in the medical field.

As Amity did her schooling to become a doctor, Manny decided it was time to switch career fields and become a firefighter more than a decade after talking with the family friend. The couple moved north to Cleveland, Ohio, in 2010 and Kirkland hooked on with the fire department at Highland Hills, a small town nearby. When the family needed to move again so Amity Kirkland could do her residency at a U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs medical center in Dayton, Ohio, Manny Kirkland once again found a job in a surrounding community, this

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