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County sees 'mind boggling' spike in COVID-19 cases

County to receive 'just over' 10,000 at-home tests from state but unknown when

By ANTONIO SIERRA
East Oregonian

UMATILLA COUNTY — During the first full week of 2022, Umatilla County hit some dark milestones in its continuing experience with the coronavirus pandemic.

The county on Wednesday, Jan. 5, had 218 new COVID-19 cases,

according to the Oregon Health Authority. And on Jan. 6, the county announced 306 new COVID-19 cases, an all-time high for the daily case count since the county recorded its first case in March 2020.

The latest spike in cases brings Umatilla County to a total case count of 16,355. While the tally doesn't differentiate between first-time and repeat COVID-19 diagnoses, there are enough cases that 1 in 5 Umatilla County residents could have contracted the virus at some point during the pandemic.

While there have no mandates to shut down local businesses again,

local institutions are starting to feel the effects of the latest wave. Nixyaawii Community School announced on Jan. 5 it would shut down for the rest of the week due to the number of COVID-19 related illnesses.

With the onset of the omicron variant, Umatilla County Public Health Director Joe Fiumara said his department was expecting a spike, but not so soon.

"I think what surprised us was just how fast and just how soon it showed up," he said. "We really thought we had a couple more weeks before it was going to spike and I don't think we were expect-

ing it to spike this dramatically. (It happened) almost overnight. This really happened in a matter of a couple of days. We went from 20 cases a day to over 100, which is mind boggling."

Although COVID-19 spread is rising rapidly, Fiumara doesn't anticipate introducing new strategies or initiatives during the spike.

"At the risk of sounding ill prepared, I don't know that there's much more we can do that we've already been doing," he said.

Fiumara added the county will continue to promote vaccinations and boosters plus staying home if residents feel sick.

Based on the experiences of countries that already endured the wave of illness the omicron variant caused, Fiumara is hopeful the wave will be short-lived and won't result in a rash of hospitalizations. He said the silver lining of the wave is that it's showing plenty of people still have access to testing.

A lack of tests has been a concern across the country, especially as people have trouble finding at-home rapid tests in stores. In late December, the Oregon Health Authority announced it was purchasing 12 million at-home tests that it would

See Cases, Page A7

WINTER WEATHER



Alex Wittwer/EO Media Group

Trucker Ken Spriggs makes his way toward the Flying J Travel Center, La Grande, after winter weather Wednesday, Jan. 5, 2022, forced the shutdown of Interstate 84 and other roads. Now 78, he said he is considering making this his last season of driving.

DISPATCHES FROM FLYING J

Closure of I-84 on Jan. 5 leaves truckers stranded in the Grande Ronde Valley

By ALEX WITTWER
EO Media Group

LA GRANDE — Brenda Holman belongs to a dying generation of truckers.

Her blazer is embroidered with "Aunt B." on the right breast. She jokes that she is an aunt to seven, mother to none. A byproduct of the lifestyle, she said. She noted it was difficult to find a partner. She's been a trucker for more than 32 years.

Inside her truck, a collection of books. A physical map of inter-

states. A small bed, slightly disheveled. A CB radio hangs above the driver's seat. A smattering of notebooks and pens placed neatly on the dashboard. A small monitor attached to the dash for checking the routes, though she usually uses her phone to find information on road closures.

Her CB radio has become more silent over the years, with less chatter coming over the airwaves. She remembered when truck stops were abuzz with truckers swapping stories and jokes over coffee whenever the roads were closed.

On Wednesday, Jan. 5, she found herself stuck for more than 24 hours at Flying J Travel Center, La Grande, as repeated accidents, heavy snow and maintenance closed down Interstate 84. It had

been closed off and on several times during the past week. Snowdrifts one day, wrecks and traffic blockages by unchained semitrailers the next. Dozens of other truck drivers had been stranded there, as well.

"It's been a long time since I've been shut down with this many trucks parked," Holman said.

Rows of trucks were parked, placed and maneuvered into the lot, blocking each other in and forming a logistical slide puzzle, one made trickier when the roads were clear.

She was anxious to leave Flying J — the roads had just opened eastbound, albeit briefly — and solicited other truck drivers to move their rigs so she could maneuver

See Truckers, Page A7

Pausing sports is just a recommendation

Local schools staying the course with COVID-19 precautions

By ANNIE FOWLER
East Oregonian

PENDLETON — Student-athletes have been through a lot the past two years because of the COVID-19 pandemic — from sports being shelved to seasons being altered.

Things might take another turn for the worse as the Oregon Department of Education suggested during its meeting Monday, Jan. 3, that schools and other organizations should pause extracurricular activities or ensure they have the same layered mitigation efforts as during the school day.

The recommendations are advisory only, but the ODE said schools that proceed with extracurricular activities, especially if students don't wear masks, should expect rapid COVID-19 transmission. ODE also said the risk should be clearly explained to families.

"That is a last resort," Oregon School Activities Association Executive Director Pete Weber said of pausing extracurricular activities. "The ultimate goal is to keep schools in in-person schooling. We believe it's critical for them to be able to do their activities."

The Oregon Health Authority and ODE strongly suggest schools strengthen their safety protocols with indoor masking, encourage vaccinations, recommend frequent hand washing and sanitizing and limiting spectators.

COVID-19 cases are up 140% in Oregon, and the Oregon Health Authority on Jan. 6 reported

Umatilla County had 306 cases — the highest one-day count since numbers have been tracked.

At the present time, the OSAA does not require COVID-19 testing of student-athletes, and Weber said local school districts have been given the green light to make decisions that they believe work best for their schools and communities.

"They have local control as to what they believe makes sense for them and their communities," Weber said. "At this point, I think everyone is waiting to see what the surge looks like. I was at a conference in California, meeting with people from all 50 states. Some have reached the peaks of their surge and it's on the way out."

In Eastern Oregon, conferences are staying with their current mandates. Intermountain Conference athletic directors discussed the matter during a meeting Jan. 7.

"We just talked about what each school is doing," Pendleton Athletic Director Mike Somnis said. We are staying with what we have been doing. We are asking fans to wear a mask while attending games, we make masks available, and make announcements during games. We are not talking about pausing anything. We are doing a good job within our own conference and we are staying the course."

Heppner AD Greg Grant said the Blue Mountain Conference, which also includes Pilot Rock, Stanfield and Weston-McEwen, is following the mandates set forth by the OHA to provide the safest possible environment for student-athletes.

"That has not changed and will not change," Grant said. "We are sick of reading about this. We want to read stories about real people. Part of my meeting today (in

See Sports, Page A7

State lawmaker from Crane seeks to limit governor's emergency powers

By STEVEN MITCHELL
Blue Mountain Eagle

CRANE — A state lawmaker from Eastern Oregon will look to trim the powers of state government during an emergency when the Legislature meets for a short session next month.

A bill written by Rep. Mark Owens, R-Crane, would amend Oregon's Constitution to spell out when governors can declare emergencies, what powers they can exercise and, more importantly, how long they can unilaterally keep them in place.

Oregon has been under a state of emergency since March 8, 2020, when Gov. Kate Brown declared her intention to take extraordinary measures to combat the COVID-19 pandemic. Brown has extended the state of emer-

gency several times since then.

Under Owens' proposal, known as Legislative Concept No. 49 until it is assigned a bill number, the governor, when making a declaration of emergency, must specify each county where the emergency exists and list reasons why local jurisdictions should be under a state of emergency.

According to the proposed legislation, the declarations cannot exceed increments of 30 days. After 30 days, the decision to extend a state of emergency would go to a local governing body for a vote. County and city governing bodies could then create a hybrid of emergency restrictions if they choose to do so regarding such measures as masking, school closures

See Lawmaker, Page A7



Blue Mountain Eagle, File

State Rep. Mark Owens, R-Crane, speaks during a meet-and-greet with constituents on Nov. 10, 2021, at the Squeeze-In Restaurant and Deck in John Day. Crane has written a bill to amend Oregon's Constitution and limit the governor's emergency powers.



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