

# Sunshine, but dark days for deer?



GARY LEWIS

ON THE TRAIL

In the fall of 1992, a friend and I drove east to hunt mule deer. In places like Joseph and Enterprise, and out past Post and Paulina, we counted hundreds of deer in one day. Herds of 50 or a hundred does with small bucks in the mix and always a big mule deer buck tucked up on a butte. It opened my eyes.

I would never see that many deer in Oregon ever again. The winter of 1992-93 was especially hard on deer when the snow crusted over. Thousands of deer were winter-killed. Biologists thought the herds would bounce back. They always did before.

In those days deer numbers ebbed and flowed with the numbers of predators. Cougars were hunted with hounds, and a lot of people trapped the coyotes that preyed on the fawns. When the voters outlawed hunting cougars with hounds in 1994, the numbers of deer didn't rebound. Think about it. An adult cougar is probably going to kill 50 deer or elk a year if it gets its way. That's a lot better success rate than your average hunter, who tags a mule deer maybe once every four or five seasons.

It is easy to find reasons why deer numbers have not bounced back. But let's talk about winter range. Drive through the Columbia Basin, out to Enterprise or Whitney and along the base of the Elkhorns and you will see deer in twos and threes. Count the fawns. Every doe should have a fawn each spring and often two. By January there are probably 45 fawns for each 100 does. What happened to them? Is that enough fawns to rebuild a deer herd? It's not. But the primary limiter is winter range. Deer are most fragile in late March and even in April it is hard to get the nutrition they need to stay alive. Weakened by winter, they are easy prey for cougars, coyotes and bobcats.

Miles of sagebrush, native grasses, stands of



Gary Lewis/Contributed Photo

**What are the cumulative effects of solar farms? What about glint and glare? Can proposed projects be built without affecting big game migration corridors?**

bitterbrush and mountain mahogany should provide food, thermal shelter cover and escape for deer, elk, pronghorn and other species that make the desert home when snows blanket the mountains.

We take it for granted winter range will always be there, that there will always be a place for deer, elk and antelope. We are losing winter range fast.

Oregon's winter range is at the center of discussions from Portland to Salem to Hermiston, Burns and Lakeview.

The abundance of sunshine in Eastern Oregon makes it a prime location for solar farms.

When the sun shines, solar panel arrays collect the free energy. Blue sky days are dependable east of the Cascades. The more solar panels there are, proponents of the technology tell us, the better we prevent pollution, minimize waste and conserve natural resources. Really?

In March 2016, Kate Brown signed House Bill 4037 into law to offer a half-cent-per-kilowatt-hour incentive to large scale solar projects. Oregon is moving away from dependence on coal with a mandate to reach 25% dependence on renewable energy sources by 2025 and be 100% reliant on renewable energy by 2030.

The Oregon Solar Plan (2017) targets 10% solar power by 2027, powering 500,000 Oregon homes. In December 2016, Oregon

had 264 megawatts of solar installations, which was enough to power 30,000 homes.

We have a long way to go. We get there by offering tax breaks to industry. Right now, incentives for commercial solar installations include a Federal Investment Tax Credit, state and utility rebate programs and accelerated depreciation.

Wonder where these projects will end up? Eastern Oregon offers the most dependable blue sky days and cheap land.

The Oregon Solar Plan says, "In the very near future, thriving communities will share a common commitment: to harness and use power from the sun. These communities will have robust solar industries that support local economic growth and provide local job opportunities. These communities will have resilient energy systems and stable electricity costs."

Let's add another sentence: And no mule deer.

What are the biggest threats to mule deer? Predators, poachers, disease, juniper encroachment, invasive plants. Maybe the biggest one is habitat loss. If predators are the problem, they tend to stop expanding when the prey base is limited. Energy development doesn't stop when deer numbers decline.

That's what vineyards, marijuana grows and solar farms all have in common. When the fences go up, deer, elk, antelope and

even the pygmy rabbits are locked out.

A lot of people look at empty sagebrush land or stands of bitterbrush and call it junk land. I call it critical winter range. The fact that it has no people or homes on it, the fact that it is only fit for deer browse, is what makes it valuable.

Imagine, instead of a sea of silvered sagebrush, thousands of acres of solar panels. Where do the mule deer go when snow blankets the Blues and the Ochocos? With a solar farm on core winter range, the only place left to go is to farm and ranch lands, where they are not welcome.

Call it a green revolution. Call it a land rush. But the location of solar farms on empty land has a cumulative effect. Without winter range we have no mule deer.

Each of these projects are proposed one by one. Who is studying the cumulative effects?

We are tipping the scales in favor of the solar farm industry and those areas are not available for mule deer anymore.

Think solar farms will reduce our carbon footprints? I'd rather see deer tracks in bitterbrush than a sea of black mirrors pointed at the sky.

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## EOU:

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court until Jan. 14 when they travel to Kirkland, Washington, to take on Northwest.

This is the time of season when teams are looking to make their mark in conference play and begin the ramp up for postseason action, Weissenfluh said.

The Mountaineer women did not practice on Thursday, Jan. 6, and Weissenfluh said they are evaluating the best way forward. That could include practices or even giving the players the weekend off.

"The health and safety of our players is most important," she said.

### Bigger impact

Weissenfluh said the impact of the pandemic is something everyone in the conference and throughout the nation is dealing with. Last season, which did not see EOU's basketball teams begin play until February, taught the Mountaineers to be flexible and to adjust on the fly.

"Our conference is aligned in how we are handling it in our processes

and policies," Weissenfluh said. "We are allowed to play when we are healthy, and we will be blessed when those opportunities come."

Having the ability to practice and compete are no longer taken for granted, but that does not mean the last year and a half has been easy on the athletes.

"The struggles have been real," Weissenfluh said. "Managing their class load, taking more online classes has all been a struggle. We try to acknowledge that and find that balance."

"We want to be positive, but keep it real because it has impacted all of our student-athletes in different ways."

### Safety first

Weissenfluh tells all Mountaineer athletes to control the things they can control. That means wearing a face mask, frequently washing hands, get sleep and eat right.

"We have to be very mindful of who is in our bubble, and who we are being exposed to at all times," she said. "You can't control everything, but we are going to do everything in our power to try to stay healthy."

## Coach:

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In 2018, Pilot Rock started the season 6-0 before a 46-8 loss to Dufur derailed the Rockets. They finished the season with a 26-8 loss to Adrian/Jordan Valley in the first round of the playoffs.

Then came 2019. Led by all-purpose player Tyasin Burns, the Rockets posted a 6-3 record, including a 50-30 victory over league power Dufur. They lost 50-34 in the first round of the state playoffs to Days Creek.

"That was the year," Baleztena said. "With the win over Dufur, it was a coach's dream. Too bad we had injuries and didn't play the playoffs like that."

Burns, who came from Nixyaawii as part of the schools' co-op for football, was a once-in-a-lifetime player for Baleztena.

"For three years, the kid could do everything," Baleztena said. "Not only did we have him kick and run a mile every game, it was everything else he did. He was so smart. A coach is always hoping for a player like that, and I was lucky to have him. We had a good quarterback (Tanner Corwin) and a line that could block."

The coronavirus pandemic pushed football to spring in 2020 where the Rockets had a 4-2 record.

The past fall, Pilot Rock started the season 2-0 before injuries and suspensions depleted the roster. The Rockets finished 2-5.

Through the course of seven seasons, Baleztena had an 18-34 record.

Baleztena said he would like to return to the team in some capacity in the future.

"I have to put football on the shelf for a little while," he said. "I'd like to say I'll be back."

## Changes:

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nine-man leagues would have the option to compete in the Class 3A.

During that Dec. 20 meeting, representatives from 2A schools said they would support the move to nine-man football. Nestucca head coach Jeff Schiewe said it would be better than an eight-man game.

But one thing the 1A representatives agreed on Jan. 5 was there was not enough representation from 1A schools when making this decision.

"After visiting with a lot of the 1A schools, we feel like eight-man football should be a 1A decision," Powder Valley High athletic director Brad Dunten said. "But the last proposal that came from the ad hoc football committee, it was like we were getting pushed out of what our tradition and what we want as a classification."

Dunten surveyed athletic directors at other 1A schools. Of the 80 responses he received, 95% said they would prefer to play eight-man football rather than nine-man football. And the number of responses showed how passionate 1A schools are on the matter, Powder Valley Superintendent Lance Dixon said.

"1A schools have not been the most unified and come together in a large format matter to represent 1A until this nine-man proposal came out," Dixon said.



Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian, File

**lone/Arlington's Bryce Rollins hauls in a pass Nov. 5, 2021, against the St. Paul Buckaroos at the St. Paul Rodeo Grounds in the first round of the OSAA 1A State Football Championship. Coaches and administrators from Oregon's Class 1A schools are voicing concern over a proposal that could completely change how small-school teams operate this fall.**

Another frustration raised surrounded finances. Billy Wortman, the football coach and principal at Adrian High School, noted many small rural schools save money by having volleyball and football teams travel together to play at league opponents. A complete redistricting would increase the number of buses needed, thus increasing travel costs.

Also, any changes to nine-man football would limit playing options because it would eliminate out-of-state competition, since Washington and Idaho do not have nine-man football.

Wortman also voiced concerns over the OSAA officially sponsoring the six-man league, saying many eight-

man teams would drop to six-man. He said there needs to be a roster cap in place in six-man to make sure teams aren't dropping down in hopes of competing for a state championship when they could otherwise play eight-man games.

Oregon has been running

a pilot six-man league for four years. The teams compete for an unofficial state championship, which is organized by the teams involved. The state originally canceled its six-man league in 1960, creating eight-man football to create more opportunities to play for student-athletes.

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