



Kristian Foden-Vencil/Oregon Public Broadcasting

**The Pendleton Unmanned Aircraft System Range bought several mobile air-command centers so visiting companies can drive into the countryside to fly their drones over varied terrain, including canyons, forests, pastures and rivers.**

## Drones:

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What customers want, according to Chrisman, is to get to market quickly and safely. And Pendleton helps them do that.

During the last six years, the airport has hosted dozens of major tech organizations, including Airbus, Yamaha, NASA and Verizon.

Nine companies now lease space year-round; Yamaha is testing unmanned helicopters about the size of a small person. They can deliver herbicides directly onto an individual vine on a hillside. Company leaders think the drones might be more efficient and cheaper than traditional crop-dusting planes.

An Arizona-based company, Spright, is working on transporting medical tests between a health clinic and a laboratory via drones.

"Our goal is not to come, test and leave. It's actually to come, test and hire and encourage jobs locally," said Spright Vice President Justin Steinke.

About 10% of drone activity at the Pendleton Unmanned Aircraft System Range is military. Those projects are secret. Chrisman said what's important is that all these technologies are cutting-edge and the basis of what he calls a fourth industrial revolution.

"The world and Oregon would be very shocked if they knew the technology that's right on the horizon. And we're going to hopefully usher it in, right here through the Pendleton airport," Chrisman said.

### Drone money spills into local economy

All the new activity at the



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**During the last six years, the Eastern Oregon Regional Airport, Pendleton, has hosted dozens of major tech organizations, including Airbus, Yamaha, NASA and Verizon.**

drone range has been good for the local economy. Employment around the airport has jumped from 20 jobs to 200 over the last six years.

But the new workers are not doing traditional airport work like air traffic control, and the airport doesn't offer any more commercial flights than before the drone boom. Instead, the new workers are drone pilots, engineers, entrepreneurs and software experts, all working for private companies on drone projects.

Those businesses are paying to lease hangars and to use the drone range, money that funnels back to local coffers. Airport revenues will amount to about \$1.7 million dollars this financial year; that's four-and-a-half times more than in 2016.

After years of operating in the red, the airport now makes a profit.

Drone activity is being felt in town, too. A brand new Radisson Hotel opens this spring, to provide accommodation for visiting drone pilots. One drone company booked the local Pendleton House Bed and Breakfast for two years solid.

Some of Pendleton's construction companies have benefited. Joseph Hull, a vice president at McCormack Construction, said they have

hired several dozen workers to build hangars during the last couple of years.

Pendleton's car rental businesses are benefiting, and local restaurants such as the Oregon Grain Growers Brand Distillery have seen a substantial increase in diners. Not one Pendleton restaurant closed during the pandemic.

But the owner of Eden's Kitchen, Kayla Henshaw, said while she's seen a few extra customers, the bigger deal for her has been all the weird things in the sky. She lives out by the airport.

"I like to do motion lapses, time-lapses out my porch, of the sunset. And there's this one that me and my husband to this day can't figure out," she said. "It looks almost like a spaceship or something."

While restaurants, hotels and car rental shops are reporting increased economic activity, Oregon Employment Department economist Dallas Fridley said a major drone impact cannot yet be detected in the local job numbers. It's one thing to test drones in Pendleton; the real question is whether Eastern Oregon can someday attract businesses that make drones.

"It's not a situation where you have manufacturers who are based in Umatilla County testing products," Fridley said.

## Creek:

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and identify steps that might mitigate seasonal flooding while making sure McKay Dam keeps enough water for irrigators and to provide water for endangered fish species.

"We're negotiating with ESA now," City Manager Robb Corbett said. "The project's budget is \$400,000, of which \$300,000 comes from a grant."

The grant is from the Federal Emergency Management Agency. If needed, he said, the remaining \$100,000 will come from Umatilla County, the city and the Lower McKay Creek Water Control District.

An ESA consultant team has the task of documenting conditions of the entire basin and how it has functioned, identifying weaknesses and risks of future flooding. It must meet with stakeholders and appropriate agencies to assemble a list of ideas that might reduce flooding and improve safety for property owners.

Mark Mulvihill sits on the Lower McKay Creek Water Control District and has been calling for this kind of big look at McKay Creek since it flooded in the spring of 2019.

"We need more than anything a modern, 21st century study of the drainage," he said. "We've had three high water events in four years."

The reservoir's capacity has diminished since 1927 due to sedimentation, Mulvihill explained. Creek banks downstream from the dam have eroded, and gravel has accumulated in its bed. Obtaining a permit to remove gravel is difficult, he stated.

"Since the creek's designation as critical fish habitat, we can't routinely go in and do maintenance," he said. "If the city had not gotten permission to remove gravel after the 2019 flood, the flooding last week would have been catastrophic."



Yasser Marte/East Oregonian

**Anglers try their luck Thursday morning, June 9, 2022, at McKay Reservoir south of Pendleton, where the city council has selected a consultant to study the McKay Creek Basin and make suggestions to mitigate flooding while making sure the reservoir has water for irrigators and fish habitat.**

The Bureau of Reclamation operates McKay Dam, and Mulvihill said the federal agency does a good job of managing water flow, but it is restricted by the metrics of a very complex situation. It's hard to please all stakeholders.

"It's emotional for all concerned," he said. "For the irrigators, it's their livelihood. Their districts built the dam. For the tribes, First Foods are an essential component of their culture. For homeowners, the threat of flooding is stressful. We all need a data-driven study to soothe our emotions."

Mulvihill noted weather patterns are changing. The decreased capacity of the reservoir means the amounts allocated to irrigation and fish habitat might not be met in a dry year. In a wet spring such as this year, irrigators hate to see a precious resource spilling out to lower the risk of disastrous flooding.

"It's a huge basin, from Meacham down to the creek's confluence with the Umatilla River," he concluded. "The study might take two years, but we have to have up to date data to make wise allocation decisions."

The city advertised and issued a request for qualification and proposals for engineering services on March 3. ESA and Anderson Perry & Associates Inc. submitted bids on April 22. A selection

team with representatives from Pendleton public works and community development departments and Umatilla County recommended Environmental Science Associates. The firm has offices in Bend and Portland.

After analyzing opportunities to reduce flooding, the team is to submit a final report. This basin analysis will capture the information collected and make recommendations, listing the highest opportunity to improve public safety.

Final recommendations might include:

- Management plan addressing flood control, floodplain and channel protection and enhancement.
- BOR reservoir management, considering hydrology and sediment, with graphical and conceptual drawings representing planned measures.

The council expects consultants to present findings and provide a final report describing conditions and analysis to the city and other government agencies. ESA and the local stakeholders' advisory group also could present findings and recommendations to city councils and county boards of commissioners as the project progresses.

The consultants must develop a strategic operations plan the city, county and Bureau of Reclamation would implement.

## Water:

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Gray, emergency manager for Morrow, 68 of 70 tested wells showed dangerously high nitrate levels.

Gray, who was present at the meeting, expressed special concern for infants and pregnant women. They are particularly vulnerable, he said.

He said he was seeing people who knew of water impurity but did not know what to do about it. Some people, he said, were boiling their water before drinking it, as they thought this would help. Gray said boiling only makes the water worse.

The emergency declaration would empower commissioners to "act as an emergency management agency," work to end the emergency and coordinate with state and federal agencies.

In presenting the declaration, Doherty spoke of the nitrate issue as one of inheritance. It's a problem that previous generations gave to us, and it's one to which we are contributing, he stated.

He said this is especially unfair to Spanish-speaking residents, people who are harmed most by this problem.

The problematic wells are largely rural, the commissioner said. He identified the worst areas as being places with high Hispanic populations.

Boardman city water, Doherty said, remains safe to drink, as it has been tested and has not risen to dangerous levels.

In the meeting, there was no mention of individual polluters.



Kathy Aney/East Oregonian, File

**Morrow County Commissioner Jim Doherty collects a water sample from the faucet of Boardman homeowner Tiffany Baldock on May 9, 2022, so a lab can determine if nitrates have contaminated the water.**

Commissioner Melissa Lindsay, who attended the meeting via Zoom, stated she was concerned about this issue. She called safe drinking water a top priority. Still, she said, she was unsure why the declaration was being made at a special meeting June 9 rather than at the next regular meeting of the board on June 15.

Doherty replied, saying this is a big issue and addressing it "should have happened a long time ago."

By signing this declaration, he said, bottled water would be sent to people the following day, and water trailers would be placed in the area next week.

Still, Lindsay expressed concern about local control, as she said she does not want to release power to the governor. Gray reassured her otherwise.

"This is our disaster," he said.

Morrow is not losing its ability to govern itself, he said, free of the sorts of government mandates that occurred

during the pandemic. The emergency manager added the county could wait for the next meeting or some other time, or it could act now, potentially saving lives.

Doherty said there are around 1,300 wells in Morrow County that could be tested. By declaring an emergency, the county brings in the state of Oregon with resources to test these wells.

Members of the public viewed the meeting via Zoom. Some posed questions and made statements through chat. They largely expressed concern over the haste of this vote.

Doherty read and responded to the public, pointing out this issue should've been addressed 30 years ago and waiting is unacceptable.

After this discussion, Lindsay expressed agreement with Doherty; an emergency should be declared.

The vote was 2-0 to declare an emergency.

Commissioner Don Russell did not vote; he was not at the meeting.



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