

Umatilla National Forest temporarily closes portion of FSR 54

East Oregonian

PENDLETON — The Umatilla National Forest on Friday, June 10, announced in a press release it temporarily reclosed a portion of Forest Service Road 54 due to road damage from recent rainfall and flooding.

FSR 54, also known as Pearson Creek Road, is approximately 10 miles southeast of Pilot Rock. The closure begins at mile post 1.5, near the intersection of

East Birch Creek Road, south to the installed gate just east of the intersection of Forest Service roads 54 and 5411.

Closure barriers and signs will be on the ground and visitors can take alternative routes into the area, including FSR 54 north from Highway 244 near Ukiah or FSR 5427 near Indian Lake. Detailed closure maps and updates on flood repair activities are available on the Forest website and at any Forest office.

FSR 54, which is a popu-

lar access route into the North Fork John Day Ranger District of the Umatilla National Forest, was initially damaged in the May 21, 2020, flood event. The North Fork John Day Ranger District temporarily closed 13 miles of FSR 54 following the flooding. Between 2020 and the recent flooding the past few weeks, Forest Service officials restored access on 4.5 miles of the road through two phases of contract work. Road repairs in early 2021

restored road conditions in the residential portion of FSR 54 between East Birch Creek and milepoint 0.6. The second phase of road repairs restored access to milepoint 4.5 within the Umatilla National Forest.

Forest Service staff are assessing on-the-ground damage to develop repair plans for reopening FSR 54. The Umatilla National Forest will share updates as work progresses and lift road closure as repairs are complete.

With continued rain in the forecast, Forest Service officials advise the public to use caution when traveling in the Umatilla National Forest as washouts or obstructions, such as rocks or boulders, could affect roads and trails.

“Forest conditions can be dynamic this time of year and likely to change throughout the day and week,” according to the press release. “Visitors should plan ahead and contact their local ranger district prior to

starting their trip.” Many places in the Blue Mountains have limited or no cell phone coverage. Forest visitors should be prepared to spend the night in the forest with warm clothing, food, personal hygiene items and plenty of water. The public can monitor the Umatilla National Forest Facebook page and website, www.fs.usda.gov/umatilla, for updates on forest conditions and flood repair activities.

Part 3: Much abuzz at Pendleton’s UAS range

Editor’s Note: This is the conclusion of a story Oregon Public Broadcasting produced on the Pendleton Unmanned Aircraft System Range. The first and second parts ran in previous print editions of the East Oregonian. The entire story is online at www.eastoregonian.com.

By KRISTIAN FODEN-VENCIL
Oregon Public Broadcasting



Kristian Foden-Vencil/Oregon Public Broadcasting

Stability is not growth

During the last 20 years, Umatilla County has had a remarkably stable economy with a level of 28,000 non-farm jobs. But that stability masks turmoil. For example, hundreds lost work when the Umatilla Chemical Weapons Depot near Hermiston closed. At around that same time, hundreds of others found work, as the nearby Wildhorse Resort & Casino on the Umatilla Indian Reservation expanded.

Twenty years of stability may be comfortable, but it’s not growth. Pendleton leaders would very much like to grow by attracting drone manufacturers. Dallas Fridley, the state economist, said he thinks the airport is on the right path.

“They are setting themselves up for the future by doing this, because we’re looking at the first phase of development in drone technology and who knows what it’s going to be like in 10 years,” he said.

Pendleton Mayor John Turner said he thinks that given time, some drone companies will start manufacturing locally. He points out that to start with, they only came to the airport for a week. Then they started to stay for a few months. Now many have a permanent presence and some are starting to bring-in parts to assemble.

“We think the next logical step would be manufacturing of some kind,” Turner said.

Local labor force remains a question

He said he thinks manufacturing in Pendleton makes sense because costs are lower than in places like Silicon Valley. The city has invested in the kind of infrastructure — state-of-the-art hangars,

high-tech lathes, 3D printers and fast internet connectivity — necessary for more.

Stan Springer, the retired Air Force colonel who runs a drone pilot training facility in Pendleton, agreed the airport has done a good job attracting businesses such as his. But he’s not sure attracting manufacturers is as simple as saying: “Build it and drones will come.”

“There has to be an investment in people capital, on top of the physical capital to really see a spike in employment,” Springer said.

Springer’s company, Volatus Group, trains dozens of people a year to maintain and fly drones that check power lines and survey farmland. They can start at \$60,000 a year and make upwards of \$150,000 over time.

Springer said he thinks the sector still is at the stage where a couple of people in a garage can break through. But there’s always one question companies ask before moving to an area: “What’s the local labor force?”

The city of Pendleton knows skilled labor is an issue and has taken steps to grow the supply. For example, Blue Mountain Community College now offers drone operator and maintenance courses, and Pendleton High School has a talented robotics team.

If Pendleton can increase its supply of drone experts, Springer said it doesn’t need to worry about competing with overseas labor, such as in China. That’s because national security concerns, overseas supply chain constraints and intellectual property issues are now driving many Western companies to relocate manufacturing in the United States again, particularly in the high-tech sector.

The fact that Pendleton is a small rural town, isn’t a problem either, he said.

“Because aerospace is a fever,” Springer said. “Once you get it, you don’t get out, and you’ll go to about any place in the world to do something cool.”

One gap remains

There is one thing Pendleton needs that has yet to be built and that’s a drone incubation center, a place where garage tinkerers can share ideas and get advice from experts.

The airport has picked out a location for just such an incubation center, but it’s still trying to find the money.

In 2020, the airport received \$16.8 million in CARES ACT funds from the Federal Aviation Administration to help recover from the effects of the pandemic. Pendleton used the money to improve airport infrastructure and build new hangars.

Meanwhile, unlike Pendleton, the skies above most American cities remain relatively drone-free. Federal Aviation Administration rules continue to restrict airspace. But those rules are constantly being updated as businesses push for new ways to fit drones into the economy.



Erick Peterson/East Oregonian

A.C. Houghton Elementary School in Irrigon, here June 2, 2022, is the oldest building in the Morrow County School District. Dirk Dirksen, MCSD superintendent, said it is in need of upgrades, which would have happened if voters passed the recent school bond.

Superintendent: Irrigon schools in need

By ERICK PETERSON
East Oregonian

IRRIGON — It’s time to go back to the drawing board, according to Dirk Dirksen, Morrow School District superintendent.

A \$138 million bond to modernize and improve the district’s schools was on the May 17 primary ballot, and it failed by roughly 37% to 63% — 884 votes to 1,480.

This loss changes plans throughout the district, Dirksen said. It’s impact on Irrigon schools is just part of the disappointment.

“The plan for Irrigon High School was to update safety and security, remodel classrooms and add a competition gymnasium,” he said.

According to the superintendent, these improvements

would have created separation between junior high and senior high school students.

Not getting those things, the school will continue the status quo, he said — though this means continuing with “safety problems” and buildings that are in “desperate need of repair.”

“In Irrigon specifically, the building that needs the most repair is A.C. Houghton Elementary,” he said. He added that it is the oldest building in the district, as a section of it is around 70 years old.

Fortunately, he stated, these Irrigon schools are not growing; enrollment is not surpassing capacity. Other schools within the Morrow School District are growing, however, Dirksen said.

“In Boardman, there is

growth,” he stated. “And there’s a lot of homes that are going in, in Boardman. That’s going to become a problem down the road, with overcrowding.”

He said that some Boardman schools could be overcrowded as early as the next school year.

Meanwhile, the district will consider next steps. Likely, Dirksen added, there will be “listening sessions” in which the district solicits public opinions.

“We’ll see what people are OK with, or not,” he said. “We got a pretty clear message. The last bond was too large.”

He said he is unsure about the date of the next bond, though he expressed his feelings that one would be necessary.



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