Business & AgLife B

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Small-business & Ag HAPPENINGS

Observer staff

Funding available for more layoff aversion grants

LA GRANDE — The Eastern Oregon Workforce Board announced it received funding to open a third round of COVID-19 layoff aversion grants.

But the organization changed procedures for processing the applications, according to the press release from the board. The major differences are:

•There now is a $3,500 limit on requests.

•Payroll and payroll-related expenses are not eligible.

•The application is online at www.eowb.org

The third round of applications became available this week and will close Tuesday unless funds are depleted before then.

Email info@eowb.org or call 541-963-3693 id you have questions.

"Be aware that it may take a couple of days to return calls due to the popularity of these grants," the press release stated.

Union County Chamber provides takeout list

LA GRANDE — The Union County Chamber of Commerce released a list of the restaurants and retail stores identifying the businesses hours of operations during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The list also includes whether the restaurants offer takeout or delivery. You can find the list here: https://visitunioncounty.org/2020/03/27/union-county-covid19-updates-resources/.

La Grande seeks applications for urban renewal grants

LA GRANDE — The city of La Grande's Urban Renewal Agency announced it is accepting applications for its competitive grant program, the Call for Projects.

Each fiscal year, the La Grande Urban Renewal Agency has a limited amount of funding to allocate toward public/private development projects within the Urban Renewal Distict.

Due to the outbreak of the COVID-19 virus, the URA will be extending the grant application deadline to May 1 at 5 p.m.

The city will not accept applications past the deadline.

Application forms and information packets are be available online at: http://www.cityoflagrande.org/muraProjects/muraLAG/lagcity/index.cfm/city-offices/community-development/.

You may also request a packet via email by contacting Kendra VanCleave at KVanCleave@cityoflagrande.org.

This will be a competitive round of funding, according to the city's press release, with no guarantee all qualified applicants will receive funding.

If you have questions, contact Christine Jarski, economic development director, at 541-962-1307 or cjarski@cityoflagrande.org.

USDA extends deadline for proposals for natural resource projects

PORTLAND — The USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service announced it will extend deadlines for project proposal submissions to May 29 for On-Farm Conservation Innovation Trials and the Regional Conservation Partnership Program Alternative Funding Arrangements.

Originally deadlines were mid-May, but the service in a press release stated it wanted to provide additional time because of the coronavirus pandemic.

NRCS will invest up to $50 million in fiscal year 2020 to fund AFAs, a partner-led approach to address natural resource concerns at local, regional and landscape scales. The Conservation Service can fund up to 15 projects in which partners will receive greater liberty to manage a Regional Conservation Partnership Program project and the associated relationships with participating producers and landowners. Funding for projects will range from $250,000 to $10 million.

The Alternative Funding Arrangements allow partners to work directly with farmers, ranchers and private forest landowners to carry out conservation projects. The 2018 Farm Bill highlighted some project types that are particularly suited to alternative funding:

•Projects that use innovative approaches to leverage the federal investment in conservation.

•Projects that deploy a pay-for-performance conservation approach.

•Projects that seek large-scale infrastructure investments that generate benefits for agricultural producers and nonindustrial private forest owners.

Additionally, NRCS will invest up to $25 million in On-Farm Trials in 2020, which are a component of the Conservation Innovation Grants.

For more information about the Regional Conservation Partnership Program and On-Farm Trials, visit www.nrcs.usda.gov.

New life for old business

Photo by Nella Mae Parks/EO Media Group

Wallawa County locals gather at M. Crow & Co. in Lostine before stay home orders went into effect across the state.

Artist invests in Wallowa County to save landmark

By Nella Mae Parks
EO Media Group

LOSTINE — The speed limit on Oregon Highway 82 drops to 35 mph at Lostine in Wallowa County, which is slow enough to notice the few "downtown" businesses. An ag mechanic, the old grange, the tavern (closed), the coffee drive through and M. Crow & Co.

For more than 100 years "Crow's" has served up groceries, dry goods and sundries to the lower Wallowa Valley, but in 2013 the store was in danger of closing. Artist and entrepreneur Tyler Hays bought the business to keep the much-loved local business going and give it a modern life.

The front half of M. Crow & Co. is remodeled but fairly unchanged in its historical offerings. People sit at the bar or in booths eating dinner and drinking pints. Behind them are classic glass-front coolers with milk, eggs, and beer. Near the door is an old dry-goods nook with candy, work gloves, jerry cans, and other things locals or visitors need in a pinch.

But the back half of M. Crow is unexpected — a professional radio studio crammed with records; a bench full of pricey, handmade ceramics; a room full of high-end leather boots, denim jeans, and plaid shirts, each with a curious price tag.

"M Crow Shirt
(NY Price- $325)
Lostine Price- $225."

M. Crow clothing is sold in fashion hubs such as New York City and Milan, Italy, but in a county with an average per capita income of $26,000 per year, a $200 shirt attracts attention. M. Crow owner Hays said his handcrafted, made-in-the-USA clothing is creating conversations and much-needed jobs.

"When you pay someone $20 per hour to sew garments and give them health insurance, pants can be $200," Hays said.

Hays creates the clothing patterns, manufactures the denim, and does some sewing in his Philadelphia factory. The next step, he said, is to bring denim

Photo by Nella Mae Parks/EO Media Group

Lostine's M. Crow & Co. offers an array of dry goods and more.

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Dairy demand down 10% but will rebound, analyst says

Prices for milk, cheese and butter are at their lowest levels since 2009

By Carol Ryan Dumas
EO Media Group

SALEM — Retail sales of dairy products remain strong, but the closure of dine-in eateries during the coronavirus shutdowns has pushed overall dairy demand down 10%, an analyst says.

While people are still eating, most generally eat a bigger meal at restaurants than they do at home, Katie Burgess, director of risk management for Blimling and Associates, said during the latest Dairy Business Association's "Dairy Stream" podcast.

Prices for milk, cheese and butter are at their lowest levels since 2009, she said.

"That being said, we have seen a number of restaurants pivot successfully to delivery and takeout," she said.

Deliveries and takeout were already at 75% of pizza sales and 60% to 70% of fast food sales. They've doubled for some casual dining chains to 30% to 40% and increased 20% or more for some steak chains, she said.

Those sales are likely to increase over the next few months as people get tired of cooking at home, and people will be ready to get back out to restaurants once it's finally safe, she said.

Before COVID-19 hit, consumer expenditures at grocery stores and food service were on equal footing. March data show grocery store sales increased 25% while food service sales fell 25%, she said.

"Once we start to feel more comfortable, by the end of this year, I think we'll see those numbers begin to converge again," she said.

Once people are free to leave their houses they are going to want to travel, go out to eat and get together with friends, she said.

"The long-term trend is that food service sales have been growing, outpacing grocery store sales. And so I think that we'll get back to that historical growth in food service," she said.

As for dairy exports, she thinks it'll be touch-and-go until there's a vaccine against the virus.

Sales to Asia have been a little better, but she's keeping her eye on Mexico — the largest market for U.S. dairy. Exports there seem to have slowed, she said.

How $19 billion in aid will help farmers, ranchers

By Sierra Dawn McClain
EO Media Group

SALEM — The USDA has announced $19 billion in federal aid that will be distributed this spring to help farms and ranches across the U.S. survive the plunging prices caused by the COVID-19 shutdowns.

The package, called the Coronavirus Food Assistance Program, is part of the $2 trillion Aid, Relief and Economic Security Act that Congress passed in March.

"The program will include direct payments to farmers, as well as mass purchases of dairy, meat and agricultural produce to get that food to the people in need," said President Donald Trump at a White House briefing Friday.

CFAP will issue $16 billion in direct payments to farmers and ranchers and $3 billion in food purchases.

Industry experts say the aid comes at a critical time. Across the nation, farms that have lost restaurant orders and can't divert supply lines in time are dumping thousands of gallons of fresh milk into lagoons and manure pits, digging ditches to bury produce and plowing under ripe vegetables.

"The losses are devastating," said Michael Nepveux, economist at the American Farm Bureau. "This aid package is so necessary."

But how will USDA officials decide which commodities and individual farmers and ranchers will receive aid?

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EO Media Group file photo

Cattle remains big business in Eastern Oregon, with half the region's farms in cattle and calf production. Farms and ranches are getting $19 billion in federal aid to help with dropping prices due to the COVID-19 shutdowns. More than $5 billion will be for cattle.

TOP DOLLARS

• Union County accounted for $57 million in agricultural products sold

• Wallowa County approached $39 million.

BY THE NUMBERS

• Union county has 5.7% of Oregon's beef cows

• Wallowa County accounts for 7.4%

Source: Oregon's 2017 Census of Agriculture