

'We really need help': Coronavirus in rural Oregon

By Sara Cline
Associated Press/Report for America

SALEM — Heather Griggs presses a phone to her ear in a makeshift office in the small brick courthouse that once served as a jail in rural Pendleton, a place best known for its annual rodeo.

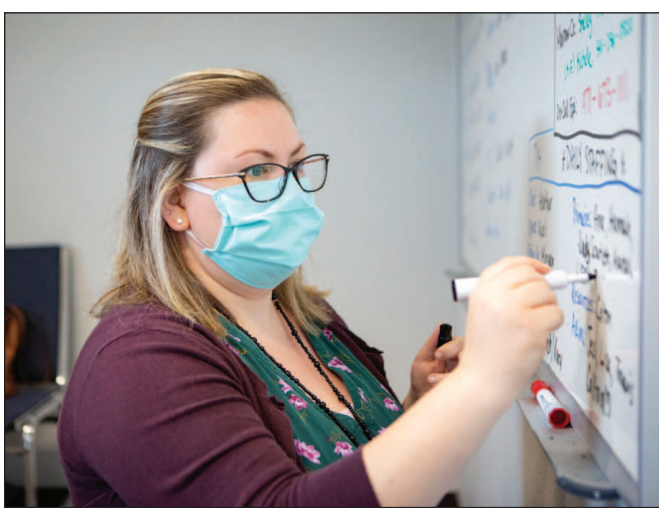
Her assured tone masks her exhaustion when she tells the person on the other end that they may have been exposed to COVID-19. It's a call she has made thousands of times since March, but lately there has been a heightened sense of urgency.

The coronavirus has torn through the small Oregon community where farmers grow crops such as potatoes, onions and grains. In Umatilla County, where Pendleton is located, the rate of people testing positive for COVID-19 is about 16%. That's a measure of how widespread the disease is in the community, and the World Health Organization recommends it stay below 5%.

In the county with a population of 77,000, the virus has infected more than a thousand people and killed nine, overwhelming its limited resources and employees.

"I'm tired," said Griggs, who's working as a contact tracer.

The pandemic sweeping



Ben Lonergan / East Oregonian

Heather Griggs, a registered nurse, helps run the Umatilla County Public Health Department contact tracing center out of a converted jail in Pendleton.

through major U.S. cities is now wreaking havoc on rural communities, with some recording the nation's most new confirmed cases per capita in the past two weeks. The virus is infecting thousands of often impoverished rural residents every day, swamping struggling health care systems and piling responsibility on government workers who often perform multiple jobs they never signed up for.

Officials attribute much of the spread in rural America to outbreaks in workplaces, living facilities and social gatherings. Food processing plants and farms, where people typically work in cramped

quarters, have proven to be hot spots.

Umatilla County has Oregon's highest number of confirmed infections per capita, sometimes reporting a figure this month above that of Multnomah County, which is 10 times larger and includes Portland. The surge in Umatilla and most of Oregon's rural counties is driving the state's rise in confirmed cases.

In response to the pandemic, Umatilla County divided virus-related tasks among the 30-person public health department.

For Griggs, that meant her role supervising the agency's

maternal-child section turned into contact tracing and investigating. She spends her days asking people with positive test results about those they interacted with and then calling to warn those people.

"We are a small county, so I don't think there is a single person here at public health who hasn't been involved in some way," said Griggs, who works with eight other contact tracers.

Officials recognize that rural case numbers are low compared with city totals, but even a slight increase can push a small community over the edge.

"We've discovered we are getting really overwhelmed by the rapid numbers in the rise we are seeing now," Umatilla County Commissioner George Murdock said. "We really need help."

The county has received guidance, contact tracers, case investigators and equipment from the state, but Murdock says more help might be necessary. Officials need housing alternatives for people who have COVID-19 or are living with multiple families and

field teams to serve at-risk residents and distribute federal aid to poor families, he said.

The fact that many rural jobs cannot be done from home has exacerbated the virus's impact, Murdock said. Officials have noted cases where people continued to work despite having minor coronavirus symptoms, which led to outbreaks.

"They are forced to go to work in order to survive. They don't have benefits. You can't telecommute on a production line," he said.

Of Oregon's 23 rural counties, 12 have reported workplace outbreaks at farms or meat and seafood processing plants. Umatilla County has reported six workplace outbreaks since mid-June.

For most people, the new coronavirus causes mild or moderate symptoms, such as fever and cough that clear up in two to three weeks. For some — especially older adults and people with existing health problems — it can cause more severe illness, including pneumonia, and death.

To confront the surge in cases, rural governments are rearranging and shuffling responsibilities for workers already juggling multiple roles.

Lt. Melissa Ross updates journalists about drug busts and fatal crashes as the public information officer for the Morrow County sheriff in eastern Oregon. She also oversees the records and civil department. Adding to her duties, she's now the spokeswoman for the county's Emergency Management Team, which gives updates on case numbers and other virus-related information.

"That's what happens when you live in small rural America I guess," Ross said.

Lake County, where southern Oregon meets California and Nevada, has just one hospital. The next one is 90 miles away.

To serve its 7,000 residents, the county took the unusual step of asking the Lake Health District to not only run the hospital but also oversee its health department during the pandemic.

PORTLAND

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The violence happened as local and state leaders expressed anger with the presence of the federal agents, saying that the city's protests had started to ease just

as the federal agents started taking action on the streets of Portland.

Speaking on CNN's "State of the Union," Democratic Mayor Ted Wheeler said federal officers "are not wanted here. We haven't asked them here. In fact, we want them to leave."

WILDFIRE

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The possibility of storms is important because lightning sparks a majority of wildfires on public lands in the region.

"That's one of our bigger concerns," said Noel Livingston, fire staff officer for the Wallowa-Whitman National Forest.

Fire danger now is moderate on the Wallowa-Whitman.

A computer model that estimates how much energy a fire would release — a key indicator of the fire danger — has been near or below average since June 1 but as of Monday was rising to near average in parts of the forest, Livingston said.

"It's starting to dry up," Livingston said.

Widespread rain during the latter half of May and the first half of June pushed the fire danger below average.

But with little rain falling in the past month — just 0.03 of an inch since June 16 at the Baker City Airport, barely enough to lay the dust — the potential for a fire to spread quickly has increased steadily, Livingston said.

Meanwhile the temperature at the Baker City Airport reached 80 or higher on all but two of the first 20 days of July. The National Weather Service is predicting highs in the 90s today and Wednesday.

The Weather Service on Monday issued a fire weather watch that includes most of

Baker County starting Wednesday afternoon and continuing through Thursday afternoon for lightning. Although initial storms could be dry — which increases the risk of lightning sparking fires — storms that linger into Thursday have a better chance of delivering rain, according to the Weather Service.

Livingston said the fire season so far has been about average — typically the highest risk for major fires in the region runs from late July through August and, occasionally, continuing into September.

This year so far is quite different from several recent summers, including 2018, when June was warmer and drier than average, the fire danger index set record highs in late July, ranging from 79 to 84. By comparison, the readings for Sunday ranged from 47 to 61.

One advantage to the fire danger remaining below average well into July is that fire-fighting crews, aircraft and other resources are comparatively plentiful, Livingston said.

The largest local fire, which burned 6 acres on July 15 near California Gulch, about 14 miles southwest of Baker City, was quickly controlled by fire crews on the ground and with aerial assistance from two single-engine tankers and one helicopter.

The fire, which started near Highway 7, was human-caused, and Forest Service officials are investigating, said Travis Mason-Bushman, a public information officer for the Wallowa-Whitman.

COVID-19

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The cases were the first since July 14, the day before the Oregon Health Authority added Baker County to eight other counties on a "watch list" due to sporadic cases — ones not directly tied to an outbreak.

Mark Bennett, the county commissioner acting as incident commander for the county during the pandemic, said Monday afternoon that no one is hospitalized in the county due to COVID-19.

Bennett said contact tracers from the county Health Department are investigating the two new cases.

Bennett also urged county residents to

be cautious when traveling outside the county, in particular to places with recent outbreaks.

Bennett said some of the Baker County residents were infected outside the county. He didn't say how many were in that category, but that the list doesn't include the five U.S. Forest Service employees who are among the county's 15 cases.

"A lot of it is just being prudent and exercising good judgment," Bennett said.

He encouraged residents, whether they travel outside the county or not, to continue to practice social distancing and to wear face coverings when they can't stay at least 6 feet from others when in social settings or while visiting local businesses.

BAKER TRUCK CORRAL

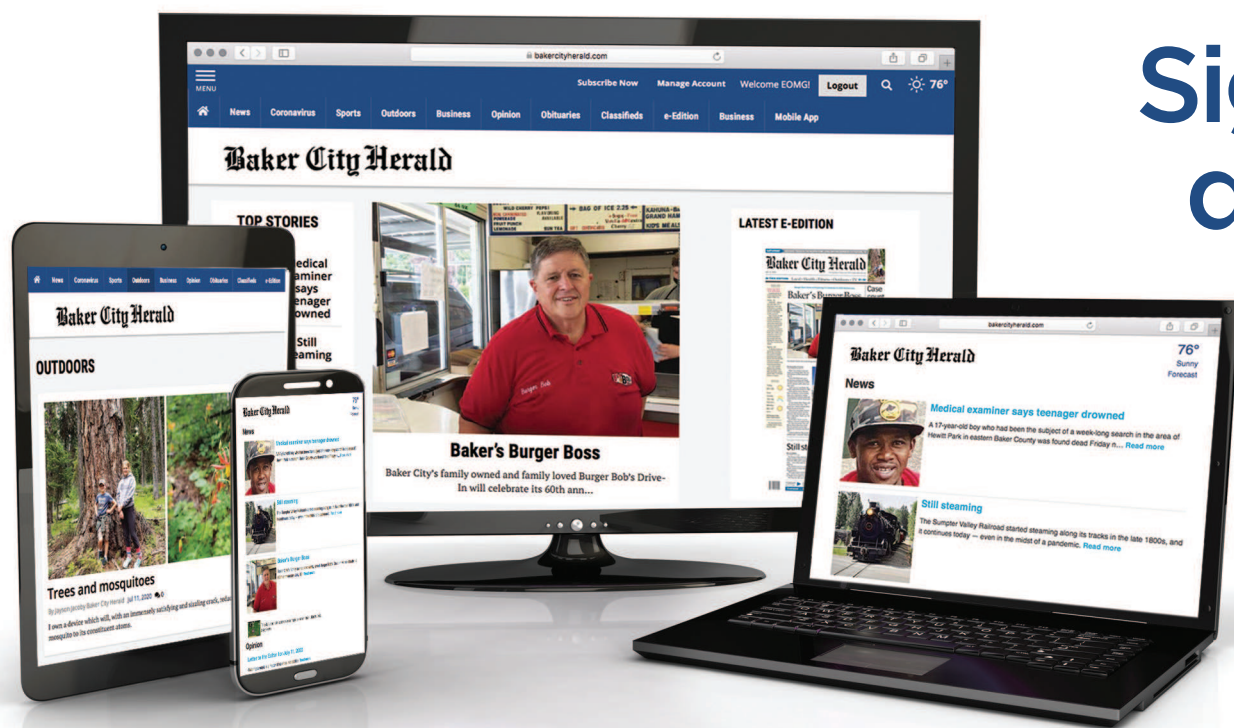
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