

BOARDMAN TO HEMINGWAY POWER LINE PROPOSAL



EO Media Group/File

A crew works on a power line tower outside Boardman. Oral arguments were held in federal court over a proposed transmission line between Boardman and the Hemingway substation in Idaho.

Power line foes ask judge to overturn agency approval

By **Mateusz Perkowski**
Capital Press

SALEM — Opponents of a 300-mile transmission line in Eastern Oregon claim the U.S. Bureau of Land Management's approval of the route across its property violated federal laws.

The Stop B2H Coalition — which is challenging the high-voltage power line between Boardman and the Hemingway substation in Idaho — is asking a federal judge to overturn BLM's permission for the project.

Among the transmission line's critics, the agriculture industry has raised concerns about the project taking prime farmland out of production and impeding farm practices.

The agency didn't comply with the National Environmental Policy Act by selecting a preferred route and a variant in 2017 that were different than what it had analyzed in a draft environmental study, according to the coalition, which has members in Baker County.

The newly chosen route is prob-

lematic because it's only one-half mile from La Grande, runs across an intact portion of the Oregon Trail, and passes near ecologically sensitive areas, critics say.

"The public had no way to anticipate the two new routes that would run through that area. It deprived residents of La Grande and Union County of the right to weigh in on disproportionately adverse effects," said David Becker, attorney for the coalition, during Monday, Feb. 22, oral arguments.

The coalition also argues that BLM didn't properly evaluate the transmission line's "synergistic" effects with livestock grazing, which the group argues will have cumulative impacts on the sage grouse in the region.

The BLM and Idaho Power, the utility company that would construct the project, are defending an inadequate NEPA analysis of the transmission line's effects, Becker said.

"They really are trying to piece together and point the court in 25 different directions and say, 'We deserve deference,'" Becker said.

The BLM countered that its preferred route was a permissible "logical outgrowth" of alternatives examined in a draft environmental impact statement, or EIS, and doesn't require a supplemental NEPA study.

The agency wasn't required to study burying a section of the power line and it sufficiently evaluated the implications of grazing while examining the route's effects on vegetation, said Krystal-Rose Perez, attorney for the BLM.

"The EIS is not organized in the way plaintiffs want, but it's up to BLM's discretion how to disclose that information," she said.

Beth Ginsberg, an attorney for Idaho Power, said both the Obama and Trump administrations have recognized the transmission line as a critical connection between the electrical grids of the Pacific West and Intermountain West.

"The importance of a project like this cannot be understated," Ginsberg said.

"My discussion has been, we've got to get back full time at some point. We think it's time to begin sometime after spring break to get all students back."

— **Mark Witty**, superintendent, Baker School District



SCHOOLS

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Witty said he's looking at starting a four-day in-person schedule on April 5 or April 12. BHS and BMS students have been taking in-person classes two days per week since Jan. 25.

Witty said the state would have to agree to make changes to the current classroom space requirement of 35 square feet per student, and to the size of the cohort groups students are a part of each day. The current limit is 100 people per day, including staff.

The square foot requirement would have to be reduced to 16 to 20 square feet and the cohort size would have to be increased to 160 to 170 at Baker Middle School, and up to 190 at Baker High School, for the schools to reopen four days per week, Witty said.

The Monday morning meeting Witty was part of included about 12 superintendents representing larger districts in the state and some of the midsize districts such as Baker, Witty said.

Elementary school students have been attending in-person classes four days a week since Oct. 14.

To make his point for fully reopening schools for older students, the superintendent said he pointed out that all Baker staff members who wanted to be vaccinated have been.

"Seventy to 75% of the staff have gotten the vaccine," he said.

Witty noted most of the residents in the community's long-term care centers have been vaccinated, as have many county residents ages 75 and older who live independently.

And because vaccinations and the number of available beds in the hospital's intensive care unit have long been part of the discussion of opening schools during the COVID-19 pandemic, Witty said he believes now would be the time to start considering that action.

"My discussion has been, we've got to get back full time at some point," he said. "We think it's time we begin sometime after spring break to get all students back."

Spring break is March 22-26.

Witty said the school leaders have asked OHA to check with other state health administrators to learn how reopening schools is going for them.

"There are academic considerations and social-emotional considerations," for returning students to their classrooms full time, he said.

Witty speaks proudly of the hard work that has been expended to ensure safety protocols have been followed and the positive results the Baker School District has produced.

"We've had more kids in school than any other school of our type and our size," he said.

And to date, there has been no spread of the coronavirus in the schools. Students and employees who have tested positive were infected elsewhere, Witty said.

"We're having success," he said of his argument that it's time to open schools up full time for all students.

"And I think it was well-received," he said of the state officials "It's now a matter of continuing to provide information for them to consider — they never said that the suggestion was dead on arrival."

Witty added, however, that any plan to return secondary students to in-person classes full time must be done with student and staff safety foremost in mind.

There are options for families who would prefer not to send their children back to the classroom.

Comprehensive distance learning through livestreaming instruction from the classrooms would remain available for families who have extenuating circumstances, such as a vulnerable person in the home, Witty said.

The Eagle Cap School, which has an enrollment of about 160 students in Grades 7-12 this year and allows students to participate in online learning at their own pace, is another option.

Under the current system, secondary students rotate through two days of in-person attendance and two days of learning at home through comprehensive distance learning.

Oregon to offer vaccine to all adults by July 1

By **Gary A. Warner**

Oregon Capital Bureau

Every adult in Oregon will be offered a vaccination against COVID-19 by July 1, with the two-shot vaccines reaching all adults who want it by August, Gov. Kate Brown said Friday, Feb. 26.

"Come summer, any Oregonian who wants the vaccine can receive it," Brown announced at a virtual press conference.

It was a surprisingly optimistic forecast after recent estimates that the vaccination of the entire state would stretch into autumn or even early 2022.

Oregon has had one of the lowest COVID-19 infection rates in the nation, with 154,878 infections and 2,206 deaths through Friday. Nationwide, there have been just under 28.5 million infections and 510,089 deaths, according to the Johns Hopkins Coronavirus Resource Center.

The shorter timeline announced Friday is based on reports from the Biden Administration that Pfizer and Moderna, the maker of the two currently available vaccines, will hit their production targets, which would increase the number of doses coming to states.

A third vaccine, being developed by Johnson & Johnson, requires just one inoculation, though initial reports show its effectiveness is somewhat less than the Pfizer and Moderna doses.

Logistical bottlenecks are being cleared and Biden is bringing in

more help for states.

In Oregon, Phase 1 vaccine eligibility, which covers about 1.36 million people, reaches its last eligibility milestone Monday, when those age 65-69 can make appointments.

The state then plans to use most of March to catch up with some of the Phase 1 backlog.

Phase 2 eligibility begins March 29, when residents 45-64 with medical conditions that the Centers for Disease Control defines as making them more likely to become seriously ill or die if infected with COVID-19, can sign up. Conditions include type 2 diabetes, cancer, heart conditions, kidney disease, COPD, Down syndrome, compromised immune systems, sickle cell disease and type 2 diabetes. Pregnancy is on the list, as is obesity that results in a Body Mass Index (BMI) of 30 or more.

Residents should consult with their doctor and with the full explanation of qualifying conditions on the CDC and Oregon Health Authority websites.

Also eligible on March 29 are some farm and food industry workers, homeless people, residents of low-income or congregate housing, wildland firefighters and those displaced by the 2020 wildfires.

On May 1, those 16-44 with medical conditions on the CDC list can sign up. Also "frontline" workers with jobs dealing with the public, and any adult living in a multi-generational household.

Phase 2 wraps up with anyone over 45 eligible on June 1 and anyone over 16 on July 1.

No vaccine approved for children is available yet, though several are under development.

The optimistic scenario for the future clashed with the reality of widespread frustration over the gap between eligibility and availability. Brown and Allen forecast "chaos" last month for the system of large vaccination centers and local pharmacies that will handle inoculation of seniors across the state.

The central math problem is too little vaccine for too many arms.

Allen pointed out Oregon is at or above the national average of 15% of the populace having received at least one shot.

But a look at the numbers is daunting and at least for now, disappointing.

About 1.36 million people in Oregon are in Phase 1. Each vaccination requires two shots, or 2.72 million shots for the group.

Oregon is not close to reaching that number. Between the vaccine first becoming available at the end of December 2020 and Friday, Oregon reports it has injected 911,648 doses.

That would leave 1.8 million shots needed to cover Phase 1 with a month to go until Phase 2 starts.

Oregon has ramped up to about 20,000 shots per day and forecasts expanding the number of places and people who can inoculate those

Vaccine eligibility

MARCH 29

- Adults age 45 to 64 with underlying health conditions, as defined by the CDC
- Seasonal workers, such as migrant farm workers, seafood and agricultural workers, and food processing workers.
- Currently displaced victims of the September 2020 wildfires
- Wildland firefighters
- People living in low-income and congregate senior housing
- Homeless

MAY 1:

- Individuals age 16-45 with underlying health conditions
- All other frontline workers as defined by the CDC
- Multigenerational household members

JUNE 1:

- Adults 45 to 64.

JULY 1:

- Everyone age 16 and over.

eligible as the vaccine supply increases.

One number that's not known is how many people are refusing the offer to be inoculated.

Oregon Health Authority Director Pat Allen said neither state or federal officials are tracking who is eligible but says no to the vaccine. The higher that number, the more

vaccine is actually available for those that want it.

Allen said OHA is still vaccinating Phase 1 groups who want to be inoculated but have not yet been able to get to a vaccine site.

Brown said that pausing this month will allow Oregon to catch up on the backlog.

"We want to keep our commitment to our seniors," Brown said.

Allen said Phase 2 will begin May 29 regardless of how many Phase 1 people get inoculated this month.

Brown has been sharply criticized for her decision last month to depart from CDC guidelines recommending the next priority go to vaccinating those over 65. In Oregon, 90% of COVID-19 deaths have been age 60 or older.

The governor opted to put 153,000 teachers, school staff and day care workers ahead of seniors.

Brown argued the school group was small compared to the nearly 800,000 seniors. To wait would likely wipe out any chance to get schoolchildren back in classrooms in the spring.

Learning in the classroom is overall far better and equitable than "virtual" learning where a laptop or tablet and internet connection can be difficult to obtain for poorer families. Schools also offer hot meals, and check in on children's mental and physical health, while freeing parents to work outside the home.

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