



Alex Wittwer/The Observer

Chris Aldrich cleans the front end of a Cat engine Monday, March 22, 2021, in the Freightliner Northwest service shop in La Grande. Gordon Truck Centers, which owns the dealership and 13 others, recently purchased the Western Idaho Freightliner dealership in Nampa, Idaho.

Lucky number 14

Trucking company with La Grande ties expands

By DICK MASON
The Observer

LA GRANDE — A large Northwest truck company with a strong La Grande connection is boosting its Interstate 84 presence.

Gordon Truck Centers, which owns the Freightliner Northwest dealership in La Grande, recently purchased the Western Idaho Freightliner dealership in Nampa, Idaho. It began doing business as the Freightliner Northwest dealership in Nampa on March 13.

The Nampa dealership is among the largest of the 14 that Gordon Truck Centers has in the Pacific Northwest and Hawaii. All sell Freightliner and Western Star trucks, parts and service.

The Nampa Freightliner Northwest site has \$1 million in parts inventory and more than 20 technicians, said Bob Kautz, the regional operations director for Freightliner Northwest's dealerships in La Grande and Hermiston. Freightliner



Alex Wittwer/The Observer

Bob Kautz, the regional operations director for Freightliner Northwest in La Grande, pauses for a portrait Monday, March 22, 2021, in his office. Kautz has worked in the trucking industry more than three decades and spent the last six years working for Freightliner Northwest in La Grande before his promotion.

Northwest of Nampa is the first dealership Gordon Truck Centers has had in Idaho.

"Adding the Boise market is a natural fit and expands our service coverage area east on I-84 into the greater Boise area," said Gordon Truck Centers President Scott Gordon in a press release.

Gordon Truck Centers now has three dealerships

along Interstate 84. The company also has dealerships in Albany, Coburg, Redmond and Medford, plus six in Washington in Ridgefield, Mount Vernon, Pacific, Olympia, Yakima and Spokane. The company's Hawaii store is on the island of Oahu in Kapolei. Gordon Truck Centers' La Grande dealership has 15 employees including seven technicians. The

vehicles it services and sells parts for include more than Western Star and Freightliner trucks. Buses, motorhomes and agricultural rigs for hauling produce also are among the vehicles it services and provides parts for.

Freightliner Northwest dealerships often service buses and motorhomes because many have a Freightliner chassis, said Kautz, who lives in La Grande.

Gordon Truck Centers in 2015 purchased the Freightliner Northwest dealership in La Grande. Before the acquisition it was an Eagle Freightliner dealership.

Prior to taking his present position Kautz was the branch manager of Freightliner Northwest's La Grande dealership. He has been the regional operations director for Freightliner Northwest's dealerships in La Grande and Hermiston since 2019.

Kautz said his job is fulfilling.

"I just love working with the teams at both locations and the customers," he said.

Officials investigate 'mystery' of five dead wolves

Union rancher Bob Huffman contends management of wolves is 'shoddy'

By GEORGE PLAVERN
Capital Press

UNION COUNTY — Officials continue to investigate how five wolves found Feb. 9 in Union County died.

On Feb. 9, the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife reported a GPS collar on a wolf emitted a "mortality signal" in the Mount Harris area near La Grande. Officers with the Oregon State Police Fish and Wildlife Division found five wolves dead.

The carcasses were taken to a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service forensic lab to determine a cause of death. Results have yet to be released.

OSP Capt. Tim Fox said he could not immediately

provide additional details about the dead wolves, such as their size, sex and pack. Roblyn Brown, wolf program coordinator for ODFW, also declined to comment, citing the pending investigation.

Oregon has a minimum wolf population of 158, as of the most recent ODFW survey in 2019, though the actual number is likely higher. Most packs are concentrated in the state's northeast corner, including Union County where the five dead wolves were found.

Kathleen Gobush, Northwest program director for the

See, Wolves/Page 2B

Forecast for spring: Nasty drought worsens for much of U.S.

NOAA expects the drought to hit 74 million people

By SETH BORENSTEIN
AP Science Writer

With nearly two-thirds of the United States abnormally dry or worse, the government's spring forecast offers little hope for relief, especially in the West where a devastating megadrought has taken root and worsened.

Weather service and agriculture officials warned of possible water use cutbacks in California and the Southwest, increased wildfires, low levels in key reservoirs such as Lake Mead and Lake Powell and damage to wheat crops.

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's official spring outlook March

18 saw an expanding drought with a drier than normal April, May and June for a large swath of the country from Louisiana to Oregon, including some areas hardest hit by the most severe drought. And nearly all of the continental United States is looking at a warmer than normal spring, except for tiny parts of the Pacific Northwest and southeast Alaska, which makes drought worse.

"We are predicting prolonged and widespread drought," National Weather Service Deputy Director Mary Erickson said. "It's definitely something we're watching and very concerned about."

NOAA expects the spring drought to hit 74 million people.

Several factors go into worsening drought, the

See, Drought/Page 2B

Oregon businesses endured unprecedented year: 'What's next, locusts?'

By JEFF MANNING
The Oregonian/OregonLive

PORTLAND — You can't blame John Helmer for being a sunny optimist. The third-generation proprietor of John Helmer Haberdasher in downtown Portland will celebrate the family store's 100th birthday this year. It has survived depression, world war, and the advent of Amazon.

But life — and business — as he knew it ended last March. Like thousands of other business owners in Oregon, Helmer had to deal with the global pandemic and a whole new lexicon of disaster — stay-home orders, social distancing, PPE, super-spreading events and the virtual workplace. None of it was good for business.

Downtown Portland emptied out as employers sent their workers home to ride out the COVID-19 disaster. Tuesday, March 23, marked one year since Oregon issued a stay-home order that forced many businesses, including boutiques like Helmer's, to shut down.

The list of horrors continued. Demonstrations and civil unrest gripped the city.



Brooke Herbert/The Oregonian/OregonLive

Protecting employees became a priority for businesses as the pandemic took hold. Here, Dustin Anderson wears a face mask and gloves, and stands behind a plastic barrier, while working at the Cedar Mill Liquor Store in Portland in March 2020.

In September, the skies above Oregon turned a noxious orange when wildfires roared when just about every major river valley on the west side of the Cascades. Then came the ice storm in February which cut electricity to hundreds of thousands and paralyzed the Portland area.

"What's next," Helmer asked himself, "locusts?"

Though estimates vary, hundreds of thousands of businesses failed nationally. Hotels, airlines, and restaurants and bars were among the hardest hit. In Oregon, proprietors' income fell a devastating 20% while unemployment

surged to an unprecedented 13.2%.

At the same time, a rather remarkable trend began to emerge. Thanks in part to a massive federal assistance program, businesses survived. Some thrived.

By early this year, it became apparent that busi-

ness failures did not measure up to initial fears. Thanks to a ban on foreclosures and evictions, bankruptcies actually decreased in 2020.

There were even clear signs of optimism, and not just because of the vaccines. New business formation actually increased last year.

And Helmer remains open for business.

"I'm hardened," he said. "I often think of my great-grandfather getting through the depression and I feel like I could get through just about anything."

'People are genuinely fearful'

Harsch Investment Properties manages millions of square feet of industrial, office and retail space all over the West Coast.

When the pandemic hit, tenants reached out to Harsch CEO Jordan Schnitzer in unprecedented numbers begging for help.

"We got 850 requests for rent relief and we cut more than 400 deals," he said.

The concessions cost Harsch more than \$2 million. But Schnitzer said it was only fair.

"Yes, it's a financial

issue," he said. "But it's also a moral issue. Our tenants have paid a lot of rent and they've been really loyal."

One year since Oregon's stay home order

Harsch manages 28 million square feet throughout the West. It's difficult everywhere, Schnitzer said. But it's particularly problematic right here in Portland. For the local real estate industry, the big, outrageous story of 2020 is not the pandemic, it's the stunning decline of downtown Portland and the inability of city hall to do anything about it.

"Between the homeless, the demonstrations, the looting and boarded up windows, and tax increases on top of that ... It's like the city of Portland couldn't write a worse script," Schnitzer said.

Mike Holzgang, a real estate broker with more than 25 years of experience, is an old hand at the downtown tour. For years it was an easy sell — the city was vibrant, beautiful, green.

It's a different story these days. Holzgang said he recently helped a potential

See, Year/Page 3B