

# Grande Ronde Hospital acquires Blue Mountain Associates

The Observer

LA GRANDE — Grande Ronde Hospital and Clinics, La Grande, is expanding its health system.

The hospital announced Friday, March 19, that Blue Mountain Associates, an outpatient treatment center in La Grande, will become part of the GRH system. The hospital reported it expects a full transition to a new GRH Behavioral Health Clinic to begin June 1.

GRH President and CEO Jeremy Davis in a press release said the acquisition means better care for Union County

residents and allows for fuller integration of behavioral health care into the hospital's system. He cited the trend over the last decade toward a multi-discipline care track that places the patient at the center of a collaborative expertise model designed to treat the whole patient with medical, mental and behavioral services.

"We believe this integration of services will help improve coordination and access for a broader spectrum of health ser-

vices for the people of Union County," Davis said.

Dr. Joel Rice, who started BMA almost 30 years ago, echoed Davis' statement.

"It's been a long time coming," Rice said. "The process of integrating behavioral health care into primary care clinics, hospital wards and emergency rooms

is the cutting edge of innovation in health care not only nationally, but worldwide."

The press release did not provide any financial

terms of the deal.

The integrated team of Blue Mountain Associates and Grande Ronde Hospital associates will eventually work from BMA's location at 1101 I Ave., providing a home base as both entities work to ensure a smooth transition. According to the announcement, BMA patients should notice little difference in their care.

Grande Ronde's behavioral health team will continue to see patients in all primary care locations. However, Rice will have an office in Grande Ronde's Regional Medical Clinic,

506 Fourth St., La Grande.

Davis added that having the first psychiatrist on staff at the clinic gives the organization a key foundational building block for recruiting additional psychiatrists to the GRH team. Notably, the clinic also is the first primary care clinic in Union County to have a pharmacist on staff.

GRH was an early adopter of the Comprehensive Primary Care Initiative, which the federal government launched in 2012 to strengthen primary care. The plan set the stage for population-based care manage-

ment and cost-savings opportunities and was the foundation for the broader Comprehensive Primary Care Plus, which the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services initiated in 2017 and referred to as the "largest-ever multi-payer initiative to improve primary care in America."

The program seeks to improve quality, access and efficiency of primary care. Numerous studies show the integration of medical, mental and behavioral health services can serve to reduce the demand on emergency services in community hospitals.



Susan Montoya Bryan/Associates Press

This Feb. 17, 2021 photo shows an empty irrigation canal at a tree farm in Corrales, New Mexico, with the Sandia Mountains in the background. Much of the West is mired in drought, with New Mexico, Arizona, Nevada and Utah being among the hardest hit. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's official spring outlook March 18, 2021, sees an expanding drought with a drier than normal April, May and June for a large swath of the country from Louisiana to Oregon.

## DROUGHT

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agency said. A La Nina cooling of parts of the central Pacific continues to bring dry weather for much of the country, while in the Southwest heavy summer monsoon rains failed to materialize. Meteorologists also say the California megadrought is associated with long-term climate change.

The March 18 national Drought Monitor shows almost 66% of the nation is in an abnormally dry condition, the highest mid-March level since 2002. And forecasters predict that will worsen, expanding in parts of Florida, Texas, Oklahoma, Kansas, Nebraska, Colorado, Wyoming and South Dakota, with small islands of relief in parts of the Great Lakes and New England.

More than 44% of the nation is in moderate or worse drought, and nearly 18% is in extreme or exceptional drought — all of it west of the Mississippi River. Climate scientists are calling what's happening in the West a "megadrought" that started in 1999.

"The nearly West-wide drought is already quite severe in its breadth and intensity, and unfortunately it doesn't appear likely that there will be much relief this spring," said UCLA climate scientist Daniel Swain, who writes the Weather West blog and isn't part of the NOAA outlook. "Winter precipitation has been much below average across much of California, and summer precipitation reached record low levels in 2020 across the desert Southwest."

With the Sierra Nevada snowpack only 60% of normal levels, U.S. Department of Agriculture meteorologist Brad Rippey said "there will be some water cutbacks and allocation cutbacks in California and perhaps other areas of the Southwest" for agriculture and other uses. It will probably hit nut crops in the Golden State.

Winter and spring wheat crops also have been hit hard by the western drought with 78% of the spring wheat production area in drought conditions, Rippey said.

The dry, warm conditions in the upcoming months likely will bring "an enhanced wildfire season," said Jon Gottschalk, chief of NOAA's prediction branch.

Swain of UCLA said the wildfires probably will not be as bad as 2020 because so much vegetation already has burned and drought conditions retarded regrowth. Last year, he said, wildfire was so massive it will be hard to exceed, though this fire season likely will be above average.

Drought and heat breed a vicious cycle. When it's this dry, less of the sun's energy goes to evaporating soil moisture because it's not as wet, Swain said. That leaves more of the energy to heat up the air, and the heat makes the drought worse by boosting evaporation.

In the next week or two, parts of the central United States may get pockets of heavy rain, but the question is whether that will be enough to make up for large rain deficits in the High Plains from the past year, Nebraska state climatologist Martha Shulski said.

The drought's flip side is that for the first time in three years, NOAA is projecting zero major spring flooding, with smaller amounts of minor and moderate flooding.

About 82 million people will be at risk for flooding this spring, mostly minor with no property damage. That's down from 128 million people last year.

Flooding tends to be a short-term expensive localized problem while drought and wildfire hit larger areas and are longer lasting, NOAA climatologist Karin Gleason said.

Since 1980, NOAA has tracked weather disasters that caused at least \$1 billion in damage. The 28 droughts have caused nearly \$259 billion in damage, while the 33 floods have cost about \$151 billion.

## Guest column: Ag has plenty to teach



ANNE MOSS  
OREGON FARM BUREAU

In honor of National Ag Week, March 21-27, I'd like to share a few things I've learned while working for Oregon Farm Bureau since 2004.

1. There's room for and a need for all types of farming.

Organic, conventional, biotech, no-tech, small-scale, mid-size, commercial-scale, direct-to-consumer, contract for food processors, international exports — all can be found in Oregon and all have an important, vital place in agriculture.

The myth that one type of farming is "good" and another is "bad," and therefore should be pitted against each other, is just plain untrue.

I know farms in Oregon that grow organic crops on one field, conventional crops on another and biotech crops, like GMO alfalfa or sugar beets for seed, on a third.

Other farms stick to just one farming method.

Farmers decide what to do based on many factors, including their customer base, market potential, the farm's location, the crop's

labor requirements and equipment available.

2. Big doesn't mean bad. The size of a farm or ranch does not dictate its commitment to a healthy environment, care for animals, treatment of employees, or respect for neighbors.

A farmer with 2,000 acres cares as much about these things as does a farmer with 20 acres. Their day-to-day work may be different, but their values and integrity are shared.

Nearly 97% of Oregon's farms and ranches — including commercial-scale farms — are family-owned and operated. Some are "corporate farms" that incorporated for tax purposes or succession-plan reasons. These are run by families, people raising kids, often living on the farm, who are involved in their communities and are proud of what they do. They're not in the business of harming their customers, their neighbors or themselves.

3. Part of sustainability is profitability. Because eating food is such a personal act, there's a tendency for consumers to forget that the people growing their food are also running a business. Even the smallest farms must ultimately make a profit to survive.

Few people get into agriculture to get rich quick. It often involves slim

profit margins at the mercy of many uncontrollable factors like weather, pests, fluctuating commodity prices and rising supply costs.

This is compounded by the fact that almost every realm of public policy, from transportation to taxes, directly impacts agriculture. When regulations bring new fees or compliance costs, it's very difficult for most farmers to pass along those expenditures to their customers.

4. There's no such thing as a "simple farmer."

Farmers do more than raise crops or take care of animals. Farmers are also business owners, accountants, scientists, meteorologists, mechanics and marketers. Many are also eager innovators, always searching for new technology to help them produce more with less: less water, less fertilizer, less fuel, fewer pesticides.

5. There's more that unites agriculture than divides it.

No matter the amount of acreage worked, farming method used or number of animals raised, Oregon farmers and ranchers share core values: a deep love for the land, incredible work ethic and immense pride in their work.

Anne Marie Moss is the communications director for the Oregon Farm Bureau.

## WOLVES

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conservation group Defenders of Wildlife, said the deaths were suspicious, though without knowing the cause of death, they cannot say whether poaching may have been to blame.

"It highlights the pressing need for a thorough investigation, for sure," Gobush said.

Gobush, who is in Seattle, said she has never heard of so many wolves found dead at once in either Oregon or Washington.

"We're all waiting to hear what the cause of death is," she said. "A lot of this is a mystery."

Rodger Huffman, a rancher in Union, and wolf committee co-chairman for the Oregon Cattlemen's Association, said the relationship between wolves and local producers remains contentious, due in part to what he describes as "shoddy" management of the species.

Oregon's Wolf Management and Conservation Plan allows for ranchers and wildlife officials to legally kill wolves that prey on livestock if they



Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife/Contributed Photo

A trail camera in January 2016 caught this image of two adult wolves from the Walla Walla Pack in northern Umatilla County. The Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife is investigating the deaths of five wolves in Union County.

reach a certain number of "confirmed" depredations within a certain time period, and non-lethal deterrents have failed.

But Huffman said it is frustratingly difficult to "confirm" a wolf depredation, unless it is found and reported immediately, leaving ranchers in a difficult predicament.

"The wolf population is not a celebrated thing in cattle country," he said. "It's frustration, there's no doubt about it."

Wolf poaching is not unheard of in Eastern Oregon. Two incidents were reported last year in neighboring Baker County — one in late September, a breeding male from the Cornucopia Pack, and another in late October, a sub-adult female from the Pine Creek Pack.

Gobush said apex predators like wolves play an important role in the ecosystem, and should be protected.

Defenders of Wildlife

also supports a bill in the Legislature that would help crack down on poachers, Gobush said. Senate Bill 841 would appropriate \$1.6 million from the state general fund to support the Department of Justice's Environmental Crimes and Cultural Resources Enforcement Unit.

The bill, sponsored by Democratic Sens. James Manning Jr., Chris Gorsek and Deb Patterson, is scheduled for a public hearing on April 5.

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