

Umatilla County officials decry political overtones with vaccines

By Bryce Dole
East Oregonian

PENDLETON — Umatilla County Commissioner John Shafer wants to send a clear message — he’s a Republican man choosing to get vaccinated against COVID-19.

In response to the county’s low vaccine rates, officials recently convened to discuss new ways that they could encourage residents to get a shot. Shafer, who has voiced frustration in the past regarding the politicization of vaccines, volunteered to endorse the shot by having a photo taken of him while getting his second jab.

“I want people to know — don’t be afraid of the vaccine,” he said. “I’m getting it. And one of the things is that the Republican males seem to be one of the worst at getting vaccinated.”

Shafer and Umatilla County Commissioner George Murdock, each of whom are Republicans, decry the political overtones associated with vaccines. They say declining demand for shots alongside rising cases are hindering the county’s progress during the pandemic, and that political division is playing a role.

“At no time in our history has a vaccine been this political,” Shafer said. “And, for the life of me, I can’t figure out why. I don’t know if some people are thinking that it could be because a Democratic governor and a Democratic president are pushing this. But I keep thinking, even President Trump was saying, ‘Get vaccinated. I did.’”

Murdock says COVID-19 vaccinations “should have nothing to do with political party,” adding, “I would not trust my health to partisan politics.”

Murdock says that he and Commissioner Dan Dorran buck the national trends, saying “it’s not universal.”

“The polling seems to show older Republican men seem to be the group who least likely want to get the vaccination,” Murdock said. “But I’m an absolute contrast to that. I’m old, I’m a Republican and I couldn’t wait to get mine fast enough.”

The notion that Republicans are largely declining vaccines in the county echoes national trends that critics say are driven by right-wing pundits who flout coronavirus precautions as a Democratic effort to undermine the party and impinge on civil liberties.

Poll: Vaccination rates lag in areas that supported Trump

A recent national poll conducted by Monmouth University found nearly 2 in 5 Republicans said they would avoid getting the vaccine if possible. The findings are similar to a separate survey



Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian

Umatilla County Commissioner John Shafer receives his second dose of the Moderna COVID-19 vaccine from registered nurse Kelsi Reyes during a vaccination event in Pendleton on Friday, April 30.

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— Republican John Shafer, Umatilla County commissioner

from Quinnipiac University, which found 45% of Republicans say they don’t plan to get a vaccine.

According to a New York Times survey of nearly every U.S. county, vaccination rates and interest was lower on average in counties where the majority of residents voted to reelect former President Donald J. Trump, leaving some areas with more vaccines than there is demand.

That trend appears to be present in Umatilla County, where voters largely favored Trump and where vaccine rates have long ranked lowest in Oregon, despite reporting some of the highest infection rates in the state in recent months.

And this week, the county health department asked the state to briefly withhold vaccine shipments as demand is rapidly declining.

With case counts rising on average over the past few weeks, the county was moved from moderate risk back to high risk this week, bringing greater restrictions on businesses and gatherings, and raising concerns among officials who say local businesses can’t withstand the constant shifts.

New cases tied to unvaccinated residents

Officials say newly reported cases are coming almost entirely from residents who have yet to be vaccinated.

“I think it’s frustrating to me that I get calls over and over and over again from people who want us to open up the county, open up large events, and have us start moving back to where we were,” Murdock said. “But we can’t order people to get vac-

inated. It’s such a contradiction to hear all day, every day, from people that want us to go a certain direction, there’s a path to go there, and they don’t want to go down it.”

Joe Fiumara, the county’s public health director, said the county lacks concrete data showing vaccine hesitancy falls along party lines, but added, anecdotally, that appears to be the case.

“We hear nationally that the Republican white man is the least likely to be getting the COVID vaccination right now,” he said. “And we know we have a decent sized population of white Republican men in this county. And so the assumption I make is there’s probably something there.”

However, Fiumara noted that some Hispanic and Latino residents, as well as people from some religious groups, are also hesitant to get vaccinated.

To combat this, Fiumara said county health officials are working to create new ways to inform specific groups about the importance, safety and efficacy of vaccines, though he didn’t provide specifics.

‘Mind-boggling’ resistance to vaccine

For the commissioners and Fiumara, what is “mind-boggling” is the vaccine is now seeing reluctance from Republicans when it was, in fact, designed under a Republican administration.

With Operation Warp Speed, an effort that saw vaccines developed at an unprecedented rate with billions of dollars from the Trump administration, the former president repeatedly

said vaccines would be the solution to the pandemic and took credit when they were cleared for use in November 2020.

The Biden administration, however, promptly took steps to hasten the rollout after the election and drove the development of the Johnson & Johnson vaccine, which has reached nearly 7 million Americans despite being paused briefly after six women reported blood clots. The vaccine has now been cleared by the Food and Drug Administration with a warning label noting the potential for rare blood clots.

“This really isn’t about Republican or Democrat, this is not a control move, this is not many of these conspiracy theory items that are fun and off-the-wall sometimes,” Fiumara said. “It’s much more straightforward. It’s about protecting yourself and protecting those around you, because they’re the ones who end up suffering if something goes wrong.”

By getting vaccinated and speaking out about vaccinations, Shafer said he’s looking to shift the stigma with some hopes the county can make progress toward reopening in time for summer events.

“I want our county to be open,” he said. “I don’t want any restrictions in place because of our numbers. And the way to do that is the vaccine.”

Fiumara said despite the county’s low vaccination rates, he’s optimistic that more and more people will get vaccinated as the rollout continues. Even now, he said health officials are seeing people change their minds.

“I think people are recognizing that this is our path out of here,” he said. “People who were more on the fence aren’t so on the fence now that millions and millions across the country are receiving it with very low side effects or down side.”

COVID

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From April 25 to May 1, the county reported 19 new cases. That’s fewer than half the total new cases for the two previous Sunday-Saturday weeks — 42 from April 18-24, and 58 from April 11-17. The last Sunday-Saturday period with fewer than 19 new cases was March 14-20, when there were nine.

Bennett said on Monday morning, May 3, that although he’s pleased with the declining trend in the county’s COVID-19 case rate, it’s not certain that the county will move out of extreme risk this Friday, May 7.

Although state officials are reviewing county risk levels weekly rather than every other week as in the past, county decisions will continue to be based on their case count and test positivity numbers for a two-week period, said Jonathan Modie, a spokesman for the Oregon Health Authority (OHA).

There are two ways Baker County could move out of extreme risk.

The first is if the number of people hospitalized for COVID-19 statewide drops below 300, or the seven-day percent increase in the hospitalization rate drops below 15%, Modie said.

As of Monday, there were 351 people hospitalized statewide for COVID-19 treatment, and the percent rate exceeded 15%, so that option appears unlikely.

The other possible way to move out of extreme risk is based on the county’s number of new cases for the two-week measuring period starting April 20, Modie said.

Baker County, as of Monday, May 3, had 59 new cases during that period. That would qualify the county to move to high risk, but by the narrowest margin — the threshold for extreme risk is 60 cases. In counties at high risk, restaurants and bars can have indoor dining up to 25% of their capacity or 50 total people, including staff, whichever is fewer.

OHA was scheduled to announce any changes to county risk levels today, May 4.

WOLVES

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“It was a classic case (of wolf depredation),” Ratliff said on Monday, May 3. “It was pretty straightforward.”

Ratliff said a hunter who reported the attack — not the rancher who owns the calves — was driving through the allotment on the morning of April 30 and saw one dead calf and a wolf standing on it.

The hunter texted Ratliff, who arrived at the spot later that day.

Ratliff said he found two dead calves about 40 yards apart. The calves were born this winter and were among a herd of 57 cow-calf pairs that were moved to the allotment, managed by the Bureau of Land Management, on April 16.

Based on the absence of any evidence that scavenging birds had fed on either carcass, Ratliff said he believes wolves killed the calves either late on April 29 or early on April 30.

He said there were “struggle scenes” and wolf tracks around each of the calves.

Ratliff said both carcasses had bite marks that, based on their location and depth, are consistent with wolves rather than smaller predators such as coyotes.

Ratliff said he also found splotches of blood on vegetation that was still standing and had not been trampled.

That’s further evidence that the calves were attacked while alive, he

said, because when bloody vegetation is not matted, it means the animals were standing when they bled.

Ratliff said blood on flattened vegetation, by contrast, is consistent with wolves or other predators dragging a carcass, or part of a carcass, across the ground before, or while, feeding on it. In that case it’s possible that the calf died from another cause and that the predator only fed on the carcass.

The Keating pack consists of eight wolves, according to the annual wolf report ODFW released in April.

The pack had at least two pups in the spring of 2020 that survived through the end of the year.

Ratliff said ODFW trapped three wolves from the pack in January of this year and fitted them with tracking collars. However, he said that only one of those collars is still functioning.

That collar broadcasts radio signals rather than GPS, Ratliff said, so he can’t determine the location of any wolves from the pack during the period when he believes wolves attacked the calves.

However, Ratliff said that when he arrived at the attack scene, a radio receiver put the location of the collared wolf at about one-quarter mile away.

Ratliff said the owner of the calves, whom he didn’t name, spent the weekend in the area to prevent further wolf attacks.

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- Face is pale or clammy
- Blue lips, fingernails, and skin
- For lighter skinned people, the skin tone turns bluish purple; for darker skinned people, the skin tone turns grayish or ashen
- Breathing is very slow and shallow, irregular or has stopped
- Pulse is slow, erratic or not there at all
- Choking sounds or a snore-like gurgling noise (sometimes

called the “death-rattle”)

- Vomiting

Steps to take for opioid overdose victims

- Call 911 immediately, report a drug overdose, and give the street address and location of the victim. If there are other persons available, send someone to wait in the street for the ambulance and guide the emergency medical technicians to the victim.
- Try to rouse the victim by speaking loudly, pinching, or rubbing your knuckles vigorously up and down the sternum (the bony part in the middle of the chest).

- Make sure the victim is breathing. If not, administer rescue breathing (mouth-to-mouth) by pinching the victim’s nose shut and blowing into the mouth. Lay the victim on their side after they have resumed breathing on their own.
- Administer an opioid antagonist, such as Naloxone (Narcan), if you have it and know how to use it.
- Stay with the victim until help arrives, and act quickly to administer rescue breathing if they stop breathing. Encourage the victim to cooperate with the ambulance crew.

COVID cases close Wallowa High School

Wallowa County Chieftain

WALLOWA — Wallowa High School is closed for the next two weeks, effective Thursday, April 29, after several COVID-19 cases were confirmed at the school, Superintendent Tammy Jones said in a post to the district’s Facebook page.

According to the post, six individuals have tested positive for COVID-19 — two Wednesday night, April 28, and four other positive tests earlier in the week. In a post Tuesday evening, April 27 that first outlined the details of the outbreak, the district said it did not plan to close. That plan changed Thursday morning. “Given the timing and the numbers

of contacts that local health officials will need to contact, we are immediately closing our high school,” Johnson wrote.

Students in grades six through 12 were moved to distance learning starting Thursday and will remain there through May 11. A local health official will contact parents who have a student who is required to quarantine, Jones said in the post. Students in kindergarten through fifth grade will remain on campus, Jones said.

The Facebook post Tuesday evening linked the outbreak to a community prom, which the post said was not a school-sponsored activity.

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