

COVID-19

Oregon extends workplace mask rule

Despite flood of protests, requirements for masks, social distancing remain in place 'indefinitely'

By SARA CLINE
Associated Press/Report for America

PORTLAND— Oregon last week adopted a controversial rule that indefinitely extends coronavirus mask and social distancing requirements for all businesses in the state.

State officials say the rule, which garnered thousands of public comments, will be in place until it is "no longer necessary to address the effects of the pandemic in the workplace."

"We reviewed all of the comments — including the many comments that opposed the rule — and we gave particular consideration to those comments that explained their reasoning or provided concrete information," said Michael Wood, administrator of the state's department of Occupational Safety and Health. "Although we chose to move forward with the rule, the final product includes a number of changes based on that record."

Oregon, which has been among those with the country's most stringent COVID-19 restrictions, had previously had a mask rule for businesses, but it was only temporary and could not be extended beyond 180 days. That prompted Wood to create a permanent rule with the intent to repeal it at some point.

"To allow the workplace COVID-19 protections to simply go away would have left workers far less protected. And it would have left employers who want to know what is expected of them with a good deal less clarity than the rule provides," Wood said.

But the proposal prompted a flood of angry responses, with everyone from parents to teachers to business owners and employees crying government overreach.

Wood's agency received more than 5,000 comments — mostly critical — and nearly 70,000 residents signed a petition against the rule.

Opponents raised concerns that there is no sunset date or specific



Bill Bradshaw/Wallowa County Chieftain

Rick LaFave stands by the control computer for the burn table at his Renaissance Design, Fabrication & Powder Coating business just outside Joseph on Wednesday, May 5, 2021. He plans to open the shop about May 20.

Metal and money

New business to bring living wage jobs to Wallowa County, owner says

By BILL BRADSHAW
Wallowa County Chieftain

JOSEPH — Rick LaFave is bringing to Wallowa County something many have noted the county sorely needs — jobs that pay a living wage to as many as 25 people.

His said his Renaissance Design Fabrication & Powder Coating company is set to open at the end of Russell Lane just outside of Joseph about May 20.

"I'm not going to base the wages on what they are in Wallowa County," he said. "My wages are going to be based on what my company does as a whole. So if I have a welder/fabricator making, say, \$22 an hour over in Forest Grove doing the same job, he's going to be making \$22 an hour here. It's the scale of how the company is set up. It doesn't matter if it's here, North Plains or Forest Grove. I've got three shops, and they're all on the same scale."

The Joseph operation will be LaFave's third shop. He and wife, Carey, also own a couple restaurant/bars and a commercial/residential painting company on the west side of the state, as well as two holding companies through which he's bought com-



Bill Bradshaw/Wallowa County Chieftain

Rick LaFave describes the operations of the press brake that bends metal at his Renaissance Design, Fabrication & Powder Coating business just outside Joseph on Wednesday, May 5, 2021. He seeks employees before opening the shop about May 20.

mercial properties. The couple also recently purchased the Imnaha River Bed & Breakfast, which Carey will operate.

LaFave said the 17-year-old RDF&P largely caters to the high-tech industry.

"Everybody from Micron, Intel — anybody who's big into the high tech, we supply them with the goods to build 'clean rooms' where they make (computer) chips," he said. "They

build a plant and I supply a lot of the steel stuff that goes into those plants."

LaFave said his shop is specialized in terms of the equipment it uses for computer chip machines, and these tool pedestals always are being upgraded.

"Most often, when that happens, they change out the whole tool and every tool has a different footprint and it sits on a raised-access floor and I build

the frames that go underneath them — the pedestal," he said. "That turns us multiple millions of dollars a year."

In fact, the payroll for his 100-plus employees is around \$3 million a year, he said. He offers a full slate of benefits to hourly and salaried employees.

"I'm basically just the president and CEO, and I let them do their jobs," he said.

Of course, most of that payroll won't be in Wallowa County, but a large portion will be. He said his two shops on the west side are buried in back orders and he plans to direct the overflow here. He has a fleet of about 50 trucks that can haul raw materials and finished products.

LaFave said he's planning to hire almost entirely local people. The only person he plans to bring from the west side is Greg Doty, who will serve as shop foreman.

"Experienced welders, they're going to range anywhere from \$18.50 to \$24 an hour, depending on what they know," he said.

Welders don't have to be experts in the work they'll do at RDF&P. He said he plans to have

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Grass seed dealer agrees to \$300K settlement in mislabeling case

By GEORGE PLAVEN
Capital Press

SALEM — A Willamette Valley grass seed dealer accused of mislabeling more than 8 million pounds of seed has reached a settlement with state agriculture officials.

Dynamic Seed Source LLC and owner Trevor Abbott have agreed to pay \$300,000 in fines to the Oregon Department of Agriculture as part of the deal. The company also will have its wholesale seed dealer's license suspended for one year, effective June 30.

ODA initially alleged Dynamic Seed Source and Abbott in 2019 had mislabeled 124 seed lots as Kentucky 31, or K-31, a popular variety of tall fescue used for livestock forage, manicured lawns, erosion control and turf.

Investigators later determined the company mislabeled 161 seed lots as K-31, totaling 207 infractions. Each lot equals up to 55,000 pounds of seed.

False labeling is a violation of both the Federal Seed Act and Oregon seed laws, regulating the sale and commerce of agricultural seed crops.

"It's all about consumer protection," said Elizabeth Savory, Seed Regulatory Program manager at ODA. "You want to make sure



Capital Press, File

This undated file photo shows the harvest of grass seed in a Willamette Valley field. Dynamic Seed Source LLC and owner Trevor Abbott agreed to pay \$300,000 in fines to the Oregon Department of Agriculture for mislabeling millions of pounds of seeds.

what's on the label, that's the seed they're getting."

Savory made the comparison to someone buying a bag of M&Ms, only to open the bag and

find out there were Skittles inside — they're both round candy, she said, but not the same thing and not what the person thought he was buying.

K-31 is sought after for its heat and drought tolerance, low maintenance and durability, fetching a premium price for growers.

About half of all K-31 grass seed comes from Missouri, Savory said, and the other half is grown in Oregon. In 2017, Missouri experienced a record-low harvest caused by several years of difficult weather. The shortage led to a spike in demand and prices.

ODA began an industry-wide investigation in 2018 at the request of the Oregon Seed Association to root out bad actors misrepresenting K-31 seed, based on anomalies in the market.

The Seed Regulatory Program has reviewed thousands of records from 214 registered wholesale dealers, Savory said, making it the largest investigation in the program's history.

The violations allegedly committed by Dynamic Seed Source and Abbott occurred between 2016 and 2018. Under the terms of the settlement reached May 6, Abbott and the company neither admit nor deny any wrongdoing, but agreed to pay the combined \$300,000 in fines and a one-year license suspension.

In a statement, Abbott and Dynamic Seed Source said ODA's case was "unnecessary," and they were always willing to pre-

pare their labels per the state's specifications.

"ODA sued anyway, and after two years of litigation the parties settled," the company stated. "The settlement did not require Trevor Abbott or Dynamic to admit fault. They are glad the lawsuit is over and look forward to putting it all behind them."

Once their license is reissued, Dynamic Seed Source and Abbott will be placed on three years of probation. Conditions of the probation will include twice-yearly records audits, participation in at least one workshop or training on Oregon Seed Laws and at least one in-person examination of records annually.

Savory said no other violations have been uncovered to date, though the investigation is ongoing.

Angie Smith, executive director of the Oregon Seed Association, said the group is so far pleased with the state's review.

"It was at the request of the Oregon Seed Association's members that we asked ODA to look into the sales of K-31," Smith said. "We look forward to the outcome of that continued investigation."

ODA Director Alexis Taylor said the agency takes complaints

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