

Fatal virus spreading in local deer

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An outbreak of an insect-spread disease has killed at least eight deer in Baker Valley in less than a week, and a state wildlife biologist fears this outbreak could be much worse than previous episodes.

The often-fatal illness is Epizootic Hemorrhagic Disease (EHD). It's caused by a virus spread by the bite of midges that breed in stagnant water.

Brian Ratliff, district wildlife biologist at the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife's (ODFW) Baker City office, said on Monday morning, Aug. 23, that he received several calls over the weekend from residents who found dead deer on their properties in the Pine Creek and Ben Dier Lane area, at the western edge of Baker

Valley about 12 miles northwest of Baker City.

Based on that cluster of cases, the disease seems to be spreading more rapidly than in previous outbreaks in the valley, Ratliff said.

EHD can kill both white-tailed and mule deer — the first two carcasses Ratliff examined this weekend were mule deer — but whitetails are much more susceptible to the illness, he said.

An outbreak of EHD killed an estimated 2,000 white-tailed deer in Umatilla County during the fall of 2019.

Deer can't spread the virus, also known as blue tongue, to other deer or animals by direct contact. Midges carrying the virus can infect other animals, including mule deer, elk, pronghorn antelope, sheep and cattle, but the mortal-

ity rate is much higher with white-tailed deer than with other species, Ratliff said.

The virus poses no threat to people, cats or dogs. Nor can people become ill by eating the meat of a deer or other animal infected with EHD.

The biggest recent outbreak in Baker County happened during the late summer and early fall of 2015, Ratliff said.

He said ODFW didn't compile an official death toll then, but he believes many dozens of white-tailed deer died in the county in 2015.

Ratliff said EHD outbreaks typically start later in the year, when water sources are more scarce, forcing deer to congregate in those places and making them more likely to either be infected by midges, or, in the case of deer that already carry the virus,

to spread it to midges that bit them.

The virus can spread in both ways, he said — from infected deer to midges, and from infected midges to deer.

That allows the illness to spread rapidly in certain conditions.

Ratliff said outbreaks usually dissipate once freezing temperatures have killed the year's crop of midges.

Although infected mule deer are much more likely to survive than white-tailed deer are, Ratliff said the virus, which causes blood vessel constriction, can have severe and in some cases permanent effects on mule deer.

The vascular constriction can cause the testicles to shrivel and eventually fall off infected mule deer bucks, which renders them incapable of breeding, Ratliff said.



Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife/Contributed Photo

White-tailed deer, which are found throughout Northeastern Oregon, are especially susceptible to the Epizootic Hemorrhagic Disease, which is spread by biting midges.

The loss of testicles also means the bucks can't produce testosterone, the hormone that causes bucks to shed their antlers every year, generally in late winter.

When that happens the buck can have antlers for the

rest of its life, and the antlers typically remain in the velvet stage constantly.

Ratliff said he has seen several mule deer bucks that apparently were infected with EHD in 2015, survived the virus but lost their testicles.

RODEO

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With his second-place ranking, he shouldn't have to endure any last-minute anxiety about whether he'll qualify for the National Finals.

"It's definitely a different spot than last year," Brown said in a phone interview on Sunday, Aug. 22. "It feels good."

He's also excited about competing in Las Vegas, where the National Finals Rodeo returns after its one-year move to Texas.

"It'll be a completely different energy level," Brown said.

Back to normal

Having the National Finals back in their traditional home in Las Vegas will cap a rodeo season that Brown said has been "pretty normal" — something that can hardly be said of 2020.

In early March 2020, when most people weren't familiar with the word coronavirus, Brown was competing at Rodeo Houston in Texas, a three-week event that normally draws hundreds of thousands of spectators. The top steer wrestler wins \$50,000.

But when organizers learned that a man who attended a barbecue cookoff associated with the rodeo on Feb. 28, along with about



Kathy Aney/East Oregonian File, 2019

Bulldogger Jesse Brown wrestles his steer to the ground to clinch the steer wrestling title at the 2019 Pendleton Round-Up. Brown's time in the final round, 3.7

73,000 others, had tested positive for COVID-19, they canceled the Rodeo on March 11.

"It was the domino effect from there," Brown said in a 2020 interview.

Most rodeos were canceled during the spring of 2020.

Brown, meanwhile, returned to Baker City and went back to work at Lew Brothers Les Schwab Tires, the business his dad, Jim, co-owns with Jim's brother, and Jesse's uncle, Rocky Brown.

After more than two months away from competition, Brown drove about 15 hours to enter a rodeo in Cave Creek, Arizona, in late May 2020.

He was on the road for much of the summer.

This year, by contrast, Brown has been wrestling steers since winter. He expects to compete in about 85 rodeos before National Finals.

He said competitors, and spectators, have been enthusiastic everywhere he's traveled.

"I think people are loving it," Brown said. "We couldn't do a lot last year. I think people are dang sure glad to be out and having fun. There's been a lot of people at almost every rodeo I've been to."

On the road again ... and again

With a full slate of rodeos, Brown hasn't spent much time in Baker City this year.

"I've been rodeoing hard from the start," Brown said.

He helped his dad move some cattle recently, but most of the time he's either competing in a rodeo or rolling along a highway.

Brown said he occasionally takes an airplane flight from one rodeo to the next, but most often he drives with a group of fellow competitors.

They share the driving — it could hardly be otherwise when they sometimes have to drive all night to make it to the next event.

Here's a brief itinerary for Brown starting on Thursday, Aug. 19:

- Thursday at 8 p.m. he was in Gooding, Idaho.
- Friday at 8 a.m. he was 455 miles away, in Moses Lake, Washington.

- Friday at 7 p.m. he was 340 miles away in Kalispell, Montana.

- Saturday at 1 p.m. he was 624 miles away in Baker, Montana, hard on the North Dakota border.

- Saturday at 7 p.m. he was 224 miles away, this time retracing part of his route of the previous day, in Billings, Montana.

- Sunday morning he was 680 miles away in Kennewick, Washington.

This week Brown's schedule has him competing in Tremonton, Utah, on Tuesday, Aug. 24, in Bremerton, Washington, on Wednesday, and then back to Kennewick on Thursday.

"There's a lot of driving," he said, with the well-honed sense of understatement typical of people who leap off a horse at 25 mph to tussle with several hundred pounds of stubborn steer.

"It's part of the job."

In the midst of a great season

Brown doesn't have any specific explanation for his strong season, in which he trails only Jacob Talley of Keatchie, Louisiana, in earnings. Talley has won \$113,039.

"I've been more consistent, with a higher win percentage," Brown said. "I was more streaky last year."

He had some of his strongest performances at Prin-

eville, Joseph and Eugene in Oregon, and at Price, Utah, and Great Falls, Montana.

He credits the two horses he rides.

His primary horse is Tyson, owned by Curtis Cassidy, a Donalda, Alberta, Canada, steer wrestler who is in 18th place in this year's standings.

The Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association named Tyson the steer wrestling horse of the year for 2020.

Brown also bought a horse, named Gunner, about three months ago.

"Usually guys will ride a couple different horses," Brown said.

Besides the National Finals, a highlight of the year is just a few weeks away, and less than 100 miles from home — the Pendleton Round Up.

"That's one of my favorite rodeos," Brown said. "It's good to have it back."

The Round Up, which started in 1910, was canceled in 2020 due to the pandemic, the first cancellation since World War II.

Brown has another reason, besides the event's reputation in rodeo, to be excited about returning to Pendleton.

In the 2019 Round Up he set an event record by bringing down his steer in 3.7 seconds. That broke the Round Up arena record of 3.8 seconds set in 2002 by K.C. Jones and equalled in 2014 by Casey Martin.

COUNCIL

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"The LPFC team has a good track record with the City and excellent knowledge of city-owned forested property," Owen wrote.

The first project the city is proposing under the new contract is a timber sale on the city's 102-acre property that includes the site where water from Goodrich Creek is diverted into the city's water supply pipeline.

The water comes from Goodrich Lake, a natural lake high in the Elkhorns that is one of the city's two supplementary sources of water.

The Goodrich Creek property was last logged during the winter of 2002-03, according to Owen's report.

The city advertised a Request for Proposals for forestry consulting in July and received only one response — from Lane Parry — by the Aug. 12 deadline.

Owen wrote that Parry's proposal meets all the city's requirements. She proposes a five-year contract with the option to renew for two additional five-year terms.

"Forest health and evaluation is a long-term commitment and having the ability for one primary consultant to manage the lands for several years will be advantageous to the City and the forest," Owen wrote in her report to councilors.

Lane Parry Forestry Consulting, in its proposal, estimates that logging on the Goodrich Creek property would yield a net profit to the city's water department of \$50,000 to \$65,000. Consulting fees for the project are estimated at \$8,850.

If councilors approve the contract, "a more complete evaluation of the project" would happen, Owen wrote.

Over the past few years, city officials have been discussing a much larger forestry project that, like the proposed logging at Goodrich Creek, would be designed to thin crowded forests and reduce the risk of a large wildfire.

The larger project is in the city's 10,000-acre watershed, which starts at Goodrich Creek and

runs south for several miles along the east slopes of the Elkhorns to Elk Creek.

The watershed, which is public land managed by the U.S. Forest Service, includes the streams and springs from which the city gets most of its drinking water.

Owen noted in her report to councilors that logging in the watershed, which is closed to public access and has few roads, would be more complicated since the land "has far greater restrictions than the city-owned Goodrich property."

In other business during tonight's meeting, councilors will:

- Consider applying for a grant from the Oregon Department of Land Conservation and Development to have a housing production strategies report written.

As a newly designed "medium-sized" city due to exceeding 10,000 population in the 2020 U.S. Census — the city's official population is 10,099 — the city is required by Oregon law to adopt a housing production strategy by Dec. 31, 2023, according to a letter to councilors from Holly Kerns, director of the Baker City/County Planning Department.

The Planning Department would hire a consultant to craft the housing production strategy, Kerns wrote. This would include open houses and a community survey that solicits comments from city residents about housing needs and how to address them.

- Discuss new state mandates requiring face masks to be worn in indoor public spaces, including Baker City Hall, and requiring health care workers to be vaccinated against COVID-19.

In a report to councilors, City Manager Jon Cannon wrote that the vaccination requirement applies to the Baker City Fire Department, where firefighters also work as paramedics, operating the city's ambulances.

- Discuss Baker County's Request for Proposals for operating a visitors center in Baker City.

Councilors are slated to meet with county commissioners to discuss the topic on Wednesday, Aug. 25 at 6 p.m. at the Baker County Event Center, 2600 East St.

- Appoint a member to the city golf board.

PROTEST

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"And if you don't get a vaccination, the person who manages those employees is personally liable for a \$500 fine per week per employee."

Johnson said the firefighters' union believes its members, and other health care workers, should have the freedom to decide whether to be vaccinated.

"We don't believe it's lawful for the governor to mandate this," Johnson said on Monday, Aug. 23. "I myself am vaccinated (but) it still is infuriating to me that she would supersede the law with a work around and go through OSHA and the Oregon Health Authority to enforce this."

Johnson said Baker City firefighters will be joined in the protest by local nurses, firefighters from La Grande, and potentially local teachers, who also are required to be vaccinated by Oct. 18.

Dustin Alam, president of the La Grande Firefighters Local 924 union, said he and other members of that union will participate in the demonstration at Baker City Hall.

"There are a lot of people out there that

don't agree with these mandates and people forming together to make coalitions and show that there's a lot of people that aren't for the mandates is important to make sure that the state understands that people are in opposition to this and that it could end up being detrimental to the state if these mandates come to fruition," Alam said.

Johnson said he has reached out to Baker County's state legislators, Sen. Lynn Findley, R-Vale, and Rep. Mark Owens, R-Crane, but had not heard back from them as of Monday morning.

Findley and Owens did send a letter to Brown recently objecting to the requirement that students, teachers and

other school staff wear face masks when classes start next week.

Johnson said union members hope to raise awareness for "the fact that this is government overreach and laws should not mandate personal choice."

"We believe that it is the individual's right to make an informed decision," Johnson said.

Johnson said that the government, instead of mandating vaccination, should focus on education, information, and helping empower communities to get the word out about the pros and cons to any vaccination.

"Really, what the main focus that we're going for is that it is government overreach and it's chipping away at our civil rights," Johnson said.

"So much of who we are is where we have been."



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