

Hospitals await aid from National Guard

By ALEX WITTWER

EO Media Group

LA GRANDE — Oregon Gov. Kate Brown on Aug. 13 issued an emergency order to deploy nearly 1,500 Oregon National Guard soldiers throughout the state to help support hospitals.

In Eastern Oregon, only the Blue Mountain Hospital District in Grant County has received any of those resources.

As of Friday, Aug. 27, several hospitals in Northeastern Oregon have not sent in a request for National Guard support, according to Oregon Health Authority officials.

Those hospitals include CHI St. Anthony Hospital in Pendleton, Grande Ronde Hospital in La Grande, Good Shepherd Medical Center in Hermiston and Pioneer Memorial Hospital in Heppner.

According to an OHA spokesperson, Saint Alphonsus Medical Center in Baker City was one of the few hospitals to put in a request for guard members to bolster resources but did not specify when the order was placed. The soldiers would provide support to the hospital through clinical and nonclinical roles. The hospital chain — which serves Baker City, Ontario and Boise — also requested six soldiers to assist



Baker City Herald, File

Saint Alphonsus Medical Center in Baker City.

with operations in Ontario. It was not known how many soldiers were requested for the Baker City location.

Wallowa County on Aug. 25 requested Oregon National Guard support, according to Brooke Pace, director of communications and public relations at Wallowa Memorial Hospital. The request came 12 days after Brown's announcement about deploying Oregon National Guard soldiers to hospitals during the recent surge of COVID-19.

In Grant County, several members of the Oregon National Guard have already begun assisting operations in the Blue Mountain Hospital

District. The hospital is among only 11 hospitals in Oregon to receive support from the nearly 500 national guard members currently activated. Officials with the Oregon National Guard have indicated roughly 20 more hospitals will be bolstered by an additional 1,000 guard members by next week, with numbers varying based on need.

Soldiers' tasks include assisting in support roles, such as entrance screeners, janitorial services and security for the hospital, as well as providing logistical relief for overworked health care staff who have been on the front lines of the pandemic for nearly two years.

"We have staff burnout. They have been working very long, stressful hours, and we are looking for ways to help our staff out as they face this next wave of COVID-19," said Mark Snider, public relations and digital strategy coordinator at Saint Alphonsus Health System in Baker City.

Soldiers with the Oregon National Guard served in support roles rather than direct clinical roles in Josephine County in Southern Oregon, which has experienced the fastest growing outbreaks of COVID-19 in the United States within the past two weeks.

"The goal is to help these hospitals with nonclinical support staff," said Maj. Chris Clyne, public affairs officer with the Oregon National Guard.

Mardi Ford, director of communications and marketing at Grande Ronde Hospital, said that the situation at the hospital is fluid — while they haven't needed support from the National Guard yet, that situation could change.

"Yes, we are short staffed, but at this point we have contingencies locally and at the state level for bringing in support and are in the process of working through all of that if needed," Ford said in an email.

According to Ford, the situation in Union County is not as dire as it is in Southern Oregon, which has seen one of the largest spikes in hospitalization in the United States in the past two weeks, but that the hospital was monitoring the situation in case it changes.

"Right now, we are managing. But it requires daily — often hourly — oversight," Ford said.

Hospitals in Eastern Oregon have reported staffing issues and are looking to add several dozen workers to their ranks. As of Aug. 26, Grande Ronde Hospital had 63 posi-

tions available on its career webpage, while St. Anthony had 57 open positions. Ontario had 41 open positions, Wallowa Memorial Hospital had 31 and Saint Alphonsus Medical Center-Baker City had 28 open positions.

More than 1,600 new cases of COVID-19 were reported in Northeastern Oregon since Aug. 11. Region 9, which encompasses Morrow, Umatilla, Wallowa, Union, Baker, Grant and Malheur counties, has just five staffed intensive care unit beds available. Jackson and Josephine Counties in Southern Oregon reported having only one ICU bed available.

As hospitalizations increase throughout the state, the stress it puts on normal operations at hospitals — which transfer patients based on availability — is immense. Grande Ronde Hospital in Union County reported last week it had to transfer a patient to Montana because there wasn't enough space available at the hospital, which has 25 beds.

"As the volumes continue to rise statewide and as facilities elsewhere in the state become overrun and start looking for other locations to transfer patients," Snider said, "they turn to smaller locations like Baker City."

BIGHORNS

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county's eastern edge. Those sheep are part of the Lookout Mountain herd, Oregon's biggest herd of the Rocky Mountain subspecies with about 400 sheep prior to the bacterial outbreak.

Later in 2020 biologists also confirmed that the same strain of Mycoplasma ovipneumoniae bacteria had infected bighorns in the county's other herd, in the Burnt River Canyon between Bridgeport and Durkee.

The Burnt River Canyon bighorns, which previously numbered about 85 animals, are of the California subspecies, which are somewhat smaller than Rocky Mountain bighorns.

Biologists believe that all of the 65 to 70 lambs born in the Lookout Mountain herd in the spring of 2020 died from pneumonia, which results from the bacterial infection.

Ratliff estimated that at least 75 adult bighorns from the Lookout Mountain herd also died in 2020.

An aerial survey of the herd in late 2020 turned up about 250 sheep, compared with 403 in a 2018 aerial census.

To maintain the herd population requires a minimum of 20 lambs per 100 ewes, Ratliff said. The average ratio for the Lookout Mountain herd is 38 lambs per 100 ewes, and the number ranged from a high of 67 per 100 to a low of 24.

Ratliff said biologists were initially optimistic at the start of this summer that the worst of the outbreak had passed. As of mid June, biologists hadn't found any dead lambs from the 2021 crop, nor any that were coughing or otherwise appeared to be sick.

"We started out really, really good," Ratliff said.

But the situation quickly turned bad.

Once ewes and lambs started to congregate in large groups, as they typically do during summer, due in part to the scarcity of water sources, people started reporting dead lambs in the Lookout Mountain unit, Ratliff said.

(Based on previous testing of lambs, biologists know they are not infected, by their mother, prior to birth, he said.)

As of Monday, Ratliff said, ODFW knows of just five lambs from the Lookout Mountain unit that have survived.

He said biologists haven't found any lambs in the Burnt River Canyon herd, although he said those sheep are harder to track due to the terrain.

Sheep in the Burnt River Canyon began dying around October 2020, and Ratliff believes sheep from that herd crossed I-84 earlier in the year, mingled with Lookout Mountain bighorns and became ill, then returned and began spreading the bacteria among Burnt River Canyon sheep.

Trying to identify 'chronic shedders'

ODFW's focus is on finding which bighorns, from both herds, are chronically shedding the bacteria, regardless of whether those animals are actually ill.

Ratliff said even a few of these chronic shedders can keep the bacteria circulating throughout a herd and continue to decimate each year's lamb crop.

He's especially concerned about ewes that are chronic shedders, since the female sheep spend much more time in close contact with other ewes and with lambs.

Rams, by contrast, generally don't mingle with ewes and lambs until November, so a ram that's a chronic shedder isn't as likely to spread the bacteria as widely.

Last fall, ODFW, with financial aid from the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation, as well as the Oregon and national chapters of the Foun-

dedation for North American Wild Sheep, captured 25 bighorns from the Lookout Mountain herd. Although all 25 of those sheep had antibodies in their blood showing they had been infected with the bacteria, just four of the 25 were shedding bacteria at that time, Ratliff said.

Biologists fitted all those sheep with tracking collars so they can be captured again this year and retested, Ratliff said.

This tracking and testing campaign will be expanded dramatically this year, with a goal of capturing 140 more bighorns, including some from the Burnt River Canyon herd.

The strategy is a "two strikes and you're out" concept, Ratliff said.

Bighorns that are identified as chronic shedders for two consecutive years will be euthanized, he said.

Source of bacteria remains mystery

Ratliff said biologists don't know how the Lookout Mountain herd was initially infected with the bacteria.

Mycoplasma ovipneumoniae bacteria are not known to be carried by cattle, but domestic sheep can be infected.

Domestic sheep graze on a public land allotment, overseen by the Bureau of Land Management, in the Lookout Mountain unit, Ratliff said. None of the domestic sheep that graze on that allotment has been tested for the bacteria.

Sheep from two other domestic flocks near Richland, at the north end of the Lookout Mountain unit, were tested in 2020 and none was carrying the Mycoplasma ovipneumoniae bacteria, Ratliff said. A llama owned by a resident along the Snake River Road was also tested, and was also negative for the bacteria.

Ratliff said the strain of bacteria in both Lookout Mountain and Burnt River Canyon herds has not been detected in bighorns in Idaho, which can potentially mingle with Oregon bighorns.

contributed to the surge in infections during August.

"If we had gotten to an 80% vaccination rate, the pandemic would be over for us right now," Lamb said in an Aug. 12 press release. "First, absolutely stay home if you're sick, don't pass illness to others. Second, get vaccinated. The virus will keep mutating and spreading until we eliminate potential carriers."

Bowen takes a different tack in his letter addressed to Brown, writing: "We will raise our children how we see fit. We will choose to wear a mask or choose not to wear a mask. We will choose to get vaccinated or choose not to get vaccinated. Your mindless dictates will no longer be tolerated."

Ash, in his letter, acknowledges that the debate over masks, vaccines and the pandemic itself have become political.



Samantha O'Conner/Baker City Herald

Students and parents gathered Monday morning, Aug. 30, for the first day of classes at Brooklyn Primary School in Baker City.

SCHOOL

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Anderson said the mask requirement didn't cause any noticeable problems.

He pointed out that students are accustomed to wearing masks inside, as that was required last year.

"I think the silver lining to this whole year is that we've done this before," Anderson said. "Last year we had very similar protocols and so masks were required all last year and so students and staff are pretty familiar with the protocols and how to use masks throughout the day. To start the year, students come in, a lot of

them come in with masks in the morning and those who didn't, we have masks for them. It's kind of been business as usual."

Anderson said he was happy to see students streaming through the front doors for the first time since June.

"We're just excited that we're able to start the year in person and, like I said, a lot of the protocols that were in place last year continued to be in place this year," he said. "We've been able to hit the ground running this year, and I can tell you kids are super excited to be in school even with some of the protocols that we're doing."

SHERIFF

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Ash wrote that he also favors "science, and common sense."

"Over the course of the pandemic, lapses in leadership at the state and national level have resulted in a certain level of distrust," Ash wrote. "We saw the benefits of local control last year when many of our small school districts were able to return to in-person learning and extra-curricular activities (without negative health consequences) much sooner than their larger counterparts."

Ash's letter doesn't mention Brown or any other state or local elected official.

Bowen's letter, by contrast, is addressed to Brown.

(Although the governor's communications director told The Oregonian that none of the sheriffs' letters had actually been sent to Brown.)

Bowen in his letter refers to Brown's "overreaching mandates" and "bullying threats," and he accuses the governor of "dictating our state by fear."

Bowen also contends that Brown is "inflicting more damage to our children than any virus could ever do, and you hide behind the misrepresentation that you care for us all. You ma'am care nothing about our children or the people of Eastern Oregon."

Columbia County Sheriff Brian Pixley also posted a letter to Brown that includes some of the same phrases as Bowen's letter does, including referring to Brown's "overreaching mandates" and "bullying threats."

Malheur County Sheriff Brian E. Wolfe wrote in a letter to his constituents that "It has become very apparent that certain government heads have used this pandemic to enact emergency

procedures and are testing the waters of tolerance for the loss of freedom to alleged safety."

Ash in his letter acknowledges the current surge in COVID-19 cases. Baker County reported 270 cases from Aug. 1-27 — more than in any previous month.

"This spike in cases and hospitalizations is supported by real-time local data," Ash wrote. "I believe our county health department and county physician have our best interests at heart in making recommendations and providing guidance for our community. These are our own local experts who are a reliable source of information as we make our individual health decisions."

Dr. Eric Lamb, the county's public health officer, said earlier this month that the county's relatively low vaccination rate — seventh-lowest among Oregon's 36 counties — has

"As Sheriff, I represent everyone, and I hate to see how residents are being divided over these issues," Ash wrote. "I believe that in spite of our differing viewpoints we all want to do what is best for our community. We breathe the same air. We visit the same stores. Our children go to the same schools. We are all still in this together."

I ask that we don't attack those whose decisions may be different than ours, and to please take responsibility for staying home when you are sick. Real people around the world and in our own community have lost loved ones or are experiencing long-term health effects. My thoughts and prayers go out to them."

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



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