

# Round-Up source of new COVID-19 spike

By **BRYCE DOLE** and **GARY A. WARNER**

Oregon Capital Bureau

Gov. Kate Brown said Tuesday, Sept. 28 that she was “gravely concerned” about an alarming spike in COVID-19 cases across Eastern Oregon with a common factor — the Pendleton Round-Up.

During a morning press call, Brown and state health officials gave an upbeat update on the state’s efforts against the highly contagious delta variant of COVID-19.

Statewide, the COVID-19 surge of late summer and early fall “appears to have reached its peak,” said Deputy State Epidemiologist Dr. Tom Jeanne.

Brown hailed the state’s efforts in curbing new infections and hospitalizations as the state appeared to descend from a two-month spike in cases that set new pandemic records in Oregon.

It was only during a question and answer period at the end of the presentation that the Pendleton Round-Up spike was addressed as a sour point in the state’s progress.

The East Oregonian newspaper was the first to report Monday, Sept. 27 that the spike in COVID-19 cases in Umatilla County had been tied by local health officials to the annual rodeo event held Sept. 15-18.

The East Oregonian reported Tuesday that at least 68 COVID-19 cases have been traced back to the event and all its venues, up from 49 Monday. Health officials across Eastern Oregon reported spikes in new cases, as did some in eastern Washington and Idaho.

“That was a very large outdoor event,” Jeanne said of the Round-Up. “And there may not have been great compliance with masking there. We do expect to see some impact on cases from that, but it’s still too early to know the full extent of that.”

When pressed for her level of alarm amid the outbreak, Brown said first and foremost that she did not attend the Pendleton Round-Up because she was concerned about community spread.

Brown said she was well aware of the regional case spike “as a result of the Pendleton Round-Up,” but she still said “it’s a little early,” noting that the Round-Up only ended a few weeks ago.

But the state’s own numbers, along with those from federal and non-government groups, painted a darker picture.

There were at least 506 COVID-related deaths in Oregon during September, which surpasses the January 2021 total of 476, making it the deadliest month of the pandemic in the state.

Oregon’s Hospital Capacity Web System (HOSCAP), which tracks availability of hospital beds in the state, reported Monday that only 6 of 89 staffed adult Intensive Care Unit beds located east of the Cascades were available.

The Pendleton Round-Up was canceled in 2020 amid COVID-19 concerns, but plans moved forward in early summer as Brown had dropped many restrictions on activities when COVID-19 cases appeared to bottom out at the end of June.

The event went off as scheduled despite a steep wave of cases linked to the highly contagious delta variant that swept across Oregon and filled state hospitals to capacity.

It’s still too early to say if cases foreshadow a new spike statewide and health officials are watching closely for that possibility, Jeanne said.

Brown did not voice any regret in not overriding local officials’ decision to go ahead with the event. The Round-Up brought tens of thousands of people into an area with high infection rates and where just 51% of

eligible adults were vaccinated. Many of the visitors came from areas in neighboring states where vaccination rates were also low.

Brown said the state had pressed officials across Oregon to encourage safety protocols like mask mandates. She pointed to other states where people are gathering en masse without a mandate.

“If you watch an Ohio football game in Ohio, those stadiums filled with 100,000 people, there is hardly a mask there,” Brown said. “That is very different here in Oregon.”

Prior to the mid-September event in Pendleton, Brown had said it was up to local officials to ensure the safety of the crowd. As for those who attended, she said they should mask up, follow social distancing guidelines, but otherwise “let ‘er buck,” the Round-Up’s slogan.

But masks were few and far between throughout the Round-Up, even though organizers were offering thousands of them and had posted signs encouraging masking and distancing.

Umatilla County Public Health Director Joe Fiumara has said the number of COVID-19 cases tied to the Round-Up is an undercount, as many people who have tested positive, and are aware of others who have, are not cooperating with health officials. The reported cases include people who had COVID-19 symptoms prior to the event and yet still chose to come, officials have said.

“When so many people come together in one location, it is inevitable,” Umatilla County Commissioner George Murdock said in an email. “The same thing has happened each time restrictions in Oregon have been lifted.”

No county or state officials voiced any interest publicly in stopping the Pendleton Round-Up from happening.

Until this past week, COVID-19 cases had declined statewide for three consecutive weeks.

But state officials acknowledged in the press conference that cases had flat-lined over the previous week. They cited the Pendleton Round-Up outbreak specifically as one of several factors contributing to this trend.

Last week, Umatilla County reported 505 new COVID-19 cases, the county’s second-highest total since the pandemic started.

On Tuesday, the county’s average daily cases reached a new pandemic high, topping its previous record set in August, a month when more county residents died with COVID-19 than any other month — 22.

But public health directors in Umatilla County and the Umatilla Indian Reservation have voiced alarm in recent days about the speed with which the outbreak has unfolded.

Umatilla County officials have said they are preparing for the surge to continue for several weeks. In response, tribal officials quickly reinstated pandemic restrictions that harken back to those from the pandemic’s early stages, including limited social gatherings.

Brown said she was “very, very concerned,” adding that rural communities generally have less access to health care than counties in Western Oregon.

“Honestly, I’m very concerned about the capacity of health care workers themselves,” Brown said. “They have been working day in and day out for the last several weeks providing incredibly valuable patient care, life-saving care. And to have an additional surge on top of it is incredibly frustrating, I’m sure, for them after they have worked so hard.”

In August, Brown announced a COVID-19 vaccine mandate for teachers and health care workers with an Oct. 18 deadline, citing the

alarming rise in cases driven by the delta variant.

Besides Wheeler County, more than a quarter of health care workers in every Eastern Oregon county are unvaccinated, according to state data. All would be fired or forced to resign under Brown’s current mandate.

Last week, Umatilla County’s public health officer, Dr. Jon Hitzman, said if a COVID-19 surge were to follow the Pendleton Round-Up, its peak would occur right around the mandate’s deadline, placing a greater strain on hospitals that are already short-staffed.

In the press conference, Brown said she was “pushing forward on our vaccine requirement for health care workers because we have a really stark choice right now: a vaccinated workforce that can continue to work through our COVID surges like the one we’re likely to see again from the Pendleton Round-Up, or an unvaccinated workforce that’s depleted by quarantines and illness.”

Much of the briefing was taken up with mostly upbeat news of overall drop of statewide cases, approval of booster shots for some Pfizer vaccine recipients, and the usual requests for continued voluntary masking and social distancing.

The rising numbers in Umatilla County led the independent pandemic monitoring group COVID Act Now to raise the county’s risk rating to its highest level: Extreme.

Since first appearing in Wuhan, China at the very end of 2019, COVID-19 has infected 232.6 million people worldwide and killed 4.76 million, according to the Johns Hopkins Coronavirus Resource Center. In the United States, 43.2 million cases have been reported and 692,058 have died.

*Bryce Dole is a reporter with the East Oregonian. Gary A. Warner is a statehouse reporter for the Oregon Capital Bureau.*

## SCIENCE

Continued from A1

Then the students took up nets to catch some specimens in the nearby meadow (and warm up in the sunshine).

Bob Hassmiller from the Forest Service presented on Tuesday for the science field trips. He talked about the watershed, streams, snow load, and impacts on the ecosystem.

At other stops, Christy Johnson from the Forest Service talked about forest health, and Kati Stuchlik supplied watercolor paints at the “Bob Ross Watercolor Station” so the

students could “paint a happy little tree.”

(She even played soft music and wore a wig to emulate Bob Ross, painter and host of “The Joy of Painting” that aired on PBS.)

A station with horseshoes and cornhole games spurred laughter that echoed through the forest, and Smith lead groups on a “Neature Walk” — “Because nature is neat,” Sullivan said with a grin — as they gathered photos of trees, insects and animal prints for the scavenger hunt.

And Sullivan threw in an extra challenge to that task.

“Try to get a photobomb with Mr. Smith,” she whispered to the kids before they set off on their mission.



Lisa Britton/Baker City Herald

Evan Rexroad, left, and Makea Robb check their net to see if they caught any bugs during a science field trip to Phillips Park on Wednesday, Sept. 29.

## DAY CARE

Continued from A1

“We’ve had a lot of interest with infants and toddlers, so that’s the age classroom that we’ll fill up first,” Shukle said. “The buildings are in, they’re beautiful, we have equipment, we’re getting our playground worked on as we speak and we are just charging away.”

About 16 people will be working at the center, Shukle said.

The center is a cooperative venture involving the Baker 5J School District, which operates the Baker Early Learning Center, and the YMCA.

Other partners and contributors include Saint Alphonsus Medical Center-Baker, St. Luke’s, and Wilson Cattle Company, Shukle said.

The project has also received many other financial contributions, she said.

Fred Warner Jr., interim director for the YMCA, wrote in a report that Baker County is considered a child care “desert,” meaning there are more than three children for every certified child care slot. The most acute need, he said, is for infants and children up to 30 months old.

“The lack of child care in our community has led to working mothers and fathers leaving the work force or not able to look for work because of lack of reliable, safe and affordable child care,” Warner wrote. “Businesses in our county are unable to attract new workers and retain current employees because of family child care issues. Children will benefit from quality programs that will prepare



Jayson Jacoby/Baker City Herald

The new center is located in two modular buildings.

them to learn and the schools will benefit from students that are ready to learn.”

The center’s tentative operating hours will be from 7 a.m. to 5:30 p.m., Warner wrote. He said the YMCA will work with the Oregon Employment Related Day Care program to make the cost affordable to parents.

Parents who are interested in the new center can learn more by visiting the YMCA at 3715 Pocahontas Road, or by calling 541-523-9622.

## SWAT

Continued from A1

Ash said Rex noticed the pickup parked in his driveway. When he went inside his home he saw that items had been moved. Rex also went outside and noticed items, including acetylene tanks, had also been moved.

He also realized that a gun was missing from inside the house.

Ash said Rex, who was armed with a gun, called police to report the burglary. While Rex was on the phone, he told the dispatcher that he saw a person running

away from his home, a couple hundred yards away, Ash said.

Rex also told police about the missing gun, which Ash said prompted the call to the Northeast Oregon Regional SWAT team, which has members from the Baker County Sheriff’s Office, Baker City Police Department, Union County Sheriff’s Office and La Grande Police Department.

The SWAT team was activated at about 4:30 p.m.

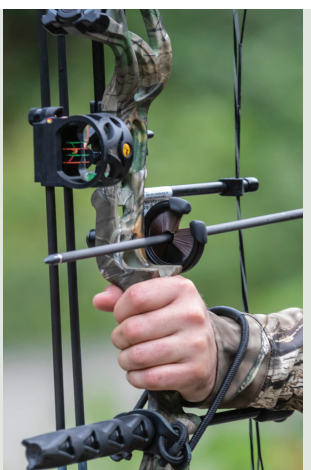
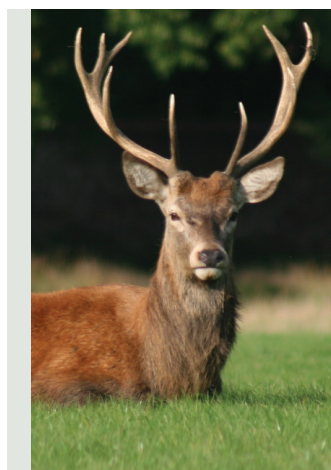
The team searched the area between Atwood Road and Interstate 84. A tracking dog followed a scent trail to the freeway, according to the Baker County Sheriff’s Office. Ash said officers from

his office, Baker City Police, Oregon State Police and the U.S. Forest Service set up a perimeter while the SWAT team searched an area that includes multiple ponds, ditches, dense brush and scattered vehicles.

The Baker County Road Department and Baker Aircraft also assisted.

Ash said that during the investigation, police found, in the pickup truck parked in Rex’s driveway, the gun that Rex said was missing.

Sheriff’s deputies continued to patrol the area through the night, after the SWAT team ended its search, Ash said.



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