

WOLVES

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After ODFW biologists confirmed that Lookout Mountain wolves had attacked cattle five times during July, killing three and injuring three others, agency employees killed two pups, born during the spring of 2021, on Aug. 1.

Following additional attacks in August and September that killed five head of cattle, ODFW employees shot and killed three more wolves, including the pack's breeding male, on Sept. 17.

There were no attacks on cattle for almost a month, until Oct. 16, when biologists determined that wolves had killed a 400-pound calf, likely on Oct. 14.

ODFW employees then shot and killed three more wolves, two juveniles born this year and one wolf born in 2020, on Oct. 20.

ODFW officials believe the Lookout Mountain pack, which roams in the area between Highway 86 on the north and Interstate 84 to the south, now consists of up to three wolves — the breeding female and two juveniles born this spring that are about six months old.

The breeding female has a GPS tracking collar that allows biologists to monitor her movements.

Brown wrote that one possibility is that the breeding female will remain in the area.

"When there is a loss of a breeder, the remaining wolf will often stay in the familiar territory, while waiting for a new mate to disperse into the area," Brown wrote.

It's also possible that the breeding female will leave the area to search for a new mate.

But Brown said she doesn't think that will happen so long as the two juvenile wolves are still traveling with their mother.

Because the breeding female would not mate with one of her offspring — ODFW doesn't know the gender of the two remaining juveniles — the only circumstance in which the breeding female would have a new mate is if a dispersing male wolf moves into the Lookout Mountain area, Brown wrote.

"Dispersing wolves commonly travel throughout the Lookout Mountain unit," she wrote.

Brown wrote that there are no nearby wolf packs that are likely to "take over" the territory of the Lookout Mountain pack.

The juvenile wolves are old enough to travel full time with the breeding female, but they "are unlikely to contribute any when killing larger prey due to their lack of experience," Brown wrote.

The juvenile wolves can kill smaller prey on their own, she wrote.

ODFW officials have said previously that they decided to kill wolves from the pack because the evidence showed that the wolves were targeting cattle despite healthy populations of elk and deer, the usual main food source for wolf packs, in the Lookout Mountain area.

Officials also said ranchers in the area had frequently patrolled the area, tried to haze the wolves, and ensured there were no bone piles or other attractants.

The agency initially focused on juveniles and yearlings rather than the pack's breeding pair. But ODFW officials decided to kill the breeding male on Sept. 17 when depredations continued.

Baker County Sheriff Travis Ash, who has talked with ranchers who have lost cattle to the wolves and been present at some ODFW investigations at attack scenes, wrote a letter on Sept. 12 to ODFW Director Curt Melcher asking for the state to eliminate the entire Lookout Mountain pack.

Ash said on Friday, Oct. 22 that although he hopes the killing of the three wolves on Oct. 20 will change the pack's behavior and end attacks on cattle, he's not confident that will happen.

He said ranchers are frustrated and want to be able to run their cattle on private land — where several of the attacks have happened — without having to deal with losses from wolves.

Protesters decry vaccine mandate

By **BRYCE DOLE**

East Oregonian

PENDLETON — As the sun crested the hills over CHI St. Anthony hospital in Pendleton on Tuesday, Oct. 19, a group of health care workers who had just finished their final 12-hour shift stood in the cold.

The workers were not vaccinated against COVID-19, and the hospital placed them on 90 days of unpaid leave after the state's mandate went into effect the day before. A hospital spokesperson said in an email that the hospital placed 15 employees — or 4% of its more than 370 employees — on leave.

The group joined more than 50 protesters outside the hospital, where a record number of COVID-19 patients were admitted during a delta variant crisis that has infected, hospitalized and killed more county residents than any other pandemic surge since March 2020, according to data from the Oregon Health Authority and Umatilla County Public Health.

First they protested near the parking lot. Then they protested at the nearby intersection. For more than an hour, they cheered and held signs decrying the mandate while dozens of vehicles, including ambulances, honked as they passed.

Among them was Michelle Burcham, a hospital chaplain who said her request for a religious exemption was denied. Burcham joined the hospital in 2017. She said she loved her job and enjoyed supporting her community. But when she heard on Oct. 16 that her request had been denied, she felt that it was a sign.

"From the beginning, I didn't make it about the vaccine," she said. "I made it about God's directing me to another place."

Emily Smith, a St. Anthony spokesperson, said in

an email that employees who were denied exemptions could request their case be reevaluated and added "most who chose to resubmit were subsequently approved."

But at this point, Burcham said she's uninterested in pursuing that route. She said she doesn't want to lose the connection she's had with her community through her job, adding she would consider helping out part-time if given the opportunity.

"I don't know how a Catholic, religious institution decides if your religious exemption is valid or not," she said. "And I do think it's disrespectful of them to say that other workers don't care about their community if they're not vaccinated."

Smith said the hospital could not comment on the specific case of any employee but explained exemption requests are processed by the national office for CommonSpirit Health, a part of Catholic Health Initiatives, the national Catholic health care system that owns St. Anthony.

In a statement in response to the protest, Smith said the hospital had "no choice but to comply" with the Gov. Kate Brown's and President Joe Biden's COVID-19 vaccine mandates.

The statement said the vaccine is the "most effective tool we have to manage" coronavirus.

"In our efforts to improve health and advance social justice, especially for those who are most vulnerable, we seek to diminish the risk of bringing an infectious disease into the workplace, exposing our families to it, or spreading it in our community," according to the statement. "St. Anthony is committed to optimizing safety for its patients, staff, and visitors." The U.S. Centers for Disease



Kathy Aney/East Oregonian

About 50 protesters involved in a demonstration against vaccines and vaccination mandates on Tuesday morning, Oct. 19, 2021, walk along a sidewalk near St. Anthony Hospital in Pendleton.

Control and Prevention also states COVID-19 vaccines are safe and highly effective at preventing severe cases, hospitalization and death.

Protesters decry mandate

Protesters nationwide have voiced opposition to what they describe as government overreach amid state and federal vaccine mandates. Outside St. Anthony, a group held signs calling for medical freedom and bodily autonomy. Teenagers to older adults took photos, smiled, laughed and waved. Several health care workers and attendees said they felt like they were standing for a good cause.

"We have rights as citizens, living in a free country," said Julie Malcom, a 29-year employee at St. Anthony who worked in the labor and delivery unit.

Malcolm, a born-and-raised Pendleton resident, said her unit has roughly a dozen workers. She and Dawn Jeffers, who also worked in the labor and delivery unit, said they are concerned about how the unit will operate with about a quarter fewer workers.

"It feels like we're a number, not a person," said Jeffers, who said she worked at St. Anthony for more than eight years. She called hospital policies requir-

ing weekly COVID-19 tests among unvaccinated employees "discriminatory."

Andrina Thornton, a fifth-year nurse on the hospital's medical floor, said she came to the protest in solidarity with the nurses who lost their jobs. She pointed out that many community members had their children delivered by the labor and delivery employees placed on leave.

"It's really sad that we are losing nurses who are born and raised here, invested in our community," she said. "These are home-grown nurses."

Thornton said she received a vaccine exemption but said she'll be getting vaccinated to continue her work in the Army National Guard. She said she wants the community to know about how hard this will be on the small hospital.

"People need to think about the consequences as a whole," she said. "All of us nurses here know that COVID is real. All of us nurses here know that we're losing people of COVID, and it's unfortunate. But we've been in the trenches for 18 months, unvaccinated, and now that choice is being taken away from us, and there's a lot of nurses that strongly feel that their health is their choice."

County discusses options for east county ambulance service

By **SAMANTHA O'CONNOR**

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Baker County Commissioners on Wednesday, Oct. 20 authorized Jason Yencopal, the county's emergency manager, and his staff to continue efforts to deal with a staffing shortage in the Halfway/Oxbow ambulance service in eastern Baker County.

The district notified county officials in a letter dated Oct. 12 that it can't meet its minimum response time due to Oregon's COVID-19 vaccination mandate, which took effect Oct. 18.

Yencopal told commissioners that volunteers, who already have day jobs, operate the Halfway/Oxbow ambulance service.

In response to Commission Chairman Bill Harvey's question, Yencopal confirmed

that the service will continue, but that it might not be able to respond to calls within 45 minutes in 90% of incidents.

"They don't want to vacate the area, they don't want to not continue any service, it will just take them longer," Yencopal said. "What they did tell me was, 'we have about three that have been responding to most of those calls — a driver, an EMR (emergency medical responder), and an EMT (emergency medical technician) intermediate.'"

Commissioners authorized Yencopal to discuss with other rural departments in the county the possibility of having their volunteers drive the ambulance for Halfway/Oxbow.

Yencopal said the plan is to start a training and recruitment process.

"We thought we would start out with the EMRs — emergency medical responders — in each locale, Huntington, Halfway and then Burnt River to augment that and that we would, by the books, we would pay the instructor," Commissioner Mark Bennett said.

The letter from the Halfway/Oxbow ambulance service didn't say how many of its volunteers are not available due to the vaccine mandate.

Volunteers who choose not to be vaccinated can request a medical or religious exception.

In addition to the Halfway/Oxbow ambulance service, Yencopal said he has been seeking to ensure coverage in the Huntington area, which does not have its own ambu-

lance. Now, a private company in the Treasure Valley, and the Baker City Fire Department, generally respond to ambulance calls in the Huntington area, which includes a stretch of Interstate 84.

"I think all EMS agencies are feeling this," Yencopal said. "So, making sure they are responding to their assigned (ambulance service areas) and how much mutual aid they are able to provide, I don't know."

Baker City Manager Jon Cannon said earlier this week that the Baker City Fire Department, which also provides ambulance service to Baker City and to much of Baker County, has a vaccination record or has approved an exception for all the paid staff.

BACKPACK

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The program started 11 years ago by the First Presbyterian Church as part of its mission group.

Many local businesses, civic groups, churches and residents have contributed to the project.

Although the basement of the First Presbyterian Church remains the pantry and distri-

bution center for the program, Defrees said the goal is make it more of a standalone program rather than one specifically affiliated with the church.

"That was partly to encourage participation in the community," Defrees said. "And also we're still exploring the possibility of becoming our own 501(c)(3) so that we can qualify for some additional funding."

Defrees said the Backpack

Program has more volunteers this year compared with last year, when the pandemic discouraged some people, when volunteers were divided into two rooms when food packages were filled. This year's operation is more typical of the past.

"We still have all of our volunteers wearing masks and social distancing whenever possible but we have a pretty strong crew that rotates packing," Defrees said.

They are always looking for volunteers to help with fundraising for the program. She said people are mostly interested in helping with packing, but there are ample volunteers for that task now.

People who are interested in delivering bins to the schools are also welcome to volunteer.

"And there's always an opportunity to get involved with the board, with the leadership,"

Defrees said. "And people can certainly call me or email me if they have any interest in any of those roles."

The Backpack Program accepts food donations, but Defrees asks that people check with her before they donate due to the specific food items and quantities that they need. One example is peanut butter. They cannot use the large jars but they take the standard smaller jars.

"We always welcome donations on our website link that's actually linked through the church," Defrees said.

People who are interested in volunteering or have questions can reach out to Defrees through her email at jessdefrees@gmail.com.

More information on the Baker City Backpack Program is also available at <https://firstpresbakercity.blogspot.com/p/blog-page.html>

COVID

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Breakthrough cases

These infections in fully vaccinated residents continue to account for about 1 of every 5 cases in Baker County.

From Oct. 10-16, there were eight breakthrough cases out of 37 total, a rate of 21.6%.

That's down slightly from a 25% breakthrough case rate from Oct. 3-9 (12 of 48) and 23.2% from Sept. 26-Oct. 2 (16 of 69).

Statewide, 23.5% of cases from Oct. 10-16 were breakthrough, according to the Oregon Health Authority (OHA).

More Coverage

A 61-year-old Baker County woman who died Oct. 19 at Saint Alphonsus Medical Center in Boise is the county's 29th COVID-19-related death.

The Oregon Health Authority reported the woman's death today, Oct. 22. She tested positive on Sept. 21. The presence of underlying medical conditions has not been confirmed.

OHA's weekly breakthrough case report notes that overall, 4.4% of people with breakthrough cases

have been hospitalized, and 1% have died.

Of the 325 people who have died with a breakthrough infection, 51% were 80 or older, and 78% were 70 or older, according to OHA. Those two age groups account for just 18% of the state's nearly 33,000 breakthrough cases, however.

The agency has tallied seven deaths in people ages 40 to 49 with breakthrough infections, and two deaths in people ages 30 to 39. No deaths have been reported in people younger than 30 with breakthrough cases.

Almost 53% of the state's breakthrough cases have been in people younger than 50.

Breakthrough cases have accounted for a higher percentage of deaths in Oregon since the delta variant became the primary source of infection in July.

The percentage of deaths attributed to breakthrough infections rose from 8.2% in May 2021 to 19.8% in July and to 23% in August.

The percentage dropped to 19.9% during September, when breakthrough infections accounted for 126 of Oregon's 633 COVID-related deaths.

The report also lists the breakthrough case rate, per 100,000 vaccinated residents, for each of the three vaccines.

• Johnson & Johnson, 1,779.4 cases per 100,000 vac-

inated residents

• Pfizer, 1,137.7 per 100,000

• Moderna, 938.3 per 100,000

Vaccination

After rising during September, Baker County's daily average of vaccine doses administered had dropped so far in October, according to OHA figures.

In September a total of 723 doses were administered in the county, an average of 24.1 doses per day. That was up from August's total of 633 doses.

From Oct. 1-20, there were 350 doses given, a daily average of 17.5. Those are pre-

liminary numbers, however, and additional doses could be added for that period.

The county's seven-day running daily average of Baker County's vaccination rate — 52.7% of residents 18 and older — is tied for the fifth-lowest among Oregon's 36 counties. Harney County also has a 52.7% rate.

The counties with lower rates:

- Lake, 43%
- Malheur, 46.2%
- Grant, 48.4%
- Gilliam, 48.4%

Vaccination rates for other counties in the region:

- Wallowa, 66%
- Union, 56.6%
- Umatilla, 53%