

Truck crash leads to series of wrecks

Baker City Herald

A commercial truck-trailer combination lost control on an icy curve on Interstate 84 near Rye Valley, southeast of Baker City, Sunday morning, Dec. 26, leading to a chain reaction in which several other vehicles were damaged.

There were no serious injuries, although several drivers or passengers

sustained minor injuries, according to an Oregon State Police report.

The incident started when truck driver Teresa S. Hubbard, 59, of Knoxville, Tennessee, who was driving westbound near Milepost 342, about 38 miles southeast of Baker City, slid on the slick pavement just before 10 a.m. and careened off a steep embankment.

The trailer was partially blocking one westbound lane, and several other vehicles crashed when they reached the site, according to a report from Sgt. David Aydelotte.

Shortly after the chain reaction crashes, a Lexus SUV crashed into an Oregon Department of Transportation snowplow that was helping with the incident.

Several vehicles, including the truck and trailer, had to be towed.

The truck crash caused significant damage to the concrete barrier in the center of the freeway, and destroyed a section of guardrail, according to Aydelotte's report.

An estimated 150 gallons of diesel spilled from the truck.

HERDS

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He said that's strong evidence that the bacteria, which sheep can easily spread among themselves, is still present in those larger groups and likely killed all of this year's lambs.

"In the smaller subgroups there's less chance of lambs being infected," Ratliff said.

Biologists were initially optimistic in 2020, with no dead lambs found as of mid June.

They knew, from earlier testing, that lambs aren't infected by their mothers prior to birth.

But later in the summer of 2020, as ewes and lambs started to congregate in larger "nursery" groups, lambs started to sicken and die.

Finding the 'shedders'

The key to saving the Lookout Mountain herd — and the smaller herd of California bighorns, a smaller subspecies, in the Burnt River Canyon south of I-84 — is finding the sheep that are chronic "shedders" of the bacteria that causes potentially fatal pneumonia, Ratliff said.

That's the focus of a multiagency effort that started in 2020 and likely will continue for several more years.

This campaign relies heavily on temporarily capturing bighorns, testing them for the bacteria, and fitting them with GPS tracking collars.

Chronic shedders often don't get sick, but they can quickly spread the bacteria to other sheep that lack high levels of immunity, Ratliff said.

Ewes that are chronic shedders are especially problematic because they mingle with other ewes, and lambs, more often than rams, which are either solitary or with other rams much of the year.

Lambs are especially vulnerable, as the nearly wholesale loss of the youngest animals the past two years attests.

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 Foundation 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 and retested.

So far this fall, ODFW has captured, tested and collared 14 more sheep from Lookout Mountain.

None was a chronic shedder, Ratliff said, although test results from two of the bighorns were inconclusive, so it's not clear whether they are shedders or not. One of the 14, a ewe, was a chronic shedder identified in 2020, but was not shedding this fall.



Lisa Britton/Baker City Herald, File

A group of bighorn rams photographed on June 20, 2020, in the Lookout Mountain unit in eastern Baker County.

Campaign to save sheep herds costly

Trapping, testing and attaching GPS collars to bighorn sheep in some of Baker County's most rugged country is a time-consuming, and expensive, endeavor.

Brian Ratliff, wildlife biologist at the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife's (ODFW) Baker City office, said the agency has benefited from financial assistance from the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation, as well as technical assistance from the Tribes' biologists. The Tribes have contributed \$32,000 from their own budget, and also received a federal grant for \$183,000.

Ratliff said the Oregon chapter of the Foundation for North American Wild Sheep contributed \$10,000, and the Foundation's national office allocated \$50,000 for a three-state bighorn sheep project that includes Washington and Idaho. The Bureau of Land Management, which oversees much of the land that both the Lookout Mountain and Burnt River Canyon bighorn herds use, recently contributed \$20,000. And ODFW has spent more than \$125,000 so far on the campaign, Ratliff said.

Sheep that are trapped twice and are chronically shedding both times will be euthanized, Ratliff said.

So far, ODFW hasn't euthanized any bighorns from Lookout Mountain since none has twice been identified as a chronic shedder.

Ratliff said it's possible that the herd could naturally recover from the outbreak by virtue of the chronic shedders dying naturally. Over time, more sheep are likely to gain immunity from a previous exposure to the bacteria, as well.

On the other hand, just a few chronic shedders could potentially keep the bacteria circulating within the herd, and decimating each year's crop of lambs.

"We've just got to figure out who it is," Ratliff said.

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 has ranged from a high of 67 per 100 to a low of 24.

Looking ahead to 2022

Ratliff said he expects to see a typical crop of lambs born in the Lookout Mountain herd late in the coming spring.

During the aerial survey this month, he said he didn't see any evidence of sick sheep — bighorns that develop pneumonia from the bacteria typically cough and stumble. And based on 2020 and 2021, it doesn't appear that the bacteria is affecting the reproductive capacity of the herd.

But again, because chronic shedders usually aren't themselves ill, the absence of any obviously sick sheep doesn't mean the bacteria isn't still present, Ratliff said.

The key period will be the summer, when the ewes and lambs begin to gather into their nursery groups, greatly increasing the chance of spreading the bacteria.

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.

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 infected Lookout Mountain bighorns and became ill, then returned and began spreading the bacteria among Burnt River Canyon sheep.

OHSU predicts fewer hospital cases due to the omicron variant

By FEDOR ZARKHIN

The Oregonian

Oregon's COVID-19 omicron hospitalization peak won't be nearly as bad as forecasters predicted a week ago but could still overwhelm the health care system within weeks with about as many people needing hospital beds as did during the delta wave.

Oregon Health & Science University revised its omicron surge projections Thursday, Dec. 23, down from about 2,400 people hospitalized at the peak of the upcoming surge to about 1,200, provided Oregonians take steps to prevent the spread of infections.

The peak, which is expected to hit in early February, could exceed

1,700 if Oregonians' behavior doesn't change, though it always has in the past when infections have started to climb, OHSU data analyst Peter Graven said.

But while the downward revision could be heartening, the currently predicted wave of hospitalizations could still rival or exceed Oregon's peak in early September.

"The risk of overwhelming hospital systems is real," Graven said. "We're seeing a dire situation."

The numbers could be revised down again next week, when Graven hopes to produce a forecast with yet more accurate data. The key variable driving the uncertainty is how likely an omicron infection is to land a vaccinated person in the hospital.

RESCUE

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Christensen said in a phone interview with the Herald on Monday afternoon that he is also an experienced snowmobiler who has participated in search and rescue missions, involving snowmobiles, with the Umatilla County Sheriff's Office.

Christensen said he was riding his snowmobile in the Tollgate area, north of Elgin, on Sunday. He said he had just returned to his cabin when he got a phone call from Mike Kelly, a friend from Burbank, Washington, near the Tri Cities.

Kelly said he and four other riders, all of them friends with Christensen, were riding in the Fish Lake area north of Halfway and that they were lost in a storm that brought fog, snow and gusty winds that eradicated their tracks. The riders couldn't find their way back to the trailhead in the dark.

"I immediately started making phone calls," Christensen said.

One of those was to the Wallowa Avalanche Center in Joseph, where a staff member gave Christensen a phone number for Ash.

Kelly used his cellphone to send Christensen a digital map ostensibly showing their location. But the map showed them to be in the Catherine Creek area, more than 15 miles to the west.

At about 5:43 p.m., the Baker County Sheriff's Office received an SOS alert from a Garmin satellite device. The message stated that several snowmobilers, one of whom had a medical condition, were lost. The message pinpointed the group's location near Fish Lake.

Ash said it was clear that this was the same group that Christensen had called him about.

Christensen said another member of the group, John Mecham of Kennewick, brought the Garmin InReach satellite device.

Ash said he told Christensen, who had intermittent cellphone contact with Kelly, to tell the group to stay where they were since the GPS message had established their location.

Christensen said his friends had ridden in the area several times, but were unable to get their bearings in the storm.

They did have materials to start a fire, as well as some food.

"They're experienced riders," Christensen said. "That's something all snowmobilers should do, to be

prepared even if they don't think they'll ever be stranded."

Ash said that after confirming the group's location he called Duane Miles of the Panhandle Snowmobile Club, who immediately started assembling riders while Ash was en route from Baker City to Halfway.

Ash said the sheriff's office has worked with members of the Panhandle Snowmobile Club for many years, and their knowledge of the area is valuable.

"They know the terrain and they're used to riding it all the time," he said.

Several of the club members who participated in the rescue had been riding in the area earlier in the day, and they refueled their machines and headed back into the mountains despite the darkness and the severe weather.

The club members reached the five Washington men about 9:10 p.m. They were cold and tired but otherwise OK. They rode back about nine miles to the Clear Creek Sno-Park on the road to Fish Lake.

The group, in addition to Kelly and Mecham, consisted of John Rasmussen of Kennewick, and Alan Townsend and Steve Paget, both from Burbank.

The sheriff's office thanked the members of the Panhandle Snowmobile Club who helped in the rescue: Dusty Traw, Ray Denig, Kyle Bennett, Josh Sevier, Kyle Dennis, Chad DeCurto, Tucker Gulick, Kelly Grisham, Shane Denig.

Christensen said he talked with Kelly on Monday morning, and he and the other riders expressed their gratitude to the Panhandle Club members, Ash and everyone else who assisted in the rescue.

"They were super thankful for all the help," Christensen said. "It was really amazing how quickly the community banded together."

Ash and Christensen agreed that the incident is a reminder of why all outdoor recreationists should carry a GPS device that has the capability to send messages via satellite, allowing them to summon help even from areas lacking cell service.

Had rescuers had only the snowmobilers' cell-derived map as guidance, they would have searched in the wrong place, and the riders would have had to spend at least one night in the mountains, Ash said.

The nearest weather station to the rescue site, a snow-measuring device at Schneider Meadows, recorded temperatures as low as 10 degrees early Monday.

COVID

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"We're not going to let up on the vaccinations," Staten said. "That's the one thing we can do that we know will help."

Case counts stay relatively steady

After reporting 11 cases on Dec.

21, Baker County had daily totals of three, six, two, zero (on Christmas Day) and one.

The weekly total (Dec. 18-25) was 25, an increase of three cases from the previous week.

December is on pace to have the lowest daily average case count since July. Through Dec. 26, the daily average for the month was 3.5 cases, down from 4.8 per day in November and 5.4 per day in October.

July's average was 2.9 cases per day.

The county's numbers, driven by the arrival of delta variant, rose rapidly thereafter, to 10 cases per day during August and to a record of 15.5 per day in September.

Staten said that although December's case counts have declined, she believes there are residents in the county who have symptoms consistent with COVID-19 but who

choose not to be tested.

She said the more important issue is that people who feel ill take precautions, such as staying home from work, to avoid potentially infecting other people.

Staten encourages people who are seriously ill to make sure they seek medical treatment.

Breakthrough cases

Baker County had two break-

through cases — infections in fully vaccinated people — for the most recently measured week, Dec. 12-18, according to OHA. There were 22 total cases in the county that week, and the breakthrough rate of 9% was the county's lowest since August.

From Sept. 5 through Dec. 18, the county's breakthrough case rate was 16.8% — 143 of 849 cases.

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