

YEAR in REVIEW

Photos by Alex Wittwer



Lightning appears to strike the Blue Mountains as a crop harvester collects grass seed near Alice on Thursday, Aug. 5, 2021.

Pandemic dominates the news cycle in 2021



ANDREW CUTLER
FROM THE EDITOR'S DESK

Here we are at the end of another year. It hardly seems possible that we're turning the page on 2021 and moving into 2022. It seems, at least for me, that each successive year just races by quicker than a hiccup. That especially seems the case as we continue to be trapped in this COVID-19-induced nightmare.

And yet, no matter how much whining I do, here we are, waving goodbye to 2021.

With the turning of the calendar page comes The Observer's annual year-in-review section. As I started preparing for this project, I went back and looked over last year's section, helmed by former editor Phil Wright. When I read Wright's column that looked back at 2020, one thing jumped out to me — the final sentence.

"Here is to a better 2021," Wright wrote to bid farewell to 2020.

Did we get one?

At first glance, if one didn't get their fill of pandemics and mandates during 2020, 2021 certainly was a repeat in a lot of aspects. For much of the year, especially early, the state as a whole, and Union County specifically, struggled with vaccinations. Oregon Gov. Kate Brown targeted June 30 after the state failed to reach its initial goal of vaccinating 70% of Oregon's eligible population by June 21.

It looked like we would finally be rid of COVID and the mandates when Oregon reached Brown's 70% vaccinated threshold, and she famously held a press conference at Providence Park in Portland on June 30 and exclaimed, "Welcome back, Oregon."

The event was marked by the celebration of the lives of people who were lost to the pandemic, as well as commending the efforts of first responders and essential workers who put the state on their shoulders over the past year. The crowd consisted of a political and business "who's

who" of Oregon, with attendees including Oregon Secretary of State Shemia Fagan, countless legislators and local city and county elected officials.

That optimism and the accompanying "return to normal" was short-lived, however, as the delta variant reared its head later in the summer, signaling that the pandemic wasn't through with us just yet.

And now, as 2021 turns to 2022, another new variant — omicron — looms on the horizon and promises the very real possibility of more of the same in the new year.

The omicron variant of COVID-19 is spreading very rapidly in other parts of the world and is capable of infecting people who've been fully vaccinated. Pandemic modeling from Oregon Health & Science University predicts that by February hospitalizations could peak at numbers far higher than the delta variant's September surge.

Much about the omicron variant remains unknown, including whether it causes more or less severe illness. Early studies suggest the vaccinated will need a booster shot for the best chance at preventing omicron infection, but even without the extra dose, vaccination still should offer strong protection against severe illness and death.

COVID-19, again, certainly is the story of 2021, and the pandemic and its ramifications promise to redefine much for us, personally and professionally, in 2022. But it also continues to show we are a community full of people striving to improve themselves and improve where we live.

That applies as well to the crew at The Observer. The last two years have reaffirmed for us the value of our mission to cover local news and bring a light to the people, situations and stories that shape all of our lives in this corner of Oregon.

Andrew Cutler is the interim editor of The Observer and the regional editorial director for the EO Media Group, overseeing The Observer, East Oregonian and four more newspapers in Eastern Oregon.



Marcy Bartlett on Monday, Feb. 8, 2021, cleans the common room at a residence hall on the Eastern Oregon University campus in La Grande. EOU reported it continues to take measures to control the spread of COVID-19, including implementing social distancing measures, the creation of a COVID-19 case management team and requiring vaccinations for students and staff in the fall of 2021.



Union County Sheriff Cody Bowen speaks at a medical freedom rally on Fourth Street in La Grande on Saturday, Sept. 18, 2021. In August, Bowen penned a viral letter to Gov. Kate Brown outlining his grievances about mask and vaccine mandates, drawing support — and ire — from Union County residents. Several other Oregon county sheriffs chimed in with their own letters in opposition to the state's pandemic safeguards.

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2021

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