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Cliff Bentz voices opposition to River Democracy Act

Baker City Herald

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QUICK HITS

Good Day Wish To A Subscriber

A special good day to Herald subscriber Rona Music of Baker City.

BRIEFING

Local, A5

JOHN DAY — The 10-year stewardship contract between the Malheur National Forest and Iron Triangle is widely credited with saving John Day's last surviving lumber mill, creating hundreds of jobs and improving forest health.

But it has also prompted criticism from some who feel the John Day-based logging company has profited at the expense of smaller rivals.

Sports, A6

Baker's girls and boys basketball teams were scheduled to open their Greater Oregon League season on Tuesday, Jan. 11, by playing host to rival La Grande in the Baker gym.

But then COVID-19 intervened.

Quarantines in both the La Grande girls and boys teams prompted the games to be postponed, Baker School District Athletic Director Buell Gonzales Jr. announced late on the morning of Jan. 11, about seven hours before the girls game was slated to tip off at 6 p.m.

WEATHER

Today
38/24
Mostly cloudy

Friday
34/22
Mostly cloudy

Full forecast on the back of the B section.

Meat of the Matter

Ranchers optimistic about federal attention to lack of competition in meatpacking



Lisa Britton/Baker City Herald

Cattle in Bowen Valley, just south of Baker City, on Tuesday, Jan. 11, 2022.

BY JAYSON JACOBY

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Curtis Martin doesn't expect a problem that was decades in the making to be solved by a single announcement from the White House, even one that comes with a billion-dollar pledge.

But Martin, a North Powder cattle rancher and past president of the Oregon Cattlemen's Association, is nonetheless encouraged by the Biden administration's effort to increase competition in the meatpacking industry, which is dominated by four corporations.

"I think it's wonderful," Martin said of the administration's recent announcement that it would divert \$1 billion from the 2021 American Rescue Plan Act to address problems in the meat processing system and try to encourage the construction of smaller, regional meat processing operations and, potentially, curb a recent rise in beef, pork and poultry prices at the retail level.

"It's really a positive report, and I think the best thing ranchers can do is engage in it and help Tom Vilsack," Martin said.

Vilsack is the U.S. Agriculture Secretary, and one of the federal officials who met with Biden recently in a virtual meeting to discuss the situation.

The resulting plan, which was announced on Jan. 3, has among its goals enforcing existing competition laws and making the machinations of the cattle markets more transparent.

That new federal focus is welcome news for Martin, who has been concerned for many years about what he considers an unfair manipulation of beef markets by the four companies that control about 85% of the country's cattle processing — Cargill, Tyson Foods, JBS, and National Beef Packing.

While retail beef prices have risen by 21% over the past year, according to

the U.S. Department of Agriculture, that trend hasn't been reflected in what ranchers are receiving for their cattle, Martin said.

Tom Sharp, the Oregon Cattlemen's current president, addressed the rise in beef prices in an October 2021 interview with the Pacific Northwest Ag Network.

"Those profits have largely gone solely to the major beef packing companies that dominate boxed beef production here in the United States," Sharp said. "There's really four multinational companies that produce 83% of the total boxed beef for retail consumption here in the United States."

Martin said he believes one way to reduce the dominance those four companies have is to encourage more local and regional processing of beef.

That would also give ranchers more options for marketing their cattle, and boost consumer choice, potentially affording them the option of buying beef raised, and butchered, in the same county where they live.

Martin said there is a sufficient number of beef cattle in Eastern Oregon and Western Idaho to support processing plants with a capacity to handle 250 to 500 head per day.

But now, he said, "we have absolutely no competition in the Northwest. There's no negotiation. You take what is given to you (in terms of prices)."

Martin said he's encouraged by Agri Beef's construction of a beef processing plant in Jerome, Idaho. It's expected to open by the end of 2022, and will have a capacity of about 500 head per day.

"That's a great thing, but I still see the need for more competition," Martin said.

Smaller processing plants would also benefit rural economies by creating jobs, he said.

Increasing competition

Martin said he's encouraged that Attorney General Merrick Garland also participated in the recent virtual meeting.

Martin has been advocating for years to have the U.S. Justice Department investigate what he believes constitutes "price manipulation" in the beef industry.

Matt McElligott, who raises cattle between Haines and North Powder, said he's glad that issues in the beef industry are being acknowledged at the federal level.

"The good thing is that it is being talked about," said McElligott, who is chairman of the public lands committee for the Oregon Cattlemen's Association. "It's something we in the industry have been talking about for a long time, the need to have a more vibrant and competitive industry."

McElligott said that although details of the Biden administration's \$1 billion campaign have yet to be determined, a preliminary draft called for spending \$375 million, over two phases, to "jumpstart independent processing" for beef and other meat. The first phase could include \$150 million earmarked for 15 specific local processing projects, which could potentially help ranchers market beef to local consumers, McElligott said. Prospective processors would compete for the dollars under the proposal.

The second phase would designate the remaining \$225 million to expand the capacity at existing processing plants across the nation, he said.

McElligott said boosting independent processing, and thus reducing the dominance of the four leading processing companies, would be beneficial to both ranchers and consumers.

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Schools, hospital weather COVID surge

BY JAYSON JACOBY

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The surge in COVID-19 cases spawned by the highly contagious omicron variant accelerated this week in Oregon and in Baker County, but some experts predict that infections could soon start dropping rapidly in the U.S.

Baker County reported 30 cases on Tuesday, Jan. 11.

That's the second-highest one-day total during the pandemic. The record is 37 cases. That was the total on two days, Sept. 9 and Sept. 14, during the wave of cases driven by the delta variant.

For the first 11 days of January, the county reported 161 cases, an average of 14.6 per day.

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Council discusses pharmacy struggles

BY SAMANTHA O'CONNOR

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The Baker City Council's newest member, Dean Guyer, reported to his colleagues during their Tuesday, Jan. 11, meeting about the pharmacy crisis.



Guyer

Guyer, who was appointed during the Council's Dec. 14 meeting, talked about problems that have arisen since the pharmacy at the Baker City Bi-Mart store closed in early November.

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The space below is for a postage label for issues that are mailed.

Commissioners discuss 'constitutional county,' mandates

BY JAYSON JACOBY

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Several Baker County residents attended a work session Wednesday, Jan. 12, to again urge county commissioners to approve a resolution declaring that Baker is a "constitutional county" where state and federal governments must comply with the U.S. Constitution.

The work session was scheduled after the commissioners' Dec. 15 meeting.

During the earlier meeting, Jake Brown of Halfway, a representative from Baker County United, asked commissioners to approve the resolution.

Commissioners moved the Jan. 12 work session from the usual meeting room at the Courthouse to the much larger Baker County Events Center, in the former National Guard armory at 2600 East St.

During the Dec. 15 meeting, with about 30 people in the audience, commissioners didn't comply with Gov. Kate Brown's executive order requiring that masks be worn in indoor public spaces. That includes the



Samantha O'Conner/Baker City Herald

About 40 people attended a Baker County Commission work session Wednesday afternoon, Jan. 12, at the Baker County Events Center.

Courthouse, where signs are posted outside citing the mask requirement.

The county's notice for the Jan. 12 meeting stated: "Baker County must comply with all federal, state and local laws, or face penalties and fines. Oregon Administrative Rule (OAR 333-019-1025, Masking requirements for indoor spaces) states that individuals five years of age and older, regardless of vaccination status, are required to wear a mask, face covering or face shield when in an indoor

space. All individuals in attendance at meetings under the control of Baker County are expected to comply with this rule, unless actively eating, drinking, speaking or presenting in the meeting."

Most audience members during the Jan. 12 did not wear a mask.

Commission Chairman Bill Harvey and Commissioner Mark Bennett attended the work session in person.

Commissioner Bruce Nichols attended remotely.

In a comment that Nichols posted in the online portal for the work session and that was read aloud during the session, he wrote: "We commissioners have no legal means to override the Governor's executive orders. As a commissioner I swore an oath for about the third or fourth time in my life to support the constitution and to follow the laws of the state of Oregon. To choose to openly defy the Governor's executive orders is a violation of the oath that I swore I would comply with. I too do not like mandates, forced vaccinations, and the ongoing never-ending rules. Yet I represent all of the people in the county so my personal feelings are secondary to those that do not agree with me.

"Civil disobedience is sometimes necessary to make a point yet with COVID cases continuing to rise now is not the time in my view," Nichols wrote. "I value all points of view and even those that disagree with me. Yet in protecting our rights we all must be careful to not trample on the rights of others. It is our duty to protect

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