

Plowing through the darkness

BY ALEX WITTWER

EO Media Group

UNION COUNTY — Tesmond Hurd likens the view he sees plowing the roads at night to that of Star Wars.

Hurd is part of the maintenance crew with the Oregon Department of Transportation in La Grande. In summer months, he works on road improvement and repair projects such as chip seals.

In winter, he commands a nearly 30-ton piece of machinery down Interstate 84.

It's not hard to understand the comparisons between spaceships and the industrialized behemoths ODOT uses to clear roads.

At highway speeds, snow resembles trailing stars after the Millennium Falcon engages hyperdrive. The plow even has wings — blades attached to the side of the vehicle that extend just shy of 24 feet for clearing snow. As it's pushed away, the snow forms wakes like those of a naval ship pulling into port. A pair of bright green laser pointers — which keep track of where the wings are — pierce through the blanket of night.

Hurd said his job is to drive in the worst weather conditions every night.

On nights when the snow falls unrelentingly, Hurd spends the entire shift behind the wheel. His only communication once his shift starts might be through the CB radio, which

has a local channel for ODOT operators in the field and a channel for relaying information to dispatch about road conditions.

The snow was falling fast — though milder than previous nights — as he worked to clear I-84 on Wednesday, Jan. 5.

“When it's snowing like this, there will be lots of calls for crashes or disabled vehicles,” Hurd said.

He passed a semi that appeared to be disabled and alerted dispatch.

Snowplows are sentries for ODOT capable of calling in stuck or stranded vehicles — or unchained semis.

Unchained

According to Oregon State Police Capt. Stephanie Bigman, troopers issued 32 violations and warnings between Jan. 1 and Jan. 6 for commercial vehicles that did not carry or use chains when required. A number of those violations occurred along I-84 in Northeastern Oregon, which had been closed on Jan. 5 at one point due to unchained semis blocking the route at Cabbage Hill near milepost 224.

The fine for unchained commercial vehicles is \$880 per occurrence, up from \$440. The change occurred in September 2021.

“Commercial trucks not chaining up when required is a major contributing factor for

freeway closure that occur in the mountain passes of Eastern Oregon,” Tom Strandberg, public information officer for ODOT, said. “Once a truck starts sliding or jackknives it can quickly block lanes and close down the freeway. It can then take several hours to get the proper tow service providers to respond to the scene and move the disabled vehicle. Depending on the location and duration of the closure, it can impact hundreds or thousands of motorists.”

According to an ODOT press release, the estimated cost of delays caused by trucks failing to follow Oregon chain laws is more than \$8 million a year — to the motor carrier industry and other highway users.

“When it comes to chaining, I don't chain — I don't want to hurt anybody — I park it,” Samuri Schaffer, a truck driver of more than 15 years, said on Jan. 5 at the Flying J Travel Center outside La Grande when he was waiting out the snowstorm that had closed Interstate 84. “I don't deal with it until they take off the chain laws. There's so much liability on us.”

Schaffer stated the liabilities for truck drivers can be severe if they are involved in any accident, so he avoids the issue entirely by keeping off the road.

If a truck is involved in a crash where failure to use chains is a factor, there could be additional costs for the motor

carrier, according to a press release from ODOT.

A Sisyphean task

Inside, the cockpit of the snowplow is kept blisteringly warm. It isn't for comfort — Hurd said he sheds jackets and layers and opens the windows even when it is below freezing outside, and getting colder. If it weren't for the heat, he wouldn't be able to see out of the windshield.

“You can see the snow on the windshield,” he said. “It will just freeze there, and it will keep building and building until you have to get out and clear the windshield every few miles.”

Already an hour into his shift, ice had begun to amass on the corners of the windshield. The windshield wipers squeaked incessantly as they battled the accumulating snow. If not addressed, the windshield would freeze over until just a small circle of visibility remained. At least one secondary headlight was completely encased in ice; the other was encased in snow.

Hurd resigned to leaving the wipers on despite the noise — a chirping metronome for a long night.

It's a Sisyphean task to keep the roads clear during heavy snowfall.

ODOT plow operators are assigned sections of the interstate and state roads to keep clear. Mostly, they handle



Alex Wittwer/EO Media Group

Tesmond Hurd readies a torch to remove a stuck bolt on a snow plow that had its blade damaged plowing Interstate 84 on Wednesday, Jan. 5, 2022.

I-84, but they also are responsible for plowing La Grande's Island Avenue. Sometimes, they pair up when conditions are poor, running tandem down the freeway and clearing it all in one fell swoop.

“You can only plow so fast, so you just keep making laps and keep plowing and plowing,” Hurd said of plowing during heavy snowfall. “Hopefully you don't have to close the freeway down.”

If the road maintenance department was short-staffed, the drivers might not be able to keep up with the snow. EO Media Group recently reported on a possible shortage of ODOT snowplow operators. Craig Slipp, the manager for ODOT Region 5 — the area encompassing most of Eastern Oregon — told The Observer there were 12 open road maintenance positions. Hurd said his department in La Grande was fully staffed, however.

When it's snowing, the plow operators lay down sand for traction; they use salt in drier conditions. Hurd said he had seen firsthand the immediate impact sand can have when freeing stuck motorists.

ODOT keeps barns full of both materials for plows to refill. The sand and salt also fulfill a secondary purpose of increasing the weight of the snowplow, increasing its individual traction capabilities. It is difficult to extricate a snowplow that has been disabled by the snow.

Hurd said there were a number of reasons why ODOT makes the decision to close the interstate. Recently, unchained semis had closed down the freeway, as did snowdrifts formed by heavy winds and fresh snow, creating whiteout conditions on the interstate — for motorists and snowplow operators. “If we can't see and we're running off the road,” Hurd said, “we'll make the call to close it.”



Lisa Britton/Baker City Herald

Makayla Hobbs reads with her daughter, Claire, during storytime at the Baker County Public Library.

Reading

Continued from A1

Each sheet contains 100 circles. Once filled, it can be returned to the library for a reward.

When a child reaches the goal of 1,000 books, he or she will receive a diploma to recognize the milestone.

Early literacy

According to United for Libraries, a division of the

American Library Association, early literacy refers to “the natural development of skills through the enjoyment of books, the importance of positive interactions between babies and parents, and the critical role of literacy-rich experiences.”

The association explains that literacy development begins at birth, and that babies “learn language through social literacy experiences of parents interacting with them using books.”

Storytime

Grammon has storytime at the library every Tuesday at 10 a.m.

She also offers storytime via Zoom on the second and fourth Wednesdays, also at 10 a.m. Find a link on the library's Facebook page.

On Fridays, Grammon leads StoryArt with a story and art project at 10 a.m. Space is limited, so inquire by calling the library at 541-523-6419.

Grouse

Continued from A1

A portion of the area, which is managed by the Bureau of Land Management, is closed yearly from March 1 to June 30 to protect sage grouse during their mating season.

Defrees said that although the wash station will help curb one potential source of noxious weed spread, it's only one strategy to preserve sage grouse habitat.

The Baker County Sage Grouse LIT has spent money from the state grant to control noxious weeds on almost 6,000 acres in the county, to plant native grasses on 850 acres and to build 6.5 miles of fence to control livestock grazing.

“It is a multi-pronged approach that the Baker LIT is taking in order to preserve and improve our rangelands — striving to maintain the agricultural backbone of Baker County,” Defrees said. “The Baker LIT will continue to work with private and public landowners to promote a more resilient landscape to wildfire and weed encroachment, all while increasing forage and habitat for sage grouse.”

Defrees asks people who use the Virtue Flat OHV area to complete an online survey about the wash station at <https://fs9.forms.site.com/v1Yjj4/6x8b5g0qpx/index.html>.

The Baker LIT is working with the Bureau of Land Management, Baker County, Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service on the wash station project.

Sage grouse in Baker County

Baker County's sage grouse situation is unique in Oregon in that the majority of the bird's habitat

here is on private property. Baker County is at the northern fringe of the sage grouse's range in Eastern Oregon, and the county's sage grouse population accounts for less than 10 percent of Oregon's total.

Most of the bird's habitat and population in the state are in the southeastern counties of Lake, Harney and Malheur, which are predominantly public land.

Environmental groups have repeatedly asked the federal government to classify the bird as a threatened or endangered species, a decision that could curtail activities, including cattle grazing and motorized vehicle use on public land, that could degrade sage grouse habitat.

In September 2015 the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service decided not to list the bird as threatened or endangered.

A Baker County group has been working for several years to study why the county's sage grouse population declined by about 70% over a decade ending around 2019.

Baker County Commissioner Mark Bennett, who has sought to improve sage grouse habitat on his cattle ranch near Unity, said Marisa Meyer, a wildlife biologist with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in La Grande, and Nick Myatt, who manages the Grande Ronde Watershed District for the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife (ODFW), were instrumental in starting the Baker County Sage Grouse Local Implementation Team that applied for the Lottery dollars through the Watershed Enhancement Board.

The team has used the state grant not only for projects in the county, but to leverage federal dollars for other work.

COVID

Continued from A1

But of the first 16 days of January, there were more than 20 cases on seven days, including six straight from Jan. 10-15.

With two weeks left in January, its tally of 289 cases is the third-highest monthly figure, behind September (465) and August (300).

The percentage of positive tests for the week Jan. 9-15 was 26.4%, slightly below the delta peak of 26.5% for the week Sept. 5-11.

The recent rise in cases has led to the postponement of many high school sporting events in Northeastern Oregon, including the La Grande-Baker girls and boys basketball games set for Jan. 11 (rescheduled for Feb. 8) and the Baker boys

game at Mac-Hi on Friday, Jan. 14 (rescheduled for Saturday, Jan. 22).

The North Powder School District canceled classes for Tuesday, Jan. 18.

A post on the district's Facebook page stated: “This week has been a crazy week with contact tracing. Although we have only had a few positive cases at school, after visiting with our school nurse and the local

health authorities, we are choosing to close school for Tuesday, January 18th. This has been a difficult decision, but for the safety of our students and staff, we feel this is the best decision. School will resume on Wednesday, January 19th. The high school basketball game that was scheduled for Tuesday will be rescheduled and we will announce that as soon as we have it confirmed.”

Hoops

Continued from A1

No Baker team has played before a larger crowd. “That was a big game,” Daugherty said.

Daugherty said two members of the 1972 team — Daryl Ross, the leading scorer, and Mike Davis — have passed away.

But most of the other players still live in Baker City, he said.

The complete roster, in addition to Daugherty, Ross

and Davis, included Craig Erickson, Rick Scrivner, Mark Johnson, Dick Sheehy, Wes Morgan, Fred Warner Jr., Tim Wood and Greg Sackos.

Daugherty said Greg Hammond, the son of the late Gary Hammond, the head coach who guided Baker to the runner-up finish in 1972, also lives in Baker City, as does assistant coach John Heriza.

The team's statistician, Gerry Steele, and manager, Verl Cote, also live in Baker City.

Daugherty said the five

cheerleaders, three of whom live in Baker City, will also be invited to the ceremony.

“It's surprising how many people from the team still live here,” he said. “We should have a big representation (at the ceremony).”

Baker entered the 1972 tournament with a 16-6 record. At the time Oregon had just four classifications for high school sports — B, A, AA and AAA — and the Bulldogs were a AAA school, meaning they competed against the largest schools.

In the tournament opener

on March 22, 1972, Baker beat Corvallis 51-45.

The Bulldogs then beat Newberg 64-44 on March 23 — setting a tournament record with 65% field goal shooting — and nipped Sunset 50-49 on Ross' buzzer-beater in a semifinal game on March 24 to set up the championship game against Jefferson.

The Baker City Herald is planning a story about the 1972 team, including interviews with team members, for later this winter.

IT'S IN YOUR INBOX

before your mailbox

Subscribers can receive daily email updates and uninterrupted digital delivery on a computer, tablet and smartphone



Sign up for free digital access

Baker City Herald

Call 800-781-3214

BakerCityHerald.com