EOU reports surge in COVID cases

Most of the increase is among students who live off campus

BY DAVIS CARBAUGH

The (La Grande) Observer

LA GRANDE — Like any other entity in Oregon, Eastern Oregon University has not been immune to the sharp increase in COVID-19 cases caused by the omicron variant.

The university saw a significant rise in off-campus cases in January, while its numbers among on-campus individuals staved rather steady.

Eastern Oregon University has totaled 251 total positive COVID-19 cases this academic year, since the school began tracking data at the start of July 2021. Of that total, 152 positive tests came from off-campus students, 45 positive tests accounted for employees and 40 positive tests were from on-campus students.

From Dec. 6, 2021, to Jan. 1, 2022, there were 16 cases among on-campus students. By the end of January, that total rose to 40. The rate among employees at Eastern Oregon University saw a similar mild increase, rising from 22 to 45.

Cases among off-campus students saw a significant rise in the same time frame, jumping from 44 cases to 152.

The university had several high points in January, mirroring national and statewide trends as the emergence of the omicron variant led to an increase in cases. Eastern recorded a record-high case count for a single day on Jan. 4, tallying 23 positive cases. The school recorded 21 cases on Jan. 10 and 14 on Jan. 25, all three of which are the highest single days since Eastern started tracking its COVID-19 data this school year.

The previous single-day high was seven cases on Sept. 13, 2021.

Eastern's testing has continually increased throughout the 2021-22 school year, reaching 2,425 total

committee. If the FDA clears

vaccinations for these young-

sters, "that's going to be really

important because all of those

hospitalizations and deaths es-

For kids under 5, Pfizer's

study is giving participants

followed by a third dose at

least two months later. The

company is testing whether

the youngsters produce an-

known to protect teens and

In December, Pfizer an-

nounced that children under

2 looked to be protected but

that the antibody response

was too low in 2- to 4-year-

olds. It's not clear why, but

one possibility is that the ex-

Since the preliminary re-

safe, Pfizer added a third dose

Given how well boosters are

working for older age groups,

younger children could bene-

fit from a third shot, O'Leary said. "I certainly can under-

stand where both the com-

pany and the FDA are coming

move this along, anticipating

dose down the line."

that there's going to be a third

"it makes some sense" that

to the testing in hopes of im-

proving protection.

sults showed the shots were

tra-low dose was a little too

low for the preschoolers.

young adults.

tibody levels similar to those

two shots three weeks apart,

sentially are preventable."

tests through Feb. 1. The 251 total positive tests result in a 10.4% positivity rate. The measurement had stayed steady around 5% through most of the fall, peaking toward the end of January and into February.

The university tracks its off-campus isolations and quarantines, a number that has stayed relatively low. The schools tracked three off-campus quarantines from Jan. 4-9 and two from Jan. 12-18.

Eastern has 50 isolation rooms available on campus in case of infection, but the university has never come close to running out of space in that regard. From Jan. 5-10, 45 out of the 50 spaces were available, the lowest mark that Eastern has reached since the dashboard started tracking data at the start of July.

The vaccination rate among on-campus students stands at 75.7%, with a 24.2% exemption rate. For on-campus employees, 80.1% are vaccinated and 17.7% received an exemption.



Eastern Oregon University/Contributed Photo

Students walk to class at Eastern Oregon University in this undated photo.

Pfizer requests FDA approval for COVID-19 vaccine for kids under 5

BY LAURAN NEERGAARD AND **MATTHEW PERRONE Associated Press**

WASHINGTON— Pfizer on Tuesday, Feb. 1, asked the U.S. to authorize extra-low doses of its COVID-19 vaccine for children under 5, potentially opening the way for the very youngest Americans to start receiving shots as early as March.

In an extraordinary move, the Food and Drug Administration had urged Pfizer and its partner BioNTech to apply earlier than the companies had planned.

The nation's 19 million children under 5 are the only group not yet eligible for vaccination against the coronavirus. Many parents have been pushing for an expansion of shots to toddlers and preschoolers, especially as the omicron wave sent record numbers of youngsters to the hospital.

If the FDA agrees, Pfizer shots containing just one-tenth of the dose given to adults could be dispensed to children as young as 6 months. Pfizer said on Feb. 1 that it had started submitting its data to the FDA and expects to com-

plete the process in a few days. An open question is how many shots those youngsters will need. Pfizer is testing three from in terms of wanting to shots after two of the extra-low doses turned out to be strong enough for babies but not for preschoolers, and the final data from the study isn't expected until late March.

That means the FDA may consider whether to authorize two shots for now, with potentially a third shot being cleared later if the study supports it.

The FDA said on Feb. 1 that it will convene a panel of independent researchers and physicians in mid-February to help review the Pfizer data. The agency isn't required to follow the panelists' advice but their input is a key step in publicly vetting vaccine safety and effectiveness.

The FDA's ultimate decision could come within the month but that isn't the only hurdle. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention also has to sign off.

The Biden administration has been trying to speed the authorization of COVID-19 shots for children, contending vaccinations are critical for opening schools and day care centers and keeping them open, and for freeing up parents from child care duties so they can go back to work.

Yet vaccination rates have been lower among children than in other age groups. As of last week, just 20% of kids ages 5 to 11 and just over half of 12- to 17-year-olds were fully vaccinated, according to the American Academy of Pediatrics. Nearly three-quarters of adults are fully vaccinated.

While young children are far less likely than adults to get severely ill from the coronavirus, it can happen, and pediatric COVID-19 infections are higher than at any other point in the pandemic.

"What we're seeing right now is still a lot of hospitalizations and unfortunately some deaths in this age group," said Dr. Sean O'Leary of the University of Colorado, who is on the AAP's infectious disease

Oregon lawmakers take aim at explosion of illegal pot farms

BY ANDREW SELSKY **Associated Press**

SALEM — Seven years after Oregon voters legalized the regulated production and use of recreational marijuana, the state Legislature is set to consider a raft of measures to crack down on an explosion of illegal pot farms.

Underscoring the industrial-size scale of the illegal marijuana farms, the Rogue Area Drug Enforcement, or RADE, announced this week it seized 52 tons of illegal marijuana last year. That was in southern Oregon alone.

The amount of pot seized was greater than previous years, Grants Pass Police Department Detective Sgt. Doni Hamilton, a member of the RADE team, said in an email.

Many of the growers are claiming to be legal hemp farmers but are instead cultivating plants with illegal amounts of THC, the component that creates the "high," according to the Oregon Liquor and Cannabis Commission.

"A lot of people have been using hemp as a cover," OLCC spokesperson Mark Pettinger said in an interview last year.

One of the bills put forward for Oregon's five-week legislative session that began Tuesday, Feb. 1, aims to financially punish those who are operating under the guise of growing hemp. Industrial hemp was legalized nationally by Congress in the 2018 Farm Bill.

Under a bill sponsored by Sen. Bill Hansell, R-Athena, and Rep. Lily Morgan, R-Grants Pass, a building or other premises used for unlawful growing or handling of hemp would be subjected to lien and could be sold to pay all fines and costs.

Another bill authorizes the Oregon Department of Agriculture to refuse to issue industrial hemp grower licenses, based on supply and demand for the prod-

Meanwhile, a bill sponsored by Sen. Tim Knopp, leader of the minority Republicans in the Senate, would have the Oregon State Police establish a unit to assist overwhelmed county sheriffs' offices in uprooting the illegal pot farms.

The state police would ensure that each county sheriff's office receives at least \$500,000 annually for the offensive on illegal pot growers, with more resources going to sheriffs who demonstrate a greater need. The Oregon Department of Revenue would transfer funds to the state police for these purposes.

During this year's short legislative session, lawmakers have numerous bills to push through committees and send to both the House and Senate for approval. Many will die along the way in the limited time period, especially those that haven't

been fine-tuned yet, leaders of the majority Democratic caucus said Tuesday.

But Senate President Peter Courtney has said he's very concerned about the surge in illegal marijuana farms in southern Oregon, and even suggested the Oregon National Guard be sent in to help, and so might favor legislation aimed at tackling the problem.











