

# VA plan calls for big changes to its Walla Walla medical center

BY DAVIS CARBAUGH AND JOHN TILLMAN

WASHINGTON — Oregon U.S. Sen. Ron Wyden last week said he plans to personally contact the Department of Veterans Affairs regarding recommendations to reduce services at the Jonathan M. Wainwright Memorial VA Medical Center in Walla Walla.

The VA in mid March released a report from the Asset and Infrastructure Review Commission to modernize and realign the VA health care system. According to the Walla Walla Union-Bulletin, the report is in response to 2018's MISSION Act, also known as the Veteran Community Care Act.

After site visits, listening sessions and data gathering around the country, the AIR Commission listed among its recommendations that the Walla Walla VA reduce services to primary care and mental health, which could result in the facility being reclassified as a community-based outpatient clinic, known better as a CBOC, rather than a full medical center, according to the Walla Walla UB.

At a virtual town hall for Union County residents on Wednesday, April 20, Wyden addressed several concerns related to veteran health care in Eastern Oregon. Key points included slow hiring processes, travel pay, difficulties at call centers across VA clinics and attaining health care services outside of the VA.

Wyden noted he has been hearing often from veterans on similar issues and said he will be reaching out to the VA himself for an explanation and how to address the four major concerns brought up at the meeting and potential changes to the Walla Walla medical center.

"Vets have earned the benefits because of their extraordinary ser-

vice," Wyden said. "The vets committed their lives to our country and now I'm going to make sure we make our commitment to them really clear."

A market analysis showed veteran enrollment in VISN 20, the service region centered by the Walla Walla VA, is predicted to increase modestly and largely outside of Walla Walla. According to the Walla Walla paper, the recommended strategy is to invest in new outpatient facilities and expand services in existing clinics to meet future demand, while "rightsizing" services at the Walla Walla VA, officials said.

The full set of recommendations call for closing a total of 17 VA medical centers nationwide while building 14 new ones and 140 new clinics, according to the Spokane Spokesman-Review, and encourages veterans, especially in rural areas, to seek care from private providers.

Under the proposal, Walla Walla would become an outpatient clinic similar to those in Coeur d'Alene, Idaho, and Wenatchee, Washington, per the Spokesman-Review. Along with ending surgeries and other inpatient treatment at the Walla Walla hospital, the plan proposes relocating the residential rehabilitation treatment program housed there to Spokane, where such a program doesn't exist.

According to Walla Walla VA Medical Center Public Affairs Officer Linda Wondra, the proposed changes to Walla Walla will not lead to any changes at the local level in La Grande, which has provided services to veterans from as far away as Pendleton.

"At the current time, we have no knowledge or concern that the La Grande clinic will be affected in any way," Wondra said. "All our sites of care are expected to continue providing care as before."

Per the Spokane paper, relocating services to Spokane and Richland would serve a larger number of veterans than the Walla Walla area, the VA report says. According to an assessment of VA's Inland Northwest market, about 5,000 veterans enrolled in VA health care services live within an hour drive of Walla Walla, while more than 9,100 live within an hour of Richland and nearly 29,000 within an hour of Spokane.

Not all local veterans oppose the plan to move to outpatient services. Vietnam War destroyer sailor George Oblisk of Athena said that's how he uses the Walla Walla VA now.

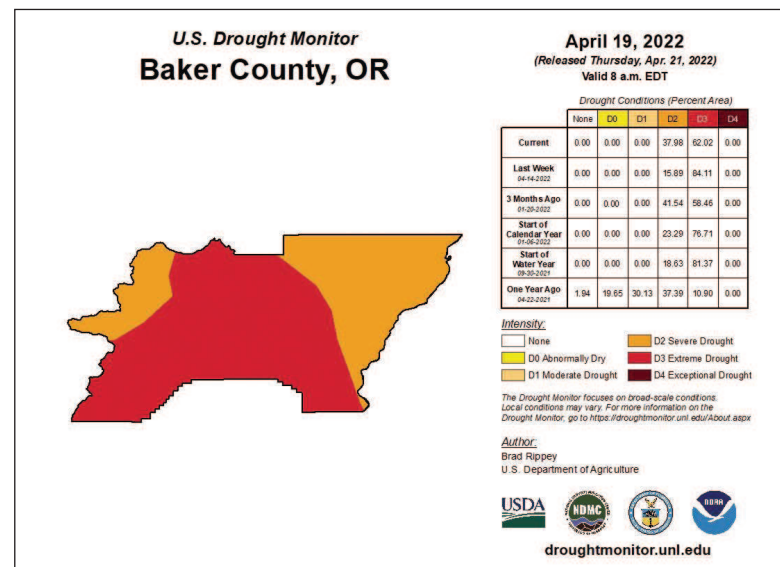
"The change wouldn't affect me," he said. "They just expanded dental services and eyeglasses there. They put up a whole new building."

And if he needed surgery, the VA would send him to Portland or pay for it at St. Anthony Hospital in Pendleton, or Providence St. Mary Medical Center in Walla Walla.

"I wouldn't want to undergo surgery at the Walla Walla VA," he said.

A statement from the Walla Walla VA stated the proposals are strictly recommendations, with nothing set in stone to date. Any potential changes to the infrastructure of health care within Veterans Affairs could be several years away, depending on congressional decision making.

The Walla Walla VA is continuing efforts to strengthen its regional health care services in areas with a high volume of veterans, such as Richland and Yakima. Moving forward, the Asset and Infrastructure Review Commission is set to conduct public hearings on any new recommendations heading into January 2023 — input and feedback at these hearings could impact the extent of the recommendations to the Jonathan M. Wainwright Memorial VA Medical Center in Walla Walla.



Between April 12 and April 19, 2022, the percentage of Baker County's land rated as being in extreme drought, the second-worst of five categories, dropped from 84% to 62%.

## Drought

Continued from Page A1

### Drought conditions improve slightly

April's showers have had a modest effect on the drought in Baker County.

On April 12, the U.S. Drought Monitor designated about 84% of the county as being in "extreme" drought on the five-level scale that ranges from abnormally dry, the least severe condition, to moderate, severe, extreme and, the worst, exceptional drought.

The remaining 16% of the county was rated as being in severe drought, one step below extreme.

A week later the Drought Monitor, which is updated weekly, pegged 62% of the county in extreme drought and 38% in severe drought.

Most of the area that improved from extreme to severe drought is in the eastern part of the county.

Martin and Ward both said they hope the weather pattern that has dominated the second half of April will continue for at least the next month or so — albeit with warmer temperatures.

"April and May are the months that make the rangeland and grasslands flourish," Martin said.

Spring rains not only nourish rangelands and crop fields, but they can allow irrigation district managers to store more water in reservoirs, where it can be used later in the summer when rain is much less likely and generally comes only in the form of scattered thunderstorms.

### Damp weather too late for some ranchers

Martin said that although the spurt of grass growth in the sagebrush country bodes well for ranchers as they turn out their herds onto spring and summer grazing pastures, the drought has already caused major problems for some producers.

The 2021 drought, which reduced hay production by 25% to 40% in some areas, left some ranchers without enough hay to feed their entire herds this spring, Martin said. And with the grass yet to appear, they couldn't move cattle to spring pastures.

That forced some to either sell some of their base herds, or cut back on the number of replacement heifers they bought, he said.

## Wolves

Continued from Page A1

Environmental groups argued the report shows Oregon's wolf population is in crisis due to poaching and other human-caused mortality.

Danielle Moser, wildlife program coordinator for Oregon Wild, said the deaths reported by ODFW are "only known mortalities and there are certainly many more unaccounted for deaths and poaching of uncollared wolves."

Zoe Hanley, Northwest representative for Defenders of Wildlife, said the group is concerned Oregon's wolf recovery is not adequately addressing threats like poaching.

"This year's report is a call to action for agencies like (ODFW) and Oregon State Police to recognize the severity of poaching incidents and take additional steps to protect Oregon's vulnerable wolves," Hanley said.

John Williams, wolf committee co-chairman for the Oregon Cattlemen's Association based in Enterprise, said he was surprised by the wolf population being mostly unchanged, considering ranchers are seeing wolves in areas where they've never seen them before.

"We know their areas are expanding. We know the numbers are expanding," Williams said.

Most wolves in Oregon inhabit the far northeast corner of the state, though they are branching into new territory. ODFW established four new areas of resident wolf activ-

### Wolves in Baker County

As of December 2021, two of the 19 confirmed wolf packs in Eastern Oregon have ranges that are largely in Baker County.

Those are the Keating pack, which consisted of 10 wolves, and the Cornucopia pack, with five wolves.

There is also a group of wolves, which ODFW does not consider a pack, in the Lookout Mountain area of eastern Baker County.

The state killed eight of the 11 wolves from the former Lookout Mountain pack during the summer of 2021 after those wolves killed at least nine head of cattle and injured at least three others.

After ODFW biologists confirmed that Lookout Mountain wolves had attacked cattle five times during July 2021, killing three and injuring three others, agency employees killed two wolf pups, born during the spring of 2021, on Aug. 1.

ity in 2021, covering parts of Grant, Jefferson, Klamath and Union counties.

The state now has 21 known wolf packs — 16 of which qualify as breeding pairs — in addition to eight other groups of two or three wolves.

Wolves also continued to prey on livestock in 2021. ODFW confirmed 49 cases of wolf depredation, up from 31 in 2020. In all, wolves killed or injured 95 animals, including six cows, 44 calves, 17 ewes, 11 lambs, 14 goats and three guard dogs.

The vast majority, 92%, of those depredations occurred between July and November,

Following additional attacks in August and September that killed five head of cattle, ODFW employees shot and killed three more wolves, including the pack's breeding male, on Sept. 17, 2021.

There were no attacks on cattle for almost a month, until Oct. 16, when biologists determined that wolves had killed a 400-pound calf, likely on Oct. 14.

ODFW employees then shot and killed three more wolves, two juveniles born this year and one wolf born in 2020, on Oct. 20, 2021.

ODFW officials believe the Lookout Mountain wolves, which generally roam in the area between Highway 86 on the north and Interstate 84 to the south, now consists of up to three wolves — the breeding female and two juveniles born in the spring of 2021 that are now about one year old.

— Jayson Jacoby

with 86% on private land and 14% on public land.

Williams said wolves are becoming an increasing problem for ranchers across the state, with the impacts extending beyond killed or injured livestock to lower birth rates for cows and lower birth weights for calves. He urged the state to take a more proactive approach to managing the predators.

"The rancher is taking the brunt of it," Williams said. "It is becoming one of the major expenses for the producer."

Between August and October, ODFW killed eight members of the Lookout Mountain pack in Baker

County after wolves repeatedly attacked cattle.

Under Phase III of the Oregon Wolf Management Plan, wolves can be killed east of highways 395, 78 and 95 if they meet the state's "chronic depredation" threshold of two confirmed depredations in nine months.

Ranchers must first be using non-lethal deterrents and remove all potential wolf attractants in order for an incident to qualify toward lethal removal.

Western Oregon wolves were restored to the federal endan-

gered species list following a court ruling earlier this year.

The Oregon Department of Agriculture's wolf compensation program awarded \$130,814 in grants to 10 counties in 2021, which helps pay for non-lethal deterrents and provides direct payment for ranchers covering dead and missing livestock.

"After a calm spring with few incidents, we saw a much higher number of depredations from July through November despite livestock producers' extensive non-lethal efforts to reduce conflict," Brown said.

"We thank all producers who have taken preventative measures and encourage all those in areas with wolves to reach out for assistance."

Brown did express concern about an uptick in poaching that included the poisoning of eight wolves, including all five members of the Catherine pack in Union County, in 2021.

So far in 2022, three wolves have also been poached in northeast Oregon.

All cases are being investigated by the Oregon State Police Fish and Wildlife Division.

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**Reelect David Baum**  
Oregon Trail Electric Board, Position 8

**STATEMENT TO VOTERS:** The electric utility industry is seeing significant changes due to increased demand, new technologies, government mandates, high prices of natural gas and oil, and weather renewables (solar and wind). Weather renewables work only when the Sun is shining and the Wind is blowing.

Currently OTEC purchases 100% of its electrical power from Bonneville Power Administration (BPA) and some of the lowest electrical rates in the country. But BPA is being challenged with increasing costs, reduced revenue, and threat of the removal of the four lower Snake River dams. As the board member involved with the Wildfire Mitigation Plan, we have aggressively pushed forward with the drafting and finalization of a Wildfire Plan.

As we negotiate a new contract with Bonneville (BPA), my legal experience is a valuable evaluation tool. My focus will be to continue to work diligently in areas of Power Supply, Transmission and Distribution. I will strive to keep your electrical rates low.

Our CEO, Les Penning and staff with board support will not be raising your electrical rates for 2022.

It's been a pleasure and a privilege to serve as your representative on the board of Directors. I have gained a significant knowledge and experience about cooperatives during this time. I will continue to work hard at keeping electric rates low while providing safe and reliable electricity to our members along with excellent customer service. I have knowledge, experience, energy and time to serve.

I ask for YOUR VOTE and look forward to our future challenges.

Paid For By David Baum / The Committee to Reelect David Baum

**2022**

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