

# Wallowa County open for business

**Business groups positive about coming tourism season**

By **BILL BRADSHAW**  
Wallowa County Chieftain

WALLOWA COUNTY — As the tourism season begins with Memorial Day weekend, Wallowa County is all set to rebound from the hindrances of the COVID-19 pandemic that put a dent in it over the past couple of years.

Representatives of business organizations in the county expressed optimism that the coming season will be profitable and active.

“It’s looking to be a very busy tourist season,” said Jennifer Piper, executive director of the Wallowa County Chamber of Commerce. “This area continues to be a popular destination for people to get away.”

Jude Graham, interim president of the Joseph Chamber of Commerce, agreed.

“All the signs are we’re going to have a great summer,” she said.

Mike Lockhart, president of the Wallowa Lake Tourism Association, also was onboard.

“It’s looking very good,” he said.

While some events were canceled because of the pandemic, the tourism industry managed to survive and even thrive.

Piper said during both pandemic years, which also were plagued by the fire seasons that coincided, lodging data showed the volume was considerable.

“They were two of the strongest tourist seasons Wallowa County has ever had,” she said. “They were two of the strongest years for demand we’ve ever seen in Wallowa County.”

**Hotel bookings**

One of the signs the season will be strong is that reservations for rooms are filling up.

“From my conversations with the accommodation people, they’re getting good bookings and filling up pretty well,” Lockhart said.

“I think we’re going to get back to our normal tourist season,” Graham said. “The motels say they’re booking up for the car shows and Chief Joseph Days weekends.”

She was referring to Main Street Show & Shine in Enterprise set for Aug. 19-20 and the Joseph-based Wallowa Mountain Cruise scheduled for Aug. 26-27. Chief Joseph Days is always the last full weekend in July.



Chief Joseph Days Rodeo Queens, from left, Brianna Micka, Destiny Wecks and Casidee Harrod, wave to the crowd on Saturday, July 31, 2021, during the CJD Grand Parade in Joseph. Chief Joseph Days is always held the last full weekend in July.



Quail Run Ranch gets the job done in ranch team roping during the 2021 Chief Joseph Days Ranch Rodeo on Saturday, July 3, 2021. It’s one of the many events Wallowa County holds each summer to excite locals and draw tourists.

*“There’s a greater demand in the tourism market. Meeting that demand, there definitely are some challenges in the hospitality workforce.”*

Jennifer Piper, executive director of the Wallowa County Chamber of Commerce

Graham said she’s hoping to see a bigger turnout for Chief Joseph Days. The rodeo runs from July 26-30, but there are added events such as the parade July 30 and the cowboy church and breakfast at the Harley Tucker Arena the day after the rodeo ends.

She said the chamber has

been attracting vendors from out of the area, but she hopes to see more locals there.

“We’d love to have some more local vendors sign up,” she said. “It would be nice to get some local people signed up for that.”

But those are just a few of the major events of the summer — others also are planned.

Graham mentioned a bike rally planned for June in Joseph. Put on by a private group, she said, it also is expected to draw tourists. “They’ll be roaming around town for a couple of days,” she said.

One event hit particularly hard by the pandemic was Hells Canyon Mule Days. For the most part, it

was canceled the past two years, but it’s back on this year, Sept. 9-11, at the Wallowa County Fairgrounds in Enterprise.

**The weather**

Of course, one variable that could either throw a wrench into the works or be a strong benefit is the weather. Two years ago, the

county was plagued with smoke from fires across the state. Last year was hot, with a major fire in the northern end of the county.

Graham was all about good weather in her prognostication.

“It’s going to be wonderful and there’ll be sunshine and blue skies soon,” she said. “It’ll be a great summer.”

Piper, too, was positive in her outlook.

“My take, my perspective is very positive,” she said. “I’m hopeful for good weather conditions, as well.”

**Meeting the demand**

Businesses always have to step up to meet the demand of the thousands of visitors who swarm the county during tourist season.

“There’s a greater demand in the tourism market,” Piper said. “Meeting that demand, there definitely are some challenges in the hospitality workforce.”

She said filling jobs is hardly unique to Wallowa County.

“Some of the repercussions we’re seeing from COVID are in the workforce sector with seasonal positions,” she said.

Still, everyone was generally positive in their outlook.

“The lake is very much in demand and they’re filling up pretty well,” Lockhart said, adding that both chambers have done a strong job marketing the county. “I’m pretty positive about the way things are going.”

**FARMS**

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The general concept is that a farmer or rancher whose property is under threat — for example, on the brink of being pulled into an urban growth boundary for development — could potentially benefit from putting acres into a long-term working land easement instead of selling to a developer, allowing the farmer to benefit financially while keeping the land in agriculture. It also makes it easier for a farmer to retire and pass on farmland to the next generation.

The federal dollars will fund projects within the state’s Agricultural Conservation Easement Program-Agricultural Land Easements, or ACEP-ALE.

The increase in funding from USDA’s Natural Resources Conservation Service to ACEP-ALE this year is huge, land experts say. The agency upped its funding by 1,100%, from \$590,060 to \$6,765,000.

Kelley Beamer, executive director of the Coalition of Oregon Land Trusts, called the spike in funding a “momentous investment.”

McAdams, of the Oregon

Agricultural Trust, said the increase in funding will be “an incredible boon” to rural and farming economies. Working land easements are a useful tool for landowners but are expensive to set up, she said, and this pool of funding will help with costs.

The funds come from the last farm bill, which Congress passed in 2018.

According to land experts, Oregon got more federal dollars this year for working land easements because NRCS Oregon requested additional funds when faced with high demand from landowners. The pro-

gram received a record-breaking number of proposals for fiscal year 2022.

“The interest we’ve seen in the Agricultural Land Easements program so far this year reflects the growing number of landowners who want to protect their agricultural land for generations to come,” said Ron Alvarado, NRCS Oregon state conservationist.

The increased federal investment was also likely tied to the newly funded Oregon Agricultural Heritage Program, designed to match the federal ACEP-ALE program. The Oregon Agricul-

tural Heritage Program received \$5 million from the state Legislature this year, allowing the state to match federal dollars.

The \$6.7 million will help eight Oregon landowners in 2022 protect 14,917 acres of farms and ranches across the state. Although USDA has not yet released the landowners’ names, McAdams said they come from around the state: from Clatsop County on the North Coast to South-Central Oregon’s Lake County.

McAdams said she hopes to see more funding for working land conservation easements in the 2023 farm bill.

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