

OSP handled over 338K gun background checks last year

BY MAXINE BERNSTEIN
The Oregonian

SALEM — Background checks for gun sales in Oregon remained high last year but did not top the state's record year in 2020, according to a new state police report.

Oregon State Police last year conducted 338,330 background checks on prospective gun buyers, a drop from 2020, when the state recorded the most, 418,061.

Yet last year's number was still far greater than the background checks in each of the three previous years from 2017 through 2019, figures show.

For the past 25 years, less than 2% of people in Oregon seeking to buy a gun have been denied due to a failed background check, according to the state police's latest report obtained Tuesday.

Last year, 95%, or 320,735, of the purchases were approved after background checks were done.

The state police Firearms Instant Check System Unit has struggled to keep up with the increased volume of gun buyers and required background checks.

Under Oregon law, the police agency conducts state and national criminal background checks for federally licensed gun dealers and private people before a gun is sold or transferred. State law also requires a background check for all gun transfers, including those that take place at a gun show and between private parties.

The goal is to ensure the timely transfer of firearms to eligible buyers while also keeping guns out of the hands of those that are prohibited under state or federal law, according to state police.

Under federal law, however, a gun dealer may sell a firearm to someone if a background check is not completed within three business days.

Last year, state police ap-

proved 320,735 gun purchases and denied 1,129 purchases after conducting background checks. The total does not equal 338,330 because it does not include figures for two other categories contained in the report: canceled, those stopped by either the dealer or purchaser after the initial request for background checks, and pending, those requiring more investigation before final determination.

In 2020, 394,011 were approved and 2,119 denied, according to the latest report.

In 2021, most denials occurred because the person had been convicted of a felony, was on probation for a criminal conviction, or had been convicted of domestic abuse.

Last year, 1,101 people were denied guns due to background checks in Oregon. Of those denials, 58 were people who previously had been committed to a mental health institution, according to the data.

About 100 were denied because the guns sought for sale came back as having been reported stolen.

In 2021, the top three counties recording the most gun purchases were Washington County, 47,761; Clackamas County, 33,558; and Lane County with 32,090.

Deschutes County had the sixth highest transactions at 25,018, one notch above Multnomah County, with 23,789, according to the state police.

But when analyzed per 10,000 residents 18 or older, Harney County recorded the most gun buys with 2,180 per 10,000 adult residents, followed by Union County with 1,851, and Crook County with 1,795.

Nearly 40% of the state police gun background checks were completed within three days.

Yet about 14% took six months or longer to complete, meaning the gun sales could



Philip Kamrass/The Associated Press, File

Oregon State Police reported 338,330 background checks requested for gun purchases in 2021, according to a report. The total fell below the number requested in 2020 but was still higher than those for the years 2017-19.

proceed before a background check was done.

State police said the agency fielded more calls last year from people challenging the denials of their background checks or calling with questions about the checks that were pending. As of April of this year, the unit would only receive people's challenges of denied sales due to failed background checks by email or U.S. mail.

The state police Firearms Instant Check System Unit operates seven days a week, 14 hours a day and is closed two days out of the year, on Thanksgiving and Christmas Day. The 30-member unit includes 26 background check staff and one support staff and a program manager.

More budgeted positions

After the unit was deluged in 2020 with an unprecedented increase in gun purchases and background check requests, state police asked lawmakers for more budgeted positions. The Legislature during the

regular session last year approved \$2.6 million in one-time general fund spending to support 17 additional positions, including 12 part-time staff, to help address a backlog of gun background checks. Recruitment began in November to try to fill those jobs, and the first new hires will start training in January, according to the state police report.

"It takes awhile to recruit and then train, and the people who are training are offline and their production is reduced," said Capt. Stephanie Bigman, a state police spokesperson.

As a result, the unit logged 1,225 hours in overtime last year, a drop from the 1,354 overtime hours in 2020 but much higher than the overtime put in each year from 2017 through 2019.

"Events that occurred throughout 2020 severely impacted service levels within the (Firearms Instant Check System) program in nearly every way possible," the state police report said. "Background

check volumes soared with the onset of COVID-19, followed by months of social unrest both locally and nationally, as well as stimulus money distribution and finally the presidential election."

The higher demand for guns came at a time when the firearms unit suffered staff shortages due to absences resulting from COVID-19, coronavirus-related safety directives that restricted staffing in the office and remote work that challenged the background check function, the report said.

Since 2011, the firearms unit has allowed gun dealers to submit a request for a background check online as an alternative to placing a phone call, and a majority of the requests come into the unit via the internet, according to the report. The state police website now says the unit will only accept requests for background checks via its online portal.

While staff in the unit typically review and conduct the checks, about 38% of the requests were automatically processed.

That occurs if there's no possible matches to criminal justice databases and no discrepancies detected in the information submitted, according to state police.

Completion of background checks sometimes are dependent on agencies out of state to respond to questions about a person's criminal record, and states' response times vary widely from several days to several months, the report said.

State police also check and ensure the gun sought for sale has not been reported stolen.

The day with the most gun purchases last year was the day after Thanksgiving. In 2020, however, March 20 saw the highest gun purchases.

According to national figures from the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives, 118 guns in Oregon

were reported lost or stolen last year, with the majority, 78, reported to have been taken during a burglary.

The state does not have data on background checks done so far this year.

But the FBI has monthly data for the first four months of this year, based solely on background checks initiated through the FBI's National Instant Criminal Background Check System, known as NICS, which are viewed as a proxy for sales.

In the first four months of this year, there were 135,610 background checks done for prospective Oregon gun purchasers through the national check system, down from 175,907 done in the same period in 2021.

The state police Firearms Instant Check Unit conducts both statewide criminal background checks and checks through the FBI's National Instant Criminal Background Check System.

As of May 3 of this year, there were 310,630 concealed handgun licenses in the state, according to Bigman.

"Different world events cause a lot of these upticks in gun sales," she added, noting there seemed to be an increase in gun purchases following Russia's invasion of Ukraine this year.

Under Oregon law, a person may not sell, deliver or transfer any gun when the person knows or reasonably should know that the recipient is under 18, has been convicted of a felony, has any outstanding felony arrest warrant, is free on any pretrial release for a pending felony charge, was found by a court to suffer from mental illness and be committed to treatment, was convicted of a violent misdemeanor or found guilty except for insanity of a felony or a misdemeanor involving violence, or if the gun is stolen.

County

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Victory EMS of Boise is the other.

Commissioners asked Kim Mosier, the county's attorney, to prepare a notice of intent to award the contract to Metro West.

Metro West has been in business for 69 years and operates ambulances in seven areas in Oregon, three in Washington and one in California.

Randy Daugherty, a member of the advisory committee that commissioners appointed last month to review proposals, said Metro West "seem confident that they can do it and I don't know why we would doubt that."

Mosier said the committee — whose other members included Tony Alexander, Wayne Endersby, Debra Duggan, Pat Sullivan, David Richards, Loran Joseph and Jeanne Peacock — met for about two and a half hours on Monday, June 6 to review the two proposals.

"It was a lot of time spent with the proposals and discussions," Mosier said.

The county has not publicly released either proposal.

Under Oregon's Public Records Law, the county can withhold the proposals until the notice of intent to award is finished.

Under Oregon law, the county is responsible for ensuring ambulance service.

Commissioners approved the request for proposals earlier this spring in response to

a notice from the Baker City Council, on March 22, that the city, which has operated ambulances since before World War II, intended to curtail the service Sept. 30, 2022.

City Manager Jonathan Cannon told councilors that he doesn't believe the city can afford to continue operating ambulances because revenue from ambulance billing isn't keeping pace with the expense.

The City Council decided on May 10 to submit a proposal to the county, but councilors, by a 4-2 vote on May 24, reversed the unanimous decision from two weeks earlier.

During the May 24 meeting, Councilor Dean Guyer suggested the city not send a proposal to the county by the June 3 deadline.

Guyer and councilors Joanna Dixon, Johnny Waggoner Sr. and Kenyon Damschen voted in favor of Guyer's motion to not respond to the county's request for proposals.

Mayor Kerry McQuisten and Councilor Shane Alderson voted no. Councilor Jason Spriet was absent May 24.

Guyer said during the meeting that "the city still has the possibility of stepping back into" the ambulance service issue depending on what county commissioners decide after reviewing any proposals they receive.

Now that commissioners have voted to move ahead with awarding a contract with Metro West, it seems likely that the city is no longer a potential candidate to continue operating ambulances.

It's not clear whether the city will discontinue its service before Sept. 30.

The city's budget for the fiscal year that starts July 1 calls for reducing staffing in the fire department from 16.25 full-time equivalents in the current fiscal year, to 10.5.

Casey Johnson, a Baker City firefighter/paramedic and president of the local firefighters union, has said the layoffs will significantly reduce the department's firefighting capacity, particularly in cases where it might be necessary for firefighters to enter a burning building.

In that case, Johnson said, the department would need at least four firefighters, two to go inside and two to serve as backup.

City officials dispute that contention.

In a section that Cannon recently added to the city's website — www.bakercity.com — the city poses the question, "Will the Fire Department still be able to enter a burning building?"

The answer: "Yes they will. Our skilled Fire Department staff will still be able to enter a burning building to save lives per OSHA regulations and laws, even with the proposed staff model. The proposed staff model actually offers MORE staff on duty to respond to fire calls. The City also has mutual-aid agreements and great partnerships with other departments such as North Powder and Baker Rural Fire Department. They all can assist when we have a larger fire if needed."



Lisa Britton/Baker City Herald

Bill Taylor, left, and Ken Bain are longtime volunteers who help make the annual Haines Stampede rodeo possible.

Rodeo

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"We've never had a good place for people with a disability or mobility issues to have a good seat," said Bill Taylor, who has worked with the rodeo since it was revived in 1991. "All the handicap parking will be at this end — easy to get to."

Half of the raised area will be flat, for wheelchairs, and the other half will have bleachers.

A temporary awning will shade it this summer.

"The long-range plan next year is to build a permanent shaded area," Taylor said.

The new seating area is just north of the existing covered bleachers. It required 340 cubic yards of fill dirt to elevate it for a good view of the bucking chutes and roping boxes.

"We decided this would be a primo spot," Taylor said.

"The best seats in the house," Bain added. "90% of the action is right here."

Volunteers

The Haines Stampede happens every year on July 3 and 4.

And planning for the next year, Bain said, starts as soon as the rodeo wraps up on the 4th.

"Every year something comes up that we can better," he said.

Any work on the rodeo grounds is funded by proceeds from the annual demolition derby, which happens this year on Aug. 6.

"For any ground improvements, we rely on the derby," Taylor said.

The cool spring slowed progress on this new addition, but these volunteers are accustomed to last-minute adjustments.

"The first time we did this rodeo in 1991, we were nailing the floor down in the announcer's booth the day before the rodeo. We work well under pressure," Bain said with a smile.

Taylor said this project benefited from equipment provided by Britt Corporation, the City of Haines, Lost Soul Contracting Inc., Eric Swanlund, Tom Kerns, Steve Virtue, Jim Aldrich Farms and Eastern Oregon Rental.

Materials were donated by Harney Rock in North Powder and R.D. Mac.

Trucks were donated by Adam Phillips Trucking, Colby Thompson, Sherman Trucking, J2K Excavating, Floyd Morgan Excavating and Triple C.

Jeff Petershon and Dirk Lien designed the railing.

Stampede

The schedule is the same as always for this Fourth of July tradition in Haines.

On Sunday, July 3, slack is at 9 a.m. and the rodeo starts at 5 p.m.

On Monday, July 4, the rodeo begins at 1:30 p.m. This day is also a celebration in Haines with a cowboy breakfast at 7 a.m., vendors in the park, a parade at 10 a.m. and fireworks at dusk.

Rodeo admission is \$10 adults and \$5 for ages 5 and older.

Museum exhibit

The Haines Stampede will unveil its new exhibit at Haines' Eastern Oregon Museum, 610 Third St., at the beginning of July.

The display, located in the museum's carriage wing, features history and artifacts from the rodeo dating back to 1915.

And Taylor said they welcome more additions to the display.

"We're still looking for memorabilia," he said. "We'd like to see what people have."

Taylor can be contacted at 541-403-0900 or through the rodeo website, www.haines-stampede.com.

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