

COVID-19 | Summer events in the Pendleton area

Organizers take a wait-and-see approach

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East Oregonian

For some Umatilla County event organizers, there's a sense of déjà vu.

In 2020, organizers cycled from confidence that their summer events would go on as scheduled despite the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic to uncertainty as the virus spread rapidly throughout the county to resignation that they would have to cancel their events once it became clear the state wouldn't lift its rules on mass gatherings.

A year later, Umatilla County, like other places in Oregon and the United States, is experiencing declining coronavirus case numbers and is continuing to distribute vaccines. But organizers remain non-committal as they await word from the state about what kind of rules they'll have to contend with this summer.

Pendleton Round-Up studying safety plans

Umatilla County's largest event has been fairly quiet on its 2021 plans.

When the Round-Up canceled the rodeo for the first time since World War II, organizing quickly committed to a 2021 event.

The Round-Up website's homepage features a counter that measures the days before Sept. 11, and a short message: "Planning is well underway for a safe and healthy 2021 Pendleton Round-Up."

Clicking on the message



Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian file

A member of the Seattle Cossacks Motorcycle Stunt and Drill Team rides his Harley Davidson in a circle pivoting about his foot during a performance at the 2019 Pendleton Bike Week.

links to a page that explains why the Round-Up canceled the 2020 rodeo and Let 'Er Buck Cares, a charity fund set up by the Round-Up to assist businesses and organizations affected by the rodeo's cancellation.

Round-Up Publicity Director Pat Reay didn't respond to a voicemail requesting comment, but at a joint meeting between the Pendleton City Council and the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation Board of Trustees, Pendleton Mayor John Turner, an ex-officio member of the Round-Up Board of Directors, gave a short update on the Round-Up's planning process.

Turner said the Round-Up board is studying the safety plans of other large outdoor rodeos, like Cheyenne Frontier Days, as they try to formulate their own. Turner said early discussions include logistics like a temperature checkpoint and whether attendees need to wear masks.

Tribal participation is also a significant part of the Round-Up and Boots Pond, an at-large member of the Board of Trustees, said he's on a subcommittee with other tribal members that is working with the rodeo on what that participation will look like.

Pond said the subcommittee is expecting to receive a draft

plan from the Round-Up in April, and after input from the subcommittee's members, a final draft in July.

Kat Brigham, the chair of the Board of Trustees, said the tribal government is looking to coordinate more with Round-Up ahead of the next rodeo.

Whisky fest 'full steam ahead'

Last year was supposed to rival 2018 for the Pendleton Whisky Music Fest's biggest year, but it wasn't to be.

When Whisky Fest canceled its 2020 event, it retained headliners Eric Church and Macklemore for a rescheduled 2021 concert. Whisky Fest is still ad-

vertising a July 10 concert, but co-founder Doug Corey said he's still waiting on word from the state.

"We're full steam ahead — if they let us go," he said.

Corey said Whisky Fest is reliant on ticket sales to make the concert financially feasible, and if attendance is capped at a level too far below the Round-Up arena's capacity, organizers might not be able to stage the event.

Corey said large event organizers are supposed to meet with the governor's office by the end of March, and he hopes Whisky Fest will have more clarity on 2021 following the meeting.

Rodeo moving forward

On the west side of the county, Farm-City Pro Rodeo board member Dennis Barnett said the rodeo will go on in Hermiston in August.

"There will be a rodeo, we just don't know if there will be no fans, or some fans or 100%," he said.

Barnett said there have already been other rodeo events held at the Eastern Oregon Trade and Event Center without fans present since the pandemic began, establishing a precedent for using the arena. So the board is making three plans — one for an event with no spectators, one for partial capacity, and one for an event that looks like years past.

"We owe it to the cowboys, we owe it to the contractors, because they need to make a living too," he said.

Barnett said the Farm-City Pro Rodeo has not received any government money to support the event, despite its complete cancellation last year. So if event organizers can't sell any tickets this year or half the usual amount, it will fall to sponsors to make up the difference.

Fortunately, he said, sponsors he has met with so far have all been very supportive.

The rodeo takes place each year in tandem with the Umatilla County Fair, held on the same dates, also at the event center.

Fair Manager Angie McNalley has said the fair board is also moving forward with plans on the assumption that there will be a "fair that looks like a fair" in August, even if there are some regulations in place regarding social distancing, capacity, sanitation and other safety measures.

Bike Week: Unsure

Pendleton Bike Week is in a similar boat to Whisky Fest.

Under new ownership, the 2020 bike week was supposed to shift from the Pendleton Convention Center to the Round-Up Grounds and feature more affordable entry prices.

But bike week owner Stuart Rice had to cancel the 2020 event and he's not sure about the 2021 event either.

Pendleton Bike Week is still advertising July 15-18 event dates, but Rice said he wants to wait until he hears from the governor before proceeding.

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