

## Workers

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County saw an increase of 3%, or 10 workers during the same time period, and Umatilla County saw the largest total decrease of employment in the sector, losing 180 jobs from July 2019 to July 2021.

Across all industries in Eastern Oregon, leisure and hospitality saw the biggest decrease in employment from July 2019 to July 2021, dropping 8.2% from its 2019 levels for a total loss of 570 jobs. The second hardest hit industry was manufacturing, which saw a 6.6% decrease along the same time period for a total loss of 570 jobs as well. Compared to the rest of the state in regards to employment, however, the leisure and hospitality industries were in far less dire straits in Eastern Oregon — Oregon overall saw nearly a 20% decrease in employment within the sector; far above any other industry with regards to job losses.

Other Eastern Oregon counties didn't fare much better. Union registered a 10.3% drop in leisure and hospitality workers since July 2019. Malheur County, which borders Idaho and remained open for much of the pandemic, saw a 9.75% decrease in the sector, while Umatilla County saw a 6.8% drop, beating out the regional average. Surprisingly, Wallowa County saw only a marginal decrease from its July 2019 numbers; it lost just 10 jobs.

Unsurprisingly, the manufacturing jobs lost aren't affected by seasonal employment changes normally seen in the leisure and hospitality industries. Still, manufacturing in Eastern Oregon



EO Media Group/Alex Wittner

**An acrylic painted 'closed' sign reflects in the mirror at the Sumpter Junction restaurant in Baker City on Wednesday, Sept. 15, 2021. The restaurant has been closed for 18 months due to the pandemic and inability to find workers.**

lost 200 jobs from the start of the pandemic in March 2020.

Morrow County saw an 8.4% decrease in workers in the manufacturing industry since July 2019; a drop of 160 workers. Not to be outdone, Umatilla County registered a neat 10% decrease of workers within the same sector, within the same time period, numbering 340 lost jobs. Baker and Union counties saw a 5% decrease in the sector during the same period, corresponding to 30 and 70 workers lost, respectively.

At Behlen Mfg. Co.'s plant in Baker City, where 110 employees weld and otherwise assemble gates, panels, troughs and other livestock equipment, maintaining a full workforce during the pandemic has been "challenging," said Stacy Delong, the plant's human resources manager.

Only 30 jobs were lost in the Baker

County manufacturing industry from July 2019 to July 2021, representing a 5% decrease.

However, Delong said Behlen, a Nebraska company that opened its Baker City factory in 1996, has been "fairly successful recruiting new applicants the last couple of months."

Among the company's techniques was setting up an electronic reader board on Campbell Street, Baker City's busiest thoroughfare, advertising a job fair at the factory on Aug. 18.

"We found that to be successful," Delong said.

She said she hopes that the end of the federal unemployment payments will persuade more people to apply for jobs at the Baker City plant.

Behlen's goal is to add about 40 workers, to a total of 150, by the end of 2021.

"Our approach has been to broaden

community outreach through communication and to best utilize our current advertising resources and simply engaging current employees to encourage friends and family to apply," Delong said. "Fortunately, Behlen Country offers excellent benefits and competitive wages. This does give us slight edge over other employers not able to offer such benefits. We are not there yet, there is a lot of work to do."

Delong said demand for the company's products has continued to increase, "and we don't foresee any kind of decline anytime in the future."

### Out of woodwork

Another of Baker City's larger manufacturing employers is Marvin Wood Products.

The company, which employs about 170 workers at its factory, would like to hire about 30 more employees, plant manager Sandi Fuller said in June of this year.

To entice people to apply for jobs, Marvin Wood Products earlier this year boosted its entry level wage to \$17.73 per hour, plus a 50-cent bonus for people who accept rotating shifts, and other incentives including signing bonuses of \$500 and up to \$1,500 to help people move to Baker City.

Shelly Cutler, executive director of the Baker County Chamber of Commerce, said she has recently heard "positive feedback" from some businesses that have struggled to retain their workforce, although she said she doesn't know of any local restaurants that are fully staffed.

Cutler cautions that she believes the county is in the "very early stages of recovery."

She is optimistic that the cessation

of federal jobless benefits, combined with higher wages and incentives some businesses are offering, will entice people to re-enter the workforce.

Cutler also said she has been sending an increasing number of relocation packets to people who might be interested in moving to Baker County — including younger people who would need a job.

Anna Johnson, a senior economic analyst at Oregon Employment Department, wrote that difficult-to-fill positions were largely unrelated to the pandemic.

"The phrase 'no one wants to work anymore' was already a common reason given for why vacancies were difficult to fill," Johnson wrote. "Now, with lack of applicants and lack of qualified candidates still being a major factor in hiring difficulties, the reason has expanded to become 'no one wants to work anymore... because of high unemployment insurance benefits.'"

Johnson reported that between April and June of this year, only 14% of difficult-to-fill vacancies had relatively high jobless benefits reported as the primary reason employers had trouble filling job openings.

Johnson also noted that leisure and hospitality was the top industry for the pandemic-related, difficult-to-fill vacancies. Among the hardest to fill jobs were restaurant cooks.

Reasons for the vacancies vary — among those offered up include lack of child care, high unemployment benefit pay and low wages at leisure and hospitality jobs. According to the report, the number of employers citing low wages as the reason for the vacancies grew to 15% in spring 2021.

## Co-op

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is the combined enrollment pushed Grant Union into the 3-A level.

That is not the case in this situation, he said. Workman said the combined enrollment, according to the Oregon School Activities Association, is 200. He said 206 would reclassify Grant Union as a 3-A school. Even if the number was over 205, Workman said, OSAA has an exemption based on the number of participants from each school. For example, he said, Grant Union has 20 players. Prairie City has two. The exemption would be allowed, according to Workman.

Workman said Prairie City has not failed at a high school baseball team in 15 years, except for a co-ed team in 2014.

In other words, he said, Prairie City had not fielded a competitive baseball team since 2006. Likewise, he said, the school had never fielded a softball team or even a dance team.

Workman said Prairie City restarted its little league program after a roughly five-year

hiatus, and some local kids have gone on to play in John Day.

He said youth sports not only teach fundamentals of the game, but they also bring kids together.

The kids, Workman said, develop relationships with others from neighboring communities.

Workman said these friendships continue to grow into their high school years, partly because of the co-op agreements.

"High school sports are not so much about winning and losing," he said. "It's about learning life lessons, building character through sportsmanship, hard work and responsibility."

Likewise, he said, rural communities need cooperative agreements to help give young people opportunities they wouldn't have otherwise.

In emotional testimony, Cyrus told the board that doctors had cleared him to play baseball and basketball; it means much more to him to play. He said head coach RC Huerta and his teammates made him feel at home last season through their friendship and the respect he gained for the Grant Union program.

"To have it taken away from me breaks my heart," Cyrus said.

One of the criticisms of the cooperative agreements was that Prairie City students had taken playing time away from Grant Union students. For her part, Grant Union student and softball player Paige Weaver told the board that the times she was benched for a Prairie City student was because that person was "better-fitted for that job at that time."

She said she did not think it was for "political reasons" or because the other player was from Prairie City.

Weaver said the whole county needs to be included when people talk about the community.

"We are too small of a town," she said. "Not only here, but Dayville, Monument, Prairie City, Long Creek, and when we talk community, we mean everybody in our county."

She said the board could not exclude those players from neighboring towns who rely on sports for scholarships to go on to college.

Zach Williams, Grant Union's softball coach, told the board that he had never heard one of his players com-

plain about losing playing time to a Prairie City athlete.

He said that the notion of them losing playing time to a Prairie City student came from an adult.

Williams, who did not sign the letter with the other coaches, said he did not do so because he disagreed with the letter. He said it had been said that he benefits from the co-op. Williams said he struggles with that because he likes to win.

"Nobody likes to lose as a head coach," he said.

Williams, whose team has already been approved for a co-op this season, said if his team were not co-oping with Prairie City, he would have a roster of 17.

Which, he said, is the "worst" number of players to have on a softball team. He told the board that it is way too many for one team and not enough for two.

Shanna Northway, Grant Union's volleyball coach and a teacher, said she signed onto the letter from "a place of emotion" and said she was on the verge of retracting her name.

Northway said she is in the "kid business" and did not want to impact the few kids who would lose out if the schools did not have an agreement in place.

That said, Northway told the board that Grant Union is "constantly slandered" by Prairie City community members, staff, and students when they go to Prairie City.

Northway said the issues with the co-op agreement are not a "kid problem."

"The kids aren't the ones that are causing this problem," she said. "There's a lot of adults that need to get together in a room, sit down and hash it out and become a partner."

## Vaccine

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### Hospital

Last week, Blue Mountain Hospital CEO Derek Daly said the hospital's vaccination rate mirrored the overall rate among health care providers in the county, which is at 53% overall. That's up from 46% but still the third-lowest in all of Oregon.

Daly said he and his peers in the rural health care industry are "obviously" concerned about the impacts after Oct. 18. However, he pointed out that they have seen an uptick in vaccinations since the requirements came out.

He also said that in small rural hospital districts such as Blue Mountain, there are valid religious exemptions and that his organization is doing its "due diligence" to follow the law and respond to those requests.

Daly said that the hospital BMHD belongs to an Eastern Oregon Association of Hospitals peer group that can help mitigate a potential staff shortage. He said the group has extra traveling nurses and medical personnel throughout the state.

### Education

Grant School District 3 Superintendent Bret Uptmor told the Eagle on Sept. 7 that he is still in the process of collecting information from staff. However, he said he is sending out a survey asking if employees have rolled up their sleeves yet and if they would share their vaccination cards. For those who have not been vaccinated, he is asking if they have obtained

### COVID-19 BY THE NUMBERS

An average of five cases per day were reported in Grant County last week, a 16% decrease from the average two weeks ago. Since the beginning of the pandemic, about 10.5% of Grant County residents have been infected, a total of 755 reported cases. The statewide infection rate is roughly 7.5%.

According to its website, St. Charles Bend, a major hospital in Grant County's Region 7, as of Sept. 20, has 97 COVID-19 patients. The website said that 15 of those patients are in the ICU, and 14 are ventilators.

The hospital reports that five patients in the ICU are under 60 and are not fully vaccinated. Additionally, 84 of the 97 inpatients are not fully vaccinated, and nearly half are under 60.

a religious or medical exemption.

Uptmor said he did not know how many staff within the district were vaccinated. As of Sept. 7, he said he had sent out 35 out of 100 survey questionnaires.

Uptmor said he was not sure if he could release the exact number of vaccinated staff and would get back in touch with the Eagle when he knew. However, he did not immediately respond to the Eagle's phone calls and emails on Monday.

"If your medical is in your hands," he said, "why, why would I share that with somebody?"

## Committee Volunteers Needed

**Grant County is now recruiting volunteers to serve on active boards and committees.**

**Obtain an Application to Volunteer from County Court, 201 S. Humbolt, No. 280, Canyon City OR 97820; (541-575-0059) GCCourtAdmin@grantcounty-or.gov Applications are due by Thursday, October 7, 2021**

Committees are formal public bodies required to comply with Oregon Public Meetings Law ORS 192.610.

### Extension & 4-H Service District Advisory Council

Eleven members serve three year terms and meet semi-annually to provide guidance and assistance to local OSU Extension staff in planning, developing, and evaluating balanced educational programs directed to high priority needs of county residents. Membership is limited to one re-appointment.

### Extension & 4H Service District Budget Committee.

Members include two advisory members and a member-at-large serving three year terms. Annual meetings include the County Court and are held to receive, deliberate, revise and approve the annual budget as provided by the District Budget Officer. Any proposed programs are discussed and considered.

### Fair Board

ORS 565.210. Seven members serve three year terms and meet monthly to facilitate exclusive management of fair business operations, the fairgrounds, and other property devoted to the County Fair. Responsibilities include public relations and other work for the fair as needed.

### Planning Commission

Nine members serve a four year term and two alternates serve a two year term, meeting as needed to review land use and zoning applications and discuss city and county growth issues and siting new facilities. Members must be residents of various geographic areas within the county and no more than two voting members shall be engaged in the same kind of business, occupation, trade or profession with agriculture designations of livestock / forage crop production and horticulture / specialty crop production. Commissioners serving in this capacity must file an Annual Verified Statement of Economic Interest with the Oregon Government Ethics Commission. Members must re-apply to the County Court before their term ends if they wish to be re-appointed. The commission is a formal public body required to comply with Oregon Public Meetings Law ORS 192.610.

### Senior Citizens Advisory Council

ORS 410.210. Five members serve three year terms and meet semi-annually to define the needs of older adults, promote special interests and local community involvement, and represent senior citizens as an advocate to the local, state and federal government and other organizations.

### Wolf Depredation Advisory Committee

OAR 603-019-0015. Members include one County Commissioner, two members who own or manage livestock and two members who support wolf conservation or coexistence with wolves. These members agree upon two business representatives to serve as additional members. The committee oversees the procedure established by Grant County for its Wolf Depredation Compensation Program. The current vacancy is for a business representative.

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