

# New editor takes the reins at the Eagle

As some readers of this newspaper may already be aware, the Blue Mountain Eagle has a new editor. After nearly five years in the position, Sean Hart has decided to move on to pursue other interests. The staff of the Eagle wishes him the very best in his next endeavor.



Bennett Hall

I've traveled to Eastern Oregon plenty of times before — my ex-wife had family ties to Lonerock in Gilliam County, and over the years I've enjoyed memorable trips to the Wallowas, Steens Mountain, Hart Mountain, the Alvord Desert, the Deschutes River, Malheur Wildlife Refuge and the Painted Hills.

But those were all short-term visits. This time I'm here to stay.

Driving out here last week, I was struck yet again by the wild and rugged beauty of this part of Oregon. (And to the driver who flashed your brights at me in the Ochocos, thank you. At first I was mad, since I had my low beams on and it wasn't even full dark yet, but then I rounded a bend and realized you were just trying to warn me about cattle in the highway ahead.)

I can't wait to start exploring the area and getting to know the mountains and canyons, lakes and streams around here. But more than that, I can't wait to start getting to know my new neighbors, the people of John Day and the other communities that make up Grant County.

As the Eagle's new editor, I hope to build on the strong legacy of community journalism established by Sean Hart and his predecessors at this newspaper. That means covering the news fairly, accurately, honestly and ethically, and always keeping the best interests of the community in mind.

It also means listening to what you have to say, whether it's a story idea, a criticism or even a pat on the back for a job well done. You can reach me at 541-575-0710 or editor@bmeagle.com. I look forward to hearing from you.

The paper's Sept. 15 edition was the last produced under Sean's guidance, and the Sept. 22 edition was the first produced under mine.

My name is Bennett Hall, and I'm the new editor of the Blue Mountain Eagle. I'm proud to be taking the reins of Oregon's oldest weekly newspaper, which has been serving the people of John Day and Grant County in one form or another since 1868.

While I'm not from Oregon originally, I've lived more than half my life in this state and consider it my home. This is where I went to college, where I raised my family and where I launched my journalism career. I've been working for Oregon newspapers since 1987, first in Portland, then in Eugene and, for the last 25 years, in the Corvallis-Albany area.

You'll note that my Oregon years have been spent in the Willamette Valley, in the western part of the state. But this is the east side, and things are different here.

That was abundantly clear as I made the drive over here from Corvallis last week, with most of my worldly goods crammed into the back of my Subaru. The minute you cross the Cascade crest, the landscape starts to look quite a bit drier. (You also start to see a lot fewer Subarus and a lot more pickup trucks.)



## OTHER VIEWS

### BLM needs to reimagine Owyhee

For many Oregonians, hunting, public lands and family go together. Every year, parents take their children out to bag their first buck, catch their first trout or take aim at their first covey of chukar.

Generation upon generation of hunters pass on the family tradition of waking up early, heading out to our state's gorgeous public lands, and heading home (hopefully) with protein to feed the family. As we approach hunting season, it's worth reflecting on how we use our public lands and how we can protect access to hunting, fishing and our wild public lands for our children.

This year, the Bureau of Land Management, which manages some of the best hunting and fishing areas in Southeast Oregon, is celebrating its 75th anniversary. The theme of this milestone is to "Reimagine our Public Lands," which include places like the Owyhee Canyonlands and the Trout Creek Mountains. This anniversary comes right as the BLM's Vale District is conducting a public process to amend its resource management plan — a once-in-a-generation opportunity to guide management on these lands for the next 20 years.

Known for its dark skies where one can view the stunning spread of the Milky Way, find increasingly rare solitude and build memories of backcountry adventures, the Owyhee is one of the most remote and beloved expanses in the Lower 48. For decades, folks have been trying to preserve this unique area through



Michael O'Casey

various pathways including legislation, national monument designation and through administrative planning, such as the RMP.

While the BLM is asking the public to reimagine our public lands, hunters and anglers are asking them to make changes to its preferred alternative within the draft Southeast Oregon Resource Management Plan, the amendment that was published in 2019. In the BLM's preferred alternative, it chose not to manage even a single additional acre for its conservation values.

The kicker is the agency itself identified more than 1.2 million acres as containing wilderness characteristics, meaning these lands are wild, undeveloped, backcountry lands and many of these acres deserve to be managed to ensure they remain that way.

Oregonians deserve a plan that protects our access and enjoyment of these shared public lands and one that will conserve habitat for iconic species such as the sage grouse and our state's renowned big game animals that have been declining for decades.

This RMP will guide management across millions of acres of public land for decades to come. Through this amendment process, there is an opportunity for the BLM to conserve this wild and remote area by limiting unnecessary development. Following the BLM's stated vision of reimagin-

ing the shared treasure of our public lands, this is a golden opportunity to truly reimagine this plan.

The BLM is reviewing more than 4,000 public comments that were submitted about the draft plan. The bulk of those comments asked the BLM to make changes to their proposal and to conserve this backcountry escape. With the recent shift in the administration, the BLM has a great opportunity to make changes between the 2019 draft plan and the soon-to-be released, proposed final plan. These changes should incorporate additional conservation measures that would protect hundreds of thousands of acres of remote, backcountry landscapes.

The solitude and the quiet in these remote high desert canyons and sagebrush plateaus are some of the finest values any place can offer. As the BLM celebrates 75 years, we should make sure our public lands are protected for the next 75, starting with this hidden Oregon gem. Please make your voice heard and speak up by joining the Owyhee Sportsmen's Coalition or contacting your senators today.

Updating the Southeast Oregon RMP to include conservation measures will make sure we are always able to share this place with the next generation of hunters and anglers and we continue to have robust game species to pursue this uniquely American heritage.

Michael O'Casey lives in Bend and is the Oregon/Washington field representative for the Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership.

## OTHER VIEWS

### Issues remain after deadline pushed back

**Editor's note:** This editorial originally appeared in the East Oregonian.

The news that more than half of Oregon's state employees will get an extra six weeks to get inoculated against COVID-19 was welcome, but the question of what happens after the deadline remains unanswered.

Gov. Kate Brown pushed back the earlier October deadline and set Nov. 30 as the final date state employees must be vaccinated. The decision affects more than 20,000 workers.

Yet many people — including many in the health care industry — have no intention of getting vaccinated for a variety of reasons, and that could mean the state will face a new crisis on top of an already spiraling COVID-19 surge.

Now, more than a quarter of all health care workers in Umatilla, Union and Morrow counties remain unvaccinated. All those

workers would be fired or forced to resign under the governor's vaccination mandate.

Dr. Jon Hitzman, Umatilla County's public health officer, said last week the situation is like a game of chicken.

"Who's going to relent first?" he asked.

That we've reached this point in what is a once-a-century pandemic is beyond troubling. It is sad.

Yet, here we are. If neither side budges — and so far, the governor hasn't indicated she plans to back down — then the small towns scattered across Eastern Oregon will encounter a new medical emergency because there will be fewer qualified people to attend to those with the virus and people injured or in need of serious care.

In a sense, the area's hospitals are caught in the middle — a not uncommon situation since the pandemic began — as they must com-

ply with the state mandate but, at the same time, need qualified people to operate effectively.

Ultimately, much of the final consequence of this situation is out of the hands of residents of the region. We can sympathize with health care workers, or we can feel they should all follow the governor's mandate but, in the end, it will be an individual decision thousands of workers have to make.

So, the real question is what measures and fail-safes are elected leaders across the region proposing to overcome a sudden loss of thousands of qualified workers? What will be the state's role if the region faces a mass exodus of health care workers? Have local elected leaders reached out to state leaders about the issue? If so, what plan is in the works?

We can't afford to wait around and see who blinks first. We need actionable plans in case we lose a great number of workers.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### Masks in schools a sensible move

**To the Editor:**

Oregon has laws that require children to be in safety/car seats. Every state in this nation has car seat laws. Car seats save children's lives and protect them from serious injury. Kids in car seats can't move around the car once buckled in. Their freedom

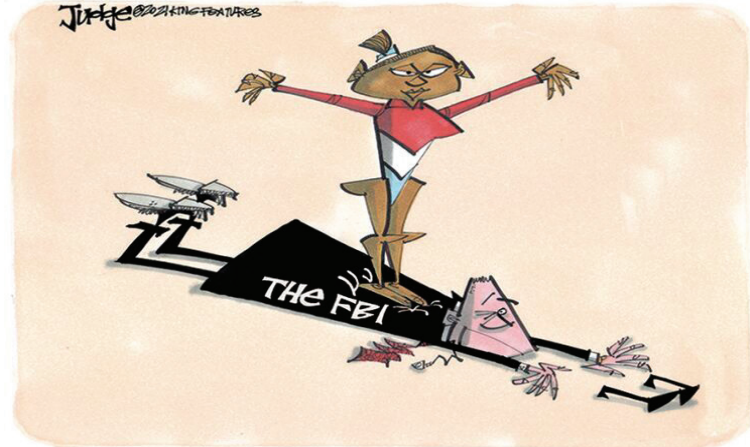
is very restricted. Fines are imposed on the driver if kids aren't properly secured. Car seats and boosters are taken for granted. Yet mandating a parent and a school that a child has to wear a piece of cloth over their face in certain environments, just while the pandemic is still happening, which protects the child and the children around them, and their teachers, from contracting and/or spreading what can now be a deadly disease for kids and even infants, is "tyr-

anny"? I am seeing that word plastered around this community. History has horrific examples of tyranny. Trying to keep kids from dying by mandating a simple protective measure is not going to show up in history books as tyrannical. If it is reported, it will be as a simple, responsible, public health measure that any reasonable government would take to protect its most vulnerable people.

Nancy Nickel  
John Day

**LETTERS POLICY:** Letters to the Editor is a forum for Blue Mountain Eagle readers to express themselves on local, state, national or world issues. Brevity is good, but longer letters will be asked to be contained to 350 words. No personal attacks; challenge the opinion, not the person. No thank-you letters. Submissions to this page become property of the Eagle. The Eagle reserves the right to edit letters for length and for content. Letters must be original and signed by the writer. Anonymous letters will not be printed. Writers should include a telephone number so they can be reached for questions. We must limit all contributors to one letter per person per month. Deadline is 5 p.m. Friday. Send letters to editor@bmeagle.com, or Blue Mountain Eagle, 195 N. Canyon Blvd., John Day, OR 97845; or fax to 541-575-1244.

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**EAGLE** USPS 226-340  
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PUBLISHED EVERY WEDNESDAY BY EO Media Group

Periodicals Postage Paid at John Day and additional mailing offices.

Blue Mountain Eagle  
 195 N. Canyon Blvd.  
 John Day, OR 97845-1187

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 Monthly autopay ..... \$4.25

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