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HOLIDAY HAT PARADE



Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian

Kindergartners from Humbolt Elementary School walk along a path at Valley View Assisted Living in John Day. See story and photos on Page A8

Back to the future in 2022

Here comes another pandemic New Year for Oregonians

By GARY A. WARNER
Oregon Capital Bureau

SALEM — A rapidly spreading deadly virus. Record-breaking fires. Acrid smoke from the Pacific to Pendleton. A riot in the Capitol.

As 2020 came to a welcome close a year ago, an exhausted Oregon public had hope for the New Year.

The worst of the COVID-19 pandemic seemed over with the arrival of vaccines. The Labor Day fires were gone and the smoke that gave the state the worst air in the world some days was gone. Protesters who fought with police in the Capitol in Salem were gone with the end of the special session.

Soon, 2020 would be in the rear-view mirror. An optimistic joke that the worst had passed was that “Hindsight is 2020.”

But as 2021 in Oregon winds down, it feels like a sequel of the highly unpopular horror classic, 2020 in Oregon.

Dark humor dominates — rueful wordplay that 2021 is actually spelled as “2020 Won.”

Now the question is if we are going to have a trilogy.

In announcing that a sixth wave in two years of COVID-19 would arrive around Jan. 1, Gov. Kate Brown noted that another year of COVID-19 wasn't on anyone's wish list. “I know that bracing for a new variant as we head into our second pandemic holiday season is not what we all hoped for,” Brown said.



Dean Guernsey/Bulletin file photos

Nurses participate in a vaccine mandate protest at St. Charles Bend on Oct. 18, the day Oregon's strict rules requiring COVID-19 shots for many workers took effect.

Catastrophes return

Many of the catastrophes that marked 2020 as no one's favorite year were back in 2021.

The vaccines set off a mass scramble for appointments, with most people told they might have to wait until mid-summer for inoculation. Then demand fell off a cliff. Bottles of Pfizer and Moderna vaccine with fewer and fewer arms to put them in. From a high of 50,000 shots in April, demand in Oregon shrank to less than a tenth of that on days in June. Vaccination became another political wedge issue. A riot at the U.S. Capitol showed the fragility of peaceful democracy.

The fires were back — earlier and more remote this year — but burning miles of scars in the land and costing million of dollars to contain.

The smoke choked not just Oregon but jetstreams shared it with places as far as Boston. This year added a grim stretch of record-frying heat on June 28. It hit 116 degrees in

Portland. Salem was 117. Temperatures more familiar to Death Valley than the Willamette Valley.

As 2022 is about to dawn, there is little swagger that the worst is over. The cornerstone of crisis — the COVID-19 pandemic — began on the last day of 2019 with a trickle of infections in China.

It was worldwide — a pandemic — by the end of 2020 with over 300,000 dead in the United States.

Through 2021, the virus threw off variants — most little more than scientific curiosities. But a few — “variants of concern” — would start a roll call of names taken from the Greek alphabet. Delta brought contagion to a new level. Omicron is capping the year as the biggest and fastest, though hopefully less lethal, of them all.

The cases in one city in one country that could be counted on two hands at the end of 2019 would

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No verdict yet on COPS grant

John Day still unsure if it will restart police or pass money to sheriff

By BENNETT HALL
Blue Mountain Eagle

JOHN DAY — The future of John Day's \$375,000 law enforcement grant remains uncertain.

The city got word on Nov. 18 that it had been approved for the funding from the U.S. Justice Department's Office of Community Oriented Policing Services. Known as a COPS grant, the money is to be paid out over three years in \$125,000 annual installments.

But in October, two months after a law enforcement levy failed at the ballot box, the City Council voted unanimously to suspend police operations indefinitely and transfer the city's two remaining officers to the Public Works Department.

In order to accept the COPS grant, the city would have to restart the John Day Police Department, which most city councilors seem reluctant to do for budgetary reasons. There is support on the council for passing the funds to the Grant County Sheriff's Office, which has taken on the burden of policing inside the city limits, but it's not clear whether the Department of Justice would allow that. It's also not clear how soon the funds would be available, either to give to the sheriff or to begin hiring more officers to reboot the Police Department.

City Manager Nick Green emailed the DOJ on Dec. 1 asking for clarification of both those points but had not heard back prior to the Dec. 14 City Council meeting, where the COPS grant was a major point of discussion.

“I've received no response to that inquiry,” he told the council. “I expect we'll get an answer, but I don't have one for you tonight.”

That left law enforcement in John Day and Grant County exactly where it was before the meeting: in disarray.

Tall order

When the John Day Police Department was suspended in October, the Grant County Sheriff's Office instantly became the only local law enforcement agency in the county. But it was already stretched thin, with just four patrol deputies to cover a 4,529-square-mile area with 7,200 residents. Since then, the agency has lost one patrol deputy and has not yet been able to refill the open position.

“We are very overwhelmed, I've got to tell you, but we're doing our best,” Sheriff Todd McKinley told the council at last week's meeting.

McKinley said he understood the budget constraints that led the city to shut down its police department, but he made no effort to hide his frustration at having to take on the burden of patrolling inside the city limits.

“You guys threw my people under the bus,” he said. “My people are doing what yours wouldn't do.”

Budget realities

Green told the councilors they could vote to bring the department back, but it would take time and money to hire a chief and a patrol officer to fill the department's two empty slots. And even then, he said, when the COPS grant expired after three years, the city would once again be faced with a major budget shortfall.

“We were one of the smallest cities in the state, maybe even in the U.S., that was trying to run a police department,” Green said, pointing out that the city's population has been declining for decades and dropped to 1,664 in the most recent census.

As the Eagle reported in October, at least 14 Oregon communities have dissolved their police departments since 1999, including Sisters and Lakeview, both of which have substantially larger populations than John Day.

The city has been budgeting roughly \$450,000 a year to operate the department, which far outpaces property tax revenue.

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Lawsuit contests wild horse plan for Ochocos

By MICHAEL KOHN
The Bulletin

PRINEVILLE — A group that advocates for the welfare of wild horses in the Ochoco National Forest has opened up a lawsuit against federal officials, alleging that a planned reduction of the herd size is detrimental to the species and the Ochoco ecosystem.

The suit, filed Oct. 1 by the Prineville-based Central Oregon Wild Horse Coalition in U.S. District Court, lists Gayle Husted and Melinda Kestler, members of the coalition, as plaintiffs. Defendants listed in the case include Randy Moore, chief of the U.S. Forest Service, and Shane Jeffries, supervisor of the Ochoco National Forest.

The horses in the Ochocos



Ryan Brennecke/Bulletin file

Members of a herd of wild horses graze in the Ochoco National Forest near Prineville in 2018.

roam a 25,000-acre territory that was established in 1975 following the Wild Free-Roaming Horses and Burros Act of 1971, which requires the secretary of agriculture to protect unbranded and unclaimed

horses residing on public lands.

Horses started appearing in the territory in the early 1900s. According to the Forest Service, ranchers purposely turned loose quality animals to ensure a future supply of good horses,

and some made a home in the Ochocos. The Forest Service says the horses had migrated to the area from Post, Mitchell and Prineville.

Now the Forest Service says the herd in the Ochocos has grown too large, and the horses are consuming too much grass in riparian areas, which officials say degrades sensitive habitat for wildlife.

Ochoco National Forest spokesperson Kassy Kern described the riparian areas in the wild horse range as “unsatisfactory” and “not meeting the forage goal of the Forest Plan.”

“We expect that by maintaining horses within the appropriate management level, there would be less degradation of riparian and moist meadow habitat, less streambank alter-

ation, and less sediment,” said Kern.

“The Forest Service must maintain a herd size that the habitat within the territory boundary can sustain.”

The management level of 47 to 57 wild horses is based on analysis of existing conditions in the territory, said Kern. Currently, there are around 120 horses in the herd. The Central Oregon Wild Horse Coalition says the numbers are satisfactory.

Kern adds that there are other factors that have contributed to riparian degradation in the territory, including historic grazing and logging practices.

“Riparian forage is often utilized by many species and

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