

# Guard returns to Eastern Oregon hospitals

By ALEX WITTWER  
EO Media Group

LA GRANDE — Eastern Oregon will see a return of National Guard members to beleaguered hospitals as yet another wave of the COVID-19 virus sweeps through the nation.

On Wednesday, Jan. 12, Gov. Kate Brown ordered a second relief mission in support of hospitals across the state. Nearly 1,200 service members across 40 hospitals were requested by the Oregon Health Authority. The expected deployment date is no later than Tuesday, Jan. 18, and are expected to remain deployed until mid-April.

Hospitals set to receive aid from the National Guard include Grande Ronde Hospital, La Grande; Good Shepherd Health Care System, Hermiston; Blue Mountain Hospital District, John Day; and Wallowa Memorial Hospital, Enterprise.

“Grande Ronde Hospital and Clinics is extremely grateful for the guard members we will be receiving here to help us with staffing shortages in several of our key support services that have been severely impacted by the current labor market,” wrote Mardi Ford, Director Communications & Marketing, in an email. “GRH is, and always has been, proud and support-



Alex Wittwer/The Observer, File

**Oregon National Guard Spc. Renay Monohan sanitizes and cleans a procedure room Tuesday, Sept. 14, 2021, in the surgicenter at Grande Ronde Hospital, La Grande.**

ive of our military.”

As before, the deployed soldiers will be serving in non-clinical support roles, such as material handlers, equipment runners, COVID testing support, custodial services and other logistical services.

“They (hospitals) were reporting that they were understaffed,” said Maj. Chris Clyne with the Oregon National Guard. “The nurses and doctors — you know, the clinical care providers — were having to take out the trash

and do these menial tasks, and it was getting in the way of them providing the care to patients. That way they’re streamlined and they can just focus 100% on caring for the patients.”

According to Clyne, each hospital in Eastern Oregon would receive an average of five national guardsmen.

“We have been told that Blue Mountain Hospital District is set to receive five members of the Oregon National Guard next week,” wrote Derek Daly, CEO of Blue Mountain

Hospital District. “We are thankful for these staffing resources and the support from the National Guard. We plan to utilize these team members to help in non-clinical positions, such as environmental services, across our campuses.”

Caitlin Cozad, marketing and communications director with Good Shepherd Health Care System in Hermiston said that the hospital is expecting six guardsmen to support the hospital.

But as to why the Oregon National Guard deploys soldiers to support and logistical assignments at the hospitals instead of ones with medical training has a surprising reason behind it — Medical staff in the Oregon National Guard often hold positions at local hospitals for their non-military job, according to Clyne.

“We would basically — if we did that — we’d be robbing Peter to pay Paul,” Clyne said of activating clinical guardsmen to support hospitals, “because we would take somebody that’s in that position in their civilian job and then just move them to another location.”

Many of the guard members will be deployed to the communities in which they live, according to Clyne.

“One of the efforts that we’ve been making is to try to get (soldiers) in the location where they live,” Clyne said. “One of the things that we pride our-

selves in is that we serve in the communities where we live. That’s one of the efforts and priorities that leadership has made is that they have that chance to serve as close to home as possible.”

The omicron variant has been rapidly spreading across Oregon and the nation, driving record breaking infection rates and leading to shortages of testing kits and long lines at drive thru testing clinics. According to OHA data, it is the prevailing variant in Oregon as of Jan. 2, accounting for nearly all new infections. At least one sequenced infection has been traced to Eastern Oregon, according to the OHA.

Data shows hospitalizations from the new circulating variant are lower, but the higher infection rate has led to similar hospitalization rates to the previous delta variant.

The number of hospitalized patients at Oregon hospitals due to COVID-19 is 811 and climbing, as of Jan. 14, according to OHA data. The previous peak hospitalization number came on Sept. 1, 2021, with 1,178 patients hospitalized due to the delta variant.

The Oregon National Guard was called in last August to help understaffed hospitals during the delta variant surge. Those soldiers remained at the hospitals until mid-December.

# Ranchers welcome Biden’s bid to ease processing problems

By JAYSON JACOBY  
jjacoby@bakercityherald.com

BAKER CITY — Curtis Martin doesn’t expect a problem that was decades in the making to be solved by a single announcement from the White House, even one that comes with a billion-dollar pledge.

But Martin, a North Powder cattle rancher and past president of the Oregon Cattlemen’s Association, is nonetheless encouraged by the Biden administration’s effort to increase competition in the meatpacking industry, which is dominated by four corporations.

“I think it’s wonderful,” Martin said of the administration’s recent announcement that it would divert \$1 billion from the 2021 American Rescue Plan Act to address problems in the meat processing system and try to encourage the construction of smaller, regional meat processing operations and, potentially, curb a recent rise in beef, pork and poultry prices at the retail level.

“It’s really a positive report, and I think the best thing ranchers can do is engage in it and help Tom Vilsack,” Martin said.

Vilsack is the U.S. agriculture secretary, and one of the federal officials who met with Biden recently in a virtual meeting to discuss the situation.

The resulting plan, which was announced on Jan. 3, has among its goals enforcing existing competition laws and making the machinations of the cattle markets more transparent.

That new federal focus is welcome news for Martin, who has been concerned for many years about what he considers an unfair manipulation of beef markets by the four companies that control about 85% of the country’s cattle processing — Cargill, Tyson Foods, JBS, and National Beef Packing.

While retail beef prices have risen by 21% over the past year, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, that trend hasn’t been reflected in what ranchers are receiving for their cattle, Martin said.

Tom Sharp, the Oregon Cattlemen’s most recent president, addressed the rise in beef prices in an October 2021 interview with the Pacific Northwest Ag Network.



Lisa Britton/Baker City Herald

**Cattle in Bowen Valley, south of Baker City, on Tuesday, Jan. 11, 2022.**

“Those profits have largely gone solely to the major beef packing companies that dominate boxed beef production here in the United States,” Sharp said. “There’s really four multinational companies that produce 83% of the total boxed beef for retail consumption here in the United States.”

Martin said he believes one way to reduce the dominance those four companies have is to encourage more local and regional processing of beef.

That would also give ranchers more options for marketing their cattle, and boost consumer choice, potentially affording them the option of buying beef raised, and butchered, in the same county where they live.

Martin said there is a sufficient number of beef cattle in Eastern Oregon and Western Idaho to support processing plants with a capacity to handle 250 to 500 head per day.

But now, he said, “we have absolutely no competition in the Northwest. There’s no negotiation. You take what is given to you (in terms of prices).”

Martin said he’s encouraged by Agri Beef’s construction of a beef processing plant in Jerome, Idaho. It’s expected to open by the end of 2022, and will have a capacity of about 500 head per day.

“That’s a great thing, but I still see the need for more competition,” Martin said.

Smaller processing plants would also benefit rural economies by creating jobs, he said.

### Increasing competition

Martin said he’s encouraged that Attorney General Merrick Garland also participated in the recent virtual meeting.

Martin has been advocating for years to have the U.S.

Justice Department investigate what he believes constitutes “price manipulation” in the beef industry.

Matt McElligott, who raises cattle between Haines and North Powder, said he’s glad that issues in the beef industry are being acknowledged at the federal level.

“The good thing is that it is being talked about,” said McElligott, who is chairman of the public lands committee for the Oregon Cattlemen’s Association and its president-elect. “It’s something we in the industry have been talking about for a long time, the need to have a more vibrant and competitive industry.”

McElligott said that although details of the Biden administration’s \$1 billion campaign have yet to be determined, a preliminary draft called for spending \$375 million, over two phases, to “jumpstart independent processing” for beef and other meat.

The first phase could include \$150 million earmarked for 15 specific local processing projects, which could potentially help ranchers market beef to local consumers, McElligott said. Prospective processors would compete for the dollars under the proposal.

The second phase would

designate the remaining \$225 million to expand the capacity at existing processing plants across the nation, he said.

McElligott said boosting independent processing, and thus reducing the dominance of the four leading processing companies, would be beneficial to both ranchers and consumers.

“The more processing you have the more opportunities we have for different markets for the cow-calf producer,” he said. “That gives producers more options and it gives consumers more options.”

Now, only about 5% of the beef cattle born in Oregon are actually butchered here, McElligott said.

Both he and Martin pointed out that building a processing plant is no small undertaking.

“To say it’s complex is an understatement for sure,” Martin said.

Complying with federal food safety rules and other regulations is neither simple nor inexpensive, and Martin said he hopes the Biden administration’s \$1 billion campaign will also include resources to help potential entrepreneurs negotiate the regulatory labyrinth.

Among other things, he advocates for the federal government to eliminate or streamline regulations that deter people from pursuing regional or local processing plants, and to assign a coordinator to work with prospective owners to help them with all aspects of the endeavor, including financing.

McElligott said a significant obstacle in the industry for ranchers who want to sell beef directly to local customers is that packaged products must be inspected by someone certified by the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

He said he can sell a half of beef “on the hoof” to a neigh-

bor, but not a single pound of packaged hamburger unless it’s been inspected.

McElligott said he’s encouraged that a draft plan for spending the \$1 billion includes \$100 million to pay overtime to USDA-certified inspectors, which could expand independent processing markets.

### Truth in labeling

Mark Bennett, a Baker County commissioner who also owns a cattle ranch in the southern part of the county near Unity, agrees with Martin and McElligott that the Biden administration’s announcement is promising.

“I think it’s a worthy undertaking,” Bennett said. “Any time you have concentration it limits competition and the opportunity for innovation. This whole discussion is really crucial.”

Bennett said one of the most common topics that come up in his conversations with other ranchers is mandatory country of origin labeling.

Although some meat sold in the U.S., including chicken, is required to be labeled to show where the animal was raised, that’s not the case with beef.

Beef can be labeled as a product of the U.S. even if the cattle were raised in another country but were butchered in the U.S.

(Retailers can also include details about where animals were born and raised; they’re just not required to do so.)

Ranchers and industry groups have been pushing for beef, which has not been subject to mandatory country of origin labeling since 2016, to be reinserted into the labeling law along with chicken and other meats.

“American consumers want to know where their beef comes from,” Bennett said.

There has been some interest in Congress in reinstating mandatory labeling for beef. It ended after officials from Mexico and Canada vowed to impose tariffs on American beef if the mandatory labeling continued.

A group of U.S. senators introduced legislation in September 2021 calling for the U.S. Trade Representative and U.S. Department of Agriculture to come up with a plan to improve beef labeling transparency.

McElligott said country of origin labeling “really needs to be addressed.”

He pointed out that Americans’ demand for beef has continued to grow even with rising retail prices.

He considers this evidence that people recognize the value of beef.

“If you look at everything beef gives you from a nutritional standpoint, it’s still an economical part of your plate,” McElligott said.

**ELTRYM**  
Showing Movies Since 1940!  
1809 1st Street • Baker City

★ NOW SHOWING ★

---

SHOW TIMES NOT AVAILABLE BY PUBLICATION DEADLINE

**For Show Times**

Please Call  
**(541) 523-2522**

or visit  
**www.eltrym.com**

---

\*\*SHOWTIMES SUBJECT TO CHANGE. VISIT OUR WEBSITE OR CALL AHEAD TO VERIFY\*\*  
www.eltrym.com (541) 523-2522

**CANYON CREEK Clinic**

Shawna Clark, DNP, FNP  
**541-575-1263**

235 S. Canyon Blvd. John Day, Oregon 97845

Accepting new Patients! Go to:  
**www.canyoncreekclinic.com**

5273514-1

**AW CONSTRUCTION, LLC**  
Featuring:

- Roofing
- General Construction
- Remodeling
- Fences
- Decks
- Storage Sheds

**and Much More!**

5275620-1

**Andy Wolfer 541-910-6609**      CCB#186113

SINCE 1959  
**Murray's Drug**  
HEPPNER | CONDON | BOARDMAN

**Serving Eastern Oregon since 1959!**  
Pharmacy • Hallmark Cards • Gifts • Liquor Store

**Heppner**  
(541) 676-9158
**Condon**  
(541) 256-1200
**Boardman**  
(541) 481-9474

**www.MurraysDrug.com**

5273979-1

Your Rural Family Health Clinic

**Grant County HEALTH Department**  
528 E. Main, St. E.  
John Day

Monday - Thursday  
7am - 6pm  
Friday 8am - 5pm

Appointments available

Call and schedule your appointment today!  
TOLL FREE  
**888-443-9104**  
or **541-575-0429**

5273514-1

Services Provided:

- Primary Care
- Pregnancy Testing & Referrals
- Acute Care
- HIV Testing & Referrals
- Women's Health Exams
- Cocoon
- Men and Children Exams
- WIC
- Immunizations
- High Risk Infants
- Family Planning
- Maternity Case Management
- Contraception

Grant County Health Department does not discriminate against any person on the basis of race, color, national origin, disability, or age in admission, treatment, or participation in its programs, services and activities, or in employment.

**HESSTON**

**Robbins Farm Equipment**

3850 10th St.  
Baker City  
**541-523-6377**
62302 Pierce Rd.  
La Grande  
**541-963-6577**
1160 S Egan  
Burns  
**541-573-6377**
86812 Christmas  
Valley Hwy.  
Christmas Valley  
**541-576-2160**