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ODFW says mule deer decline predating Measure 18 implementation, citing multiple contributing factors

Very little mention of wolves as significant threat to mule deer

By Chris Sykes

The Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife (ODFW) is nearing the completion of its Mule Deer Management Plan's final draft. As part of the last phase of this process, ODFW hosted two final webinars in October 2023 and January 2024. These webinars provided an opportunity for stakeholders and the public to learn about the plan's details and provide feedback.

Mule deer mortality

The ODFW conducted a research study on mule deer populations at the Starky experimental station from 2019 to 2023, with a particular focus on juveniles. They also studied adult mule deer populations from 2005 to 2023. Each year, they collared 50 mule deer to investigate overall mortality rates within four days of death.

The research revealed that neonate mortality (birth to four months) showed that 36% of the fawns survived, while 64% died. The main causes of death were coyotes (19%), cougars (11%), bobcats (6%), bears (6%), natural causes (13%), and unknown predation (9%). For juvenile mortality (6-12 months), survival rates were 60%, while 40% died. The major causes of death were coyotes (11%) and cougars (8%). However, as the mule deer mature, the percentage of kills switches, with cougars becoming the main predator. Interestingly, bears do not have a significant impact on the deer population later in the season. Wolves had little effect on the studies.

Another interesting finding is that when rabbit populations are low, fawn kills by coyotes tend to increase. This is because coyotes will target fawns when their preferred prey is scarce. Additionally,



Mule deer buck - Contributed Photo

coyotes occasionally take advantage of cougars by stealing their kills, as the prey is already dead. However, cougars retaliate by killing coyotes that try to steal their food.

Predator removal

From the mid to late 2000s, ODFW conducted a study on reducing predation pressure in specific areas across the state. The study focused on six areas for cougars and one area for coyotes, aiming to enhance population performance. The Heppner Unit was selected as the target area for cougars, with the goal of decreasing cougar density and increasing cow and calf elk ratios. Predator removal

measures were implemented in the area. The implemented predator removal strategy proved effective in improving cow and calf elk ratios in the fall season. However, no significant improvements were observed in deer population metrics during the study in the fall.

During a question-and-answer session with ODFW representatives in October, it was discussed that predator removal has not shown significant and long-lasting effects on mule deer populations, according to their data. However, it was agreed that predators do have an impact on mule deer populations. The decline in mule deer popula-

tions across western states cannot be solely attributed to predator presence, as other factors such as changes in habitat quality and human activities also play a significant role.

ODFW representative say the decrease in the deer population cannot be solely attributed to the implementation of Measure 18, which banned specific hunting practices such as using hounds to hunt cougars and bait. The ODFW indicated that the decline began prior to 1994 when the measure was put into effect. Various factors have contributed to this decline, making it impossible to single out Measure 18 as the sole cause.

Habitat

Another question raised was what has changed that decreased habitat quality to support larger numbers of mule deer populations. Several changes have contributed to the decrease in habitat quality. One major change has been the increase in dry and wet cycles which have had a significant impact on the vegetation in their habitat. As a result, the cultivation of crops specifically for wildlife, has transformed.

In addition, there has been a decline in timber harvests, leading to less light reaching the ground and resulting in less available forage for mule deer. Furthermore, recent years have seen more extreme weather patterns, including both intense dry spells and heavy moisture during winter. These fluctuations in weather also contribute to the deterioration of habitat conditions.

ODFW states that human activities have a negative impact on the Oregon landscape, with recreational activities having a significant influence on deer and

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Sheriff's report page 6

In response to feedback from our readers, The Heppner Gazette is committed to keeping up with all the latest updates from the Sheriff's report. We understand that the community values being informed about the activities and events happening in Morrow County. As such, we will try to provide regular and comprehensive coverage of the Sheriff's report.

Winter Weather Chaos



The cold and snow couldn't stop Kim Gutierrez and his dog Edger last week. - Photo by Gayle Gutierrez



Cam Sweeney on main street shoveling a walkway for drivers to get from their car to the sidewalk. -Photo by Cindi Doherty

By Annalynn Black

Morrow county residents had quite the snow-filled adventure this month! The snowfall was so intense that it disrupted the daily routines of many, including our schools, mail services, sports events, and even local businesses.

Let's dive into the winter wonderland misadventures that occurred.

The schools in Morrow County had their fair share of cancellations and delays. Heppner High School district decided to hit the snooze button not once,

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Meetings planned to discuss issues in Morrow County

The Morrow County Citizens for Liberty & Justice are organizing five meetings across different cities in Morrow County. Led by Stewart Dick, topics to be discussed include MCHD ASA, para medics/EMTs ambulance service, the location for the new Circuit Court House, Commissioner/Administrators salary, Amazon tax abatement Commissioner deals, and nitrates in county wells.

The meetings will be held on January 25th at 6pm at the Senior Center in Heppner, January 29th at 6pm at the Holly Rebekah Lodge in Lexington, January 31st at 6pm at the Irrigon Library Conference room, and February 5th at the Boardman Grange Hall. An Ione meeting at the Legion Hall is yet to be announced. A private ballot will be conducted after the January 25th meeting in Heppner.

Community Counseling Solutions Project in Morrow County to receive \$2 million

Salem - On January 4th, Oregon Governor Tina Kotek unveiled a \$25 million partnership with Co-ordinated Care Organizers (CCOs), Oregon's regionally based Medicaid insurers, to address the increasing profits recorded by these organizations during the Covid-19 pandemic. With over 1.5 million individuals enrolled in the Oregon Health Plan, according to healthinsurence.org, which serves low-income Oregonians, the need for affordable and accessible healthcare is paramount. In response to this, Governor Kotek requested the CCOs to reinvest an additional \$25 million towards projects aimed at bridging the gaps in behavioral health coverage. This partnership, formalized through a Memorandum of Understanding, represents a collaborative effort between CCOs, providers, and the Oregon Health Authority (OHA) to support the mental well-being of Oregonians.

The \$25 million investment has been allocated towards four projects across the state, ensuring geographical diversity and a focus on serving the youth population.

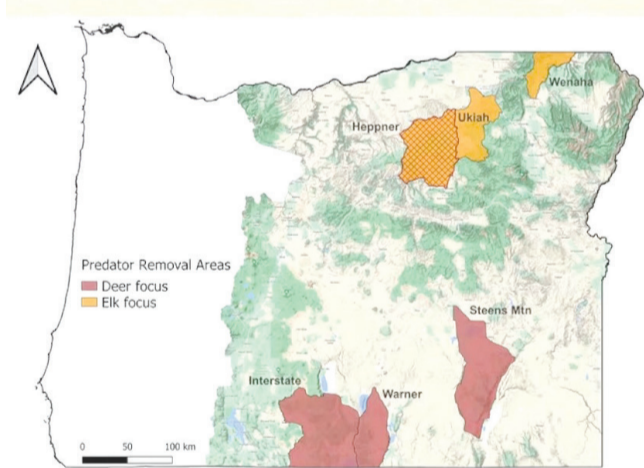
1. Trillium Family Services Project - Portland Metro Area: \$13.2 million
2. Adapt Project - Douglas County: \$7.5 million
3. Looking Glass Project - Lane County: \$2.3 million
4. Community Counseling Solutions Project - Morrow County: \$2 million

To bridge the funding gap for new psychiatric residential treatment beds, the Community Counseling Solutions Project in Morrow County has been allocated \$2 million. This investment will enhance the capacity to serve individuals in need of mental health care in an underserved region. It aims to minimize the financial barriers preventing access to adequate treatment.

According to the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI), approximately 731,000 adults in Oregon live with a mental health condition. The state also faces challenges in the delivery and affordability of mental health care, with Oregonians being four times more likely to be forced out-of-network for mental health care compared to primary health care. This disparity impedes access to essential treatment and makes it financially burdensome for individuals seeking help.

"Oregon needs more treatment options to help young people in our state who are struggling with serious behavioral health issues," Governor Kotek said in a press release on the 4th. "The state and CCOs developed a plan to reinvest surplus Medicaid dollars into Oregon communities, and this partnership will support youth behavioral health projects that we desperately need."

The \$25 million partnership between Governor Tina Kotek, Coordinated



Map showing the six different units that the ODFW targeted for predator removal years ago. - Contributed image

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