

# Two Umatilla County worksites on state's coronavirus outbreak list

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As the Oregon Health Authority starts releasing data on worksites with outbreaks of COVID-19, Medelez Trucking and Good Shepherd Health Care System both made the list.

Medelez Trucking has had 22 confirmed cases linked to it since April 29, according to the report released June 3, and Good Shepherd Medical Center has had five cases linked to its worksite since May 21. The two Hermiston worksites were the only Umatilla County employers on the list of 19 worksites statewide.

The report counts employees who work in the same location together and started experiencing symptoms within 14 days of each other, but it also includes close contacts, such as family members of the employees who tested positive after they did.

"That makes it sound like we had that many employees test positive, but we didn't," said Joyce Hughes, human resources manager for Medelez Trucking. "People can say, 'I was around an employee,' and then we get tagged with it."

She also pointed out that for the sake of protecting patients' privacy, OHA is only listing workplaces with more than 30 employees and more than five cases. That means a business with all 25 out of 25 employees testing positive for COVID-19 would not be named in a report of worksite outbreaks, while a business with five out of several hundred employees would.

Hughes said Medelez Trucking has 200 to 250 employees year-round but about 400 during har-



Staff photo by Ben Lonergan

**Hospital workers screen people arriving at Good Shepherd Medical Center in Hermiston in late March.**

vest season. Near the end of April, she said, they were notified that someone who was not an employee, but had come into the office, had tested positive. Employees who had been there that day subsequently tested positive.

"When we found out two people had it we shut down the office completely," Hughes said.

"They sanitized the building 'top to bottom' and reopened for a day on a limited basis before another employee tested positive and they shut down completely again. Hughes said from the beginning, each person who tested positive was not allowed back to work until the county health department considered them recovered.

Their most recent case, according to the OHA report, was on May 9. Since OHA is considering worksite outbreaks resolved if the site has gone 28 days without a new case, if the state had waited a few more days to start publishing worksite data, the Hermiston trucking company would not have been included.

Benny Medelez, one of the owners of the company, said the company is

essential to area growers who need to get their products to market, so they need to "keep on trucking." But also said from the beginning of the outbreak they have followed all safety measures recommended by the state, including closing their office to members of the public who don't have essential business with them, keeping people spaced 6 feet apart and putting in strict cleaning protocols.

"We do everything possible," he said. "We're not opposed to anything because we want to keep everyone safe."

Dennis Burke, CEO of Good Shepherd Health Care System, echoed some of Hughes's concerns about the way the information was being presented.

"The criteria for which the Oregon Health Authority (OHA) is reporting COVID-19 case counts in the workplace is very misleading," he said in an email. "Reported numbers are based on contact tracing, which includes all household members and other close contacts related to that one case. Unfortunately, the implications of these reports indicate that all the cases occur in the

workplace, which is not representative or correctly reported."

He said in Good Shepherd's case, the affected employees were in one of Good Shepherd's outpatient facilities. They sent a list of patients who had possibly had contact to Umatilla County Public Health for contact tracing, and testing was "encouraged and paid for" for any employee who may have been exposed.

Good Shepherd Health Care System has 745 employees, Burke said, and the hospital has numerous measures in place to protect them. Some of those include limiting visitors, implementing social distancing, doing temperature checks for everyone entering a facility, requiring masks for employees and patients (with a few health-related exceptions), holding meetings virtually, providing up-to-date information to staff, providing PPE and providing testing to staff with symptoms.

If an employee is diagnosed with COVID-19, GSHCS follows Oregon Health Authority's current guidelines to not allow them back at work until at least 10 days after symptom onset and 72 hours after their fever is gone without the use of any fever-reducing medications.

Morrow County did not have any worksites listed on the Oregon Health Authority's report, which OHA stated "may not reflect all the workplace outbreaks in Oregon." On May 12, *The Oregonian* reported that Lamb Weston had four confirmed cases of COVID-19 among its Boardman employees, but Lamb Weston did not respond to requests for comment by the *East Oregonian* at the time.

**IN THE WORKS**

# Port of Morrow moves forward on improvements

If you're ever looking for new growth and development in Eastern Oregon, the Port of Morrow in Boardman is always a safe bet.

Last week, during a meeting of the Columbia Development Authority, port director Ryan Neal shared that while COVID-19



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has shut down the SAGE Center and the port's offices, from a business standpoint they have been busy.

A project known as the East Beach rail extension, which will add 25,000 feet of track for use by port businesses, will be finished later this year.

The port is using state and federal grant dollars it received in late 2018 for the Columbia River Barge Terminal Rail Access Project, which will allow the port to offer rail-to-barge shipping capabilities. The rail extension, along with developing Terminal 1 and Terminal 3 with rail access, is the first part of the project.

Neal reported that design for the rail-to-barge-portion should be done within a month, with construction beginning in early 2021.

The port is also working on expanding its water and wastewater infrastructure. Neal said they are working on a loop system for their water system in the East Beach Industrial Park, which should be done within the next 12 months. Port employees are also working on their application for a

water reuse system that will allow recycled water to be reused on agricultural land.

The City of Boardman passed a \$20.3 million bond last month to add its own water and wastewater infrastructure nearby. The money will pay for a water booster pump station, an approximately 1 million gallon water reservoir, a new water collector well, a 13-acre lagoon, wastewater lift stations and acquiring land for the projects.

Neal said the expansion of the Neal Early Learning Center is currently under construction, and while it has been held up due to some supply chain issues related to COVID-19, it should be complete in early October.

The center is a collaborative effort between the Port of Morrow, InterMountain Education Service District, the Morrow County School District and Umatilla-Morrow Head Start and stands adjacent to the Blue Mountain Community College's Workforce Training Center.

"It will be a good facility for the region," Neal said.

Other parts of Morrow County are also seeing growth.

The Wheatridge Renewable Energy Facility, located just north of Lexington, is currently under construction.

The project by Portland General Electric combines wind turbines, solar panels and battery storage. According to the *East Oregonian's* reporting when the project was first announced in 2019, it will be the largest facility of its kind in the United States — enough to power the equivalent of 340,000 homes.



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