

COLUMN

From the publisher | What's going on at the newspaper?

The answer to the above question is, quite a lot, actually.

In May, the *Hermiston Herald* was converted from a small weekly paid newspaper to a mass distribution free product covering west Umatilla County and northeast Morrow County, while the *East Oregonian* reduced publication days from five times per week to three times (Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays).

Either of these projects would have been a heavy lift, but we chose to tear off the proverbial Band-Aid all at once and enacted both changes at the same time.

While the *Herald* has long been a weekly newspaper for the Stanfield-Hermiston-Umatilla area, as well as a news bureau for the

East Oregonian, it was clear that remaining a small paid-circulation weekly was no longer the best use of resources nor adequately serving these rapidly growing communities. The decision was made to convert the *Herald* into a free mass-distribution weekly blanketing that market by direct-mailing to 14,500 households throughout the area. It has been very well



Chris Rush

received.

At the very same time, we reduced print publication days at the *East Oregonian* and it has gone as well as or better than could be expected.

Under the extraordinary circumstances that every small business now finds itself in these days, it was a necessary move to align expenses with the new reve-

nue realities. But the truth is, this move had been seriously contemplated even before the onset of COVID-19.

We have not decreased our news-reporting footprint in Eastern Oregon.

Our current print home delivery for the *EO* is actually up for the year and we have recently witnessed a significant increase in single-copy sales from local retail and rack locations, as well as tremendous growth in our online subscriptions. It all adds up to an average paid audience of nearly 5,000 local households.

The real growth, however, is online. For instance, did you know that www.eastoregonian.com reaches between 50,000 and 60,000 unique readers on an average every week? You read that right. Our online footprint extends

throughout the Pacific Northwest with thousands of readers logging in from Oregon, Washington, Idaho and beyond every day. The *Hermiston Herald's* online traffic has also increased since we removed the paywall.

The transformation of the newspaper industry as a whole — from print-centric operations to online multimedia outlets — is well underway. The pandemic is merely speeding up this process.

Another big change is coming for yours truly. I am stepping down as regional publisher here in Pendleton at the end of June. My wife and I will be relocating to Texas shortly thereafter to be closer to our extended family.

The operation is being left in the very capable hands of the talented Andrew Cutler overseeing editorial operations in the region

and Karrine Brogoitti as regional sales director. Both are media veterans and natives of Eastern Oregon.

I have thoroughly enjoyed my time here in Eastern Oregon and will certainly miss so many good people I've had the pleasure to meet and work alongside. My parting advice is this: Please don't take your local newspaper for granted. Now, more than ever, local news is vital and the folks here at your local newspaper are working hard every day to keep you informed, both in print and online.

Chris Rush is the regional publisher for the East Oregonian, Hermiston Herald, La Grande Observer, Baker City Herald, Wallowa County Chieftain and Blue Mountain Eagle.

Lamb Weston sees COVID-19 outbreak

37 COVID-19 cases linked to Lamb Weston outbreak

By NADA SEWIDAN
STAFF WRITER

The Oregon Health Authority reported 37 COVID-19 cases linked to Lamb Weston's Hermiston facility on June 23 in its weekly reporting of worksite outbreaks.

According to OHA, the 37 cases includes employees, but also cases that have been traced back to employees through contact tracing, such as family members.

Shelby Stoolman, a spokeswoman for Lamb Weston, said the plant closed and will remain down while they work closely with the Umatilla County Public Health to ensure the safety of the staff.

"We're taking this situation very seriously and prioritizing the safety of our team members," Stoolman stated in an email.

Lamb Weston shut down their facility on Monday, June 15, to complete deep cleaning measures. According to OHA, an investigation was launched on Tues-



Potatoes run on a conveyor belt at a Lamb Weston processing plant in 2019.

Contributed photo by Lamb Weston

day, June 16. OHA did not publicly disclose the potential outbreak at the time because the initial case count did not exceed the number necessary to consider it an outbreak. Outbreaks of more than 20 people in an employee workspace with at least 30 employees are now publicly reported, up from the threshold of five cases per worksite that the state was previously using.

Stoolman said the facil-

ity will remain closed until it is safe to continue operations and that they have not yet determined a reopening date.

"We've reviewed our safety protocols with the Oregon Department of Agriculture and Oregon OSHA and have confirmed that we meet or exceed all of the requirements for safe operation," she said in an emailed statement.

Lamb Weston is one of

Hermiston's largest employers. In June 2019, the company cut the ribbon on a new \$250 million expansion of its french fry factory in Hermiston, and at the time reported that the location's 570 employees made approximately 750 million pounds of potato products per year.

Other Hermiston residents also work at the company's Boardman and Tri-Cities locations.

Minimum wage increases July 1

By JADE MCDOWELL
NEWS EDITOR

Oregon's minimum wage will see an increase on July 1.

Umatilla and Morrow counties, which fall under the nonurban category, will increase from \$11 an hour to \$11.50. The Portland metro area will increase to \$13.25, and "standard" counties will go from \$12 to \$12.25.

The increases are part of a bill passed by the Oregon Legislature in 2016, dividing counties into categories and mandating incremental increases in minimum wage each summer.

The entire state had a minimum wage of \$9.25 an hour before the bill was passed. By July 2022 nonurban counties, found mostly in Eastern Oregon, will rise to \$12.50 while the Portland metro area will be at \$14.75.

The state does not allow employers to count tips as part of an employee's base pay — they must be paid at least minimum wage directly by the employer and be allowed to keep tips in addition to that amount.

For more information about minimum wage, visit oregon.gov/boli/workers/Pages/minimum-wage.aspx or call 971-673-0761.

Credit Union offers free shred day

HERMISTON HERALD

Old West Federal Credit Union is offering a free shredding day at its Hermiston location on Thursday, June 25 from 9 a.m. to noon.

The business suggests people consider bringing in tax documents over 6 years old, old bills that have been paid, statements from loans

that have been paid off, credit card statements, pay stubs from past years and other confidential financial documents you may have at home but no longer need.

Staff will provide free and secure shredding and disposal of the documents.

The credit union is at 1739 North First St., Hermiston.

Farm Fair looks at online options

People can take a survey to weigh in on what they want to see

HERMISTON HERALD

The Hermiston Agricultural Research and Extension Center is conducting a survey as staff work to determine what the 2020 Farm Fair will look like.

In an email to stakeholders, HAREC staff said it was unlikely that COVID-19 restrictions would allow for an in-person fair by December, but they would still like to offer an online option for people who are interested in listening to the

presentations or need continuing education credits.

The survey about possible online options can be found online at oregonstate.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_42b8gVKZc7Xflup.

The extension center has already moved some of its field days, cooking classes and other services online in the past few months while social distancing guidelines are in place.

The 2020 Farm Fair will be the 47th annual event. In years past, the trade show and conference has offered a three-day long collection of displays and classes at the Eastern Oregon Trade and Event Center in Hermiston.



HH file photo

Juan Salamanca, left, and Antonio Echeverria, both of Hermiston, look at the front bucket on a Case tractor in 2017 at the Hermiston Farm Fair. This year's farm fair will likely be held online.

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