

Umatilla County on two-week 'pause' as COVID-19 cases rise

By **JADE MCDOWELL**
NEWS EDITOR

Umatilla County is among nine Oregon counties on a two-week "social pause" to try to slow down a sudden surge in COVID-19 infections in the state.

From Nov. 11 to Nov. 25, counties included in the pause must reduce the capacity of restaurants, bars, gyms, bowling alleys and other indoor recreation facilities to no more than 50 people at a time, with tables at restaurants seating no more than six. Churches are exempt from the 50-person limit.

All indoor visits to long-

term care facilities are halted. Businesses are asked to have all employees able to work from home to do so. Individuals must limit their social gatherings to six people or fewer when including people from outside their household, and everyone is asked to reduce the frequency of social gatherings altogether and try to limit their contact circle to no more than six people outside their household.

As part of the pause, Hermiston School District suspended all in-person activities until further notice, including the limited in-person instruction that had been taking place for

special education and Newcomers students, and onsite extra-curricular activities, including sports practices and conditioning.

"I am heartbroken over this turn of events," Superintendent Dr. Tricia Mooney said in a statement. "These student interactions — teacher to student and with peers — is vital to the well being of all involved, students and adults!"

Veterans Day activities were also canceled or modified, including the Hermiston Chamber of Commerce's planned parade.

After Umatilla County successfully brought down its COVID-19 cases fol-

lowing a major surge over the summer, the county's cases are rising once again, as is the percentage of tests coming back positive. In the seven days between Nov. 3-9, the county reported 160 new cases of COVID-19.

Meanwhile, statewide, Oregon surpassed 600 cases in a single day on Oct. 31 and since then has seen cases continue to shoot up, with an average of 740 new cases per day last week. On Monday, Nov. 9, the state reported 269 hospitalizations of COVID-19 patients, sparking worries from health officials that Oregon was headed toward maxing out its hospital capacity.

"We've been nervous with how these rates are going," Umatilla County Public Health Director Joe Fiumara said. "I think we've felt here that we've been able to stay on top of it — our hospitals have been able to stay relatively available, our tracers have been able to follow up within 24 hours — but you never know when you're going to get to that point where you're not doing that anymore."

Fiumara and state public health officials have stated that the latest surges seem to be driven mostly by small, informal social gatherings between family and friends that have then been spread

elsewhere by attendees. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the most common symptoms of COVID-19 are fever, chills, cough, shortness of breath, headache, muscle aches, sore throat, vomiting or diarrhea, runny nose or congestion and the loss of taste or smell. In some patients, the virus has caused permanent or long-lasting damage to the heart, lungs, brain or other organs or caused lingering symptoms months after the patients no longer test positive for the virus.

For more information, visit oregon.gov/oha/erd/pages/covid-19-news.aspx.

Umatilla Electric receives \$3 million federal loan from USDA

Money will help customers make their homes energy efficient

By **KATY NESBITT**
FOR THE HERMISTON HERALD

Umatilla Electric Cooperative received a \$3 million federal loan to finance major energy efficiency upgrades that will reduce energy waste and cut costs for residents of Umatilla County.

Steve Meyers, Member Services Administrator for Umatilla Electric, said the loan will further the co-op's existing energy efficiency program.

"In 2018, we received a \$1.5 million no-interest loan to begin our Energy Saver Loan program, in which we offer 1.99% loans for residential heat pumps, windows and insulation," Meyers said.



Ben Lonergan/Hermiston Herald, File

Umatilla Electric Cooperative of Hermiston has received a \$3 million federal loan to finance major energy efficiency upgrades.

Well received by Umatilla Electric members and installation contractors, Meyers said the co-op has made 60 loans since January 2019.

Meyers said the program's intention is that the monthly energy savings from these improvements will help off-

set all or part of the homeowner's loan. The \$3 million the co-op just received from the federal government will pay for the development of a manufactured home replacement program.

"Through this year, UEC has been working with state and community action agen-

cies as guidance is developed for manufactured home replacement legislation signed by the governor in January 2020," Meyers said.

To the extent possible, as a community service, Meyer said the co-op wants to combine its no-interest loan with related programs and incentives offered by state and federal agencies and Bonneville Power Administration.

Meyer said Sens. Jeff Merkley and Ron Wyden and the USDA were helpful in making changes to the Rural Energy Savings Program to make it more expansive and useful for communities, and this loan approval is a good example of that.

The Umatilla Electric's general manager and CEO, Robert Echenrode, expressed his gratitude for what he called the hard work

and dedication of Oregon's senators to help co-op members with their energy needs.

"We have experience with the RESP program and this additional federal loan bolsters what we can offer to our members for energy efficiency," Echenrode said.

The 20-year loan, administered through the USDA's Rural Energy Savings Program, was designed to allow rural electric co-ops to offer their customers low-interest loans to provide affordable financing for energy efficiency improvements. Customers then pay back the loans through the savings on their electric bills.

"Throughout this year, the coronavirus crisis has claimed Oregonians' lives and livelihoods — upending every aspect of our lives," said Merkley, who serves as the top Democrat on the

Senate Appropriations subcommittee that oversees funding for the USDA, in a statement. "Now is the time to do all that we can to build a road to recovery, and that road must include the state-of-the-art infrastructure investments our rural communities need to access essential utilities, cut costs, and thrive."

Wyden was also a supporter of the program, stating in a news release that, "Smart investments like this loan for the Umatilla Electric Cooperative to help low-income customers make their homes more affordable to heat this winter are a must for rural Oregonians to weather this economic storm, and I'll keep battling for communities throughout our state to secure resources like this so they too can be helped in their recovery."



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