



SUMMER HEAT

Forecast provides little relief

JEFF BUDLONG
STAFF WRITER

HERMISTON — The calendar has long since flipped from February, but it would be easy to forgive Hermiston and surrounding communities for feeling like they are trapped in a perpetual Groundhog Day.

Record heat has defined early summer and little precipitation has been the theme of the year. Relief on either front isn't in the forecast over at least the next week.

"We do expect temperatures to remain above normal — not the excessive heat we saw at the end of June — in the low to mid-90s instead of readings around 100," Pendleton National Weather Service hydrologist Marilyn Lohmann said.

Hermiston's normal highs are in the upper 80s this time of year, but triple-digit temperatures usually reserved for late July and August have already become common.

The extreme heat in late June came with a strong area of high pressure that trapped the warm air, Lohmann said.

"Outside of the irrigated areas, the grasses and soils are very dry, and with little moisture there temperatures can heat up even more," she said. "That feedback loop led to those extreme temperatures."

Gov. Kate Brown declared Umatilla County in a drought disaster in an executive order last month.

The county was one of four — along with Grant, Union and Wasco counties — that Brown announced was facing "a severe, continuing drought emergency" that is projected to continue as conditions are unlikely to improve, the order said.

June saw just 0.23 tenths of an inch of rain in Hermiston, well below the 0.64 tenths in a normal year. Normal rainfall for much of the area in July is just a quarter of an inch.

The picture doesn't improve looking at precipitation so far this year at the Hermiston airport. Lohmann said just 1.79 inches has been recorded since January, 4.23 inches below normal. The water year, which starts in October, is at 4.63 inches, 4.71 below normal. Lohmann gives it less than a 50% chance that the deficit will be made up this year.

"The August, September and October forecast still shows above normal temperatures and below normal precipitation for the area," she said.

The drought has taken its toll on crops with lower yield on wheat and barley. Lohmann said municipal water systems in the area have avoided issues so far, but that is not the case across the state.

"In north central Oregon and into south-central Washington they have had some dry wells already and are having to drill deeper," she said.

The dry conditions also have led to the early arrival, by more than a month, of fire season and the potential for larger fires.



Alex Wittwer/For the Hermiston Herald

Head chef Trevor Olson looks through the line of orders June 26, 2021, during his shift at Nookie's Restaurant & Brewery in Hermiston. Nearly every company in Eastern Oregon is looking for workers, but the restaurant industry is the most visible indication of the labor shortage, with many kitchens having overworked staff pushed to their limits.

HELP WANTED

Eastern Oregon feels pinch of labor shortage

By ALEX WITTWER
EO MEDIA GROUP

The Oregon Employment Department reported the number of residents in Eastern Oregon receiving unemployment benefits is lower now than it was before the pandemic started.

That statistic makes no difference to the lines of orders filing through the printer at Nookie's Restaurant & Brewery in Hermiston, which has struggled to find workers as the nation faces a new complication in the economic recovery from the pandemic.

"I don't have a single cook that's not in overtime right now," said Trevor Olson, the head chef at the restaurant and brewery.

He's been a cook for nearly seven years, shifting around other restaurants in Hermiston and Tri-Cities before coming back to Nookie's last winter. At 25, Olson is in charge of the entire kitchen at Nookie's.

"Halibut in 30 seconds," Olson said down the line.

The two prep cooks were busy at the stove as flames licked at the pans cooking seafood alfredo. Neither are over



Alex Wittwer/For the Hermiston Herald

Sean Altizer, a server at Nookie's Restaurant & Brewery in Hermiston, looks through orders Saturday, June 26, 2021, at the kitchen window. According to the managers, the restaurant had just finished staffing their wait staff, though the kitchen remains sorely understaffed, with nearly every cook working overtime.

for the week.

Olson flipped two burgers, flames reached toward the ceiling. The previous head cook quit some time after the county relaxed its restrictions due to dropping COVID-19 cases in May 2021, leaving Olson and sous chef Lupe Delgado to run the restaurant.

Before his shift started that day, Olson clocked 60 hours

for the week.

Some workers left the market

Most restaurant owners point to supplemental unemployment benefits as not only a principal cause of the labor shortage but also a cause of lowered morale among employees. However, record-low unemployment rates in states such as Nebraska, Idaho and Utah — which are at or

below their pre-pandemic levels — has done little to stave off their own labor shortage problems.

The continued benefits, which are set to last until Sept. 6, prompted Eastern Oregon leaders and officials to send a letter to Gov. Kate Brown on June 7 demanding the end of the federal supplement to the 1,468 unemployed workers collecting benefits in Eastern Oregon.

But ending those benefits, according to economists, would not fix the economy's woes.

Scott McConnell is an economics professor at Eastern Oregon University, and also runs Side A Brewing in La Grande, which has given him close-up experience with the labor shortage.

"The research says no," said McConnell regarding whether or not ending expanded unemployment benefits would resolve the labor shortage. "I think it's easy to point at that as being the sole reason."

A large portion of the workforce returned to the labor market, McConnell said. A few have not. It's that last portion of the workforce that confounds economists and state leaders alike.

See Shortage, Page A8



Ben Lonergan/Hermiston Herald, File

Cars pass through a drive-thru COVID-19 testing event at the Pendleton Convention Center Feb. 1, 2021.

Delta variant now in Eastern Oregon

By BRYCE DOLE AND CARLOS FUENTES
EO MEDIA GROUP

UMATILLA COUNTY — The delta variant has arrived in Eastern Oregon.

And with vaccination rates across the region lagging behind the state, the question for health experts is not if the latest and most contagious strain of COVID-19 will spread through communities, but how large the outbreak will be.

"It's not a question for unvaccinated people if they're going to get the virus," said Dr. Jon Hitzman, Umatilla County's public health officer. "It's when they're going to get it and how sick they're going to get."

The state has reported 14 delta cases so far and three in the Oregon Health Authority's Region 9,

an area that encompasses Morrow, Umatilla, Union, Wallowa, Baker and Malheur counties. Each of those cases were reported in Umatilla County, according to Dr. Bill Messer, an associate professor in the department of microbiology and immunology and the division of infectious diseases at Oregon Health & Science University, Portland.

But experts say that almost certainly is an undercount, as only a small percentage of cases are sequenced to confirm if they are delta. In Umatilla County, only 16 of 116 positive cases over a two-week period in early June were sequenced to confirm if they were delta.

"The short answer is that we, collectively the state, we want to sequence absolutely every spec-

imen we can get our hands on," Messer said. "But there are logistical problems for that, particularly for the Eastern Oregon counties and rural hospitals."

According to Messer, the state is two weeks behind in its sequencing. That means cases reported since June 15 have not been confirmed as delta or not.

"There is a lag there, and a lot of cases in those lags," Messer said.

Cases have declined across Oregon in recent weeks as the state reached its goal of 70% of residents vaccinated. Meanwhile, some less-vaccinated Eastern Oregon counties, including Baker and Umatilla counties, have reported sharp case spikes.

Umatilla County — where

See Delta, Page A8

INSIDE

A3 ▶ City council continues discussion on digital infrastructure plan

A4 ▶ Putting in more safeguards to protect workers who must be out in the oppressive heat is the right move

A7 ▶ Businesses getting back to normal as restrictions ease

A9 ▶ New BMCC president has start date