

Commissioners direct county employees, residents to wear face masks in county buildings



Ben Lonergan/Hermiston Herald
A sign Wednesday, Aug. 4, 2021, on the door of the Umatilla County Courthouse, Pendleton, advises courthouse visitors of the mask requirement for county buildings.

HERMISTON HERALD

PENDLETON — The Umatilla County Board of Commissioners announced it is reinstating mask requirements for county employees and residents visiting county buildings.

The commissioners announced the directive Monday, Aug. 2, citing concerns over the growing number of COVID-19 infections in the county.

The county will require all its employees to don facemasks anywhere outside their private work space and when someone visits their

desk, according to a county document describing emergency guidelines.

In addition, security will deny access to people attempting to enter county courthouses without masks on. Anybody receiving services from the county must wear their mask, according to the county.

The county also is encouraging its employees to socially distance themselves as much as possible. Employees who feel ill or have COVID-19-like symptoms are directed to not come to work. The county will continue conducting daily symptoms and temperature checks until further notice.



Ben Lonergan/Hermiston Herald, File
Tractors and trucks on Sept. 30, 2020, navigate the fields at Threemile Canyon Farms near Boardman during potato harvest.

Threemile Canyon Farms hires new president

By GEORGE PLAVERN
CAPITAL PRESS

BOARDMAN — Threemile Canyon Farms has hired a new president following the unexpected death of founder and general manager Marty Myers in December 2020.

Bill Antilla, of Longview, Washington, was selected to lead the operation, which includes Oregon's largest dairy and 39,500 acres of cropland. His first day was Monday, Aug. 9.

For the last seven years, Antilla served as general manager at Crown Companies and Crown Iron Works in Blaine, Minnesota, a world leader in oilseed processing technology. There he oversaw all aspects of global business, including financial performance, engineering, sales, research and development, marketing and supply chain.

Previously, Antilla spent 26 years at Cargill Inc., a Minnesota-based global food corporation, serving in various leadership roles including food ingredients, food production, agricultural processing and bio-renewable industrial technologies.

In a statement, Antilla said he was drawn to Threemile Canyon Farms for its culture, values and location. The farm is about 15 miles west of Boardman.

"I'm eager to build upon Threemile's success of innovation and dedication to the team, animal welfare and sustainable practices," he said.

Established in 1998 by R.D. Offutt Co., Threemile Canyon Farms is well known for its large dairy operation,

with 35,000 milking cows and approximately 70,000 total cattle. The milk is sold to the Tillamook County Creamery Association — makers of Tillamook cheese — which has a factory at the nearby Port of Morrow.

Myers served as general manager from day one. He pioneered the farm's "closed-loop system," whereby nitrogen-rich manure from the dairy is mixed at agronomic rates and sprayed onto the surrounding farmland to grow potatoes, onions, blueberries, carrots and other crops.

The farm also grows alfalfa, hay and triticale for animal feed, which goes back to feed the dairy cows thus completing the closed loop.

Last year, Threemile Canyon Farms was one of three dairies nationwide recognized for Outstanding Dairy Farm Sustainability at the 2020 U.S. Dairy Sustainability Awards, lauding management practices that "demonstrate outstanding economic, environmental and social benefits."

R.D. Offutt CEO Tim Curoe said Antilla's lengthy career in agribusiness and food processing, combined with his love of the Pacific Northwest, make him uniquely qualified to serve Threemile Canyon and build on its strong foundation of sustainable agriculture.

Antilla has a bachelor's degree from Carleton College in Northfield, Minnesota, and a master's of business administration from the University of Chicago Booth School of Business. He has a wife and two grown children, and will be relocating from Minnesota to Oregon.

Pendleton music festival under investigation for outbreak

Umatilla County reports 95th death from COVID-19, total case count passes 10,100

By BRYCE DOLE
STAFF WRITER

PENDLETON — The Oregon Health Authority is investigating a COVID-19 outbreak stemming from the Pendleton Whisky Music Fest.

The state as of the first week of August reported 64 COVID-19 cases tied to the music event in Pendleton on July 10. Forty-one of those cases were Umatilla County residents, according to Umatilla County Public Health Director Joe Fiumara. Cases have so far been identified in Umatilla, Morrow, Union and Wallowa counties, as well as Washington state.

"This outbreak is the first one of its size and scope to be traced to an outdoor entertainment event since the lifting of statewide COVID-19 prevention measures at the end of June," the state said Friday, July 30.

The reported cases almost certainly are an undercount, Fiumara said, adding that more than 25% of people with presumed cases do not cooperate with contact tracers. The total also does not include people who did not attend the concert but were infected by people coming to town.

Cases already were rising in Umatilla County before the 12,000-person event — a surge health officials attributed to the state lifting virtually all pandemic restrictions at the end of June, just as the delta variant was reaching Oregon. But county health data shows a "big jump" in cases between four to six days after the concert, Fiumara said.

"While I am by no means saying all of these cases are tied to Whisky Fest," Fiumara said. "It does seem like that concert taking place kind of jump started some additional spread in the area."

The concert, however, did not appear to break any rules. The state lifted virtually all pandemic restrictions less than two weeks before, and although health officials voiced alarm about the delta variant and cases rising in Umatilla County, no officials publicly recommended stopping the event. It likely was the largest event Eastern Oregon has seen since the pandemic began.

"It's a very unfortunate situation," said event co-manager Doug Corey. "Hopefully everybody will improve and get well. It would be an interesting number to know how many were vaccinated and not vaccinated."

Corey noted he consulted with county and city officials prior to the festival and obtained all necessary permits. He said he believes the event followed all pandemic guidelines from the state and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Event organizers also capped ticket sales at 12,000 people to downsize, he added.

Fiumara said he appreciated the reduction, adding "there could have been more than 20,000" people.

Corey said he has been in close contact with state health officials as the investigation is underway. State,

county and tribal officials are working together to identify other cases from attendees, the state said.

County death toll nears 100

Umatilla County reported its 95th COVID-19 death in a Monday, Aug. 6, press release.

The disclosure comes as the county reported 145 new COVID-19 cases, raising the county total case count since the pandemic began to 10,114, the press release said.

The victim is a 69-year-old man who tested positive on March 3 and died 20 days later at Kadlec Regional Medical Center in Richland, Washington. He had undisclosed underlying health conditions, the press release said.

The health department recently reported several COVID-19 victims who died months ago, all of whom died in Washington. That's because Washington has different reporting requirements than Oregon, health officials say, which suggests that the county's death toll could be higher than previously disclosed.

The press release comes a week after the county's reported COVID-19 cases surged past 10,000 cases. More than one in eight people have had COVID-19 in Umatilla County, according

to health data.

The county continues to report some of the highest case rates in Oregon and is reporting more daily cases on-average than at any other point in the pandemic. The surge, health officials say, is being driven by the highly contagious delta variant spreading rapidly among unvaccinated people. Last week, the county reported 416 new cases — the second straight week with more than 400 cases.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends that people wear masks in public indoor places in areas where there are more than 50 new infections per 100,000 residents over the previous seven days. Umatilla County's case rate is more than 18 times higher than that, according to state data.

Concerns for upcoming events

The outbreak and the ensuing investigation does not bode well for upcoming events in Umatilla County, including the Umatilla County Fair and the Pendleton Round-Up, Fiumara said.

The fair runs this week, Aug. 11-14, and typically draws thousands of people. Fiumara said he expects cases to rise because of the fair, but he would not for-

mally recommend against holding the event because of the backlash that would ensue.

"I think if you're trying to reduce cases, I think canceling fair would be a way to do that," Fiumara said. "And I think it would be an effective way to prevent additional spread. That being said, I'm not sure all the fallout from cancelling it would be worthwhile. I think there would be a lot of pushback."

State and county health officials agree the best way to ensure outbreaks don't result from large summer events is by getting more people vaccinated against COVID-19.

"Outbreaks like these will continue to occur if vaccination rates don't increase," said Rudy Owens, a spokesperson for OHA.

Less than 40% of Umatilla County residents are vaccinated against the virus, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Fiumara said Gov. Kate Brown's office reached out to the county last week, asking how officials planned to curb the county's skyrocketing infection rates. He noted the last time Brown's office made that move was a week before the state shut down Umatilla County.

"The state is watching things very closely," he said.

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