

Irrigation water supplies holding on locally

By **KATY NESBITT**
FOR THE HERMISTON HERALD

While much of Oregon's irrigators are in dire straits, water users in Umatilla and Morrow counties have not been greatly affected by this summer's drought.

Sean Kimbrel, Bureau of Reclamation Umatilla field office manager, said McKay Creek Reservoir was slightly above average for this time of year.

"Water storage in Umatilla County is in better shape than the rest of Oregon," Kimbrel said. "Irrigation districts have close to a complete water supply."

According to the Bureau of Reclamation, Pacific Northwest Region Umatilla River Basin Storage and Flow Diagram, McKay Reservoir is 42% full.

McKay Dam has 65,534 acre-feet active storage capacity plus 6,000 acre-feet of space exclusive for flood risk management above the normal full pool.

McKay Reservoir typically peaks the third week of May. This year, the maximum stored water was 64,176 acre-feet, a bit below last year's maxi-

mum of 69,242 acre-feet.

"Irrigation water supplies will be close to if not completely fulfilled this year from reclamation facilities to contracted water users in the Umatilla River Basin, which is much better in comparison to the very limited irrigation water supplies across the rest of Oregon as a result of drought conditions," Kimbrel said.

One of the reasons the reservoir is still around average for late August is because the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation haven't released water for fish yet.

"CTUIR is about to ramp-up fish water releases in the Umatilla," Kimbrel said.

While the Cold Springs Reservoir is below average right now at 12% capacity, it is fulfilled by wintertime diversions from the Umatilla River with minimum flows maintained for fish, which are exchanged with summertime pumping from the Columbia River, Kimbrel said.

Morrow County's Willow Creek Reservoir outside of Heppner is managed by the Army Corps of Engineers primarily as a flood control facility. Its



Ben Lonergan/Hermiston Herald, File

Boaters on June 2, 2021, recreate on McKay Reservoir outside of Pendleton. According to the Bureau of Reclamation, Pacific Northwest Region Umatilla River Basin Storage and Flow Diagram, McKay Reservoir is 42% full.

downstream use is primarily irrigation.

Tom Conning, public affairs specialist for the Corps' Portland District, said the reservoir is filled with snowmelt and rainfall. Its peak storage is between April 1 and May 15. This year's drought has greatly affected its levels.

"At this point of the year, it should be close to full, but it's 90% below full," he said.

Conning said Willow Creek is far lower than it is even in the winter months.

"After Labor Day it starts to draw down to allow a larger pool to catch large storm events," he said. "By Feb. 1 it starts to refill, while releasing

any excess water coming from a storm."

To supply irrigators with summer water, Conning said the Corps coordinates with the Oregon Water Resources Department to adjust inflows versus outflows.

"Once we hit 2,047 acre-feet we start to lose the ability to release more than what is coming in," he said. "We are pretty close to that now at 2,051."

Willow Creek is a popular fishing and camping destination and the minimum acre-feet level is maintained for fish managed in the reservoir by the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife, Conning said.

Umatilla County reports two COVID-19 deaths

By **BYRCE DOLE**
STAFF WRITER

Umatilla County reported two COVID-19 deaths Monday, Aug. 30, raising the county's death toll this month to 19.

One of the victims was 21 years old, according to the county.

The latest disclosure puts the county two COVID-19 deaths shy of its all-time pandemic record for deaths reported in a single month. That record was set in July 2020, when the county became the epicenter of high infection rates in Oregon.

The newly reported deaths come as the latest surge in COVID-19 cases, driven by the highly infectious delta variant, continues to rock the county, state and the nation. The county on Aug. 30 reported 78 new cases.

The county's 116th victim is a 21-year-old man who tested positive Aug. 17 and died Aug. 21 in his home. He had unspecified underlying health conditions. Aside from a newborn boy from Umatilla County who died in January, he is the county's youngest COVID-19 victim.

Young people in Umatilla County are getting sicker and are being hospitalized more often amid the delta surge than at any other point in the pandemic, county health officials and hospital employees have said.

On Aug. 10, a 29-year-old Umatilla County woman with COVID-19 died. The week before that, the

state reported a 35-year-old Morrow County woman and a 19-year-old Union County woman died after contracting the virus.

The county's 117th victim is a 51-year-old woman who tested positive Aug. 11 and died Aug. 27 at Providence St. Mary Medical Center, Walla Walla. She had unspecified underlying health conditions.

Hospitals across Oregon over the past month have filled to the brim with COVID-19 patients, and Umatilla County hospitals also saw record numbers of residents admitted after testing positive this month. The vast majority of patients were not vaccinated against COVID-19, hospital spokespersons have said.

Roughly 42% of all Umatilla County residents have been vaccinated against COVID-19, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Though cases have declined slightly from record-breaking levels two weeks ago, the county has reported more than 400 cases for five consecutive weeks, a total that dwarfs all previous pandemic surges.

In early July, the county was reporting less than 70 cases per week. For more than five months, the county reported at least 100 cases in a week just once.

Since the pandemic began, Umatilla County has reported 11,475 COVID-19 cases, according to county data. Roughly one in seven residents have tested positive.

GOBHI works to ensure smooth transition of services in Umatilla County

HERMISTON HERALD

UMATILLA COUNTY — Greater Oregon Behavioral Health Inc. on Friday, Aug. 27, announced its board of directors took action to support the continuity of behavioral health services for Oregon Health Plan members in Umatilla County who are members of the Eastern Oregon Coordinated Care Organization.

GOBHI serves as an administrative services organization on behalf of the EOCCO and is responsible for administering the behavioral health benefit, nonemergent medical transportation and for facilitating community conversations to improve the healthcare system in Eastern Oregon for

EOCCO members.

GOBHI also is one of the owners of EOCCO, the entity the state designated to manage healthcare benefits for Oregon Health Plan members in 12 rural and frontier counties. There are approximately 23,000 EOCCO members in Umatilla County.

GOBHI's announcement comes in the wake of the Umatilla County Board of Commissioners selecting Community Counseling Solutions over Lifeways Inc. as the county's provider for mental health and substance abuse treatment.

GOBHI in a press release reported its board on Aug. 25 voted to terminate its "Com-

prehensive Behavioral Health Provider agreement" with Lifeways in Umatilla County effective Nov. 30. The board also adopted a new agreement with Community Counseling Solutions fulfilling this role effective Dec. 1. This timeline coincides with the county's timeline for transitioning providers.

In each Oregon county, community mental health programs offer an array of behavioral health and support services, as well as crisis response and mobile crisis services. CCS is the provider serving Gilliam, Grant, Morrow and Wheeler counties.

The GOBHI board's actions represent a step forward in the formal process of service transitioning from

Lifeways to CCS.

"We look forward to continuing our work with partners in Umatilla County to make this as smooth a transition as possible," said Karen Wheeler, GOBHI CEO. "We're encouraged by conversations with CCS leadership about their commitment to meet the behavioral health needs in this community. We are aligned in our vision to improve service delivery in this county, particularly in the area of crisis response for vulnerable residents."

CCS will begin operating the Umatilla County substance use disorder services effective Sept. 1, and mental health provider services effective Dec. 1.

Kimberly Lindsay, CCS executive director, said in the press release the organization is "eager to learn more about what has worked and not worked, and are completely committed to providing high quality behavioral health services to those we serve."

Representatives from CCS, Lifeways and GOBHI are in regular communica-

tion regarding the transition, according to Greater Oregon Behavioral Health, "to ensure continuity of operations and clinical care for Umatilla County residents, including EOCCO members."

"These partnerships are critical," according to Wheeler. "We must not lose sight of our common goal: making sure Umatilla County residents have the quality services they need to lead healthy and fulfilling lives. We look forward to serving the community in the future."

Fire ravages hay stand near Hermiston



Umatilla County Fire District 1/Contributed Photo

Firefighters with Umatilla County Fire District 1 responded Wednesday evening, Aug. 25, 2021, to a hay fire off of Prindle Loop Road outside Hermiston. The fire district responded at 8:09 p.m. to the blaze and assisted in salvaging hay and containing the fire. The fire district also reported firefighters kept a watch on the scene until Aug. 26 at 11 a.m.

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