

Cold temps turn Eastern Oregon rain into snow

By ANTONIO SIERRA
Hermiston Herald

Just a day before the calendar recognized the first day of winter, many communities in Eastern Oregon saw their first significant snowstorm of the cold weather season.

Cold temperatures turned rain into snow Sunday night, Dec. 20, and the snow continued into the morning of Dec. 21. The National Weather Service issued a winter weather advisory through 3 p.m. that day.

Every region of Umatilla County saw significant snowfall through the morning. Joe Solomon, a meteorologist with the weather service, said Pendleton received 1-3 inches of snow, Hermiston 2-5 inches and the Milton-Freewater and Walla Walla areas about 2 inches of snow.

Solomon explained what factors turned a standard rain storm into something much icier.

“There was a stalled cold front that runs across northern Oregon to southern Washington with a steady stream of moisture moving along that front,” he said. “Cold air north of that front has been slowly filtering in all the way down into north-central Oregon.”

Most area schools already started their winter break, giving students some snow to play with on their first official day off. The Pendleton School District wasn't set to break for the holiday season until Dec. 22, but the district canceled school the morning of Dec. 20. Blue Mountain Community College eventually joined its K-12 peers in canceling in-person classes on all of its campuses.

Snow and ice also can wreak havoc on local infrastructure, and it took a brief toll on Hermiston electric customers. In an email, Steve Meyers, the member services administrator for the Umatilla Electric Cooperative, wrote that accumulated snow caused a tree limb to fall into a power line, cutting off power to 987 UEC and Hermiston Energy Services customers for about an hour during the morning.

Snowstorms also mean road closures on Interstate 84 and other state roads, just as residents begin traveling to visit friends and family for the holiday season. The westbound lanes on Interstate 84 were briefly closed between mileposts 193 and 374, and Oregon Department of Transportation spokesperson Tom Strandberg said he expects more in the coming days.

Strandberg said the most frequent cause of road closures are drivers losing control of their vehicles and he urged local drivers to travel cautiously when navigating



Andrew Jimenez, and his daughter Juliet, 2, sled down a hill Monday, Dec. 20, 2021, at Sunset Elementary School in Hermiston.

Ben Lonergan/Hermiston Herald

Eastern Oregon's roads.

“Everybody needs to be slowing down and drive according to conditions,” he said.

When traveling during the holiday season, Strandberg said part of their preparation process should involve checking road conditions on ODOT's Trip Check website. Strandberg said motorists should check images of Interstate 84 to see if there is snow and ice on the portions they will be traveling on. He said travelers should not be fooled if they see a clear stretch of road on the website's camera because it may be sandwiched between long stretches of freeways covered with snow and ice.

Strandberg recommended drivers store food, water, blankets and cell-phone chargers just in case they get stuck during a road closure.

Motorists who see long stretches of bad driving conditions should stay home if at all possible, he said, and he encouraged drivers on I-84 to be very careful when looking for detours if there are closures or bad conditions.

“Don't blindly follow GPS detour routes,” he said. Strandberg said many are county roads not as well maintained as I-84. He also warned drivers to be on alert for motorists who may be operating carelessly.

“They should be mindful that a lot of drivers are anxious and in a hurry,” he said.

He also urged motorists to be patient if they get behind snowplows and do not attempt to pass them. He

said snowplow operators are aware of traffic behind them.

“They will pull over,” he said.

And Strandberg said drivers should stay at least four car lengths behind snowplows to avoid being hit by the snow and rocks they kick up.

While weather conditions are expected to warm up and dry out midweek, Solomon said another system is approaching the region at the end of the week. While it should mostly result in a mix of rain and snow in the lower elevations, it could create hazardous conditions for drivers traveling through the Blue Mountain or Cascades.

— Reporter Dick Mason with *The Observer in La Grande* contributed to this article.



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Kurt Clayson rolls a snowball Monday, Dec. 20, 2021, at Sunset Elementary School in Hermiston.



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