

Native son

Carl Miller's lifelong love affair with the Methow

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Go outside

Winter rec is already at its peak in the valley

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Forest Service closes areas near Washington Pass to snowmobiles

Sledders say emergency action singles them out

BY MARCY STAMPER

After an exceptionally busy summer and fall in the North Cascades, the Methow Valley Ranger District is anticipating elevated use will continue and has closed several areas near Washington Pass to snowmobiles and motorized snow bikes to protect winter recreationists from avalanches.

Highway 20 remains open to all users. "This is a closure based on health and safety," Methow Valley District Ranger Chris Furr said last week.

The closure took effect Jan. 1 and runs through June 30. "This is temporary. A lot of folks have concerns that one year will turn into two, and then it will be permanent. It absolutely is not," Furr said. "The intent is to get through this season and make time for user groups to revisit informal agreements between users given the increasing use."

The order closes areas around Blue Lake, Cutthroat Creek and Cutthroat Peak to

motorized use. Spire Gully, a popular area near the hairpin turn, remains open.

The ranger district implemented the closure on an emergency basis. For any changes to become permanent, there would be a formal process involving public comment. This closure is not meant as a start to any travel-management process, Furr said.

Several factors informed the decision by the ranger district. With gyms and other activities closed because of the COVID pandemic, people — some with little winter experience in the mountains — are flocking outdoors for recreation. And improving technology has created nimble, powerful snowmobiles and snow bikes (like a motorcycle with a ski in the front and tracks in the rear), making areas that haven't traditionally seen motorized use accessible, Furr said.

Snowmobilers 'blindsided'

In planning the closures, Methow Valley Ranger District staff talked to people familiar with where snowmobilers ride, who helped pinpoint the most popular areas. Based on specific input about where and how sledders access the area,

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WINTER FORAGE



Photo by Ann McCreary

The previous year's hay harvests are keeping Methow Valley herds fed through the snowy months.

COVID-19 vaccinations on the rise

Providers cope with uncertainty, lack of guidance

BY ANN MCCREARY

Approximately 3,800 doses of COVID-19 vaccine have arrived in Okanogan County as of early this week, and local health officials are working to get the vaccine into the arms of eligible people, despite logistical hurdles, uncertainty and rapidly changing information.

Dealing with challenges faced by health care organizations in launching the vaccination effort is like "building the plane as we're flying it," said Scott Graham, CEO of Three Rivers Hospital in Brewster.

"Administering vaccines isn't new," said Jennifer Best, a spokesperson for Three Rivers Hospital, "but doing it in this way, on such a wide scale, as quickly as possible, is brand new to all of us."

North Valley Hospital in Tonasket was the first state-approved vaccine site in Okanogan County to receive vaccine three weeks ago. The hospital began administering the required second dose of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine this week

to about 570 people who have received the first round of vaccine, said John McReynolds, chief executive officer.

Vaccinations are currently available to front-line health care workers and residents and staff of extended care facilities, under state guidelines. State health officials recently expanded eligibility in the first phase of vaccinations, called 1A, to other workers in health care settings after those at highest risk of COVID-19 infection are vaccinated.

Since the first shipment on Dec. 15, North Valley Hospital has received about 3,200 doses of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine, which must be stored at ultra-cold temperatures of minus 94 degrees Fahrenheit. North Valley is currently the only facility in the county with a freezer capable of storing that vaccine.

Three Rivers Hospital has received 400 doses of a vaccine made by Moderna, which is stored at temperatures similar to most vaccines. The hospital gave its first vaccinations to hospital employees on Christmas Eve, the day after receiving its first shipment, and had provided about 115 vaccinations to hospital employees, first responders and other health care workers as of Monday (Jan. 4), Best said.

Family Health Centers, headquartered

in Omak, received 200 doses of Moderna vaccine, and has vaccinated about 80 staff members in partnership with North Valley Hospital, said James Wallace, chief health officer of Family Health Centers.

Scheduling doses

Of the approximately 3,800 doses of vaccine distributed to the three state-approved vaccine recipients in Okanogan County, about 700-800 doses had been used as of early this week, based on numbers provided by the facilities.

"We still schedule a lot of folks each day, but it seems like the numbers are leveling off or decreasing," McReynolds said Tuesday (Jan. 5). "Over the next few days, we will have large numbers that mirror our initial launch" as people return for their second dose of vaccine, he said.

"There are certainly a lot of people that have not signed up but there is the capacity for them to get vaccinated quickly," he said.

Health care organizations in Okanogan County — including hospitals, EMS, medical clinics and Okanogan Public Health — have collaborated to notify eligible people in Phase 1A about the availability of vaccinations.

See **VACCINE, A3**



Photo courtesy of Lost River Winery

Lost River Winery's hard-to-miss tasting room in Winthrop is a popular destination for wine lovers.

'21 could be another good year for Lost River Winery

Successful local vintner seeks a buyer

BY DON NELSON

Lost River Winery, which in 19 years has grown from an upstart local business into an established presence in the state's fiercely competitive wine industry, is being offered for sale.

John Morgan, a co-founder of the winery and one of its part-owners, said this week that while Lost River has grown every year since its inception — including in 2020 despite the coronavirus pandemic — it's time to part with the winery and look for new challenges.

"It's been a fun ride, a great ride, but it's time for a change," he said.

Lost River Wines was launched in 2002 by Morgan and his ex-wife, Barbara, who had a home in the valley and had dreamed of finding a way to be here permanently. Morgan was a civil engineer specializing in road construction, and had no background in wine-making. But he grew up a family that appreciated wines. His father was a collector of distinct vintages.

According to the company's website, "The more John looked into wine making as a possible career choice, the

more he reasoned that if he could learn pre-stressed concrete design on his own, then crafting quality wines seemed achievable. After a commercial-scale test batch and coursework at U.C. Davis, the winery was born."

Liam Doyle, the winery's marketing and sales manager as well as a part-owner, arrived in the valley in 2004 after working in the restaurant industry in Connecticut and became a vital factor in the company's success, Morgan said.

The "boutique" winery's production has grown from about 400 cases (4,800 bottles) in 2002 to more than 4,000 cases/48,000 bottles in 2020. Its proprietary blends include Cedarosa, Community Red, Massif, Rainshadow and Cote-Wall. Lost River partners with a dozen Columbia Valley vineyards that supply the grapes.

Local operation

The winery has production facilities in the Mazama area, and owns a warehouse on Horizon Flats Road in Winthrop. At one time, Lost River had its own tasting room near the Pike Place Market in Seattle, but now shares a tasting room with other wineries in the market's Post Alley.

See **WINERY, A3**

Conservancy moving to 3 Bears Café building

Anonymous donors buy Winthrop site

BY DON NELSON

The Methow Conservancy, which has been headquartered in the same small space on Riverside Avenue in Winthrop for nearly 25 years, is about to get a new home.

The Conservancy announced this week that later this year it will move a couple of hundred yards down the road to the 3 Bears Café and Quilts building, thanks to anonymous donors who are purchasing the site for the nonprofit.

Cyndy and Jerry Oliver, owners of 3 Bears, said last year that they were putting the building and property up for sale. Conservancy Executive Director Jason Paulsen said in

a press release that long-time supporters approached him after noticing the "for sale" sign at 3 Bears, and offered to purchase the property for the nonprofit organization. The transaction closed on Dec. 31. The Olivers will stay in the building through the end of March, according to the press release.

"We have recognized the need for more office and gathering space for several years, but the right situation just hadn't emerged until now," Paulsen said. "It will allow us to focus our resources on permanent land protection and conservation education and because of the unique nature of the building and property, we are excited to explore opportunities to provide community gathering spaces, too."

With the organization's growth, Paulsen said, the need for additional

space has become more pressing. "We currently lack meeting spaces and our staff are literally bursting at the seams of the building," he said.

The Conservancy has 10 employees jammed into cramped spaces in its existing building, which it has occupied since its inception in 1996. The building was subsidized by Martha Kongsgaard and Peter Goldman, who co-chair the organization's Advisory Council, Paulsen said.

Assessing potential

Paulsen said the Conservancy is still figuring out all the potential uses for the 3 Bears building, which sits on a 4-acre site just north of the Methow River Bridge. He said outdoor uses such as demonstration

See **CONSERVANCY, A3**

ADDRESS LABEL

THURS.	FRI.	SAT.	SUN.	MON.	TUES.
Jan 7	Jan 8	Jan 9	Jan 10	Jan 11	Jan 12
36°	36°	39°	37°	33°	37°
27°	23°	28°	32°	32°	22°
Sunny then Cloudy	Morning Snow	Mostly Cloudy	Snow Possible	Intermittent Snow	Cloudy

WEATHER DATA BASED ON ACCUWEATHER.COM FORECAST FOR TWISP

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SNOWMOBILE

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they avoided those areas in the closure, Furr said.

Craig Stahl, president of the Methow Valley Snowmobile Association (MVSA), said the snowmobile community statewide and even nationally had “basically been blindsided by this closure.”

The closure has gained national attention, Stahl said by email. “It is a well-known fact that any safety concerns due to overcrowding are based on pure speculation. All outdoor recreation has become increasingly popular this past year due to COVID-19 restrictions on other areas of normal life,” he said.

MVSA understands that it’s challenging for the U.S. Forest Service to treat the broad range of recreationists equitably. “To single out one user group and restrict their access to public land to accommodate the concerns of another user group is wrong,” Stahl said.

MVSA said they’d had many conversations with the Forest Service about snowmobilers’ concerns over closing these areas and offered to help with safety education so that all users can enjoy the national forest.

Snowmobiler Dwain Hutson said he was not happy about the restrictions. “They’re just closing more areas off from the public,” he said. Hutson speculated that the closure is the culmination of a long-standing desire by skiers to exclude motorized users, not merely a response to high use in an unusual year.

Increasing hazards

The decision to restrict motorized access was made more urgent by recent recreation trends, but the potential for hazardous interactions has been on the radar of land managers since at least last winter, according to local backcountry skiers.

One weekend last February, a group of snowmobilers from out of the area rode all over the steep terrain in the Hairpin Valley above the hairpin turn, CB Thomas, a backcountry skier from Mazama,

said. That outing created ruts several feet deep that pose a big risk to skiers. “I’ve rarely encountered tracks with the same level of destruction,” he said.

Some sledders went into the wilderness, which is off-limits to motorized vehicles. Skiers who witnessed the incident expressed their concerns to the ranger district last winter, Thomas said.

In past years, there’s been what several winter recreationists called a “gentleman’s agreement” between local backcountry skiers and local snowmobilers to share terrain safely. But as more skiers and snowmobilers come from out of the area — who aren’t familiar with the tacit agreement nor the terrain — the potential for conflicts has grown. “The highway can get territorial,” one skier said.

Particularly since the Highway 20 corridor is so accessible, it attracts a lot of people seeking an alpine experience who may not know how the area is shared, Furr said.

“Despite the area’s popularity and it being open to both motorized and nonmotorized winter use, in the past, different user groups could expect some level of separation due to terrain and technology limitations,” Furr said.

The entire area is at high risk for avalanches and more users compound the risk, said Victoria Wilkins, a public affairs officer with the Okanogan-Wenatchee National Forest. Skiers can hear snowmobiles, but the sledders don’t necessarily see or hear skiers, she said.

Because snowmobiles travel so fast, they can be above a skier in no time, said one skier. “It’s impressive what these guys can do — they go up incredibly steep slopes,” he said.

Hutson said he’s never had problems snowmobiling at the pass. When he sees a skier’s tracks, he doesn’t ride above them, he said. Closing some areas will just concentrate people, instead of spreading them out, he said.

The closed sections haven’t been high-use areas for snowmobilers in the past, but the Okanogan-Wenatchee land managers

were concerned they’d attract more people this year, Wilkins said. “This year is an unusual year, but it’s brought to the fore issues that need to be addressed,” she said.

Record winter use

With gyms and other activities closed because of the pandemic, public land managers across the state see people getting outside to recreate in record numbers, said Pamela McConkey, manager of the Washington State Parks Winter Recreation Program.

In November and December 2020, State Parks sold more than 4,400 daily passes and 5,500 seasonal Sno-Park permits online for non-motorized use — five times more than in 2019. That doesn’t count permits sold by local vendors, McConkey said. Ample early-season snow probably contributed, but many people simply want to get outside to exercise, she said.

McConkey is concerned about risks beyond avalanches as less experienced people head to the mountains. She reminded people to check the weather and pass conditions and be prepared with food, water, warm clothing and a blanket in case they get stuck on the road.

The number of skiers near Washington Pass has been growing dramatically for the past decade, and this season it’s been “through the roof,” said Thomas, who’s seen skiers sleeping in their campers at the Silver Star SnoPark. The number of snowmobilers has tripled, he said.

The fact that many downhill ski areas are requiring reservations and limiting lift tickets this year to keep crowds low has also driven people into the backcountry, Thomas said. A dearth of snow in Utah and Colorado has also drawn skiers to the Cascades.

“Skiers recognize the right for snowmobilers to recreate in the national forest,” Thomas said. But some areas may need to be segregated to keep everyone safe, he said. Many western states already restrict areas for skiers and snowmobilers, he said.

Snowmobile riders play an



Photo by Marcy Stamper

Snowmobilers and skiers headed out from the Silver Star Sno-Park toward Washington Pass to recreate in the deep snow. An emergency closure has restricted where sledders and snow bikes can travel off the highway.

important role in safety, since snowmobiles are the fastest way to get to an injured person in the backcountry, Stahl said. Restricting access actually puts other users at greater risk, he said.

“With more users of the Highway 20 corridor and popularity growing, some groups are concerned about sharing their honey hole/fresh powder spots,” Stahl said.

“Everyone wants fresh snow — it’s a dream for snowmobilers and skiers — and it’s a limited resource,” Thomas said.

“It’s commendable that the Forest Service was able to see forward and wanted to participate in solving a problem before it became a crisis,” one backcountry skier said. “There’s going to be an adjustment period — for skiers, too.”

Furr said he understands that some snowmobilers are upset and question why they’ve been excluded. The closure was never meant to be punitive but, with such high winter use, the agency needed to do something, he said.

“This was in anticipation

of an unprecedented level of use — what I didn’t want to have happen is that we knew about an increased level of risk, but I didn’t do anything and it resulted in a bad outcome,” Furr said.

Stahl said he’d like to see more collaborative efforts between all backcountry users, such as the recently achieved common goal of the new Sno-Park at Silver Star.

Sledders who commented on the MVSA Facebook page were dismayed that the closure had gone into effect without public comment. The Forest Service has already gotten pushback from the snowmobile community, Wilkins said.

When the Okanogan-Wenatchee updates its travel-management plan, that will be the proper place to address these issues, Stahl said. Furr said the district may restart its travel-management analysis, but that wouldn’t include travel on snow.

Furr encouraged snowmobilers to call the ranger district at 996-4000 if they have concerns. The district can suggest many places to ride.

There will be signs near the pass

explaining the closure. Violators are subject to a fine of up to \$5,000.

NORTH CASCADES GATE CLOSURE IS MOVING

The North Cascades Highway’s closure point in the valley will move eastward from the Silver Star Gate (milepost 171) to Early Winters (milepost 177) on Wednesday (Jan. 6), the Washington State Department of Transportation announced. The change was prompted by increasing winter conditions and allows maintenance crews to focus snow and ice control elsewhere, WSDOT said. The road will be gated at Early Winters, and a snow berm will be constructed. Recreationalists should plan accordingly, WSDOT said, as vehicles will not be able to access the highway past the closure point.

Health officials wary of COVID-19 infection rate

BY MARCY STAMPER

It was a fitting end to 2020, as the Okanogan Coalition for Health Improvement (CHI) took stock of the state of COVID in the county — and looked at the steps the county needs to take to have a truly healthy new year.

“No one’s going to get you out of this mess. You’re going to get yourselves out of this mess. It’s going to be the community at large that says, ‘Hey, we got to stop this,’” Okanogan County Health Officer John McCarthy said on his final day, after 16 years in the job.

New COVID infections in Okanogan County over a two-week period have been hovering around 400 per 100,000 people since the fall, an incidence rate that makes health professionals

nervous. “We’re on a general incline — we’re much worse than we were at the beginning of the school year. We were actually at the numbers the state wanted us to be for reopening schools for a period of time,” when the two-week incidence rate was below 75, McCarthy said.

Having that many infections puts the county in a precarious place, particularly since the cases are widely distributed throughout the county, said Jim Wallace, who took over from McCarthy as the county’s health officer on Jan. 1. “Any one spot could become the epicenter of a new explosion, and we have to be ready for it,” Wallace said.

Diligent efforts by public health workers to trace contacts of anyone who gets sick with COVID and ensure that those people isolate and

quarantine has been key to keeping cases under control, Wallace said. But it’s equally possible for just a couple of cases to spark exponential growth in the disease if people aren’t careful, he said.

Okanogan County confirmed 88 new COVID cases in the week ending Jan. 3, six in the Methow Valley. Cases were distributed throughout the county, from Brewster to Malott to Oroville. The county has registered a total of 1,792 cases since the start of the pandemic, and has lost 32 people to the disease.

The county can take advantage of its small, tight-knit communities to keep the virus from spreading. Outreach from Okanogan County Public Health and a local fire chief helped persuade organizers to cancel a planned new year’s eve party that had been advertised on Facebook.

ARTS BRIEFS

CONFLUENCE EXHIBIT OPENS JAN. 16



Photo courtesy of Confluence Gallery
“Wish Hope” by Janet Fagan will be part of Confluence Gallery’s next exhibit.

Confluence Gallery’s first major exhibit of 2021, “Wish You Were Here,” opens Jan. 16 and continues through March 6.

“This show is a love letter to the life we once lived and the life we hope to live after the virus has been contained,” according to a press release. Curators for the show are Mandy Shoger and Joanne Marracci.

For more information, contact sarahjo@confluencegallery.com or call 997-2787.

ARTIST-IN-RESIDENCE PROGRAM

The Icicle Fund invites artists from North Central Washington to apply for an environ-

mentally focused Artist-in-Residence program on May 21–23. Selected artists will spend three days in the Wenatchee River Watershed, traveling to sites documented by the 2001 Watershed Artists and creating original works.

Selections from the created art will be displayed throughout the state in a traveling exhibition. Artists of any medium are welcome. For more information and applications, visit www.iciclefund.org/cha-cha or email chacha@iciclefund.org. Applications are due Jan. 31.

WRITING WORKSHOPS

Methow At Home is offering a month-long writing workshop, “Making it Matter” with writer Sarah Conover, on Tuesdays beginning Jan. 19 and continuing through Feb. 19. The workshops are from 1–2 p.m.

The workshops will cover a variety of writing levels and genres, including poetry, memoir, fiction and non-fiction. Register for the free workshops at <https://methowathome.clubexpress.com>.

Conover holds a bachelor’s degree in religious studies from the University of Colorado, an MFA in creative writing (poetry) from Eastern Washington University, and has taught creative writing through the Community Colleges of Spokane. She is the author of seven books, and her poetry and essays have appeared in numerous literary journals.

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