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Methow Valley News

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Brewster 'hot spot' remains a COVID-19 concern in county

Gov. Inslee visits, cites new programs

BY MARCY STAMPER

Although the rate of per-capita COVID infections has slowed in Okanogan County, dropping by more than half in the past two weeks, the outbreak was serious enough to prompt a visit to Brewster by Gov. Jay Inslee last week. "It's a real concern—there's been a real outbreak in Okanogan County. It's one of the hottest spots,

certainly in our state," Inslee said in a press conference after the visit on Thursday (Aug. 13). "I'm very concerned, given the numbers they are experiencing." Inslee traveled to Brewster to meet with community, health and business leaders to understand how to get on top of the pandemic in the county. Brewster is by far the hardest-hit area, with 543 cumulative cases, or 58% of the county's total of 930, as of Monday (Aug. 17). Overall, the county has reported 147 new cases in the

past 14 days. There have been 11 cases, total, in the Methow Valley, with the last reported case in Winthrop on July 30. The rate per 100,000 was 344 for the two weeks ending Aug. 17, compared to 730 for the two weeks ending Aug. 3. Nine people have died from COVID in the county. Inslee was particularly concerned about the responsibility of employers to care for their employees, many in the agricultural sector. Inslee noted that most agricultural workers can't telecommute and many are not eligible for

standard sick pay. Supporting these individuals financially—so they can isolate if they are sick or have been exposed to COVID—is key, Inslee said. Inslee pointed to two new programs to help these workers. Starting Tuesday (Aug. 18), the Washington COVID-19 Food Production Paid Leave Program requires employers to provide paid sick leave to their employees, including orchard workers, employees in fruit-packing warehouses, and domestic workers. The program also

covers foreign workers here through a lawful visa. Full-time workers get up to 80 hours of paid leave if they are ordered to quarantine because of illness, COVID symptoms or are prohibited from working because of risks of COVID transmission. Part-time workers get benefits in proportion to the hours they work. Covered workers will receive \$430 for 40 hours of sick leave. The state allocated \$3 million for the program, which runs through mid-November.

Inslee also announced the \$40 million Immigrant Relief Fund, which will provide up to \$1,000 to individuals, regardless of immigration status. People would have to apply for the funding. The state is currently soliciting bids for a nonprofit to administer the program. Grants will most likely be available this fall, according to a press release from the governor's office.

COVID testing
Okanogan County Public Health
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PICKING IT UP



Photo by Joanna Bastian

Trevin Leon hauled lots of junk and some waterlogged boots from the Methow River on cleanup day last weekend.

School opening plans continue to evolve

First day for MVSD may be delayed

BY MARCY STAMPER

Everyone involved with school—teachers, administrators, students and parents—agrees that they face an impossible and unprecedented choice as the new academic year looms in just a couple of weeks. They have good reason to feel overwhelmed and unsettled. The Methow Valley School District is one of just a small number of districts in the state proposing some form of in-person instruction, according to Methow Valley School District Supt. Tom Venable. Even that option—which the district is still committed to offering—may be snatched away if the district doesn't get an exemption from Okanogan County Public Health that allows it to offer in-person instruction

despite COVID-19 rates in the county far exceeding the recommended threshold. Not only is in-person education up in the air, but even the first day of school—initially set for Monday, Aug. 31—may change. District officials are considering moving three to five scheduled professional-development days to before the school year, meaning school would start on Thursday, Sept. 3, or Tuesday, Sept. 8 (after Labor Day). The school board will act on any recommendations at its meeting on Wednesday (Aug. 25), Venable said. In the most recent two weeks, the county had 344 new confirmed COVID cases per 100,000 population. The state Department of Health wants that number to be below 75 for in-person schooling. Health officers for Okanogan, Chelan, Douglas, Grant and Kittitas counties released their guid-

ance for re-opening classroom instruction on Aug. 7. "Due to the increase in COVID-19 cases, the Health Officers agree that, until the COVID incidence rate decreases, in-person instruction is not safe or recommended in North Central Washington," they said. But the Methow is "an outlier," Venable said at a virtual Q&A on Thursday (Aug. 13). While disease rates in the county have skyrocketed in the past month, cases in the Methow remain consistently low—just 11 from Carlton to Winthrop since March, with only one active case at the moment, Venable said. Venable talked with Okanogan County Health Officer John McCarthy after the Q&A, he said in an interview this week. Public Health is very interested in supporting students' safe return to school in a way that balances the interests and needs of the community and its overall

health, Venable said. To decide whether it's safe for kids to go to an actual classroom with real teachers and classmates, the district and Public Health will monitor results of free COVID testing in Winthrop this past weekend—where 375 people got tested—and of another round of testing in the Methow within the week, Venable said. If the number of infections exceeds the threshold (approximately seven infections in the school district), in-person instruction can still begin later in the fall, Venable said. **Three options** In the online Q&A, Venable pointed to the valley's geographic isolation. He cited an emerging body of research that suggests elementary schools in rural areas with few cases should consider re-opening, call-

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Wolf conservation advocate dismissed from WDFW advisory panel

Conservation groups protest to Gov. Inslee

BY ANN MCCREARY

Conservation groups have appealed to Gov. Jay Inslee to intervene after an outspoken wolf conservation advocate was abruptly dismissed from a

citizen group that advises state wildlife officials on management of endangered gray wolves. Timothy Coleman of Republic, who has been openly critical of Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) decisions to kill wolves that attack livestock, was removed from the Wolf Advisory Group by WDFW Director Kelly Susewind last week. In a letter to Coleman, Susewind cited his

participation in lawsuits, protests and interviews as a "pattern of behavior" that eroded trust with other advisory group members and WDFW staff. Representatives of 17 conservation and animal rights organizations signed a letter to Inslee last week expressing "outrage" at Coleman's removal from the Wolf Advisory Group, known as WAG. Coleman has served since 2015 as a member of the advisory

group, which is comprised of 15 citizens with an interest in wolf management including ranchers, farmers, hunters, outdoor recreationists, and wildlife advocates. The advisory group makes recommendations on managing endangered gray wolves in Washington, including development of wolf-livestock conflict protocols that guide WDFW decisions on killing wolves that

attack cattle. Coleman has criticized WDFW for violating the protocols when determining that wolves should be killed. Coleman is executive director of the Kettle Range Conservation Group, and lives in northeast Washington, where most of the state's wolves reside and where most of the conflicts between wolves and cattle occur. "He has filled a unique role on the WAG as the only environ-

mental group representative who lives and works in the core wolf territories in northeast Washington," according to the Aug. 13 letter to Inslee from conservation groups. "Frequently, Mr. Coleman was also the sole voice of dissent on the WAG in his opposition to Department actions favoring the interests of the livestock industry over

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Home at last

With the Shafer's help, Gene Moon finds his valley birthplace

BY ASHLEY LODATO

Genetic genealogy is all the rage these days, and with the widespread availability of DNA testing, everyone seems to be able to trace their ancestry to multiple continents and genetic groups. But sometimes a guy really wants to find his roots, and

there's no cheek swab in the world that can help you find the place from whence you came. For that sort of answer, you need a community with historic memory and a historical museum—one like Winthrop's Shafer Historical Museum. The Shafer Museum recently helped facilitate a successful roots search, says museum board chair Sharon Sumpter. "A Tonasket man in his mid-80s (born 1935) came with his daughter to the museum ... wanting to find out where the Haase homestead was, because his family had told him he was born in the Haase tack shed," says Sumpter. The man, Gene Moon, lost both his mother and his father when he was 18 months old, says Moon's daughter, Linda Patrick. "His maternal grandmother and grand-

father raised him in Tonasket under their last name, Utz," she says. "Wondering about where he was born is something that has always been a part of him. He wants some answers, especially now as he's getting older." Moon has pieced together sketchy details of his past, Patrick says, but no one was ever able to put the whole puzzle together—until now, and it took a village, or rather, a valley. Using free time newly available to her due to the pandemic, Patrick drove Moon to the Methow Valley every day for a week straight and they talked to anyone who might know anything about old homesteads that might match the description Moon had of his birthplace, which he had been told was called Hawk Ranch—a mispronunciation

of the Haase name. "But we kept running into dead ends," Patrick says. **Searching the files** "Initially we thought the homestead might be in the Gunn Ranch area," Patrick says. "And one day as we were driving up Gunn Ranch Road we flagged down someone passing by and asked him. He and his wife got involved in helping us find information. The Trail's End Bookstore staff provided some information. Everyone rallied around us in this search." Sumpter, meanwhile, did a little sleuthing in the museum files and learned that Bill and Helen Haase had a homestead ranch off the Left Fork Wolf Creek Road from 1907 to 1944—actu-



Photo courtesy of Linda Patrick

Gene Moon found some answers to his past in the valley.

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ADDRESS LABEL

THURS.	FRI.	SAT.	SUN.	MON.	TUES.
Aug 20	Aug 21	Aug 22	Aug 23	Aug 24	Aug 25
82°	83°	85°	90°	85°	92°
58°	52°	50°	51°	54°	51°
Some sunshine	Sun and clouds	Plenty of sunshine	Mostly sunshine	Sunny	Mostly sunny

WEATHER DATA BASED ON ACCUWEATHER.COM FORECAST FOR TWISP

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