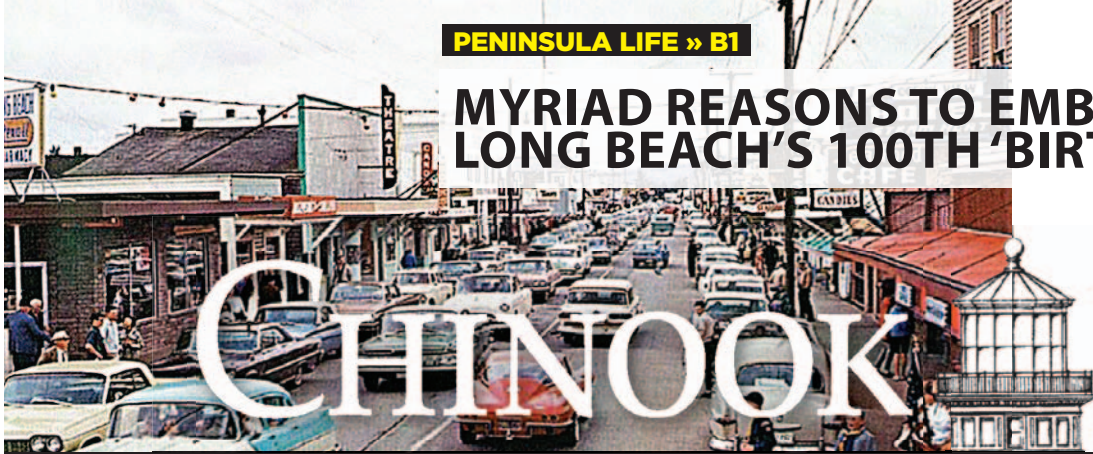


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Job picture best in 30+ years

Record growth for tourism workforce

By BRANDON CLINE
Chinook Observer

OLYMPIA — Pacific County ended 2022 with its best year-end unemployment rate in at least 31 years, according to data released last week by the Washington State Employment Security Department. The county's unemployment

'YOU'RE TALKING ABOUT A COUPLE OF YEARS WORTH OF PEOPLE HAVING GOOD EXPERIENCES ON THE PENINSULA — THAT'S GOOD ADVERTISING RIGHT THERE. I THINK THE SITUATION IS GOING TO BE THAT THE OFF-SEASON IS GOING TO BE SHORTER AND SHORTER EVERY YEAR.'

Jim Vleming
Regional economist

rate stood at 5.2% in December according to preliminary figures, down from 5.5% in November

and 10.1% in December 2020. The strong monthly report closes out a year that saw local tourism

not only bounce back from 2020's pandemic challenges but soar to new heights altogether.

Jim Vleming, regional economist with ESD, said it was an "upbeat" monthly report for Pacific County, and noted it was a strong year of recovery overall for the county. The annual unemployment rate in 2021 for the county was 7.1%, down from 11.2% in 2020 and only slightly up from 7% in 2019 — which is the lowest annual unemployment rate since at least 1990. Vleming believes the county is poised to best that mark in 2022.

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School board approves bond plan

Expected to go to voters in April

By BRANDON CLINE
Chinook Observer

LONG BEACH PENINSULA — Members of the Ocean Beach School District's Board of Directors unanimously voted to move ahead with the drafting a \$96.2 million, 25-year bond resolution at its regularly scheduled meeting last week, following a formal recommendation from OBSD Superintendent Amy Huntley.

The school board's decision means that district voters are expected to weigh in on the bond's fate this spring, during an April 26 special election. The board still must vote on and approve the bond resolution itself at a meeting later this month, before the Feb. 25 filing deadline for the April election.

Huntley made her recommendation to the board earlier in the Jan. 26 meeting, after the Facilities Advisory Committee (FAC) made its recommendation to Huntley at a meeting two weeks earlier. The FAC was convened by OBSD last year and is made up of more than two dozen citizens representing the various communities within the district's boundaries.

"If a committee of community members recommends something, I'm going to take that very, very seriously, despite potential opposition," Huntley said before giving her facilities recommendation to the board. "This is hard for me, because I'm recommending something large and that makes me nervous, but I need to do it anyway."

By and large, Huntley's recommendation mirrored the recommendation that the FAC made to her. Her proposal included:

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LUKE WHITTAKER

The 'You Are Loved' mural in bold block letters and latex paint is the work of artist Alex Cook, the latest installment of an ongoing nationwide project to help promote self worth with art.

'YOU ARE LOVED'

Mural illuminates Ilwaco hallway with important message



LUKE WHITTAKER

Artist Alex Cook describes the inspiration behind his 'You Are Loved' mural project. "The thing that makes people feel safe, confident and valuable is knowing that they're loved," Cook said.

LUKE WHITTAKER
Chinook Observer

ILWACO — A colorful mural with a simple, heartfelt message now greets students inside Ilwaco High School.

The 'You Are Loved' mural, designed in bold block letters and latex paint, was the work of artist Alex Cook. It is the latest installment of an ongoing nationwide project to help promote self-worth through art.

Cook started the painting on Monday, Jan. 24 and

was adding the finishing touches on Friday with help from Ilwaco juniors Julianna Fleming, Zoey Zuern, Rachel Mower, Ione Sheldon and Olivia McKinstry, each adding their own personal touch. The message is mirrored in Spanish on an opposite wall.

Origin of 'You Are Loved' murals

Since 1997, Cook has created more than 200 murals across the U.S. The mural at

See Mural, Page A8

European green crab erupt in Willapa Bay

By JEFF CLEMENS
For the Observer

WILLAPA — Non-native European green crab are in the midst of a major expansion in Washington coastal waters, including Willapa Bay. The small crab is regarded as a potentially devastating invasive species.

The Shoalwater Bay Indian Tribe and Pacific County Vegetation Management (PCVM) have been working to determine over-

all populations and track their growth in the bay. In 2021, PCVM's Ed Darcher trapped 11,600 green crab in Willapa. Washington Sea Grant staff and volunteers are thought to have found around 4,400 last year in Grays Harbor.

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EMILY GRASON/WASHINGTON SEA GRANT

Despite its name, the European green crab's distinguishing feature is not its color, but the five spines to the outside of the eye on the shell.

'We may have peaked'

Omicron, hopefully, on the decline

By BRANDON CLINE
Chinook Observer

PACIFIC COUNTY — Cases of covid-19 remained well above pre-Omicron records in Pacific County,

although a notable drop from the previous week has local health officials hoping that the county is on the other side of the peak.

Last week saw another 223 covid cases reported in the county, bringing the total number of cases to 3,384 since the pandemic began as of Monday. While still a

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Jobs

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“You expect the December rate to be kind of high, and now with it being so low I think [Pacific County] is really starting 2022 from a pretty good point. It’ll be interesting to see how low we can get,” Vleming said.

Tourism rebounds

The year ended with an estimated 1,300 people employed in the leisure and hospitality industry, up 4% from November, a staggering 78.1% from last December and 36.8% from pre-pandemic December 2019. This past December saw the most people employed in the industry than any other single month dating back to at least 2000, beating out the previous high of 1,260 seen in both August 2019 and August 2018.

The number of people employed in the industry almost doubled in 2021, from 690 in January to 1,300 in December. In recent years, the number of people employed



LUKE WHITTAKER

Lines of cars stretched along Pacific Avenue while sidewalks and beach approaches bustled on March 13, 2021 in downtown Long Beach. The year saw a record rebound in local employment, especially in tourism-related businesses.

in the industry peaks in July and August, before receding in the fall and winter months that coincides with the tourism “off-season.”

With such strong off-season employment figures for leisure and hospitality, Vleming said there’s reason to be hopeful that the labor crunch the local industry faced last summer won’t be as drastic of a problem in 2022 — although the pandemic still brings a level of uncer-

tainty. He also expects people to mostly continue staying close to home for their vacations, which should continue to bring strong crowds to the peninsula.

“I think the shortages are still probably going to apply as we enter into spring and summer, but some businesses have got it figured out, and so every iteration that comes along they’re going to be able to handle a little bit better,” Vleming said. “I can see

a repeat of what we saw [in 2021], depending on what goes on with the virus ... I don’t see a bunch of stuff that would short-circuit the direction we’re heading.”

With so many people visiting the peninsula over the past couple of years, a segment of whom are first-time visitors, Vleming believes those who’ve enjoyed their visit could provide a long-term economic boon to the area — and not just during

the traditional spring and summer tourism months. The data from 2021 bore that out, he said, both in Pacific and Grays Harbor County.

“You’re talking about a couple of years worth of people having good experiences on the peninsula — that’s good advertising right there. I think the situation is going to be that the off-season is going to be shorter and shorter every year,” Vleming said. “I think it’s pretty safe to say that it’s not going to be a march to October anymore, where it’s just the summer months [that are busy]. People are going beyond that now, and I think that bodes well for the Pacific County economy.”

Other industries

Overall, the county’s unemployment rate ranked 30th out of Washington’s 39 counties, which represents marked improvement from most months when it’s typically among the three or four counties with the highest unemployment rate.

In all, the total number of nonfarm jobs in the county in December was estimated at

6,190, up 2% from November and 15.7% from December 2020.

Most industries saw solid gains in its ranks from a year ago, with manufacturing jobs up 17.3% from December 2020, retail trade jobs up 10%, governmental jobs up 8.3% and financial services jobs up 8.3% as well.

Some local industries haven’t seen their fortunes brighten over the past year, though. Mining, logging and construction jobs are down 12% from a year ago, and education and health services jobs are down 5.2%.

On the peninsula, Ocean Beach Hospital had 21 job openings listed on its website at the end of January. Vleming said hiring struggles for the industry are being experienced nationwide, largely due to burnout from the pandemic.

“Those jobs are getting harder to fill, so they’re gonna have to think outside of the box,” Vleming said. “I see that as being temporary, and I think we’ll be seeing that get better taken care of as the year goes on.”

Green crab

Continued from Page A1

The invasive species was first detected here in 1998, but populations remained low for most of the next two decades. State funding for ongoing monitoring was axed in 2003. However, a recent upswing in the crab population in Willapa Bay has local officials and shellfish farmers worried about their long-term impact on local aquaculture.

“I started to hear regular reports from farmers around 2015 and at that point the reports were pretty widespread through Willapa Bay,” said David Beuguli, executive director of the Willapa Grays Harbor Oyster Growers Association. “Farmers were reporting them on the oyster and clam beds, bare tide flats, within eelgrass beds and in deep channels. That was when we began to encounter multiple age classes and [egg-bearing] females. This is typical for an invasive species that persists in low number for years or decades until conditions become optimal.”

Willapa shellfish growers began seeking state help with the issue, but made little headway until green crab numbers recently began exploding in Lummi tribal waters in north Puget Sound. This generated a response from the governor.

“The European green crab is a globally damaging invasive species that, if they become permanently established, will particularly harm endangered species, impact resources that are part of the cultural identity of the tribes and native peoples, and affect small businesses,” Gov. Jay Inslee said in a statement on Jan. 20.

Destructive creatures

European green crab are about the size of a fist and can quickly destroy habitats, including eelgrass, and deplete native species, including smaller crabs, clams and oysters — all of which are big moneymakers in Pacific County. Green crab can easily dig down six inches in bay muck and disrupt natural biodiversity.

According to the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife, a green crab can consume up to 40 half-inch clams per day and small oysters, but they cannot crack the shells of mature oysters.

Though invasive, the crabs

are edible and are harvested in other regions of the world, but are roughly the size of a fist and usually aren’t considered worth the effort. They contain a small amount of meat compared to native Dungeness crab, and are best harvested during their brief soft-shell phase.

Clams have become a major crop in Willapa Bay. “The last few years we have seen a significant decline in manila clam survival and we are not sure if their is a correlation,” Beuguli said. “Obviously that has many clam famers concerned so in order to get a better understanding of any possible negative effects we are currently collaborating with Sea Grant on a WDFW funded study to trap and remove crabs from clam beds and dissect their stomach contents to get a better idea of their feeding preferences.”

Population could be doubling

According to Shoalwater Bay Department of Natural Resources (SBDNR) Director Larissa Pflieger-Ritzman, the tribe began trapping efforts in 2020 and caught 503 crabs in 105 traps, equating to an average of 4.79 crabs per trap.

“After that trap set, it was determined that there were certain green crab ‘hot spots’ or areas [where] the population was greater and that trapping would continue into 2021,” Pflieger-Ritzman said in a press release.

Trapping conducted in 2021 by the tribe resulted in catching 5,965 crabs in 535 traps, equating to an average of 11.14 crabs, approximately 2.3 times more than a year before.

“The SBDNR’s Catch Per Unit Effort (CPUE) total of 1,114.95 is the highest in Washington state for EGC trapping in 2021, exceeding efforts at Lummi, Grays Harbor, Drayton Harbor, Makah, Samish Bay, Padilla Bay, Copalis River, and Dungeness Spit,” Pflieger-Ritzman added.

While the numbers are high when compared between 2020 and 2021, Pflieger-Ritzman said the extent of the Willapa infestation won’t be clear until later this year.

“2020 to 2021 trapping numbers are slightly misleading, because trapping efforts were likely not as high. There also was no relevant population number to compare to,”

she said. “Our trapping in 2020 didn’t even start until August, and we had fewer traps. In 2021 we bought more traps to support tribal efforts and expanded to shrimp pots. We trapped 4,000 of our crab just at one site from September to December of 2021,” she added.

The tribe plans to hit it hard this year, with planned trapping through the entire year. Early numbers are already troubling.

“2022 will be our first full year of expanded year-round trapping; we’re still learning where they are and seasonally present. We have been setting this month 242, 211, and 172 this month so far trapped each week in 15 shrimp pots each time at the Tokeland Marina and off of Alder Street in Tokeland,” Pflieger-Ritzman said.

Funding support

Even with the extraordinarily high numbers of invasive green crab, the highest numbers in the state, Willapa Bay was left out of funding to combat the issue. Inslee signed an emergency order on Jan. 20, allotting \$8.9M to combat the growing green crab invasion.

“Small pools of funding have been acquired through the local Pacific County Marine Resources Committee to support essential trapping gear purchases for SBDNR and additional salary needs for PCVM,” Pflieger-Ritzman stated.

“To immediately remove more [green crabs] from Willapa Bay, SBDNR and PCVM need more [immediate funding]. More staff, traps, baits, boats, and time to dedicate to removal would increase the amount of [green crabs] from the bay substantially,” she added.

Inslee’s order focuses on combatting green crab populations in the Lummi Indian Nation’s pond and outer coastal waters. However, he has called upon other state

agencies to work diligently to prevent permanent green crab population settlements.

“The emergency order directs the Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) to begin implementation of emergency measures, as necessary, to affect the eradication of or to prevent the permanent establishment and expansion of the European green crab,” Inslee stated.

“The order [also] urges the Legislature to provide additional emergency funding as requested by the WDFW as soon as possible,” he added.

‘No clear direction’

Willapa shellfish growers are troubled by the crab invasion and what some see as a lackadaisical attitude by the state.

“Begged the state for resources all last summer; they said no one would take the position they offered on the coast. We got minimal research efforts only. According to [Beuguli’s] calculation, our trapping rate is as high or higher than in the Lummi Pond, which is getting so much attention,” Marilyn Sheldon of Northern Oyster Co. said.

“It has already got out of hand and could be in the top five threats to shellfish farming if we don’t get a plan to deal with them immediately,” grower Warren Cowell said.

According to Pflieger-Ritzman, the funding proposed by Inslee is set to target green crab invasions for other tribes and the Puget Sound region, even though Willapa Bay clearly has a significant problem.

“The [tribe] believes [that] the [WDFW] should fully fund and support the local, on the ground, experienced crews whose efforts have the goal of removing as many [green crabs] from the Willapa Bay system as possible,” Pflieger-Ritzman stated.

“If history has shown, management decisions in Willapa Bay for invasive species, pests, salmon and aquaculture have been met with mediating the environmental consequences after-the-fact approach,” Pflieger-Ritzman added.

However, neither the Shoalwaters nor the PCVM support the historical approach by the state and remain adamant that it’s not the proper solution.

The state has taken a similar strategy in the bay for combating ghost shrimp that have devastated Willapa oyster, crab and clam habitat by outlawing the one chemical that can eradicate the shrimp: imidacloprid.

Shrimp remain the top concern for Annie Herrold of Chetlo Harbor Shellfish on the east side of the bay. Noting that huge numbers of green crab are being found on Willapa’s north end, Herrold said they aren’t yet a top concern in her area.

“If the governor wanted to declare an emergency for something in Willapa Bay, it definitely should’ve been shrimp over green crab in my opinion,” she said.

Time to be proactive

Regardless of the passive approach the state has historically taken in Willapa Bay,

Pflieger-Ritzman and other officials point to an immediate proactive approach as being the best solution to combat the increase in green crab populations.

“Consensus of others is that we do not believe there is a way to completely eradicate [European green crabs]. Trapping and removal should be increased to control the population to the lowest extent possible,” Pflieger-Ritzman said.

“With a presence in other states like Oregon and California, the larval spread is the most difficult chain to disrupt when it comes to control, as well as human pathways and international shipping and larvae hitching a ride that way. Articles also address oceanic current patterns and connection with high El Niño indices having a beneficial effect on green crab recruitment,” she added.

Pacific County officials are still in the early process of figuring out what to do, and according to Commissioner Lisa Olsen, they hope to have more in-depth knowledge here soon.

“We have been in contact with WDFW regarding their response and how we can be a part of that and am waiting for the results of some studies they have done that they should be sharing with us fairly soon. That information should give us a clearer direction on how to control these populations,” she said.

“I am really hoping we find out that their main diet consists of burrowing shrimp,” she added. “A girl can dream, I guess.”

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