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Many Oregon parents aren't vaccinating their children

Connor Radnovich
Salem Statesman Journal
USA TODAY NETWORK

With the first COVID-19 vaccines for Oregon children ages 5-11 available, more parents will be faced with the question of whether to vaccinate their kids against the coronavirus.

If recent history is any indication, public health experts pushing for herd immunity could be in for another uphill battle.

An analysis of state data by the Statesman Journal and Register-Guard shows kids ages 12-17 who are already eligible are getting vaccinated at lower rates than older Oregonians. This reflects a similar trend nationwide, according to data from the Mayo Clinic.

Public health experts point to a few reasons for the lower rate. First, COVID-19 vaccines were not approved for kids until later this year, meaning they've

had less time to get vaccinated (though the rate of new vaccinations has slowed in line with other age groups).

It's also more difficult to convince teenagers to seek medical care, even for routine check-ups, said Paul Cieslak, medical director for communicable diseases and immunizations at the Oregon Health Authority.

Cieslak added that COVID-19 also tends to impact kids less severely than older individuals, so parents might hold off on vaccinating for that reason.

But he and other public health experts still say there are a number of benefits to vaccinating kids.

Among them: If a child is fully vaccinated and is exposed to a person with the coronavirus — say, at school — they do not need to quarantine for 14 days. Severe cases still happen among children, and the risk associated with vaccination is much lower than that of COVID-19.

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Ximena Ambriz, 12, receives the second dose of the Pfizer-BioNTech COVID-19 Vaccine during a COVID-19 vaccination clinic at Lancaster Health in Salem on Aug. 24. BRIAN HAYES/STATESMAN JOURNAL



Beachie Creek Fire impact on the Opal Creek Recreation Area east of Salem. The main stream in this picture is the Little North Santiam River. SUBMITTED PHOTO

Will one-two punch of wildfire, drought change forest for good?

Zach Urness
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In the span of just two years, Oregon's forests were roasted by historic wildfires and then baked by the hottest summer in recorded history.

Given a future expected to be warm and wet in winter, hot and dry in summer and with more wildfire overall, scientists and foresters have been studying how climate change will impact forest regeneration in thousands of acres of burn scars across the state.

The greatest impact, foresters and researchers said, is centered on forest "transition zones" — the place where valley and foothills meet — where burned forests may regrow as sage, juniper or shrubs instead of towering trees. And Oregon's timber industry is planning to harvest trees in a hotter and drier climate.

"With the changes we're seeing — and with the knowledge we have to think decades into the future — foresters are not only rethinking the types of trees they're planting but the genetics of the trees they're putting in the ground," said Seth Barnes, a forester

working on growing trees in a changing climate for the Oregon Forest & Industries Council.

How will Oregon change in the coming years and decades?

Oregon isn't going to stop being a damp and rainy state all of a sudden, sprouting cactus on the Coast or with scorpions scurrying alongside the Willamette River.

But the numbers don't lie: of the 10 warmest years in Oregon's recorded history — which dates back to the 1890s — seven have been recorded since 2000. This year is almost certain to crack the top three hottest, if not overtaking 2015 for the top spot.

In those years, Oregon's temperature was 2 to 4 degrees warmer than historical averages.

"Simply put, our climate has become less like Washington and more like California," Oregon State climatologist Larry O'Neill said. "Our winters are a bit shorter and summers are a bit longer, warmer, and drier."

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Oregon offers loans to fix failing septic systems

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Oregon is offering \$2 million in low-interest loans for homeowners and small businesses to repair or replace failing septic systems.

Malfunctioning septic systems can cause sewage to come to the surface onto the ground or spill into waterways, creating public health hazards and harming natural resources.

The Oregon Legislature created the loan program in 2016, but funding ran out in June 2020. The Legislature approved the new funding earlier this year.

"By supporting those struggling to repair failing septic systems, we can not only prevent damage to homes and property but also improve public health outcomes for all Oregonians," Oregon Rep. Ken Helm, D-Beaverton, said in a news release.

The Oregon Department of Environmental Quality has partnered with nonprofit lender Craft3 to administer the loans. It has just reopened loan applications.

DEQ estimates that, of the 450,000 septic systems in use across Oregon, 10-20% fail each year.

The loans cover all eligible costs for permitting, design and installation, and also provide for ongoing maintenance when needed. The loans have variable low rates based on the income of the borrowers and are accessible to borrowers who may not have perfect credit.

They are available to homeowners and to small businesses that use septic systems, such as restaurants, convenience stores and small manufactured home or RV parks.

Before the program was paused, it provided more than \$3.6 million in loans to 187 Oregon residents and small businesses to improve or install septic systems. Loan recipients were in 92 cities and in 28 of Oregon's 36 counties.

To learn more about the program or to apply, visit Craft3.org/CleanWaterOre.

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Marion County broke the law in refusing telework, board says

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Marion County broke the law when it refused to bargain with its employee union after revoking the temporary telework policy put in place early in the COVID-19 pandemic, the state's employment relations board determined.

The board determined the county has 30 days to bargain with the Marion County Employees Association, the union that represents about 1,000 of 1,740 Marion County employees, about the telework policy.

For 15 months of the pandemic, Marion County allowed or required many employees to work remotely. That lasted until the commissioners allowed the county's state of emergency to expire in July.

It then required all workers to return to work in person, even as the Delta variant pushed cases to record levels in Oregon.

"Part of the problem, and it's been part of the problem, is there hasn't been a solid policy around expectations," MCEA president Trish Straw said. "It hasn't been equitable and fair, so this forces them to the table so they can bargain, so we can bargain and get something that's equitable and fair and they can follow."

Shortly after Marion County revoked its temporary telework policy in July, the county's Health and Human Services Department was identified as a source of a workplace outbreak by the Oregon Health Authority. The outbreak, which is now considered resolved, involved nine cases.

According to the ruling, the extent of COVID-19 outbreaks among Marion County employees was far more than previously reported.

There were 10 workplace outbreaks of the coronavirus in the county from June 10 through Oct. 4 involving 67 county employees, according to the decision.

According to the ruling, the county's decision to revoke its telework policy jeopardized the safety of its employees.

"Because the safety issue of exposure to COVID-19 has a direct and substantial effect on employees' on-the-job safety, it is a mandatory subject for bargaining," according to the ruling.

The current labor contract, which predates the pandemic, doesn't include a telework policy. But, according to the ruling, by having a temporary one in place for 15 months during the pandemic, the county created a status quo. That makes it something the county has to bargain with the union about.

"What's going to happen if we have another surge?" Straw said. "Look at the fires, look at the ice storm, pandemic. This is something that needs to be discussed, it needs to be nailed down and it needs to be available."

"There is no sense having employees use up all their time (off) when they could actually be working. It's a waste of taxpayer money for us to sit home when we can be working and productive. It makes no sense."

The county and union have until Nov. 27 to negotiate a telework policy. If they don't come to an agreement, both sides must submit their proposal to the state employment relations board, which will then determine the remedy.

Straw said the current labor contract between the union and the county runs through 2022, but bargaining for it will begin in January.

"Anything to do surrounding telework, obviously, this is the new normal so we really want to nail that down," Straw said.

She said the union also wants to talk about hazard pay for employees whose jobs don't allow them to work remotely.

"There are people that can't telework, obviously. We got to keep them safe," he said. "This has all been around safety, from day one."

Bill Poehler covers Marion County for the Statesman Journal. Contact him at bpoehler@statesmanjournal.com or [Twitter.com/bpoehler](https://twitter.com/bpoehler)

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