

**RISK**

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it means Union County's public health situation is improving. She said lower infection rates mean there is less stress on Grande Ronde Hospital, La Grande, and other local health care facilities.

Union County Commissioner Donna Beverage said she is delighted because being in the lower risk category will assist merchants.

"I'm super happy for businesses," Beverage said, noting she hopes this will help merchants recover from some of the losses they suffered in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The county commissioner said she believes falling infection rates are due to people following social distancing rules and wearing masks.

"They are respectful of each other," Beverage said.

Cody Guentert, the owner of Brother Bear Cafe, a business on Adams Avenue, La Grande, said one of the aspects of the lower risk level he welcomes is allowing up to eight people to sit at a table together indoors at restaurants. The current maximum is six people at a table and, he said, can create awkward situations.

He noted recently his family was celebrating a birthday in a local restaurant, but the party of eight had to sit at separate tables because of the six-person limit.

Guentert also said he likes how the lower risk limit category allows people from up to four households to gather in homes, double the current limit of two houses. He said this will make it easier for more than just families to be together. He feels good overall about the county's switch to lower risk.

"I'm happy," he said. "This is exciting."

Arturo Escamilla, co-owner of Raul's Taqueria, said being in the lower risk category will help his La Grande restaurant.

"I'm happy that we are moving forward," Escamilla said.

Sue Memmott, the manager of Globe Furniture, La Grande, joined the chorus of cheer.

"It will put smiles on people's faces. We are moving in the right direction," Memmott said.

John Howard, the owner of John J. Howard and Associates Real Estate, said he believes the drop in infection rates is due in large part to the number of people who have been vaccinated in Union County. He said the development of COVID-19 vaccines is an enormous credit to the many people who took part in vaccine testing trials.

"They are the real heroes," the La Grande business owner said.

Howard urged everyone to get a COVID-19 vaccine. He said he cannot understand why some people are reluctant, considering vaccinations have been successful in stopping the spread of dreaded diseases, including measles, polio and chicken pox.

While Union County joins Wallowa County and eight others in the lower risk group, COVID-19 infections are rising in Oregon, putting two-thirds of all counties into what, for now, is the highest possible level of restrictions.

The new county risk levels include nearly a dozen special waivers under

**COUNTY RISK LEVELS BEGINNING FRIDAY, APRIL 23**

<b>Lower risk (10)</b>	lower	Linn*
Gilliam	Benton	Marion*
Grant	Clackamas*	Multnomah
Harney	Clatsop (moved from moderate)	Polk* (moved from moderate)
Lake	Columbia* (moved from moderate)	Tillamook
Malheur	Coos	Wasco (moved from lower)
Morrow	Crook* (moved from lower)	Washington (moved from moderate)
Sherman	Deschutes*	Yamhill (moved from lower)
Union (moved from moderate)	Douglas	<b>Extreme risk (0)*</b>
Wallowa	Jackson*	*This county qualifies for extreme risk but is placed at High Risk because the statewide hospitalization trigger for Extreme Risk was not met.
Wheeler	Jefferson (moved from lower)	
<b>Moderate risk (3)</b>	Josephine*	
Curry (moved from high)	Klamath*	
Hood River (moved from lower)	Lane (moved from lower)	
Umatilla	Lincoln	
<b>High risk (23)</b>		
Baker* (moved from		

Brown to keep counties from going into the most severe set of restrictions on activities, businesses and events.

Brown said the waivers are possible because of advances in vaccination numbers and a drop in severe cases of COVID-19, along with fewer deaths. But she said new variants that are able to morph inside infected bodies could prove a future challenge. Some of the variants have been shown to be more contagious and lethal than the version that appeared in the United States early last year.

Brown stressed vaccinations are the best way to protect yourself and others from the variants and the increased spread of COVID-19.

"Until you, your family, your friends, and your neighbors are fully vaccinated, it's also critical that we all continue to wear masks, maintain physical distance, and stay home when sick," the governor said.

The measure of new cases, cases per 100,000 people and positive test rate determine the risk levels. As the levels rise, so does the severity of limits on activities, events, dining and shopping.

But a mandate from Brown is keeping 11 counties from going into the extreme risk category even if the county level data suggests they should be. On April 6, she ordered that no county would be put in extreme risk if the statewide number of hospitalized COVID-19 patients remained under 300 and didn't rise by more than 15% in a week.

With 25% of state residents immunized, including 75% of those 70 and older, the upswing in infections hasn't always been followed by increases in hospitalizations and deaths.

The Oregon Health Authority reported April 20 that 270 people are hospitalized with COVID-19 in Oregon, below the threshold.

That means residents of the 11 counties don't have to go all the way back to the harshest curbs of the pan-

demic — they top out at the rules associated with the high risk level. The counties are Baker, Clackamas, Columbia, Crook, Deschutes, Jackson, Josephine, Klamath, Linn, Marion and Polk.

Under an earlier plan adopted by Brown, counties that moved to a lower risk level only to boomerang back up were held at the lower level of restrictions and given two weeks to get their virus numbers back down.

Three Eastern Oregon counties were listed at risk levels lower than their numbers would suggest: Umatilla County will remain at moderate risk instead of moving to high risk. Grant County will stay at lower risk instead of high risk. Malheur County will stay at lower risk instead of moderate risk.

Brown's cap only extends to the extreme level. Seven counties moved from either lower or moderate to high. All will have to follow the stricter guidelines that go with their new risk level status.

Amid the stampede of counties moving to higher risk levels, Curry County went from high to moderate, joining Union County with dropping infection numbers leading to a drop in restrictions.

The rising county numbers reflect statewide statistics. Oregon recorded 8,276 cases between April 4-17. The statewide measure of cases per 100,000 residents is 195.4 and the test positivity rate is 5.1%.

For comparison, if Oregon were a county, it would be on the lip between high and extreme risk level ratings. For larger counties, 200 cases and above per 100,000 people is the trigger for an extreme level rating. The test positivity is just slightly above the highest rate the state has said will keep the infection rate flat.

The next risk level adjustment will be announced May 4 and take effect May 7.

Updates are posted to [coronavirus.oregon.gov](https://coronavirus.oregon.gov).

— Gary A. Warner with the Oregon Capital Bureau contributed to this report.



Alex Wittwer/The Observer

Maaik Schotborgh, right, Oregon Trail Electric Cooperative's safety and loss control manager, answers questions Tuesday, April 20, 2021, from Greenwood Elementary students during a career and safety training day at the La Grande school.

**CAREER**

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fires and save lives.

"An ambulance is a small emergency room," La Grande firefighter Kyle Wattenburg told the students.

Fire Capt. Robert Tibbetts told the Greenwood students the life of a firefighter is rewarding, but also taxing and requires sacrifices. He told the students firefighters at the La Grande Fire Department work 48-hour shifts and then are off four days.

"That means you are away from your family one-third of your life," Tibbetts said.

Tibbetts said there are often long stretches in which firefighters get little if any shuteye. For example, on Monday, April 19, the fire department responded to 22 calls.

"The crew on duty did not get any sleep that day," he said.

The La Grande Fire Department captain said



Alex Wittwer/The Observer

La Grande Fire Department Capt. Robert Tibbetts gives a tour of Engine 46 to students at Greenwood Elementary School, La Grande, during a career day on Tuesday, April 20, 2021.

he welcomed the chance to participate in the career-safety fair.

"It is great to be able to do this for the community and the kids," Tibbetts said.

Donna Rainboth, the La Grande School District's science, technology, engineering and mathematics coach, said one of the best things

about the career and safety day is showing students there are excellent career opportunities in the Grande Ronde Valley. She praised the participants making presentations for providing insightful descriptions of their occupations.

"The students," Rainboth said, "really got see what their jobs are like."

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