



Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian

Fans stroll into the Round-Up Grounds on Saturday, July 10, 2021, at the Pendleton Whisky Music Fest. The Oregon Health Authority is investigating a link between an outbreak of COVID-19 cases and the concert, which drew 12,000 fans.

COVID-19 numbers shooting up

Most counties would be at 'extreme' risk level

By GARY A. WARNER and BRUCE DOLE
Oregon Capital Bureau

SALEM — The faster, stronger delta variant of the virus that causes COVID-19 is setting record numbers of infections and sickness across Oregon, state statistics for the most recent two weeks show.

In Wallowa County, 1 out of 4 people tested for COVID-19 was positive.

Umatilla County had 915 cases per 100,000 people, by far the most in the state, while Union County has 622 cases per 100,000.

Multnomah County, the state's most populous, reported 1,013 new cases over the two-week time frame, its shallower rise still driving big total numbers.

Lake County was the only one of Oregon's 36 counties to record a drop in reported cases.

The numbers were contained in the weekly County COVID-19 Community Spread Report, the document whose arrival each Monday once meant Gov. Kate Brown would reassign new risk levels based on the prevalence of COVID-19 within county boundaries.

Where a county fell on the risk chart determined what businesses could be open, how many customers could be in a store, how late a bar could stay open and whether a diner could sit down for a meal or had to buy takeout.

The measures of total cases, cases per 100,000 population and percentage of tests that were positive, controlled Oregon residents' lives for much of the past fall, winter and spring.

With the steep drop in the infection rate as a majority of Oregonians started getting vaccinated, Brown unshackled the fate of local lives and economies from the weekly report's ups and downs. On June 30, Brown handed over control of public health decisions to counties.

The weekly reports continue to come out, though the Oregon Health Authority delayed delivery of the numbers this week by a day. If the list still carried its restrictions, 22 and likely more of Oregon's 36 counties would be under the "extreme" risk level, which carried the highest restrictions.

In early July, Oregon showed a seven-day average of 110 new cases in the whole state. It had not been so low since early June 2020 when the pan-

demic was still in its early days.

There would be four waves of infection by the beginning of this summer. But the arrival of vaccines seemed to guarantee the dark days of winter, when the seven-day average topped out at 1,515 new cases, were gone forever.

Now, Oregon is back to wintery numbers of infections, and hospitals are again stretched to the limit. A saving grace is that most of the most vulnerable — the very elderly and those with serious medical conditions — have had access to vaccinations. That has made the wave of deaths that once followed after reported infections and hospitalizations shallower and shorter.

Brown's decision to lift restrictions on June 30 when the state closed in on vaccinating 70% of eligible adult residents came as new infections were at their lowest levels in more than a year. But just as the state opened up, the delta variant arrived in force. In areas of the state with large numbers of unvaccinated people, it wreaked immediate havoc.

OHA is investigating the role of the Whisky Fest country music concert in Pendleton last month that drew 12,000 and has led to dozens of reported positive cases of COVID-19, primarily in Umatilla County. The specter of a superspreader event now shadows plans for the Umatilla County Fair Aug. 11-14. That's dwarfed by the Pendleton Round-Up, beginning Sept. 11, which in the past has drawn up to 50,000 people from across the United States.

The OHA investigation also underlines a structural problem with the state's plan to have local authorities enforce the rules. Public health officials are hired by local government officials. The officials are elected by local voters. In areas where vaccination rates are low, including much of Eastern and Southwestern Oregon, there is still doubt — and sometimes outright hostility — toward any restrictions such as mandatory masks.

Umatilla County Public Health Director Joe Fiumara told the East Oregonian this week that he expects COVID-19 cases to rise because of the county fair.

"If you're trying to reduce cases, I think canceling the fair would be a way to do that," Fiumara said. "And I think it would be an effective way to prevent an additional spread."

But Fiumara said he would not formally recommend cutbacks or closing the event because of the backlash that would ensue. "I'm not sure all the

fallout from canceling it would be worthwhile. I think there would be a lot of pushback," he said.

For her part, Brown and her administration have put the focus back on counties, many of which had clamored for 18 months for more local control.

While other states and cities are pushing for mandatory rules, Oregon's mask-wearing warning is voluntary. The state has issued a requirement that workers and visitors to state buildings must wear masks.

After a second mandate following CDC guidance to require masks in schools, Brown got a taste of blowback over the past few days as schools boards and parents pushed back.

Instead of waiting for the state to impose new sanctions, Brown has said localities should step up, "follow the science" and take action themselves.

"While we have learned not to rule anything out, we also know that locally-driven response efforts are most effective at this stage in the pandemic to reach unvaccinated Oregonians," said Brown spokesperson Charles Boyle on Tuesday, Aug. 3.

Boyle said nothing is stopping locals from acting — and the state is ready to help with materials such as vaccines and public health workers — to make any action a success.

"Counties, cities and employers also have the ability to institute their own safety measures and requirements, and we expect local leaders in areas most impacted by COVID-19 to take action," Boyle said.

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Snowy summer skyline fades to brown peaks

Central Oregon glaciers, snowpack feeling the heat of climate change

By MICHAEL KOHN
The Bulletin

BEND — Winter brought above-average snow to the Central Cascades. Then a summertime heat wave melted most of it away.

Now Central Oregon's glaciers could experience significant melt as the snow that normally protects them in the warmer months disappears.

The rapid snowmelt that occurred in spring and early summer has left midsummer snowmelt at historic lows, said Larry O'Neill, an associate professor at the College of Earth, Ocean and Atmospheric Sciences at Oregon State University. What's more, this snow season — with its unusually rapid melt-off — is going to become the new normal, he said.

When snowpack melts early in the year, it can have negative consequences on water resources and the health of the glaciers. Reservoirs struggle to fill, river levels remain lower than normal and rangeland can deteriorate. For those who enjoy scaling



Ryan Brennecke/Bend Bulletin

A small amount of snow remains on South Sister as a vehicle travels Friday, July 30, 2021, along the Cascade Lakes Highway.

Mount Jefferson, North Sister and other Central Oregon peaks, it can mean an early end to the climbing season on several mountains.

"The slightly warmer than normal spring and the June heat wave melted nearly all the snowpack," said O'Neill. "We entered spring with near-normal snowpack in the Central Oregon Cascades, but unfortunately it melted out about three to four weeks earlier than normal."

The impact of this is less snow in late summer to melt into streams, causing streams to flow at lower levels than normal. That can impair habitat for fish and wildlife. The weak snowpack in late summer also dries out forests, creating conditions for wildfire.

"This snow season is a perfect example of what the future will look like,"

said O'Neill. Glaciers melt off more rapidly when the protective snowpack that covers them disappears, said Anders Carlson, president of the Oregon Glaciers Institute, a nonprofit that works to preserve glaciers through science and education.

"This will be a very bad year for them," said Carlson. "With the snow retreating and disappearing so quickly, this exposes the underlying glacier to melting sooner than in more normal years."

The melt-off comes amid historically hot weather in Central Oregon. Temperatures recorded in Bend reached all-time highs in late June, culminating in 107-degree weather on June 30. At Warm Springs on June 27, the temperature soared to 119 degrees, tying a state record.

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