

Another wave of COVID-19 infections?

Researchers at OHSU emphasize importance of booster shots to fight the new variant

By AMELIA TEMPLETON
Oregon Public Broadcasting

SALEM — Hospitals in Oregon are still understaffed and struggling.

And now they're facing a new challenge: planning for omicron, the new variant of COVID-19 that's upending what we know about the pandemic.

The first three cases of omicron were detected in Oregon just on Monday, Dec. 13.

Now, local scientists are warning that omicron could become the dominant variant in the state within a month or so, poised to trigger a new fifth wave of infections.

"Oregon probably has a little time, but each day is counting now," said Peter Graven, a data scientist at Oregon Health and Science University and author of an influential COVID-19 statewide forecast. "The cases are here and it means that certainly in January we're going to be dealing with this big time."

Graven says while just three cases have been detected so far, likely many more have gone undetected. He points to places like the United Kingdom and Denmark, where the variant was first identified about three weeks ago — and is now driving up infection rates.

Whether that fifth wave is a lion or a lamb will likely hinge on two key factors: if Oregon can quickly increase the number of people who are vaccinated and have received a booster dose, and omicron's virulence.



Alex Wittwer/The Observer, File

A thin plastic sheet separates the intensive care unit from the COVID-19 ward at Grande Ronde Hospital on Monday, Aug. 30, 2021. Oregon-based scientists are warning that omicron could become the dominant variant in the state within a month or so, poised to trigger a new fifth wave of infections.

Losing herd immunity

So far, early evidence shows a two-dose course of approved vaccines is significantly less effective at preventing mild infection and transmission of omicron than it was against past variants.

While the data is limited, scientists say there are reasons to believe two doses may offer some protection against severe outcomes like hospitalization and death.

However, booster doses appear much more effective against omicron than just an initial course of vaccine.

"If you're really interested in doing the things that you can do to protect yourself, boosting is something that is really likely to enhance your protective immunity," said Dr. Bill Messer, a clinical researcher at OHSU who treats COVID-19 patients and studies viral evolution.

Only about 20% of Oregonians

have gotten a booster shot so far.

Graven says the bottom line is that Oregon needs to drive up its booster rate — otherwise many more people will be susceptible to getting infected as the new variant spreads.

"We were getting very close to herd immunity once again with delta. Now, to have a lot of that immunity be kind of thrown out the window is a real problem," he said.

Graven says getting booster doses to people in nursing homes and other types of long term care should happen immediately, before the variant has time to start spreading.

"They are still our most vulnerable group. They are the most likely to get sick and then need to go to the hospital. And many of their vaccines were delivered first, which means they have had the most time to wane. This is a pop-

ulation that needs to have their booster," Graven said.

Less virulent — but how much less?

Graven and Messer both say research is pointing toward omicron causing less severe illness than other variants — a second key factor in what the next wave of cases may look like.

Messer cautions that much of the data on severity comes from South Africa, a country with a very young population, among whom COVID-19 tends to produce milder illness in general.

But he believes the research on virulence so far is good news.

"I am becoming cautiously optimistic that omicron is less virulent than delta or prior variants," Messer said. "The real question is how much less virulent."

If omicron is a little less viru-

lent, but capable of infecting lots of vaccinated people — that could still be enough to bring Oregon's health system, still reeling from the delta wave, to its knees again.

"Even with a low rate of hospitalization, when we open up so many people to being no longer protected, it's gonna put a real strain on our health care resources. It's bad news," Graven said.

Why vaccination still matters

Messer says it's possible that omicron is inherently less virulent because of its mutations.

But another critical question is whether the variant is causing less severe infections because it is re-infecting a lot of people who have been infected previously and causing breakthrough cases in vaccinated people.

Experience with a previous version of the virus may be giving people's immune systems a head start against the variant, regardless of its new mutations.

"There's probably still protection against severity of illness for people who have been vaccinated," Messer said.

He expects two types of immune cells, memory T cells and memory B cells, may still recognize omicron and begin to fight it.

Memory B cells, which produce antibodies, may play a particularly important role in moderating the severity of an infection with a new variant.

Messer says the best way to give your immune system a head start against omicron is to get boosted — or if you haven't been vaccinated at all, to start the process.

"It's helpful that it's less virulent," he said, "but it still doesn't do the work that vaccination would do to take the pressure off our health care system."



Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian, File

The former headquarters of Pendleton Grain Growers in Pendleton now belongs to La Grande-based Braseth Properties. PGG announced Thursday, Dec. 16, 2021, the cooperative paid members, avoided bankruptcy and is heading finalizing dissolution.

Pendleton Grain Growers pays members \$12.1M, heads to dissolution

East Oregonian

PENDLETON — Pendleton Grain Growers in a press release Thursday, Dec. 16, announced it avoided bankruptcy and paid \$12.1 million in patronage, a distribution of profits, to members at the cooperative's annual meeting Dec. 15.

Members who did not attend the annual meeting will receive checks in the mail.

"The PGG board anticipates distributing additional funds, in cash and patronage," according to the press release, "as the dissolution of the co-op is finalized."

Pendleton Grain Growers in 2014 faced years of losses, while the co-op's banks called in loans, threatening liquidation.

"The PGG board took a different approach and in the seven years since, successfully avoided bankruptcy, repaid all debts, met pension obligations, found operators to purchase most businesses, provided employees with new jobs or severance and resolved all environmental issues," the press release stated.

Tim Hawkins, chairman of the PGG board, said in the press release it was

the board's commitment that made the avoidance of bankruptcy possible.

"It was understood this would take years to achieve and the board chose to commit to it," Hawkins said in the press release. "The results of the board's commitment have been spectacular, and we were able to return more patronage than ever imagined, and we leave behind no debt unpaid, no known problem unresolved."

According to PGG, the key events that made this turnaround possible were CoBank refinancing the co-op's debts, the quick closure of losing operations that could not be sold, the sale of grain operations in 2016 to United Grain Corporation, the improvement and sale of remaining operating businesses and the development and sale of other properties.

Hawkins said dissolving the board in "a healthy, careful way" resulted in a better outcome than expected.

"In the end, we will return funds to members three times greater than the patronage PGG had recorded at its low point," he said in the press release. "The outcome is a huge win for PGG and the community."

Sams sworn in as National Park Service director

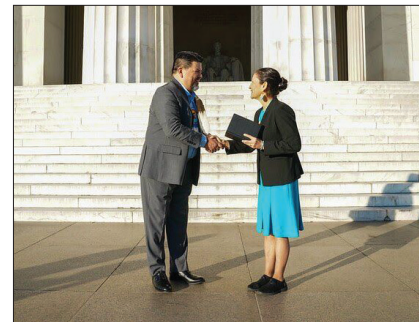
By ANTONIO SIERRA
East Oregonian

WASHINGTON — In the photo accompanying the news that Chuck Sams has been sworn in as the 19th director of the National Park Service, he and his new boss, U.S. Secretary of the Interior Deb Haaland, shake hands as the Lincoln Memorial looms in the background.

Sams now is directly responsible for managing the Lincoln Memorial, and in a statement Thursday, Dec. 16, in a press release, Sams previewed his stewardship of America's parks, historical sites and monuments.

"I am honored to serve as director of the National Park Service and thank President Biden and Secretary Haaland for entrusting in me the care of one of America's greatest gifts: our National Park System," he said in the statement. "I am also incredibly proud to work with the dedicated employees of the National Park Service. I have no doubt that together, we'll be able to expand access to the outdoors, protect America's public lands, and upgrade our nation's infrastructure system through the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law."

When the U.S. Senate unanimously confirmed him in December, Sams, an enrolled member of the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation, became the first



National Park Service/Contributed Photo

Chuck Sams, the new director of National Park Service and an enrolled member of the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation, shakes hands in this undated photo with U.S. Secretary of the Interior Deb Haaland. Sams is the service's first permanent director in five years.

American Indian to serve as park director. He now serves under Haaland, a member of the Laguna Pueblo in New Mexico and also the first Native person to hold her role.

"Everyone should have access to the outdoors no matter where they live, how much money they have, or what their background is," she said in the press release. "Chuck Sams understands the importance of connecting people to nature, and I am thrilled to work with him as the Interior Department works to make our national park system accessible to all Americans. Under his leadership, the National Park Service will continue to protect

our public lands for generations to come and make critical investments in the vast infrastructure that sustains our public lands and national parks."

U.S. Sen. Ron Wyden, D-Oregon, took to Twitter to express his support for Sams and what his appointment means:

"Today is a great day for everybody who treasures America's national parks & for all of us as Oregonians with Chuck Sams now the @NatlParkService director," Wyden tweeted. "My friend Chuck will be a great steward of our beloved national parks."

During his confirmation hearing, Sams was repeatedly questioned about how he would address the park system's maintenance backlog and staffing shortages. Sams will be expected to address some of those issues with federal funds created through recent legislation. American Indian tribes across the country are also hoping Sams' history in tribal government will lead to co-management agreements where ceded tribal land intersects with national parks.

Prior to his appointment, Sams represented Oregon on the Northwest Power and Conservation Council. But Sams is probably best known locally for his many years in CTUIR government, rising all the way to interim executive director before resigning in March.

COVID-19 outpatient infusions are not all the same



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