

Wastewater data finds more people have COVID than reported

Rise in home testing, decrease in disease severity have masked large increase in infections in Oregon

By AMELIA TEMPLETON
Oregon Public Broadcasting

SALEM — Last month, a new COVID-19 variant from the omicron family spread across Oregon, causing a seventh wave of infections.

On paper, this seventh wave hasn't looked particularly impressive, peaking in late May at about 1,500 new cases reported per day. But data from sewage samples collected at wastewater treatment plants across the state suggests that the BA2 omicron variant is silently causing far more infections than are showing up in state testing tallies.

"Wastewater across the state is more or less at record highs or near record highs," said Tyler Radniecki, an associate professor of environmental engineering who is leading the wastewater sampling research

effort at Oregon State University.

The OSU project is part of a nationwide COVID-19 wastewater surveillance effort. The viral concentrations in Oregon during the current surge look similar to what the team saw during the peaks of the delta surge last August and the first omicron surge in January.

By the end of May, the concentration of virus in wastewater samples registered as "strong," indicating a significant outbreak, in much of the state. In a handful of communities, including Forest Grove and Bend, concentrations of the virus were even higher, signaling particularly intense BA2 outbreaks.

What the wastewater shows, Radniecki says, is that the state's tally of COVID-19 cases is a very significant underestimate of the actual spread of BA2.



The Observer, File

A danger sign hangs near the entrance to the La Grande Wastewater Lagoon Headworks on Thursday, Jan. 13, 2022. The treatment center stopped testing for COVID-19 in January of 2021 after experiencing difficulties related to a short staff and skewed testing results.

Wastewater monitoring does not, however, give any indication of how much severe illness a particular variant is causing. Hospitalization data shows BA2, like other omicron variants, is mostly causing milder cases, though the number of people with COVID-19 in intensive care rose above 50 this week.

Case counts have always been a very imperfect measure of actual infections because they are highly dependent on the number of people getting clinically tested for COVID-19. And as more people use rapid at-home tests, the amount of clinical testing is dropping, making case counts an even less reliable proxy

for COVID-19 spread.

To better understand how prevalent the virus is, some local public health officials are increasingly relying on the wastewater data instead.

The surveillance method takes advantage of the fact that many people infected with COVID-19 shed the virus in their poop. The OSU team collects data from around 40 wastewater treatment plants statewide, from Ontario to Warm Springs to Florence.

Every week, the treatment plants use a small filter to collect a representative sample of the sewage flowing in over a 24-hour period. The filters get rolled up, stuck in little tubes, and shipped to Corvallis. OSU's scientists identify viral RNA on the droplets in the filters and quantify it. After two years of honing the process, it now takes about four to five days from when a sample is collected to when OSU has an estimate of how much COVID-19 virus is in it.

Ballot title certified for revived animal cruelty initiative

By GEORGE PLAVEN
Capital Press

SALEM — A controversial voter initiative in Oregon that would remove exemptions for farming and ranching under the state's animal cruelty laws is being revived for another run.

Proponents of Initiative Petition 3 — named the Abuse, Neglect and Assault Exemption Modification and Improvement Act — took another step toward qualifying for the 2024 general election after being issued a certified ballot title on Monday, June 13.

IP3 is essentially a reboot on Initiative Petition 13, which was filed last year for the 2022 election. It calls for amending Oregon's animal abuse and neglect statutes, abolishing long-standing exemptions for agriculture.

The result would make it a crime to slaughter livestock for food, while also banning common animal husbandry practices such as branding and dehorning cattle. Artificial insemination would furthermore be considered sexual assault of an animal, a Class C felony.

Exemptions for hunting, fishing, rodeos, pest control, scientific research and wildlife management would likewise be stripped away under the the proposal.

According to the "Yes on IP3" campaign website, the laws would retain exemptions for killing or injuring animals in cases of self-defense and providing veterinary care.

David Michelson, a Portland-based animal rights activist and lead organizer for the campaign, said IP13 failed to garner enough signatures for the 2022 ballot because, "unlike the claims some have made that we receive funding from the



George Plaven/Capital Press, File

Holstein cows eat feed inside the dairy barn at Tilla-Bay Farms in Tillamook on Oregon's North Coast in this undated file photo.

likes of (George) Soros or (Bill) Gates, this is a very grassroots initiative that had started with very few team members."

"Since we started this process in November 2020, we have steadily grown in support and are hopeful of our chances for qualifying in 2024," Michelson said in response to questions emailed by the Capital Press.

Petitioners filed IP3 on March 16. It is largely the same as IP13, but with two additions, Michelson said.

First, he said IP3 would remove additional exemptions for livestock and farmed animals under animal neglect statutes requiring they have access to "adequate bedding, adequate shelter and other minimum care provisions."

Second, the initiative would make it so that anyone convicted of animal cruelty could not own any animal for 5-15 years, depending on the severity

of the crime.

While the attorney general did certify the ballot title for IP3, supporters are not yet approved to start circulating the petition. Those who commented on the draft ballot title for IP3 may appeal the certified title to the Oregon Supreme Court. Appeals are due June 28.

If approved, the campaign would need to collect 112,020 signatures to place IP3 on the 2024 ballot.

Tami Kerr, executive director of the Oregon Dairy Farmers Association, said IP3 would put dairies and cattle producers out of business, hurting rural communities statewide.

"I know how hard our producers work, my family included. It's personally offensive," Kerr said. "As crazy as this is, and as negative as it would be to our rural communities, I would hope that a lot of our elected officials would speak up in opposition to it, our state senators included."

State to start sending \$600 stimulus payments to low-income workers

By JAMIE GOLDBERG
The Oregonian

SALEM — More than 200,000 Oregon workers will receive \$600 checks from the state as soon as this week.

Oregon lawmakers in March approved the one-time stimulus payments for certain low-income workers. The payments will go to Oregonians who claimed the Earned Income Tax Credit in 2020, a tax break for low-income working households, and lived within the state in the last six months of that year.

The Oregon Department of Revenue said Wednesday it would distribute nearly \$141.8 million to 236,000 qualifying households. Payments are limited to one per household.

About \$82 million will be deposited directly into the bank accounts of qualifying individuals, while the

remaining nearly \$60 million will be sent via mail. The state said qualifying individuals will receive the money no later than Friday, July 1.

The state is paying for the stimulus payments with federal pandemic aid approved by Congress last year.

Rich Hoover, a spokesperson for The Oregon Department of Revenue, said the payments are not subject to state or federal income tax.

House Bill 4157 passed by wide margins in both chambers of the Oregon Legislature this spring, with a handful of Republicans joining majority Democrats in supporting the bill. The payments evolved from a 2021 plan for larger stimulus payments — up to \$2,000 — to essential workers who stayed on the job during the pandemic and those who rejoined the workforce last fall.

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