

Trump declares disaster in Washington state

Boeing shuts down production facilities

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Associated Press

OLYMPIA, Wash. — President Donald Trump on Sunday issued a disaster declaration for Washington state and ordered federal assistance for the state, tribal and local response to the coronavirus outbreak that has killed dozens.

The disaster declaration will provide federal assistance for both emergency protective measures and crisis counseling, the White House said. Washington Gov. Jay Inslee said the federal declaration was appreciated but added it was a “first step” that doesn’t go far enough.

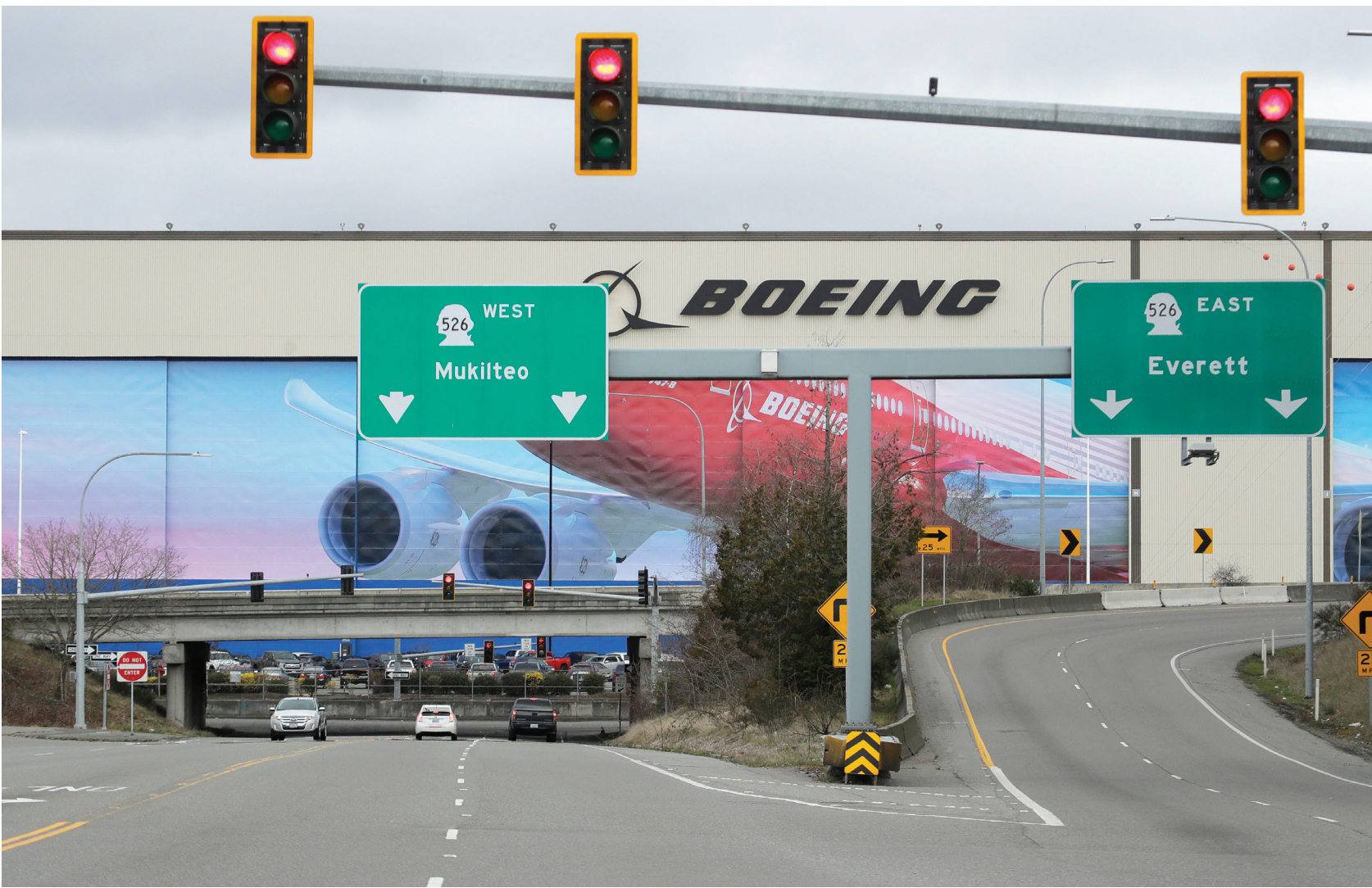
Inslee planned to give a statewide address Monday night on the ongoing coronavirus outbreak. As of Monday afternoon, the state Department of Health reported 110 deaths in the state.

In a statement, Inslee said “today’s declaration does not unlock many forms of federal assistance we have requested to help workers and families who are badly hurting. We will continue working with our federal partners to deliver the full suite of disaster assistance that is sorely needed in our state, such as expanded unemployment benefits for workers who lose their paychecks as a result of the COVID-19 crisis.”

Trump also said Sunday he’d ordered the Federal Emergency Management Agency to ship mobile hospital centers to the hard-hit states of Washington, California and New York amid the coronavirus pandemic.

On Monday, Boeing announced it was shutting down its Seattle-area production facilities for two weeks.

In a statement Monday,



Ted S. Warren/AP Photo

Cars drive near Boeing’s manufacturing facility in Everett on Monday.

Inslee said he applauded Boeing’s decision “to implement an orderly shutdown and continue to pay its workers during this difficult time.”

“Now is a time for bold actions like these, and we will continue to look at what can be done statewide,” Inslee wrote.

Boeing employs about 70,000 people in the region. The company said 32 employees have tested positive for the virus, including 25 in the greater Seattle area.

Operations would be reduced beginning Wednesday, Boeing President and CEO Dave Calhoun said in a statement, and production would be suspended for two weeks.

“This necessary step protects our employees and the communities where they work and live,” he said.

Production is continuing at a Boeing plant in South Carolina where Boeing 787 jetliners are assembled.

The company said employees in greater Seattle who can work from home will continue doing so and those who can’t — like the tens of thousands of machinists who build airplanes — will receive paid leave.

“We will keep our employees, customers and supply chain top of mind as we continue to assess the evolving situation,” Calhoun said. “This is an unprecedented time for organi-

zations and communities across the globe.”

Boeing’s shutdown comes after a worker died of COVID-19. The Seattle Times reports that co-workers and a union official confirmed Sunday’s death of the man who worked in Everett. The newspaper said the man was an inspector who had worked for Boeing for 27 years.

The state Department of Health said that on Saturday it received a shipment of medical supplies from the Strategic National Stockpile, including more than 133,000 masks, more than 104,000 gloves and more than 26,000 gowns. The equipment will be sent to counties. Health

workers in the state have complained about a lack of things like masks as they treat COVID-19 patients.

Also, Inslee named retired Navy Vice Admiral Raquel C. Bono as the director for the state’s COVID-19 Health System Response Management.

She is currently a senior fellow with the Johns Hopkins University Applied Physics Laboratory. As the former chief executive officer and director for the Defense Health Agency, Bono led a joint, integrated support agency that enabled all branches of the U.S. military medical services to provide health care to people in combat. Inslee’s

appointment was effective immediately.

“Vice Admiral Bono will help bolster our existing coordinated response to the COVID-19 pandemic across our state’s health care system,” Inslee said.

For most people, the coronavirus causes only mild or moderate symptoms, such as fever and cough. For some, especially older adults and people with existing health problems, it can cause more severe illness, including pneumonia, or death. The vast majority of people recover.

Washington also announced that all state campgrounds would be closed until April 30.

Rentals: ‘This is both a moral and a public health imperative’

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restaurants over the coronavirus. While some North Coast restaurants opted to lay off the majority of their staff and shift to takeout models with skeleton crews, others, like the Columbian Cafe in Astoria, where Torres has worked as a server for years, was one that decided to shut down completely.

“I don’t want to say it hurt my pride, but it kind of did,” Torres said about signing up for unemployment benefits.

But she knows she’s one of the lucky ones. Her rent is “decently cheap,” she said. She has savings and her boyfriend still has his job.

Hundreds of people in the North Coast’s service industry are suddenly jobless and budgeting for a crisis that doesn’t have a known expiration date. In response to growing economic turmoil because of the virus, Gov. Kate Brown on Sunday announced a 90-day moratorium on all residential evictions for nonpayment.

In Washington state, Gov. Jay Inslee has issued a similar temporary stop to evictions for 30 days.

“Through no fault of their own, many Oregonians have lost jobs, closed businesses and found themselves without a source of income to pay rent and other housing costs during this coronavirus outbreak,” Brown said in a statement. “The last thing we need to do during this crisis is turn out more Oregonians struggling to make ends meet from their homes and onto the streets.”

“This is both a moral and a public health imperative,” she added. “Keeping people

in their homes is the right thing for Oregon families, and for preventing the further spread of COVID-19.”

Options for landlords

In tandem with the moratorium on evictions, the governor and other officials are looking at options for landlords who may face costs of their own. The governor plans to reach out to lenders and explore state and federal policy options to offer some relief.

Rick Newton, a Warrenton city commissioner and president of the Clatsop County Rental Owners Association, was looking into landlords’ options ahead of the governor’s announcement on Sunday.

“Landlords are going to be in a tough spot because they still have payments to make, and I understand renters are going to be in a tough spot, too,” Newton said.

Though landlords will not be able to evict tenants for nonpayment under the temporary rule, what other flexibility they are able or willing to give tenants will depend in large part on their own particular situations.

Many of Newton’s tenants are elderly, retired and on fixed incomes. Newton said these tenants have long paid below market rate. Other tenants work in industries that have yet to be negatively impacted by the pandemic.

Newton plans to recommend that other landlords whose tenants may face income shortages negotiate a pay-back plan with them if it is impossible for them to make rent. Better to keep tenants in place for now, he reasoned.

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Gov. Kate Brown

Landlords The Astorian spoke with said they didn’t need Brown’s order to stand by their tenants.

Sean Fitzpatrick, general manager of Wecoma Partners Ltd., and the owner of several rental properties in Astoria, including the Illahee Apartments, said housing providers he communicated with throughout the state had already made it clear they would not evict for nonpayment.

“For those who may experience income disruption, we hope that they will contact us to discuss their situation so that we may work with them regarding options,” Fitzpatrick said in an email.

“We, along with all of the housing providers with whom we have communicated, want to keep our tenants in their homes and have no wish to add to the issues that we are all facing,” he added.

Astoria resident Hamil Brown works in insurance

and his job has not been affected by the coronavirus. He felt very comfortable offering to reduce or defer rent for tenants in a house he owns in Astoria.

He considers it a good investment. The couple he rents to have been model tenants.

“I actually have a self-interest in making sure they can thrive,” he said.

But, he added, “I certainly don’t want to make it sound like it’s something people should be obligated to offer because that’s going to be a case-by-case basis.”

“Some landlords are going to have primary incomes that are going to be affected by this and just won’t be able to,” he said.

Debbie Boothe-Schmidt, a trial assistant for Clatsop County who recently announced her campaign for the state House, operates a house rental in Astoria. One of her longtime tenants there is a Fort George Brewery employee impacted by the

government’s restrictions.

Boothe-Schmidt called her tenants when she heard the news and offered to give them any kind of break on rent that they needed.

“At this point, they’ve turned me down,” Boothe-Schmidt said. She made them promise to let her know if things needed to change.

Boothe-Schmidt and her husband, Tom Schmidt, had recently paid off the mortgage on the house, but feel they could have afforded to take in far less rent on the property regardless.

“I have never wanted to gouge anybody,” Boothe-Schmidt said. “I don’t think going out there and charging as much as you can possibly get from renters is something you should be doing. If you make a little bit of profit, that’s great.”

The virus is also impacting people looking for housing. Affordable and workforce priced housing is already in short supply on the coast, but now people cautious about exposing themselves to the virus are leery about taking on new roommates.

Boothe-Schmidt has a campaign manager looking for housing — unsuccessfully, so far.

One woman who has

worked in the service industry in Astoria for years and is now struggling to make ends meet had been advertising for a roommate. She decided against it as cases swelled across the Pacific Northwest.

‘Trying the best we can’

For Torres, rent remains a lesser though still potentially significant concern. Right now, she is more worried about long-term utility bills. In the past, if it looked like she would be short on money for those kinds of bills, she would just pick up an extra shift at the restaurant.

She had another taste of the vulnerability she and others are facing when her dog suddenly came down sick. It was a day she would have normally been at work. Instead, she sat in a parking lot with her dog waiting her turn to go into the veterinarian’s office.

“I realized I might not have the resources that I need,” Torres said. “I could just only imagine if I had to go to the doctor. The system’s just breaking down and you’re realizing a lot of people aren’t following the rules.”

“We’re trying the best we can, but we don’t really know what we’re doing.”

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