

Risk: Levels will again be reassessed and announced on April 6

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Umatilla County's numbers rose slightly, but it retained its high risk level rating. Union County numbers were lower, but it remains at moderate risk.

Grant County's numbers were sharply up, moving it from the lower to moderate risk.

In the northwest coast, four counties were all in the moderate risk level, but got there in different ways. In Clatsop and Lincoln counties, rising indicators moved them up from lower, while Columbia County's improvement dropped it from high. Tillamook County remained the same.

Statewide, 14 counties are in the lower risk level. Jefferson County dropped two levels, while Lane and Baker counties dropped one.

Fourteen counties were at moderate risk level, with increases in infection cases and rates pushing Clatsop, Grant and Lincoln up from lower. Columbia and Polk dropped from high.

Six counties are at high risk. Douglas County moved to high after an extended period at the extreme risk level.

Two counties are at extreme risk. Coos County's rising numbers moved it up from high to extreme, where it joined neighboring Curry County.

The Oregon Health Authority sees COVID-19 rates in Southwestern Oregon as troublesome. No county that is west of the Cascades



Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian

Umatilla County remains in the high risk category according to new COVID-19 risk levels released by Gov. Kate Brown's office on Tuesday, March 23, 2021.

and south of the Willamette Valley is at better than high risk and many are in or just exited extreme risk.

During testimony last week before the House Subcommittee on COVID-19, OHA Director Pat Allen said the issue wasn't just vaccine hesitancy, but "vaccine obstinacy."

Allen said six months of data from vaccination efforts show demand "varies wildly" around the state.

While vaccination appointments are booked weeks in advance in most areas, southwest Oregon hasn't matched its demand with its supply. Allen said

a recent mass vaccination event in Douglas County did not come close to filling its eligible slots for shots.

"It's an indication they are running out of people who are interested in being vaccinated," Allen said.

A new OHA rule will grant a two-week grace period to counties that reduced their risk level in the prior period but rebounded with higher numbers in the next period.

Instead of immediately returning to the more restrictive rules, the counties will get a two-week "caution" period to try to get their numbers down again. If they

are unsuccessful, then OHA will move the county up at the next risk level adjustment.

This week, the caution period was granted to two counties: Josephine County's cases and infection rate should move it from high risk to extreme risk. Klamath County's worsening infections were enough to move it from moderate risk to high risk. Both counties will retain their current level and will have their status reassessed at the next round.

The next revision of risk levels will be announced April 6 and will go into effect April 9.

COUNTY RISK LEVELS

Effective March 26–April 8

Lower risk (14)	High risk (6)
Baker (moved from moderate)	Deschutes
Crook	Grant (moved from lower)
Gilliam	Klamath*
Harney	Lincoln (moved from lower)
Hood River	Linn
Lake	Malheur
Lane (moved from moderate)	Multnomah
Morrow	Polk (moved from high)
Sherman	Tillamook
Wallowa	Union
Wasco	Washington
Wheeler	Extreme risk (2)
Yamhill (moved from moderate)	Benton
Moderate risk (14)	Douglas (moved from extreme)
Clackamas	Jackson
Clatsop (moved from lower)	Josephine**
Columbia (moved from high)	Marion
	Umatilla
	Coos
	Curry (moved from high)

Source: OHA, Oregon Secretary of State

LARGEST COUNTIES AND RISK STATUS

Seven of the 10 largest counties in Oregon are now at moderate or lower risk level. None are in the extreme risk category.

1. Multnomah (pop. 829,560) moderate	5. Marion (pop. 349,120) high
2. Washington (pop. 620,080) moderate	6. Jackson (pop. 223,240) high
3. Clackamas (pop. 426,515) moderate	7. Deschutes (pop. 197,015) moderate
4. Lane (pop. 381,365) lower	8. Linn (pop. 127,320) moderate
	9. Douglas (pop. 112,530) high
	10. Yamhill (pop. 108,605) lower

Source: OHA, Oregon Secretary of State

Vaccine: Umatilla County last in vaccinations

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geared toward a community of frontline workers that have borne the brunt of the pandemic — Hispanic and Latino agricultural workers.

In Umatilla County, Hispanic residents accounted for more than 40% of the county's total COVID-19 cases in 2020, according to data from the county health department. The population also tested positive at a rate over three times higher than non-Hispanics and were hospitalized at a higher rate, the data shows.

And in Morrow County, Hispanic residents have accounted for approximately 57% of the county's total COVID-19 cases, according to data provided by county officials as of March 12.

Officials from both counties have pointed to workplace exposures in food processing and agricultural facilities as having contributed to the disproportionately high rates of infection, which echoes both state and national trends.

"Our farmworkers were disproportionately impacted by COVID," Murdock said. "We had some very high numbers, and it was people who had no choice. If they want to support their families, they had to work. They have to be out in the fields and in the processing plants. And while efforts are made to try and protect them, it's very difficult. So, consequently, they become very, very vulnerable."

Just in time

The state's approval comes just in time for spring harvest, which brings an influx of agricultural workers to the region annually, offi-



Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian, File

A nurse reaches for a vial of the Moderna COVID-19 vaccine during a vaccination clinic at St. Anthony Hospital in Pendleton on Dec. 28, 2020.

cial from both counties said. In Umatilla County, harvest season brings with it more than 10,000 additional jobs, officials say.

"That's exactly why we immediately raised our hand" when the state said counties could expand vaccinations," Lindsay said. She added that the county's essential workforce is one of the largest in the state and is predominantly comprised of Hispanic and Latino workers.

Lindsay said she hopes the new timeline will bring with it a surge of vaccinations as the county begins to see more and more people hesitant to get a shot.

As of Tuesday, March 23, only 300 appointments had been made at the SAGE Center clinic for the 1,200 doses provided by the state, Lindsay said. She described the lack of appointments as "concerning," though workers are not required to make an appointment to get a shot.

Morrow County officials will be making further efforts to communicate and educate regional farmworkers about the importance of getting vaccinated as harvest season

continues, Lindsay said.

Umatilla County Public Health Director Joe Fiumara said he's also concerned that the vaccine turnout among agricultural workers will be slim, since many employees cannot simply leave work to get a shot.

So, the county has contacted employers at agriculture and food processing facilities to bring the vaccines to them. Murdock said the health department has "talked to virtually all employers of both processing plants and farmers to try to figure out strategies for conducting vaccines where they are."

The county has already held vaccine clinics at two food processing facilities in Weston, Fiumara said, and more are planned for later in the week.

"Our hope is that by reducing some barriers for these (food processing) and migrant workers," he said, "they don't have to necessarily leave work, go to our drive-thru on a Thursday or Friday, maybe sit for a half-hour in line, and then go back to work and potentially miss out on three or four hours of

pay to get their shot when we can, in many cases, get to them and reduce that time."

New clinics

In the coming weeks, Fiumara said the county is looking to work with state officials to hold similar efforts as the SAGE Center clinic in Boardman. He added that the state's team could help bring extra doses, which the county desperately needs.

"We're trying to do the same thing here," Fiumara said. "Largely because that (team) comes with additional vaccines. That's a big draw for us."

Since early March, Umatilla County has been entrenched at the bottom of the state's rankings for COVID-19 vaccinations per capita. The county has vaccinated 1,576 people per 10,000 residents, which is last in the state, according to state data. Officials have said the low rates are due to a meager allocation from the state.

"All of our grand plans and designs are dependent on getting enough vaccine, which for us is a constant problem," Murdock said.

Fiumara said the latest development shouldn't immediately change the rest of the county's vaccine timeline.

"We'll stick with the state's (timeline) as long as we've got people to give doses to," he said. "If we feel like we need to go further, we'll start those conversations with the state again about moving beyond that. It's all about having vaccine and getting it to people, and we want to make sure those folks who are high-risk have ample opportunity to receive it."

Gardener:

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in 1998 and later he became operations manager. Hodge, divorced with two grown children, retired in 2018 after 20 years with the company.

Hodge, 56, is a competitive runner who sometimes runs the 1.5 miles from his apartment to the community garden, where he frequently spends 12 hours a week during the height of the season. When questioned about his zeal for gardening, he ticks off several reasons — the physicality of working hard, the mental challenge of learning to grow things, and the intangibles.

"You're among plants and nature and it's a little bit spiritual," he said. "It just feels peaceful to be out here."

Hodge enjoys fresh salads made of his own homegrown ingredients at least once a day. He admits that before becoming a gardener, he didn't eat nearly as many vegetables. His bedroom windowsill is now filled with pots of herbs, kale and arugula.

Hodge readily shares his knowledge and bounty with others. He offers produce to neighbors and Agape House. He gives away seeds gleaned from his garden at the dentist or the barbershop, or wherever he happens to be. Once during the Umatilla County Fair Parade, he walked alongside a Walmart Distribution Center float/semitruck and, as his fellow employees distributed candy, he gave away green beans in little sacks. Most of the kids looked at him quizzically, he said, though some sampled the beans straight away.

Hodge, who works two of the 80 total plots at the community garden, said gardeners can borrow hoes, shovels, watering cans and other tools from the gardening shed, and use bark and compost piled near the plots for free. Watering happens automatically through a drip irrigation system. Plots cost \$10 per year.

"All you have to do is plant and harvest," Hodge said.

Bringing in the bounty

Weeding and seeking and destroying squash bugs are also on the to-do list. In his pair of 12-square-foot spaces, he plants tomatoes, green beans, squash and leafy greens, such as chard, arugula and collard greens.

He delights in slightly exotic produce, such as the Armenian cucumber, which is long, light-skinned and has the texture of a kiwi.

Some plants are easier to grow than others. Arugula usually germinates readily from seed and can be planted early. Green beans need warmer soil, but grow easily and produce a long time.

"I've seen them start producing in early July and go all the way through the end of September," Hodge said. "It's a fun plant."

Chelle Hankinson, garden facilitator at the Hermiston Community Garden, calls Hodge "the kale master" and relies on him when a master gardener is needed.

"Any time we do a program, he is there," Hankinson said. "He's our Joe. He's got a wealth of knowledge."

Hodge recently designed a demonstration garden with fellow master gardener Norah Pratton to display a variety of herbs. Eventually recipes will be available for each herb.

'You can't be afraid to fail'

Fellow master gardener Jeannette Byrnes watched Hodge's transformation from novice to gardening expert with fascination. The two now help teach Seed to Supper classes (when they aren't canceled because of COVID) and she marvels at Hodge's easy and encouraging style.

"I'm amazed at his presence and how much he knows," Byrnes said. "He's a very unassuming person and you don't expect all that comes out of him."

Diana Romero, formerly OSU Extension's master gardener program coordinator, called Hodge a "huge asset" to the program.

"He was always available to provide his gardening expertise by answering the calls from the community and he volunteered on numerous community events where he worked with children on gardening art projects," she said. "I cannot think of a community event in Hermiston where he did not volunteer, he loves giving back to his community."

Hodge just wants new gardeners to find their confidence.

"You can't be afraid to fail," he said. "Have patience. Sometimes you think something isn't growing and a few days later it takes off."

Housing:

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two-phase project that is expected to be completed this summer.

While the Tribes are downsizing the size of the park from 27 to 18 units, Tovey said many of the trailers were uninhabitable and unoccupied at the time of the flood, so the project is more of a lateral move in terms of numbers.

Tovey said the CTUIR

is using the extra space to replace the single-wides with double-wides, and with flood victims prioritized on the tenant waiting list, some have already moved into the completed units.

The CTUIR's new housing developers are clustered at the southwest corner of Mission Road and South Market Road, where the Tribes have already established many of its government and service buildings.

Tovey said the idea is intentional, an attempt to build a more centralized community

in the Mission area. While Mission has grown significantly in recent years, Tovey said it lacks a Main Street and other traditional markers of communities around the country. Depending on how area grows after the housing projects are completed, Tovey said other amenities like retail and restaurants could be added.

While most of the CTUIR's new housing efforts are targeting tribal members, it could affect Pendleton's tight housing market.

At the joint meeting, Kat

Brigham, the chair of the Board of Trustees, said about 500 tribal members live in Pendleton. If provided more options on the reservation, Brigham said some may decide to leave the city for the reservation, opening up more real estate in Pendleton.

While Pendleton and the CTUIR have largely operated independently in pursuing new housing for their respective communities, Tovey said both sides have held discussions about collaborating on a mutually beneficial housing project.