

Vaccine: Remaining J & J vaccine expires in June

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Morrow County,” Morrow County Commissioner Melissa Lindsay said. “This is really depressing and disappointing and frustrating. We really want to get people vaccinated so we can keep moving forward, and as we see (coronavirus cases) going up around the state, it’s just concerning.”

Officials had only used “about 800 doses” of the Johnson & Johnson vaccine at the clinics, said Lindsay, who believes the low turnout was partly due to vaccine hesitancy among newly eligible groups.

“I’m definitely worried about how this will play into that hesitancy,” she said of the pause.

In Umatilla County, officials will now be using Moderna vaccines at clinics originally scheduled with Johnson & Johnson vaccines, including those geared toward agricultural workers and local schools, according to county health officials. Other facilities using Johnson & Johnson will also be halting efforts, county health officials said.

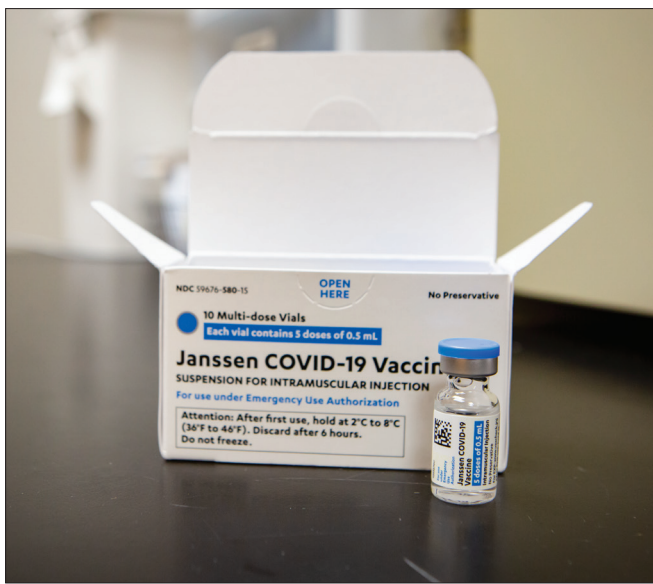
Alisha Lundgren, deputy director for Umatilla County Public Health, said the pause will not force the county health department to cancel events or slow its efforts.

Umatilla County Commissioner George Murdock called the latest pause a “disaster.” He’s concerned the pause could drive the county’s already-low vaccine rates further down as cases rise elsewhere in Oregon.

“We’re already having difficulty trying to get a larger percentage of our residents to get a shot in the first place regardless of the manufacturer,” he said. “Anything like this sets back our efforts.”

In all, more than 2,200 doses of the Johnson & Johnson vaccine have been administered in Umatilla County, according to state health data. More than 800 doses of the vaccine are on hold for the time being, according to county officials.

Murdock estimates that more than half of the county’s residents are reluctant to get the vaccine. And in recent weeks, the health department has consistently seen leftover doses and open appointments



Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian

A box of the Johnson & Johnson COVID-19 vaccine sits on a counter at the Umatilla County Public Health Department on Wednesday, April 14, 2021.

at vaccine clinics, which officials attribute to vaccine skepticism.

The pause comes as Umatilla County reports some of its lowest COVID-19 data points since the pandemic began and was recently lowered by the state to the moderate coronavirus risk category.

The county reported 33 cases last week and 25 the week before — the lowest two-week total since last spring, according to county health data. The county also reported a testing positivity rate of 3% last week and has no active COVID-19 hospitalizations, according to county officials.

“The statistics for cases and hospitalizations show that we’re making real (progress) with the health of our citizens,” Murdock said. “We don’t want to lose that momentum.”

Morrow County cancels FEMA clinic

The Morrow County clinic was one of three clinics nationally where FEMA assisted local officials with a vaccine rollout, providing staffing and resources that small counties typically lack. For Lindsay, the canceled clinic felt like a lost opportunity.

“It was a lot of people on the ground that gave our health department a break,” she said. “We most likely won’t see that kind of dedication from the federal government to a small county (again).”

And with cases rising statewide and nationally, it

is concerning that “now our ability to vaccinate is slowed down,” Lindsay said.

The county was planning to give its leftover doses to Malheur County to help raise its vaccination rates, “but at this point that will be on hold,” Lindsay said.

The remaining doses will be kept in refrigerated storage for the time being, but they will expire in June, as all Johnson & Johnson vaccines do after three months, a possibility Lindsay called “concerning.”

Dr. Janet Woodcock, the commissioner of the Food and Drug Administration, said at a news conference on April 13 that the pause is expected to last “a matter of days.” That time frame, however, is contingent upon what federal officials learn in their investigation, Woodcock added.

Umatilla County shifts efforts

Lundgren said the pause illustrates that officials are making a painstaking effort to ensure the vaccine’s safety and efficacy.

“It shows that our systems that we have in place to help make sure that we catch safety (concerns) are working,” she said, adding that those systems, which report adverse vaccine events, “should give people even more comfort about the vaccine.”

The Johnson & Johnson vaccine has recently become a popular option focused particularly toward agricultural workers in Eastern Oregon — a workforce hit

disproportionately hard by the pandemic and who have often opted for the single-dose option because they often can’t take time off work, officials say.

County health officials this week had scheduled clinics at both Riverpoint Farms and Lamb Weston in Hermiston, where employers had specifically requested the single-dose vaccine for their workers. Though the clinics are still being conducted with the Moderna vaccine, Fiumara said he’s worried that the turnout could be lower.

“Our concern is if anybody who turns (the vaccine) down today because they wanted the one dose, in a week, if we’re allowed to do it, are they going to come back?” he said. “That’s the fear.”

Last week, officials held a clinic in Milton-Freewater where people were given the option to choose the vaccine they wanted. Out of 365 doses administered, 166 people chose the Johnson & Johnson vaccine.

“Demand was going down already,” Fiumara said of the county’s latest vaccine rates, which have often ranked among the lowest in Oregon. And most of the demand that was left was specifically for the Johnson & Johnson vaccine, Fiumara said.

Murdock said he hopes “people distinguish between the issue with Johnson & Johnson and not expand that to concerns about Pfizer or Moderna.” He said putting numbers into perspective is important, as the concerns over getting COVID-19 should outweigh the concerns over the safety of getting the vaccine.

“The country has given (hundreds of millions) of vaccines, and over half a million people have died of COVID-19,” he said. “And yet, incidents involving 10 or 12 people seem to be blown out of proportion and cause undue problems.”



Blue Mountain Community College/Contributed Photo

The Oregon Senate followed the House in passing House Bill 5042, a spending bill that includes \$542,033 to Blue Mountain Community College to help tie up some loose ends as it starts its new contract with the Oregon Department of Corrections.

Funding:

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Oregon Correctional Institution, Two Rivers Correctional Institution and Powder River Correctional Facility in Baker City came into question in August 2020 after the DOC told community colleges across the state that it intended to end all of its contracts and move its educational programs in-house.

BMCC and the other community colleges rallied to try to save their programs before their contracts expired in January, contacting Hansell and state Sen. Michael Dembrow, D-Portland, to help bring DOC to the negotiating table.

Despite the department halting talks at one point and insisting its decision was final, the two sides eventually came to a new agreement, albeit under new terms. The colleges would now contract with the Oregon Higher Education Coordinating Commission, which would act as an intermediary between the state prison system and the schools. The DOC, would also pay the colleges less for their services than they had under the old contract.

This development hurt BMCC especially because it has one of the largest corrections education programs in the state.

John Fields, the college’s vice president of instruction, said BMCC is unique in the fact that much of its corrections faculty are full-time staff.

“Some of them have been there their entire careers,” he said.

The college believes the structure leads to better educational outcomes for the inmates in the program, but it also meant BMCC was operating its program at a higher cost than others. When the DOC approved the new contract, the college eliminated five positions, including four faculty. As a result, two employees retired, one changed disciplines and one moved to a part-time job.

But BMCC couldn’t make moves until it agreed to the new contract, which came well after the old contract ended in January. Meanwhile, the college still had to negotiate staff reductions with its faculty union.

Fields said the money from the Oregon Legislature allows BMCC to move forward while still honoring the union contract. The college also won’t have to revisit the size of its corrections education program until January 2023, when the current contract ends.

Sen. Hansell said his next move is to ensure all the contracts the community colleges and DOC agreed to are funded in the next biennium.



Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian

Members of the Hermiston School Board, Superintendent Tricia Mooney, second from right, and future Loma Vista Elementary School Principal Joshua Browning, right, pose for a picture at the groundbreaking of the new elementary school on Tuesday, April 13, 2021.

Schools:

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those who helped get an \$87.2 million bond passed in 2019 to fund the new schools. The bond is also paying for the new softball complex, a new annex adding classrooms at Hermiston High School, purchase of additional property for future schools, and improvements to the parking and drop-off areas of several schools.

Wenaha Group has served as project managers for the bond, and BBT Architects did the design for the schools. Construction of both elementary schools will be handled by Kirby Nagelhout Construction.

“I’m looking forward to having students here instead of sand and sagebrush,”



Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian

Hermiston School District Superintendent Tricia Mooney speaks to attendees at the groundbreaking for Loma Vista Elementary School in Hermiston on Tuesday, April 13, 2021.

Mooney said.

The school district recently named Josh Browning as principal of Loma Vista. While the school is being built, he will work on staffing the school and

making other preparations needed before its opening.

Browning, who is currently an instructional coach for the district, said he is excited to see work start on the building.

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