

As mask mandates end, Oregon bucks trend with permanent rule

States around the country are lifting COVID-19 restrictions

By SARA CLINE
Associated Press/
Report for America

PORTLAND — As states around the country lift COVID-19 restrictions, Oregon is poised to go the opposite direction — and many residents are fuming about the possibility.

A top health official is considering indefinitely extending rules requiring masks and social distancing in all businesses in the state.

The proposal would keep the rules in place until they are “no longer necessary to address the effects of the pandemic in the workplace.”

Michael Wood, administrator of the state’s department of Occupational Safety and Health, said the move is necessary to address a technicality in state law that requires a “permanent” rule to keep current restrictions from expiring.

“We are not out of the woods yet,” he said.

But the idea has prompted a flood of angry responses, with everyone from parents to teachers to business



Gillian Flaccus/Associated Press, File

Residents wearing masks sit in downtown Lake Oswego on Sunday, April 11, 2021. Tens of thousands of Oregon residents are angry about a proposal to make permanent an emergency rule that requires masks and social distancing in the state’s businesses and schools to prevent the spread of COVID-19.

owners and employees crying government overreach.

Wood’s agency received a record number of public comments, mostly critical, and nearly 60,000 residents signed a petition against the proposal.

Opponents also are upset government officials won’t say how low Oregon’s COVID-19 case numbers must go, or how many people would have to be vaccinated,

to get the requirements lifted in a state that’s already had some of the nation’s strictest safety measures.

“When will masks be unnecessary? What scientific studies do these mandates rely on, particularly now that the vaccine is days away from being available to everyone?”

Wood said he is reviewing all the feedback to see if changes are needed before he makes a final decision by May 4, when the current rules lapse.

Oregon, a blue state, has been among those with the country’s most stringent COVID-19 restrictions and now stands in contrast with much of the rest of the nation

some certainty on when they will no longer be threatened with fines.”

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as vaccines become more widely available.

At least six states — Alabama, Iowa, Mississippi, Montana, North Dakota and Texas — have lifted mask mandates, and some never implemented them. In Texas, businesses reopened at 100% capacity last month.

In January, Virginia became the first in the nation to enact permanent COVID-19 workplace safety and health rules.

“While the end of this pandemic is finally in sight, the virus is still spreading — and now is not the time to let up on preventative measures,” Democratic Gov. Ralph Northam said following the announcement.

Besides mask and distancing requirements, Oregon’s proposal includes more arcane workplace rules regarding air flow, ventilation, employee notification in case of an outbreak, and sanitation protocols.

It dovetails with separate actions issued by Democratic Gov. Kate Brown, using a state of emergency declaration, requiring masks in public statewide — and even outside when 6 feet of distance can’t be maintained — and providing strict, county-by-county thresholds for business closures or reductions in capacity when case

numbers rise above certain levels.

More than one-third of Oregon’s counties are currently limited to indoor social gatherings of six people, and the maximum occupancy for indoor dining, indoor entertainment and gyms is 25% capacity or 50 people, whichever is less. And many schools are just now reopening after a year of online learning.

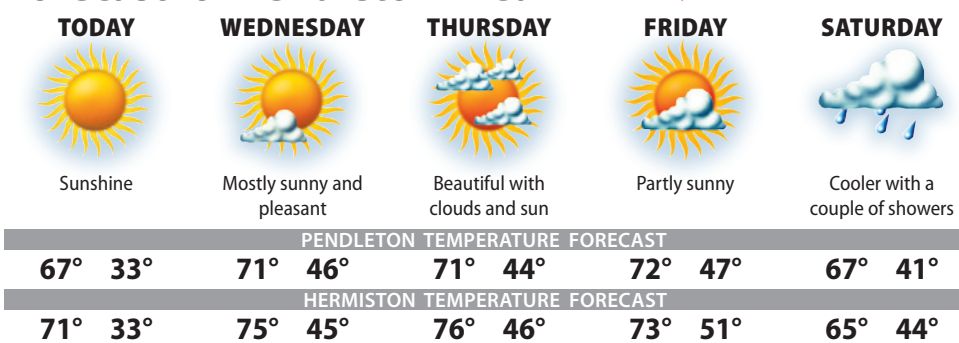
The workplace rule is “driven by the pandemic, and it will be repealed,” Wood said.

“But, it might not need to go away at exactly the same time the State of Emergency is lifted,” he said, referring to Brown’s executive orders.

Amid pandemic frustration and deprivation, the issue has gained a lot of attention. A petition on change.org opposing the rule gained nearly 60,000 signatures and spread on social media, drawing even more interest to the proposal. More than 5,000 public comments were sent to the agency, smashing its previous record of 1,100.

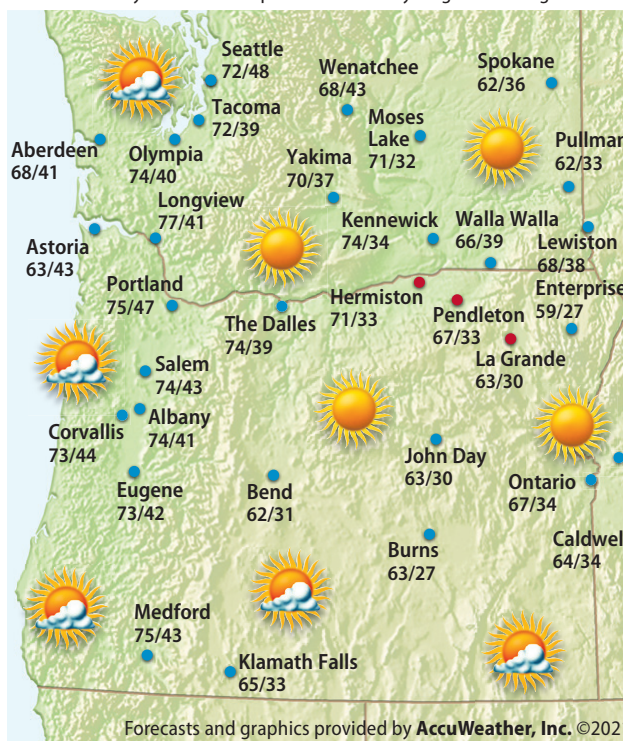
“The majority of comments were simply hostile to the entire notion of COVID-19 restrictions,” Wood said. “The vast majority of comments were in the context of, ‘You never needed to do anything.’”

Forecast for Pendleton Area



OREGON FORECAST

Shown is today's weather. Temperatures are today's highs and tonight's lows.



ALMANAC

PENDLETON through 3 p.m. yest.

TEMP.	HIGH	LOW
Yesterday	59°	38°
Normals	63°	40°
Records	88° (1934)	23° (1966)

PRECIPITATION

24 hours ending 3 p.m.	0.00"
Month to date	Trace
Normal month to date	0.76"
Year to date	3.34"
Last year to date	4.98"
Normal year to date	4.72"

HERMISTON through 3 p.m. yest.

TEMP.	HIGH	LOW
Yesterday	64°	45°
Normals	66°	40°
Records	90° (1934)	24° (1982)

PRECIPITATION

24 hours ending 3 p.m.	0.00"
Month to date	Trace
Normal month to date	0.50"
Year to date	1.20"
Last year to date	0.48"
Normal year to date	3.61"

WINDS (in mph)

	Today	Wed.
Boardman	NE 6-12	NE 4-8
Pendleton	N 6-12	NNW 6-12

SUN AND MOON

Sunrise today	6:01 a.m.
Sunset tonight	7:48 p.m.
Moonrise today	12:00 p.m.
Moonset today	3:07 a.m.

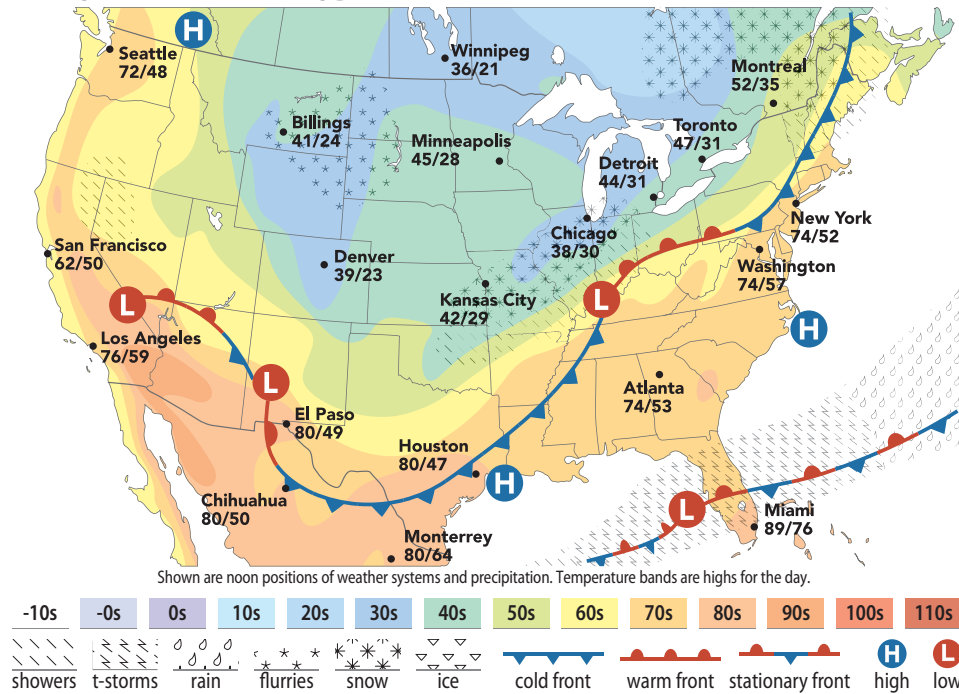
Full Apr 26, Last May 3, New May 11, First May 19

NATIONAL EXTREMES

Yesterday's National Extremes: (for the 48 contiguous states)

High 95° in Thermal, Calif. Low 1° in Climax, Colo.

NATIONAL WEATHER TODAY



Eastern Oregon University students get a first-hand look at restoration project

Program allows groups of students to restore and enhance sites in Eastern Oregon

East Oregonian

LA GRANDE — Thick dust and a selection of bird droppings cover what used to be bustling high school hallways. A small group of students from Eastern Oregon University are some of the first to leave footprints since the school was abandoned in 2009, but their visit marks a turning point for the historic building.

These students, all majoring in sustainable rural systems at EOU, will play a key role in transforming the contaminated building into a functional community asset, according to a press release from the university.

The sustainable rural systems degree program opened in fall 2020. After two terms of virtual, and then on-campus meetings, students took their first field trip on Wednesday, April 14. Professor Shannon Donovan arranged for the small

class to visit the former Baker Central High School building, which was recently designated as a brownfield. An EPA assessment found lead and asbestos contamination in tiles and paint, but students could safely walk through the building so long as they didn’t disturb the collected dust particles.

“It’s a bigger building than I expected, and I was surprised how worn down things are and how much work it’ll take to clean it up,” EOU junior Joanna Campbell said. “It’s cool to think about how it could be transformed, and I’m excited to work through the whole process.”

The program is designed with a cohort model so groups of students work on real-world, multi-year projects to restore and enhance sites in Eastern Oregon. The one-of-a-kind curriculum combines environmental science, public administration, community organizing, project management and leadership. EOU faculty collaborated with Baker Technical Institute’s existing brownfields program that engages high school students in similar work.

BTI instructor Robbie

Langrell led the building tour, and has worked with a group of local stakeholders to earn an EPA grant that will fund decontamination of the site. Following their visit, EOU students will draft a request for proposal and open the bidding process for contractors who want to take on the project.

Langrell will use the students’ work to begin interviewing contractors and ultimately select a company that will safely remove hazardous materials from the building. Once it’s cleaned up, she expects to put it on the market for sale or further development.

This is the first of many hands-on projects sustainable rural systems cohorts will tackle. The same four students who visited the dark, messy building will return regularly throughout the restoration process and have a role in its revitalization.

“You get to see for yourself and have the first-person experience of being here,” EOU junior Monte Zufelt said of the visit. “I hope to be able to see the progress as we move forward with hiring contractors.”

IN BRIEF

Over 30,000 pounds of dog food donated to Blue Mountain Humane Society

WALLA WALLA, Wash. — Thousands of pounds of dog food traveled via semitruck from Tracy, California, to Walla Walla, Washington, for families in need of help taking care of their pets during the pandemic.

The Blue Mountain Humane Society received 30,800 pounds of dog food on April 6, from Greater Good Charities, a national nonprofit dedicated to protecting people, pets, and the planet, according to a release.

The J.M. Smucker Company donated the dog food to Seattle nonprofit Greater Good Charities, whose staff worked with the humane society for six months to determine how and where to distribute the food. The 39 pallets of pet food will be distrib-

uted weekly to more than 1,100 local community members, according to the BMHS release.

The effort is part of a distribution plan that started in March 2020, in collaboration with Blue Mountain Action Council, to help low-income families take care of and keep their pets during the financially straining pandemic, the release stated.

“The two agencies are working together in an effort to feed all of our community members through a very difficult year,” Communications Coordinator Meghan Spracklen said.

The program has benefited 1,100-1,200 families weekly, she said. Each distribution contains 4 pounds of either dog or cat food or both, depending on the family.

The humane society is accepting donations of cat food or money to purchase cat food, she said.

— Walla Walla Union-Bulletin

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