

# State unions win six-week reprieve on vaccine mandate

By SAM STITES  
Oregon Public Broadcasting

SALEM — Two of Oregon's most influential unions have bargained with the state to allow employees of the state executive branch more time to comply with Gov. Kate Brown's mandate, which requires them to be vaccinated by Monday, Oct. 18, or risk losing their job.

According to Liz Merah, press secretary for Brown, the governor has agreed to a process that will allow employees represented by SEIU Local 503 and AFSCME Council 75 who have received at least one dose of COVID-19 vaccine by Oct. 18 to complete their immunization by Nov. 30.

The agreements with two of the state's largest public employee unions will provide an extra six weeks for just more than 26,800 workers to comply with the mandate.

"This is a more productive path than someone not getting vaccinated at all and leaving state service," Merah said in an email Oct. 13.

An addendum to the statewide



Kristyna Wentz-Graff/Oregon Public Broadcasting, File

**Annalisa Birt, left, talks with Gov. Kate Brown after Birt received a COVID-19 vaccination at a drive-thru vaccination clinic at Portland International Airport, April 9, 2021.**

policy issued Oct. 1 will give the same grace period to an additional 7,156 state employees who are unrepresented by a union or are considered management and executive service.

That means a majority of the approximately 43,000 state work-

ers who fall under Brown's mandate will be granted more time to complete their vaccination requirement. In the meantime, those who aren't fully inoculated will be allowed to work remotely or use paid leave time as a stopgap while they get vaccinated.

According to Ben Morris, communications director for SEIU Local 503, the union's intent through this bargaining process was to ensure the state listened to the concerns of frontline workers who feel that, until now, they haven't been a part of the conversation.

"One of our biggest issues going into negotiations was making sure there was a clear process in place for people who were not fully vaccinated by Oct. 18, those who are most impacted by this mandate," Morris told OPB. "The goal of this mandate was to get as many people vaccinated as possible. The grace period encourages that because people can start the process at the last minute."

Morris said state employees represented by SEIU — which includes workers within divisions such as the Department of Human Services, Department of Transportation, Department of Justice and State Parks, among others — have varying opinions on and degrees of comfort with the vaccine.

According to Morris, SEIU leadership has fielded concern regarding side effects of receiving the shot, a lack of fear over getting the virus

and even the spread of misinformation as reasons for hesitancy.

"State employees as a group aren't any different than the general population when it comes to their views about the vaccine," he said.

Morris also said workers are extremely busy in balancing both their personal and professional lives. Many have families they're caring for while also trying to serve the state the best they can, causing delays in their ability to receive the shots.

Part of the agreement between the unions and the state will provide employees with paid leave to take the vaccine and recover from any side effects, a major barrier the unions hoped to clear in negotiations.

"I think it's really important to note that when employers listen to their workers and negotiate with them over these kinds of things, you get a better outcome," Morris said. "We're going to see more state workers get vaccinated, and we are going to see a smoother process in terms of the functioning of state services as a result of this agreement."

# EPA acts to improve salmon survival rates

## U.S. Army Corps of Engineers will be required to cool water at Snake River dams

By KEELY CHALMERS  
KGW News

KENNEWICK — Starting this spring, the Environmental Protection Agency will require Snake River dam operators to limit hot water pollution to help salmon survive. The change comes after an environmental group took the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to court to try and stop the warming.

The Corps owns and operates the dams on the Snake River, which is a major tributary to the Columbia River.

Over the summer, sick and dying salmon sought refuge in the Little White Salmon River just off the Columbia River. Video showed sockeye salmon covered in lesions and fungus — the result of water that was 71 degrees.

Long-time fishing guide Bob Rees said that temperature is way too hot.

"It's just flat out lethal to these wild salmon that come up into these rivers," he said.

Rees has been a professional fishing guide for 31 years and he knows the Columbia River well. He also knows the fish that swim in it are in trouble.

"Fish are dying in these waterways because of the lethal

summer water," he said.

The Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife said salmon exposed to water above 68 degrees have an increased risk of stress, disease and mortality.

"It's going to lead to extinction," said Brett Vandeneuvel, the executive director of Columbia Riverkeeper.

The group has long maintained that the large reservoirs behind the dams are partly to blame for the warmer river water.

The group first sued the Corps back in 2013, and last week got a victory.

"For the first time ever, the federal dams on the Columbia now have to reduce the amount of pollution that they're creating," Vandeneuvel said.

Rees and Vandeneuvel both said the change is long overdue. However, they stressed this requirement is an important step in helping salmon survive a warming climate.

Many experts have said, without significant change, the fish won't survive.

"There's a limited amount of time before we drive species of salmon to extinction," Vandeneuvel said. "So the time is now for action."

# ODA braces for potential staffing shortage due to vaccine mandate

## Agency leaders say drop could affect services to farmers

By SIERRA DAWN MCCLAIN  
Capital Press

SALEM — The Oregon Department of Agriculture faces a potential staffing shortage that could impact the scope of services the department provides to the state's farming community.

Over the past year, COVID-19-related disruptions, including budget cuts early in the pandemic, impacted the department's labor force.

Seasonal and part-time positions have been the hardest to fill.

Now, with Oregon Gov. Kate Brown's vaccine mandate for state government employees set to go into effect Monday, Oct. 18, ODA leaders are bracing for a potential further loss of workers.

"There are workforce shortages in the ag sector and for us as a state agency that are impacting those services that we're providing," Alexis Taylor, director of ODA, told state agriculture department leaders at a recent National Association of State Departments of Agriculture event.

Taylor said employees' response

to the vaccine mandate adds "another layer on the work staff shortage that we're trying to work through in the state of Oregon." Taylor said some staff members for various reasons don't want to get vaccinated, which is "becoming a challenge in some of our programs."

How many staff might ODA lose?

The agency declined to make predictions, instead telling the Capital Press that "at this time, it is unclear what the vaccine mandate will do to ODA staffing levels."

Andrea Cantu-Schomus, spokesperson for ODA, said the agency is committed to Oregon's requirement that state employees be fully vaccinated or have started the vaccination process by Oct. 18 except for employees with medical or religious exemptions.

ODA leadership, staff and stakeholders have been in conversations "preparing for possible drops in staffing and potential impact to services," Cantu-Schomus said. Whatever happens, she said, "ODA will do its very best to maintain services that Oregonians expect."

ODA's leaders said they expect the department will be able to maintain its existing core staffing levels for essential services but are putting in place "contingency plans" in case the agency has areas

with service gaps. Several staff have already volunteered to help cover gaps as needed.

This isn't the agency's first tussle with labor challenges during the pandemic.

When COVID-19 first hit, lottery funds were hit hard due to the closures of businesses, including bars and restaurants. This hurt ODA, which relies on lottery dollars to fund some programs.

Some ODA staff members lost their jobs, while others were re-assigned.

In ODA's Noxious Weed Program, for example, which relies on lottery money, the agency re-assigned staff to other programs to avoid layoffs.

As the pandemic progressed, the lottery situation improved and the Oregon Legislature passed a "robust state budget" to allow the department to fill more staffing positions.

ODA declined to respond to a Capital Press request for numbers on how understaffed the department is or what percentage of advertised positions has gone unfilled.

However, Cantu-Schomus did say "as ODA begins to recruit and fill key positions, the hiring pool has been strong for most jobs."

The hardest roles to fill are seasonal and part-time positions, especially in Eastern Oregon.

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Spot News - "Community mourns: Colleagues mourn Pendleton city councilor" by Antonio Sierra, Kathy Aney

Photo Essay - "Banjo Man" by Ben Lonergan

Enterprise Reporting - "Stuck in the middle: Police officers of color describe experiences in law enforcement" by Jade McDowell

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