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COVID-19

Masks off in Oregon March 19

Gov. Kate Brown also ending state of emergency

By DIRK VANDERHART
Oregon Public Broadcasting

SALEM — Oregon's masking rules now have a firm expiration date: March 19.

As COVID-19 infections and hospitalizations plummet across the state, the Oregon Health Authority will lift requirements for masks in indoor public spaces and schools earlier than expected; the mandate had been scheduled to lapse by March 31.

At the same time, Gov. Kate Brown announced Thursday, Feb. 24, that she will rescind her COVID-19 state of emergency declaration on April 1. By then the declaration will have lingered for more than two years, allowing the governor to take unprecedented actions to stem the spread of the virus.

Taken together, the moves are the most significant curtailment of COVID-19 restrictions that Oregon has seen since the arrival of the virus in March 2020. Brown previously revoked masking and distancing requirements last summer as cases dropped, only to reinstate them weeks later as the delta variant of the virus took hold.

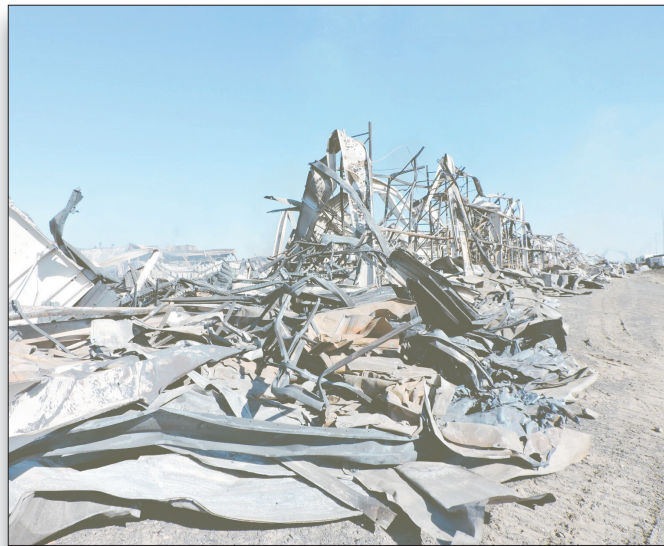
Despite those fluctuations, the governor has repeatedly extended the emergency declaration that has allowed her to wield broad powers. Brown cautioned Feb. 23 that her decision to lift it now was not a sign Oregon is in the clear.

"Lifting Oregon's COVID-19 emergency declaration (Feb. 23) does not mean that the pandemic is over, or that COVID-19 is no longer a significant concern," Brown said in a written statement. "But, as we have shown through the delta and omicron surges, as we learn to live with this virus, and with so many Oregonians protected by safe and effective vaccines, we can now protect ourselves, our friends, and our families without invoking the extraordinary emergency authorities that were necessary at the beginning of the pandemic."

Oregon's current masking requirements are not authorized under Brown's emergency order. They are public health rules the Oregon Health Authority put in place. The agency said in a statement of its own Feb. 24 that modeling suggests Oregon will see pre-omicron levels of the virus by March 20. The OHA still is recom-

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IN FIRE'S WAKE



TOP: Umatilla County Fire District No. 1 firefighters sift through the wreckage Wednesday, Feb. 23, 2022, to put out remaining fires from an explosion the day prior at Shearer's Foods, Hermiston. **ABOVE:** Remains lay twisted and smoldering Wednesday, Feb. 23, 2022. **BELOW:** Smoke continues to waft Thursday, Feb. 24, 2022, from the site of a massive fire. Photos by Erick Peterson/East Oregonian

Shearer's Foods, local governments commit to helping the processor's 230 employees

By ERICK PETERSON
East Oregonian

HERMISTON — The day after an explosion and fire at Shearer's Foods, Hermiston, smoke still rose from the scorched ruins.

Umatilla County Fire District No. 1 firefighters, having spent a late night at the scene Tuesday, Feb. 22, returned at 10 a.m. Feb. 23, sorting through rubble to put out remaining hot spots. Fire officials said they expected to remain working at Shearer's "for a while," stating they were not quite sure when work would be complete.

Jimmy Davis, operations chief for the district, said he was weary, and he was not the only one who felt this way. "Our guys are exhausted," he said.

A hard day at Shearer's Foods

Davis said the work was especially difficult on the first day of the fire because the inside of the building collapsed. When the fire was at its greatest, the walls remained, he said. According to Davis, this situation made it so firefighters had difficulty reaching certain sections.

This was not the only problem firefighters faced, Davis said, and firefighters pulled out of the scene at around 10 p.m. Feb. 22.

"We weren't making much progress," the operations chief said.

Water valves on the fire trucks were freezing in the cold temperatures. Firefighters were "exhausted and cold," too, he said.

There were 73 firefighters at the scene, according to Davis. These firefighters came from "all over" Umatilla and Morrow counties. Nineteen firefighters, he said, worked on water shuttles, bringing much-needed water to the fire.

The engine to the pump of the facility's water supply broke, he said, and there was only one hydrant firefighters could access on the road. The lack of water was significant in the attack on the blaze.

"We knew we weren't going to be able to put it out," he said.

Firefighters worked to protect large tanks on the property that store chemicals, he said, and firefighters held the flames back from nearby totes that also contained flammable materials.

"We were able to keep it away from that," he said. "That was the big thing."

The Shearer's Foods explosion could have been even worse, he said, especially when considering air quality.

"Don't get me wrong, whatever was in there and burned was putting up some nasty stuff," he said.

Looking at the wreckage of Shearer's, Davis said the fire had "burned through a lot of what could burn."

The work on Feb. 23

Davis said he left Shearer's at 2 a.m. on Feb. 23. He woke at 6 a.m. to take his children to school and begin Day 2 at the fire scene. By 10 a.m., he was able to acquire an excavator and bring it to the site. Four or five firefighters were with him.

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Early learning center principal announces retirement

By ANTONIO SIERRA
East Oregonian

PENDLETON — After more than 30 years in local education, Pendleton Early Learning Center Principal Lori Hale is calling it a career.

Hale submitted her retirement letter to Pendleton School District Superintendent Chris Fritsch on Jan. 5, and on Feb. 14, the school board approved the personnel move, effective June 30. In her letter, Hale wrote about the experience of becoming the early learning center's first principal.

"I was given a gift from this community to help in creating a caring, loving and high-quality school that I will never forget," she said. "I will forever be grateful for the incredible opportunity to open this building. There has been no greater professional gratification than to be a part of this journey."

In an interview Wednesday, Feb. 23, Hale said making the decision was difficult because of how much she loved her job, and



Principal Lori Hale reads a clue for a group of kindergartners on a scavenger hunt during their first day of school in 2018 at the Pendleton Early Learning Center. Hale, who has served as the center's principal since its opening in 2015, is retiring after a career of 38-years in education.

although she went back and forth, she ultimately decided 38 years in education was enough and she was ready to hand over leadership to someone else.

Hale got started as a teacher

in Beaverton in 1984 before making the move to Pendleton in 1988. Except for her first year with the district, Hale spent her entire teaching career working in kindergarten. With kindergarten

still on half-days, Hale said she worked part-time, splitting her time between home and work.

But by 2015, kindergarten was starting to look different. That was the first year the state was requiring every school to offer full-day kindergarten. Pendleton anticipated the move by making the Pendleton Early Learning Center one of the centerpieces of its 2013 bond campaign.

After voters passed the bond, the district renovated the former Hawthorne School and turned it into a centralized kindergarten for all of Pendleton's 5- and 6-year-olds and other early childhood services, such as Head Start and the federal Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children.

By that time, Hale left the classroom for administration and was serving as the principal of Lincoln Primary School. With Lincoln set to close and turn into the district's central office, Hale was tapped to

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