

Masks:

Continued from Page A1

mending that people at high-risk from the coronavirus continue to wear masks in public settings.

"We are able to take this important step, earlier than anticipated, because of the collective diligence and the shared sacrifice that people in Oregon have demonstrated in getting vaccinated, wearing masks and limiting their gatherings," state epidemiologist Dr. Dean Sidelinger said in a statement.

In the last month, new reported COVID-19 infections have dropped by more than 80%, according to the state health agency. More important for Oregon's over-taxed health care system, hospitalizations are down nearly 50% since peaking last month, the agency said.

In Union County, the average rate of COVID-19 cases per day stood at just under 15 through from the start of the month to Feb. 23. Case numbers in January reach upwards of 85 in one single day.

IMESD thrilled, EOU holding steady

Mark Mulvihill, superintendent of the InterMountain Education Service District, whose service area includes Umatilla and Morrow counties, expressed pleasure at the earlier date.

"I am very excited. It has been a very, very difficult period. Many are exhausted from the pandemic. Now we can return to a sense of optimism," Mulvihill said.

Mulvihill said it is fitting the mandate will be lifted when many students are beginning their spring break, one they will be able to enter with a sense of renewal because of the Feb. 24 announcement.

"Rebirth is what spring is all about," Mulvihill said.

At Eastern Oregon University, La Grande, it is not known when the mask



Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian, File

Elementary students wear masks and sit in alternating desks on Feb. 2, 2021, during in-person instruction at the Echo School. Oregon Health Authority now will lift requirements for masks in indoor public spaces and schools on March 19, 2022.

mandate will be lifted.

EOU Vice President of Student Affairs Lacy Karpilo stated last week the university will make its decision on mask mandates from within campus leadership.

The university has continued to consult with the Oregon Health Authority and local public health officials when making decisions related to COVID-19. Karpilo noted the university relies on evidence-based processing to keep the campus as safe and productive of an in-person experience as possible during the pandemic.

Oregon in step with what is happening nationally

Many of the same trends are playing out nationwide, and a growing list of state and local governments have announced an end to masking rules in recent days. A mask requirement in Washington state is scheduled to lapse on March 21.

In Oregon, restrictions Brown and health officials put in place have been among the strictest in the nation, but also helped Oregon record fewer deaths per capita than many other states. Nevertheless, the restrictions have been deeply controversial in many more

rural parts of the state.

Union County Sheriff Cody Bowen previously wrote a letter addressed to Brown on Aug. 13, opposing mask mandates in schools statewide.

"I'm glad common sense has prevailed," Bowen said. "I'm excited to see it, especially for our kids."

In a videotaped message released Feb. 24, Colt Gill, director of the Oregon Department of Education and deputy superintendent of public instruction, said schools would be included in the move based on feedback from school districts.

"Based on the feedback from local leaders and communities, OHA and ODE are partnering to develop practical updates to safety protocols for quarantine, contact tracing and testing that meet the current conditions of the pandemic," he said. "These guidelines will continue to support our North Star goal of providing in-person learning for every student, all day, every school day and will focus on specific supports for students, staff and families that may be at more risk from COVID-19 than others in the school population."

— EO Media Group contributed to this report.

Fire:

Continued from Page A1

"Today, we're just working on tearing down these walls and trying to get what we can on the outside," he said, motioning to twisted remains at the scene.

The one firetruck on the scene followed the excavator, as firefighters put water on remaining hot spots. Davis said they would not be able to put out the fires entirely.

"It's not going anywhere," he said. "At this point, we're just trying to get to some of the stuff that's producing the darker, nastier smoke and put it out."

He said he was looking forward to being able to leave the site and go home at 4 p.m.

Meanwhile, the state fire marshal and police were investigating the cause of the explosion, Davis said, and interviews were taking place that day.

After firefighters cleared enough of the site to make it safe, investigators would be able to enter the grounds, he stated.

"That's where it's at," Davis said. "I think we still have a good idea that it was a boiler explosion."

He also expressed relief that people escaped the fire with few injuries. He credited Shearer's for a successful evacuation, as well as a full account of personnel. Because Shearer's was able to account for their workers, firefighters did not have to search the fire for victims.

"That took a huge weight off our shoulders," he said.

Shearer's assesses next steps

Shearer's Foods commented on the fire with an email and a press release.

"Currently, we do not have a thorough understanding of the extent of damages to our facility or the impact on our business. As a result, we are still determining the full package of support for our teammates," Joline Manning, Shearer's Foods

chief human resources officer, stated in an email. "Their wellbeing is important to us; we have created a centralized location for our employees to gather and gain access to resources. To assist them in processing this event we have established (Employee Assistance Programs) services immediately."

She stated Shearer's 230 employees from the Hermiston plant site were accounted for and safe.

"We do intend to take care of our Shearer's family," she stated, adding "senior leaders are present in Hermiston supporting our teammates and gaining an understanding of the impact of the fire and planning our next steps."

"We are committed to providing assistance for all impacted employees and will do everything we can to limit the impact of the fire on our team members and the local community," Shearer's stated Feb. 23 in a press release. "We would like to thank the emergency responders and our local team for their efforts."

Government commits to help

Government officials voiced their sympathy for the situation and their opinions on what this will mean for those affected.

Hermiston Assistant City Manager Mark Morgan said the city has been in touch with Shearer's corporate leadership.

"They're still assessing what they think they've got here — what's salvageable and how they can proceed," he said. "They're a good business that has a need for keeping things in operation, so I think they'll be doing everything they can to have things up and running as fast as they possibly can."

Morgan added the city will find what it can do and expressed confidence that other levels of government — county, state and federal — will be part of this effort, too.

"It's a primary job creator in the sense, without them,

there are other dominoes," he said.

The 230 employees at Shearer's in Hermiston, then, are not the only people affected. Also, there are potato suppliers, planters, harvesters, truckers and marketers who are hurt.

"There are the people inside the plant, but this has a ripple effect," Morgan said.

In addition to speaking with Shearer's corporate employees, Morgan said city officials have been in touch with county commissioners, state congressmen and Oregon U.S. Sen. Ron Wyden. All these government officials, he said, expressed their support for returning Shearer's to shape.

Umatilla County Commissioner John Shafer in an email to EO Media Group stated Shearer's is a large employer in the region and an important business in Umatilla County.

"Shearer's Foods is a vital part of Umatilla County," he said. "We are working with the city of Hermiston, Shearer's Foods, federal officials and many community partners to do everything we can to make sure the workers are taken care of. ... We want to do everything in our power to make sure that Shearer's and their employees are back working as soon as possible."

A representative of Wyden's office stated the senator met with Shafer and tweeted a response.

"The impact from the Shearer's Foods explosion cuts deeply in Hermiston," Wyden tweeted. "My thoughts are with the victims, and I'm thankful for the first responders on the scene. I've told @UmatillaCounty Chair John Shafer that I stand ready to help in any way I can to recover and rebuild."

Morgan expressed some optimism about rebuilding.

"There may be some salvageable core pieces out there," he said.

Shearer's has a long road ahead to get back to where it was before the fire, Morgan said, but it is possible and the city is committed to helping.

Principal :

Continued from Page A1

become the Pendleton Early Learning Center's first principal.

The center was considered a novel concept in its first years, and Hale recalled how the school often hosted visitors from other districts interested in implementing similar ideas in their own communities. In 2016, Gov. Kate Brown toured the center's facilities while classes were in session and then signed a solar energy bill on the playground.

Hale said she agonized over her decision because she loved her job and the people she worked with.

"I really, truly think I have the best job in the district," she said.

Hale was appointed to the early learning center a few years before Fritsch was hired, but the superintendent was effusive in praising her.

"She's leaving a big hole

in our administration," he said.

Fritsch said Hale was a great leader who could balance collaborating with staff and tasking herself with making big decisions. Whether as a coach, mentor or educator, Fritsch said Hale had an ability to connect with whoever she worked with.

While Fritsch will be responsible for selecting Hale's successor, he won't have the ability to oversee the Pendleton Early Learning Center's next principal because he himself will be retiring at the end of June.

Although the timing is awkward, Fritsch said it was imperative for the district to start the process because it's been more difficult to find candidates for building principals in recent years. Fritsch said the position was already being advertised and he expected to fill it before the end of his tenure.

With the end now in sight, Hale said she's looking forward to having more time with her family and travel. But she's put most of her focus into finishing out the school year and stewarding the center until her successor arrives.

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