



Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian, File

An elementary school student reaches to get his face shield Sept 3, 2020, after taking a "mask break" on the playground at the Ukiah School District building.

State offers guidance as schools ready to drop mask mandates

By ALEX BAUMHARDT
Oregon Capital Chronicle

SALEM — The Oregon Department of Education released updated guidance for school districts on Wednesday, March 2, that ends some testing protocols and contact tracing.

The changes to the Ready Schools, Safe Learners Resiliency Framework — a roadmap for keeping schools open and students safe during the pandemic — comes as schools prepare for the end of state mask mandates on March 12.

Gov. Kate Brown announced the lifting of the mandates for the public and in schools on Monday, citing a rapid fall of COVID-related infections and hospitalizations in the state.

The Oregon Health Authority now estimates nearly 82% of Oregonians are immune and potentially safe from reinfection for at least 90 days, according to a note on March 2 from a state official to school districts.

The update says schools should no longer try to pinpoint the source of an outbreak by contact tracing or continue with test-to-stay — a program that previously allowed students to stay in school as long as they tested negative twice within five

days of an exposure. Test-to-stay will now only be available for students at high risk of COVID-19.

“These practices now, unlike earlier in the pandemic, have minimal impact,” said Colt Gill, director of the Education Department.

COVID-19 tests will be available to students and staff who think they have been exposed, and parents and guardians will be in charge of deciding to quarantine their kids if they are suspected of being infected or test positive at home. Leaders at the state Education Department and health authority recommend a quarantine of five days if a student tests positive for COVID-19, or until symptoms fully subside. Gill said schools have a responsibility to exclude students who are infected for five days, the period when they are most infectious. Schools also have a responsibility to communicate to parents when a student is suspected to have been exposed, he said.

The Oregon Department of Education continues to recommend universal masking when there is high risk of transmission, based on data from local health authorities, and for students and staff who are at increased risk for severe disease.

Pacific Power seeking 12.2% rate increase

By TED SICKINGER
The Oregonian

PORTLAND — PacifiCorp wants to raise electricity rates for Oregon customers by more than 12% in 2023 because of higher power costs, general inflationary pressure as well as increasing costs for wildfire planning and mitigation, according to proposals filed Tuesday, March 1, with state regulators.

The proposed hikes include a general rate increase to cover the costs of operating and maintaining the utility system as well as an annual power cost adjustment that covers the costs of electricity it buys on wholesale markets and the fossil fuels it purchases for its own generation plants.

It is the largest general rate increase the company has requested since 2010, and if approved, would be the first such increase since 2014. It will be subject to a 10-month regulatory review in which it is typically reduced, sometimes significantly.

PacifiCorp supplies electricity to more than 600,000 Oregon customers under the name Pacific Power, making it the state’s second largest electric utility.

Utility officials said Tuesday they are requesting an \$82.2 million increase in revenue. That’s 6.6% overall, but the impact differs by customer class. If approved as filed, it would represent a 9.1% increase for residential ratepayers, a 4.3% increase for general service commercial and industrial customers and a 5.9% increase for large industrial customers.

The company concurrently filed for its annual power cost adjustment, proposing a 5.6% increase in rates. That increase also differs by customer class, and would amount to a 5.2% increase in rates for residential customers, 6.1% for general service commercial and industrial and 7.7% for



East Oregonian, File

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large industrial. Company officials, who will update the request in November, said that increase is being driven by inflation in wholesale electricity markets and natural gas commodity prices.

The company is facing a number of lawsuits stemming from the historic 2020 Labor Day fires that claim the company systematically underestimated fire risks in its service territory, underinvested in vegetation management and that its equipment was responsible for most of the destructive conflagrations that took place in 2020.

The company has accrued \$136 million in reserves to cover potential wildfire losses net of expected insurance recoveries. None of those costs are included in Tuesday’s proposal.

But a significant driver of the general rate increase request, accounting for about half of it, is future investments in wildfire planning and mitigation. That includes a big increase in tree trimming costs to keep limbs from contacting wires and potentially causing fires.

Aside from reviewing and authorizing rate increases, the Oregon Public

Utility Commission also performs an annual audit of large utilities’ vegetation management programs. The commission has repeatedly concluded that PacifiCorp’s and Portland General Electric’s programs fall short of requirements. Its 2019 audit of PacifiCorp listed 27 pages of violations across the state. In 2020, there were 20 pages of violations listed.

Allen Berreth, vice president of transmission and distribution operations, said Tuesday that the utility is moving from a four-year to a three-year trimming cycle along most of its transmission and distribution lines and will be inspecting its lines in high fire-risk areas annually and taking corrective actions.

To manage the work, it is hiring more foresters and inspectors, and it is also seeing cost increases for the contract crews that do the trimming.

To enhance its ability to monitor on-the-ground conditions, it also plans to expand the number of weather stations deployed across the state from 20 to 120 by the end of 2022.

Other factors driving the rate increase include cost

recovery for the final phase a new Wyoming wind farm that became operational last year and general inflationary costs for labor, insurance and other items, company officials said. The company is also asking regulators to boost its profit margins, increasing its allowed return on equity from 9.5% to 9.8%, a request sure to be opposed by ratepayer advocates given the size of the general increases being sought.

“PacifiCorp always comes in wanting more money, more profits and less risk, so all of those elements are here,” said Bob Jenks, executive director of the Oregon Citizens’ Utility Board, a ratepayer advocacy group.

Matt McVee, PacifiCorp’s vice president of regulatory policy and operations, said the utility has aggressively managed its costs, and will also be filing a proposal with regulators to offer discounted rates to low-income customers. In the meantime, he said that new factors, including extreme weather events and the general inflation impacting all households and businesses, are increasing utility costs, too.

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