

Vaping concerns affecting sales

By Gillian Flaccus and Jennifer Peltz
Associated Press

PORTLAND — Vaping products, one of the fastest-growing segments of the legal marijuana industry, have taken a hit from consumers as public health experts scramble to determine what's causing a mysterious and sometimes fatal lung disease among people who use e-cigarettes.

The ailment has sickened at least 805 people and killed 12. Some vaped nicotine, but many reported using oil containing THC, marijuana's high-inducing ingredient, and said they bought products from pop-up shops and other illegal sellers. The only death linked to THC vapes bought at legal shops occurred in Oregon.

Amid the health scare, the amount of the legal pot industry's revenue that comes from vape products has dropped by 15% nationwide, with some states, including Oregon, seeing decreases of more than 60%.

Health officials in California, home to the world's largest legal marijuana marketplace, this week issued an advisory urging people to stop all forms of vaping until a cause is determined. Massachusetts, which like California allows so-called recreational use of marijuana by people 21 and older, went further than any other state, issuing a four-month ban on vape sales.

Vaping THC is popular for those desiring quick high without the smoke that comes from lighting up joints. Marijuana companies are trying to boost the public's confidence by promoting that their vaping products are tested by the government, demanding ingredient lists from their vendors and in some cases pulling items from shelves. Some also are scrambling to get liability insurance.



Tribune News Service

Second Oregon death prompts officials to urge people to stop vaping

SALEM — A second Oregonian has died from a lung illness after vaping cannabis products, and state health authorities on Thursday urged people to immediately stop using all vaping products.

"People should stop vaping immediately," said Dean Sidelinger, Oregon's state health officer. "If you vape, whether it's cannabis, nicotine or other products, please quit."

Oregon Gov. Kate Brown said the Oregon Health Authority informed her of the death and that she is requesting the Oregon Department of Justice to advise what legal options are available to the state, including the temporary ban of all vaping products.

The most recent death was an individual who had been hospitalized with respiratory symptoms after vaping cannabis products, the Oregon Health Authority said in a statement. The other Oregon fatality, whose death was announced on Sept. 3, had used e-cigarettes, or vape pens, with THC, the psychoactive chemical in marijuana.

— Andrew Selsky, Associated Press

Still, many have seen notable declines in sales in the few weeks since the health scare emerged on a national scale.

"It's having an impact on how consumers are behaving," said David Alport, owner of Bridge City Collective in Portland, which in two weeks saw a 31% drop in sales of vape cartridges that hold the oil that vaporizes when heated. "People are concerned,

and we're concerned."

In the United States' booming legal cannabis market, vaping products have exploded in popularity. In roughly two years, they have grown from a small fraction of overall sales to about one-third, with \$9.6 billion in sales between 2017 and 2019, according to New Frontier Data, an economic analysis firm that tracks the industry. About one-fifth of U.S. cannabis consum-

ers report using them.

New Frontier found a 15% decline in the market share for vape sales nationwide during the first week of September and saw no rebound in data collected through Sept. 18. At the state level, New Mexico, Massachusetts, Nevada and Montana all saw drops of one-third or more, while California fell by 6%.

Oregon, which announced its death at the beginning of the month and said it was from a vape purchased at a regulated dispensary, saw one of the biggest drops in market share for vape revenue — 62%, said John Kagia, the firm's chief knowledge officer.

Yet as vape sales sink, some retailers report sales of other cannabis products going up. Bridge City Collective, for example, saw its usually lackluster edible sales increase about 40 percent the same week vaping sales plummeted. Consumers also are showing more interest in the dried flower used in joints.

Analysts are watching to see if vape sales erode further after the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention announced Thursday that the number of suspected vaping-related illnesses had grown by 52 percent in the past week.

Doctors have said the illnesses resemble an inhalation injury, with the lungs apparently reacting to a caustic substance. So far, no single vaping product or ingredient has been linked to the illnesses.

Health officials in New York are focusing on vitamin E acetate, a viscous solution that's sometimes added to marijuana oils. Retailers in some markets are pulling products from their shelves that contain that and other additives. Other companies have proactively released public statements saying their vape oils contain only pure THC.

State regulators track the cannabis sold to consumers but don't monitor what additives are in marijuana oil vapes. That's led states to begin discussions of how to tighten restrictions on vaping products even as retailers themselves try to determine which of the products on their shelves contain so-called cutting agents.

"We haven't evolved our system that far to think about what we would test for in those products. A lot of these additives were conceptual at the time when the (marijuana legalization) law passed and the program came into place," said Steve Marks, executive director of the Oregon Liquor License Commission, which oversees the state's cannabis industry.

"Figuring that out is part of the evolution that we have to do as a consumer protection agency," he said.

INVESTIGATE

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McQuisten said she started preparing to become an investigator, and to start her business, about a year ago.

Oregon requires private investigators to be licensed — five states, including Idaho, don't require any license — and McQuisten said the process is rather involved.

She said she had to document at least 1,500 hours of relevant experience — her journalism work qualified — undergo a criminal background check, pay about \$630 in fees, submit reference letters from people in law enforcement and, finally, attend a class and pass a test, with a score of at least 86%, at the Department of Public Safety Standards and Training in Salem, the agency that licenses and monitors private investigators.

McQuisten, who said she is already working on cases locally and has received calls from potential clients in Western Oregon, said she's glad she went through the process to become licensed.

"If you have a dream and you don't take action it goes nowhere," she said. "This is a neat thing to be a part of. I love it."

McQuisten is a member of the Oregon Association of Licensed Investigators.

She said the flexible schedule of an investigator meshes much better with her existing business, Black Lyon Publishing, than running the Baker County Press did.

"I'm not scaling back at all with Black Lyon," McQuisten said.

She is one of six licensed private investigators in Baker City, according to the Department of Public Safety Standards and Training.

More information about Shadow Work Investigations is available at shadowworkinvestigations.com

SKEETERS

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Not that Hutchinson will be tucking in the covers or adjusting soft pillows for the bloodsucking insects.

He's responsible for controlling mosquitoes in a 200,000-acre district that includes most of Baker, Bowen and Keating valleys. That's approximately 10% of the county's land mass, and includes some of the prime breeding grounds for mosquito species that breed in permanent water sources as well as those that prefer ground inundated seasonally for flood irrigation.

Hutchinson said mosquito numbers, including the culex varieties that are the most common carriers of West Nile virus, have been declining for the past few weeks.

"We haven't had any complaint calls for the past couple weeks," he said.

Hutchinson said mosquito populations typically dip substantially around early September, in response to lower temperatures and, in the case of floodwater species, the end of flood irrigation in most places.

Health officials announced Tuesday that two Baker County residents had been infected with West Nile virus from mosquito bites.

Officials declined to release any information about the two victims,

including whether or not they lived within the Vector Control District, and how severe their symptoms were.

They are the first human cases of the virus in Baker County since 2014, when two women who live at New Bridge, about 3 miles north of Richland, were infected. That is outside the Vector Control District. Both women recovered.

Earlier this summer four pools of mosquitoes trapped inside the Vector Control District tested positive for the virus. All of those mosquitoes were trapped in the Keating Valley, about 15 miles east of Baker City.

The Vector Control District gets revenue from a pair of property tax levies, one permanent, which raises about \$282,000 annually, and a local option levy that goes before voters every four years and brings in about \$87,500 per year.

Both levies are affected by "compression" — the effect of a 1990 voter-approved statewide ballot measure that limits property tax increases. The permanent levy loses about \$6,200 annually to compression, meaning the money isn't assessed on property owners or received by the district. Compression has a much larger effect on the local option levy. Its nominal amount is \$140,000 yearly, but the district actually collects about \$87,500.

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JUDGE

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"I appreciate the governor's appointment and her confidence in me based on 25 years of service to the citizens of Baker County," Shirtcliff stated in a press release.

Shirtcliff's tenure in the Baker County District Attorney's Office includes six years as a deputy district attorney, beginning in 1994. He was elected district attorney in 2001 and served for five terms.

Shirtcliff said he expects the governor to appoint an assistant attorney general from the Department of Justice to help in the District Attorney's office during the transition.

Shirtcliff's present term was due to expire in 2020. Candidates seeking to fill the position will compete in the May 2020 election with the winner possibly being appointed to fill the remainder of Shirtcliff's term through the year, he said.

There are two assistant district attorneys on the staff. Michael Spaulding joined the office in January of 2012 and Kevin Imhoff has been on the job for about a year.

"I am proud of the work we have accomplished for the community and the citizens of Baker County," Shirtcliff said. "It has been a team effort with the great staff in the District Attorney's Office and the amazing members of the law enforcement community in Baker County.

"I will always be grateful for your service and your support," he stated in the press release. "I also want to thank Circuit Court Judge Greg Baxter for his guidance and mentoring over the years."

Baxter's term would have run through 2024 had he not announced his plans to retire on Oct. 31. Shirtcliff will stand for election to a six-year term as Baker County Circuit Court judge in 2020.

"I'm just excited to get started," Shirtcliff said of his appointment as judge. "I've worked hard to get ready for this."

Shirtcliff, 52, said he expects to follow Baxter's lead in the way he administers the court.

He is especially looking forward to providing support from his position for people who struggle with mental health issues.

Although it will take time to implement, Shirtcliff said he plans to establish a mental health court, modeled after the drug court system.

"I enjoy talking directly to people," he said, adding that his knowledge of programs available in the community should be a benefit to helping people who need mental health as well as drug and alcohol treatment.

"But I'll still be a strong judge on public safety and sentencing," he said. "I've had a lot of trial and courtroom experience with major cases and that helps me to be ready to serve as judge."

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