

Rural America watches pandemic erupt in cities

■ Rural residents can more easily comply with social distancing recommendations, but they also know they’re not immune

By Gillian Flaccus

Associated Press

DUFUR — The social distancing rules repeated like a mantra in America’s urban centers, where the coronavirus is spreading exponentially, might seem silly in wide-open places where neighbors live far from each other and “working from home” means another day spent branding calves or driving a tractor alone through a field.

But as the pandemic spreads through the U.S., those living in rural areas, too, are increasingly threatened. Tiny towns tucked into Oregon’s windswept plains and cattle ranches miles from anywhere in South Dakota might not have had a single case of the new coronavirus, but their main streets are also empty and their medical clinics overwhelmed by the worried.

Residents from rural Alabama to the woods of Vermont to the frozen reaches of Alaska fear the spread of the disease from outsiders, the social isolation that comes when the only diner in town closes its doors and economic collapse in places where jobs were already tough to come by.

“Nobody knows what to do and they’re just running in circles, so stay away from me is what I’m saying,” said Mike Filbin, a 70-year-old cattle rancher in Wasco County, one of the few parts of the state that has yet to see a case of COVID-19.

“Right now, we’re pretty clean over here, but we’re not immune to nothin’ — and if they start bringing it over, it’ll explode here.”

To make matters worse, some of the most remote communities have limited or no internet access and spotty cellphone service. That makes telecommuting and online learning challenging in an era of blanket school and work closures, and it eliminates the possibility of the FaceTime card games and virtual cocktail hours that urban Americans have turned to in droves



Gillian Flaccus/Associated Press

Rancher Mike Filbin points to a herd of cattle on his property at Dufur where social distancing is a way of life. The rural lifestyle also comes with limited access to medical care and internet along with spotty cellphone service.

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to stay connected.

The routine ways that rural Americans connect — a bingo night, stopping in at a local diner or attending a potluck — are suddenly taboo.

“Rural people are reliant on their neighbors and have more confidence and trust in their neighbors,” said Ken Johnson, a senior demographer at the Carsey School of Public Policy and professor of sociology at the University of New Hampshire. “Now you have people who are supposed to self-isolate themselves. What does that mean when people you depend on, in order to help you, are going to put themselves and their families at risk? I don’t know what that will do in rural America.”

Neil Bradshaw, the mayor of Ketchum, Idaho, is starting to see the answer to that question in his own commu-

nity.

The rural resort town has struggled since the arrival of COVID-19, and he fears if the virus lingers too long, it could devastate it. The town is nestled next door to the tony skiing destination Sun Valley Resort and is known as the second-home haven for dozens of celebrities.

It’s also become the epicenter of Idaho’s caseload, with at least 35 cases and known community spread of the virus. At least 14 of the cases are among health care workers, forcing the town’s few medical workers to bring in replacement staffers from nearby cities.

“Our town thrives on people coming to town, and for the first time in our history we are discouraging visitors,” said Bradshaw, of the town of 2,700 people. “Initially

people had different levels of adoption, but there’s tremendous community pressure that we’re all in this together. We’ve gone from being a vibrant town to a ghost town.”

The town’s coffers rely on a local option tax, and if that drops by half the city will have lost \$700,000 in revenue, he said.

Others worry about outsiders bringing the disease to truly remote areas that aren’t equipped to deal with it. Across the nation, there are over 51,000 general intensive care beds in urban counties, compared with just 5,600 in rural counties, according to data compiled by The Associated Press.

Those beds serve a smaller population than in urban areas, but it would still take fewer people in rural areas to overwhelm a typical hospital. In fiscal year 2018, the average rural hospital had eight ICU beds, compared with 20 for a typical hospital in an urban area.

In Georgiana, a small town in southern Alabama,

the only hospital closed last year and residents have now been forced to flock to the health clinic instead when a person in a town 5 miles away was diagnosed with COVID-19. More than 30% of Georgiana’s 1,600 residents are over age 60, putting them at higher risk with limited medical facilities to serve them, said Mayor Jerome Antone.

The town’s older residents, he said, are “aggressively upset” even though no one there has been diagnosed yet.

In Alaska’s Point Hope, an Inupiat whaling village at the edge of the Arctic Ocean nearly 700 miles north of Anchorage, tribal leaders have been preparing and discussing potential issues, including air travel into town. The state’s limited road system doesn’t reach the town of 900 people, which relies on planes for much of its connection to the outside world.

Concerns over the virus have already shut down the school and youth recreation center, and food is now

delivered to elders instead of letting them congregate for daily social meals.

One of the two airlines that serve Point Hope will begin restricting flights this week to cargo and passengers with medical or other essential needs.

Some residents worry the recent deaths of two elders could still bring out-of-town mourners by plane for the funerals.

“We have all kinds of different people who come into our village,” said acting Mayor Daisy Sage. “This coronavirus is serious.”

Thousands of miles away, in South Dakota, falling prices for beef are generating as much — or more — worry than the virus.

Sam Stoddard, a cattle rancher near the small community of Kadoka said futures markets for beef have dropped up to 30% because of the coronavirus. He’s worried about longtime ranchers being able to hang on.

If the market remains terrible, he said, ranchers can put off selling their calves until later in the year — but no one knows how long the economy will be in upheaval, leaving everyone stressed.

At the same time, the state has not shuttered businesses, leaving residents wondering what to expect next. South Dakota has 30 confirmed cases of the coronavirus.

“Normally this time of year we’re more worried about a big blizzard coming in and killing 10% of our calves. You know it’s coming, and you can prepare for it,” said Stoddard, who lives 35 miles from the nearest town of any size.

“With this, you don’t know what’s coming or what you should be doing.”

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Governor says people can go on scenic drives, take hikes

By Dick Hughes

For the Capital Bureau

Gov. Kate Brown said the far-reaching executive order she issued this week should not stop immediate families from motoring for relaxation or driving to a trailhead, as long as they maintain proper social distancing while hiking.

“The goal here is to limit your social circles. The goal is to stay away from crowds. The goal is to maintain social distancing,” Brown said of Oregon’s efforts to stem the spread of COVID-19.

“Oregonians are very innovative and creative, and I encourage them to comply with the spirit and the letter of the executive order.”

Oregon State Police Superintendent Travis Hampton noted that most campgrounds and boat ramps are closed, so Oregonians and visitors should research their plans before heading out.

In a letter sent to all police agencies in Oregon, he emphasized that Brown’s order was not close to martial law. People don’t need documentation showing they are traveling legally to or from work or other permitted activities.

“There are no curfews and a person’s movements are not restricted under the Governor’s Executive Order,” Hampton wrote. “While details are offered in the order relating to social distancing, specific business closures and non-essential social gatherings, [Oregonians’] movements are generally unrestricted.”

Motorists should not be pulled over under suspicion of violating the executive order. “If, however, you are committing a traffic violation or crime that would be enforced

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— Oregon Governor Kate Brown



independent of the order, you may be stopped, like any other day,” he wrote.

As Hampton noted, the challenge may be finding a place to recreate.

In her executive order, Brown said the need for a strong “Stay Home, Save Lives” directive was reinforced by seeing that crowds had gathered last weekend at the Oregon Coast, Smith Rock State Park, Columbia River Gorge and other places in defiance of social distancing guidelines.

State parks, public and private campgrounds, and many other recreation sites now are closed, either under the governor’s order or voluntarily. Oregonians are allowed to go outside for recreation so long as they maintain appropriate social distancing — at least 6 feet, except for family members living in the same residence.

Oregon’s beloved ocean beaches are not closed but getting there — legally — could be problematic.

“The state parks closure doesn’t impact the ocean shore, but it does close all state park-managed parking lots and beach accesses,” said Liz Merah of the Governor’s Office. “The Oregon Parks and Recreation Department has the authority to close the beach temporarily for health reasons.”

And that department said in the FAQs posted online, “If people don’t get the message that clumping up and overwhelming local areas is a bad idea, we’ll have to revisit the

decision to leave all beaches open.”

Some coastal cities and counties also have closed beach access, as well as lodging, in part to keep visitors from spreading coronavirus and overwhelming local health facilities.

In the Columbia Gorge, local officials also urged visitors to stay away — for now.

Hood River County Chair Mike Oates, Hood River Mayor Kate McBride and Cascade Locks Mayor Tom Cramblett issued a statement saying: “An influx of visitors creates an undue burden on our efforts to maintain social distancing and strains our supply channels, public safety resources and health care system.”

Friends of the Columbia Land Trust also has closed the Mosier Plateau in Oregon and the Lyle Cherry Orchards in Washington. Both are popular for hiking.

But the rules for some activities remain unclear.

At Brown’s Wednesday teleconference with reporters, the governor was asked whether her stay-home order applied to couples in long-term relationships who don’t live together but frequently stay over at one another’s residence.

“Every family is in a different situation,” Brown responded. “The spirit of the executive order is to severely limit your social circles. So that’s all I will say about sleeping together at this point.”

Jobless claims soaring in Oregon due to virus

■ After reaching a historic low of 3.3% last month, unemployment rates could hit 20%

By Gillian Flaccus

Associated Press

PORTLAND — Jobless claims are soaring in Oregon as the state nears the end of its first week under Gov. Kate Brown’s stay-at-home order due to the coronavirus outbreak, the Oregon Department of Employment said Thursday.

Since March 15, the state has received 76,500 initial unemployment claims. That’s a sharp increase from the 4,900 claims the week of March 8, before the economic devastation of the new coronavirus took hold, the department said. Hospitality and leisure jobs made up about half the 22,800 claims processed in the last week, signifying the impact of the executive order that banned dine-in service at restaurants and bars and banned nonessential travel. Schools are also closed until April 28.

Deschutes Brewery, an iconic craft brewery, also said Wednesday that it will lay off 300 employees and close its pubs and tasting rooms. Other uniquely Oregon businesses, such as McMenamin’s and Powell’s Books, have laid off hundreds of workers as well.

Oregon’s jobless rate was at a historic low last month of

just 3.3%, but recent warnings have suggested unemployment could rise as high as 20% during the outbreak.

Brown said earlier this week that she is “gravely concerned” about Oregon’s ability to deliver basic services over the next six months to a year because of the economic fallout from statewide closures, massive layoffs by affected businesses and stay-at-home orders aimed at slowing the spread of the coronavirus.

The state also on Wednesday delayed the personal tax filing deadline until July 15, meaning Oregon will have less money coming in as it scrambles to address the economic crisis.

Also Thursday, the city of Hood River closed its motels, hotels, short-term vacation rentals, hosted home shares, bed and breakfasts, RV parks and campgrounds until April 14. The city said it took the action because despite the governor’s stay-at-home order issued Monday, people are still traveling to the Columbia River Gorge in large numbers and not following social distancing requirements of maintaining at least 6 feet of space between people.