

Oregon seeks to keep COVID-19 workplace regulations in place

By Zane Sparling
Oregon Capital Bureau

Face masks and social distancing are likely to remain a fixture of the shopping and working experience for some time, according to the state’s employee safety department.

Oregon’s Occupational Safety and Health Administration has announced plans to make its series of COVID-19 public health emergency regulations permanent — with some tweaks to the rulebook — at least until the pandemic fades away.

“We have not yet defeated this disease and we clearly will not have done so by the time the temporary rule expires,” said Oregon OSHA administrator Michael Wood. “As a result, it is critically important that we carry forward measures that we know are effective at combating the spread of this disease and reducing risks in the workplace.”

OSHA first adopted its temporary rules for addressing COVID-19 risk Nov. 16, and says the rules will expire on May 4.

Because the law does not allow the extension of temporary workplace regulations, OSHA has prepared 105 pages of proposed permanent rulemaking. Virtual public hearings will be held before their adoption.

“Oregon OSHA intends to repeal the rule when it is no longer necessary to address that pandemic,” the agency explained. “Because it is not possible to assign a specific time for that decision, Oregon OSHA will consult with ... the Oregon Health Authority and other stakeholders as circumstances change to determine when all or part of the rule can be appropriately repealed.”



Dean Guernsey/The (Bend) Bulletin

Face masks at workplaces likely will remain a fixture until the pandemic fades.

What won’t change?

Keeping 6 feet of distance from all others, requiring customers and employees to wear a face covering — as well as regular sanitation of common areas, shared equipment and high-touch surfaces — will continue to be mandatory, assuming the rule is approved by the department.

Employers will continue to be required to display safety posters, develop an infection control plan, ventilate businesses as much as possible and provide employees with training in case the novel coronavirus strikes.

Public health agencies will retain the power to direct companies to isolate certain employees who have been potentially exposed or infected.

What will change?

Among the changes, OSHA will ask employers to consider not transporting multiple people in a single vehicle,

though this activity will not be prohibited.

Business owners with more than 10 employees and existing ventilation systems will be required to certify in writing that the ducts are flowing, and bosses will be required to cooperate with public health agencies that seek to arrange workplace vaccinations.

Written notice will be mandatory for employees who quarantine, with the notice stating their right to return to work — without penalty from management — after the period of isolation ends.

Health care organizations will be required to provide workers believed to be exposed to COVID-19 with respirators, unless they demonstrate a “genuine shortage.”

OSHA highlights that wearing face shields — the thin plastic visors resembling welders’ masks — “should be discouraged when more suitable alternatives” exist to prevent spreading the disease. Oregon

Health Authority is considering banning face shields entirely.

Vaccines not required

While the Bureau of Labor and Industry previously announced that employers may require their employees to be inoculated, with some exceptions, OSHA’s proposed rules state that “employers need not require employees to accept the vaccination.”

If employers are offered the vaccine on a voluntary basis, those who refuse must provide written documentation.

However, if the Oregon Public Health Authority or another agency requires certain workplaces to get their shots, the employer must cooperate by making workers and space available.

“It is the considered opinion of both the Oregon Health Authority and Oregon OSHA that all individuals should accept vaccination unless it is medically contraindicated,” the agency said.



Harris

VP Kamala Harris casts deciding vote to enable \$1.9 trillion virus aid package

By Josh Boak
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The Senate early Friday, Feb. 5, approved a measure that would let Democrats muscle President Joe Biden’s \$1.9 trillion coronavirus relief plan through the chamber without Republican support. Vice President Kamala Harris was in the chair to cast the tie-breaking vote, her first.

Democrats in the chamber applauded after Harris announced the 51-50 vote at around 5:30 a.m. The action came after a grueling all-night session, where senators voted on amendments that could define the contours of the eventual COVID-19 aid bill.

The budget now returns to the House, where it will have to be approved again due to the changes made by the Senate. Final passage will unlock the next phase in drafting of the virus relief bill, with the work divided among several congressional committees.

Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer D-N.Y., called passage of the resolution the “first big step to putting our country back on the road to recovery.”

By moving on a fast track, the goal for Democrats is to have COVID relief approved by March, when extra unemployment assistance and other pandemic aid expires. It’s an aggressive timeline that will test the ability of the new administration and Congress to deliver.

The push for stimulus comes amid new signs of a weakening U.S. economy. Employers added just 49,000 jobs in January, after cutting 227,000 jobs in December, the Labor Department said Friday. Restaurants, retailers, manufacturers and even the health care sector shed workers last month, with state and local governments also letting go of nonschool employees.

The unemployment rate fell to 6.3% from 6.7%, but there was a decline in the number of people who were either working or looking for a job in a sign that some people are dropping out of the labor force. The U.S. economy is about 12 million jobs shy of its pre-pandemic trends.

Biden, who has been meeting with lawmakers in recent days to discuss the package, planned to talk Friday at the White House with the House committee chairs who will be assembling the bill under the budget process known as “reconciliation.”

With a rising virus death toll and strained economy, the president’s goal is to have COVID-19 relief approved by March, when extra unemployment assistance and other pandemic aid measures expire.

RISK

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Under high risk, restaurants are limited to 25% of their capacity for indoor dining or 50 people total, including staff, whichever is fewer.

The same limits apply to gyms, theaters and museums.

Assisted living facilities and other long-term care centers can resume visits, which are prohibited for counties in the extreme-risk category.

Bennett said Oregon Gov. Kate Brown intervened on the county’s behalf Friday, acknowledging that the Oregon Health Authority’s (OHA) COVID-19 case count for the county was too high for the period Jan. 10-23. The state agency had pegged the

number of cases at 66, which would put the county in the extreme-risk category.

But the actual number was 54, Bennett said, which qualified the county for the high-risk category.

He said OHA neglected to delete 12 cases among inmates at the Powder River Correctional Facility in Baker City. This is the second time the state has failed to deduct those cases, which are not supposed to be used to set a county’s risk level because the inmates are incarcerated and don’t interact with the community.

“This is a great step in the right direction for our community and local businesses,” Bennett said. “I’m grateful for the work of Nancy Staten, the

Health Department director, Jason Yencopal, the Emergency Management director, and Dr. Eric Lamb, the county’s Public Health Officer, for their work in identifying the discrepancy and following up. Thank you, too, to the State of Oregon for working with us to review the data and correct the issue.”

Bennett said the OHA has also corrected a problem that led to inflated counts of positive tests in the county. That was related to some of the county’s tests being processed in Idaho labs, and being counted twice, he said. That mistake boosted the county’s positivity rate, which, along with new case counts, determine the county’s risk level.

As of Friday, the county

had 18 new cases during the two-week measuring period, and a positivity rate of about 2.7% (down from 8.2% based on the inflated test totals). Both figures would qualify the county to move to the lower-risk level starting Feb. 12. The threshold for that level is no more than 29 new cases, and a positivity rate of below 5%.

The county’s rate of new cases over the past two weeks has been the lowest since mid-October.

County starts vaccine call center

Baker County is asking people 65 and older who want to receive a COVID-19 vaccine to have their name added to a waiting list by making a phone call or signing up online.

Based on Oregon’s vaccine priorities, people 80 and older are slated to start being inoculated on Monday, Feb. 8, with those 75 and older starting the following week, then 70 and older and 65 and older at one-week intervals.

The call center will be open from 7:30 a.m. to 6 p.m. Feb. 8-11. The number is 541-523-0015. You can also sign up at www.bakercountycovid19.com. The county will call residents when vaccines are available.

WYDEN

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Wyden said he plans to discuss the matter on Monday, Feb. 8, with Tom Vilsack, a past U.S. Secretary of Agriculture whom Biden has nominated to return to that cabinet post.

“I am going to tell him from all the input I’m getting from rural Oregon, from folks, particularly ranchers and producers, that they really want to see the new president and Tom Vilsack step up and give us the green light from the federal department of agriculture to run our own meat inspection program,” Wyden said.

Barbara Sidway, owner of the Geiser Grand Hotel in Baker City, told Wyden that financial effects from the pandemic have affected the federal tax credit for historic buildings, which can be important for projects in rural areas.

“With the pandemic, we’re really suffering some problems as so many sectors are,” Sidway said. “The challenges are increasing, financial markets have slowed to a crawl, lenders are restricting what they’re doing, banking institutions are generally increasing their underwriting requirements, material and construction costs are increasing, and many historic tax credit projects are stalled out.”

Sidway asked Wyden what the likelihood is of Congress passing an infrastructure bill, and whether that could include incentives for community development projects.

Wyden noted that the pandemic has taken a heavy toll on the travel and tourism industries.

“We will support you on the historic credits, as you know I’ve long been a supporter of that,” Wyden said.

He also said Congress is working to

revise a federal law that could help struggling restaurants.

The senator said he also is striving to increase access to broadband in rural areas.

“To me, access for rural broadband is about as important as it gets whether it is business, quality of life,” Wyden said.

Mark Witty, superintendent of the Baker 5J School District, told Wyden that the availability of high-quality broadband service has become increasingly important during the pandemic, with many students taking at least some classes online.

Witty said what people expect to receive, in terms of internet speeds, and what they actually get isn’t always the same.

“One of the things that we really seem to be discovering is that what’s advertised as far as the actual in the house usage, what’s advertised is not correct,” Witty said. “It’s over-advertised and not really come to delivery. At some level, we’d like some accountability to those companies.”

“That’s just dealing a bad hand to the consumer,” Wyden responded. “In other words, they pay for something, they aren’t getting it. That’s more of a consumer rip-off than it is a service question.”

Mark Ward, whose family raises potatoes, silage corn, peppermint, alfalfa and other crops in Baker Valley, queried Wyden about potential trade deals that the Biden administration might pursue.

“As you well know, 65% of the potatoes grown in Oregon are exported so trade is vital to the Oregon potato growers” Ward said. “With the new administration, can we look forward to some maybe bilateral trade agreements that we currently don’t have?”

Wyden said that’s definitely a priority.

“We do a lot of stuff well in our state but what we do best is grow things,” he said.

NEWS OF RECORD

DEATHS

Forrest Green: 76, of North Powder, died on Feb. 3, 2021, at Life Care Center of Treasure Valley in Boise. Arrangements are under the direction of Tami’s Pine Valley Funeral Home & Cremation Services. Online condolences can be made at www.tamispinevalleyfuneralhome.com

Coy Riggs: 85, of Baker City, died on Feb. 4, 2021, at Meadowbrook Place Assisted Living. Arrangements are under the direction of Tami’s Pine Valley Funeral Home & Cremation Services. Online condolences can be made at www.tamispinevalleyfuneralhome.com

Jack Pfaff: 66, formerly of Baker City, died on Feb. 4, 2021, at his home in Richland. Arrangements are under the direction of Tami’s Pine Valley Funeral Home & Cremation Services. Online condolences can be made at www.tamispinevalleyfuneralhome.com

Scott George Griffith: 65, of Baker City, died on Feb. 4, 2021, at his home with his family by his side. To leave an online condolence for Scott’s family, go to www.grayswestco.com

Jack E. Campbell: 86, of North Powder, died on Feb. 2, 2021, at a care center in Emmett, Idaho. Arrangements are under the direction of the Potter Funeral Chapel of Emmett.

Janice Schroeder: 89, of

Baker City, died Feb. 2, 2021, at Meadowbrook Place. Services are under the direction of Coles Tribute Center, 1950 Place St. Baker City, OR 97814. To light a candle in memory of Janice, go to www.colestributecenter.com

Lawrence Jay “Larry” Adkinson: 75, of Baker City, died Feb. 3, 2021, at his residence. His graveside service will take place on Wednesday, Feb. 10, at 11 a.m. at Mount Hope Cemetery in Baker City. Pastor Greg Pierce of the Blue Mountain Baptist Church will officiate. Contributions in memory of Larry may be made to the Bonnie Hays Animal Shelter through Gray’s West & Co. Pioneer Chapel, Baker City, OR 97814. To leave an online condolence for Larry’s family, go to www.grayswestco.com

Raymond Lee Hubert: 50, of Baker City, died Feb. 3, 2021, at his home. Due to COVID-19 restrictions, no services will be held at this time. To leave an online condolence, go to www.grayswestco.com

FUNERAL PENDING

Lloyd Harry Bigler: A military honors ceremony will take place at 2 p.m. on Saturday, Feb. 20, at Union Park. Those attending must wear a mask and practice social distancing. In lieu of flowers, the family suggests memorial contributions to the Union VFW Post, 518 N. Main St., Union, OR 97883. Online condolences may

be made at www.lovelandfuneralchapel.com

POLICE LOG

Baker City Police Arrests, citations

HARASSEMENT (Baker County Circuit Court warrant): Joshua Alan Johnson, 35, of Baker City, 3:03 a.m. Thursday, in the 1500 block of Dewey Avenue; cited and released.

CONTEMPT OF COURT (two Baker County Justice Court warrants): Michael S. Myers-Gabiola, 29, of Baker City, 7:29 p.m. Thursday, in the 2100 block of Court Avenue; cited and released.

CONTEMPT OF COURT (Baker County Justice Court warrant): Todd Mitchell Post, 57, of Baker City, 11:03 p.m. Thursday, in the 900 block of Campbell Street; cited and released.

CONTEMPT OF COURT (Baker County Justice Court warrant): Timothy Kelly Slaney, 31, of Baker City, 11:11 p.m. Thursday, in the 900 block of Elm Street; cited and released.

SECOND-DEGREE CRIMINAL TRESPASSING: Juan Pablo Burgos, 59, of Baker City, 11:23 p.m. Thursday, on Chestnut and Madison streets; cited and released.

VIOLATION OF RESTRAINING ORDER: Ronald Edward Thompson, 53, of Baker City, 2:55 p.m. Wednesday, in the 1100 block of Dewey Avenue; jailed and later released.