

Forecast: Oregon won't return to pre-spike COVID-19 levels until near year end

By GARY A. WARNER

Oregon Capital Bureau

A recovery from the record-breaking spike in COVID-19 cases has been pushed from Halloween to Christmas, according to an Oregon Health & Science University forecast released Thursday, Sept. 30.

Longer hospital stays for those with severe infections from the delta variant and signs of public weariness with pandemic safeguards have delayed the expected pace of a rebound.

The premature dropping of mask-wearing and limits on socializing, along with a return to tepid rates of vaccination, could slow the rebound further.

"We're in a moment right now where we're going to see what happens as fatigue sets in," said Peter Graven, Ph.D., lead data scientist on the OHSU forecast.

In mid-August, OHSU accurately predicted that a sharply rising spike in cases from 200 hospitalizations per day in early July would top out at nearly 1,200 by early September.

But the forecast that the numbers would drop at roughly the same rate as they rose proved overly optimistic.

The earlier forecast showed daily COVID-19 hospitalizations dipping below 200 by the end of October.

The data at the time showed the numbers falling under 100 by the time the holiday season kicked off with Thanksgiving at the end of November.

In the forecast released on Thursday, pre-spike hospitalization levels won't be reached until the last half of December. Case levels will remain elevated throughout the holiday season, with 600 hospitalizations per day forecast on Nov. 1.

Rates below 50 cases per day wouldn't be realized until mid-March 2022.

OHSU researchers underline that each forecast is just that — a model based on data. Each week's forecast includes a graph overlaying prior forecasts.

Graven said the model was at a "tipping point" driven by both the resilience of the virus and weariness of the population. Oregon is wobbling in a "fright and fatigue" cycle in the pandemic.

When the delta variant skyrocketed in July, many parts of the state returned to masking and limiting contacts. The slow growth in immunization rates started to increase in July and August, even in counties where vaccine hesitancy or resistance was widespread.

OHSU said that "breakthrough" cases of infection in people who had been vac-

nated has risen to 20% of new cases. But the worst outcomes have remained steady, with stark differences for the vaccinated and those who are not. OHSU said unvaccinated people accounted for 95.5% of severe cases and over 99% of deaths.

While hospitalizations have taken a steep dive, it is from the highest point in the COVID-19 crisis. If this forecast holds up, it will take over a month just to get below the peak of the 584 hospitalizations a day during last winter's surge.

The OHSU forecast this week pointed to some troubling areas. Estimated mask usage dropped from 84% to 81%. Based on an analysis of social media traffic, people are becoming more active and getting together in larger groups. With the colder weather starting to take hold, researchers worry that will drive activity indoors, where the virus can spread more rapidly.

Vaccinations have also slowed their pace of growth. A quarter of all adult Oregonians — just under 1 million people — remain unvaccinated more than nine months after COVID-19 vaccines first became available.

The state is seeing a drop in infections and hospitalizations overall. But parts of Eastern Oregon are seeing an

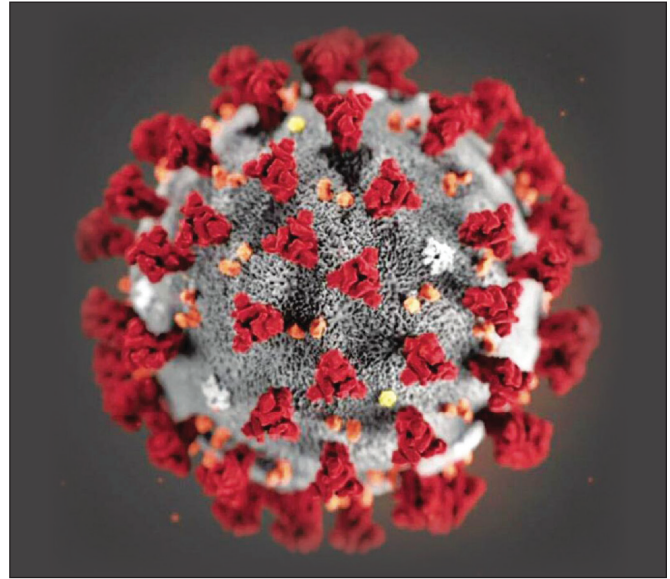
increase in infections, which some local health authorities have tied to outbreaks from the Pendleton Round-Up in mid-September.

An exception to the drop in hospitalizations is Region 7, which includes Deschutes, Crook, Jefferson, Grant, Harney, Klamath, Lake and Wheeler counties. After showing a decline along with the rest of the state, hospitalizations this week edged upward in Region 7 while declines continued in other regions.

Part of the region has some of the lowest rates of vaccination in the state. Lake has the second lowest percentage of eligible adults who have been vaccinated, 41.7% as of Thursday, according to Oregon Health Authority reports.

Grant is one of the four counties in the state where less than half of eligible adults have been vaccinated. It's currently at 47.1%. Harney, at 50.3%, just crossed the threshold this week, nine months after vaccines first became publicly available.

After seeing two consecutive weeks of a decline in cases, Grant County quadrupled in cases from 30 to 116 between the weeks ending Sept. 15 and Sept. 22, the latest data available. The case rate per 100,000 people — a way to measure the level of infection between areas with



CDC/Contributed Photo

A COVID-19 particle is pictured in this image provided by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

different population sizes — was 1,596. The percentage of tests that were positive tripled from 5% to 14.6%

The highest infection rate in the state is in Harney County, where one out of every four tests was positive. Harney's infection rates have remained high for the past month and the most recent survey showed it with a state-leading 1,675.8 cases per 100,000 people.

The statewide impact of the Pendleton Round-Up outbreak that began last month is still not completely known, state officials said last week. While many of the Eastern Oregon counties have low populations, they can be a

harbinger of new statewide spikes because of the large percentage of unvaccinated residents.

That's what happened with the Pendleton Whisky Music Fest outbreak in July.

The Whisky Fest, an outdoor country music event on July 16, attracted up to 12,000 people to Umatilla County. The county's vaccination rate was under 50% at the time (it's now 51.5%). An outbreak of cases after the festival swamped hospitals in Eastern Oregon and spread to the rest of the state.

Each rise in infections targets the most vulnerable, those who have neither vaccination or exposure.

BURGLARY

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He said investigators are using the truck's vehicle identification number to determine its registered owner.

No trucks of that make have been reported stolen in Baker County recently, Ash said.

Rex arrived at his home a little after 4 p.m. on Thursday, Sept. 30. He noticed the pickup, which he didn't recognize, parked in his driveway, and he noticed both

inside and outside his home that items had been moved or were missing.

One of the items missing inside the house was a gun.

After Rex called police to report that the gun was missing, and that he had seen a person, who he believed was a man, on foot about 200 to 300 yards from his home, police called in the Northeast Oregon Regional SWAT team, which has members from the Baker County Sheriff's Office, Baker City Police Department, Union County Sheriff's Office and La

Grande Police Department.

The SWAT team searched the area Thursday afternoon and evening but didn't find a suspect.

Ash said a Kubota all-terrain vehicle was reported stolen from a property in that area on Friday morning, Oct. 1. A resident in Baker City found the ATV later, abandoned in an alley.

Ash said it's not clear whether the theft of the ATV is related to the burglary at Rex's home, but the sheriff's office is investigating both cases simultaneously.

Oregon attorney general sues two counties over their gun ordinances

By ANDREW SELSKY

Associated Press

SALEM — Oregon's attorney general filed lawsuits Friday, Oct. 1 against two counties that had adopted ordinances that sought to nullify new statewide gun safety laws and declaring themselves "Second Amendment Sanctuaries."

In her lawsuits against Yamhill and Harney counties, Attorney General Ellen Rosenblum asked the circuit courts in those jurisdictions to declare the ordinances "invalid and void" because they conflict "with paramount state law."

"Gun safety laws exist to help keep guns out of dangerous hands and keep people safe. A county commission simply doesn't get to override state law in this way," Rosenblum said.

The ordinances, passed by county commissioners in the two counties earlier this

year, did not apply to local, federal or state firearms regulations that were in effect as of last February. But they did encompass a bill passed by the Legislature and signed by the governor on June 1 that mandates the safe storage of guns and bans them from the Oregon State Capitol and Portland International Airport.

The new law, which went into effect on Sept. 24, also allows public school districts, community colleges and universities to set their own policy banning guns.

Yamhill County Counsel Christian Boenisch had warned the county commissioners that their ordinance might pre-empt state gun laws, which state law prohibits, the McMinnville News-Register reported.

The two Yamhill County commissioners who voted for the ordinance argued at the time that no county's

Second Amendment ordinance had yet been challenged in court.

That changed on Friday. Rosenblum noted that other Oregon counties have enacted similar "illegal ordinances" and warned that the lawsuits filed on Friday are sending them the message that further action could be taken.

WOLVES

Continued from A1

Biologists estimated the calf was killed early on Sept. 28, and they attributed the attack to the Keating wolf pack.

Wolves from the Keating pack killed a pair of two-month-old calves north of Keating Valley in late April 2021, and they killed a calf in late May in the same area.

The Keating pack consists of eight wolves, according to the annual wolf report ODFW released in April.

The pack had at least two pups in the spring of 2020 that survived through the end of that year.

Ukiah area investigation

ODFW officials are trying to determine which wolf pack is responsible for the attacks on calves in the Ukiah area.

The calves were attacked in an area that's not designated as part of the range of any pack, or that has other known wolf activity, according to ODFW.

However, the attacks happened less than two miles from the approximate range of the Fivemile pack, and ODFW biologists believe it's possible that wolves from that pack have expanded their territory.

The agency has also received reports from the public about multiple wolves about 10 miles southeast of where the calves were attacked. It's not clear whether those wolves are a new, unidentified pack.

The Ukiah pack was not in the area where the calves were attacked, according to data from tracking collars on wolves in that pack.

Rodger Huffman, a Union County rancher and co-chairman of the Oregon Cattlemen's Association wolf

committee, said both the organization and the rancher who owned the calves, are asking Fish and Wildlife to kill members of the offending pack to deter further wolf-livestock conflicts in the area.

Under the state's Wolf Conservation and Management Plan, wolves in Eastern Oregon may be subject to lethal control if they have two confirmed depredations within nine months.

That plan authorized ODFW workers to kill the three wolves from the Lookout Mountain pack on Sept. 17. ODFW employees shot and killed two pups from that pack on Aug. 1.

Wolves from the Lookout Mountain pack have killed at least six head of cattle, and injured three others, since mid July.

George Plaven of the Capital Press contributed to this story.

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