

# Oregon seeing 'light at the end of the tunnel' of COVID-19 surge

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Oregon Capital Bureau

Oregon hospitalizations for COVID-19 will peak at a much lower level than expected as state officials see the steep spike driven by the omicron variant showing strong signs of waning.

Oregon is seeing "the light at the end of the tunnel" with infection rates dropping in Portland and other areas of the state.

"The potential beginning of a decrease is real," Dr. Dean Sidelinger, the state's health officer and top infectious disease expert, told reporters Friday, Jan. 28.

The health authority reported 7,222 new COVID-19 cases, down 649 cases from Thursday's report. The state reported 19 new deaths on Friday.

Hospitals reported 1,125 patients with COVID-19, five

less than Thursday. There were 176 COVID-19 patients in intensive care unit beds, up seven from the day before.

Oregon Health & Science University issued a new forecast Friday showing that hospitalizations would peak lower but later than projections last week.

Hospital patients with COVID-19 will likely top out at 1,200 on Feb. 6, according to the forecast presented by Dr. Peter Graven, the OHSU top statistical analyst.

That's far below the 3,000 cases OHSU forecast at one point early in the year, and below the 1,533 projected last week. The lower plateau has pushed the peak five days beyond the Feb. 1 mark forecast last week.

The current numbers have hospitals "near the breaking point," Sidelinger said. Hospital beds will be in

short supply for weeks as each point on the back side of the spike is equally dangerous as the same levels going up.

"Hospitals have very little space right now to handle new cases of COVID-19 on top of what they're already dealing with," Graven said in the OHSU forecast. "Our hospitals and health care workers remain under severe strain."

Sidelinger said the Portland metro area was ahead of much of the rest of the state in a drop in infections because it was hit earlier in the omicron wave and also has a very high level of vaccination.

But the drop would eventually extend to the whole state over the next few weeks. He said it would likely hold despite Oregon neighboring Idaho, which is currently going through a belated spike in cases.

## COVID

Continued from A1

The rate for other counties:

- Grant, 29,358 per 100,000 (highest in Oregon)
- Malheur, 16,571 per 100,000
- Umatilla, 16,033 per

100,000

- Wallowa, 11,802 per 100,000
- Union, 12,204 per 100,000
- Morrow, 17,486 per 100,000

Relatively few children who contract COVID-19 are hospitalized, according to OHA.

Just 0.6% of pediatric cases have been hospitalized. The hospitalization status of 58.1% of pediatric cases is not known, and 41.3% were not hospitalized, according to the agency.

There have been just three COVID-19-related deaths among Oregonians 17 and younger.

## N.E. Oregon Snowpack Report

Measuring Site	Elevation	Snow Water Equivalent (inches)				Snow Depth
		Now	Average	% of avg.	Last year	
Aneroid Lake	7,300	9.2	12.4	86	7.2	26
Anthony Lake	7,125	14.8	15.8	94	13.0	44
Beaver Reservoir	5,150	6.7	6.7	100	5.9	26
Bourne	5,800	9.8	9.8	100	8.6	26
County Line	4,530	4.4	3.3	133	2.2	15
Eilertson Meadow	5,440	8.6	7.6	113	8.1	26
Gold Center	5,340	7.5	7.2	104	8.5	14
High Ridge	4,980	15.8	16.6	85	15.5	45
Little Alps	6,200	7.0	7.8	90	6.6	24
Little Antone	4,560	6.6	6.8	97	6.4	21
Moss Springs	5,850	13.6	15.2	89	12.3	40
Mount Howard	7,910	7.9	9.2	86	5.8	26
Schneider Meadow	5,400	17.3	18.6	93	21.0	54
Taylor Green	5,740	10.3	13.2	78	14.1	30
Tipton	5,150	7.7	7.6	101	9.0	28
Wolf Creek	5,630	6.0	10.2	59	8.3	32
<b>AVERAGE</b>				<b>94</b>		

Source: U.S. Natural Resources Conservation Service

## Hatchet

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He left around 11:30 a.m. Before they started down to the water, Noah, John and Isaac managed to kindle a fire that they used to cook some flank steak from the elk — probably the freshest meat any of them had ever enjoyed.

But they didn't have a lighter or even matches to get a blaze going on the cold and blustery January day.

They had a hatchet. And a chunk of flint that came with it.

The hatchet, Noah said, was a gift this past Christmas to John from their sister, Abigail.

They were able to coax enough sparks from the flint to catch some dry tinder.

"It's difficult," was Noah's succinct description of starting a fire the old-fashioned way, with no assistance from butane or some other petroleum accelerant.

The elk meat tasted fine, though, to the trio who had only had bagels and coffee for breakfast.

Noah, a student at Eastern Oregon University in La Grande, John, who lives in Eugene, and Isaac, who's from Prineville, wrapped the elk hide around the meat and maneuvered it, which is to say rolled it as best they could, down through the sage and the rock outcrops, to Brownlee.

They arrived at water's edge around 1:30 p.m., Noah said.

When they got to the river they sparked a second blaze — every bit as challenging as the first — to warm their frigid feet while they waited for the elder Chaney to arrive by boat.

Noah said his dad had figured he could get there by about 3 p.m., so it ought not be a long wait.

But 3 p.m. passed. And then 4 p.m.

"We were sitting, waiting, hoping that we would hear a boat eventually," Noah said.

At the farthest edge of Oregon, at the bottom of a canyon more than 2,000 feet deep, the dark came fast. The temperature dropped. The wind rose.

They found an old dead tree near a decrepit cabin.

They hauled the tree to their makeshift camp on the rocky, uncomfortable shore and used the hatchet to chop a pile of firewood.

Then they sliced some backstrap from the elk and had another meal.

By this point, Noah said, the group concluded that their dad wasn't going to show up with the boat.

They hunkered down for what they expected would be a chilly and unpleasant night.

But first they retrieved the elk hide.

They came up with a schedule — one would wrap up in the hide and try to sleep for an hour while the two others stayed close to the fire.

They'd swap the hide every hour.

Isaac was just coming to the end of his second hour in the hide, about 9:55 p.m.,



Snow blows across Brownlee Reservoir during the rescue of three stranded hunters on Sunday, Jan. 30, 2022.

when John said he heard an engine.

But at first they couldn't see any lights.

They thought it might be an airplane.

Noah threw back the hood of his coat and saw a white glow.

It was the light bar on a Baker County Sheriff's Office boat.

Inside the vessel were Sheriff Travis Ash and Marine Deputy Wayne Paxton.

They had braved eight miles of icy whitecaps and blowing snow from the boat ramp at Moonshine Mine park, owned by Idaho Power Company near Swede's Landing on Brownlee.

"Thank goodness," was Noah's reaction. "It was so nice to see."

Neil Sr. had indeed brought his boat from Baker City.

But it wouldn't start, said Frances Chaney, Neil Sr.'s wife and Noah and John's mother.

Knowing the trio of hunters was likely waiting to be picked up by boat, the Chaney's got word through a friend to Ash by way of a phone call at about 6:39 p.m.

Ash said that after hearing the couple's story, and knowing that a snowstorm was moving in, he decided that a rescue operation couldn't wait for the morning.

He and Paxton brought

the boat to Moonshine Mine park.

Another group of search and rescue volunteers was on standby in case the trio had hiked back up the mountain rather than wait on the shore.

Ash said the boat trip on the black water was one of the more harrowing in his experience.

Brownlee is about 32 feet below full, and at that level rocks, normally well below the surface, pose a danger to boats, Ash said.

"We were running at about 7 mph," he said.

Fortunately, they were able to establish a GPS track to follow back to the park, so they could run a bit faster on the return.

"Without GPS, navigation would have been really difficult," Ash said.

The Chaney's were reunited around midnight.

Noah said he is extremely grateful not only for the rescue, but also for that hatchet and the flint that not only kept the trio somewhat warm, but also kept their stomachs somewhat satisfied with flame-cooked venison.

"Without that hatchet and the fire, I have no doubt we would have had some frostbite," Noah said. "Once it got dark our feet froze. We had walked through knee-deep snow, our socks were soaked. We had blisters. It was miserable."

## Snowpack

Continued from A1

The reservoir has fared much better than many others in the region during the drought.

As of Monday, Jan. 31, Unity Reservoir was at 27% of capacity.

The situation is quite different at the three-times-larger Phillips Reservoir, on the Powder River about 17 miles southwest of Baker City.

The drought all but emptied Phillips last summer, and the reservoir, which supplies irrigation water to more than 30,000 acres in Baker Valley, dropped to its lowest level since it first filled in 1968.

As of Jan. 31, the reservoir was at 2% of its capacity.

The key snowpack measuring site for Phillips is near Bourne, in the headwaters of the Powder River basin.

Despite the lack of snow since early January, the water content in the snow at Bourne (the most relevant statistic; snow depth doesn't necessarily reflect the amount of water since powdery snow has much less moisture than slush) remained right at average on the final day of January.

The water content is a bit above average at a few measuring sites, including Eilertson Meadow, along Rock Creek in the Elkhorn Mountains west of Haines. The water content there is about 13% above average.

That is down, however, from earlier in the month, when the water content at Eilertson Meadow was as much as 55% above average, on Jan. 8.

Higher in the Elkhorns, the water content was slightly below average at Anthony Lakes and at Little Alps, a few miles to the east and about 800 feet lower.

The tranquil January had a more noticeable effect in some areas, including the Wallowa Mountains.

At Schneider Meadows north of Halfway, for instance, the water content was as much as 26% above average after the blizzards of early

January. But by the end of the month the water content was 7% below average.

That measurement was also below average at several other sites in the Wallows, including Aneroid Lake (14% below average), Moss Springs (11% below), Taylor Green (22% below) and Mount Howard (14% below).

### What's happening under the snow?

Although water content is an important statistic in predicting spring and summer water supplies, it's not the only factor, Morgan said.

The condition of the soil can have a significant effect as well.

Last winter, for instance, the snowpack was close to average in most parts of North-eastern Oregon.

Yet the runoff was paltry, as the rapidly receding Phillips Reservoir illustrates.

A main reason, both irrigation district officials and farmers and ranchers agreed, was that the ground was still parched from the 2020 drought, so much of the melting snow soaked into the soil rather than trickling into streams and, eventually, into reservoirs.

That problem might not be so severe this spring.

Heavy rain fell across the region last fall, before cold temperatures arrived and snow began to accumulate.

And there's evidence that the soil is more damp now than it was a year ago, which bodes well for a more robust runoff in 2022.

Jason Yencopal, Baker County's emergency management director, assisted with a manual snow survey at three sites along the Anthony Lakes Highway on Jan. 26.

Unlike the automated stations that measure snow at most sites, the manual surveys can yield information about soil moisture. Surveyors use a hollow aluminum pole to collect a snow sample, and often the pole plunges into the ground, bringing up a chunk of soil as well as the snow.

Yencopal said these soil samples were classified as

"damp," as the soil stuck together when squeezed.

Morgan noted that although little snow has fallen over the past three weeks, most of the snow from earlier storms remains.

At lower elevations, the persistent atmospheric inversion kept temperatures near or below freezing for much of the month.

Higher in the mountains temperatures were well above freezing on many days, but snow reflects solar radiation effectively and although snow depths dropped, water content stayed relatively steady as the snow become more dense.

An automated weather station in a meadow just east of Anthony Lake, for instance, recorded temperatures as high as 52 degrees, on Jan. 15, and daytime highs above 40 degrees on 17 of the first 30 days in January. The snow depth dropped from 53 inches to 39 inches during the month.

(That station does not measure water content, a statistic based on the weight of the snow.)

At Schneider Meadows, despite a drop in snow depth from 69 inches on Jan. 8 to 53 inches on Jan. 31, the water content there increased slightly, from 16.7 inches to 17.3 inches.

### Drought situation

The snowstorms of late December and early January improved Baker County's drought ratings.

On Jan. 25, 58.5% of the county, mostly in the center, was in extreme drought, the second-worst category, below only exceptional drought, in the five-level drought rating system.

The remaining 41.5% of the county was in severe drought, which is one step below extreme drought. The areas in severe drought are at the extreme western end of the county, and roughly the eastern one-thirds.

On Jan. 6, by contrast, 76.7% of the county was rated in extreme drought, and on Oct. 28, 2021, 81.4% of the county was in that category.

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