

Biden urges shots as concern grows around variant

Efforts increase to get younger Americans vaccinated for COVID-19

BY ZEKE MILLER

The Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The U.S. government is stepping up efforts to get younger Americans vaccinated for COVID-19 as the White House acknowledges it will miss two key vaccination benchmarks and as concern grows about the spread of a new variant that threatens to set the country back in the months ahead.

The delta variant, first identified in India, in the last two weeks has come to represent more than 20% of coronavirus infections in the U.S., the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported Tuesday. That's double what it was when the CDC last reported on the variant's prevalence.

"The delta variant is currently the greatest threat in the U.S. to our attempt to eliminate COVID-19," Dr. Anthony Fauci, the nation's top infectious disease expert, said at a White House briefing on the virus. "Good news: Our vaccines are effective against the delta variant."

He added: "We have the tools. So let's use them, and crush the outbreak."

The White House on Tuesday acknowledged that President Joe Biden will fall short of reaching his goal of vaccinating 70% of all American adults with at least one shot by Independence Day. But it tried to paint an optimistic picture nonetheless by stressing that the nation had reached that

threshold for those aged 30 and older and expects to meet it for those age 27 or older by the July 4 holiday.

Biden also expects to miss a second goal — fully vaccinating 165 million adult Americans by July 4. White House COVID-19 coordinator Jeff Zients projected it will take several more weeks to hit that number. On Monday, the U.S. crossed 150 million fully vaccinated.

White House press secretary Jen Psaki rejected the idea that the missed July 4 benchmarks would represent a failure for the administration, telling reporters, "We don't see it exactly like something went wrong."

Still, administration officials said they were redoubling their focus on vaccinating younger Americans age 18-26, who have proved to be least likely to get a vaccine when it's available for them.

The nationwide rate of new vaccinations has dropped off precipitously over the past month even as shots have become more available, with fewer than 300,000 Americans now getting their first dose per day on average — a pace that, if sustained, will have the U.S. not reaching Biden's 70% goal until late July at the earliest.

Officials are also increasingly concerned about regional variations in the vaccination program.

More than 16 states and the District of Columbia have vaccinated 70% of their adult population. But others — particu-

larly in the South and Midwest — are lagging substantially behind, with four not having yet reached 50% vaccination rates.

The White House said meeting Biden's vaccination goals is less important than the pace of the nation's reopening, which is exceeding even its own internal projections as the overwhelming majority of the nation's most vulnerable people are fully vaccinated and cases and deaths are at their lowest rates since the earliest days of the pandemic, averaging about 11,000 new infections and fewer than 300 deaths per day. More states are opening back up, with Michigan on Tuesday becoming the latest to do away with a mask mandate and virus restrictions. The state had the nation's worst outbreak this spring.

"We have succeeded beyond our highest expectations," Zients said.

Americans at highest risk for complications from COVID-19 are overwhelmingly vaccinated, according to CDC data, but only 53% aged 25-39 have received one dose. Among those 18-24, it's 47%.

"Where the country has more work to do is particularly with 18 to 26 year olds," Zients said.

Zients and government experts said the rise of the delta variant should motivate younger Americans to get vaccinated.

"The reality is many younger Americans have felt like COVID-19 is not something that impacts them, and they've been less eager to get the shot," Zients said. "How-



Rogelio V. Solis/AP

First Lady Jill Biden comforts Christian Lyles, 13, who expressed his fear of needles as he received a vaccination from nurse Maggie Bass, center, during Biden's visit Tuesday to a COVID-19 vaccination site at Jackson State University in Jackson, Mississippi. The visit was part of Biden administration's nationwide tour to reach Americans who haven't been vaccinated and to promote vaccine education.

ever, with the delta variant now spreading across the country, and infecting younger people worldwide, it's more important than ever that they get vaccinated."

The variant is taking root as there are warning signs about a possible surge in cases in unvaccinated corners of America. Rural sections of Missouri, including Springfield and Branson, have seen a dramatic spike in COVID-19 hospitalizations in recent weeks that

health officials attribute in part to the delta variant spreading among younger, unvaccinated residents.

"There is a danger, a real danger that if there is a persistence of a recalcitrance to getting vaccinated that you could see localized surges," said Fauci.

Mississippi, Louisiana, Wyoming, Alabama and Idaho are all below 40% of their population with at least one dose of vaccine.

The White House planned to focus on increasingly local vaccination pushes, with first lady Jill Biden traveling Tuesday to Mississippi and Tennessee to promote vaccinations and Biden himself set to visit North Carolina on Thursday.

The variant is accounting for half of new infections in the regions that include Iowa, Kansas, Missouri, Nebraska, Colorado, Montana, North Dakota, South Dakota, Utah and Wyoming.

COVID-19

Continued from A1

Brown said Clatsop County's cases and rates would have qualified it for high risk level, but the state would allow it a caution week at its current lower risk level ranking in order to try to get its infection rate back down.

Josephine County also met the criteria for high risk, but would be given a caution week at moderate risk to work on dropping its case rates.

As of Friday, 23 counties will be at lower risk, seven at moderate risk and six at high risk.

Polk County became the ninth county to move to the lower risk level regardless of the county's infection rates due to meeting the goal of having 65% of residents with at least one shot of vaccine. Its status is effective immediately.

Brown asked Oregon residents to encourage friends and family to get the vaccine as the best way to protect themselves, their families and communities from COVID-19.

The state will hold a drawing Monday in which one

vaccinated Oregon resident will receive \$1 million. One resident from each of Oregon's 36 counties will also receive \$10,000. The state will also name five students, aged 12 to 17, to receive \$100,000 Oregon College Savings Plan scholarships.

OHA confirmed that because the state was close to reaching the governor's target for at least one shot of vaccine, it would no longer issue risk level rankings after Tuesday.

Health officials said the lifting of restrictions by Gov. Brown is subject to U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention guidance for use of masks and physical distancing.

President Joe Biden has said he wants Americans to enjoy as close to normal July 4 holiday as possible.

California and New York last week joined a growing list of states to meet their vaccination goals and "reopen" public life by lifting mask restrictions and allowing larger numbers of visitors to places like Disneyland and Yankee Stadium.

Vaccination in the United States has slowed severe illness and death, though new vari-



Ryan Brennecke/Bulletin file

Masked visitors stroll along Brooks Alley in May 2021 during the Bend Farmers Market. Mask mandates will be lifted statewide when Oregon hits a 70% vaccination rate.

ants that are more contagious are causing a rebound in some areas.

Oregon has reported 207,105 COVID-19 cases and 2,757 deaths as of Tuesday, according to the Oregon Health Authority.

Just under 33.6 million cases of COVID-19 have been reported in the United States since the virus was first found in Washington State in Feb-

ruary 2020, according to the Johns Hopkins Coronavirus Resource Center. The virus has killed 602,350 in the United States.

The virus is still spreading rapidly in parts of the world, as new variants are also reported. Worldwide, there have been over 178.9 million cases and just under 3.87 million deaths.

■ gwarnar@eomediagroup.com

County COVID-19 risk categories, effective June 25 to July 1

LOWER RISK (23)

- Baker
- Benton
- Clackamas
- Clatsop
- Coos
- Curry
- Deschutes
- Gilliam
- Grant
- Hood River
- Lake
- Lane
- Lincoln

- Morrow
- Multnomah
- Polk
- Sherman
- Tillamook
- Union
- Wallowa
- Wasco
- Washington
- Wheeler

MODERATE RISK (7)

- Harney
- Jackson

- Jefferson (Moved from High)
- Josephine
- Klamath (Moved from High)
- Marion (Moved from High)
- Yamhill

HIGH RISK (6)

- Columbia
- Crook
- Douglas
- Linn
- Malheur
- Umatilla

Fire

Continued from A1

A red flag warning was in place for Central Oregon on Tuesday. Red flag warnings mean warm temperatures, low humidity and strong winds can combine to produce increased fire danger. The National Weather Service forecasts temperatures in the high 90s by Saturday.

The pre-positioning of fire crews is a rare event in Central Oregon and comes after wildfires tore across the state at the end of last year's wildfire season. The Labor Day wildfires burned large areas of Western Oregon and left Central Oregon covered in a thick pall of smoke for nearly a week. Johnson said this is the first time he has seen crews moved in his nine years as fire chief in Sisters.

The fire alert comes after thunderstorms Monday afternoon sparked around 15 small fires around Central Oregon. Two of the Monday fires grew to half an acre, said Christie Shaw, a spokesperson for the Oregon Department of Forestry. The other fires were

single-tree incidents or fires that covered just one-tenth of an acre, said Shaw. A reconnaissance flight patrolled the area Tuesday looking for additional fires.

Fire officials are concerned that drought conditions across Central Oregon have made the area a tinderbox for wildfire. Most of Deschutes County is in exceptional or extreme drought, while nearly all of Crook County is in extreme drought.

"We are anticipating record temperatures, 100 degrees plus over the weekend, so obviously it's concerning for us based on our fuel conditions," said Shaw. "The thunderstorms are going to come with high winds. Fuels are receptive to ignition and then you add wind to it which can cause rapid spread."

Three of the Monday fires were visible near Ochoco Reservoir and one was located east of Powell Butte, said Shaw. None of the fires threatened any homes.

Mike Shaw, district forester for the Central Oregon District of the Oregon Department of Forestry, said the fires were rel-

atively easy to control.

"We have enough resources to manage the fires that we picked up in that lightning and there was just a little bit of moisture with it," he said. "That allowed us a little bit of time so we could jump on them pretty quick to get them corralled while they were still small."

While the Monday night fires have been contained, a fire on the Warm Springs Indian Reservation continues to burn out of control. The S-503 Fire has burned 6,200 acres and is 10% contained.

Mike Shaw said his crews use GIS systems to monitor lightning strikes and prepare to respond to fires. The system will come in handy in the coming days, he said, as more lightning is expected, combined with warm temperatures.

"There is a lot of nervousness," said Mike Shaw. "We are going to be flying detection flights over the next few days. Detection is going to be key for the next three or four days in front of that heat."

■ Reporter: 541-617-7818, mkohn@bendbulletin.com

Dentistry For The Entire Family



Awbrey
Dental Group

The services offered at Awbrey Dental Group ensure that patients of all ages feel welcome. From the earliest check-ups to the management of full mouth rehabilitation, Our team of doctors will listen to your concerns and guide you through every stage.

965 SW Emkay Drive, Suite 100, Bend
Call 541-383-0754 or visit www.awbreydental.com