COVID-19 variant rising in Oregon

By GARY A. WARNER Oregon Capital Bureau

SALEM — A new omicron variant of COVID-19 is driving a rise in infections, but is not expected to be a significantly severe wave of the now 110-week pandemic in Oregon, state health officials said this week.

The BA.2 "subvariant" of omicron spreads up to 80 percent faster than the first omicron wave, now called BA.1. It's swept across the United States over the past month, leading to a swell of infections and hospitalizations.

It's now the overwhelming source of new infections in Oregon, according to the latest data from the Oregon Health Authority released Friday.

The sheer speed and spread of BA.2 will cause what is by most accounts the seventh wave of new infections since COVID-19 appeared in Oregon on February 28, 2020, two months after it was first found in Wuhan, China, at the end of 2019.

COVID-19 cases rose for the week ending April 3, breaking a streak of nine consecutive weeks of falling cases and hospitalizations. OHA reported 1,988 new positive cases, up 42% from the previous week.

Oregon officials underlined that nearly all the severe cases requiring hospitalization and those who die from COVID-19 are not vaccinated.

While breakthrough cases in vaccinated people accounted for more than four in 10 new cases in the most recent week, those people also make up 68% of the Oregon population.

If infected, a vaccinated person has a less than 5% chance of severe illness and less than half of 1% of death. The average age of a vaccinated person who dies from COVID-19 is currently 80.

For the past week, deaths were up and rising. A forecast from Oregon Health & Science University's forecast, released Friday, said there were 140 COVID-19 deaths in the most recent week, up from 99 the previous week.

"While the decline is still evident, the level of deaths per day are proving to be closer to the numbers seen during the delta wave," OHSU reported.

Hospitalizations in Oregon fell to 95 in Oregon on Friday, the lowest level since prior to the deadly delta variant wave last summer.

OHSU says it now expects the daily count to peak at 220 patients per day on June 10. That's fewer than

since the beginning of the year.

The falling totals are due at least in part to the increased availability of free rapid tests sent by the federal government to any resident who signed-up online.

The CDC has reported people are unlikely to report negative tests and less likely to report positive tests unless they develop symptoms.

OHSU said that one area of uncertainty is the impact of public behavior that could accelerate the spread of BA.2. With the end of mask mandates for indoor public places in Oregon and the decision to let the more than two-yearold COVID-19 state of emergency lapse on April 1, a return to predelta spike habits have shown up in OHSU's metrics.

The forecast said in Oregon, voluntary mask use has significantly decreased, while restaurant visits are matching the national average. Indoor shopping is trending higher than the national average, while attending large events is slightly lower than elsewhere.

A significant number of cases were patients admitted to the hospitals for reasons other than COVID-19 but were found to be positive for the virus during routine tests.

Omicron's speed shows up in many measurements compared to versions of COVID-19 seen before late November 2021.

The time from exposure to admission to a hospital for a severe cases has fallen from 12 to eight days on average.

The typical hospital stay has fallen from seven to five days, while intensive care unit time has dropped from 14 to 12 days.

The recovery period prior to omicron was 12 days compared to eight for earlier versions.

With little advance notification or fanfare, the state several weeks ago ended its daily synopsis of COVID-19 cases provided to the public and media since the beginning of the pandemic.

The synopsis included hospitalization levels, deaths and information such as the age, gender, location and home county of those who die will not be compiled daily.

Other summaries are being curtailed, while OHSU will release a forecast every other week rather than weekly.

OHA says the data will still be available on its many COVID-19 dashboards on its website, along with weekday posting on social media.

OHA said it was making the



Erick Peterson/Hermiston Herald

Equipment was in place to remove sections of debris from the destroyed Shearer's Foods plant in Hermiston on Monday, April 4, 2022.

Ex-safety manager faults Shearer's

By ERICK PETERSON Hermiston Herald

HERMISTON

Forty people are trying to figure out why a boiler exploded at Hermiston Shearer's Foods plant on Feb. 22, causing a fire that destroyed the building and put 231 people out of work.

Scott Goff, Umatilla County Fire District No. investigator, said on April 5 that the examination of the site has been delayed. First, there was trouble because the rubble was so great it was difficult to sort through it. Also, it took time to bring together involved parties. In the past couple of days, big winds pushed back the investigation, which was the latest delay.

The examination of the destroyed Hermiston plant, which once employed 231 people, has brought people from the fire district, Shearer's, insurance carriers and representatives of involved equipment and contractors, according to Goff.

Speculation on the cause

Though the direct cause of the cause of the explosion is yet unknown, one former Shearer's Foods employee claims lax safety



Erick Peterson/Hermiston Herald A toppled section of the Shearer's plant stands Monday, April 4, 2022.

ald contacted the Shearer's corporate office to verify Dean's employment. Shearer's management, though, stated the company would not share employment information out of respect for employees and their confidentiality.

Dean, however, was able to present a letter of hire and his own resignation letter as evidence he had worked there.

Early in his employment, he said, he did some in depth looks into the facility to identify risks and hazards and found some he deemed as "high risk" and "high consequence." He was particularly worried about oil fires, he said.

While he was at the plant, Dean said, there were "a bunch of miniwhich were fires,

Safety and Health, or Oregon OSHA. He confirmed that the agency is investigating the Feb. 22 explosion and fire. He stated in an email, however OSHA does not discuss the status or details of active cases and he would share information about it once the investigation is complete.

"In the past five years, Oregon OSHA has conducted four inspections of this site, two of which resulted in citations. One of the citations followed an accident investigation," Corvin said.

In one of the cases, he said, the employer initially filed an appeal of the citation but then later withdrew the appeal.

Missing safety meetings were among the causes for the citation.

could not improve safety, as he could not encourage management to prioritize safety.

"It was a direct problem of management, in my opinion," Dean said, "in how they viewed and prioritized and felt toward the safety of the employees at the plant."

He said he repeatedly brought up safety concerns to senior management, but to no avail. Not only did managers fail to make changes, they dismissed his recommendations entirely.

"Their direct, verbatim, response to me when I raised these safety concerns was to 'calm my tits; they've been doing this for 40 years.' That's the phrase they used," he said.

Meanwhile, Dean said, the company was neglecting environmental regulations, too.

The one thing he said he was able to do was to create an active evacuation plan, something the company lacked prior to his employment. He said he also organized evacuation drills.

"It was difficult to do, because it affected production," he said.

He added there were additional concerns, especially when it came to the treatment of workers.

"They'd work people till they couldn't work anymore," he said. This was a safety concern, he said, because exhausted workers would intentionally break lockout-tagout safety rules. Having broken these rules, management would punish them with three-day suspensions.

the 300 forecast two weeks ago but with a top date a month later.

OHSU said the projection was based on patterns seen in states where BA.2 took hold earlier. Several states in the Northeast of the nation have seen increases in cases. Only Vermont is seeing an increase in hospitalizations.

In comparison, a peak of 1,178 people with COVID-19 cases were in hospitals in Oregon on Sept. 1, 2021, the peak of the delta wave. September 2020 totaled 610 deaths, the highest monthly total of the 7,296 deaths so far in Oregon.

A sign that more infections can be expected was the rise in the percentage of tests that came back positive. OHSU said test positivity had dropped to 2.5% for the week ending March 19. The rate is expected to rise to 3.4% by mid-April.

During the height of the original omicron spike, when tests were more often at medical and public health facilities, positive test rates hit above 25% statewide in January.

COVID-19 test However. reports have fallen precipitously

changes to reflect the declining number of severe cases, a decision made before the BA.2 variant reversed more than two months of declining numbers.

Charles Boyle, a spokesman for Gov. Kate Brown said this week the governor endorsed the change to the timing, number and format of the state reports used since early in the pandemic.

"As part of that shift of living with this virus over the long-term, we expect to see state agencies and entities, such as OHA and OHSU, adjust the frequency of their COVID-19 data reporting towards less frequent but still regular public reporting when cases are down," Boyle said in a statement Thursday. "If Oregon is hit by another surge of COVID-19, we would expect them to reassess the frequency of data reporting as well."

OHA cut back on the frequency of daily reports during last summer's lull in cases, ending weekend and holiday daily reports. The reports were not restored when the delta variant hit Oregon, despite calls in the media and public for more information.

measures might have contributed to the explosion.

"I saw a lot of things," Stephen Dean said. "I spoke with several peers that I had that no longer work there about how many conversations I had about that place being a time bomb."

According to Dean, when he heard of the explosion and the resulting fire, the first words that came out of his mouth were, "I told you so."

He said he was surprised the fire, which destroyed the building, sent a handful of people to the hospital and left 231 people out of work, was not worse. After all, no one died.

He said he was plant safety manager, working directly with the management team. He said he "provided safety culture and influence and direct safety policy and procedure" for about one year, from early 2018 to early 2019.

The Hermiston Her-

result of material building up in ovens. In policies and procedures, he said, workers were supposed to rake out the ovens when in a safe state. According to Dean, procedures changed so workers were using compressed air to clean the ovens instead.

"You don't put compressed air onto fires," he said.

He said this is just one example of the culture at the plant. Practices were unsafe, not necessarily because any one person was directing them poorly, but because those practices shifted towards being unsafe, he said. Dean said once people start doing things one way, they pass on those habits to new workers and behaviors become engrained.

OSHA weighs in

Aaron Corvin is the public information officer for Oregon Occupational

Complaints of safety problems

Dean said he brought up major safety hazards to the directors of the company when in the company.

"I couldn't get anywhere with management," he said. "They were spending millions on production and innovation, but they were spending nothing on the safety department. Whereas they had an astronomical production budget, we had roughly just enough to pay for personal protection equipment."

Dean described his employment as "working from nothing" and "building a grassroots program when there was nothing to work with." He said he quit out of frustration. An 'agent of change in the industry," he said he has long worked to fix safety issues at different companies. After working with Shearer's, he felt he

"It was motivation for them to take their breaks," Dean stated.

He said his co-workers would regularly point out their own infractions, just to be sent home for rest or to attend a funeral or some other necessary event.

Answers forthcoming

Goff, while working on the site for the fire district, said investigators should be able to remove the roof from an area they wish to study soon, barring weather delays. Then, they should be able to have answers for the explosion by late this week, he said.

