

**Lifted:**

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and Morrow counties all remained at lower risk for weeks, and some for months.

Umatilla County Public Health Director Joe Fiumara said there could be a number of explanations for this, including the county's greater population density and its industrial facilities increasing the risk of infection, but it's difficult to pin exactly why the county continues to report relatively high case counts.

Umatilla County is being dragged across the state's 70% finish line by western counties with much higher vaccination rates. But county officials are worried that reopening may lead to case spikes in the county due to its low vaccination rate.

"Somehow, being over the line gives the impression that COVID is over," Umatilla County Commissioner George Murdock said. "And that's a false assumption. It's not. It's not over, even if Oregon opens up, it's not over here. It's going to continue."

Two weeks ago, Umatilla County reported 76 cases, 35 more than the previous week, according to county health data. That's the steepest weekly case spike the county has reported since April, after reporting declining weekly cases for five straight weeks. Cases declined again this past week.

"We were trending downwards, and that (case spike) keeps us solidly in that high risk unfortunately," said Fiumara. "I wish it wasn't this way. But, we're waiting for the rest of the state to carry us across the goal line."

Fiumara said much of the county's cases are being traced back to small

social gatherings but with no large outbreaks. However, he said people who have been exposed often are reluctant to cooperate with contact tracers, all but assuring cases are going unreported and making it difficult to track the spread of infection.

Fiumara and Murdock each said nearly all reported cases are coming from people who have not been vaccinated against COVID-19.

"We have vaccination sites open all over the county," Murdock said. "It is not an accessibility problem. We have enough sites, and we have enough vaccine. We just don't have enough people willing to get a shot."

Murdock described the county's vaccine rate as "extremely demoralizing." He added he believes residents likely will be less inclined to get vaccinated when restrictions are lifted.

Fiumara said it's been frustrating to see people choose not to get vaccinated, as it has likely contributed to the county remaining among the state's most stringent restrictions for longer than almost any county in Oregon.

"We knew what the outcome of that choice was going to be," Fiumara said of residents not getting vaccinated. "We were going to stay in high risk. We were going to stay in these restrictions longer."

Fiumara and Murdock each said they are glad the county's economy is primed to reopen when the state reaches 70%. But with the county's vaccination rate remaining low, they said it's possible cases could spike around the large upcoming summertime events and holidays.

"I think we'll experience cases of COVID longer than most other counties," Murdock said.

**Heat:**

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them a window unit.

If anyone thinks their air conditioning unit isn't working properly or is on the verge of failing, they should call immediately, said Seth Draper, service manager for Bruce Heating and Air, which has locations in Hermiston and the Tri-Cities. HVAC technicians are stretched thin right now, he said in an interview Thursday, June 24, and aren't available to show up at a moment's notice.

"We're slammed," he said.

As the heat wave across the western United States continues to spread, it's also taking longer to get parts in — three to five weeks, in some cases.

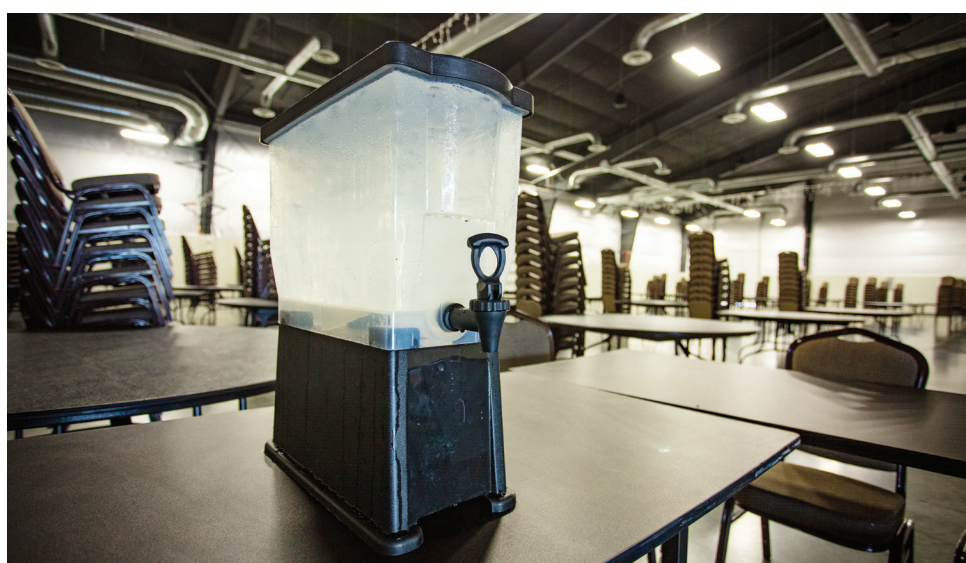
Draper said to help air conditioners stay in good working order, it's important people make sure their filters are clean and so are their outside units, which can become clogged with cottonwood fluff or other debris.

He said as temperatures soar above 110 degrees this week, people will need to have reasonable expectations for how cool they can get the inside of their home.

"One hundred and fifteen degrees outside really stresses AC units," he said.

People can help reduce that stress by keeping their blinds closed and lights off as much as possible, he said, and not running appliances, such as ovens, that will add heat to the house. They also should reduce traffic in and out of the house as much as possible, and try opening the windows if it cools down at night.

As people crank up the air conditioning in triple-digit temperatures that are supposed to stretch for at least another week, Steve Meyers, spokesper-



Ben Lonergan/Hermiston Herald

**A water cooler sweats in the main hall at the Eastern Oregon Trade and Event Center in Hermiston on Tuesday, June 29, 2021. EOTEC opened Tuesday as a cooling center for area residents and plans to remain open through the week.**

son for Umatilla Electric Cooperative, said the utility will be closely watching weather conditions and system loads. While extreme weather does put additional demand on the power supply, he said UEC has made it a priority to maintain its infrastructure to reliably provide power in all kinds of conditions.

"Our power supply is sufficient to meet the expected spike in demand from air conditioning and irrigation during this extreme heat wave," he wrote in an email.

He said in a typical year, UEC provides more than \$1 million in rebates and \$300,000 in low-interest loans for energy efficiency upgrades in members' homes and businesses. Those investments help reduce the demand on UEC's system, he said.

In a news release, Pacific Power suggested customers should set their thermostats at 78 degrees while they're home and 85 degrees while they're out.

If someone doesn't have an air conditioner, they can use fans blowing across cool water, bowls of ice or frozen water bottles to help cool down a room, or hang a

wet sheet over their window if there is a breeze coming through in the evenings.

**Protecting animals**

Darren Cox, owner of Baker's Pond Farm outside Hermiston, said livestock tend to weather the Eastern Oregon climate well, but do need extra protection when the heat reaches extremes.

He said he sprays the chickens and ducks with water when it gets especially hot, and when it's up over 100 degrees sometimes the goats need wetted down too.

"They hate water," he said of the goats, "but we do spray them when they get hot. You don't have to do as much with cows. They're used to the elements."

The farm's barn has a big awning where animals can congregate in the shade, he said, and they will have fans running. Pigs don't sweat, so Cox said he'll be making sure they have plenty of water and mud to roll around in.

One of the most important things will be making sure animals have "plenty of cool, clean water" in their troughs as they go drink more than usual, Cox said.

"You can go down and buy blocks of ice, and put them in the trough," he said last week. "When it's really hot, on the 115 (degree) day, that's probably what we'll do here."

He'll be keeping his dog in the air-conditioned house, he said, and if any of the other animals are showing signs of heat exhaustion, they can come inside too.

Experts recommend people keep their pets indoors during high heat, with plenty of drinking water, and if needed, getting them wet can provide extra cooling. Walk or run with pets in the early, cool part of the day, and before the asphalt gets hot, and make sure they get breaks with access to water.

Pets and people should never be left in hot cars.

Oregon's good Samaritan law, which has been in effect for four years, allows someone to enter a vehicle to remove a child or domestic animal in imminent danger of suffering harm without facing criminal or civil liability under certain requirements. That law could get a workout with this heat.

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