

On COVID-19, Data Shows Thurston County Has Fared Better Than Similarly-Sized Counties

County's Early Moves to Prevent Spread of Virus Just One Factor

BY ERIC ROSANE
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As some counties around the Puget Sound region have seen the worst of COVID-19, with cases soaring recently to the hundreds and death tolls in the dozens, Thurston County — for its population size, density and geographic location — has fared relatively well.

Thurston County Public Health and Social Services Di-

rector Schelli Slaughter said the county took a proactive approach to addressing the virus early on, which likely helped keep down the number of cases and deaths.

The hope is that the county will continue to see a decline in cases, if not a complete dropoff, and that the county will be able to move past the new novel coronavirus with minimal impacts.

"I think the county has largely done a good job, and I think citizens have done a good job of taking COVID-19 seriously," she said. "I think there are a lot of factors that have helped to mitigate the impacts of COVID-19 in Thurston County and I hope that will continue."

Slaughter said it was important early on to look at what

neighboring counties were doing. In effect, Slaughter said she also believes the timing of Gov. Jay Inslee's stay-at-home order benefitted the county.

But when cases began rising at an unprecedented rate in neighboring Pierce County back in mid-March, concern started

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Prairie Days, Oregon Trail Days Canceled

Yelm, Tenino Scrub Events From Calendar Amid COVID-19 Restrictions

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Yelm Prairie Days and other local summer events are being canceled due to the ongoing efforts to mitigate the spread of the novel coronavirus and because of extended restrictions state-wide on large gatherings.

In an email sent to the public on Tuesday, April 14, Yelm Mayor JW Foster and Yelm Area Chamber of Commerce Executive Director Line Critchfield said the decision was made due to strict social distancing measures and a stay

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Subscriber mailing label below this line



**Yelm Mayor
JW Foster**



**Line
Critchfield**

Wilcox Family Farms Donate 600,000 Servings of Eggs



Paul Durnn/Nisqually Valley News

Minerva Gonzalez, 23, packs liquified eggs into boxes at Wilcox Family Farms on Friday, April 17.

Rather Than Waste Products Once Bound for Food Service Industry, Business Provides Them to Food Banks, Organizations

BY ERIC ROSANE
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At a time when many are struggling to obtain nutritious food amid the COVID-19 pandemic, regionally-renowned Wilcox Family Farms will be donating 600,000 servings of liquid eggs to organizations, charities and food banks in need throughout the Puget Sound area.

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Brittany Hubbard, 26, fills liquified eggs into plastic bags at Wilcox Family Farms on Friday, April 17.

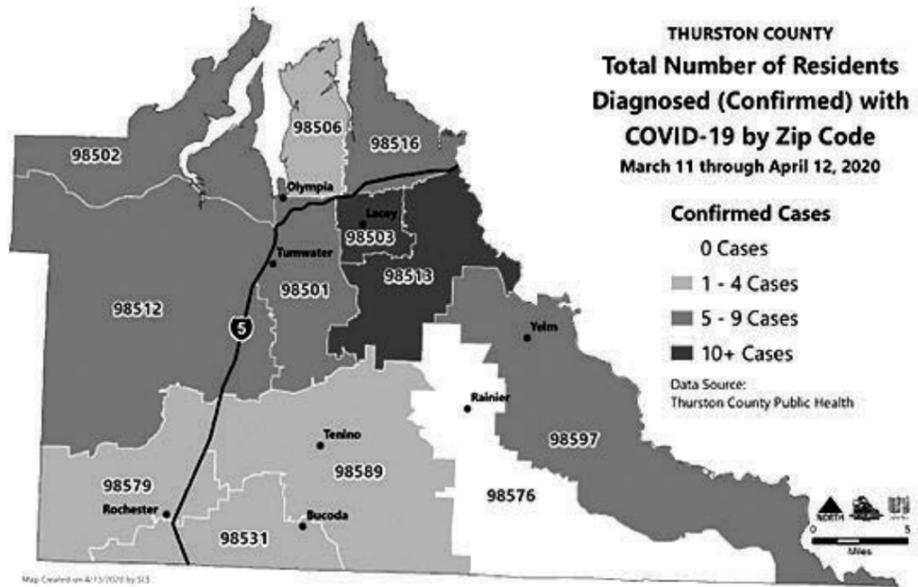
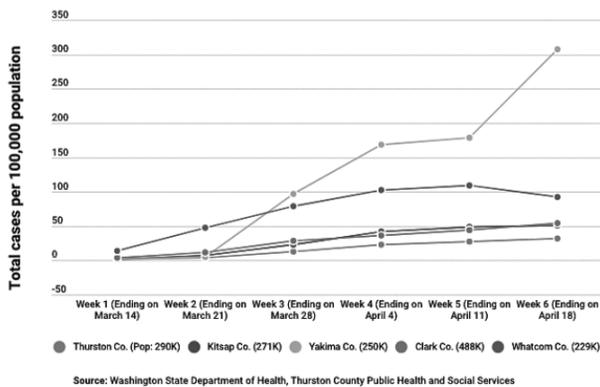
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Confirmed Cases of COVID-19 in Thurston County, Compared to Counties of Similar Size



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to rise that the virus was going to make a sharp jump to Thurston County.

“We were really, really concerned because many people live in Thurston County and work in Pierce County, and vice versa,” Slaughter said. “I think we kind of benefitted from the wisdom and what was happening to our neighbors to the north.”

Pierce County currently has more than 1,100 cases and 32 deaths. Thurston County, as of April 21, has 92 cases and just one death recorded.

Thurston County began reaching out diligently to inform the public about prevention efforts. The week after the county confirmed its first case, the Board of County Commissioners voted unanimously to close facilities off to the public in an effort to contain the spread.

While she’s happy about how her staff has handled the pandemic a month into it, Slaughter said she’s dissatisfied that even one person died from this illness.

“Even one preventable death is unacceptable, and we just feel terrible about it,” she said. “Any

loss of life is devastating for the person, the family and the community.”

In large part, many of those who have been confirmed to have the virus have recovered. Of the 92 total cases, 83 patients have recovered in Thurston County.

When compared with other counties similar in size, the number of confirmed cases Thurston County has — with a total 2019 estimated population of 290,536 — looks fairly small, with 32.35 cases per capita.

Clark, Whatcom, Yakima and Kitsap counties, for example, all have more confirmed cases per capita than Thurston County does.

Whatcom County, a jurisdiction with 60,000 fewer people and less densely populated, currently has nearly three times as many cases of COVID-19 when compared with Thurston County, at about 276 cases. The northwestern-most county in the state has also suffered 27 total deaths.

Clark County, which is about twice as dense as Thurston County and larger than Thurston County, is right up there near Whatcom in cases, with 275 confirmed cases, according

to the Washington State Department of Health.

When compared on a per-capita basis, Whatcom County has tallied about 91.90 cases and Clark County has about 54.48. Whatcom county’s rate is nearly twice what Clark County’s rate is.

Slaughter said when it comes to the variable of density, it’s proven that viral infections do transmit in more heavily populated areas, such as cities. But even that is still just one of many factors.

“That most definitely does play a role. Population can be one factor, but we’ve also seen and heard of communities that are much smaller that have had devastating impacts of COVID-19 because it was able to be transmitted easily,” she said.

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 outbreak, testing has also been a hotly debated issue.

Nationwide, there have been issues with people being able to find accessible testing sites, or with sites simply not having enough of the materials needed

to operate.

Thurston County currently has only a handful of sites that symptomatic patients can visit. One of them is at the Providence Medical Group’s Hawks Prairie clinic. Slaughter said most testing is being done by local hospitals.

Slaughter said the county has been critical of the data and number of confirmed cases they’ve been able to gather thus far. They believe there are more cases out in the county than what they’re able to report. Because of a shortage of testing supplies and of PPE, the state and county have had to set the criteria for testing quite high initially.

“The key to the next phase is to increase testing capacity,” Slaughter said.

As of Sunday, April 19, Thurston County has tested more than 3,665 residents for COVID-19, with a positive rate of about 3 percent.

Recently, the county has made more of an effort to disclose what data they are getting from patients suffering from

COVID-19 in the county.

Last week, Thurston County began disclosing the number of confirmed cases per ZIP code. New iterations of that data will be updated every Tuesday, Slaughter said.

Thurston County Commissioner Gary Edwards said while he’s very supportive of the great work the county has done, he’s been pushing for Public Health to disclose more information on who’s affected.

“One of my frustrations on this is I don’t want to scare the public any more than they already are,” Edwards said. “I just want to make sure we’re telling the truth about everything.”

Slaughter said some modeling has suggested that we’re at half the peak, although some counties may not be quite there.

“We are really encouraged to see that the number of new cases have slowed down for Thurston County... We are starting to see that, but what we’re not seeing is a drop,” she said.

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The Emergency Food Network, Northwest Harvest, Food Lifeline, Yelm Community Services and Tacoma Rescue Mission will be some of the first organizations to benefit from the donations, with many more recipients being planned.

Standing about 100 yards or so from one of the many pasture houses, Brent Wilcox, fourth-generation Wilcox family farmer and president of Wilcox Family Farms, recently said the products being donated would normally be sold to other businesses in the food service industry.

But because of state-mandated closures of businesses due to the spread of COVID-19, the illness brought on by the novel coronavirus, the demand suddenly came to a quick halt last month.

The family quickly began brainstorming ways to sell or put their liquid egg product to good use. “We were left with basically two choices: Either dump the eggs, which would have been a huge ordeal and a huge waste — and we didn’t really want to do that — or figure out how to process them and then give them away to all the local food banks,” Wilcox said. “They’ve really been hit hard just because so many more families are really wanting to use food banks because of the unemployment.”

The 600,000 servings of eggs

the family is donating is roughly about a month of its liquid egg production, Brent Wilcox said. The family-owned company, located on 1,700 acres in Roy, will continue to donate products as long as the food industry is shuttered.

Wilcox Family Farms sells eggs in multiple forms and through different cycles of production. The business produces hard-boiled eggs, liquid eggs, organic shell eggs and pasture-raised omega-3 eggs, just to name a few.

This winter, the business introduced mobile pasture coops into the equation. This has helped with healthy pasture rotation and allows the chickens to live more stress-free lives, the company says.

Brent Wilcox said large and extra-large eggs are normally sold on the shelf, while medium and small eggs are sent to a breaker facility where they’re processed for the liquid egg product.

He said they’re in contact with several food banks that have been grateful for the donations.

“People across the Northwest are experiencing fear and uncertainty right now, and that’s especially magnified for low-income, homeless and senior people,” Brent Wilcox had said in a statement.

Donnie Wilcox, a fifth-generation farmer, said in a statement that the farm normally



Hens of a variety of breeds wander along their pasture house at Wilcox Family Farms on Friday, April 17. *Paul Dunn/Nisqually Valley News*

donates eggs around Easter. But this year is a little different.

“We want to step up and support northwest families. As supplies allow, we will be sending eggs to these and other organizations around the northwest that are keeping folks fed,” he said.

While business for liquid eggs has been slow, the demand for the hard-shelled products has been through the roof.

Wilcox said they have been working on implementing social distancing measures and staggering and doubling shifts to keep up with the demand of processing the eggs.

The businesses that purchase hard shells are generally grocery stores, which have been deemed essential by the governor’s office.

During this time of uncertainty, many employees are happy for the opportunity to keep working as an essential employee.

“So far, we haven’t had anybody saying they don’t want to work. Everybody wants to work,” Brent Wilcox said. “We’ve been pretty good about moving people from the liquid and hard-boiled to the second shift at the shell and we’re do-

ing other projects around here. We’re trying to keep everybody employed.”

And as the Wilcox family keeps the ship sailing, others are helping them along the way. Yelm Methodist Church’s quilts group have helped supply the farm’s employees with reusable masks.

Jim Mahon, quality assurance manager who’s been with the company for more than 17 years, said he thinks the donation idea is great and noted that he’s been thankful for his employees who have been eager to come into work.

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at home order enacted by Gov. Jay Inslee that is currently set to run through May 4 but could be extended.

“This is a terribly difficult decision to make, but it is in the best interest of the health and safety of our community. Although the governor may lift restrictions in early May, it will most likely be on a gradual scale, focusing on getting businesses back up and running,” the two community leaders said in the email. “The gatherings of large groups of people in public will likely be discouraged well into the summer. We would not want

Yelm to be the epicenter for the next surge of COVID-19 cases.”

The chamber is currently waiting on a decision from the Cascade Bicycle Club on whether the annual Seattle to Portland Classic bike ride will happen this summer. That decision is expected on May 15.

Based on the club’s decision, the chamber will decide whether it will host its second-annual Barbecue Rally.

Foster said he can’t remember a time when Yelm has canceled Prairie Days. Many of the other events the city plays host to have been canceled through July 1, he said.

“It’s the summer that wasn’t. We’ll move forward in 2021

with, hopefully, a new model,” he added.

“The decision was made based on the best guidance we’re getting from the state suggesting that large gatherings won’t be recommended well through the summer,” he said. “It’s unlikely for them to relax the restrictions on those types of things because those are clearly the hardest to control.”

Gov. Jay Inslee’s “Stay Home, Stay Healthy” order, which deals with restrictions on public gatherings of all sizes, is set to run through May 4. The order was extended on April 2, and a second extension through June or longer is possible as the state plans a multi-phased approach

to reopening the state’s crippled economy.

In regard to the fear of asymptomatic patients spreading the virus at city-sponsored events, Foster said “to relax and allow people to come together in large numbers would be contrary to what we’ve gained so far and is risky.”

On Friday, April 17, organizers with the Tenino Area Chamber of Commerce announced they would be following suit by canceling Oregon Trail Days due to the unknown circumstances. The event was slated to take place July 24-26.

While events locally are being canceled, Foster said he does believe it’s time for the state

government and Legislature to come together and establish a plan to reopen the economy.

Foster said it’s high time for many of the businesses to open in small stages with heightened social distancing guidelines. How many in his own community is a different question, though.

“It’s got to be all or nothing,” he said regarding the unified approach. “All have to agree on a controlled reentry into the economy, and I’m going to trust them to do that.”

Foster said he hopes those who were looking forward to attending Yelm’s many events this summer can look toward their own smaller celebrations at home.