

Okanogan County confirms more COVID-19 cases, second death

BY MARCY STAMPER

Okanogan County reported six more confirmed cases of COVID-19 in the past week, as well as the second death from the disease, a man in his 60s who'd been working full-time until he became ill.

The man was transferred to a hospital in Wenatchee after his symptoms worsened in early April. He fought the disease for three weeks until succumbing, according to Okanogan County Public Health.

Of the county's 31 confirmed cases, 11 have been on the Colville Indian Reservation, five in the Methow Valley, four in the south county (Malott to Pateros), 10 in the central valley (Malott to Riverside), and one in the north county (Riverside to Oroville). Twenty-one people are recovering from the disease, according to Public Health.

Local clinics and hospitals have been able to test considerably more people within the past week. As of May 12, there were almost 100 additional tests done,

more than 10% of the total. Only 19 results are pending.

Still, the raw numbers mask the realities of the local toll of the disease. Two of the people who became ill were in their 30s and, despite having no underlying conditions, they both ended up in the hospital with diminished lung capacity, one for more than a week, Okanogan County Community Health Director Lauri Jones said at a meeting with the county commissioners on Monday (May 11). Another per-

son was transferred to Central Washington Hospital this past weekend, she said.

The local case tallies also don't provide a complete picture of where people live or where they are when they become ill, Jones said. Cases are assigned to the county of primary residence. Some of the cases didn't originate in Okanogan County and, in other instances, the people are not currently living in the county, she said.

Jones said she believes that many more people in the

Methow have had COVID-19 than the confirmed cases indicate. She couldn't be reached for additional details.

As the county and state start an incremental re-opening of businesses and outdoor activities, Public Health reminds everyone to take precautions to protect themselves and the entire community.

Businesses will have to maintain a 6-foot distance for staff and customers and use barriers to block sneezes and coughs when distancing is not possible.

They need to schedule frequent cleaning and disinfection of surfaces and provide shopping and payment options that minimize customer contact.

Businesses also must provide personal protective equipment for employees (such as face masks, gloves and goggles). There are regulations for different businesses from the state Department of Labor & Industries as well as new industry-specific COVID-19 standards developed as part of the phased re-opening.

REOPENING

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growing season ramps up.

Increased pressure

The commissioners are getting pressure from business owners and residents across the spectrum – some who can no longer abide the restrictions and others who want the county shut down to tourists.

Despite pleas to keep the situation from becoming politicized, discussions during the past week strayed into the ideological arena.

Gov. Jay Inslee has intentionally created a situation where it's impossible for any business to reopen, County Commissioner Jim DeTro said at the commis-

sioners' meeting on May 11. Inslee wants a "rolling moratorium" so the state is still under lockdown during the November elections, DeTro said.

"Public Health isn't the bad guy – we want to help businesses reopen safely and think a lot can do so," Jones said. "My job is to keep the entire population safe – and I think we can. It's not from a partisan perspective."

"We're working with everybody. We're doing the best for public health and safety. It's important to do it with a unified voice," Jones said.

If people here had experienced more loss and death of people they know, the reaction would be different, County Commissioner Chris Branch said.

Branch advocates providing a clear message to the public so everyone understands how the disease is spread and the steps they need to keep themselves safe. The county needs to make a case to the governor that we're prepared to take care of businesses and can protect ourselves, he said.

There are ways to prevent the spread of the disease, including covering your cough, washing your hands, disinfecting and wearing masks right now, while scientists continue to learn about the disease, Mid-Valley's Thill said. The county should focus on preventive measures – and on educating people about following them – so that businesses can re-open while we're waiting for tests, she said.

Reopening guidelines

Washington has given more businesses the green light to reopen – with a lot of caution.

Retail businesses can now offer curbside sales. Vehicle and boat sales can be conducted and landscapers are also allowed to resume work.

There are strict guidelines

from the state for each industry.

Retail guidelines include a minimum 6-foot separation between staff and customers at all times, the use of protective gear like masks and gloves for all employees, and regular sanitation. Transactions can be made online, over the phone, or point of sale.

Customers will notify the store that they have arrived and wait in their vehicle until the employee delivers the purchased items.

To protect employees, shifts and breaks should be staggered. Employees should be screened for health at the start of each work day.



Photo by Marcy Stamper

Tourists have already started coming to the Methow Valley.



Photo by Don Nelson

Paddleboarders Hayley Post and Luke Husband took advantage of the Methow River's swift current on Monday (May 12), ending their adventure at Twisp Town Park. The river was at 144% of its normal flow. Post is a 2018 graduate of Liberty Bell High School; Husband is from Burlington. Both are students at Whitman College. Post will be taking advantage of an internship with Room One this summer; Husband will be interning with Rob Crandall of Methow Natives.

SNOW

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the previous winter, Pattee said. At Harts Pass, snowpack was 102 percent of normal on May 1 this year, compared to 83 percent of normal on May 1, 2109. However, the rate of spring melting was very different.

"We had two totally opposite springs. Last year stayed really cool, so snow came off really slowly. This year it's coming off at a normal rate or ahead of normal," Pattee said. A quickly disappearing snowpack can lead to water shortages for irrigators and other users later in the year.

River flows

The melting mountain snow-

pack was increasing flow in local rivers in recent weeks. The Methow River was running at about 144 percent of normal on May 12 at the streamflow gauge in Winthrop, and 156 percent of normal at the gauge at Pateros, Pattee said.

The Methow River is projected to run at about 88 percent of normal during May through September, according to NRCS forecasts.

This past winter was marked by a lack of snow at lower elevations in mountains throughout Washington, contributing to expectations for drought for much of the state, Pattee said. The forecast for May predicts above normal temperatures and equal chances for precipitation. The National Weather Service

three-month forecast for May-July indicates above normal temperatures and below normal precipitation.

Precipitation in April in the Upper Columbia basin, which includes the Methow Valley, was only 52 percent of normal for the month, according to NRCS. The Upper Columbia has received 81 percent of normal precipitation for the water year, which is measured from October through September.

The National Inter-Agency Fire Center released its latest wildfire outlook for July and August, which indicates above-normal chance of wildfire for most of eastern Washington, and normal conditions on the west side of the Cascade Mountains (see related story, page B1).

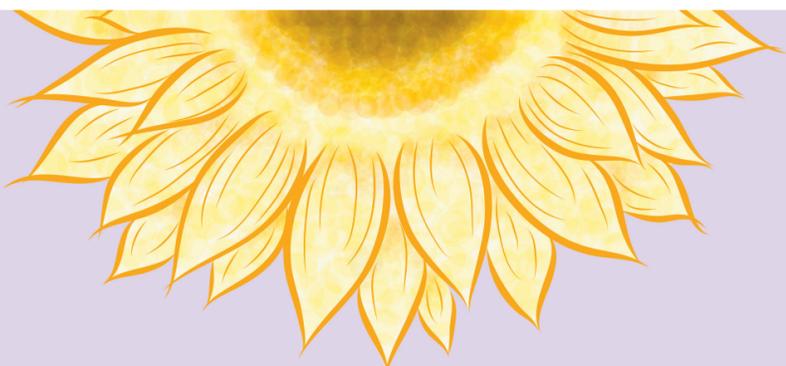
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