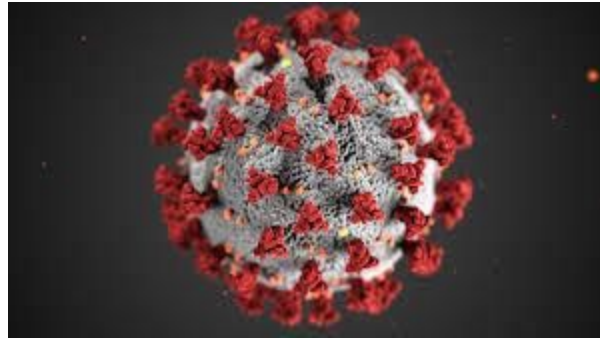


Public health officer outlines steps in motion to reopen county

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The county's public health officer has reached out to the state to loosen its restrictions on vacation rentals and RV parks to try to import low levels of COVID-19 into Del Norte County.

Dr. Warren Rehwaldt told the Board of Supervisors on Tuesday he didn't want Del Norte County to be well along the path of reopening without being able to track viral activity. However, he emphasized that relaxing safety measures puts some at risk for severe illness.

"I made the case to the state yesterday, during my presentation, that we actually needed some relaxation of a Stage 3 item — namely allowing some short-stay travelers to come in and stay in our county — to bring virus into the county so we have something to measure," Rehwaldt said during the Zoom meeting. "As crazy as that sounds — if we don't have any disease activity going on — as we start to relax these restrictions we won't know when we've gone too far until we have a huge surge of cases showing up in the hospital and people in bad shape. And I don't want to see that."

Rehwaldt explained Del Norte County has only experienced three positive COVID-19 cases. He speculated out of the nearly 480 tests that have been conducted, there's a strong chance that the last positive case announced April 27 was linked to the first two.

He said the virus may have been halted in its tracks in Del Norte County due to actions taken to shutter schools, restaurants, lodging facilities and other businesses. But it's not all clear yet for the most frail among the population.

"The super high-risk people, the super elderly, they cannot come outside and play yet," Rehwaldt said. "They have to stay indoors and stay shuttered down. Especially during the early phases of reopening."

Rehwaldt said with the help of County Administrative Officer Jay Sarina, who is also the director of the Del Norte Office of Emergency Services, will seek a letter of support from the Board of Supervisors on Thursday to submit to the California Department of Public Health. Rehwaldt figures that letter, in addition to input from Sutter Coast Hospital and other local emergency medical providers, will help Del Norte bolster its case that the community can safely lift social distancing measures more quickly than other parts of the state.

“The biggest advantage of doing this is it allows us to open up restaurants in a stepwise fashion earlier than the rest of the state,” he said. “Testing capacity has improved locally, especially at Sutter Coast Hospital, whose in-house system can have results back within an hour or two. Going forward, our next project will be trying to improve surveillance testing in the county.”

Reywaldt explained that counties wanting to lift stay-at-home measures at their own pace must take several actions:

- They have show a low COVID-19 presence in their communities.
- They must meet testing and contact tracing guidelines.
- Their healthcare system must be able to withstand a sudden increase in cases.
- They must have plans in place to protect the most vulnerable of severe illness — the elderly and those with an underlying health condition.

Reywaldt said Del Norte County could reach out to Eureka’s CDPH funded testing community testing facility to increase surveillance testing. He added the state’s goal is to have testing sites located within an hour’s drive and is exploring mobile systems that could travel to Del Norte and Trinity counties.

Sutter Coast Hospital currently can perform in-house testing for COVID-19, which is primarily dedicated to its clinical staff, Rehwaldt said. But he doesn’t want to rely on just one source of testing source, especially if there is a spike in disease activity just as safety measures are relaxing.

Rehwaldt said to help prevent that spike, officials may be able to use the same polymerase chain reaction test technology used for diagnostic COVID-19 tests to also detect traces of coronavirus at sewage treatment plants.

Another action the state is promoting to prevent spikes is through contact tracing. Del Norte Count’s Public Health Branch has two nurses dedicated to contact tracing, while the state is recommending a staff of 15 per 100,000 people, Reywaldt said.

District 3 Supervisor Chris Howard asked about the likelihood of a spike in cases as shelter-in-place measures are lifted, referencing meetings he’s had with Dr. Mark Ghaly, secretary for the California Health and Human Services Agency, hosted by the California State Association of Counties.

“What does that do to our county? Do we go back into shut-down mode on this constant roller coaster?” Howard asked.

Rehwaldt said state representatives asked him the same type of questions about the county's ability to handle a potential increase in COVID-19 cases as it resumes a sense of normalcy and what its metrics were for being able to increase safety measures if that happened.

Rehwaldt said the key is Sutter Coast Hospital's ability to handle COVID-19 cases without being overwhelmed.

"We are going to live with whatever level of disease that represents," he said. "That really is the heart of all this, not to prevent the transmission of COVID forever in the community. We want to have a manageable activity level of the disease so we don't get overwhelmed."

Rehwaldt reiterated the key component to keep the hospitals from being overwhelmed is encouraging the vulnerable elderly population and those with compromised immune systems to stay indoors and continue sheltering in place.

The contentious nature of the shelter in place order was on display when two business owners took opposite sides on the issue.

Log Cabin Diner owners Ed Salsedo and Sherry Scott asked if Del Norte County has reached out to others to petition the state to relax safety measures. The two had tried to reopen dine-in service May 2 after bills mounted while their diner remained closed. But abandoned those plans after both the county and nearby Yurok Tribe officials served cease and desist orders.

Salsedo told the supervisors Rehwaldt didn't take "real science" into consideration when he ordered businesses to be closed and threatened sue both the county and Rehwaldt.

"I will be suing the Del Norte County Board of Supervisors and the county health officer for the loss of revenue, personal anguish and punitive damages — anything I can get," Salsedo said. "We're going to come after the Board of Supervisors if we don't get leadership from you."

Meanwhile, Sticky Grove cannabis dispensary owner Robert Derego told supervisors he was alarmed at Rehwaldt's suggestion to introduce viral activity in Del Norte County. Derego said he closed his business in early March and urged county leaders to curtail tourist traffic, but was concerned reopening businesses too soon would bring the virus to the community with limited resources.

"People like myself, we made a sacrifice for the community's good," he said. "We wanted to make a sacrifice for the overall good of the community."