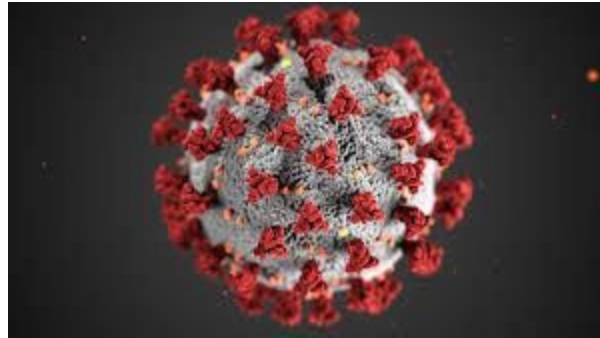


Public health officer breaks down county's first real wave of coronavirus

May 27, 2020



Del Norte County is experiencing a real first wave of the COVID-19 coronavirus according to the county public health officer.

Dr. Warren Rehwaldt reported to the county board of supervisors at their regular meeting Tuesday the breakdown of 17 new coronavirus cases that have been confirmed since last Friday. Rehwaldt said the nature the cases they're seeing are interconnected – with two confirmed cases of personnel at Pelican Bay State Prison, a few in the agriculture community and a couple hospital staff.

“That’s to be expected. Sooner or later, every part of the community is going to get touched. A first wave is hitting us for first time and that makes a difference and gets people’s attention,” Rehwaldt said. “It’s serious. We still have no hospitalizations, that’s good, but it will happen sooner or later.”

He added about half were discovered through aggressive contact tracing over the Memorial Day weekend, while the rest were new cases.

“Of those that walked on their own, there was probably at least eight to 12 new cases of that nature. Probably more depending on how you look at it,” Rehwaldt said. “Some of the cases were directed by clinics who turned out to be in contact with cases we’re investigating. We’re seeing community spread in real time doing this contact tracing.”

As of 9 a.m. Wednesday, according to the county public health website, out of 943 tests, there have now been 40 confirmed cases of the coronavirus, 847 negative results, 16 results still pending and 14 recoveries.

Rehwaldt said many of those tested over the holiday weekend were asymptomatic.

“There were a significant number of asymptomatic people who had significant contact with other positive cases,” Rehwaldt said. “Or they were presymptomatic in a two-day window we were catching them before they were symptomatic because of their contacts.”

In the wake of large numbers of people out enjoying the weather over the Memorial Day weekend, Rehwaldt said he didn’t think the new spike in cases was related to reopening more parts of the county.

“These are intimidating numbers, for us that makes perfect sense,” Rehwaldt said. “I don’t think this has anything to do with early stage of reopening. It’s more a case of people being not quite as disciplined, staying home, wearing masks, having private parties. I heard of a Mothers Day party the weekend before that. People are letting their guard down. Now is not the time to do that.”

After his presentation, supervisors and several community members weighed in with questions including whether masks are mandatory or if travel restrictions would be enforced.

District 1 Supervisor Roger Gitlin and Thomas Barnes, owner of TAB & Associates Inc., both wanted clarification on the county’s mandates regarding masks.

“Many of the cases are asymptomatic. If you don’t know you’re affected, how know you’re sick? Could be everybody in county be sick?” Gitlin asked.

Gitlin also pointed to inconsistencies in mask enforcement, where Walmart and Safeway are not requiring their employees or customers to wear masks while Home Depot does require customers to wear masks to enter the store.

“I’m concerned you’re operating in a vacuum,” Gitlin told Rehwaldt. “You have all this data on 40 cases you’re not sharing with public health.”

Gitlin pointed to news that Humboldt County’s public health officer shared a public warning of the McKinleyville Chevron gas station and Aztec Grill and asked those who visited the business between May 15-20 to get tested.

“Why are we not hearing this kind of information?” Gitlin asked. “Why are we not knowing more information about these 40 people in our community?”

Rehwaldt said Dr. Teresa Frankovich identified a specific place and timeframe when she asked those Aztec Grill customers and employees to be tested, but did not name specific individuals. He added Del Norte County hasn’t experienced an incident where that kind of public request for information is necessary.

“We get information to people who absolutely need to know it,” he said. “People can self-identify if they want to, but we’re not going to make the assumption that it’s up to us to identify them publicly.”

Rehwaldt then addressed the second part of Gitlin’s question about masks. Rehwaldt said initially, he urged people to wear masks when there was a low disease activity to help them get used to it the idea. He now

reminds people that they're required to have masks on them in public and to wear them when inside a business. He added there are exceptions to those who can't wear a mask for medical reasons.

Rehwaldt said that even through it is now a requirement, Public Health staff wanted to give businesses the options to be able to enforce mask-wearing. It's like a "no shoes, no shirt, no service" rule, Rehwaldt said. He added staff will check out businesses not complying with mask requirements, but hopes that more will pay attention going forward.

"We could technically cite people," he said. "It would be a burden on law enforcement and the courts, but we can if we have to, and we're not taking that off the table."

A related question on fines was brought up by chairman Gerry Hemmingsen and resident Jacob Chilcott, who lives near South Beach, related to the issue of travel.

While Hemmingsen said restrictions regarding non-essential travel is still in place, Chilcott pointed out Humboldt County Sheriff William Honsal warned visitors to stay away and communities in the Lake Tahoe area closed to tourists over the weekend.

"Some communities are writing fines to people that have traveled to their community for the amount of \$1,000," Chilcott said. "Why is Del Norte County not addressing this? Particularly during this time of a spike in cases, why are we not attempting to enforce the essential travel order? It just seems like a gross irresponsibility to say that it's too difficult to enforce."

Rehwaldt issued an order May 22 to hotels and vacation rentals reminding owners of his order against short-term rentals for vacationers. Regardless, Rehwaldt said some hotels were pretty much full over the weekend, with tourists showing up in the community to enjoy the weekend.

He said the problem was trying to distinguish between those who are recreating and those traveling for work or other valid reason.

"Essential travel is defined in many ways - related to work, family, a legal issue to take care of. Travel for tourism, relaxation and vacation, however, we're not quite there yet," Rehwaldt said. "Plus, it's tough to enforce. We don't have people monitoring travelers. They're on the honor system. We stress they abide as much as they can."

Rehwaldt said there also wasn't much the Public Health Branch could do to address the hotels that opened to recreators, but it's something that will be addressed.

"We're going to have to have a conversation with those folks to make them realize we're able to monitor this and will," Rehwaldt said. "We don't want to see this happening over and over again all summer until we're comfortable we're in a place where it should happen. A lot of that depends on the state."