



County of Malheur

HEALTH DEPARTMENT

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For Immediate Release

Malheur Among Six Counties Appealing to OHA for Flexibility in Risk Level Determinations

Public health administrators of six Oregon counties, including Malheur, sent a [letter](#) to Oregon Health Authority's Public Health Division director today requesting to change the top category determined by the state from "extreme risk" to "high risk" and to allow Local Public Health Authorities (LPHAs) to make the determination to enact the extreme risk framework when appropriate. The other counties represented were Baker, Grant, Harney, Klamath, and Lake.

The letter explains that the named counties' geographic areas are affected by the COVID-19 restrictions differently than more urban areas in the state. "While COVID-19 has brought hardships to our whole state, the sweeping impact of the 'extreme risk' category for 80% of counties has significantly different implications in rural counties than in more densely populated ones," the letter states, adding that even those counties that are currently avoiding the extreme risk category could, due to their low populations, quickly find themselves there with just a few cases, such as an outbreak in a large family or at a small business.

"For example, Baker County is in extreme risk with just 72 cases over 2 weeks, with a geographic area of more than 3,000 square miles. Malheur County has 204 cases over 2 weeks over 10,000 square miles. No matter if you are a small café in Juntura, more than 70 miles from Ontario, the population center of Malheur County, the impact of the extreme risk category threatens to put you out of business."

The six counties have requested that the same reasoning and practice used to allow schools to reopen under the safety measures they have in place, and with guidance from their LPHAs, be applied to determining risk categories. "These determinations should be made by the LPHA and will serve to build trust in the appropriate use of orders to protect the health and safety of our communities at the local level."

The letter also addresses an inconsistency in how data is gathered statewide and used in reporting and metrics. That issue is expected to be resolved in coming weeks.

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