

Hello world, you are listening to KPTZ 91.9 FM in Port Townsend, Washington. I am Steve Evans with local news for January 18, 2022.

With the hyper-contagious Omicron variant of the virus powering the surge, Jefferson County Public Health reported 172 new cases of COVID-19 just between Wednesday and Friday of last week, bringing the county's total case count since the beginning of the pandemic to 2,016. That's more than 8% of ALL of our historic infections in a matter of days, and lands the county deeply in severe risk territory – right alongside most of the rest of the country. To give some perspective, the two-week case rate of 1,460 per 100,000 population is now almost seven times what it was at the beginning of December, when it was at 214 – a level that was already considered to be high-risk.

The surge in cases has put Olympic Peninsula health care providers, who were already suffering from attrition and burn-out, under increased strain. In a telephone interview, Jefferson Healthcare spokesperson Amy Yaley said the hospital, which is ordinarily prepared to serve about 12 patients at a time, had a patient count of up to 23 last week. And although that number fell to 13 over the weekend, the need to be ready for a new influx has once again forced delays in scheduling non-urgent services and procedures. Some 23 of Jefferson Healthcare's 800 employees are currently out due to COVID, she said, and the hospital continues to struggle to fill open positions and has been forced to rely extensively on travelling nurses and doctors to maintain their level of service.

There are signs that the Omicron wave is easing in the places where it first hit, but until there are signs of it easing here, health officials are asking that the public reserve use of the Emergency Room and Express Clinics for truly urgent issues, and in general to delay routine health care visits to clinics until the current wave is past. If you think you may have been exposed to COVID or are experiencing mild symptoms, you can pick up a self-swab COVID test kit at the entrance to the hospital's Express Clinic, although Yaley noted that the volume of testing right now has caused a lag of about four days in getting results. If you are in doubt about whether you should get tested or not, the Jefferson County Public Health website has an easy-to-follow flowchart on its website to help you decide. (<https://jeffersoncountypublichealth.org/DocumentCenter/View/12518/Testing-Flowchart>).

Although it is true that the Omicron variant has proven more capable of breaking through and infecting vaccinated people, it is still true that vaccination is by far the best way to prevent serious illness or death. And it has been shown that getting a booster shot greatly improves the odds against breakthrough infections. In collaboration with the Washington Department of Health, Jefferson County Public Health will be offering two vaccination clinics this Saturday, January 22: the first from 9-11am at Blue Heron Middle School in Port Townsend (appointments: <https://prepmo.doh.wa.gov/appointment/en/reg/0019862590>) and the second at the Brinnon Community Center in Brinnon from 1:30-3:30pm (appointments: <https://prepmo.doh.wa.gov/appointment/en/reg/2690591109>). The Pfizer vaccine for ages 5 and older, the Moderna vaccine for ages 18 and older, and the Johnson and Johnson vaccine for ages 18 and older will be available. First, second, and booster doses of vaccine will be offered. Reservations must be made online at the DOH website.

As always, you can find the most up to date COVID-19 information at the Jefferson County Public Health website (<https://www.jeffersoncountypublichealth.org/202/Public-Health>), or on Facebook (<https://www.facebook.com/jeffcowagov/>) or on the Jefferson County Government page (<https://www.co.jefferson.wa.us/1429/COVID-19>). Links to all of the websites mentioned here can be found on the transcript of this program, which is available on the kptz.org website.

In a decision the director of the nonprofit Wild Fish Conservancy called “devastating” but which was applauded by commercial interests including the Jamestown S’Klallam tribe, the Washington Supreme Court last Thursday upheld permits allowing Cooke Aquaculture-Pacific to farm steelhead in net pens in Washington waters, removing a major hurdle for the company to go back to fish farming in the state after the state Legislature effectively shut them down following a spill of more than a quarter million non-native Atlantic salmon into the Puget Sound in 2017. Jamestown S’Klallam Chairman W. Ron Allen was quoted by the *Peninsula Daily News* as praising the decision, saying “Aquaculture allows us to utilize best practices in protecting the environment while continuing our traditional industries growing and gathering marine-based resources.”

The Jamestown S’Klallam tribe entered into a joint Venture with Cooke in 2019 to convert an old net pen installation in Port Angeles Harbor from raising non-native Atlantic Salmon to raising sterilized steelhead trout, which are native to Washington waters. The Port Angeles installation had been shut down by the state Department of Natural Resources in late 2017 after it was discovered that the facility, which at the time held 670,000 Atlantic salmon, had a defective anchoring system, was polluting the harbor with Styrofoam, and was partially located outside of the permitted perimeter.

The Wild Fish Conservancy challenged the permit issued by the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife in 2019 for the switch to steelhead, saying the department had failed to follow proper environmental review, but the Supreme Court was the second court to disagree. Fish and Wildlife director Kelly Susewind praised the decision, and was quoted in the *PDN* as saying “the Court conducted an extensive review of the arguments against WDFW’s permit decision...and it unanimously held that WDFW’s review was ‘more than sufficient.’”

But there is one last, potentially high, hurdle for the project to clear before it can go ahead. The DNR leases for the tidelands over which the net pens are located are due for renewal this year, which will trigger a broad-ranging review covering everything from tribal rights to environmental concerns.

And that’s it for today’s local news. KPTZ 91.9 FM brings you local news at noon Monday through Saturday and at 5pm Monday through Thursday. You can contact us through news@kptz.org. This is Steve Evans for KPTZ Community Radio News.