

This is KPTZ 91.9 FM in Port Townsend. This is Jim Burke with local news and commentary for Thursday, July 11, 2024.

This is from the *Washington State Standard*: Due to wildfire risks, the state Department of Natural Resources began a statewide burn ban yesterday afternoon for all of the public land it oversees. Commissioner of Public Lands Hilary Franz said, “The record-breaking temperatures we are seeing this week have left our state bone dry.” The ban on campfires and other burning on the 5.6 million acres the department manages is expected to be in effect until at least the end of September. Wildfires are already burning in the state, including a more than 12,000 acre blaze near Lake Chelan (<https://washingtonstatestandard.com/briefs/washington-issues-burn-ban-on-state-lands/?amp%3bmac=GmGMZcrDsRRr9X7IIU26mnujvAkmXf6PW9EiT8arN7c%3d&%3bemci=01c739e5-4b3f-ef11-86d2-6045bddbfc4b&%3bemdi=81c3ef73-923f-ef11-86d2-6045bddbfc4b&%3bceid=553235>).

Jefferson County, which aligns their fire risk assessments with the state and federal standards, issued a statement this morning: When the fire danger is “high” fires can start easily from most causes, and small fuels (such as grasses and needles) will ignite readily. Unattended campfires and brush fires are likely to escape. Fires will spread easily, with some areas of high-intensity burning on slopes or concentrated fuels. Fires can become serious and difficult to control unless they are put out while they are still small.

No person shall operate or use any device liable to start or cause fire in or upon a “high” fire hazard. Restricted open flame devices: No wood or charcoal cooking fires (BBQ), tiki torches, liquid fuel candles or lanterns, gas or propane-fired weed burners, discharge of fireworks of any type, discharge of firearms on open lands or undeveloped lands of Jefferson County. Only gas or propane fueled appliances. Only wood or solid fueled cooking fire – enclosed flame only, for example, a pellet-fed or propane barbecue grill or smoker,

Prohibited devices/ activities: Fireworks, charcoal grills, exploding targets, incendiary ammunition, firearm discharge on unimproved county lands, tiki style torches, no open flame devices.

This next story is from *Time Magazine*: It’s summer, and RSV and flu have come and gone. But, as ever, COVID-19 is different. The pandemic may be behind us, but the virus is once again surging in the U.S. COVID-19 seems to be settling into a pattern of two peaks a year: one in the winter and one in the summer. Signs of the COVID-19 virus in wastewater – which provides among the most accurate, real-time snapshots of cases – have been increasing since May. Just before July 4, four states – Florida, New Mexico, Nevada, and Utah – reported very high levels of the virus in wastewater samples collected from sewage facilities.

The good news is that while the number of cases is climbing, deaths from COVID-19 continue to drop. In the last week of June, deaths from COVID-19 declined by 25%. The rise in cases is due to a number of factors. First, people’s immunity to the virus is waning; only 22% of people in the U.S. received the most updated vaccine, which was available last fall. Second, the new variants are mutating to spread more easily between people. So far, the virus does not seem to be causing more severe disease. Dr. Paul Offit is director of the vaccine education center at Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia and a member of the U.S. Food and Drug Administration’s vaccine expert committee. He said, “The latest data on COVID-19 show that it is now starting to settle in and have similar kinds of statistics to influenza, meaning hundreds of thousands of hospitalizations and tens of thousands of deaths every year.”

Like the flu, the people most severely affected are the elderly and those with weakened immune systems. The latest strains are still from the Omicron family, and KP.2 and KP.3 – two examples of the circulating ‘FLiRT’ variants, named for the locations of their particular mutations in the virus’ spike protein – are dominating new infections in the U.S. right now. Since June, FLiRT variants have accounted for more than 60% of COVID-19 infections in the U.S. The newest data from WastewaterSCAN found that FLiRT variants account for 55% of the COVID-19 variants found in wastewater samples from across the country, and the concentration of the virus in samples is more than double what it was in June 2023.

For now, it does not appear that these mutations are making the virus more dangerous to human health or enabling the virus to cause more severe disease. But health experts are monitoring cases to learn more about these latest changes. (Might be time for a booster shot?)

KPTZ 91.9 FM brings you local news Monday through Friday at noon and 5pm and at noon on Saturday. You can contact us at news@kptz.org. I’m Jim Burke. Thanks for listening.