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The Desert Sun

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CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC

State lifts stay-at-home orders

Most counties sit in purple tier; health experts worry

**Maria Sestito, Amanda Ulrich
and Julie Makinen**

Palm Springs Desert Sun
USA TODAY NETWORK

Gov. Gavin Newsom lifted stay-at-home orders across the state Monday in response to improving coronavirus conditions, a surprising move hailed by beleaguered businesses. But some local

More inside

What we know about today's changes in Calif. rules, **3A**

The change comes as the numbers of COVID-19 hospitalizations and intensive care unit patients have declined since early January. It allows restau-

health experts worried it could undo the recent sharp drop in cases and hospitalizations.

rants and churches to resume outdoor operations and hair and nail salons to reopen in many areas, though local officials could choose to impose stricter rules. The state is also lifting a 10 p.m. to 5 a.m. curfew.

"We're not out of the woods," Newsom said in a press conference Monday. "We're seeing a flattening of the curve."

Most California counties will return to the most restrictive purple tier of a four-tier, color-coded system for determining what businesses can be open.

All but four counties were in the purple tier as of last week, meaning the risk of virus transmission was "widespread" among 99% of the state's population. Newsom said tier status across the state would be updated Tuesday.

In the purple tier, bars that only serve beverages cannot be open.

Alpine, Mariposa and Trinity counties were one tier beyond that — in red — indicating a "substantial" risk of

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Chapo the dog contemplates the snow Monday before jumping off of the back of his owner's truck in Pioneertown. Chapo belongs to Calvin Dahlstrom of Palm Springs and was seeing snow for the first time. JAY CALDERON/THE DESERT SUN

Storm brings rare ice pellets

Palm Springs sees wettest day in more than 9 months

Colin Atagi

Palm Springs Desert Sun
USA TODAY NETWORK

Snowcapped mountains should be visible around the Coachella Valley on Tuesday thanks to a winter storm that brought Palm Springs twice as much rainfall as forecasters had expected and even

rare ice pellets falling from the sky.

By Monday afternoon, with unusually cool conditions from the winter storm, Palm Springs experienced a rare three-minute period of what appeared to be falling ice pellets.

The National Weather Service confirmed the fall-

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Business owners readying to reopen

Brian Blueskye and Maria Sestito

Palm Springs Desert Sun
USA TODAY NETWORK

Coachella Valley business owners voiced elation Monday after California health officials lifted regional stay-at-home orders across the state.

Riverside County businesses such as restaurants and gyms can now resume outdoor operations, according to county spokesperson Brooke Federico. Additionally, barber shops as well as hair and nail salons can operate inside, she said.

"So many of our small businesses that have shouldered significant burden throughout this pandemic can now refocus on their recovery," Riverside County Board Chair and Second District Supervisor Karen Spiegel said in a prepared statement. "While some of our businesses may be reopening, we cannot lose sight of the fact that coronavirus continues to be widespread throughout all of Southern California."

Joe Wallace, CEO and chief innovation officer at the Coachella Valley Economic Partnership, estimated the

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Examining Kobe's legacy

Kobe Bryant was a savvy businessman, a forward thinker, a Southern California staple and — one might argue — the most revered athlete in the Golden State's history. HARRISON HILL/USA TODAY

USA TODAY

Biden overturns Trump transgender troop ban

President Joe Biden on Monday overturned President Donald Trump's policy that aimed to ban transgender troops from service. Biden directed Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin to implement a policy that prohibits discrimination against troops based on their gender identity and requires the Pentagon to report its progress. **11A**

State vaccine website up

Facing criticism for its chaotic COVID-19 vaccine rollout, California has quietly launched a long-promised statewide website to help residents learn when they are eligible to receive the vaccine and schedule appointments. **7A**

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Thermal collision victim ID'd as Wildomar man

Colin Atagi

Palm Springs Desert Sun
USA TODAY NETWORK

A Wildomar man was identified as the motorcyclist who died in a collision Sunday evening in Thermal.

Shane James, 26, was pronounced dead at 6:40 p.m. in the 85-500 block of Airport Boulevard, according to the Riv-

erside County Coroner's office.

Around 6 p.m., James was riding a dirt bike that collided with a forklift, according to Cal Fire.

The forklift operator was not injured, the California Highway Patrol reported. The exact cause of the collision is under investigation.

James is the fourth Coachella Valley traffic fatality this year.

A Palm Desert woman died Jan. 7 after being hit by a vehicle in Bermuda Dunes.

That same day, a Palm Springs woman and her unborn child died in a crash on Gene Autry Trail.

There were at least 66 traffic fatalities across the desert in 2020. Twenty-five involved pedestrians and the rest involved drivers, passengers, bicyclists

and motorcyclists.

In 2019, 23 pedestrians died on Coachella Valley roads. The overall number of traffic fatalities surpassed 73.

Desert Sun reporter Colin Atagi covers crime, public safety and road and highway safety. He can be reached at colin.atagi@desertsun.com or follow him at @tdscolinatagi. Support local news, subscribe to The Desert Sun.

Businesses

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economic impact of the pandemic in the region to be at least \$3 billion and as much as \$10 billion. Restaurants will be "helped tremendously" by reopening, he said.

The county joins the rest of the state in returning to the color-coded, four-tiered system for reopening. Riverside County falls in the most stringent purple tier, as of the most recent week of data. The change comes as the numbers of COVID-19 hospitalizations and intensive care unit patients across California have declined since early January.

Jacquée Renna-Downing, co-owner of La Quinta Cliffhouse and Pacifica Seafood Restaurant in Palm Desert, is a former registered nurse who didn't agree with the order to shut down restaurants. Renna-Downing doesn't believe outdoor dining is responsible for the spread of COVID-19 and is "incredibly excited" to be reopening.

"It was super difficult to lay off our staff just before Christmas. We will be reopening as soon as we can safely," Renna-Downing said. "We went above and beyond the regular orders. Just because of my background, we have to make sure our staff is re-trained and tested before they come back and our sanitization is up to snuff."

The tables at Pacifica Seafood Restaurant and La Quinta Cliffhouse are spaced 6 feet apart. The outdoor dining area at Pacifica also has cabanas with Plexiglas barriers. Downing estimates a capacity of 80% at both restaurants. Staff also use ultraviolet wands inside both locations and on top of regular sanitization protocols.

"If somebody were to say there was a new technology that would guarantee people's safety, we would implement it," Renna-Downing said.

Restaurant owners ready for reopening

Jerry Keller, the owner of Lulu California Bistro in Palm Springs, said reopening is a "nice Band-Aid." He planned to open Friday evening.

"It isn't like opening the restaurant but it's definitely helpful," Keller said. "That'll bring people into town and if they're in town, they'll be going to the restaurants."

Despite new and more contagious variants of COVID-19 identified in California, Keller doesn't anticipate making any changes to his already-built parklet on Arenas Road, or his patio that can accommodate up to 80 patrons.

"We started off very carefully design-



Chelsea Dorris, owner of Chelsea Nicole Makeup and Hair, poses for a photo in her studio on Monday in Palm Desert. Dorris was able to reopen her salon after Gov. Gavin Newsom lifted the COVID-19 stay-at-home orders in effect in California. VICKIE CONNOR/THE DESERT SUN

ing the outdoor patios and our indoor atrium seating to be extremely careful with distancing between tables and how people would be near each other," Keller said. "We started off right in the very beginning to make these services as safe as possible, so that's not going to be a problem."

Under the tier system, masks and social distancing are still required

"People have to wear masks when they get up to leave for any reason," Keller said. "If they're unhappy about it, then they just won't be able to there."

Wallace pointed to reduced capacities for restaurants under the stay-at-home order, which limited the type and number of customers to be served.

"People eat at certain times of the day and if you can't go out, there's plenty of people who will go to the grocery store, buy food and cook at home," Wallace said. "The restaurant communities have just been slaughtered by not being open. We'll see a tremendous upswing in the restaurant side."

Some question timing of Newsom's decision

Palm Springs restaurateur Mindy Reed, owner of Zin American Bistro and Revel Public House, said Gov. Gavin Newsom's decision to reopen the state

leads to "bigger questions" about the science of the stay-at-home orders while ICUs are still at capacity.

"It makes me wonder if he's taking to the political pressure of the recall or the multiple lawsuits," Reed said. "Doesn't make a lot of sense, but I'm happy to be open."

Reed has been helping to lead a local effort to help fund a lawsuit against the state so Palm Springs area restaurateurs could reopen outdoor dining.

Newsom has come under fire for his shutdown orders, as well as the rollout of the COVID-19 vaccine. A petition drive is underway to gather nearly 1.5 million signatures to place a measure on the ballot to recall the Democratic governor, who is halfway through his first term.

State Sen. Melissa Melendez, a Republican who represents Riverside County, indicated on Twitter she believed politics played a role in Newsom's decision to lift the stay-at-home orders.

"And just like that, the health threat of the virus became less important than the political threat of a recall," she said, referring to the effort to remove Newsom.

In response to criticism that his decision could be related to recall efforts, Newsom said such claims were "complete, utter nonsense."

Public health experts also questioned the move.

Epidemiologist Brandon Brown, an associate professor in the Center for Healthy Communities in the University of California, Riverside, School of Medicine, said Riverside County had more than double the number of hospitalizations and ICU patients compared to Dec. 3 when the stay-at-home order when into place.

"There are zero ICU beds available in the SoCal region, so now is not the time to lift restrictions," Brown said.

According to a model released by the state, Riverside County is projected to see hospitalizations drop to about 1,074 and ICU patients to 209 by Feb. 24. But deaths are expected to rise by more than 700 in the next month, to 3,573.

Hospitality 'relieved' by the news

Aftab Dada, chair of the PS Resorts hospitality group in Palm Springs, said even though there won't be events, conventions and gatherings ahead of peak tourism season, the local hospitality community was "relieved."

Since stay-at-home orders went into effect, out-of-state travelers have been instructed to quarantine for at least 10 days upon arrival.

Travel and hotel stays within the state were supposed to be for essential workers or for "COVID-19 mitigation" efforts, such as quarantining in a hotel.

While hotels and lodging could previously be open with modifications in the purple tier; the state's travel advisory remained in effect Tuesday.

California Department of Public Health did not immediately respond to questions from The Desert Sun about whether leisure travel would again be allowed with the stay-at-home order lifted.

The change would be "huge" for the region going into "peak season," Dada said.

It would allow hotels to service "customers and guest with open arms" but also welcome back "team members ... who have suffered a lot for the past 10 months," Dada added.

Josh Bonner, CEO of the Greater Coachella Valley Chamber of Commerce, said he was hopeful that the Coachella Valley would see tourism activity.

"Obviously, we're not going to have a ton of folks coming in from Canada and the northwestern states right now as late in the game as we are, but I think we can get a lot of that drive market traffic that comes into the Palm Springs market from San Diego, Los Angeles and places like that."

Contributing: Desert Sun reporters Brian Blueskye and Maria Sestito; Associated Press

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