

Legislative special session set for June 18

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New Mexico Gov. Michelle Lujan Grisham gives an update Wednesday on the COVID-19 outbreak in New Mexico and the State's effort to limit the impact of the disease on residents. (Eddie Moore/Albuquerque Journal)

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SANTA FE – Gov. Michelle Lujan Grisham on Wednesday set the start date of a legislative special session as her administration tries to juggle the pandemic's financial impact with efforts to suppress the spread of the COVID-19 outbreak.

The Democratic governor said that approved spending increases will have to be slowed due to a drop of up to \$2.4 billion in estimated revenue levels, but that federal stimulus funds and state cash reserves could help the state avoid layoffs and furloughs of state workers and teachers.

“We’re in a pretty good position where I don’t anticipate we’ll have to make deep cuts,” Lujan Grisham said during a Wednesday news conference that was broadcast online.

The budget-balancing special session will begin June 18, the governor said, and could be concluded in a matter of days. The agenda is expected to include a virus relief package of some kind.

But it’s unclear whether the public will be allowed to attend due to social distancing guidelines and a ban on large public gatherings.

The state’s budget faces incredible pressure because of economic disruptions related to the pandemic and a collapse in oil prices.

Lujan Grisham’s administration last week issued a revised public health order that allows retailers and houses of worship in most parts of New Mexico to reopen at limited capacity.

Dine-in restaurants, gyms, salons and movie theaters remain closed for now, as the Lujan Grisham administration has said it’s not safe yet for them to reopen.

But the governor said Wednesday that those establishments could be allowed to reopen in limited capacity on June 1, with coronavirus case counts in much of the state either declining or showing signs of plateauing – including in New Mexico’s hard-hit northwest corner.

“We’re on track,” Lujan Grisham said.

But she urged people to continue staying home, wearing masks and taking steps to slow the spread of the disease.

New Mexico has pushed its coronavirus transmission rate down to 1.12 overall – a sign of the state’s progress controlling the spread of the disease, state officials said Wednesday.

The calculation – based on state data – means that each person with COVID-19 spreads it to 1.12 other people on average. It’s down from about 1.24 earlier this month and below the 1.15 target the state set for mid-May.

“We’re getting good control of the virus,” Human Services Secretary David Scrase said Wednesday.

However, he said, social distancing measures are vital to keeping the virus at bay, comparing the situation with keeping a parachute fully deployed until landing.

“We’re not ready to completely reopen everything,” Scrase added.

NM toll at 283

Overall, New Mexico's death toll from the coronavirus now stands at 283, after seven additional deaths were announced Wednesday.

In addition, testing confirmed 134 new cases, for a total of 6,317 since March 11, when COVID-19 was first detected in the state.

As of Wednesday, more than half of New Mexico's COVID-19 deaths – 178 out of 283 – had occurred in the northwestern New Mexico counties of McKinley and San Juan, which both have high Native American populations.

Overall, Native Americans currently make up about 58.2% of all confirmed cases statewide, according to the state Department of Health, despite representing just 11% of the state's overall population.

Meanwhile, the state's overall coronavirus mortality rate of 4.2% of those infected ranks in the middle of the pack among states and is lower than the national average of 6% of all COVID-19 cases, according to DOH data.

While the state's overall outlook is improving, potential trouble spots, Scrase said, include some communities in southern New Mexico. The transmission rate, for example, climbed in southeastern New Mexico – at odds with the trend in other regions of the state.

Travel from Texas appears to have caused the increase in cases, Scrase said.

Lujan Grisham said El Paso is having a jump in hospitalizations – a potential threat to residents in adjacent Doña Ana County.

She said she knows it's frustrating to have different rules in different states, but she urged people to avoid unnecessary travel.

"We're not quite seeing a decline in cases," Lujan Grisham said Wednesday, "but we are feeling good about the stability of what's occurring in New Mexico."

'Killing livelihoods'

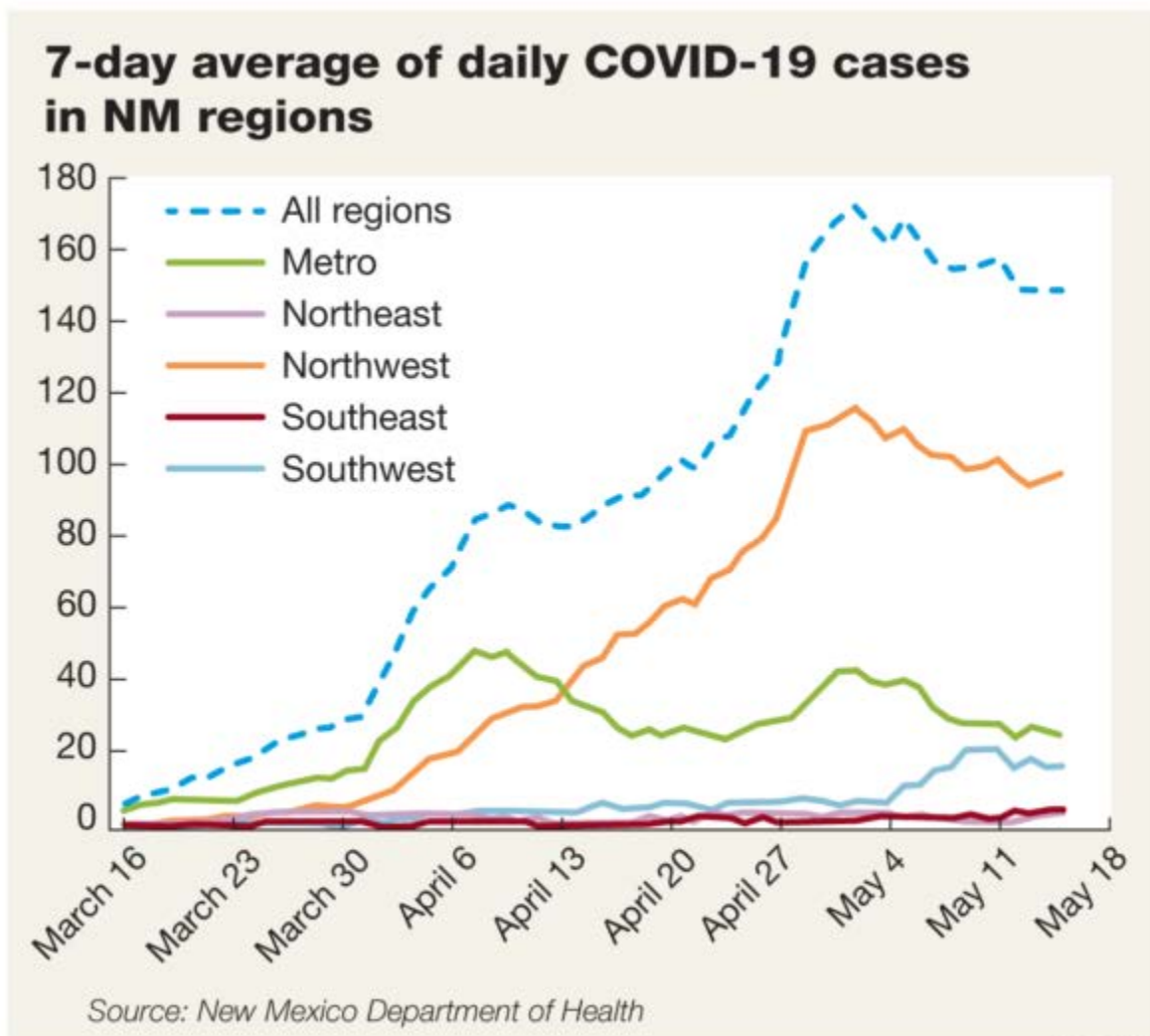
Republican lawmakers, business groups and some local officials in recent days have increasingly called for Lujan Grisham to ease restrictions, citing low infection rates in some parts of New Mexico.

State GOP Chairman Steve Pearce kept up the drumbeat of criticism Wednesday, accusing the Lujan Grisham administration of having a "piecemeal" approach to business restrictions.

“The continued shutdown is killing livelihoods while other businesses are partially opened and national chains take in New Mexico dollars,” Pearce said in a statement. “This is unjust and unfair.”

In response, the governor and some Democratic lawmakers have accused Republicans of putting economic concerns above public safety.

Lujan Grisham and top Cabinet secretaries in her administration also say their decisions are being guided by science, even as scientific consensus shifts in some cases.



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“Given a choice between using a little bit of science or no science at all, I’m proud to be part of an administration that uses what data we have,” Scrase said Wednesday.

But he also said the administration would not use science as a substitute for logical arguments to make decisions.

The governor also told Senate Republicans who had urged her this week to fully reopen the state's economy that New Mexico is in a position to start gradually reopening only because of the aggressive, early actions taken by her administration.

The state has now fully or partially met four of the five "gating criteria" established by the Lujan Grisham administration to guide reopening the economy, falling short only of a 5,000-per-day COVID-19 testing goal.

But the governor has also acknowledged the damage done to businesses during the pandemic and suggested Wednesday that things won't return to normal any time soon.

"This is going to be a long summer," Lujan Grisham said.