

Indoor dining, fall sports out; mask mandate more restrictive

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Published: Thursday, July 9th, 2020 at 3:40pm

Updated: Thursday, July 9th, 2020 at 11:12pm



Governor Michelle Lujan Grisham on Wednesday displays her face mask with “Governor” and a St. Michael’s High School emblem on it before giving her weekly update on the COVID-19 outbreak in New Mexico. (Eddie Moore/Albuquerque Journal)

SANTA FE — Citing an explosion in virus cases, Gov. Michelle Lujan Grisham said Thursday that New Mexico will reimpose a ban on indoor dining and **call off high school football** and other contact sports this fall.

She also urged colleges and universities to postpone their football seasons but said she is still weighing whether it’s safe for New Mexico United, a professional soccer team, to play its season.

The new rules — set to take effect Monday — will also require joggers and anyone exercising to wear a mask, eliminating an exception in New Mexico’s current health order.

The changes are necessary, Lujan Grisham said Thursday, to safeguard the lives of New Mexicans — another six of whom died from the virus, pushing the statewide death toll to 533.

By one estimate, the governor said, the number of deaths could more than double within the next five weeks, unless there's quick action to limit transmission of the disease.

“Where we are is an untenable situation,” Lujan Grisham said in a public briefing broadcast from the Capitol.

The tightened restrictions come as New Mexico sees a spike in the number of COVID-19 infections detected by testing.

The average number of new cases each day shot up 79% in a recent 16-day period, with “astronomical growth” in southeastern New Mexico, Human Services Secretary David Scrase said.

New Mexico's case trends, he said, show signs of “the pandemic being out of control.” Lea County in southeastern New Mexico, he said, is emerging as a particular concern.

Large family get-togethers, travel to Arizona and Texas, the relaxed restrictions on indoor business activity and other factors appear to be driving the increase, state officials said.

New rules are set to take effect Monday, including:

- A ban on dining indoors at restaurants and breweries, though outdoor seating can remain open at 50% capacity. Delivery and curbside pickup are permitted.
- More stringent mask rules. The state will require people to wear masks when they leave their homes for almost any activity, eliminating the exemption for exercise whether outside or in a gym.
- Out-of-state visitors will be prohibited from using state parks.
- All contact sports, including football, soccer and wrestling, for high schools and youth clubs are canceled for the fall.
- The governor said she did not have the authority to cancel football at the collegiate level but she would be contacting school leaders to strongly recommend they do so. As for United professional soccer, she said she is talking to the organization but said the team would not practice or play games in New Mexico for now.

“These are not easy decisions,” Lujan Grisham said. “These are not decisions any governor wants to make.”

Restaurants react

Restaurants and breweries without patios are expected to take the biggest hit from the new rules.

“I’m furious,” said Chef Mike White, owner of High Point Grill. “I understand the restrictions are because citizens didn’t properly follow guidelines. However, this in-between prohibition of services is bleeding small businesses dry. We need to be open 100% because it’s safe enough to do so, or we need to be forced to fully close all services because it’s not safe to be out intermingling at all.”

Palmer Brewing and Cider House, which does not have a patio, is feeling the sting again.

It will go to a limited-hours, takeout-only model.

“I think the majority of us understand the reasoning behind it, but it still hurts,” said Robert Palmer, owner and brewer of Palmer Brewery and Cider House. “(We’re) having to lay off our staff that we just brought back.”

Restaurants may continue to provide carryout and delivery services. Growlers, crowlers and packaged product are available for pick up at breweries. Kilt Check Brewing Co. owner and brewer Mike Campbell is taking some comfort in that.

“We were expecting some sort of shutdown,” he said. “I was hoping it was not going to be complete closure, of course, so allowing us to do some business gives me a chance.”

Santa Fe Bite-ABQ owner Jaclyn Gomez said sales had risen significantly since the state on June 1 began allowing indoor restaurant seating at 50% capacity. She said restricting dine-in service will hurt local restaurants significantly.

Advocates say they do not know how local businesses will be able to weather the new restrictions.

“While we appreciate the Governor’s focus on public health, we are increasingly concerned about the financial health of the small business restaurant owners affected by this order and the welfare of their employees, especially at a time when the federal government has not indicated additional financial support,” Mary Martinez, Albuquerque Hispano Chamber of Commerce Board of Directors chairwoman, said in a written statement.

She said everyone can do their part to “help small businesses and their employees” by wearing a mask in public.

Risk for younger adults

Texas and Arizona are seeing strong growth in infections, too, and they have also rolled back some of their earlier openings. They had gone further in reopening than New Mexico had.

Lujan Grisham said Thursday that six more state residents had died of COVID-19, including two in their 30s and one who worked in health care.

Testing confirmed 238 new cases of the disease. About 3.8% of the test results that came in Thursday were positive, just a shade higher than the 3.6% rate overall since the pandemic arrived in March.

The positive percentage varies but has been on the rise recently.

“We are beginning to see the kind of community spread that is creating spikes around the country,” Lujan Grisham said Thursday.

Adults in their 20s, meanwhile, are an increasing share of the infections, Scrase said, and “we’re starting to see more mortality in younger age groups.”

There are signs, he said, of serious health problems even for younger people who contract the virus but don’t die.

Starting in June, the state allowed restaurants, gyms, salons and a host of other businesses to operate at partial capacity. But a new health order will go into effect Monday outlining the tightened restrictions.

Schools under review

Lujan Grisham said her administration hasn’t made a decision yet on how to handle the potential start of school next month.

She went through a list of possibilities that included postponing school for a few weeks or even into the winter. In some cases, she said, older students throughout the country might finish high school through online classes, never returning to school buildings if it isn’t safe to do so.

“Those are the realm of possibilities,” Lujan Grisham said.

But she said no decision has been made and that it’s important for children to be in school for a variety of reasons. Online-only classes are a “poor substitute,” she said.