



ECONOMIC SENSE

A data-driven policy summary that examines the issues most important to families and businesses across the state.

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COVID-19 Policies Have Lost Credibility

Trustworthy Decisions Cannot Result from the Use of Arbitrary Measures and Unverified Data, along with a Lack of Transparency

Bottom line up front

The executive branch cannot expect its COVID-19 policy decisions to be welcomed and trusted when the underlying data is unreliable and unverified, measures are applied arbitrarily rather than scientifically, and reasonable questions go unanswered.

From the start, the executive branch of Washington's state government has claimed its COVID-19 policies were and are based on science and data. And from the start, questions have been raised about the transparency, reliability, and application of the data, as well as the inconsistency of the metrics.

The primary objective of the policies was also unclear. Was the priority to preserve hospital capacity so all who needed hospitalization could receive it? To drive the number of virus-related deaths downward, even while state government was failing to do all it could to protect the populations experiencing the highest mortality? To lower the “R-naught” number below 1? To slow the rise in cases, even while encouraging the testing intended to detect more cases? Each of those has seemed to be the main objective at one time or another.

Nearly one full year since a state of emergency was declared because of COVID-19, recent policy decisions and a lack of transparency only give the people more reason to be skeptical of the Inslee administration’s response to the pandemic.

A. ‘Further conversations’ no substitute for data

The governor’s second restart plan, announced Jan. 5 – the “Roadmap to Recovery” – drew criticism for taking a regional approach in place of the county-by-county approach of the summer’s unsuccessful “Safe Start” approach.¹

Three weeks later the Puget Sound and West regions became first to qualify for Phase 2 of the “Healthy Washington - Roadmap to Recovery.” This was after the executive branch intervened and on Jan. 28 announced a major change in the standards: A region could advance by meeting any 3 of the 4 metrics, rather than all 4.² Also, regional data would be evaluated on a two-week interval going forward, instead of one week.

The only basis offered by the governor for the changes was “further conversations with public health partners and the state’s increasing vaccination rates.”³ It brought immediate backlash from across Washington – from Democrat legislators, public health officials, a county council, a high-school principal in Central Washington and more.⁴

“Roadmap to Recovery” metrics

- **By Trend in case rate:** Trend in 14-day rate of new COVID-19 cases per 100K population;
- **Trend in hospital admissions rate:** Trend in 14-day rate of new COVID-19 hospital admissions per 100K population;
- **Percent ICU occupancy:** Average 7-day percent occupancy of ICU staffed beds; and
- **Percent positivity:** 7-day percent positive of COVID-19 tests.

One of the 3 metrics met by the Puget Sound and West regions was the positivity rate – yet the state Department of Health admits, on its COVID-19 dashboard, that the data for this metric “should be interpreted with caution.”⁵

In other words, unreliable data were used to support a decision that allowed about half of Washington’s population to move ahead of the rest of the population. That was hardly credible or equitable, although it may have been based on the political kind of science.⁶

B. Lack of quality control causes Phase 2 fumble

On Feb. 11 it was announced that five more regions of Washington had become eligible for Phase 2 of the governor’s so-called Roadmap to Recovery, based on its metrics.⁷ As two of the state’s eight designated regions had already moved into Phase 2 as of Feb. 1, this announcement left only the South Central region in the more restrictive Phase 1. The decision was immediately described as “heartbreaking” by one of the region’s state senators.⁸

A county commissioner in Yakima County, the most populous county in the South Central region, looked at data from the region and suspected a mistake had been made in one set.⁹ That commissioner alerted other

county commissioners and legislators in the region, and by the morning of Feb. 14, the executive branch agreed that the set of data, which came from a hospital in one county, was not accurate. As a result, the South Central region was allowed to join the other five regions in moving to Phase 2 that day.

This fumble exposed one of the flaws cited by critics of the regional approach – which is that one county’s numbers could hold the region’s other counties back.¹⁰ In response to a reporter’s question, the governor denied that his restart plan is flawed, focusing instead on the fact that the issue had been corrected.¹¹ But if no one from the Department of Health noticed the red flag in the South Central data until the sharp-eyed Yakima County commissioner called the agency’s attention to it, that’s a problem.

Before the executive branch makes more life-changing announcements about the restrictions put on certain employers, the underlying data should be first subject to a credible degree of verification.

C. Is there a Phase 3, and what would it mean?

When the “Healthy Washington – Roadmap to Recovery” was announced Jan. 5, the metrics and the two phases of activities allowed under the plan were a disappointment to the state’s small-business sector.¹² At least they were transparent, however.¹³

Nearly seven weeks later, the situation is much less clear. Although all regions of the state have been in Phase 2 for more than a week, the executive branch hasn’t confirmed there is a Phase 3, which activities will be allowed in a Phase 3, and whether the metrics for advancing to a Phase 3 are the same as they were for advancing to Phase 2. Those are reasonable questions that the executive branch should have anticipated, yet no answers have been offered.

After being kept in lockdown through the winter holidays and a full month into 2021, many restaurants, fitness centers and others were anxious to move into Phase 2, and offer indoor occupancy up to 25%. Still, that is just half of the activity allowed under the Safe Start plan’s Phase 2.¹⁴ Less than

four months ago, all 39 counties were twice as open as the eight regions are today.

Because the executive branch has not been forthcoming, the regions are effectively at a dead end on the Roadmap to Recovery. No provision exists for them to move forward, even to the up-to-50% occupancy standard that existed in early November. With the evaluation period for regions now every two weeks, a new report of regional data is expected by Feb. 27. What significance will those data have, when regions still do not know which metrics need to be achieved for them to advance – and advance to what?

Also, the governor recently made it clear that Washington's public K-12 schools can open without prerequisites related to vaccinations. Therefore, advancing along the Roadmap to Recovery also should not have prerequisites involving vaccinations, especially when the supply of vaccinations is also unreliable.¹⁵

D. A plea for the use of empirical science

The executive branch's COVID-19 policy decisions have not adequately taken into consideration an important form of science – empirical science.

The governor recently demonstrated an understanding of empirical science when he visited an elementary school in Pierce County to “show teachers and parents that it can be made safe,” as a television report put it.¹⁶

Nothing stops the governor or public-health leaders from doing the same thing through publicized visits to restaurants, fitness centers and other employers still under restriction. In addition to talking with teachers and witnessing the distancing and other safety precautions being taken by students and staff, they could talk with restaurant operators and staff and witness the precautions being taken to protect both staff and customers.

The people of Washington have engaged in empirical science every time they have patronized a place of business while employing the safety precautions required for entry. Their experience and observations have

given them reason to question the state’s position that a combination of distancing, masking, and sanitation are adequate in some business and educational settings but not in others. Factoring a strong dose of empirical science into upcoming COVID-19 decisions would be an important step in gaining public confidence.

Footnotes

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- ¹ <https://www.governor.wa.gov/news-media/inslee-announces-healthy-washington%E2%80%93roadmap-recovery>
 - ² <https://www.governor.wa.gov/news-media/inslee-announces-metric-changes-healthy-washington%E2%80%8A-%E2%80%8Aroadmap-recovery>
 - ³ Id.
 - ⁴ <https://senatedemocrats.wa.gov/vandewege/2021/01/29/lawmakers-call-for-fair-and-sound-metrics-for-24th-district-communities/>
<https://www.peninsuladailynews.com/news/clallam-jefferson-counties-stay-in-phase-1-for-now/>
<https://whatcom.legistar.com/View.ashx?M=F&ID=9107934&GUID=579F3CCC-1BC0-43D7-9CAF-2619E45C30A5>
<https://www.kxly.com/odessa-principal-calls-out-gov-inslee-for-nonsensical-decision-to-let-only-some-schools-resume-sports/>
 - ⁵ <https://www.doh.wa.gov/Emergencies/COVID19/DataDashboard#dashboard>
 - ⁶ <http://src.wastateleg.org/blog/20th-district-legislative-update-11/>
 - ⁷ <https://www.governor.wa.gov/news-media/inslee-announces-five-regions-progress-phase-2>
 - ⁸ <https://mynorthwest.com/2579713/tri-cities-inslee-phase-2-covid/>
 - ⁹ <https://komonews.com/news/local/officials-believe-south-central-region-should-advance-to-phase-2>
 - ¹⁰ <https://www.spokesman.com/stories/2021/feb/08/new-reopening-plan-same-frustrations-spokane-rural/>
 - ¹¹ <https://www.yaktrinews.com/fired-up-inslee-addresses-phase-2-snafu-defends-covid-response/>
 - ¹² <https://www.nfib.com/content/news/coronavirus-state/small-business-urges-legislature-to-end-inslee-lockdown/>
 - ¹³ <https://www.governor.wa.gov/sites/default/files/HealthyWashington.pdf>
 - ¹⁴ https://www.governor.wa.gov/sites/default/files/SafeStartPhasedReopening.pdf?utm_medium=email&utm_source=govdelivery
 - ¹⁵ <https://www.kpq.com/inslee-not-in-favor-of-vaccinating-school-staff-before-next-phase-says-schools-can-reopen-safely-now/>
 - ¹⁶ <https://www.kiro7.com/news/local/gov-inslee-visits-school-promote-in-person-learning/XJRU7HL43BD6ZIPHFLH4CZNSQ/>