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CAPITOL CONNECTION

APRIL 2022

From the governor: Good news, caution and hope

After two years of anxiety, Hawai'i is entering a new phase of the pandemic with some measure of hope. COVID-19 case counts and hospitalizations are down and vaccinations are up. The governor has lifted the statewide indoor mask requirement and ended the Safe Travels Hawai'i requirements for domestic travelers. And just in time for April's Earth Month came the stunning announcement that the U.S. Navy will defuel and permanently close the Red Hill storage facility.

Q. Why did you decide to delay ending the indoor mask requirement?

A. My biggest concern from a public health perspective was that if we lifted mask restrictions too early while there was still a lot of virus circulating in our communities, it could trigger a surge really quickly. The counties were dropping some of their requirements, and we anticipated spring break might result in a rise in cases. That's why we wanted to maintain the requirement to March 25. Many in our community understand that masks provide protection and are willing to wear them, even when it's not required.

Q. Why do you feel public school students should continue to wear their masks indoors, as well as those in congregate settings?

A. It still makes sense for students to wear their masks indoors, especially because vaccination rates among young children are not as high as we would like. However, wearing masks outdoors will be optional at the public schools. The Department of Health recommends masking for anyone who is indoors with people whose vaccination status is unknown, as well as those in congregate settings.

Q. What do you foresee in this next phase of "living with COVID"?

A. We're going to transition to more normal distribution of tests and vaccines through physicians, clinics and pharmacies. It will be a mix of continuing safe protocols and people taking personal responsibility, depending on their risk level. The state Department of Health is still monitoring for variants and doing surveillance testing and targeted contact tracing for unusual case clusters.

Q. What did Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin say to you about the decision to close Red Hill?

A. When I took the call on March 7, I was expecting a very different conversation, especially because of the conflict in Ukraine. Then Secretary Austin said he had decided to defuel and decommission the facility. He said threatening the aquifer was not something they wanted to do, and he said they were committed to cleaning up the situation. Militarily, he said it was important to have a more distributed fuel storage system. As for the Navy's plans to safely defuel Red Hill, we need to make sure their actions match their words.

Q. What do you think the impact of Russian sanctions will be on the state's gas prices?

A. We'll have to be prepared for some increases because we did get about 25 percent of our crude oil from Russia. Par Hawai'i has told us they're working to get oil from other sources. As for the war in Ukraine, I don't know how Putin can justify his invasion of another country, and it's heartbreaking to see the Russians targeting civilian populations, schools and hospitals.

Q. What is your message to the community for Earth Day 2022?

A. I'm proud Hawai'i is leading by example to slow global warming. Our state has committed to more high-impact actions on climate change than any other community nationwide. The conflict in Ukraine and the U.S. ban on fossil fuel imports from Russia is a reminder for the long-term about the need to transition to renewable energy sources, but we know rising gas and utility prices affect everyone.



Governor and Mrs. Ige thanked the Hawai'i National Guard for their service during the state's COVID-19 response and through other state crises.



Ukrainian flags at the Capitol.

Indoor mask requirement lifted . . . with health advice



Masks can still be an important tool indoors to mitigate COVID-19.

The latest sign that Hawai'i is "learning to live with COVID" came when Governor Ige lifted the statewide indoor mask requirement at 11:59 p.m. March 25 when the emergency proclamation expired. But he and DOH officials are encouraging everyone to remain cautious since "we're not out of the woods yet." The governor said: "Together, we have reduced COVID-19 in Hawai'i to the point where most of us will be safe without masks indoors. Right now, hospitalizations are trending down. Case counts are falling. We are better at treating people who are infected. Boosters are saving lives. And the CDC has rated the state's COVID-19 community level as 'low.' However, the state will be ready to reinstitute the mask policy if COVID case numbers surge."

State Health Director Dr. Elizabeth Char emphasized that masks are still an important tool in preventing transmission of COVID-19.

"We strongly recommend people over age 65, people with compromised immune systems, people who aren't vaccinated, and those who care for people at risk of severe illness still wear masks indoors. This is especially important in crowded settings." Situations where masks are still recommended indoors include schools, hospitals and health care and long-term care facilities, shelters, correctional facilities and other congregate living complexes. "Masks should be considered by anyone who is indoors with people whose vaccination status is unknown." **Simple prevention practices** that have worked in the past will keep us moving in the right direction, Char said. Look for details at <https://hawaiicovid19.com/>.

Governor ends travel quarantine, Safe Travels Hawai'i

In case you missed it, there's good news in time for summer travel: As of March 26, passengers arriving in Hawai'i from domestic points of origin don't have to show proof of a COVID-19 vaccination or a pre-travel negative test result. Incoming passengers also aren't required to create a Safe Travels account or provide traveler information. International passengers will continue to follow the requirements put in place by the federal government. In addition, state and county employees and visitors to state facilities are no longer required to provide vaccination status or negative COVID test results.



The Safe Travels screeners were on the front lines.

"We started the Safe Travels program to protect the health, lives, and livelihoods of the people of Hawai'i, said Governor Ige. "The program put in place safety protocols that included a multi-layered screening and testing approach that kept our communities safe during the COVID-19 surges that endangered the most vulnerable of our citizens. Right now, we are seeing lower case counts, and hospitalizations are coming down." Added Kaua'i Mayor Derek Kawakami, "We thank our entire state who came together, made tremendous sacrifices, and overcame the greatest challenge our society has faced in recent history."

DOH outlines plans as the COVID-19 pandemic evolves



Dr. Libby Char



Dr. Sarah Kemble

What will the next phase of the pandemic look like for the state? The answer depends on any new variants, but the good news is we know more about responding to COVID-19 than we did two years ago. In a [March 7 legislative briefing](#), health director Dr. Libby Char and state epidemiologist Dr. Sarah Kemble outlined DOH's plans to keep the community safe as restrictions drop.

• **Hawai'i's cautious approach is still working** - "Our response will evolve as the pandemic evolves," said Dr. Char, but thanks to everyone's help, "we're doing much better than many other states." However, she cautioned that some parts of the world were seeing COVID surges and that mask

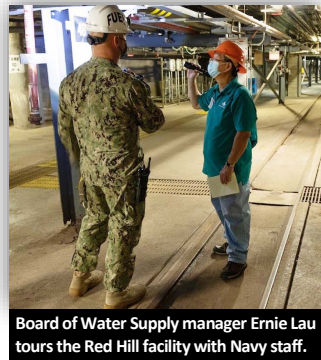
wearing is still a good idea in crowds and for vulnerable populations.

- **Preparing for new variants** - The state plans to stay ahead of the curve in protecting against new variants, Dr. Char said. The approach mirrors much of what President Biden outlined in his National COVID-19 Preparedness Plan. **DOH's focus will continue to be on vaccines and boosters as the best tools** to prevent hospitalization and death, plus increased access to tests. "People can order a second round of free test kits at covidtests.gov," she urged. "Our big push is for equity in vaccines, testing and treatment statewide."
- **Wastewater testing planned** - Hawai'i also has the advantage of being able to identify variants such as omicron faster through partnerships between its own state lab and other community labs. In addition, a local wastewater surveillance system is expected to be in place by this summer to alert the state to new variants.
- **In-school testing and masking** - Dr. Kemble said in-school testing will continue through the school year as a way to keep students in schools and everyone safe. The DOE is keeping the indoor mask requirement but has made outdoor masking on campuses optional. Contact tracing has moved from universal case investigation to prioritizing specific, at-risk groups and settings or unusual clusters.
- **Remember the basics** - In answer to the question of how to prepare for what's next, Dr. Char reminded everyone to "remember the basics. Vaccinations and masks work, stay home when you're sick, wash your hands and avoid crowded places," she said.

Navy announces it will defuel, permanently close Red Hill

The news was stunning and a major win for the state: Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III announced on March 7 that the Navy will defuel and permanently close the Red Hill storage facility. “Throughout the process, we will work closely with the Hawai‘i Department of Health and with the Environmental Protection Agency to safely defuel the Red Hill facility,” he said. “No later than May 31, the Secretary of the Navy and the Director of the Defense Logistics Agency will provide an action plan for safe, expeditious defueling of the facility, with a completion target of 12 months.

“Then, as soon as we have made corrective actions to ensure that defueling is safe, we will begin defueling,” Austin continued. “Then we will move to permanently close the Red Hill facility, including conducting any and all necessary environmental remediation around the facility. This is the right thing to do.” Austin went on to say that Red Hill’s centrally-located bulk fuel storage made sense in 1943, when Red Hill was built, but “it makes a lot less sense now.” He said the military will move to a more dispersed fueling system for ships and aircraft in the Indo-Pacific.

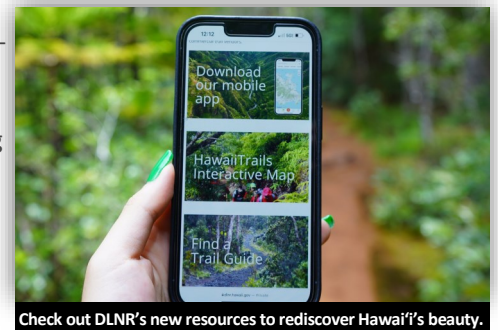


Governor Ige applauded the decision, saying, “This is great news for the people of Hawai‘i. Our national defense begins with the health and safety of our people, and there are better solutions for strategic fueling today than there were when the Red Hill storage facility was built. We look forward to working with the Navy to safely defuel and permanently close the storage facility.”

The governor said the state will continue to be vigilant in court until the U.S. government’s appeal of the state’s emergency order is withdrawn. “It’s premature for us to stop fighting the lawsuit because they’re saying the state doesn’t have jurisdiction and oversight, and we want to make sure we don’t drop our guard. . . .We definitely will not rest until we’re certain that any danger to the water system or our community is mitigated and removed. The Navy created this situation so they need to ensure we have access to clean, fresh water for the future.”

DLNR site offers new ‘Island Hubs,’ app for exploring

With the approach of Earth Day, there’s never been a better time to explore the islands — either in person or virtually. To help, the state Department of Land and Natural Resources has launched a new website upgrade to make it easier to find a whole host of resources specific to each island. The upgraded hub at <https://dlnr.hawaii.gov/dofaw/> provides information on everything from Hawai‘i’s native species, hiking trails and protected areas and volunteer opportunities to permits and guidelines for your next adventure. There’s also a special section on climate change impacts with descriptions of local challenges and what DLNR is doing to address them.



The site upgrade, managed by DLNR’s Division of Forestry and Wildlife

(DOFAW), enables users to filter for information by clicking on “Island Hubs” from the menu on the main page. DOFAW also has new online learning tools for exploration from home or classroom, including a video hub, a growing collection of virtual tours, native species profiles and over 70 new native bird pages and interactive web maps linking to information on public lands. Also available is more social media content and the **Outerspatial app** that provides details about trails and areas managed by DOFAW. “This is an equity and accessibility issue for us,” said DOFAW administrator David Smith. “If people can’t be outdoors in person, we’re going to bring some of what makes Hawai‘i special to them.”

Check out DLNR’s new resources to rediscover Hawai‘i’s beauty.



Volunteers are needed to help statewide.

Earth Day and Volunteer Week Hawai‘i 2022

The largest volunteer-focused campaign in the state – also marking Earth Day April 22 – gets under way this month with Kanu Hawai‘i, multiple community partners and thousands of volunteers. The annual event is an opportunity to encourage people to engage with their communities and recognize volunteers for their year-round contributions.

During April 17-23, residents, visitors, non-profits, businesses, schools and government agencies will join forces across the state to help the environment and invest in their communities for a more sustainable future. The collective effort and volunteer hours will be captured through the Aloha+Challenge, Hawai‘i’s local framework to achieve the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. To learn more about making “A Pledge to Our Keiki” and volunteer opportunities, go to <https://www.kanuhawaii.org>.

Celebrating 175th anniversary of Washington Place

It was a celebration Queen Lili‘uokalani would have loved – filled with music, singing and keiki dancing hula. But the March 31 event marking the 175th anniversary of Washington Place was also a chance to step back in time, to bear witness to the residence’s place in history as a National Historic Landmark and home to many of Hawai‘i’s leaders. Other 175th events included a new Washington Place exhibit about the Queen’s life, an open house, and a concert by the Royal Hawaiian Band.



Governor and Mrs. Ige celebrate with the keiki who performed at the 175th event.

The guests and participants at the March 31 gathering reflected their own part in Hawai‘i’s history. They included former governors, representatives from the Royal Order and Hawaiian Civic Clubs, the Washington Place Foundation, cabinet members, legislators, and *kūpuna* from the DOE’s Office of Hawaiian Education. Hula students from three schools – Nu‘uanu Elementary, Keolu Elementary and Ke Kula Kaiapuni ‘o Ānuenue – performed “Lili‘u Ē” live at the event. In a 21st century twist, they were joined by 2,300 fourth graders from 38 schools in a livestreamed statewide hula.



Gov. Ige signs the proclamation.

“Washington Place is best known as the home of Hawai‘i’s beloved Queen Lili‘uokalani,” said Governor Ige in his proclamation. “This is where she composed music, cultivated gardens, supported Hawaiian causes and fought for her people’s well-being until her passing in 1917.” First Lady Dawn Amano-Ige, as chair of the 175th anniversary committee, continued, “Governor Ige and I will always hold Washington Place in our hearts. It represents the foundation we continue to build upon, in memory of the queen, in honor of the people of Hawai‘i, and on behalf of Hawai‘i’s keiki, who will inherit Hawai‘i’s history and its lessons into the future.”

Inspirational women continue to make a difference



Whether it’s International Women’s Day or April’s Earth Month, celebrating the contributions of women and girls around the world and close to home has never been more important. That’s especially true as Hawai‘i has emerged as a global leader in fighting climate change and creating a healthier, more sustainable planet.

On March 8, First Lady Dawn Amano-Ige and Australia’s Consul General Andrea Gleason co-hosted their annual **International Women’s Day** event — this year featuring strong female leaders in Hawai‘i’s conservation work. Mrs. Ige praised their dedication to protecting our natural resources — whether in government service or nonprofits. “We are increasingly facing existential challenges that require us to work towards a just and inclusive community,” she said. “As an island community, we also have an acute understanding of how climate change will impact all of us in the next decade.”



Mrs. Ige and panelists gather for International Women’s Day.

The past month also provided more opportunities to honor women who have served to inspire others. Whether it’s a queen at Washington Place, a pioneering scientist in Mānoa or a teacher in Kalihi, women have remained strong role models from the past and for the future. **Alice Augusta Ball**, who made her mark more than 100 years ago, was honored at UH Mānoa in a special ceremony Feb. 28. Ball was UH’s first African-American graduate and the first woman to earn her master’s degree in chemistry in 1915. She was a pioneering scientist who at age 23 discovered a treatment for Hansen’s disease (leprosy) using oil from the Chaulmoogra tree.



Alice Augusta Ball was honored at UH for her pioneering work.

On the same day, a surprised **Michelle Le Iwasaki** heard Governor Ige announce her name at an assembly as the recipient of the **\$25,000 Millken Educator Award** for 2021-2022. Iwasaki, a Kalihi Kai Elementary academic coach, was praised for developing long-term solutions to support the students. This included leading the school to partner with the Turnaround Arts national program. “It’s teachers like her all across our state who are inspiring students to be the best they can be,” said Mrs. Ige, a former educator in Hawai‘i’s public school system.



Michelle Iwasaki is the 2022 Millken winner.

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