

OLYMPIA, WA — Later this month, Washington will double indoor capacity and allow for smaller crowds to return to large sporting events, as all 39 counties move into Phase 3 of the state's Roadmap to Recovery plan.

Gov. Jay Inslee promised a "boatload of good news" during a news conference Thursday afternoon, laying out significant reopening plans and revealing the state will enter the next tier of vaccinations earlier than expected.

"On March 22, every county in the state of Washington will be eligible to move forward to Phase 3 in our reopening plan," Inslee said. "This means our restaurants, gyms, fitness centers, movie theaters — some of the hardest-hit businesses in Washington state — will be able to return to 50 percent capacity."

Inslee said Phase 3 also allows for indoor and outdoor events, like high school graduations and concerts, to resume with up to 400 attendees. While specific industry rules are still in the works, the governor said Phase 3 would also permit alcohol service until midnight instead of 11 p.m.

One of the most significant changes announced Thursday is the return of crowds for professional sports, which will allow for an estimated 9,000 fans to attend opening day for the Seattle Mariners.

"It's been a year now since we've had a reduction in our chance to be spectators at sporting events," Inslee said. "We're now at the point where we can safely move forward. What this means is on opening day, we will be singing 'Take Me Out to the Ballgame.'"

Generally, outdoor venues with permanent seating can welcome fans at 25 percent capacity. Phase 3 also adds capacity for high school sports, rodeos and other outdoor events, all with safety precautions in place, including distancing and mandatory mask use.

Student-athletes can also resume high-contact sports, including basketball, wrestling and cheerleading, including competitions with 400 or fewer spectators.

"Assuming we continue to make progress, we're going to reevaluate this capacity limit in April and potentially increase the capacity limit on areas such as minor league baseball," Inslee said.

The governor's announcements Thursday included another overhaul in how the state evaluates re-openings, abandoning the regional approach in favor of counties and simplifying the metrics.

Moving forward, the state Department of Health will evaluate each county based on the rate of new COVID-19 cases per 100,000 people and the rate of new COVID-19 hospitalizations every three weeks. Inslee said a built-in failsafe would also move a county backward if their ICU became 90 percent full. The state's first review of Phase 3 counties will take place on April 12.

COUNTY SIZE	INDICATOR	PHASE 1	PHASE 2	PHASE 3
Larger County	New cases per 100,000 population per 14 days	> 350	350 - 200	< 200
	New COVID hospitalizations per 100,000 population per 7 days	≥ 10	9.9 - 5	< 5
Smaller County (< 50k people)	New COVID cases over 14 days	≥ 60	59 - 30	< 30
	New COVID hospitalizations over 7 days	> 5	4.9 - 3	< 3



Another piece of welcome news Thursday centered on vaccine eligibility, which will now extend to the second tier of Phase 1B on March 17, nearly a week earlier than planned.

Phase 1B2 allows vaccination for the following groups, in addition to all previous eligible people:

Workers in agriculture and food processing

Grocery store workers

Public transit employees

All first responders, law enforcement and firefighters

Corrections employees at jails and detention centers

People ages 16 and above who are pregnant or with a disability that puts them at high-risk

"This is another tremendous step forward in our fight against this pandemic," Inslee said. "We're glad to be able to advance this even a week earlier than we thought we were going to be able to do, to get more shots into arms as quickly as possible."

Inslee concluded his remarks with a reminder that successfully moving forward will require all Washingtonians to keep up their defense until enough people are immunized.

"The reason we're able to make this progress today is because we have been safe, we have been diligent, we have been intentional, we have cared about our loved ones and ourselves. We've got to understand we are still in this fight. We have these variants out there and this thing can spring back on us again. The way I look at it is we're hitting COVID with the left, with the vaccine; we've got to hit it with the right and continue to pound it with masks and everything else we know works. We've got to keep pounding it until it's down on the canvas and can't get back up. If we do this, we ought to have tremendous confidence with having a good summer." The governor's announcements Thursday included another overhaul in how the state evaluates reopenings, abandoning the regional approach in favor of counties and simplifying the metrics.

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