

# WA PUBLIC HEALTH SYSTEM MONTHLY UPDATE

**March 2026**



The Washington State Department of Health (DOH) works diligently with Local and Tribal Health Jurisdictions to improve the health and well-being of Washington residents. The WA State Public Health System Monthly Update provides an overview of the key health issues impacting Washington state, and the progress we are making in addressing them.



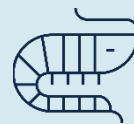
**Questions about the  
WA State Public Health  
System Monthly  
Update?**

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## **Hot Topics**

- DC Hill Visits
- Measles in Washington State



## **Puget Sound National Estuary Program**



## **Public Health Emergency Preparedness**



## **HELMS Update**



# Hot Topics

## DOH DC Hill Visit

From March 2-4, DOH's Secretary of Health, shown in Figure 1, held in-person meetings in Washington, D.C. with both U.S. Senators and 5 members of Washington’s House delegation. These meetings provided an opportunity to share real-time impacts of federal funding changes and to reinforce priorities critical to protecting the health of Washingtonians. Discussions focused on vaccine access, maternal and child health, statewide disease monitoring and surveillance capacity, and federal grant terminations and transitions. DOH outlined the operational impacts of recent and anticipated federal grant terminations, including staffing reductions, delayed community outreach, and disruptions to prevention services.

Maintaining vaccine access remains foundational to preventing outbreaks and protecting vulnerable populations. DOH also shared data highlighting immunization gaps in rural, Tribal, and underserved communities, along with operational challenges amid evolving federal vaccine policies.

DOH underscored the importance of:

- Sustained federal vaccine purchasing and distribution programs
- Flexibility to support mobile, school-based, and community vaccination clinics
- Continued investment in outreach and education to address vaccine hesitancy



Figure 1: DOH Secretary Dennis Warsham with District 7 Congresswoman Pramila Jayapal during the DOH DC hill visits.

## Measles in Washington State

Washington state continues to experience elevated measles activity with **29 confirmed** measles cases so far in 2026, more than double last year’s total of 12, as shown in Table 1. These cases span multiple counties with the highest counts in Snohomish and Clark counties, and the majority are occurring among **unvaccinated individuals**, 5-17 years of age. Data is updated weekly [Measles Cases in Washington State | Washington State Department of Health](#)

Table 1: 2026 Measle Counts in Washington State

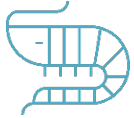
Case Counts	Number of Cases	Percent of Total Cases
Measles Cases linked to a WA Outbreak*	21	72%
Measles Cases not linked to a WA Outbreak**	8	28%
Case confirmed, under investigation	0	0%
All 2026 Confirmed Cases	<b>29</b>	<b>100%</b>
Hospitalizations	1	3%
Deaths	0	0%

\*A **Measles Outbreak** is declared when 3 or more measles cases are related.

A **WA Outbreak** is a measles outbreak happening in the State of Washington.

\*\* Cases **not linked to a WA Outbreak** are cases of measles in Washington that are linked to other cases of measles outside of Washington State.

\*\*\* **Hospitalized** refers to the total number of measles cases who were hospitalized related to their measles illness



# Puget Sound National Estuary Program

The Puget Sound National Estuary Program advances coordinated, science-driven efforts to protect and restore the health of Puget Sound. The program operates through a place-based, partnership model that leverages federal funds with state, Tribal, local, and private investments to support priorities such as shellfish bed recovery, pathogen reduction, stormwater management, habitat restoration, and climate resilience.

Puget Sound supports commercial and Tribal fisheries, millions of dollars in shellfish harvest, recreation, and coastal communities across the state. Federal investment through the National Estuary Program (NEP) and Puget Sound Geographic Funds are explicitly designed to protect estuaries of national significance and to catalyze on-the-ground projects that improve water quality and ecological function. Continued congressional support ensures these federal dollars are matched, amplified, and efficiently directed to priority recovery actions.

## DOH's role and recent uses of NEP funding

DOH administers Puget Sound Geographic Funds through cooperative agreements with EPA. DOH has been successful in competing for 3 awards, dating back to 2011, including the Pathogens Lead Organization award, 2 Shellfish Strategic Initiative awards, and is applying for an additional opportunity. The goal of this work is to restore 500 harvestable acres of shellfish beds annually, based on a 3-year rolling average with no net negative years. This goal is used by the Puget Sound Partnership for the shellfish beds "vital sign," and by EPA as one of their headquarters measures.

These cooperative agreements effectively leverage federal, state, Tribal, and local dollars together to scale restoration and resilience projects across the region. Since 2011, DOH has distributed over \$58 million of EPA's Puget Sound Geographic Funds to local governments, Tribes, state agencies, and other partners to control pathogen pollution and protect shellfish harvesting in Puget Sound. Priorities for investments include pollution identification and correction work, onsite sewage system management, manure management, preventing boaters waste, and addressing wastewater treatment plant impacts on shellfish harvest in Puget Sound. Under the current cooperative agreement, DOH has invested \$20.2 million in approximately 30 projects.

### *Recent accomplishments & examples:*

- \$8.6 million to support pollution identification and correction programs in adaptable watershed sampling and monitoring, source investigations, strategic audience-specific outreach methods, and tools and incentives for source correction.
- \$4.3 million to enable state, city, utility district, and privately owned wastewater treatment plants to prepare for modifications or implement small-scale improvements that will lead to shellfish classification upgrades around outfalls. Projects include feasibility studies and development of engineering and construction plans for modifications that can reduce the shellfish growing area closure that is implemented around outfalls for public health safety.
- \$3.5 million for technical assistance on how best to reduce livestock manure pollution. Funds support outreach and education, farm plan development, and incentives for correction. The flexibility of these funds supported partners in addressing impacts from winter flooding and are being used to help agencies develop adaptive management strategies and build flood preparedness on livestock farms.
- \$2.6 million for inventorying, inspecting, and repairing failing onsite sewage systems to reduce pathogen loads to shellfish harvest areas. This includes providing incentives and financial assistance to homeowners for system repairs and replacements.
- \$1.2 million in additional work that supports shellfish harvest, including expanding pathogen modeling

that assists DOH and partners in analyzing shellfish safety and monitoring needs. It also includes investing in a pilot project to address impacts from sea level rise and restroom facilities at state parks.

Beyond direct investments, DOH staff conduct strategic planning, which guides investments and outlines recovery needs, and run regional practitioner meetings to support cross-program resource and best practice sharing. DOH works in coordination with the Puget Sound Partnership, the Departments of Ecology and Agriculture, local health jurisdictions, Tribes, and others to make progress towards restoring and protecting harvestable shellfish beds.

#### *Opportunities for congressional support:*

- Maintain funding levels to the Puget Sound Geographic Program. This is essential to carrying out the large scale, regional, federally approved recovery plan for Puget Sound.
- Sustain appropriations to EPA for the Puget Sound National Recovery Office so Puget Sound can continue priority recovery actions, partner grants, and technical assistance.



## **Public Health Emergency Preparedness (PHEP): Sustaining Washington's Readiness When It Matters Most**

Congress created the Public Health Emergency Preparedness Program (PHEP) in response to 9/11 to strengthen the role of public health as an emergency responder. The increasing frequency and intensity of natural disasters and infectious disease outbreaks necessitate sustained coordination, collaboration, and readiness. DOH serves as Washington's lead agency for protecting communities before, during, and after public health emergencies.

PHEP directly supports Washington's emergency preparedness and response infrastructure by improving DOH's capabilities to distribute and dispense medical countermeasures, supporting laboratory and epidemiological systems that enable early threat detection and identification, and training public health professionals for day-to-day health department operations and surge capacity.

#### *Why PHEP is critical to Washington state*

Washington faces a wide range of hazards: wildfire smoke, severe winter storms and flooding, emerging infectious diseases, agricultural outbreaks, and risks associated with mass gatherings and global travel. PHEP funding enables DOH and local health jurisdictions to:

- Maintain trained incident management and response staff statewide
- Coordinate medical countermeasures and deploy life-saving supplies
- Strengthen laboratory, surveillance, and situational awareness systems
- Support local and Tribal public health partners in preparedness and response
- Conduct exercises and planning for high-risk scenarios

Under the [Washington State Comprehensive Emergency Management Plan](#), DOH serves as the primary agency for Emergency Support Function 8 (ESF 8): Public Health, Medical, and Mortuary Services, in coordination with the state Emergency Management Division (EMD).

In its ESF 8 role, DOH:

- Coordinates and provides access to critical medical countermeasures, biological products, medical equipment, and supplies
- Maintains the capability to request, receive, distribute, and track health and medical resources

- Provides technical assistance and guidance to state agencies, local jurisdictions, military installations, and Tribal governments
- Supports healthcare system stabilization and continuity during disasters

Beyond ESF 8, DOH supports multiple additional emergency support functions (ESF), including:

- ESF 3: Public Works and Engineering (with the Office of Drinking Water and Department of Ecology)
- ESF 6: Mass Care
- ESF 11: Agriculture and Natural Resources (with the Washington State Department of Agriculture)
- ESF 14: Long-Term Recovery

### *Operational readiness in action*

Over the past 18 months, DOH has been activated in multiple capacities—fulfilling statewide ESF responsibilities, supporting local health jurisdictions and Tribal partners, and coordinating internal response efforts for incidents affecting public health and healthcare systems.

A key operational tool is the DOH Readiness Group—a small, coordinated team that includes members of the Incident Management Team (IMT). Readiness Groups are established to support and/or manage responses to incidents that can be addressed within DOH’s existing authorities and operational structures.

### *Recent examples include:*

#### 2025 Fire Season – ESF 8 Activation (June–October 2025)

- Monitored wildfire smoke impacts to air quality statewide
- Coordinated EMS license reciprocity and regulatory support for wildfire responders
- Supported healthcare and emergency response partners across jurisdictions

#### December 2025 Winter Weather & Flooding – ESF 8 Activation

- Monitored impacts on patient transport and healthcare facilities
- Collaborated with the Health Care Authority and Department of Social and Health Services
- Assessed impacts to public water utilities (via ESF 3)
- Coordinated with ESF 6 (Mass Care), ESF 14 (Long-Term Recovery), and ESF 15 (Public Affairs)
- Supported local jurisdictions and Tribal partners

#### 2025–26 FIFA World Cup Readiness (Ongoing)

- Washington will host matches during the 2026 FIFA World Cup. DOH’s Readiness Group is coordinating planning, preparedness, and response strategies to mitigate health risks and promote a safe and resilient tournament experience for players, fans, and communities.

#### 2026 Measles Readiness (Ongoing)

- DOH is coordinating measles planning and preparedness strategies across the agency and with local jurisdictions, Tribes, and healthcare partners to ensure rapid response and protect community health.

#### 2025 East Adams Regional Health – Rural Hospital Support

- DOH coordinated internally to support a unified response for a rural hospital at significant risk of closure—helping stabilize access to care in a vulnerable community.

#### October 2025 Grant County HPAI Response

- DOH supported Grant County public health in response to a Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza (HPAI) outbreak at a poultry farm. Staff from Communicable Disease Epidemiology conducted fit testing for farm workers. There were no poultry-to-human transmissions.

## 2025 Port Angeles Fuel Spill

- DOH coordinated readiness efforts to support Clallam County Public Health and drinking water systems during a fuel spill incident.

Every activation demonstrates that preparedness is not theoretical, it is operational, continuous, and essential. As emergencies grow more frequent and complex, sustained federal investment in the PHEP program remains critical to maintaining Washington's readiness. This funding ensures that when disasters strike, the systems and partnerships are already in place to protect lives, safeguard healthcare infrastructure, and support resilient communities across our state.



## HELMS Update

In March 2026, the State of Washington's Department of Health launched the final release of its new Health Enforcement & Licensing Management System (HELMS).

HELMS has modernized Washington's health care licensing and enforcement processes by improving data security, reducing paper-based activities, and centralizing license information for staff. HELMS also introduced self-service features for the more than 560,000 health care providers and 12,000 health care facilities that are licensed in Washington each year.

HELMS directly supports the department's critical role in ensuring access to safe, high-quality health care for Washington families.

Our first launch in April of 2024 brought applications online for more than 140 credential types. In April of 2025, we introduced full credentialing functionality for our staff and licensees through user portals, allowing licensees to access and update their credentials at any time. Our last major launch this month integrated enforcement functionality into a single system for the very first time.

HELMS represents the work of more than 100 business and technical team members with significant experience in credentialing and enforcement. Washington's health care infrastructure requires a robust system that can adapt to the rapidly evolving health care environment. Implementation of HELMS has created a solid foundation that uses enterprise technologies to meet users' needs and will strengthen our service to all our constituents for years to come.

Our work is not over, as we transition from the creation and implementation of this system to the operations and optimization of its use, we know there is plenty yet to do. We are committed to supporting and maintaining this product for the long term through responsible management and sustainable resourcing.



### DOH 175-015 March 2026

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