

NEWS

For Immediate Release

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Boise area wastewater testing reveals low levels of UK and California COVID-19 variants

Ada County, Idaho — Recent wastewater samples submitted from the communities of Boise City, Eagle, and Garden City have identified the presence of the UK and California variants of SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19. The results are from ongoing wastewater sampling and testing through Boise City and the University of Missouri laboratory.

Analysis of the samples revealed:

- Low levels of the UK variant (B.1.1.7) were detected in Boise City/wastewater. This variant accounted for 2% of the virus that was sequenced.
- Low levels of the California variant were detected. This variant accounted for 2% of the virus that was sequenced.

Sequencing is the process used by scientists to decode the genes of a virus to learn more about the virus and how it is changing. This process can help predict how a changing virus might impact health.

Though recent wastewater testing has detected low levels of these two variants, Idaho has yet to confirm the presence of the variants among individuals who have tested positive. "While we haven't detected the B.1.1.7 (U.K.) or the CAL.20C variants in clinical samples yet, we have presumed the variants were circulating in Idaho. We are grateful to the City of Boise for doing this important work. The Idaho Bureau of Laboratories is on track to sequence SARS-CoV-2 samples in-house by the end of the month, which will both speed up the time to results and expand the number of samples in our strain sequencing program. In the interim, we continue to work with clinical labs around the state to receive samples for sequencing. Several partners including the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, regional universities, and commercial reference labs are sequencing Idaho samples. To date, 239 Idaho SARS-CoV-2 sequencing samples have been characterized in public databases. We look forward to having more robust and local sequencing capabilities in the coming weeks," said Dr. Christopher Ball, Bureau Chief for the Idaho Bureau of Laboratories.

Evidence of the two variants was detected in wastewater samples submitted on January 25 and January 30 – dates when Ada County COVID-19 case counts were higher than they have been in more recent weeks, making the samples much easier for the lab to sequence. According to the City of Boise, as cases continue to drop, it will become more difficult to sequence wastewater samples.

Evidence of variants emphasizes need for continued safety measures

The discovery of these variants among wastewater samples underscores the importance of continuing to practice all health and safety measures, including by those who are vaccinated against COVID-19. "I'm grateful we have a wastewater testing program, and that it could tell us that these variants are indeed in Boise so that we are reminded, again, that we aren't out of the woods yet," said City of Boise Mayor Lauren McLean. "We'll get through this, and our community will recover, if we remain vigilant in maintaining our distance, wearing masks, and following other health protocols." Public health also encourages you to avoid large gatherings, stay home when you are sick, and get the COVID-19 vaccine when it is your turn to get it and you can do so. When used together and consistently, these measures will continue to protect us from COVID-19 and the new variants that are becoming more common.

About wastewater testing for COVID-19

Since May 2020, Boise City has been regularly testing used water (wastewater) for SARS-CoV-2 to learn more about of the spread of the virus throughout its community.

Wastewater testing measures the quantity of SARS-COV-2 in wastewater; it cannot tell us the number of individuals who are currently infected with COVID-19. Samples submitted by the city include wastewater from the sewershed that includes the cities of Boise, Eagle, and Garden City and represents approximately 290,000 people, though no personal information can be collected through the testing process.

Boise's data dashboard is updated at least once per week as new test results are received.

More Information

- Boise City Wastewater Data: <https://www.cityofboise.org/departments/mayor/coronavirus-covid-19-information/covid-19-data/wastewater-testing/>
- CDC – US COVID-19 Cases Caused by Variants: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/transmission/variant-cases.html>
- CDC – Genomic Surveillance for SARS-CoV-2 Variants: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/cases-updates/variant-surveillance.html>

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**For more information about COVID-19, visit
<https://www.cdh.idaho.gov/covid>
or call the CDH Call Center at 208-321-2222, Monday through Friday
between 8:30 am and 4:30 pm**

(Note: The call center may be closed or operate with limited hours – 8:30 am to 12:30 pm on most holidays.)

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