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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

DATE: 12/17/2020

SUBJECT: To Del Norte County Residents

Today, I am going to turn over the heart of this bulletin to my colleagues in our Northern California region. The Rural Association of Northern California Health Officers has put out a statement about the current state of the pandemic, and has drawn on something we have occasionally mentioned in the past, that the pandemic can be compared to a wildfire.

COVID-19: A North State Wildfire by Another Name December 17, 2020

The North State is in a state of emergency. COVID-19 cases are rising, hospitalizations are reaching record highs and new deaths are reported daily. We need to respond quickly to protect our community from this growing, devastating threat.

Our beautiful region is no stranger to emergency situations. In years past, the resilient people of Northern California have worked together to survive disasters as a strong, united community. When wildfires plagued us, we became all too familiar with prevention and response practices, including defensible space, sheltering safely, mitigating poor air quality and using resources wisely. These same terms apply to our current emergency, COVID-19:

- Defensible space: Remaining six feet away from others and limiting mixing with crowds.
- Air quality: Wearing a face covering when outside the home, for ourselves and for others. And maximizing ventilation.
- Sheltering safely: Sticking close to home and limiting contact to household members only. Coupled with the above two strategies, this could result in an 80 percent decrease in COVID-19 cases in three weeks.
- Using resources wisely: The Northern California region still has adequate ICU capacity, but projections show that this could change by Christmas.

Unlike what we experienced with the wildfires, our entire nation is on fire at the same time, so accessing mutual aid is increasingly challenging. Social gatherings, travel, not masking and going out when you're sick are like fuel for this fire. Risk is higher than it's been at any point in the pandemic. Even as a region, we only have about 120 ICU beds, and 15 percent capacity leaves fewer than 20

beds; that's for people with heart attacks, strokes, trauma, and COVID-19. We, the Rural Health Officers of Northern California, are gravely concerned that this cushion of beds could be easily overwhelmed, and most counties in our region are already struggling to find hospital beds for patients requiring a higher level of health care.

As your public health officers, we are asking our communities to do what they've done during times of disaster so many times before, which is to band together and do everything we can to stop this firestorm. Please adhere to the guidelines that we know slows this disease down and will keep us out of the Regional Stay at Home Order. Availability of an effective and safe vaccine is hope on the horizon, like a caravan of CalFire trucks. But we will need to equip ourselves with all these tools until we have manageable spot fires. Like a fire hose, a vaccine has minimal impact during a firestorm, but is effective at putting out a smoldering fire. Eventually, we will be in a "fire recovery state" when enough people have been vaccinated, likely in late summer or early fall. Until then, we implore you to do your part to slow the spread. As local and regional communities, we have survived many disasters. Together, we can extinguish the COVID-19 wildfire.

We want people to take this moment seriously; this is crunch time, the pandemic surge that has been talked about for months. The sole reason the whole state is not saturated with cases of COVID and hospitals full to overflowing, is that the measures that we have all been struggling to live with every day for months are holding the virus transmission back, just enough. We are down to less than 5% ICU beds available statewide, and approaching a quarter of all hospital admissions in the state now related to COVID. Locally, we are seeing hospital cases turning over almost daily, something that is completely new to us. And we have had another Del Norte resident pass away from COVID.

We have to do better, and we have to do it now. We cannot emphasize it enough; we have jumped in cases along with the rest of the state because of people gathering, not taking enough precautions, and not taking the virus seriously. And yes, many people are recovering, but the issue has always been that if enough people get and pass on the virus at one time, enough of those will end up in the hospital and fill it up completely.

We know many people have been doing a superb job of being safe. We also know that many are still skeptical. Our answer is; look around, look at our numbers these last weeks, look at what is happening around the state and the country. It might be a good time to rethink your plans. Stay home! Cancel your plans for the holiday; this is not the time to take the chance, because if too many do so, we are going to be in big trouble in the New Year. Help us hold back the fire that is the pandemic, before it becomes a firestorm.

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