

New UV Decontamination Site to Open in Sawyer County

Written by GOV Press Wisconsin

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Site is a Product of an Impressive Collaborative Effort Between a Local Host and State Support

MADISON - Gov. Tony Evers announced Saturday that Sawyer County will soon become the latest location in Wisconsin to successfully implement a UV Decontamination System.



“It’s no secret that the COVID-19 public health emergency has strained supplies of personal protective equipment (PPE) across our state and country, leading to shortages of critical supplies including N95 respirator masks,” said Gov. Evers. “Once this system is up and running, it will allow one of the more remote areas of the Badger State to decontaminate at least 45,000 N95 respirators per month, ensuring that our frontline healthcare workers and first responders using PPE in Northwest Wisconsin can continue to do so safely.”

Healthcare workers and first responders using PPE in Northwest Wisconsin, as well as the rest of the state, are being asked to save their used N95 masks for decontamination.

“Having a local decontamination site will provide a great benefit to our Northern rural region

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residents of Northwest Wisconsin,” Sawyer County Emergency Manager Patricia Sanchez said. “We are sure to see a surge in the need for N95 masks in the next few weeks, therefore it will be extremely important to be able to reuse as much as we can.”

The new Sawyer County site, which will support a large swath of Northwest Wisconsin, is thanks to an impressive combination of local host willing to take the necessary steps to house this unit, local volunteers, and state support as far as training and resources in order to bring it online.

“The Sawyer County decontamination site is a product of people in this region being used to working together under difficult circumstances, as there are already many good partnerships and relationships here along with people who are willing to volunteer,” Wisconsin Emergency Management Northwest Region Director Randy Books said. “From the state level, they found out about the pressing need that we had here and quickly reached out. Now we are working hand-in-hand with the state to conserve and safely reuse the limited PPE supplies that are in this area.”

The Northwest region of Wisconsin was an area targeted by the Wisconsin State Emergency Operations Center (SEOC) as a location with a pressing need for this service. Currently, the region has only a limited supply of PPE.

People in at least 11 counties, Sawyer, Bayfield, Ashland, Iron, Price, Rusk, Barron, Polk, Burnett, Washburn, and Douglas, will be able to utilize the site. At least five area tribes, including the Bad River Band of Lake Superior Chippewa Indians, Lac Courte Oreilles Band of Lake Superior Chippewa, Lac du Flambeau Band of Lake Superior Chippewa, Red Cliff Band of Lake Superior Chippewa, and the St. Croix Band of Chippewa Indians, will also be able to utilize the site.

On Monday and Tuesday of this week, industrial hygienists from the Wisconsin State Lab of Hygiene (WSLH) spent time in Sawyer County building the unit and training local staff to be able to run and utilize it. At this point at least 15 volunteers have been trained and will be able to run it, using the WSLH’s best practices.

The device, which is housed in Sawyer County, utilizes the principles of mask decontamination

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set in place by Nebraska Medicine and the University of Nebraska Medical Center. To decontaminate an item, it is hung on a line and exposed to UV light. Too much light and the mask could be destroyed, while too little and it would not be decontaminated.

“We are pretty excited about the possibilities of implementing the methods pioneered by Nebraska Medicine, locally in our state,” said George Gruetzmacher, who serves as an Industrial Hygiene Consultant-Engineer for WSLH. “For places like Sawyer County, we are able to provide the equipment and training to a local site, but the sites themselves need to put together the infrastructure in a comfortable and convenient way. Sawyer County has done an excellent job with doing everything needed to get a decontamination site up and running.”



Sawyer County will be conducting final tests of the unit next week, and plan to start using it soon after.

Sawyer County’s UV decontamination site is just one of many already in place in much of Wisconsin, and with capacity to service N95 masks and other PPE. These efforts are highlighted by facilities already operational in Brown, Dane, and Kenosha counties.

In addition, the UV decontamination sites, this week Wisconsin received a delivery of 230,000 N95 respirator masks from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), providing a needed boost to efforts to obtain PPE for distribution in the state. FEMA has also informed the state that it will be receiving technology in the form of a Battelle CCDS Critical Care Decontamination System™ to help decontaminate N95 masks, which will help extend the life of these important supplies.

FEMA expects the Battelle Corporation to ship its system to Wisconsin in the early part of May, with the system likely to be ready for use later in the month. Once ready to go, the system will be able to decontaminate tens of thousands of N95 masks daily.