

# The Mercury News

## Newsom shuts down Orange County beaches, spares rest of California

The decision came in response to ‘disturbing’ images of crowds along the coast





Hundreds of people gather in Newport Beach to cool off on a hot day despite the state's stay at home orders on Saturday, April 25, 2020. (Mindy Schauer, Orange County Register/SCNG)

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Gov. Gavin Newsom's threat of shutting all California parks and beaches to stop crowds from spreading the coronavirus evaporated like the morning coastal fog Thursday.

Instead, in a growing clash with local officials downstate, the governor limited closures to beaches in Orange County, where tens of thousands of sun-seekers infuriated him by hitting the sands over the weekend in seeming defiance of the state's social distancing rules. His declaration enraged officials in Orange County, where the board of supervisors chairwoman called it "an overreaction and abuse of power" that "tramples on our constitutional rights" — but it brought relief to other coastal communities spared by the order.

Whether Newsom ever planned the more extreme step laid out in a Police Chiefs Association memo late Wednesday — he denied it — or backed off under protest, as others insisted, remained up for debate. But the governor made clear his willingness to override local authorities and enforce his first-in-the-nation, statewide stay-home order to slow the spread of the COVID-19 virus.



BIG SUR, CA.- APRIL 14: The beach remains closed at Garrapata State Park, in Big Sur, Calif., Tuesday, April 14, 2020. (Karl Mondon/Bay Area News Group)

"We're going to have a temporary pause on the beaches down there," Newsom said, calling images last weekend of Orange County beachgoers "disturbing." "I hope it's a very short-term adjustment — I'm confident it will be."



Newsom didn't detail what exactly his "hard close" would mean, but Orange County Sheriff Don Barnes [said Thursday](#) his deputies would seek "voluntary compliance" and "not take enforcement action on this order."

On Monday, Newsom [railed against crowding beaches](#) at Newport Beach and elsewhere in Southern California as "what not to do" and warned Californians that a lack of social distancing could jeopardize hard-earned progress to stem the spread of coronavirus.

Though the spike in new infections and hospitalizations has slowed, the tragedy of the pandemic reached grim milestones Thursday: California logged its 50,000th confirmed case of coronavirus and topped 2,000 deaths.

Newsom's remarks Thursday came after officials in the Orange County cities of Newport Beach and Laguna Beach declined to shut their beaches, stepping up police and lifeguard enforcement of parking and social distancing instead.



NEWPORT BEACH, CALIFORNIA – APRIL 25: People are seen gathering on the beach north of Newport Beach Pier on April 25, 2020 in Newport Beach, California. Southern California is expecting summer like weather this weekend as social distancing and beach closures in neighboring counties continue due to the coronavirus (COVID-19). (Photo by Michael Heiman/Getty Images)

Orange County Supervisor Don Wagner said Newsom's action was uninformed and unnecessary. News photographs of the beach crowds, shot with a telephoto lens that compresses perspective, made beaches appear more crowded than they were, he said, and most people were observing social distancing guidelines.

“I’m very disappointed that he has singled out Orange County in part based upon what he’s seeing in photographs,” Wagner said. “The reports we got overwhelmingly from people on the ground was that there was in fact large, large compliance.”

Newsom’s order was met with ridicule by many at Orange County beaches on Thursday, including one beachgoer who left a giant message in the sand: “Nuck Fewsom.”



Beach-goers appear to send a message to Gov. Gavin Newsom south of the pier in Huntington Beach, CA, on Thursday, April 30, 2020. (Photo by Jeff Gritchen, Orange County Register/SCNG)

Word of the possible statewide parks and beaches closure first came Wednesday night, when a memo from the California Police Chiefs Association leaked to news outlets. It said the organization’s executive committee had learned in a call with the California Office of Emergency Services’ Law Enforcement Division Chief Mark Pazin and California Highway Patrol Commissioner Warren Stanley that the governor planned to announce Thursday that “ALL beaches and all state parks in California will be closed, effective May 1.”

Asked about that Thursday, Newsom said “that memo never got to me.”

Others however, including Wagner and Surfrider Foundation CEO Chad Nelsen, said they were clear in calls Thursday morning with administration officials that was Newsom’s intent until shortly before his daily news update.



By Thursday afternoon, the police chiefs association was taking the blame: “We sent out information regarding decisions that were still evolving” and apologize “for the undue concern that caused.”

Either way, beachgoers outside Orange County celebrated the final result.

“I think advocacy from the surfing community in the state helped,” said Nelsen, whose organization fights for beach access and protection but has supported beach restrictions to control the coronavirus and shorten the lockdown. “He decided to take a data-driven and regional approach and focus on the places where the problems are.”

Dan Schnur, a political scientist who teaches at UC Berkeley and Pepperdine University, said a statewide beach ban overriding local authorities would be “completely out of character” for the governor, who has favored a softer approach.

“Newsom is too careful a politician to act rashly,” he said, “especially given the likelihood of what would have been widespread resistance to an all-out ban.”



SANTA CRUZ – APRIL 30: People take their surfboards to the water at Cowell’s Beach in Santa Cruz, Calif., on Thursday, April 30, 2020. (Randy Vazquez / Bay Area News Group)

Public access to California’s beaches has been enshrined as a right in the state constitution for nearly 50 years. It also is a political third rail of California politics. In his remarks Thursday,

Newsom said he is “passionate” about public access and has been involved with efforts to open beaches for years, including battling Silicon Valley billionaire Vinod Khosla, who has worked for a decade to keep the public from Martins Beach in San Mateo County, where he owns property.

“But my job as governor is to keep you safe,” Newsom said.

Members of the California Coastal Commission said they supported the governor’s decision.

“I had COVID-19, was hospitalized for three weeks and in ICU on a ventilator for 11 days fighting for my life,” said California Coastal Commission Chair and Chula Vista City Councilman Steve Padilla. “So take it from me — we need to listen to the governor and stay home until it’s safe.”

California has 840 miles of coastline, much of it remote or in sparsely populated areas where there have been no reports of crowds.



SANTA CRUZ – APRIL 30: People surf near Cowell’s Beach in Santa Cruz, Calif., on Thursday, April 30, 2020. (Randy Vazquez / Bay Area News Group)

Throughout the state, parking lots, restrooms and facilities at state-run parks and beaches remain closed, but people can still visit as long as they don’t conflict with local health orders.



Although Newsom's announcement did not affect Northern California, some beaches in the region are closed or restricted. Sonoma County continues to bar access to all its beaches. San Mateo County has closed beach parking and made them available only to locals, though it now says [residents who live within 10 miles instead of five miles may use them](#).

Starting Saturday morning at 12:01 a.m., all beaches in Santa Cruz County — whether owned by state parks, cities or the county — [will be closed from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. each day](#), Santa Cruz Public Health Officer Gail Newel announced Thursday, with violators facing fines of up to \$1,000.

During the morning and evening hours when the beaches are open, people must be exercising by walking, running or engaging in other activity, not lounging on a blanket or under an umbrella. Surfing and swimming are allowed at all times.

Newsom noted that the state also has [updated guidelines](#) surrounding activities that have spawned controversy across California — including in the Bay Area — such as golf, horseback riding and tennis.

“We want you to enjoy activities outdoors,” he said. “The only thing we don't want you to do is linger outdoors in ways where you're mixing or congregating.”

<https://www.mercurynews.com/2020/04/30/newsom-beaches-to-close-but-only-in-orange-county/>