

Public Health (Further Extension of Declared Public Health Emergency—COVID-19) Regulation (No. 4) 2020

Explanatory notes for SL 2020 No. 154

made under the

Public Health Act 2005

General Outline

Short title

Public Health (Further Extension of Declared Public Health Emergency—COVID-19) Regulation (No. 4) 2020

Authorising law

Sections 323 and 461 of the *Public Health Act 2005*

Policy objectives and the reasons for them

The objective of the *Public Health (Further Extension of Declared Public Health Emergency—COVID-19) Regulation (No.4) 2020* (the Regulation) is to extend the period of the declared public health emergency to ensure the Queensland Government can continue to respond to any outbreak of COVID-19 in Queensland and to allow for emergency powers to be used to reduce the risk of COVID-19 spreading in Queensland.

Chapter 8 of the *Public Health Act 2005* deals with public health emergencies. Under section 319 of the Act, the Minister may declare a public health emergency by a signed written order. The public health emergency takes effect from its declaration by the Minister.

A declared public health emergency activates a range of powers and functions under chapter 8 of the Act. For example, emergency officers have wide ranging powers under chapter 8 to assist in responding to a public health emergency, including powers of entry and a range of powers to compel persons to do or refrain from certain activities. Emergency officers (medical) have additional powers relating to the detention of persons.

In December 2019 and January 2020, a new coronavirus emerged in Wuhan City in the Hubei Province of China and was given the temporary name of 2019-nCoV (it was renamed on 11 February 2020 by the World Health Organization and is now known as COVID-19).

On 29 January 2020, a public health emergency was declared under section 319 of the Public Health Act due to the outbreak of 2019-nCoV within China, its pandemic potential due to cases spreading to other countries and the public health implications within Queensland resulting from recently arrived travellers from the epicentre of the outbreak. The public health emergency was declared for all of Queensland. A copy of the public health emergency order was published in the Government Gazette on 31 January 2020.

Prior to 7 February 2020, under sections 322 and 323 of the Public Health Act, a declared public health emergency ended seven days after the day it is declared, unless extended by a regulation. On 7 February 2020, the *Public Health (Declared Public Health Emergencies) Amendment Act 2020* (Amendment Act) amended the Public Health Act to allow a declared public health emergency to be extended by regulation for periods of up to 90 days. However, this amendment is subject to a sunset clause that takes effect one year from Royal Assent of the Amendment Act, which reverts the period to 14 days.

The declared public health emergency has been extended by regulation as follows:

- On 5 and 6 February 2020, the declared public health emergency was extended by the *Public Health (Extension of Declared Public Health Emergency—Coronavirus (2019-nCoV)) Regulation 2020* and the *Public Health (Further Extension of Declared Public Health Emergency—Coronavirus (2019-nCoV)) Regulation 2020*, which collectively extended the declared public health emergency until 19 February 2020.
- The *Public Health (Further Extension of Declared Public Health Emergency—Coronavirus (2019-nCoV)) Regulation (No. 2) 2020* extended the period of the declared public health emergency for 2019-CoV by 90 days, until 19 May 2020.
- The *Public Health (Further Extension of Declared Public Health Emergency—COVID-19) Regulation (No. 3) 2020* extended the period of the declared public health emergency for COVID-19 by 90 days, until 17 August 2020.

As at 30 July 2020, the World Health Organization had reported a total of 17,039,160 confirmed positive COVID-19 cases reported globally. As at 29 July 2020, the Australian Government Department of Health reported 15,582 confirmed COVID-19 cases, including 176 deaths in Australia.

The response to COVID-19 across Australia has continued, with sustained community transmission leading to a significant increase in the number of positive COVID-19 cases in the past month in Victoria and New South Wales. As at 30 July 2020, Victoria recorded 9,998 positive COVID-19 cases with 1,698 cases possibly attributed to community transmission. This continues to create a risk that COVID-19 may spread to other parts of Australia as people continue to attempt to leave Victoria for various reasons, including work and on compassionate grounds. This has resulted in the Queensland Government taking action to deny entry to people who have been in Victoria and some parts of New South Wales in the past 14 days (unless they meet criteria for entry), through the Chief Health Officer declaring COVID-19 hot spots for the purposes of the Border Restrictions Direction (No. 9).

As at 30 July 2020, there were 1,083 confirmed cases of COVID-19 in Queensland. Sadly, there have been six deaths relating to COVID-19 being Queensland residents.

While the response to COVID-19 in Queensland has meant that social distancing restrictions have been able to ease, this does not mean the risk of COVID-19 spreading throughout Queensland has been eliminated.

Although the number of active cases and instances of community transmission of COVID-19 in Queensland has been relatively low, the risk of an uncontrollable outbreak in the absence of emergency powers remains high. For this reason, the Queensland Government's health response to COVID-19 needs to continue and the emergency powers provided under the Public Health Act will still need to be heavily relied upon to respond to the public health risks associated with COVID-19 in Queensland.

If the declared public health emergency is not extended, the emergency powers will cease to have effect, including the powers to issue self-quarantine notices for people who are suspected of having COVID-19 or are close contacts of a confirmed case of COVID-19. It is therefore considered necessary to extend the declared public health emergency.

Under section 324 of the Public Health Act, if the Minister becomes satisfied it is no longer necessary to exercise powers to respond to COVID-19 to prevent or minimise serious adverse effects on human health, the Minister must end the declared public health emergency and make a written record of the time and date the declared public health emergency ends.

Achievement of policy objectives

The Regulation extends the period of the declared public health emergency to allow for emergency powers to be used to reduce the risk of COVID-19 spreading. The Regulation extends the declared public health emergency until the end of the day on 2 October 2020.

The effect of making the Regulation is that the declared public health emergency will be extended until midnight on 2 October 2020. If the need arises, section 323(4) of the Public Health Act states the Governor-in-Council may make another regulation to extend the declared public health emergency for a further period of not more than 90 days.

Consistency with policy objectives of authorising law

The Regulation is consistent with the policy objectives of the authorising Act.

Inconsistency with policy objectives of other legislation

No inconsistencies with the policy objectives of other legislation have been identified.

Alternative ways of achieving policy objectives

There are no alternative ways of achieving the policy objectives.

Benefits and costs of implementation

Extending the duration of the declared public health emergency until 2 October 2020 is considered essential to manage any potential spread of COVID-19 in Queensland. There are no direct costs associated with making of the Regulation.

Consistency with fundamental legislative principles

The Regulation is generally consistent with fundamental legislative principles in the *Legislative Standards Act 1992*.

Section 4(2)(a) of the Legislative Standards Act requires that legislation has sufficient regard to rights and liberties of individuals. This includes, for example, whether the legislation makes rights and liberties, or obligations, dependent on administrative power only if the power is sufficiently defined and subject to appropriate review; allows delegation of administrative power only in appropriate cases and to appropriate persons; and confers power to enter premises, and search for or seize documents or other property, only with a warrant issued by a judge or other judicial officer.

The Regulation may potentially breach fundamental legislative principles, as it will continue the declared public health emergency which empowers emergency officers to compel persons to do or refrain from certain activities. This includes requiring persons not to enter or remain within a place, or to stay in a stated place; requiring persons to answer questions; and requiring persons to stop using a place for a stated purpose. Failure to comply with these requirements is an offence with a maximum penalty of 100 penalty units.

The powers of emergency officers are discretionary and are only expected to be exercised if there are significant risks to public health. Additionally, the Public Health Act includes protections to limit the exercise of emergency officers' powers. For example:

- emergency officers can only enter places to save human life, prevent or minimise serious adverse effects on human health, or do anything else to relieve suffering or distress. Emergency officers are also required to make a reasonable attempt to seek an occupier's consent to the entry (section 344);
- certain powers can only be exercised with the written approval of the chief executive (section 345(2));
- a person must be given the opportunity to voluntarily comply with a detention order before it is enforced against them (section 353); and
- a person who is detained must be given the opportunity of receiving medical treatment including by a doctor chosen by the person (section 354(4)).

Emergency officers (medical) will also continue to have the power to order detention of a person if that person has or may have a serious disease or illness. As soon as practicable after a person is detained, an emergency officer (medical) must request that the person be medically examined. Failure to comply with a detention order is an offence with a maximum penalty of 200 penalty units.

The exercise of these emergency powers is likely to impact upon the rights and liberties of individuals. However, it is considered that any potential impact the Regulation has upon the rights and liberties of individuals in this context is justified, given the need to protect the health of the public by managing the potential spread of COVID-19.

Consultation

Due to its urgent nature, external consultation on the Regulation was not possible. However, Queensland Health will continue to consult with businesses and industries and continue its public messaging about the emergency powers, social distancing requirements and the Queensland Government's response to ensure Queenslanders are informed about COVID-19, including any confirmed cases and actions that can be taken to reduce the risk of COVID-19 spreading.

OBPR advised it no longer considers the extension of the declared public health emergency to meet the requirements of exclusion under category (m) of *The Queensland Government Guide to Better Regulation* – regulatory proposals for matters that require an immediate legislative response to prevent damage to property or injury to persons. Given the need to urgently implement the extension to allow emergency powers to continue to be used to reduce the risk of COVID-19 spreading in Queensland, Queensland Health successfully sought an exemption from further regulatory assessment for the current extension of the declared public health emergency in accordance with *The Queensland Government Guide to Better Regulation*.

Notes on provisions

Short Title

Clause 1 states that the short title of the regulation is the *Public Health (Further Extension of Declared Public Health Emergency—COVID-19) Regulation (No. 4) 2020*.

Further extension of period declared public health emergency—Act, s 323

Clause 2 states that the section applies to the declared public health emergency:

- declared by the Minister on 29 January 2020 under section 319(2) of the Public Health Act;
- extended under section 323(1) of the Public Health Act, by the *Public Health (Extension of Declared Public Health Emergency—Coronavirus (2019-nCoV)) Regulation 2020* made on 5 February 2020;
- further extended under section 323(1) of the Public Health Act, by each regulation stated in schedule 1 made on the date stated opposite the regulation.

Under section 323(1) of the Act, the regulation provides for the declared public health emergency to be extended until 2 October 2020, unless it is further extended, is repealed or the declared public health emergency ends under section 324 of the Act.

Schedule 1 — Regulations that further extended declared public health emergency

Schedule 1 lists regulations that further extended the declared public health emergency:

- *Public Health (Further Extension of Declared Public Health Emergency—Coronavirus (2019-nCoV)) Regulation 2020* made on 6 February 2020;
- *Public Health (Further Extension of Declared Public Health Emergency—Coronavirus (2019-nCoV)) Regulation (No. 2) 2020* made on 18 February 2020;
- *Public Health (Further Extension of Declared Public Health Emergency—COVID-19) Regulation (No. 3) 2020* made on 18 May 2020.