

Business

EU to have enough vaccines for 70% of adults 'in July'

Von der Leyen thanks Pfizer for building up supply

PUURS, Belgium: The EU coronavirus vaccine program will secure enough doses to immunize 70 percent of adults by the end of July, European Commission chief Ursula von der Leyen said Friday. The EU chief had previously set a goal of late September, but announced the new target during a visit to a Belgian vaccine plant that is ramping up production. "I'm confident we will have enough doses to vaccinate 70 percent of all EU adults already in July," von der Leyen said, at a factory producing the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine.

Von der Leyen said the European Union would "in the next days" conclude a new contract with the firm - already a mainstay of the European effort - for an additional 1.8 billion doses of second-generation jabs in 2022 and 2023. The Pfizer vaccine, developed by German partner BioNTech, is expensive compared to some competitors and uses the mRNA technique that can be adapted to future coronavirus variants.

The European Commission's vaccine effort to jointly purchase vaccines for the 27 member states got off to a rocky start, with delivery shortfalls, particularly from UK-based AstraZeneca. But von der Leyen thanked Pfizer and its subcontractor in Puurs for its "enormous effort" in building up supply. "So we negotiated together a second contract already early in January, and to accelerate the delivery of vaccine," she said, at a joint news conference with Pfizer CEO Albert Bourla.

"I have outlined the challenges going from vaccinating potentially children and teenagers to hav-

ing a boost to increase immunity after a certain amount of time, and mainly to prepare for... variants that might occur. And here the technology of mRNA is incredibly agile. So there is a limited amount of time that is needed to, if I may say so, engineer the mRNA in a way that it can adapt to potential escape vaccines."

The European Commission is drawing up plans to take legal action against another pharma giant AstraZeneca over its failure to meet vaccine delivery targets. Von der Leyen did not address this, but said the question of whether drug companies had proven "reliable partners" had been taken into account in the ongoing contract negotiations.

'On track to exceed'

Pfizer boss Bourla said his company was "really on track to exceed" commitments it had made to the EU and will deliver 250 million doses by the end of the second quarter, a four-fold increase on the first quarter this year. The visit with von der Leyen to the plant in Belgium underlined Europe's role as a one of the globe's vaccine-producing powerhouses.

The EU's medicines regulator on Friday gave permission for the facility in Puurs to expand its production capacity by 20 percent, with Pfizer aiming to start churning out 100 million doses a month there from May. Von der Leyen said that so far 150 million doses of vaccine had been delivered across the EU and over 123 million jabs given to people in the bloc. She said the EU has exported



PUURS: (From left) German scientist, CMO and co-founder of BioNTech Ozlem Tureci, Pfizer CEO Albert Bourla, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and Belgium's Prime Minister Alexander De Croo address a press conference after a visit to oversee the production of the Pfizer-BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine at the factory of US pharmaceutical company Pfizer on Friday. —AFP

155 million doses to 87 countries around the world since December - a bid to allay fears that Brussels

was closing up shop after introducing export controls in the face of delivery shortfalls. —AFP

Pfizer CEO: COVID vaccine to become easier to ship, store

PUURS: US pharmaceuticals giant Pfizer is planning a new version of its coronavirus vaccine that can be stored in a standard freezer and comes diluted and ready for use, its CEO told AFP on Friday. The vaccine developed by Pfizer and Germany's BioNTech is already a mainstay in Europe's efforts to control the pandemic - but it is a challenge to ship and protect.



Albert Bourla

The current version must be stored at minus 70 degrees Celsius, limiting its distribution to specially equipped vaccination centers. But Pfizer's chief executive Albert Bourla told AFP in an interview that a new version is in the pipeline and that he was optimistic the vaccine will also prove effective against new virus variants.

Indian variant

Bourla said Pfizer has large amounts of real world data from some of the variant outbreaks. "We have already data for the UK one - I hate using the countries, but people know them like that - which is very prominent in Israel... efficiency was 97 percent," he said. "We have data from South Africa, with the South African variant, and overall the efficacy was 100 percent. And also have data from Brazil. And it looks also this is very well controlled." Pfizer has not yet compiled sufficient data on the efficiency of its vaccine against the so-called Indian variant, the latest to raise concerns that a new wave of infections could overcome the immunization drive. But he said he was "optimistic" the vaccine would prove effective, and that the firm's mRNA technology can be adapted to counter new strains.

"The thing that makes me feel more comfortable is that we have developed a process that once a variant becomes a variant of concern, we should be able to have a new vaccine within 100 days," he said. "It's a tough target, but I am very comfortable that we should be able to do it. And because of the effectiveness of this mRNA technology, I believe that variants will not become an issue, we'll be able to control them."

Keeping cool

The European Union is betting big on Pfizer's relatively expensive vaccine, but there are concerns that the difficulty of keeping it at very cold temperatures will make it hard to distribute in poorer countries. But here again Bourla was confident. "We are doing actually two things on this front," he said. The US Food and Drug Administration allows the vaccine to be kept at minus 20 Celsius in a standard freezer for two weeks and Bourla thinks that could be extended.

"And we are about to generate the data for another two weeks. So that this formulation can be stored, let's say, a month in minus 20 if we get approval for that," he said. "On the other hand, we are also working with a new formulation which is much improved, that will be ready to use: that means you don't need to dilute the vaccine, it will come diluted."

Pfizer hopes the vaccine will be able to be stored for two to three months in normal refrigeration and an additional three months in a freezer, Bourla said. "So a total of four-to-six months outside the minus 50 or 70... we believe we'll be able to have it if we are successful in summer." —AFP

Hatchery reviving UK's near-extinct local oysters

PORTSMOUTH: Decimated by over-fishing and pollution, British oysters could make a comeback as a hatchery in the Channel port city of Portsmouth is helping to revive a native species. At Portsmouth University's Institute of Marine Sciences, huge piles of empty oyster shells are stacked in the courtyard, ready for the young oyster larvae to move in.

"In the wild environment, the oysters will be reproducing roughly May through to September, and we're hoping that that will be mimicked here in the hatchery," said Luke Helmer, a scientist at the Blue Marine Foundation, which co-launched the project in 2015 with the university of Portsmouth.

The hatchery is the first in Britain to focus solely on saving oysters, without any commercial motivation. It aims to reintroduce millions of the European flat oysters (*ostrea edulis*), a species that is almost extinct in this region. At the center of the research center is a small room full of saltwater tanks that hold the adult oysters that will lead their revival.

The team of scientists are "feeding them, keeping the conditions right," said Helmer. The team of eight researchers will soon start slowly raising the water temperature to match that of nearby seawater, triggering the oysters to release their larvae. Oysters reproduce by male oysters releasing sperm into the water, which fertilizes eggs released by female oysters. Larvae initially drift in the water but then seek out an oyster shell to attach to and live in. At the hatchery, the larvae will live in incubators before being released in June into the Solent, a shallow strait next to the laboratory.

Overfishing and pollution

Human intervention is required because oysters have almost disappeared from the Solent in recent decades. "If you take it back to the 1970s, there were about 15 million oysters taken out from the fishery each year," said Helmer. "That has now declined to almost nothing." In Europe as a whole, the population of this oyster species has fallen by 90 percent since the end of the 19th century, according to the University of Portsmouth, and is almost extinct in some regions.

The reasons for this is "mainly overfishing and harvesting," said Monica Fabra, a PhD student in marine biology. Other factors include pollution and the introduction of non-native species which compete for space and food, she added, most importantly the Pacific oyster.

Also known as the "Japanese oyster", this was introduced in the last century to compensate for falling numbers of native molluscs and it is now the

Honda aiming for 100% electric vehicles by 2040

TOKYO: Japanese car giant Honda said Friday it would aim to have electric and fuel cell vehicles account for 100 percent of all sales by 2040 to promote climate goals. The automaker's newly appointed CEO Toshihiro Mibe described the target as "challenging" but said the firm wanted to "set high goals".

Honda has said it wants the ratio of electric vehi-



SOUTHSEA, United Kingdom: PHD student in marine biology Monica Fabra displays a British native oyster at an oyster hatchery at Portsmouth University's Institute of Marine Sciences on April 6, 2021. —AFP

cles and fuel cell electric vehicles sold in major markets to hit 40 percent by 2030 and 80 percent by 2035, before hitting 100 percent globally by 2040. It has unveiled 5 trillion yen (\$46 billion) in investments in its R&D to reach the goals.

The announcement comes a day after Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga said Japan would aim to cut emissions 46 percent by 2030, significantly more than previously pledged. The new target revised a previous goal of cutting emissions 26 percent from 2013 levels by 2030. The pledge came with international focus on climate change as US President Joe Biden hosts a summit to encourage stronger action on warming and faster moves towards carbon neutrality. —AFP

Environmental clean-up

Even though it will take a while to reverse the drop in the oyster population, Helmer hopes to reintroduce "somewhere between half a million and a million larvae" into the Solent in the next year or so. If successful, these will help clean up the water. Each oyster can filter up to 200 litres of water a day (4.4 gallons), "which is a phenomenal amount," said Helmer.

They used to play a considerable role in improving water quality in the area when you take into account the millions of oysters that used to live on the seabed. "The oysters are known as an ecosystem engineer so they enhance the environment", due to their constant filtering, he added. Oysters will also improve the biodiversity of the reef where they settle, as their shells can shelter many other species, said Fabra.

During a preliminary trial, researchers put oyster cages down into the sea and were astounded when they pulled them up and discovered 97 species. This result is particularly spectacular for European oysters since it has evolved to live alongside local species, he said. What's more, some studies have shown that the European oyster could be better adapted to deal with the warming climate than the Pacific one.

The hatchery's findings could be rapidly duplicated around Europe as the researchers are collaborating with similar projects in Germany and the Netherlands. But Helmer cautions that a commercially viable population is still a long way away, and it could take a decade to sample delicious local oysters in Portsmouth. —AFP

Europe's COVID recovery fund starts to fall into place

BRUSSELS: Negotiations were difficult and the plan got off to a slow start, but Europe's huge post-coronavirus recovery fund may make its first payments in July. To Brussels' relief, two important obstacles in the path of the 672-billion-euro (\$812 billion) package of grants and loans were passed this week. Germany's constitutional court rejected a bid to block the deal's ratification and Portugal became the first EU member to submit its spending plan.

"It was a very good week," a senior EU official told AFP. A dozen more members - including big player France - are due to follow suit next week, handing over what officials warn are on average 50,000-page documents. This will allow the European Commission to spend two months studying what will eventually be 27 national plans for investment and reform.

If they pass muster the member states will take up to four weeks to give the go ahead and then, one official said, "we'll see money start to flow in July". This will be a year on from the European Union's historic decision to pool debt to fund the recovery package. And what once seemed like a hugely ambitious exercise has been dwarfed by the United States' adoption of a \$1.9 trillion infrastructure plan.

The US has also surged ahead with coronavirus vaccinations, meaning its economy will emerge from lockdowns quicker than those in Europe. EU chiefs remain upbeat and optimistic. "Our objective is to approve all the plans by the summer," European Commission president Ursula von der Leyen said.

Here comes the cavalry

But some national capitals have been champing at the bit. "I see that the American cavalry is arriving on time," French Finance Minister Bruno Le Maire said earlier this month. "I wish the European cavalry would also arrive on time." As late as Thursday, European Central Bank chief Christine Lagarde stressed the "urgency" of getting on with Europe's stimulus.

Spain and Italy will see the biggest injections of funds if their roughly 70-billion-euro plans are approved, followed by France at 40 billion. In recent weeks, behind the scenes, European Commission officials have been in difficult discussions with national governments on the criteria that spending plans must meet.

But, with the arrival of Portugal's dossier, they see political road blocks beginning to collapse. In terms of investment spending, each plan must assign at least 37 percent to measures that better the environment or fight climate change. Another 20 percent is supposed to finance the transition to a more digital economy.

The hope is that as European output picks up after a year of COVID and lockdown woes, it will herald a rash of spending in insulating buildings, railway transport, electric vehicle charging points and high-speed Internet. But, in a stick to accompany the carrot, the European Commission is once again looking to impose structural economic reforms on member states. —AFP



BRUSSELS: Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban is welcomed by European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen in the Berlaymont building at the EU headquarters on Friday. —AFP