Chelsea Curtis | Arizona Republic

The White Mountain Apache Tribe late Sunday announced its casino would temporarily suspend operations after two employees tested positive for COVID-19.

The Hon-Dah Resort Casino in Pinetop temporarily suspended gaming operations at 10 p.m. Sunday while its hotel was scheduled to close Monday after check-out time, according to a news release from the tribe.

Management planned to work with health officials to determine when to safely resume operations, the news release said.

"This suspension of business comes as a result of two employees testing positive for COVID-19 and the staffing shortage caused by other employees entering mandatory self-quarantine," the news release said.

All casino employees would undergo COVID-19 testing, according to the news release.

No customers or guests have been identified as being positive for COVID-19, however, one of the two positive staff members was in contact with employees who serve the public, the news release said.

"We are acting swiftly to protect the health, safety and welfare of our employees and our customers," Brent Kurth, the casino's general manager, said in the news release. "At Hon-Dah, we put our people and our community's needs first."

Sunday's announcement came nearly two months after the casino began to reopen as COVID-19 cases for the White Mountain Apache Tribe began to decline. Now, the tribe is experiencing a slight uptick in its COVID-19 cases, totaling more than 2,500 and 41 known deaths as of Monday.

The increase, however, still remains below the tribe's threshold of no more than 45 new cases in three days, which, if met, would alert more weekend lockdowns and another stay-at-home order, the tribe's Chairwoman Gwendena Lee-Gatewood previously explained. The tribe's emergency operations center in a Facebook post over the weekend said it was working to amend its alert system and seek final approval from tribal Council.

On Monday, the operations center in another Facebook post told tribal members to prepare for a possible lockdown "in the next few days," including gathering food and water supplies, medication, baby formula and diapers and food for pets and livestock.

The center also recommended all events and gatherings to be postponed until further notice.

The White Mountain Apache Tribe is currently in phase two of its reopening plan, which began with tribal parks, the casino and indoor church services and ceremonies for funerals with no more than 50 people, according to Lee-Gatewood.

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