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Biden harnesses Defense Production Act to speed vaccinations and production of protective equipment

The administration also said it would deploy 1,110 military personnel to support mass-vaccination centers

By **Isaac Stanley-Becker**

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The Biden administration announced a handful of initiatives Friday aimed at accelerating mass inoculations against the coronavirus and expanding production of rapid tests and surgical gloves to help control the pathogen.

In the most immediate action, Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin approved a request from the Federal Emergency Management Agency to deploy 1,110 troops to support vaccination sites. The first active-duty military personnel will arrive in California within the next 10 days, to begin operations around Feb. 15, said Andy Slavitt, senior adviser to the White House's coronavirus response team. The service members, the majority of whom will be medical personnel, are expected to be stationed at five FEMA megasites, two of which are in Oakland and east Los Angeles.

"The military's critical role in supporting sites will help vaccinate thousands of people per day and ensure every American who wants a vaccine will receive one," Slavitt said during a Friday briefing.

Biden has vowed to stand up 100 new sites in 30 days as he seeks to surpass his target of administering 100 million shots in his first 100 days — a rate that modeling suggests will be insufficient to stay ahead of new variants of the virus.

As of Thursday, there were 175 federally supported vaccination sites throughout the country, according to a FEMA leadership brief obtained by The Washington Post. Federal support includes the National Guard, whose services some states enlisted from the outset of the immunization campaign late last year.

In a bid to boost supplies of the shots and of other critical equipment, the Biden administration also said Friday that it was taking several steps under the Defense Production Act. The Korean War-era law has been a backbone of Biden's pandemic-related promises. But its power and its limits are poorly understood, according to experts in government contracting.

The law includes a range of emergency powers to control distribution of products and compel companies to prioritize certain orders over others. Most important for the Biden administration's long-term strategy is the authority it

provides to issue loans and purchase agreements to expand industrial capacity.

In the short term, the Biden administration said it was using the law to ensure Pfizer has access to needed equipment to scale up production of the vaccine it developed with German company BioNTech. Between that product and the one developed by Moderna, the federal government has contracts in place for 400 million vaccine doses in the first half of the year — enough for 200 million people under the two-dose protocols.

The Biden administration is seeking 100 million more doses from each company, with the aim of securing the additional doses through the summer. While the administration has expressed confidence it will receive the supply, people knowledgeable about the negotiations said the need for certain equipment is vital.

Because Pfizer did not work with the government as closely as other vaccine manufacturers did, including Moderna, it initially did not receive favored treatment under the Defense Production Act, which allows the government to direct suppliers to fulfill certain contracts ahead of others. Giving Pfizer priority for a number of crucial products — such as lipids, the oily molecules needed to produce the vaccine — was among the terms of a deal for additional doses reached by the Trump administration in December, according to people familiar with the discussions.

But Tim Manning, supply coordinator for the White House's coronavirus response, said the action taken by the Trump administration was limited. The new administration will expand the priority ratings to include more equipment, he said, identifying filling pumps and filtration units as examples.

Pfizer spokeswoman Amy Rose did not comment on the announcement but said, "Our teams continue to work closely on our production as our commercial ramp-up progresses." The company, as part of material released ahead of its fourth-quarter earnings call this week, indicated it could deliver 200 million vaccine doses to the United States by May, two months earlier than its initial July target. Its global estimate is 2 billion doses by year's end.

The company, which has lagged behind Moderna in manufacturing doses destined for the United States, has told the Biden administration it can scale up significantly starting this month, according to federal officials familiar with the conversations. Federal officials have also said they're looking at the possibility of having other vaccine manufacturers complete aspects of the production of authorized vaccines.

The new ratings for Pfizer, along with moves to expand the supply of at-home coronavirus tests and surgical gloves, marked the Biden administration's first formal use of the Defense Production Act, Manning said.

During the transition, Biden and his advisers promised aggressive use of the law, which was invoked 18 times by the Trump administration in relation to vaccine production. Current and former federal health officials said departments had already made extensive use of the law's authorities, and warned that any new action might not have an immediate payoff, while causing unwanted ramifications throughout the medical supply chain.

"It's not a flip-a-switch solution," said one health official, who spoke on the condition of anonymity to address sensitive matters. "It was absolutely all explored under the previous administration."

Manning, however, said the Biden administration was taking steps to use the law to expand domestic production of critical equipment for the pandemic response, though he declined to name specific companies involved. The White House also did not respond to a request for comment about the cost of the efforts.

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He said the administration was using powers under the Defense Production Act to boost domestic manufacturing of at-home coronavirus tests. With the investments, Manning said, 61 million such tests would be available by the summer.

Earlier this week, the administration announced that it was buying 8.5 million of the rapid tests from the Australian company Ellume. It will also invest in six more suppliers to "rapidly surge domestic testing capability," Manning said. The investments will help private-sector partners construct new plants and build new production lines, with the aim of building resilience against disruptions to the supply chain, he said.

The actions also extend to the supply of personal protective equipment. Manning said the federal government would use the Defense Production Act to spur domestic manufacturing of surgical gloves, for which the country is currently almost entirely dependent on overseas suppliers.

"That's unacceptable, and we're using all of our authorities to fix it," he said.

Manning said the government would help build plants to make the raw materials needed for the gloves, as well as factories that would produce the gloves themselves. By year's end, he said, the country would be able to produce more than 1 billion surgical gloves a month — enough to satisfy about half of all American health-care demands.

The administration, he said, was simultaneously exploring ways to expand availability of N95 masks, which have been in short supply during some phases of the pandemic. The masks offer greater protection than surgical masks because they can filter airborne particles and tiny droplets.

Rubber gloves have not been included as part of the kits, packed with syringes and alcohol swabs, that accompany federal shipments of vaccines. Gloves are not required for administering the shots, but medical staff are trained to use them routinely.

With no supplies arriving from the government, providers have been left to procure their own from shrinking warehouse stocks. The gloves are made out of nitrile butadiene rubber, or NBR, and cost 2.5 to 3.5 cents apiece.

The gloves are made by dipping molds into vats of liquid NBR. But overseas plants are running low on the raw material for dipping, said Chaun Powell, vice president for supplier engagement at hospital group purchasing agent Premier.

As a result, he said, "there are production lines that are sitting vacant today, not moving."

Dan Lamothe, Christopher Rowland and Lena H. Sun contributed to this report.