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## Joe Biden dumps Covid-19 vaccination rule for foreign travellers

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Joe Biden has dumped a controversial requirement for foreign travellers to show proof of Covid-19 vaccination to enter the US, only a few days after a top US health agency extended the rule that prevents hundreds of thousands of Australians from visiting the US.

After months of pressure from Republicans the White House on Monday (Tuesday AEST) said the requirement for non-US citizens, in place since September 2021, to prove they were 'fully vaccinated' against Covid-19, would cease from 11th May, the same day the US "national coronavirus emergency" is due to end.

"While vaccination remains one of the most important tools in advancing the health and safety of employees and promoting the efficiency of workplaces, we are now in a different phase of our response when these measures are no longer necessary," the administration said in a statement.

The US government, which also announced it would drop requirements for federal employees to be boosted, had become a global outlier in maintaining any sort of Covid-19 vaccine requirement for international visitors.

Only a handful of African nations including Angola, Guinea-Bissau and Indonesia still have such a requirement; Australia ended its similar mandate in July last year, and Canada in October.

The mandate had become controversial after it became clear in early 2022 the vaccines didn't prevent transmission of Covid-19, and didn't account for immunity acquired by travellers who had contracted Covid-19.

More than 440,000 Australians have never received a Covid-19 vaccine, according to the Australian government data published late last month.

One of them, Tony Nikolic, the director of a civil rights law firm in Sydney, said he was thrilled the ban had been lifted and would seek to travel to the US soon to see his son in Los Angeles and other family across the US.

"My heart longed to return to the USA, a place I proudly call my second home, the people, culture and freedom loving nation where I spent so much time with family and friends," Mr Nikolic, 50, told The Australian.

"I was not able to attend the funeral of my mother's brother who I was very close with, and my professional career suffered too because I couldn't attend legal conference," he added.

The Centre for Disease Control extended the vaccine requirement for travellers indefinitely in an announcement on 27th April to account for the arrival of new bivalent Covid19 vaccines.

"If you received one dose of Pfizer or Moderna vaccine before August 16, 2022, you would not be considered fully vaccinated under CDC's Amended Order," the CDC said.

More than 17.2 million Australians received their last Covid-19 vaccine six months or more ago, according to Australian data, reflecting a plunge in demand for new bivalent boosters against Covid-19, which have been available for months, despite ongoing government recommendations.

The US government recommends Covid-19 vaccines and boosters for all adults and children aged 6 months and up.

Air travel to the US by Australians dropped from more than 1.6 million in 2019 to 62,000 in 2021, before rebounding to 739,000 in 2022, according to the US Bureau of Transportation Statistics.

The G20 group of nations, which includes Australia, meeting in Indonesia last year promised to develop internationally accepted vaccine passports, to “facilitate seamless international travel, interoperability, and recognising digital solutions and non-digital solutions, including proof of vaccinations”.

The vaccine requirement for travellers represented one of the last mandates left over from the pandemic.

The US ended a “coronavirus national emergency” declaration early last month, rescinding the crisis-level setting 1124 days after it was first declared in March 2020. A separate “public health emergency” ends on 11th May.

#### **ADAM CREIGHTON, WASHINGTON CORRESPONDENT**

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