



File Code: 2300**Date:** May 1, 2020**Route To:****Subject:** Guidance for Use of NFS lands including the Operation of Recreation Sites and Services**To:** Regional Foresters and Station Directors

This supersedes Update 3 guidance issued on 03/24/2020.

Summary of guidance:

- *Anchors to USDA Reopening Playbook, OMB Guidance, and incorporates additional Agency risk considerations;*
- *Provides a framework for risk assessments;*
- *Acknowledges relationship to Statewide shelter-in-place/opening orders;*
- *Establishes guidelines for modification to operational status of facilities, recreation sites and services, permitted operations, working with partners and volunteers; and*
- *Establishes messaging coordination approaches.*

The Forest Service continues to take risks presented by COVID-19 seriously and adjust our operations to meet changing information, safety protocols, and recommendations from federal, state and local officials. Given the rapidly changing situation, proactive and precautionary steps will continue to be essential to ensure long-term viability of our workforce and mission delivery. This guidance provides consistency to agency decisions that adjust operations for public service delivery.

The Agency is following OMB, USDA, and CDC guidance and is using a common risk management framework to identify risk factors and mitigation measures to make risk-informed decisions accordingly. This working risk tolerance framework will continue to include measures to ensure the health and welfare of Forest Service employees, partners, cooperators, our families, and the local communities in which we live.

National Forest System program delivery will continue to vary across the Nation during this pandemic based upon a number of factors, including local healthcare capacity and guidelines, State shelter-in-place orders and opening guidelines, and the availability of personal protective equipment (PPE) needed to provide certain services. We also must recognize the personal situations and welfare of our workforce as we adapt and provide services to our colleagues and the public.

In general, National Forests and associated public services sites are to be open in accordance to regular service schedules. However, the level of service the agency can offer at our sites will



depend on our workforce capacity, our ability to provide the service in a manner that ensures the safety of our employees, and safeguards the sustainability of the resources we are charged to steward. Public service sites may be administratively closed in order to align with state and local health guidelines or where resource impacts are unacceptable.

Decisions to adjust service are to be based on risk assessments that include the following core principles:

- **Health and Safety:** Protect the health and safety of our employees, volunteers, partners, recreation providers, and the public. All reopenings will consider health and safety considerations, including state wide orders, employee safety, and the availability of personal protective equipment and trained personnel, as reflected in CDC, State, and local guidance.
- **Shared Stewardship:** We will collaborate with State and local officials as well as our partner Federal land management agencies to provide coordinated recreation site reopening decisions. We will also work with permittees, concessionaires, and partners to develop shared approaches to modifying operations. Our decisions and their rationale will be communicated clearly to the public.
- **Decision-Making:** Decisions to open, close, or provide modified recreation site availability and/or services shall be made by local line officers and supported by risk assessments aligned with national guidance. *Proposed decisions that are not supported by State Governors or conflict with local state guidance will be briefed to the Deputy Chief of the National Forest System prior to implementation.*
- **Communication:** Risk-sharing dialogues with Agency leaders will occur where proposed National Forest System activities impact other public land management activities.

As the number of COVID-19 cases changes over time and local conditions evolve, line officers are expected to manage and modify operations based on an ongoing risk assessment process. Stages for decisions have been described below.

Guidance for National Forest System programs, including operation of Recreation Sites

The National Forest System programs touch nearly every facet of American life. The 193 million acres of National Forests continue to be a resource for people, especially during this COVID-19 pandemic. Facilities, trails, and open NFS lands have served as refuges during this difficult time, and these assets are critical to the American way of life. Ensuring employee health and safety and working with states to align our actions with their public health stances is mission critical and the focus of this associated guidance. With public use reportedly increasing across the National Forest System, it is critical the Agency remain flexible and nimble in reaching decisions that evaluate tradeoffs in managing areas/facilities as closed or open for public use. While it is possible to offer services to the public consistent with guidelines for maintaining public health, it must be done in a manner consistent with the Agency-wide Risk Framework and USDA Reopening Guidelines within the COVID-19 playbook.

Agency recreation services will be offered in alignment with local health and safety guidance. Risk assessments and updated Job Hazard Analyses will be required to ensure appropriate measures remain in place to mitigate potential risks to Agency personnel and contractors.

GUIDANCE FOR REOPENING RECREATION SITES

As new COVID-19 cases fall and local economies begin to revive, recreation sites that have been closed may begin to reopen to the public. There are several stages local units will move through during this process. Movement back and forth between stages may occur, depending on shifting conditions on the ground. The stages are:

- Stage I:** **Mitigation and Monitoring** Effects of Current Conditions
- Stage II:** **Preparation and Planning** for Potential Reopening
- Stage III:** **Implementing Decisions** for Reopening
- Stage IV:** **Monitor and Adapt** to Whatever Comes Next

Below are suggestions for actions to complete within each stage. Consider this checklist to assure process consistency across the Agency, while allowing for adaptability in response to local unit and community conditions.

Stage I: **Mitigation and Monitoring** Effects of Current Conditions

Trigger: Federal and State level guidance has been issued that has resulted in a limitation in the work we can do and the services we can currently provide to the public.

- Encourage the public to follow applicable State and local orders.
- As needed, remind permit holders they are required by their permits to follow applicable State and local orders.
- Adhere to Agency direction regarding mission critical/essential work and telework.
- Implement recreation site closures to varying degrees consistent with risk management framework.
- Practice basic mitigation measures (washing hands, social distancing, quarantining exposed employees, etc.).

Stage II: **Preparation and Planning** for Potential Reopening

Trigger: Direction has been given for units to work through risk assessments surrounding recreation work in order to begin preparations for potential reopening.

- Coordinate with other federal, state, and local authorities to ensure decisions consider the interdependency of recreation service delivery.
- Identify appropriate PPE for employees and volunteers for varying levels of service delivery. Identify services that may be provided without PPE.

- Conduct pre-opening operational inspections of water systems, hazard trees, facility integrity, and the like.
- As needed, make adjustments and/or improvements to facilities and programs that allow visitors to practice public health guidance (e.g. hand sanitizers, maximum gathering sizes, etc.)
- Prepare clear, effective, and timely public messaging to ensure a shared understanding regarding reopening actions prior to implementation. Ensure messaging aligns with guidance from the Office of Communications.
- Coordinate with law enforcement on all reopening processes and procedures.
- If the recreation site is operated by a permit holder, ensure that any suspended permits have been reinstated. (See sample reinstatement letter provided by WO).
- Prepare contingency plans for closing recreation sites again if conditions warrant.

Stage III: Implementing Decisions for Reopening

Trigger: Decisions at the local and/or State level have occurred which relax the public health-focused stay at home orders and/or physical distancing requirements.

- Weigh the advantages and disadvantages of managing sites as open versus managing the sites as closed. Consider all aspects, including sanitization requirements, physical separation feasibility, resource damage, and community impacts.
- Consider opening the site with limited or no services.
- Prioritize reopening of different types of recreation sites depending on staffing, funding, ability to meet health and safety criteria, partner or permittee capability, etc. Consider a phased approach.
 - i. Example: sequential opening by type of recreation facility
 - a. Trailheads
 - b. Day Use Recreation Sites (e.g. picnic areas, resorts, ski areas, marinas)
 - c. Overnight Recreation Sites (e.g. campgrounds, hotels, clubs, organization camps)
 - d. Visitor Centers
- Consider consequences of site openings on other parts of the Forest and broader community—be mindful of ripple effects.

Stage IV: Monitor and Adapt to Whatever Comes Next

Trigger: A resurgence in COVID-19 cases has occurred, and/or other public health and safety conditions have developed, and/or visitor use has created issues and concerns that warrant a change in previous site management decisions.

- Monitor visitor use and concerns at open recreation sites for changes in site management or public information needs.
- Continue to assess the ability of partners or permittees to provide needed and traditional levels of service in all areas of National Forest operation and adjust operations as needed.
- Be prepared to adjust operations in alignment with State and local orders.
- Ensure permit holders are prepared to adjust operations in alignment with State and local orders.
- Consult prior guidance regarding site closures and use risk management framework to inform decision-making.

GUIDANCE FOR PERMITTED OPERATIONS SUCH AS GUIDES

Permitted recreation providers are an essential part of reopening recreation sites and services. The above Guidance for Reopening Recreation Sites applies to all recreation offerings, whether operated by the Forest Service, permittees or partners. The following additional guidance is intended for permitted operations. It is the Agency's intent to support permittees as best as possible in resuming operations.

- Collaborate with permittees when working on your reopening strategy to ensure alignment. Permittees may also provide industry best practices and leverage private industry supply chains for PPE, etc.
- If a permit has been temporarily suspended, it needs to be reinstated prior to operation. (Sample reinstatement letter to be provided by the WO).
- Per the terms of their permit, permittees are required to follow local and State laws, including public health guidance.
- When possible, consider offering extended operating seasons and amending operating plans at the request of the permittee.
- Consider inherent differences in social distancing ability across permitted operations.
- When possible, use consistent, unified communication methods so that although openings may vary across areas, permitted operations can go to a centralized location to view operating information.
- Additional Frequently Asked Questions and Answers will be provided for more detailed responses.

GUIDANCE FOR PARTNERS & VOLUNTEERS

For more than 100 years, the Forest Service has been caring for the land and serving people by collaborating with its partners and volunteers; they are part of the very foundation of this Agency. The Forest Service recognizes that many of our partners have been significantly and adversely affected by COVID-19. The Agency is aggressively positioning itself to support our partners and volunteers as they work to resume activities safely.

As previously outlined in this guidance, each national forest will determine appropriate operations. In advance of shifting operations, program managers are encouraged to reach out proactively to partners. There are several things for partners and volunteer organizations to consider:

- If a partner was unable to access sites and has been unable to implement a partnership as planned, program managers should work with partners to update schedules and alter deliverables, as needed.
- Preparation and administrative tasks required for successful on-site work can continue and be billed in accordance with the schedule.
- If a partner agreement is expiring in the near future, you should reach out to your program manager to discuss an extension.

The Agency recognizes that, while the Forest Service will soon begin a phased shift in operations, some partners may not be comfortable returning to on-site projects immediately. The Agency will work closely with its partners to ensure that Agency employees and partners and volunteers are comfortable returning to work before on-site partnership activities resume. Even once the Agency does resume operations, virtual coordination of partnership activities will be encouraged; face-to-face and on-site work should initially be conducted only when necessary to implement a partnership's activities.

As a partner's local national forest enters Stage II (Preparation and Planning for Potential Reopening), it is appropriate for partners to consider returning to sites and implementing on-the-ground partnership activities. In Stage II, partners should carefully consider whether or not strong social distancing measures can be implemented (i.e., six feet of distance between one another). If those social distancing measures cannot be implemented, partners are encouraged to wait to return to on-site work until Stage III.

As partners and volunteers arrive at on-site locations, it is advised that those individuals be screened for COVID-19 symptoms when arriving on site. Anyone with symptoms or who has been in contact with someone suspected of having COVID-19 should be directed immediately to leave the site and follow CDC guidelines. Partner vehicles, tools, equipment, and other shared resources should be adequately sanitized in accordance with previously issued guidelines. As a local forest or grassland resumes normal activities, partners should continue to rely on telework as much as possible. In addition, high-risk members of partner and volunteer organizations should follow White House and CDC guidance.

As local national forests and grasslands enter Stage III (Implementing Decisions for Reopening), partners could resume implementing projects that require people to be fewer than six feet apart, assuming those gatherings are 50 people or fewer. However, those most at risk from COVID-19 would continue to shelter in place (i.e., those individuals should not return to in-person work). Telework would still be maximized to the extent possible.

In Stage IV (Monitor and Adapt to Whatever Comes Next), the Forest Service and its partners could largely return to normal operations, while remaining alert to changing conditions on the

ground. Those most at risk from COVID-19 should still be encouraged to practice social distancing.

Communications Strategies

The availability of information is central to any modification to an NFS facility, service, or program, and field leaders are expected to dedicate resources to keep information up-to-date and available. This will include such things as availability of services, public notice of the latest safety guidance, and expected operational changes. Please continue to visit the Be Prepared Website for the latest Federal government information at <https://www.dm.usda.gov/beprepared/Covid19.htm>. Special attention should be paid to coordinating with State and local messaging wherever possible. Strategies will include the following:

- Coordinate with State and local partners on shared messaging.
- Provide frequent updates to the public in a variety of media (i.e., recorded messages, signage, social media announcements) regarding topics like availability of services and updated cleaning schedules.
- In communications with the public, officials should emphasize that the health and safety of Forest Service volunteers, contractors, resource assistants, and staff is a top priority, while acknowledging the limits of federal workers' ability to guarantee COVID-19-free environments.
- Where applicable, direct the public to online resources for information needs, pass sales, and permits.
- Visitor Information on available recreation sites, trailheads, and visitor contact points will be provided and updated regularly.

Shifts in our public service operations should always be carefully considered and start with ensuring the health, safety, and welfare of our Forest Service employees. Coordinating with our state, local, and private partners is key. Our actions should always be intentional and transparent to those we serve. I appreciate your continued professionalism and dedication to our National Forests and Grasslands.

Sincerely,

X 

Signed by: CHRISTOPHER FRENCH
CHRISTOPHER B. FRENCH
Deputy Chief, National Forest System