Guidance for Research-Related Field and Off-Campus Activities During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Last updated: 6/2/2020

Purpose and Scope
The purpose of this guidance is to facilitate research-related “field” activities consistent with State of Maine, University of Maine System (UMS) and University of Maine/University of Maine-Machias directives and guidelines to minimize employee, student, and community risks from COVID-19.

These guidelines apply to activities of the University of Maine and University of Maine at Machias. These guidelines more specifically apply to field work activities in outdoor settings on- or off-campus including at university satellite locations (e.g., aquaculture facilities, research farms, Darling Marine Center), and apply to all activities, both in indoor and outdoor settings, occurring at non-university facilities elsewhere in Maine. The above activities are hereafter referred to as “Field Research” for convenience.

Institutional Review
Effective June 1, 2020, we have entered Phase Two of the Plan for Phased Continuity of the Research Enterprise (PDF) which is characterized as a limited increase in on-site activity. Accordingly, essential research and scholarly activity (that require working on campus or in the field) have been expanded to include the following areas (the bullets in bold below are new additional criteria):

- Research and scholarly activity that is critical to the health of the public
- Research and scholarly activity of national or state importance
- Research and scholarly activity that involves the protection of valuable resources such as cell lines, animal lines, instrumentation requiring regular attention, etc. which cannot be shut down and must be kept going at a basal level
- Research and scholarly activities that directly support current Business and Operations designated as critical infrastructure in the Governor’s initial mandate; general university research and scholarly activities in those designated areas would not typically qualify as “essential”.
- Research and scholarly activity necessary to avoid prematurely stopping an experiment or research process in progress that would result in an irrecoverable loss.
- Research and scholarly activity necessary because experimentation or related activities for the coming year are tightly linked to seasonal phenology and even a short delay will result in long term impact.

Phase 2 expansion:
• Prioritize access for graduate students and postdocs close to completing their degree/term of appointment.
• Prioritize research for completion of grants and contracts where no cost extensions are not feasible.
• Prioritize research activities which are required to maintain employment of critical research personnel.
• Begin re-breeding laboratory animals, expansion of cell lines, plant propagation, etc.
• Research Centers: restart facilities based on sufficient ‘customer’ demand (approved projects) where work cannot be done remotely and those facilities have approved safety protocols, PPE, tracking mechanisms in place.
• Allow access to offices for faculty and graduate students on application, 1-3 days/week. Must maintain physical distancing and max occupancy per building.
• Field Research – expand on case by case basis (depending on local conditions/restrictions at field sites, travel restrictions, ability to travel safely and ability to physically distance at field sites)
• Humanities, arts and social sciences research that requires access to single occupancy spaces (e.g. office, private studio), and allow use of libraries, archives, labs, and collections to limited numbers of researchers using hygiene and physical distancing protocols. Close proximity training such as a clinical environment/ lab/ performance space/ practice/ studio element [or other special delivery mode (lab training, graduate mentoring)].

Research & Scholarly Activity requests will continue to be submitted using the request form which has been in place since March 24th, however all requests must now include a Hierarchy of Controls (HOC) Task Assessment (Excel) and a signed Hierarchy of Controls Checklist (Word). Requests will be sent to the applicable College or Center and the Research Continuity Task force for the respective review and recommendation regarding approval. Requests approved by OVPRDGS will be forwarded to the Emergency Operations Center (EOC) for coordination with safety and facility management support for return to work requests; you may be contacted by one or more of these offices if more information is needed. Notices of approval and other communications will be provided by OVPRDGS, through Tammy Crosby (tammy.crosby@maine.edu).

General Guidance for ‘Essential’ Fieldwork through June 30th:

Faculty and staff are encouraged to defer all non-essential field research through at least June 30th, the current date of expiration of the Chancellor’s work from home directive. The University will closely monitor mandates and guidance from both the State and UMS and will update this guidance accordingly. Faculty & staff are encouraged to discuss proposed ‘essential’ field work plans with their college or center leadership before submitting a request.

In addition to the justification regarding why the activity cannot be delayed and how it meets the definition of essential research, key review criteria are noted below:

1. All work conducted by everyone associated with UMaine and UMM must be conducted in accordance with guidance available on the UMS Health Advisory site and comply with
guidance provided by UMS Safety Management which can be found on the Safety Management website.

2. Requests must comply with contemporaneous UMS COVID-19 travel policies. Presently all university-sponsored out-of-state travel is prohibited. In-state travel is limited, and anyone traveling on official university business may not carpool or share transportation.

3. As part of Field Research plans, ensure you have conducted a standard fieldwork hazard assessment and have developed a safety plan [using UMS Safety Management’s (SM) Fieldwork Safety Program and Fieldwork Hazard Assessment/Safety Plan as guides (note: SM’s portal page requires an @maine.edu log-in)]. In addition to the standard safety plan, you should also address the elevated risks and extra precautions needed due to the COVID-19 using the Hierarchy of Controls (HOC) Task Assessment (Excel) and a signed Hierarchy of Controls Checklist (Word). These considerations must be met:

- Involves only participants who are asymptomatic and have not been in contact with known symptomatic of positive-testing individuals.
- Social distancing must occur within the work itself, including physical separation.
- Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) like respirators, eye protection and gloves are to be used as a last resort, and only when all other protective controls (such as engineering, substitutive, or administrative) have been exhausted. The use of PPE such as an n95 would be an exceptional circumstance, as stock of such protective equipment has been requested by MEMA to support the working medical professionals.
- When employees are in a “public setting,” OR are conducting activities/tasks where social distancing is not possible, they are required to wear a cloth face covering (see UMS Health Advisory “Should I wear a face covering when working?”)
- Interactions must be kept to a minimum. This includes interactions with the community on and off work, as well as within the team.
- A clear plan as part of fieldwork safety must include how elements of social distancing, interactions, transportation, emergency actions, training, isolation prior to work, disinfection, touch protocols, and communication related to COVID-19 will be handled.

General Guidance for Fieldwork planned beyond June 30, 2020:

Researchers are encouraged to continue planning for Field Research and to plan for contingencies in the event of new constraints or opportunities in the late spring and summer months. Contingency planning should not increase spending above currently budgeted amounts. Do not commit funds until plans are approved.

Field Research plans for the coming months will need to have particularly strong elements for minimizing risks as noted above, justification for essential Field Research activities (as defined at
the time of the activity), and demonstration of efforts to reprioritize or defer Field Research activities to the extent reasonable. Researchers are encouraged to discuss proposed late-spring/early summer field work plans with their college or center leadership before submitting a request.

The response to COVID-19 continues to be a rapidly evolving situation even at this stage of the pandemic and this guidance is subject to change. Please be sure to regularly review available Research Guidelines at the above links. Also, please continue to regularly check the UMS Information page (https://www.maine.edu/health-advisory/) and the UMaine Information page (https://umaine.edu/coronavirus/).