UAF COVID-19 Research Continuity Plan as of 03/25/2020

This document is intended to consider issues that will primarily, but not exclusively, be of concern to the research community. Please be aware that information specific to research activities will be updated and available at: https://uaf.edu/research/

The University of Alaska has established a single source location for all COVID-19 information. Information that is of relevance to all will not be repeated here. Our current draft academic continuity plan is available here. Plans will be revised as needed, and they will be shared and posted to the UA coronavirus website.

The UAF Emergency Operations Plan has addressed a pandemic response - see Annex 1 starting on p137. https://www.uaf.edu/oem/files/UAF-EOP-Sept-2019.pdf

The consequences of an outbreak of COVID-19 at UAF and the response of the research enterprise depend upon a wide array of factors. Does the infection affect researchers and support staff who may easily self-quarantine? Or, is it impacting researchers working in a field camp or on board a research vessel? Does the work depend upon execution of multiple roles or can the research be continued by individuals or smaller teams? Although it is difficult to foresee all potential scenarios, it is helpful to develop a response plan that may need to be modified to meet the specific situation.

To what extent should we restrict research travel?

Please visit the CDC's website, for information about the disease, prevention, and travel advisories. The UA coronavirus website describes current university policy on travel.

The UA research travel FAQs (https://sites.google.com/alaska.edu/coronavirus/faq/research) make reference to the UA memo on travel guidance (https://drive.google.com/file/d/1IyL8l6Efw1zlDfFSs_3wutJLu7XqDyM9/view) and the document as well as the FAQs based on that document (https://sites.google.com/alaska.edu/coronavirus/faq/restrictions) have been updated to reflect that UA expects all travel to comply with DHSS Health Alerts 9.1 (out of state travel) and 9.2 (in-state travel), as described at dhss.alaska.gov/News/Documents/press/2020/SOA_03202020_HealthAlert009_NonEssentialTravel.pdf. The restrictions in 9.2 apply to intra-state travelers embarking from communities in Alaska with confirmed cases and does include all UA main campuses.

Exceptions under 9.1 and 9.2 are only for emergency travel, which would be a narrower category than essential travel. Non-essential travel is barred, essential travel should be allowed only if the restrictions are observed, and bypassing the restrictions is only allowable in an emergency.

Our Alaskan rural communities have asked that we curtail research visits to their villages due to their very limited health care capacity. We must of course comply as we are also very concerned about facilitating the possible spread of this very contagious virus.

We may approve some exemptions to the travel ban under extenuating circumstances, however a field plan with safety considerations must be submitted and approved by the Dean or Director, VCR and Chancellor.

The plan must detail these expectations:

1) The field party will not pass through any rural communities
2) All field crew members have not traveled out of Alaska or have completed a rigid self-quarantine for 14 days to assure themselves and their team they are not carriers of the virus.
3) Social distancing, personal protective gear, and proper hygiene are maintained as appropriate en route and while in the field.
4) If illness does occur in any member, the entire team will return home, avoiding exposure to the public (i.e. no commercial aircraft)
5) All field expenses and travel will be borne by the project
6) The plan must include details on route, precautions implemented, and description of how party members will return to UAF in case of illness.

How do we address conferences, workshops, other gatherings of Alaskans and foreign visitors?

Conferences, workshops, research forums, and scientific exchanges are critical to sharing understanding and building collaborations. It is an unfortunate reality of the current situation that personal meetings are strongly discouraged; however, scientific progress can still proceed through online forums. Visitors to UAF are expected to follow the same self-quarantine and self-observation that is expected of UA employees. UAF will not provide housing for visitors practicing self-quarantine. Participation from countries where serious outbreaks have occurred will be denied (see CDC Level 3 countries). All in-person research conferences and workshops have been cancelled or postponed through May. Please note that this temporary ban could be extended. We encourage conference organizers to proceed with essential sessions through an online platform to avoid spreading of the contagion.

The Offices of The Vice Chancellor of Research:

Animal Resources Center (ARC):

Preparation and planning is really no different from previous efforts addressing influenza.

Risks:

1. Knowledge - ARC staff have a good background in infectious agents; however, research teams and students often do not. The current plan is to educate staff and facility users (LARS and BiRD) using CDC information and signage. Mostly focusing on prevention --- proper PPE, hand washing, how to cough, and facility cleanliness/hygiene.

2. Staff numbers - ARC staffing is currently at a minimum to meet animal welfare regulatory standards. Losing staff to illness/quarantine will compromise continuity; therefore, minimizing risk for being infected will be crucial.

3. BiRD is a biosecure facility; therefore, if Covid-19 (or other pathogens) reach pandemic level we can further restrict access to the building to key personnel.

4. LARS is also a biosecure facility and we can take similar measures to restrict access. Fairbanks summer tourism will increase travel to Alaska and LARS education & outreach program services over 10,000 people from June through early September. Tour area at LARS is isolated form the main facility. Unlikely that tours need to be cancelled but we may need to enhance hand washing capacity. We have several months to assess risk level.

Unexpected consequences of public panic:

1. N95 masks are required for laboratory animal personnel to protect against animal allergens. LARS staff also using N95 masks during wildfire season. The unnecessary panic run on N95 masks by the general public is creating a supply problem. ARC currently has approximately 1-year supply. It is not our intention to use masks as a precaution against virus exposure since they do not work for that.

2. Disinfection and cleaning supplies. Again, ARC has a reasonable supply of disinfectants for routine use; nevertheless, we are looking at increasing our current inventory in case supplies diminish over the next several months.

Office of Research Integrity (ORI)

If necessary, ORI staff are prepared to work from home or a remote location. All work may continue as we are equipped with laptops and VPN access to the UA shared drive.

1. Communication will be maintained through phone and email.

2. All files are available on the University shared drive.

3. Continuity of protocol management will continue without interruption as our protocol management system is IRBNet and can be accessed from anywhere.

4. Committee meetings (IACUC/IRB/IBC) can continue as required via teleconferencing and zoom meetings, if necessary. Live meetings are required by regulating agencies.

5. Staff numbers - We are currently an office of one. The priority at this time is to continue recruitment for the Export Controls Officer and Compliance Officer.

Risks:

1. If current staff becomes ill, there is no backup. Minimizing risk of infection is crucial.

Office of Grants and Contracts Administration (OGCA):

Currently, OGCA remains in full operation with no change in availability. OGCA core business hours are Monday to Friday from 8:00 am to 5:00 pm. Should OGCA be required to work remotely, OGCA is prepared to do so.

OGCA has created a Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) Information and Resources for Sponsored Projects webpage. The webpage contains information and communication from government agencies, sponsors, and UAF, as they relate to, and impact sponsored research activities. The information can be found on: https://www.uaf.edu/ogca/

Proposal deadlines. In general, we expect that OGCA will be able to submit proposals, even if personnel are working remotely. Our experience is that federal agencies are very flexible about deadlines under difficult circumstances beyond our control. However, if agencies are officially closed, proposals will most likely remain in a queue, pending resumption of agency operations – as has been the case during federal budget-related shutdowns. Information will be posted on the OGCA website, if necessary.

Awards: In general, OGCA will be able to receive awards, even if personnel are working remotely. Information will be posted on the OGCA website, if necessary.

Office of Intellectual Property and Commercialization (OIPC):

Our staff continues to encourage and facilitate development and commercialization of Intellectual Property. In this time of sharply curtailed travel, minimal field work, and reduced laboratory experiments, perhaps it is time to turn our attention to some of the cerebral activities that we never have enough time to adequately develop. Moving a research product into operations or commercialization requires insight into market potential, understanding of the process, and effort to protect the IP and attract partners in the venture. OIPC can help. Take advantage of this downtime and maximize the benefits of your research. Contact Mark Billingsley mcbillingsley@alaska.edu for guidance.

Other Research Related Information:

All of our projects have deadlines and every case will be unique. But, how do we deal with projects/performances that fall behind schedule either because of illness or travel limitations?

In collaboration with the Office of Grants and Contracts Administration (OGCA), project principal investigators (PIs) will be encouraged to negotiate project extensions with the funding agencies when applicable. If at all possible, strive to meet the deadlines in order to lessen the inevitable backlog this crisis will create.

What special planning should researchers carry out? For convenience, the checklist is as follows:

Checklist:

1. Identify emergency personnel who are essential to the operation of your laboratory and make sure that they know what to do in the event of suspended operations.

2. Review your communication plan and remind lab personnel of who is in the notification chain.

3. Create a plan if you do not have one. Be sure that you have a list of all lab personnel and their contact information, and remind all personnel to update their personal contact information in myua.edu.

4. Identify priorities in case of restricted access. You should discuss how work should be handled if some personnel are unable to come to work.

5. Ensure remote access to files, data, servers, and other required information. Check that all members of your research team who might need to work remotely have access to computers that are able to connect to research files and data sets, research literature and meeting software (such as Zoom or Google Meet, both available through UA).

6. Depending on the nature of your research, consider prioritizing work that has to be done in the lab and delay work that can be done remotely, such as data analysis. Freeze samples as you proceed if feasible.

7. Check the Research FAQs and/or contact OGCA to learn what to do if you believe that you will not be able to meet a grant deadline or need special assistance to do so. Agency information will be updated regularly on the OGCA webpage.

8. Check travel restrictions before making travel plans and comply.

9. Contact OGCA, ORI (IRB/IACUC), and ARC if you have any specific questions relating to grants or contracts management, human subjects research, or research with animals.

What about field work?

Faculty, staff, and students should not engage in remote field research if they have any concerns they may have been exposed to the virus. If illness does occur in the field, the individuals will be returned to their home station by means that would offer the least possible spread of the contagion. Costs for transport will be borne by the sponsoring research project.

Testing for infection of the Coronavirus is now available by your health care provider at the State Virology Laboratory for those who show the COVID-19 symptoms https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/about/symptoms.html

UA researchers, staff, and students should self-quarantine if symptoms of the virus become apparent or as diagnosed by a health care provider.

Emergency personnel. At this time, there are no plans to restrict access to University research spaces, but it is wise for every research group to plan ahead in the event that full access is not possible for some time period. In the case of campus suspended operation, the usual policies would apply. This includes the need for emergency personnel to carry out specified duties. The suspended operations link above includes the definition of emergency personnel, and below are the general categories:

The position is necessary to support or maintain:

- Human health, welfare and/or safety.

- Information technology services or security.

- Building or property security, safety, and integrity.

- Research animals, specimens, or equipment.

- Critical infrastructure (power, water, heat, roads, etc.).

- Critical business, contractual, or legal obligations including employee payroll.

In each unit, emergency personnel should be already designated. If you are unsure of who in your research project is designated emergency personnel, work with your department administrator or an equivalent administrator to identify such personnel.

Precautions. Remember, all personnel should stay home if they experience any symptoms including fever, cough, or difficulty breathing. It is also advisable to encourage limiting physical contact with others, such as hand-shaking (substitute elbow bumps or bows) and sharing of food. Finally, the most effective prevention measure is frequent, thorough hand-washing.

Communications. If a communications plan for your research group is not already in place, designate points of contact so everyone receives timely information.

Plan for researcher time. PIs and research group leads should discuss approaches now, in the event that some personnel are unable to come to work. Such advanced planning will make future decisions straightforward and minimize disruption to research activities.

Remote access. All personnel involved in research projects should ensure that they have access to information they need to carry out work remotely. This might include, for example, access to literature, access to existing datasets and research-related files, and access to meeting software (such as Zoom or Google Hangouts and Chat). PIs should prepare to carry out meetings remotely, using similar approaches as for remote teaching of classes. If you are unsure about whether you have access to such tools, it is wise to test them now. Examples of the types of research work that can be done remotely are: data analysis, literature reviews, writing proposals, reviews, or research papers, writing the background sections of theses, computational work, meetings, discussions, etc.

Prioritization. Depending upon the nature of your research, you might consider prioritizing work that can only be carried out in your research facility, and put off work amenable to remote support, such as data analysis. Stockpiling results and data now that could be analyzed remotely in the future is a potential option that might create future flexibility.

Save samples along the way. If you are carrying out a long-term experiment and if it is feasible to freeze samples at specific steps, you might consider doing this more often.

Travel. Should you cancel planned research-related travel such as to a conference, site visit, or other laboratory? Not necessarily. Be sure to access the list of travel restrictions and use caution. Note the travel restrictions posted in the Travel FAQs
https://sites.google.com/alaska.edu/coronavirus/

Advance planning will allow everyone in your research group to focus on their own efforts while they work together as a team, rather than wondering how they and their team members are to proceed. We have entered unknown territory in terms of continuing the research enterprise. It is important that we keep our research machine fully functional, but it is more important that we

protect the health of our researchers, our colleagues and the people of the State of Alaska. Please do what you can to make progress on your research without initiating undue risk.