

**COVID-19 Information re:
National Forests – Pacific Northwest Region (WA & OR)
April 3, 2020**

The Forest Service remains focused on the safety and well-being of our employees and the public we serve across the U.S. and abroad.

- The Forest Service in Washington state and Oregon are aligning operations to support state Governor executive orders for residents to stay home, stay safe and save lives.
- Our mission-critical work, such as improving the condition of the nation's forest and grasslands, suppressing wildfires and other public service responsibilities, continues uninterrupted.
- We are following USDA, CDC, and local guidance and orders to slow the spread of the virus. We are monitoring activity on our Forests and are assessing the risks to the public, our volunteers and employees.
- We will follow the lead of local and state health organizations and make any necessary changes should the need arise.

Frequently Asked Questions:

What National Forest locations are closed?

All developed recreation sites in Washington and Oregon are closed. All trails in the Columbia River Gorge National Scenic Area are closed. Oregon Dunes Recreation Area is closed.

Local forests may have additional area closures in effect to restrict access to less developed areas that attract heavy visitation – contact the local ranger district for more information.

Area closures are also posted on each forest's website, on the alerts and notices page (*find links here: <https://www.fs.usda.gov/detail/r6/home/?cid=fseprd716206>*).

What is a developed recreation site?

A developed recreation site is an area or location that has been improved for the purpose of providing a recreational opportunity. This includes, but isn't exclusive to, all trailheads, picnic areas, visitor centers, interpretive sites, boat launches, OHV staging areas, and campgrounds. Developed recreation sites may be a complex of sites and their access roads, or could be a trail that has some improvements (such as interpretive signs) along the way. Most trails are not considered developed sites, but all trailheads are.

State-managed Sno-Park parking areas that are located on National Forest Lands are also closed (*with one exception: Umatilla National Forest has two Sno-Parks that remain open; forest staff are monitoring for signs of heavy use or failure to observe social distancing at these sites*).

Is dispersed camping allowed on your forest?

Currently, dispersed camping – or camping other than at a developed campground - is allowed, provided an area closure order is not in effect. Currently, dispersed camping is not allowed in any part of the Columbia River Gorge National Scenic Area. Area closures may also be in effect on other forests; area closures are posted on each forest's website, on the alerts and notices page:

<https://www.fs.usda.gov/detail/r6/home/?cid=fseprd716206>.

Please delay travel to outdoor destinations as much as possible. We'll be here ready for you when it's much safer for all of us.

Have you closed forest roads?

Most forest roads are open, but some roads – especially those that primarily access developed recreation sites - are closed. We still have wet, muddy and snowy conditions on trails and roads—these should be considered closed until conditions improve, which will help protect our infrastructure and reduce the need for later repairs. For other closures, check with your local ranger district for information about roads on a specific forest. Area closures are also posted on each forest's website, on the alerts and notices page: <https://www.fs.usda.gov/detail/r6/home/?cid=fseprd716206>.

Remember that if you get lost, stuck, or stranded, it may take longer than normal for help to arrive – and that response may place additional strain on local law enforcement, medical services, and Search and Rescue volunteers, putting others at risk.

I have no choice but to travel. What should I do?

If you can't delay your travel, please consider the following:

- Visitors should check with local authorities to see if any local ordinances have been enacted.
- Check with local officials to see if your visit will add an unnecessary stress on local resources.
- If you get lost or injured, it may take longer than usual for someone to assist. Calling up Search and Rescue teams puts a large stress on county resources, volunteers and their families and can strain an already strained health care system.
- We still have wet, muddy and snowy conditions on trails and roads—these should be considered closed until conditions improve. Waiting for these trail and road systems to dry out and open up will mean that our road crews, trail crews and partner organizations don't have to spend additional time on reparative maintenance.

Is hunting and fishing allowed? What about firewood collection, mushroom permits, target shooting, etc.?

Hunting and fishing licenses are managed by the state. All developed sites on National Forest in Washington and Oregon, such as parking areas and boat ramps, are closed. Check with individual forests regarding availability of firewood or free-use permits and area closures which may impact other activities.

We recognize many people and many communities rely on our forests for the livelihoods, but are discouraging non-essential trips – including trips to the backcountry – to reduce the strain on local

resources.

What will happen if people go into the closed areas? Can I get a ticket?

This is a legal closure and people who don't follow the closure order could be ticketed; however, our goal is to get voluntary compliance, as our intent with this closure is to align with the Governor's executive order to stay home.

I just want to go for a walk in the woods - is that really so bad? I need some fresh air!

This is a difficult time, and we know many people seek solace outdoors. We encourage you to take this opportunity to explore the nature in your own neighborhood.

If you head out, please take some time to consider:

- What risks are associated with the activity you have chosen to do? Law enforcement, search and rescue, and hospitals have limited capacity due to the COVID-19 pandemic.
- If the site you have chosen is full, have some back up options in mind that will allow you to maintain CDC social distancing guidelines. National Forests have experienced exceptionally high visitation in recent weeks.
- How will you help minimize pressure on smaller communities adjacent to the forest that have limited resources? Restaurants, rest stops and trailhead bathrooms are likely to be closed. Do you have the food, water and fuel you need for the day? Do you have the supplies you need to hygienically pack out your waste? Search and rescue calls are on the rise, which rely on local volunteers and law enforcement; responding to calls places them at additional risk.

We know the outdoors are calling, but the decisions you make affect everyone. If there was ever a time to recognize our interdependence, this is it.

Is it okay for me to park on a road next to the Forest and access trails?

If a forest area closure is not in effect, it may be legal to drive and park along forest roads where it is safe to do so. Blocking, or impeding, vehicle traffic or damaging natural resources may result in citation and/or towing (*always avoid parking on tall grass, which is a fire hazard*). State and local ordinances may prohibit roadside parking in some areas, or may limit non-local travel. Users must abide by all Federal, local, and state laws.

Why have you closed so many sites?

The Forest Service in Oregon and Washington is aligning operations to support the Governors' executive order for residents to stay home to save lives.

Many state, county and privately-managed recreation sites are also closed. Keeping some recreation sites open while others are closed draws people in from outside areas and into situations where social distancing is difficult or impossible, which could contribute to the spread of COVID-19.

Many city and county elected officials have also voiced concern about the pressure the increased visitation puts on their already limited health care system and emergency services; some counties and cities made their own emergency declarations and social distancing orders that include closing recreation sites and campgrounds.

Our decision to close recreation areas and sites supports similar decisions aligns with the 'stay home' direction announced by the governors of both states.

Do you have signs up? How are people supposed to know what's closed?

We'll use a variety of means to inform people what has been closed but we won't have the ability to put up signage or other means of notification for all areas. If you are unsure, you can call us to ask or delay your visit until we're fully open again.

When will you reopen?

The developed recreation closures will remain in place until it is deemed safe for employees and the public to reopen them, and will likely follow state and local 'stay home' orders. On most forests, the legal closure order lasts until September 30 (the legal closures for Mt. Hood National Forest, Gifford Pinchot National Forest, and Columbia River Gorge National Scenic Area extend through late March). These forest orders may be rescinded earlier, if conditions permit.

I had a campground reservation for this time. Will I get my money back?

Yes, Recreation.gov, which manages campground reservations, will be refunding both the cost of reservation as well as their service fee. Look for communications from Recreation.gov about this.

Are Forest Service bathrooms being cleaned and maintained?

Because recreation sites are closed, so are restroom facilities; we are no longer maintaining bathrooms at recreation sites.

Are your offices open? What if I want to buy a permit?

Many forest service offices are providing virtual services, and public services are being conducted by phone, email, or through web-based transactions. Phone lines and messages are being monitored and messages will be returned in a timely manner.