

CLARIFICATION OF GUIDELINES

18 December 2020

For how the Texas Master Naturalist Program will operate under Texas A&M AgriLife Extension's recent COVID-19 guidelines for staff and volunteers. We all have a part in keeping communities safe! In the absence of COVID-19 guidelines for volunteers from TPWD, the Texas Master Naturalist Program has been following Texas A&M AgriLife Extension's guidelines since March 13th, 2020. These guidelines are continuously updated in an effort to minimize the spread of COVID-19 and further ensure the health and safety of employees, our volunteers and the public constituents they collectively serve through this and other programs.

Introduction

The Texas Master Naturalist Program recently shared Texas A&M AgriLife's guidance on how AgriLife Programs may continue. These most recent guidelines were issued with the statement that all volunteers should adhere to these in the same manner as employees, with the exception of travel. This document will explain how the TMN Program chapters and volunteers will operate under those guidelines.

Background

- The Texas Master Naturalist Program is co-sponsored by Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service (AgriLife) and Texas Parks & Wildlife Department (TPWD). As such, all TMN volunteers and chapters represent both TPWD and AgriLife Extension at all times. There are no situations where TMN programs, chapters, events, or volunteers are not also representing each of the 2 Agencies as the Program's cosponsors. No chapters or volunteers are exempt from the guidelines of either co-sponsor.
- The most updated Guidelines from Texas A&M AgriLife Extension is documented on the TMN website (<https://txmn.tamu.edu/welcome/covid-19-response/>). Please refer to this page for the updated Return to Service Guidelines Document that details how Texas county color codes guide return to service. Please note that county color designation for this purpose is different from any other Agency's meaning and county color coding as it relates to COVID-19. Extensions list of color-coded counties may be updated weekly.
- All multi-county TMN Chapters will follow the STRICTEST level of guidance for the counties in their chapter territory. If a chapter's service area contains a red county, the entire chapter area will be considered "red".
- Members of a household are collectively treated the same as an individual. Interaction among members of a household during TMN activities at home or in the field is not considered a face-to-face meeting, public event, or a gathering.
- As used in the AgriLife guidance document - "Events" are defined as service or training opportunities, seminars, public oriented gatherings and other face to face activities held in public access spaces.
- As used in the AgriLife guidance document - "Meetings" are defined as involving TMN volunteers or chapter members gathering to discuss a specific project, purpose or point of TMN business with an objective or outcome for TMN activities.
- In any chapter area that includes red counties, certain volunteer service projects may continue when masks are worn and proper social distancing can be practiced. Travel to and from a red county is not recommended for TMN activities.

- If the primary activity of the service project is to interact with people, the service project must follow indoor or outdoor capacity guidelines for the designated color level of the county. This includes all in-person outreach, training, education, or public access service projects.
- Please work with your chapter advisor(s) for questions on events & capacities, and in the absence or your chapter advisor(s) please work with your county Extension agent and/or local TPWD employee to gain approval for events or exemptions when needed.

Travel

In an effort to ensure the safety of our members, their families and their communities it is everyone's responsibility to help reduce COVID-19 transmission. While the AgriLife guidelines limit travel for employees, volunteers are exempt from that restriction. It is recommended that TMN members not travel into or out of a red county as part of a TMN face-to-face events.

Service Project Exemptions

Certain service projects may continue with special exemptions defined below. However, they must still follow all AgriLife capacity guidelines. Where exemptions apply, program service project hosts are encouraged to use a small number of volunteers that live within that county. All volunteers/participants MUST follow additional local health & safety restrictions including masks and social distancing guidelines.

- Service to care for any living organism *that requires human care to live* may occur. Examples include caring for propagated or landscaped plants, captive animals, and live biological samples.
 - Please work with your chapter advisors first, and in the absence or your chapter advisor(s) please work with your county Extension agent and/or local TPWD employee to gain approval for exemptions when needed.
- Research activities are permitted where the lack of data collection would jeopardize funding commitments or where loss of data would have profound long-term effects. This exemption may be used only for field or lab-based research work and not for in-person events such as meetings, in-person interviews, public events, outreach events, etc.

Habitat management is not included in these exemptions. However, service involving habitat management usually does not require face-to-face interactions, meetings, or public gatherings. Therefore, this service, where otherwise allowed, may occur.

Examples of service projects that can continue to occur following all AgriLife capacity guidelines, and assuming that safety, mask, and physical distancing requirements are met:

- Christmas Bird Count, assuming equipment and datasheets are not shared between households
- Trail Maintenance work where households can operate independently of each other
- Plant surveys where households can operate independently of each other
- Beach clean up where households can operate independently of each other
- Watering landscaped plants
- Feeding and husbandry activities of live animals
- Caring for propagation plants in a greenhouse or nursery

Examples of in-person service projects that may need to consider moving to virtual, but may occur following all AgriLife capacity guidelines:

- Face-to-face meetings, public outreach, and public educational events
- In-person board meetings
- Face-to-face Advanced Training opportunities, either indoor or outdoor classrooms

- In-person planning meetings about projects. (Note: A lot of project planning can be done remotely via email or virtual meeting before arrival at a project site instead)

Project Example 1 and Approach of Example Thought Process: We have a native grass planting project that requires 5 people to do outdoor survey work simultaneously. We will gather in the parking lot for 5 minutes and determine assignments, which will be done wearing masks and staying more than 6 ft apart – however, this could be avoided by the project manager supplying the information in an email or virtual meeting if it had to be beforehand. A parking lot meeting wouldn't be necessary in that scenario. All work will be outside and we can maintain well more than minimum physical distancing requirements. No tools will be shared. Can we conduct this work?

1. Is the primary activity centered around a public face to face event or interaction? No. Proceed to 2.
2. Can the work be done maintaining substantial and recommended physical separation between households? Yes. Proceed to 3.
3. Does the event involve gathering people close together? No. Proceed to 4.
4. Are proper safety precautions being taken and followed? Yes. Proceed to 5.
5. Are AgriLife capacity guidelines being followed based on the County's AgriLife color designation? Yes.

It appears this is an appropriate service project for TMNs

Project Example 2 and Approach of Example Thought Process: We have a wildlife viewing blind project that requires 5 people to do outdoor survey work simultaneously. We will gather in the parking lot and determine assignments, which will be done wearing masks and staying more than 6 ft apart. All work will be outside, but the project has progressed to where people from multiple households will be working in close proximity together and tools may be shared. Can we conduct this work?

1. Is the primary activity centered around a public face to face event or interaction? No. Proceed to 2.
2. Are proper safety precautions being taken and followed? Yes. Proceed to 3
3. Can the work be done maintaining recommended physical separation between households? No. Proceed to the answer.
OR, Are there shared tools between participants? Yes. Proceed to the answer.

This activity cannot be safely conducted and should not occur.

NOTE: IF, in this scenario, the activity could be adapted for an outdoor location where recommended physical separation between households is attainable and tools sharing is no longer an issue, then this activity can proceed while following AgriLife capacity guidelines.

The Role of VMS Admins during this time:

Our VMS Admins should **not** become the regulators of volunteer service entered outside of these guidelines. We ask that all TMNs use the TMN honor code following these guidelines and entering their data into the TMN VMS. We cannot and do not expect our VMS Admins to disapprove reported service on projects because it was performed during a time --or in a scenario-- restricted by the COVID-19 Guidelines. In an effort to keep our members safe, all Texas Master Naturalist volunteers have a responsibility to follow the guidelines and report their service appropriately.