

Texas Master Naturalist Program's COVID Safety and Response Guidelines

March 12, 2021

As Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service has phased out of an established county color coding system for operating, the Texas Master Naturalist™ Program will operate under the following guidelines for engaging with peers and the public through TMN Training, outreach and service projects. Until further notice, the TMN Program will follow this combination of the two sponsoring state agencies current COVID-19 guidelines.

When representing themselves as Texas Master Naturalist volunteers, and at all Texas Master Naturalist events, meetings, service projects, etc. volunteers must comply with all federal, state, county and local public health proclamations and ordinances. Safety is our guiding principle for operations. When and where public health and safety ordinances allow, it is our highest priority to maintain the health and safety of all Texas Master Naturalist volunteers and the communities and public they serve. Be mindful of and follow local individual partners' and project locations' health and safety policies. They may require more than what other state and local authorities do.

Texas Master Naturalist volunteers are further encouraged to evaluate their own comfort, risk, health, and safety when considering meetings and volunteer service opportunities. If you are a volunteer in a vulnerable or 'high risk' category, please continue to consider remote service opportunities where possible. If your TMN chapter is in — or serves — a vulnerable community, please continue to consider remote and socially distanced opportunities where feasible.

Please note regarding vaccines: Our program and agencies currently have no legal authority to develop policy based on private health information (HIPAA laws) at this time and we don't anticipate the program drafting its own policy or allowances, etc. addressing whether individuals (members or the public) with vaccines can/cannot participate in any TMN activities and where, when and how.

The following guidelines will direct how the Texas Master Naturalist Program will operate for the foreseeable future.

Guidelines for all TMN Activities:

It is very important to know and follow all federal, state, county and local COVID guidelines/restrictions before conducting TMN Activities. Beyond these, the TMN program will have the following guidelines:

1. Virtual meeting platform tools should be used whenever possible.
2. For any indoor activity that does occur in-person, both volunteers and public participants are strongly encouraged to wear masks. The occupancy limit shall not exceed one person per 100 square feet of indoor public space to allow for 10 feet of social distance.
3. For outdoor activities, both volunteers and public participants are strongly encouraged to wear masks and social distance by at least 6 feet.
4. All multi-county TMN Chapters must consider each of their county's health ordinances when scheduling in person ('face-to-face') events or meetings, the ability/inability for chapter membership to attend, and the equity of scheduling events in certain counties to the exclusion/inclusion of certain segments of the chapter.

Background

- The Texas Master Naturalist Program is co-sponsored by Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service (AgriLife Extension) 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 two Agencies as the Program's cosponsors. No chapters or volunteers are exempt from the guidelines of either co-sponsor.
- For all in-person events, meetings or service projects, individual service project site contacts (i.e., city park employees, nature center employees, County Extension Agents, etc.), may have additional safety considerations, preparedness plans or screening requirements that need to be followed. Please work with these partners to ensure their procedures are followed at each host site.
- Local ordinances are defined as rules or guidelines implemented by city or county government, county commissioners, or county judges. If local ordinances are more restrictive than the following guidelines, TMN volunteers will defer to the more restrictive local ordinances.
- Please work with your local chapter advisor(s), or in the absence of chapter advisor(s), please work with your County Extension Agent and/or local TPWD employee for clarification.
- With the March 12th COVID Guidelines updates and the Governor's Executive Order GA 34 regarding masks/face coverings, Chapters may not make their own guidelines more stringent to mandate masks at their local level.

Virtual Platform Use

We recommend the following types of interactions move to a virtual platform, but may occur in person where and when permissible if all guidelines are followed:

- 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)

In-Person ('Face to Face') Events/Trainings/Meetings

Where and when permissible by local, city or county ordinances, in-person public gatherings may be hosted by TMN Chapters with the following considerations:

- Chapters should continue to utilize virtual meeting platform tools whenever possible.
- Steps should be taken to maintain social distancing and ensure mask use where required.
- Volunteers and all public participants are strongly encouraged to wear face coverings.
- Indoors: Limit the physical number of people in indoor meeting spaces. The occupancy limit shall not exceed one person per 100 square feet of indoor public space.
- Outdoors: It is crucial that volunteers and public participants always maintain at least six feet of space outdoors.

Service Projects

Where and when permissible, service projects may continue. All Service Projects must follow all relevant TMN Program guidelines. As stated, volunteers must comply with all federal, state, county and local public health proclamations and ordinances.

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 of 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.

General health and safety guidance:

- Remain at home if you are not feeling well or have a fever.
- Wash your hands often with soap and water for at least 20 seconds. Use hand sanitizer with at least 60% alcohol if soap and water are not available.
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose, and mouth with unwashed hands.
- If you have traveled to certain high-risk areas, please consider self-quarantine for the recommended amount of time. *Travel to or from high risk areas should be avoided.
- Frequently disinfect surfaces, buttons, handles, knobs, light switches, podiums, and other places touched often.
- Tools and equipment should sanitized regularly and not be shared between households.