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Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) for Update on COVID-19 Protocols for the Office of Polar Programs (OPP)

Throughout the pandemic, operational decision-making has been informed by medical expertise from across government, as well as from international partners and programs. Our goal has been and will remain to place the safety of our deployers as paramount and collaborate with other station operators, national governments, and state, local and tribal policies on COVID-19 mitigation.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

1. [With COVID becoming endemic, how will OPP evolve to live with this new reality?](#)
2. [Is "zero covid on station" still OPP's governing posture? With other polar stations having gotten COVID-19, is OPP planning on changing its "no COVID at research stations" posture?](#)
3. [What investments are being considered to move to a new stance of containing, not preventing, COVID?](#)
4. [Will the United States Antarctic Program \(USAP\) still use the CDC's risk factors for severe COVID-19 illness as PQ \(Physical Qualification\) discriminators?](#)
5. [How will the CDC's reduction in quarantine period to 5 days influence quarantine periods used by OPP?](#)
6. [Has OPP looked at other locations to access Antarctica as an alternative to New Zealand?](#)
7. [What is the current outlook for quarantine in Alaska?](#)
8. [What is the current outlook for quarantine in Greenland?](#)
9. [What are the travel restrictions on other international projects?](#)
10. [Will OPP continue to require people traveling to research stations to be vaccinated?](#)
11. [Is it sufficient to have COVID-19 antibodies, whether vaccinated or not?](#)

12. How will the treatment for COVID-19 impact COVID-19 mitigation measures in OPP?
 13. What are the suggested elements of a protective plan for research projects going to the field in the Arctic?
 14. What are good practices for preventing COVID-19, especially while traveling to the field?
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1. With COVID becoming endemic, how will OPP evolve to live with this new reality?

OPP will continue to be focused on managing risk, and balancing risk with the need to continue operations to the fullest extent safely possible. In the near term, OPP anticipates continuing to require all Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)-recommended vaccinations with continued quarantine and testing to prevent significant outbreaks of the disease that would jeopardize human health and operations at research stations. COVID-19 has presented evolving risks and challenges, and we will continue to monitor the situation, consult with medical professionals, and adjust our protocols accordingly.

2. Is "zero covid on station" still OPP's governing posture? With other polar stations having gotten COVID-19, is OPP planning on changing its "no COVID at research stations" posture?

OPP's goal is to manage the risks of COVID-19 rather than prevent all instances of infection. However, the risks of a COVID outbreak on a polar station or vessel are unique and could be severe. Additionally, the level of risk varies based on medical support capabilities and station population. Finally, even mild illness that is widespread across a station could have dire consequences for our ability to safely operate. Decisions are being made with all of those factors in mind.

3. What investments are being considered to move to a new stance of containing, not preventing, COVID?

All stations are equipped with the ability to isolate infected persons and transport patients to more advanced medical care as needed. As noted above, managing a major outbreak would significantly impact planned research and operations, therefore preventing major outbreaks at research stations remains OPP's primary strategy.

4. Will the United States Antarctic Program (USAP) still use the CDC's risk factors for severe COVID-19 illness as PQ (Physical Qualification) discriminators?

The PQ criteria were adjusted prior to the FY22 austral summer season to focus on

conditions that have statistically poorer outcomes from infection with COVID-19. OPP will continue to adjust the criteria based on acceptable risk. With limited ability to treat seriously ill patients, especially large numbers, at research stations, screening out high-risk participants from the program is important. Modifications to the PQ guidelines will be made no later than June of 2022 and will be updated as needed.

5. How will the CDC's reduction in quarantine period to 5 days influence quarantine periods used by OPP?

Quarantine periods in the U.S. and at gateway locations are influenced by several factors, including international border requirements and the unique risks of severe illness or a COVID-19 outbreak at a research station, which CDC guidelines do not contemplate. Adjustments to the quarantine periods in use in the Arctic are available online. Adjustments to the quarantine requirements for the FY 23 Antarctic austral summer season will be announced no later than August 2022.

6. Has OPP looked at other locations to access Antarctica as an alternative to New Zealand?

The USAP has a very close and collaborative relationship with the New Zealand government and has worked out arrangements throughout the pandemic, even when their border was closed, to support the USAP. OPP is confident in New Zealand's continued support to the program.

7. What is the current outlook for quarantine in Alaska?

Alaska has no travel restrictions at this time. Only travelers going to Toolik Field Station will be required to quarantine. The University of Alaska- Fairbanks, in collaboration with OPP, reduced the quarantine duration to 7 days from 10 for the summer 2022 season. This and all protocols will be updated as needed to manage risk.

8. What is the current outlook for quarantine in Greenland?

The government of Greenland is not requiring quarantine or testing upon arrival. To reduce the risk of a COVID-19 outbreak at Summit Station, OPP will quarantine travelers in New York prior to flying to Greenland. Travelers to Summit Station or the Danish station EGRIP will quarantine in Kangerlussuaq. Travelers who arrive after quarantining in New York will quarantine in Kangerlussuaq for 7 days, with a PCR test on day 5. Commercial travelers arriving to Kangerlussuaq will quarantine for 9 days, with a PCR test on day 7. Projects going through Thule Air Base must follow the requirements of Thule Air Base. Projects going elsewhere in Greenland must follow Greenland and local COVID-19 restrictions.

9. What are the travel restrictions on other international projects?

Researchers must comply with the travel restrictions for any country, community or village where they intend to travel. Researchers are responsible for understanding those requirements and complying. This should be part of a protective plan the project signs with their organization.

10. Will OPP continue to require people traveling to research stations to be vaccinated?

Vaccination against COVID-19 is one of the best tools available to prevent contracting and spreading the disease and prevent serious illness in those who experience breakthrough infections. In addition, vaccine requirements are driven by entry restrictions to foreign countries. OPP has no plans to remove the vaccine requirement for participants.

11. Is it sufficient to have COVID-19 antibodies, whether vaccinated or not?

Current evidence supports vaccination in addition to natural immunity as better protection than natural immunity alone. OPP will continue to require proof of vaccinations to protect the large population of people in both programs and the volume of personnel transfers the program manages.

12. How will the treatment for COVID-19 impact COVID-19 mitigation measures in OPP?

As reliable treatments for COVID-19 become available, OPP will determine how best to include those treatments as an additional measure of managing risk from COVID-19. The best approach to avoid risk to human health, research, and operations that an outbreak would cause, even if patients are treatable, remains to prevent the illness from getting to OPP-supported stations.

13. What are the suggested elements of a protective plan for research projects going to the field in the Arctic?

Suggested elements of a Protective Plan and Verification of Informed Consent:

- A. Mitigation strategies (e.g., vaccination status, mask wearing, physical distancing, single rooms, testing prior to deployment)
- B. Travel strategies (e.g., strict social distancing, testing prior to deployment, wearing masks on planes, quarantine/restricted movement upon arrival)
- C. On-site strategies (e.g., mask wearing, distancing, restriction of movement, meal processes)
- D. Processes for interacting with members of local communities and others at the research station

- E. Contingency travel plans for weather, cancelled flights, etc.
- F. Safe return travel protocols
- G. Other situations the project needs to plan for (e.g., how to manage new team members joining the group, how to interact with pilots/other support personnel)
- H. What to do if one or more people contract COVID-19 or have close contact with someone who has COVID-19
 - I. Description of the review and approval of the protective plan
 - J. Confirmation of informed consent among all members of the field team, including students and members from different institutions/organizations
- K. Statement of acceptance of risk
- L. Signature of an organizational representative with authority over COVID-19 mitigation plans

14. What are good practices for preventing COVID-19, especially while traveling to the field?

The following are good practices to avoid contracting or spreading COVID-19 for people traveling to field locations

Prior to departure from home

- 10-14 days of strict social distancing prior to travel – prepare for field deployment, but avoid large gatherings
- Wear a mask when interacting with people outside your household
- Test for COVID-19 before travel

During travel

- Wear a KN95 or N95 mask and eye covering
- Remain physically distanced from other people as much as possible
- Keep mask up except when taking bites or sips and try to eat and drink at different times than those around you.

For work in the Arctic, upon arrival at last city/town before fieldwork

- Test for COVID-19
- Consider quarantine or restriction of movement for 5-7 days with additional testing prior to fieldwork, particularly if working in a community
- Wear masks and physically distance when interacting with people outside your group