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State Forester



# COMMONWEALTH of VIRGINIA

## Department of Forestry

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VDOF Family:

COVID-19 poses a significant threat to public health in the Commonwealth and around the world. We have a responsibility to respond both as citizens and as public servants. As employees of VDOF, we share in a long tradition of service and response to emergencies. When we combat wildfires, we fight as aggressively as we can, safely. In that same vein, in the coming weeks, we will continue to fulfill our agency mission as fully as we can, safely.

Our priorities will continue to be:

- Protect VDOF staff health and safety
- Protect public health and safety
- Maintain agency operations to the best of our abilities

In accordance with the Governor's Emergency Declaration and guidance, starting Monday, March 16, we will implement the following supplemental guidance:

### **VDOF Non-emergency Operations**

#### **Offices and Teleworking**

At this time, we plan to maintain agency operations and office hours while emphasizing hygiene and sanitation of high-use areas, staggered schedules and teleworking options.

The agency is fortunate to be able to practice social distancing because many of you have your own work spaces or often work remotely. The agency also has a robust telework policy and flexible weekly schedules which allow us to regularly practice social distancing. As we continue to assess this changing situation, we will work with supervisors to look for increased opportunities for teleworking and flexible scheduling where appropriate.

We are currently in the process of evaluating additional provisions regarding telework capabilities that enhance our goal for increased social distancing but do not negatively impact our ability to efficiently conduct business. For those employees who utilize a VPN, please read VPN tips resource for additional guidance.

## **Field Work**

The nature of much of our field work, such as harvest inspections and advising landowners, allows us to continue these activities in most situations by using proper social distancing techniques and the [recommended CDC guidelines](#).

## **Meetings and Travel**

The Governor also announced the suspension of all large-scale state-sponsored events, for the next 30 days. I am sure you have seen many other events already being cancelled by the organizers. In the spirit of that guidance, VDOF staff will not attend events with more than 20 participants for the next two weeks. Contact your supervisor with specific questions about event attendance during this period. All scheduled training, conferences and meetings in VDOF HQ are being cancelled until further notice.

Additionally, program staff should avoid in-person meetings that involve staff from different geographic regions of the state. These types of meetings should be held via teleconference or video conference. I would also ask that employees assigned to the same work location try to minimize the number, size and frequency of in-person staff meetings. Please keep in mind that social distancing is an important tool in combating the spread of COVID-19.

## **VDOF Emergency Response Operations**

We are still in the thick of spring wildfire season and continue to see dry, windy weather conditions. In addition to the standard safety protocols for wildland fire incidents, it is important for all the wildland firefighters to familiarize themselves with the Wildland Firefighter Safety Tips for guidance.

## **Human Resources**

The Department of Human Resource Management (DHRM) has initiated provisions for employees who become ill with COVID-19, or who have someone in their household who has fallen ill with the virus, including enabling state agencies to authorize up-to 80 hours of Public Health Emergency Leave (PHEL) for employees to attend to their own medical needs or those of an immediate family member.

Anyone who thinks they may have been exposed to a positive case of COVID-19 should contact their healthcare provider IMMEDIATELY and then follow VDOF's Office of Human Resources (HR) guidance below:

- Employees must call their supervisors and immediately notify our HR Team;
- Employees must follow usual leave request procedures;

- Supervisors will approve standard sick leave (VSDP or traditional) and liaise between the employee and the HR team to determine if a PHEL request is needed for the HR director's approval;
- Approval is contingent on a positive COVID-19 diagnosis in which the illness being treated is related to the declared communicable disease;
- Once approved, the affected employee is allotted the PHEL hours in IFRIS – which has been updated with a PH code for their use;
- Wage employees are also entitled to the benefit, which is prorated based on number of hours normally scheduled to work (contact HR Director for guidance);
- PHEL can only be used once – employees may need to use other leave programs to supplement an extended period of absence (e.g. VSDP, FMLA).

## Communications

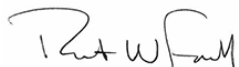
As you will see, we have a dedicated COVID-19 information page on our website where you can access resources and updates as they become available. I will provide weekly updates in The Branch, or sooner if prudent, to keep everyone informed of current recommendations that impact our staff and our ability to perform our job duties.

In order to ensure that every agency leader is able to quickly provide critical, time-sensitive information to all staff in their chain of command, VDOF is implementing a more formal agency-wide phone tree alert system. These procedures are being developed to ensure that critical messages can be effectively relayed to the entire agency in case of an emergency. If you are contacted via the phone tree, please respond to your supervisor ASAP.

Staying informed while focusing on what matters most – our health and the health of our loved ones – is crucial now. The Virginia Department of Health's [website](#) has updated information about COVID-19 in Virginia and the nation. You can also revisit the Governor's message from March 12 [here](#), and find more information from the Governor's Office [here](#).

I thank you for your patience and understanding while this situation develops. At this point, employees should report to work as usual unless ill, on approved leave or otherwise directed. If you have questions or concerns that cannot be answered by the provided resources in this message please send them to HR Director Hector Rivera ([hector.rivera@dof.virginia.gov](mailto:hector.rivera@dof.virginia.gov)) with the subject line "COVID-19 Question". We will address questions as soon as possible.

Regards,



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