

Field Research: Additional Guidance During COVID-19 Pandemic

Purpose: Field research is an integral, essential part of the research mission at UC San Diego. This guidance is not meant to supersede any pre-existing guidance from the University of California or UC San Diego which governed the conduct of field research prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, but is rather intended to supplement that guidance to minimize the risk of COVID-19 disease transmission and protect the health and safety of personnel conducting research activities at field sites as well as research volunteers. Thorough preparation and planning, always essential to the safe conduct of field research, are even more critical at this time.

Overview: Safely conducting field research during a pandemic presents unique challenges because it involves travel (which may be restricted) and working in contexts that may be subject to local restrictions as well as potentially limited key supplies, communication and access to medical services. Given the continued threat of community spread of COVID-19, on-site activity, including field research, will resume/expand in phases. New outbreaks are possible at any time and may require a contraction of activity. UC San Diego will therefore be governed by campus-identified phases (Red, Orange, Yellow and Green), with distinct and risk-appropriate restrictions for each phase. Download phase descriptions and restrictions here: https://blink.ucsd.edu/_files/research-tab/research-continuity/Phase-Chart.May19.9am.pdf. No field research can resume while the campus is in the “Red” phase.

Ramp-Up Procedures: Researchers planning to resume field research must submit the required “Research & On-Site Activity” forms online for review (<https://ucsd.edu/researchactivityform> -- login required). You can read more about this process on the Research Ramp Up webpage: <https://blink.ucsd.edu/research/covid-19/research-ramp-up.html>.

Researchers should include (as attachments) any Field Research Operations Plan that would normally govern their field research, as well as an Alternative Risk Mitigation Plan outlining the particular steps they will take to protect the safety of researchers and research participants at the site.

In addition, because the contexts in which field research is conducted are varied, and not subject to the same controls as research conducted in on-campus laboratories and facilities, ***explicit approval from the researcher’s dean is required to initiate or resume field research once UC San Diego enters the Orange or Yellow Phase.***

Research being conducted at non-UC San Diego sites should have written permission for the field work to proceed from those that control access to the field site; this should be provided to the researcher’s dean as part of any Orange or Yellow Phase request to initiate/resume field research.

Requirements:

All requirements outlined in the General Guidelines for on-site activity apply to field research.

Additional requirements specific to the context of certain types of field-research activity may apply, as outlined here, in the Research Ramp Up Guidebook (<https://blink.ucsd.edu/research/covid-19/research-ramp-up.html#Context-specific-Requirements-a>), in SIO documents (<https://scripps.ucsd.edu/ships/novel-coronavirus-covid-19-information-sio-research-vessels>), or resources provided by specific research locations.

In all contexts where strategies of varying degrees of strictness are suggested, researchers should utilize the most conservative/highest possible forms of social distancing, PPE and sanitization protocols.

Personnel

Students and trainees cannot be required to engage in field research during the Red and Orange phases of activity. Because research is an essential element of the UC San Diego educational experience, faculty should make an effort to support students in credit-bearing (honors, thesis, dissertation, independent study, experiential learning) research activity, while not coercing them to engage in field research during this time. No personnel should be coerced to engage in travel or on-site field research activities if they are uncomfortable doing so.

Location

Field researchers have a responsibility both to their research teams, and to the locations in which they are conducting their work. Therefore, on-site work should not proceed 1) domestically where a state of emergency due to COVID-19 community spread has been declared or 2) domestically where local authorities have restricted activity, as through the emplacement of travel restrictions, stay-at-home orders, or other restrictions, 3) internationally in countries that have been designated by the CDC as having Level 2 Travel Notice (“Ongoing Community Transmission”) or higher (<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/travelers/index.html>) or where local authorities have issued public health orders restricting activity.

Research being conducted at non-UC San Diego sites should have written permission for the field work to proceed from those that control access to the field site.

Travel

Trip registration: Researchers traveling off campus (>100 miles) or internationally should register their travel with UC Away (<https://ehs.ucop.edu/away>). University travelers include employees, students, medical residents, fellows and guests with travel paid by the University.

All official university travel reservations must be made through the UC San Diego travel system (<https://blink.ucsd.edu/travel/index.html>).

No more than two people may occupy a vehicle to, from or at the work site. Masks (i.e., cloth face coverings) are to be worn in vehicles with two people. If possible, travel with windows open. High touch areas (i.e., keys, door handles and steering wheels) must be disinfected before and after the field day.

Public transportation should be avoided.

Remote Work Requiring Lodging and/or Long-term Stays

Individuals planning to participate in remote work should self-quarantine as much as possible before traveling to the remote site.

Planning should include sufficient lodging to allow for social distancing among all research participants.

Field crews should establish protocols to socially isolate individuals, pairs and groups in a hierarchical fashion. For example, if individuals have to share sleeping quarters, other daily activities should be arranged to maximize these interactions such as scheduled eating times, riding in vehicles, etc.

Purchasing of food, supplies and contact with the outside community should be limited to as few individual interactions as possible.

Additional PPE and Hygiene

Fieldwork can involve travel to and work at locations with limited basic services such as plumbed water, reliable communications and limited medical services. Any field excursion should include a first-aid kit (with thermometer). Extra attention should be paid to items needed to reduce COVID-19 exposure, such as gloves and face masks. Additionally, researchers should bring or have access to adequate soap and water for handwashing, hand sanitizer and disinfectant wipes, and a cleaning or disinfection protocol suitable for their site.

Field Research at Sea

All field research at sea and/or using small boats, is subject to safety requirements as established by the Scripps Institution of Oceanography, in compliance with federal, state and local guidance. Plans submitted through the online “Research & On-Site Activity” plan should explicitly address actions taken to comply with requirements set out by Scripps.

See <https://scripps.ucsd.edu/ships/novel-coronavirus-covid-19-information-sio-research-vessels> for additional information about working on research vessels.

See <https://scripps.ucsd.edu/dive-file-uploads> for additional information about research that involves diving.