

Date: April 5, 2020

To: VIMS PIs, technical research staff, and graduate students

From: Mark W. Luckenbach, Associate Dean of Research and Advisory Service

I appreciate the patience and cooperation that you have shown over the past few weeks as we have developed guidelines for how we can conduct our research under the changing pandemic conditions, especially under the Governor's Executive Order 55 that was issued on March 30. Developed in coordination with W&M leadership, the following are the general guidelines for defining critical research activities.

Critical research activities that may be performed on our campuses, aboard our vessels, and in the field must meet one or more of the criteria listed below.

- Maintenance of research animals and cultures (algae, microbial, or tissue) of special significance
- Continuity of valuable, time-sensitive information and products that supports VIMS advisory mandates to VA state agencies and industries
- Continuation of vitally important experiments and graduate training that cannot be conducted at a later date
- Maintenance of sensitive lab equipment
- Periodic maintenance of valuable field equipment and important sampling of ongoing field experiments
- Processing of highly valuable samples that would otherwise be lost
- Initiation or continuation of experiments that are essential for meeting graduate student milestones
- Initiation of new experiments that cannot be conducted at a later time

Research activities **not** permitted on VIMS campuses, aboard our vessels, or in the field while we are under a stay-at-home directive include: 1) work that can be done from home, 2) work solely for the purpose of meeting grant deliverables timelines [many granting agencies have already signaled liberal policies in this regard], and 3) routine processing of preserved samples that are not urgent.

This list of critical research activities expands the one provided by Dean and Director Wells in his April 3rd email to the VIMS community. The above is a list of attributes of critical research activities only, not a listing of which specific projects can go forward. If you have any questions about whether the work that you are proposing meets one or more of these criteria, contact me to discuss your plans.

All research activities must comply with the distancing requirements in the Governors order—maintaining a minimum of 6 feet distance between people at all times. An unfortunate consequence of this distancing requirement is that research aboard our large vessels (*R/V Virginia*, *R/V Bay Eagle* and *R/V Tidewater*) have been suspended until June 10. Additionally, we expect everyone to develop plans that go above and beyond these requirements (e.g., isolating individual work stations where possible, adopting extra cleaning efforts, etc.). While we have managed to achieve a rather liberal definition of “critical” research that should enable us to sustain our research and keep most graduate students on track to meet their milestones, this is not a green light to resume most of our research activities. We must be driven first and foremost by safety concerns. I trust that you will all be extra vigilant about meeting distancing requirements and making your activities as safe as possible for yourself and others in your research group. As Dean and Director Wells communicated on April 3rd, “technical staff and students are *not required* to work in labs or in the field if they do not feel safe doing so” and if needed should contact the appropriate person in the VIMS administration to discuss their concerns.

There is a very important additional issue that we must consider here. It is likely that additional people at VIMS will show some symptoms over the next couple of months that cause them to either to self-isolate or to be instructed by their physician to isolate. There is also a growing likelihood that someone at VIMS will test positive for COVID-19. Under those circumstances any building on campus could be subject to our *Operational Protocol for Potential COVID-19 Contamination*, which calls for closing potentially impacted spaces for a minimum of 72 hours before sending in an Advanced Cleaning Team. Should there be a positive test, the VA Health Department would become involved, contacting others with exposure to this person and directing them to self-quarantine for 14 days.

As recently seen in Chesapeake Bay Hall, even a suspected case can shut down a whole floor of a building for several days, impacting other programs and potentially resulting in the complete loss of animals, cultures, experiments and samples. This can be a big challenge for us to manage because once it goes to a potential contamination situation you do not have any avenue to appeal for access. The potentially affected spaces are closed for several days. *The likelihood of these closures increases with the number of people that are in our buildings, not just your laboratory.*

To manage this challenge effectively, we must absolutely minimize the number of people who are in our buildings, the amount of time that they are there, and the places that they go. We must all expand our thinking beyond just the risk-benefit calculation for our immediate research group and think about our colleagues and the campus as a whole. A faculty member, staff member, or student may say that she/he feels perfectly safe working in the lab, but if that person later exhibits symptoms or tests positive, then we must shut down all or a part of the building for others for several days. Given that individuals can spread the virus before becoming symptomatic, we all need to be mindful that we could unwittingly be a vector.

I encourage you to look carefully at the list above and not simply ask, “how much of my program can I keep active?” but also the more critical question, “what work can I possibly put on hold for the next couple of months?” If we all take this seriously by minimizing the number of people that come to our campuses at any time, minimizing the places that those people go, and all of us minimizing our exposure in our daily lives, we can get through this safely and maintain a reasonable level of productivity.