

# Frequently Asked Questions about FIO-Operated Research Activities Amidst COVID-19

*Updated 24 June 2020*

**Question:** How did FIO create this plan?

**Answer:** FIO and USF have worked with medical experts within USF and external partners to integrate and adapt guidance from the CDC, UNOLSSs, the American Bureau of Shipping, and numerous other organizations and research vessel operators into a plan to mitigate COVID-19 risk at all FIO facilities.

**Question:** Does the USF approach to restarting academic activities on the USF campus align with the FIO plan for Research Vessel and the Keys Marine Lab (KML).

**Answer:** Ship and Keys Marine Laboratory (KML) operations are included in the [USF Phased Approach](#), however due to the unique operational considerations the phased approach implemented by FIO may be slightly different than the overall plan promulgated by USF. The FIO Infection Control Advisory Committee (ICAC) will advise us on moving from one phase to another. If the Covid-19 situation gets worse, it is possible that we would back up a phase. In general, early phases will involve smaller scientific parties focused on research activity only.

**Question:** What are the protocols for resuming research activities on Research Vessels or at the Keys Marine Laboratory and how will they be implemented?

**Answer:** Our priority is to return to research activities while taking steps to protect the health and safety of all FIO personnel and shoreside support both underway and ashore. See our phased approach below:

***[“FIO COVID-19 Phased Restart Plan for Research Operations” pdf](#)***

**Question:** How will FIO negotiate and evolve the plan or mitigate risk during the resumption of operations?

**Answer:** All decisions and/ or changes will be made through our Infection Control Advisory Committee (ICAC). This advisory committee is comprised of designated members of FIO, Infection Control Practitioner, Human Resources, Senior Manager, and Security program stakeholders. This committee will advise FIO on matters relating to maintaining a safe working environment through each phase of operations.

**Question:** How do I determine if I can travel to USFSP or KML?

**Answer:** This answer is twofold:

If you are traveling to USFSP or KML and are a member of the Florida State University System (SUS), travel restrictions may apply. At USF, travel exceptions must be requested and approved by the appropriate VP office, so please check with your designated VP areas. Our recommendation for all visiting researchers both from the Florida SUS and other institutions is

that they should adhere to their specific institutions travel guidance as it may be different from our host institution, USF.

For all other travelers, check local/state or federal COVID-19 regulations to ensure travel from your area is not prohibited. If travelling by air you must adhere to local quarantine guidance, as promulgated in U.S. National Phase II of re-opening, have self-isolated or tested positive for COVID-19 antibodies. Note: travel guidance is very dynamic, so please include these considerations in your planning process.

## General Operations

**Question:** What scientific parties can resume operations during Phase I?

**Answer:** Scientific parties during Phase I may include a graduate student but educational based cruises or activities at KML with numerous students will not be allowed until phase III.

**Question:** Is wearing a mask or facial covering required?

**Answer:** Yes. When in enclosed spaces (indoors), masks (or facial coverings) are required to be worn correctly and social distancing (6') maintained. Outdoors, masks (or facial coverings) should be worn in public spaces or if social distancing cannot be maintained.

**Question:** What type of mask or facial covering will be worn?

**Answer:** We are following campus guidance that face coverings be properly fitted and made of cloth that can be washed and reused.

- Be made of cloth
- Fit snugly but comfortably against the side of the face
- Be secured at all times, using ties or ear loops or wrapping around the neck
- Allow for breathing without restriction
- Be able to be laundered and machine dried without damage or change to shape
- Be laundered after each day's use

If you wish to bring a supply of surgical-style or KN-95 masks, that is acceptable, but you must use a new fresh mask each day. We also recommend that you bring more than one mask.

**Question:** Can people wear face shields instead of masks?

**Answer:** No. Face shields may be used in addition to masks (to provide another layer of protection when it is called for), but not in place of masks.

**Question:** Who is required to be tested for COVID-19?

**Answer:** All ship's personnel, shoreside support, and anyone embarking on a science cruise or land-based activity will be tested. While the FIO personnel will be tested routinely throughout this pandemic or as recommended, all members of the science party must also have a negative RT-PCR viral test within seven (7) days of arriving at FIO (vessels or KML). All members of the science party will complete a Health Status Questionnaire 24-hours prior to arrival or planned

activity.

**Question:** What kind of testing for COVID-19 does the protocol require?

**Answer:** We require RT-PCR viral testing administered by an approved testing laboratory, but let your Chief Scientist know if you encounter difficulties obtaining this test.

**Question:** What has FIO done to ensure the safest environment possible?

**Answer:** While no measure can provide 100% safety the FIO staff has taken the following steps to support and sustain the safest possible operations:

- The number of hand cleaning stations have been increased throughout each ship and the KML facility.
- U/V sanitizing lights have been added to air conditioner handlers, as appropriate.
- Flow of air throughout each ship and the KML facility has been optimized to inhibit ability of virus to linger.  
Focused sanitizing - hourly cleaning of hand holds and high-volume touch surfaces. As well as frequent cleaning of all common spaces.
- Social distancing areas identified in labs and common use areas enabled through individual stations and reduced lab capacity.

## Science Party Responsibilities

Each member of the science party plays a role in ensuring we maintain a safe environment for all embarked personnel. We ask that each person commit to:

- Wear a cloth face covering or medical style mask while onboard and on campus to help prevent viral transmission.
- Adhere to social distancing to the greatest extent possible – six (6) foot minimum enforced by FIO personnel (e.g. captain, mate, or site manager) and members of the science party.
- Adhere to CDC recommended hygiene practices – wash hands hourly or use hand sanitizer hourly, avoid touching face, practice respiratory etiquette, thoroughly clean toilet area after each use.
- Stay home when sick, or if exposed to COVID-19 (COVID + household member), or if diagnosed with COVID-19 by Doctor or PCR test. Under no circumstances should a research activity (e.g. voyage, field ops) be undertaken with the possibility of a SARS-CoV-2 patient.
- Assist and play an active role with the cleaning/safety team to support increased disinfection and monitor for soiled areas that require cleaning.
- Enforce the use of facial coverings and social distancing guidelines, as required.

## Research Vessel Operations:

**Question:** When will FIO be restarting underway operations?

**Answer:** FIO plans to restart research operations on July 10<sup>th</sup>. All cruises during this period will be research based only with no students embarked. Other limitations are detailed in each phased plan.

**Question:** What limitations are in place for underway operations during Phase I?

**Answer:** Initially, cruises will be within 12 hours or approximately 120 nautical miles from U.S. port w/appropriate support & medical services and will last 1 to 5 days which may include overnight operations.

**Question:** Who should not get underway?

**Answer:** Anyone "At risk" for COVID-19 complications by CDC guidelines (age >65+ or with an underlying condition) and based on each phases risk assessment should discuss their underlying risk before participating in field research activity at sea.

**Question:** Your guide speaks to berthing restrictions, but what about operations of less than 24 hours (day cruises)?

**Answer:** For day cruises where berthing is not required, capacity is based on the members of the science party and crew's ability to socially distance in all spaces. The final number will be based upon a risk assessment conducted by FIO.

**Question:** Is there a path to return to "normal" shipboard life if certain conditions are met?

**Answer:** With so much uncertainty about the nature of COVID-19, we don't yet know what the metrics will be for returning to "normal" shipboard life -- or even what the new "normal" will be. We anticipate that social distancing and wearing mask will be normal operations for quite a while and we will continue to evaluate our plan.

## At Sea

**Question:** What type of medical monitoring can I expect while at sea?

**Answer:** Each person embarked will be evaluated 2x per day. This will include a temperature check and general questions about how you are feeling. The results of these checks will be logged.

**Question:** Does it really make sense that masks are worn at sea despite testing prior to departure?

**Answer:** Yes. Our USF Health Science medical advisors stipulate consistent wearing of face masks, hand washing, hygiene practices, and physical distancing (to the extent possible on a ship. These are all part of our multi-layered approach to minimizing the possibility of spreading coronavirus at sea. The *FIO Plan* needs to be followed by all, for the good of all.

**Question:** Is it safe to share a stateroom?

**Answer:** We have gone to great lengths to mitigate risk. These efforts include reducing stateroom capacity, staggering occupancy by watch schedule and research activities, enhanced cleaning protocols and equipment/ supplies. In addition, occupants are expected to keep their rooms meticulously clean, and sanitize them regularly per the ship's cleaning schedule. Cabin

mates should always maximize social distancing and attempt to remain farther than six feet apart. Whenever possible, they should avoid being in their room at the same time. If they must be in the room at the same time, they should each wear masks. If cabin mates have similar watch schedules and sleep at the same time, they should keep their masks on until their bunk curtains are fully closed. Cabin mates should not share bed linens, towels or clothing.

**Question:** Your vessels are relatively small, so how can you achieve social distancing while on the ship?

**Answer:** Social distancing aboard a ship is contrary to how we normally operate, but with planning, the crew and science party can be formed into cohorts (small groups) divided by watch schedules, duties (both science and crew) which will minimize contact. In addition, we have taken the following steps:

- Established traffic schemes for each space, passageway, and only use designated doors and hatches for entry and exit.
- Limited access to certain areas of the ship. E.g. Under routine operations, limit access to the bridge of the ship to the Chief Scientist, Master and mate.
- Staggered activities in labs - if more than one person present in a room, strictly adhere to provided social distancing guidelines for capacity considerations.
- Scaled stateroom capacity or stagger personnel to minimize interaction when possible.

**Question:** Will the common areas such as the galley be open?

**Answer:** Yes, with occupancy limits so that physical distancing is maintained.

**Question:** How will mealtime be different?

**Answer:** Food service will be self-service vice self-serve meals. In addition, mealtimes will be staggered to keep traffic on the galley mess deck to a minimum.

**Question:** What kind of food will be served?

**Answer:** We will continue to serve high quality food but you may see more use of pre-packaged foods, paper products and single use items to minimize contact.

**Question:** What happens if someone gets sick at sea?

**Answer:** The *COVID-19 Response Mitigation Plan* describes the process we'll go through if there is illness at sea. In short anyone who exhibits COVID-19 symptoms will be isolated in a private stateroom and the vessel will immediately return to the nearest U.S. port.

**Question:** If someone on board develops COVID-19, will the entire ship be quarantined? Will people be able to depart the vessel?

**Answer:** We are required to report COVID-19 symptoms to a variety of medical and regulatory bodies, including the United States Coast Guard Captain of the Port. The USCG will direct any emergency response, and we have no control over the outcome.

**Question:** Who will provide medical support when the ships are away from homeport?

**Answer:** Our telemedicine provider will work with the vessel Master to deliver the highest level

of care possible on board and if necessary, we will coordinate assistance from the U.S. Coast Guard.

**Question:** There are occasions when working outside on the deck of a vessel when folks need to work closer than 6 feet from each other. What guidance can you give regarding deck operations when folks must be closer than 6 feet on deck?

**Answer:** Minimize the frequency and duration of these occasions to the extent possible. When you are unable to socially distance you should wear a face mask. When possible, do not share tools and refrain from touching the same object, or wear gloves. Refrain from touching your face and wash your hands thoroughly after working. And wipe down all equipment per the ship's cleaning plan.

## Keys Marine Laboratory Operations:

**Question:** When will FIO at KML be restarting operations?

**Answer:** KML plans to restart Phase I operations on July 10<sup>th</sup>. All activities during this period will be research-based only, limited to groups of five (5) or less, with no student-oriented activities. Graduate students may be a part of the team. Other limitations are detailed in each phased plan.

**Question:** What limitations are in place for KML operations during Phase I?

**Answer:** Initially, KML activities will be limited to visiting science teams within a one-day drive from their home institution and have not stopped while transiting an 'area of sustained community transmission'. Groups requiring air transportation thru MIA or FLL will not be considered until these counties are no longer considered an 'area of sustained community transmission'.

**Question:** Who should not participate in activities at KML?

**Answer:** Anyone "At risk" for COVID-19 complications by CDC guidelines (age >65+ or with an underlying condition) and based on each phases risk assessment should discuss their underlying risk before participating in field research activity at sea.

**Question:** Is there a path to return to "normal" activities at KML if certain conditions are met?

**Answer:** With so much uncertainty about the nature of COVID-19, we don't yet know what the metrics will be for returning to "normal" life at KML -- or even what the new "normal" will be. We anticipate that social distancing and wearing masks/facial coverings will be "normal operations" for quite a while and we will continue to evaluate our plan.

## While at KML

**Question:** What type of health screening and monitoring can I expect while at KML?

**Answer:** Each visitor staying on site will be evaluated twice daily. This will include a temperature check by KML staff and general questions about how you are feeling. The results of

these checks will be logged. This will also apply to Daily Access groups (not staying on site) at KML.

**Question:** Does it really make sense that masks are worn at KML despite testing prior to arrival?

**Answer:** Yes. Our USF Health Science medical advisors stipulate consistent wearing of face masks, hand washing, hygiene practices, and physical distancing (to the extent possible). These are all part of our multi-layered approach to minimizing the possibility of spreading coronavirus at KML. The *FIO Plan* needs to be followed by all, for the good of all.

**Question:** Is it safe to share a dormitory room?

**Answer:** We have gone to great lengths to mitigate risk. These efforts include limiting one science team per housing unit (e.g. kitchen facility), reducing dormitory capacity (6' spacing between beds, or single person per bedroom if possible), improved air flow, enhanced cleaning protocols and equipment/supplies. Roommates should not share bed linens, towels, or clothing. In addition, occupants are expected to keep their housing unit meticulously clean and sanitize them regularly, per the KML's cleaning schedule. The use of facial coverings is required, and social distancing should be maintained in all common use areas. Roommates should always maximize social distancing and attempt to remain farther than six feet apart.

**Question:** Will the common areas such as the Sea Water Systems, Dry Labs and Classroom be open?

**Answer:** Yes, the Dry Labs, Classroom, and SW System will be available with occupancy limits to indoors areas so that physical distancing can be maintained. Facial coverings will be required, and social distancing must be maintained. Congregating in outside areas, including at the sea water tables, is discouraged unless social distancing is maintained and/or facial coverings are used.

**Question:** What are the requirements for Daily Access to KML (e.g. groups not staying in KML dormitories)?

**Answer:** All visiting groups requesting Daily Access to KML will be required to:

- have RT-PCR viral COVID-19 testing 7-days prior to access
- complete a Health Status Survey 24-hours prior to access
- daily health status and temperature checks by KML staff upon arrival & at their departure

Visiting groups requesting Daily Access and residing full-time within Monroe County will not require COVID-19 viral testing at this time.

## Vessels and Diving Operations at KML

**Question:** Your vessels are relatively small, so how can you achieve social distancing while on the water?

**Answer:** KML vessels are open to fresh air and sunshine and thus considered a low risk for COVID transmission. We have taken the following steps:

- Vessel capacities will be limited during KML phased reopening.

- Science party members must maintain social distance whenever possible while topside, or wear facial coverings when distancing is not possible.

**Question:** Will there be AAUS diving missions allowed at KML during the phased reopening?

**Answer:** Yes, diving missions can be conducted with certain restrictions, as detailed in our Phased Reopening Plan.

- Divers will only handle their own gear and will disinfect all gear (especially regulators & masks) as per specified protocols.
- Divers will not be permitted to dive if they have a fever or have had any of the following symptoms in the last 14 days (cough, shortness of breath or difficulty breathing, fever, chills, muscle pain, new loss of smell or taste).
- Divers/science party members who are high risk/vulnerable may not be approved for operations but will be considered on a case-by-case basis.
- Divers who have previously tested positive for COVID-19 must submit an updated, approved Dive Medical Evaluation prior to diving.

**Question:** What precautions have been taken with SCUBA cylinders and KML air fill station?

**Answer:** Masks (or facial coverings) will be worn during the filling process. Fill whips and valves shall be disinfected before use. Only KML staff will be allowed access inside the fill station.

**Question:** What happens if someone gets sick while at KML?

**Answer:** The *COVID-19 Response Mitigation Plan* describes the process we will implement if there is illness at KML. In short anyone who exhibits COVID-19 symptoms will be isolated in a private bedroom.

**Question:** Who will provide medical support for visiting groups while at KML?

**Answer:** KML has a contact information, which will be made available, for all nearby urgent care and hospital facilities.