



# COVID-19—Forest Service's Response to the Coronavirus Pandemic at Recreation Sites

## Inspection Report 08801-0001-22

OIG identified the prevention measures that Forest Service established for recreation sites in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

### OBJECTIVE

Our objectives were to determine the prevention measures FS implemented to protect employees and the public at recreation sites due to COVID-19, and whether those measures were implemented within established timeframes.

### REVIEWED

OIG reviewed the actions FS took to develop and implement policies and procedures to mitigate COVID-19 exposure at recreation sites from March 27, 2020, through March 31, 2021.

### RECOMMENDS

We are not making any recommendations.

### WHAT OIG FOUND

The mission of the Forest Service (FS) is to sustain the health, diversity, and productivity of the Nation's forests and grasslands to meet the needs of present and future generations. FS manages 30,000 sites nationally, and these sites feature 10,000 campgrounds, 159,000 miles of trails, 750 rental cabins, 2,000 trailheads, 130 visitor centers, and 2,150 day-use and boating and fishing sites. In 2020, the United States faced an unprecedented situation that forced publicly available FS recreation sites, such as some campgrounds and visitor centers, to close because of the coronavirus disease of 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic outbreak. As a proactive and precautionary step to adjust operations, FS developed plans and guidance to prevent the spread of COVID-19 to its staff and visitors.

Forest Service identified a framework of measures to respond to COVID-19 at recreation sites, including temporary closure of recreation sites, development of cleaning protocols for recreational facilities, social distancing, use of personal protective equipment (PPE), and posting of signage. FS also provided regional officials with decision-making authority and flexibility to implement additional measures based on their operational needs.

FS' framework of prevention measures was disseminated to the regional offices, national forests, and recreation sites with the expectation that the measures would be implemented immediately. We did not find any indication that the measures FS developed and communicated were not implemented timely.



## OFFICE OF INSPECTOR GENERAL

United States Department of Agriculture



**DATE:** May 2, 2023

**INSPECTION**

**NUMBER:** 08801-0001-22

**TO:** Randy Moore  
Chief  
Forest Service

**ATTN:** Robert Velasco  
Chief Financial Officer  
Forest Service

**FROM:** Janet Sorensen  
Assistant Inspector General for Audit

**SUBJECT:** COVID-19 – Forest Service’s Response to the Coronavirus Pandemic at  
Recreation Sites

This report presents the results of the subject review. We are not making any recommendations in this report. Therefore, no further response to this office is necessary.

We appreciated the courtesies and cooperation extended to us by members of your staff during our inspection fieldwork and subsequent discussions. This report contains publicly available information and will be posted in its entirety to our website (<https://usdaoig.oversight.gov>) in the near future.

## **Table of Contents**

---

<b>Background and Objectives .....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Question 1: What Measures Did the Forest Service Implement Due to COVID-19 to Protect Employees and the Public at Recreation Sites?.....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Question 2: Were the Prevention Measures Implemented Within Established Timeframes? .....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Scope and Methodology.....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Abbreviations .....</b>	<b>9</b>



# Background and Objectives

## Background

The mission of the Forest Service (FS) is to sustain the health, diversity, and productivity of the Nation’s forests and grasslands to meet the needs of present and future generations. FS is responsible for managing more than 193 million acres of public land, which is composed of 154 national forests and 20 grasslands in 44 States, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands.

The FS headquarters is located in Washington, DC. As part of its organizational structure, FS also includes the National Forest System (NFS), which is managed through nine regions (see Figure 1).

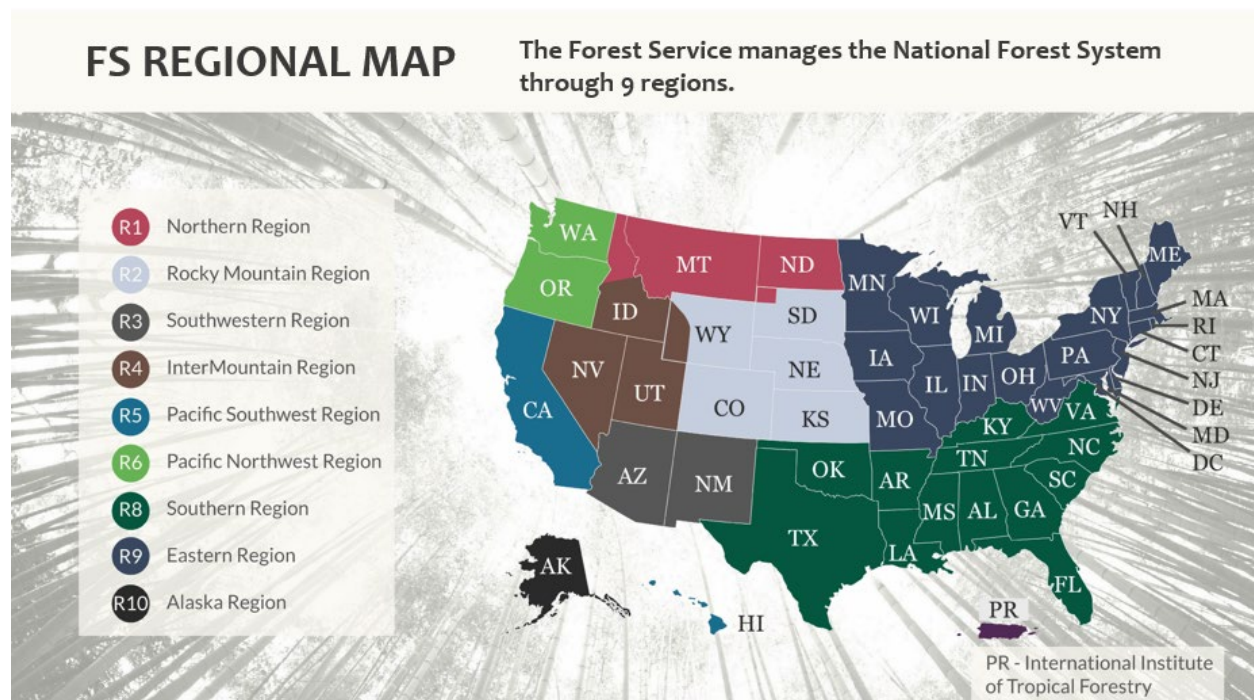


Figure 1: Map of FS’ Nine Regions.

According to FS guidance,<sup>1</sup> the NFS “is an American treasure” that touches nearly every facet of the American life and “can be a resource for people during difficult times.” FS “recreation facilities promote solitude and self-reliance,” and “the recreation activities offer benefits to health and well-being that visitors to the National Forests can continue to enjoy.” FS manages 30,000 sites nationally, and these sites feature 10,000 campgrounds, 159,000 miles of trails, 750 rental cabins, 2,000 trailheads, 130 visitor centers, and 2,150 day-use and boating and fishing sites.

During the onset of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, FS experienced an increase in visitation to its recreation sites. During fiscal year (FY) 2020, FS received more than

<sup>1</sup> *Guidance for the Operation of Recreation Services Sites and Food Services* (Mar. 2020).

168 million visits to its national forests and grasslands, an increase of 18 million national forest visits from 2019. FS attributed the increase to people’s desire to be outdoors in natural settings during the COVID-19 pandemic. The 193 million acres of national forests continued to be a resource for people to use, including the facilities, trails, and open NFS lands. However, the pandemic impacted FS operations by challenging its established means of ensuring it could fulfill its mission and keep true to its motto of “caring for the land and serving people.”

Following the closure of several recreation sites due to the stay-at-home orders issued by States, FS took steps to safely resume and maintain operations as it responded to the COVID-19 pandemic. FS’ goal was to sustain customer service and mission functions and ensure its workforce was safe, healthy, and available to meet community and public needs.

On March 27, 2020, Congress passed into law the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act (CARES Act) in response to the COVID-19 outbreak and its impact on the economy, public health, state and local governments, individuals, and businesses.<sup>2</sup> The CARES Act provided \$70.8 million in funding to FS to assist with relief efforts, including \$34 million in funding to the NFS to prevent, prepare for, and respond to COVID-19 domestically or internationally. This funding provided for the cleaning and disinfecting of public recreation amenities, personal protective equipment (PPE), and baseline health testing for first responders.

## **Objectives**

Our objectives were to determine (1) what prevention measures FS implemented due to COVID-19 to protect employees and the public at recreation sites, and (2) whether those measures were implemented within established timeframes.

---

<sup>2</sup> Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act, Pub. L. No. 116-136, 134 Stat. 281 (2020).

# Question 1: What Measures Did the Forest Service Implement Due to COVID-19 to Protect Employees and the Public at Recreation Sites?

In 2020, the United States faced an unprecedented situation that forced publicly available recreation sites, such as some campgrounds and visitor centers, to close because of the COVID-19 outbreak. Despite some closures, according to Forest Service, the national forests and grasslands received more than 168 million visits for recreation activities during FY 2020. As a proactive and precautionary step to adjust operations, FS developed plans and guidance to prevent the spread of COVID-19 to its staff and visitors.

We found that FS identified a framework of measures to manage its response to COVID-19 at recreation sites. The measures were designed to mitigate agency employees' and the public's exposure to COVID-19. Such measures included the temporary closure of recreation sites, the development of cleaning protocols for recreation facilities, social distancing, use of PPE, and posting of signage (see Figure 2).



Figure 2: FS' Prevention Measures.



Further, the FS chief delegated to regional officials the decision-making authority to modify operations and/or services based on factors such as protecting employees and the public health and supporting local and State COVID-19 mitigation efforts. For example, we found that some regional offices issued supplemental guidance related to vehicle-cleaning protocols, travel guidance, and sanitizing reusable PPE.

## Question 2: Were the Prevention Measures Implemented Within Established Timeframes?

FS identified a framework of prevention measures with an expectation that the measures would be implemented immediately upon receipt of instruction. For example, an executive order—effective March 26, 2020—was issued by a State that required its citizens to stay at home. In response to the order, FS promptly issued guidance on March 27, 2020, that communicated the temporary closure of recreation facilities to align with State and local guidance.

We also found FS took steps to safely resume and maintain operations in response to the COVID-19 pandemic to ensure its workforce was safe, healthy, and available to meet the public’s needs. FS developed a guidance and protocols<sup>3</sup> document as a framework to take actions to return to regular operations. According to FS officials, guidance was disseminated to the regional offices, national forests, and ultimately to the recreation sites for implementation. The objective was to mitigate conditions while also being responsive to FS operational needs identified within the localized areas (see Figure 3).



Figure 3: Forest Service’s Communication Flow.

Further, the regional offices we sampled established individual COVID-19 task forces which encompassed varying levels of authority and expertise. For example, we identified a task force

<sup>3</sup> United States Department of Agriculture *Forest Service Guidance and Protocols to Implement the USDA Reopening Playbook*, May 2020.

that communicated regularly with its national forest officials to ensure implementation of prevention measures based on the COVID-19 guidance. In addition, we identified that FS officials also tracked the number of COVID-19 cases among employees.

We did not find any indication that the measures FS developed and communicated were not implemented timely.

## Scope and Methodology

---

We conducted this inspection to determine the prevention measures FS implemented at recreation sites because of the COVID-19 pandemic and whether those measures were implemented within established timeframes. We performed fieldwork from May 2021 through March 30, 2023.

Our inspection scope covered the period of March 27, 2020, through March 31, 2021. We conducted fieldwork remotely with the FS Washington Office and the following FS regional offices and national forests:

Selected Three of Nine FS Regions	Selected Two National Forests per Region
<b>Region 2 – Rocky Mountain Region</b>	Pike-San Isabel National Forests & Cimarron and Comanche National Grasslands
	White River National Forest
<b>Region 5 – Pacific Southwest Region</b>	Lake Tahoe Basin Management Unit
	Inyo National Forest
<b>Region 8 – Southern Region</b>	Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forest
	National Forests in North Carolina

To identify our sample, we non-statistically selected the regional offices and associated national forests with the highest volume of recreation site visits per year.<sup>4</sup> We made our determination based on the consideration that the greater the number of visitors to the national forests, the greater the risk of exposure to the COVID-19 virus and the need for prevention measures to be implemented.

To accomplish our inspection objectives, we:

- Obtained and reviewed the applicable laws, written policies, procedures, and other guidance to gain an understanding of the actions FS took to mitigate FS employee and public exposure to the COVID-19 virus at recreation sites.
- Interviewed agency personnel from the Washington Office, regional offices, and national forests through videoconferencing and email communication.
- Assessed agency actions through review of FS’ written responses to our questions related to (1) the development and implementation of policies and procedures to mitigate exposure to COVID-19 at recreation sites, (2) communication of the mitigation efforts to staff, and (3) oversight.

We conducted this inspection in accordance with the Council of the Inspectors General on Integrity and Efficiency’s Quality Standards for Inspection and Evaluation. These standards

---

<sup>4</sup> To determine the regional and national forest site selections, we used the 2019 *National Visitor Use Monitoring (NVUM) National Report*, which identified the annual visitation estimates by region.

require that we obtain sufficient, competent, and relevant evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our conclusions based on our inspection objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our conclusions.

## Abbreviations

---

CARES Act.....	Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act
COVID-19.....	coronavirus disease 2019
FS .....	Forest Service
FY .....	fiscal year
NFS .....	National Forest System
OIG .....	Office of Inspector General
PPE.....	Personal Protective Equipment

Learn more about USDA OIG

Visit our website: <https://usdaoig.oversight.gov/>

Follow us on Twitter: @OIGUSDA

## How to Report Suspected Wrongdoing in USDA Programs

Fraud, Waste, and Abuse

File complaint online: <https://usdaoig.oversight.gov/hotline>

Monday–Friday, 9:00 a.m.– 3:00 p.m. ET

In Washington, DC 202-690-1622

Outside DC 800-424-9121

TDD (Call Collect) 202-690-1202

Bribes or Gratuities

202-720-7257 (24 hours)

In accordance with Federal civil rights law and U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) civil rights regulations and policies, the USDA, its Agencies, offices, and employees, and institutions participating in or administering USDA programs are prohibited from discriminating based on race, color, national origin, religion, sex, gender identity (including gender expression), sexual orientation, disability, age, marital status, family/parental status, income derived from a public assistance program, political beliefs, or reprisal or retaliation for prior civil rights activity, in any program or activity conducted or funded by USDA (not all bases apply to all programs). Remedies and complaint filing deadlines vary by program or incident.

Persons with disabilities who require alternative means of communication for program information (e.g., Braille, large print, audiotope, American Sign Language, etc.) should contact the responsible Agency or USDA's TARGET Center at (202) 720-2600 (voice and TTY) or contact USDA through the Federal Relay Service at (800) 877-8339. Additionally, program information may be made available in languages other than English.

To file a program discrimination complaint, complete the USDA Program Discrimination Complaint Form, AD-3027, found online at [How to File a Program Discrimination Complaint](#) and at any USDA office or write a letter addressed to USDA and provide in the letter all of the information requested in the form. To request a copy of the complaint form, call (866) 632-9992. Submit your completed form or letter to USDA by: (1) mail: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Office of the Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights, 1400 Independence Avenue, SW, Washington, D.C. 20250-9410; (2) fax: (202) 690-7442; or (3) email: [program.intake@usda.gov](mailto:program.intake@usda.gov).

USDA is an equal opportunity provider, employer, and lender.

All photographs on the front and back covers are from USDA's Flickr site and are in the public domain. They do not depict any particular audit, inspection, or investigation.