

6 May 2020

VWR Recertification 2020 – important message to returning VWRs

As you can well imagine, the Covid-19 pandemic has brought new concerns and regulations for ESWA's VWR program. Sadly, and at the request of our USFS rangers, we have postponed the June 6 VWR training day and have canceled joint trailhead hosting with FDRD on July 11. And now some **good news**: We are planning for VWR patrols to move forward as in the past, with three **important** new adjustments.

1. Online recertification. Normally, recertification of returning VWRs would take place in person on VWR Training Day. This year, because of Covid-19 restrictions on gatherings, we will have a **remote** process: We will send to you materials that include important updates from the Forest Service, and ask for (a) your online signature of the Joint Hazard Analysis (JHA) and (b) your attendance at a brief Zoom meeting on one of three days that we will select. We will also send you the new and improved training manual we will be providing our new recruits this summer, so you can scroll through it to refresh your own training. Official VWR patrols may not start until you've attended the recertification session, signed the JHA, attended one of the Zoom meetings, and waited (impatiently) for Memorial Day (the Forest Service's requested patrol start date).

2. Changes on the trail. Because of the pandemic, guideline and protocol adjustments will be more robust than in past years. We'll develop new instructions on an ongoing basis as assessments of safety issues evolve. A good starting point for all of us are the **seven general guidelines** provided by the folks at Leave No Trace (see below). More specific guidelines (forthcoming) will deal with the details of social distancing, masks, party size, distribution of swag, sharing of maps, enforcement of state and local restrictions, and so forth. Cindy and Katherine at the Forest Service say that we (and they) will be required to follow whatever the most stringent standards are – whether local, county, or other.

3. Apprentice hikes. Pity the poor enthusiasts who signed up to take VWR training on June 6, now sadly postponed. But here is the good news: Training Day is not canceled. We still hope to hold VWR Training Day later in the summer - maybe August (fingers crossed). But rather than have our new recruits sit on their hands until then, we want to help them get out on the trails to learn something about rangering - and **you** are the key. We have obtained permission from Cindy and Katherine for new recruits to accompany YOU on your regular VWR patrols as "apprentices." They will not be official in any way, but the opportunity will enable them to observe and learn from an experienced expert like yourself. And one more thing: We have made a digital copy of the newly revised Training Manual, which will be sent to everyone, so the apprentices will have a bit of a head start.

Here's how apprentice hikes will work:

If you are willing to mentor a new recruit (apprentice), we'll ask you to provide information (such as your contact info, dates available to hike, and preferred trailheads). We will create a kind of menu of opportunities for the apprentices. They will contact you and work out a mutually agreeable patrol date, time, and trailhead. They will not perform any of the official duties like you do and will not be in uniform. You will get to show off your VWR best practices. The apprentices will fill out a report form (separate from yours), just to get them into the swing of things. They can do as many such apprentice patrols as they like, and then attend the formal Training Day, hopefully later in the summer, to become fully-fledged VWRs, ideally in time to make a few patrols of their own before mid-October, when patrols end.

4. As noted above, we will offer a choice of several **Zoom sessions for you** (not for the apprentices), at which time we will discuss plans, address any questions that you have, and review the latest updates. It will be a great opportunity for you to reengage with ESWA in a way that will enable us to meet the expected surge of Wilderness hikers this summer in a responsible, effective, and safe manner.

In summary, in May we'll send you the new and improved training manual, updated instructions, and get your online signature on the JHA. We'll ask for you to agree to mentor apprentices and to send us information about your availability. And we will schedule several Zoom sessions as a substitute for the usual face-to-face recertification meetings. Please feel free to send any questions or suggestions and stay tuned for more soon.

LEAVE NO TRACE Recommendations for Getting Outside During Covid-19

1. You & your outdoor world

You may be asking: Can I go for a hike or walk on the beach right now? Your personal vulnerability, the health of others in your community, access to local and uncrowded spaces and more play into this decision. Then there are communities and states with either lockdown, shelter in place or stay at home mandates. Where Covid-19 is spiking, it may not be possible to get out at all, so pay close attention to guidance in your community before heading outside. Then follow physical distancing guidance, meaning staying at least six-feet away from anyone not living with you.

2. Expect closures

As businesses limit services or direct their staff to work remotely, closures should be expected. The result could be a lack of water, restrooms, campgrounds, or other facilities—or even entire areas closed to the public. Many experts are recommending that you refrain from using public restrooms and other open facilities at all right now. Take necessary precautions like bringing extra food and water, learning how to go to the bathroom outdoors, and being ready to pack all your trash out with you.

3. Pack out your trash

With limited staff and services likely in many parks and protected areas, trash and recycling receptacles may not be emptied as often as normal or at all. This can result in trash overflowing from receptacles which becomes litter and can harm wildlife. Instead, pack your trash and recyclables out with you all the way home and utilize your own receptacles.

4. Avoid times & places of high use

Absolutely avoid crowded parks, trails, and beaches. Physical distancing applies in the outdoors just as it does anywhere else. To avoid being part of the creation of large crowds and groups at popular outdoor areas, spread out to less popular spots, and avoid times of highest use if possible. Follow guidelines at the Colorado State website: (<https://covid19.colorado.gov/>)

5. Proceed with caution

Keep in mind that as our healthcare system becomes more overwhelmed, it's important to reduce potential accidents that would add to the stress on first responders and medical professionals. As much as possible, stick to activities and areas that are within your regular routine and take it easy.

6. Don't forget the 7 LNT Principles

Just because times are tough, doesn't mean the Leave No Trace 7 Principles fly out the window. Our outdoor spaces will likely be receiving less attention from staff and volunteers right now. This means our shared spaces need us to act as stewards more than ever. Remember, it is still just as important to prepare for spring weather conditions, stick to trails, dispose of our waste properly, minimize fire impacts, leave what we find, keep a safe distance from wildlife, and generally do your best to eliminate impacts. They are summarized below.

7. Be considerate and kind to other visitors

We are all in this together. Be considerate of others in the outdoors by ensuring that you practice physical distancing. Be particularly kind to Forest Service staff during these challenging times. Help them do their job by doing your part to take care of each other and our beloved outdoors.