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Office of Research Compliance

COVID-19 Guidance for Researchers

Updated March 24, 2020

The University of Maine and University of Maine at Machias continue to closely monitor the coronavirus/COVID-19 pandemic and are actively engaged with the University of Maine System in daily planning to inform and reduce risk to faculty, staff and students. While the University of Maine and the University of Maine at Machias still remain open and operational, research labs have moved to 'remote research' when possible, with small numbers of staff coming in to conduct essential research activities to sustain the most critical functions.

Essential means either that the research activity during this period is critical to the health of the public; is of national or state importance; involves the protection of valuable resources such as cell lines, animal lines, instrumentation requiring regular attention, etc. which cannot be shut down and must be kept going at a basal level; is necessary to avoid prematurely stopping an experiment or research process in progress that would result in an irrecoverable loss; or is necessary because experimentation or related activities for the coming year are tightly linked to season phenology and even a short delay will result in long term impacts. All 'essential research' being conducted on the University of Maine campus in Orono and its other facilities in the state must be reported through the following online form. The OVPRDGS will receive the reports and identify any that represent areas of concern. All reporting forms and information on concerns will be forwarded to the appropriate college dean or center director who will ensure that established unit-specific safety protocols are followed.

Below is information to help plan and prepare:

Laboratory Operations

Prevention:

The overarching goal of the University's actions is to minimize the risk of the spread of COVID-19 and to safeguard the health and safety of the UMaine community. At this time, all are encouraged to practice social distancing ("maintaining distance -approximately 6 feet or 2 meters- from others when possible").

- Consider implementing staggered schedules so that researchers can avoid close contact.
Remind your staff and students to take basic preventative measures to avoid exposure to or infection from coronavirus, including:
Wash hands often with soap and water for at least 20 seconds
Stay home if they are sick
Disinfect common laboratory areas and frequently touched surfaces (e.g. doorknobs, sink handles, freezer doors, fume hood sashes, telephones)
Employees (students & staff) should self-report any travel, particularly out of state, to their supervisor. Together they should refer to the UMaine COVID website (https://umaine.edu/coronavirus/) and discuss options such as self-quarantine. If the student feels sick upon returning, they should self-isolate and call a doctor immediately.
Consider limiting tours and visitors. When necessary to have visitors, external visitors to laboratories should exercise the same precautions as internal laboratory users.

Personnel:

- Identify 'essential' personnel and make sure that they know what to do if operations are suspended
Remind your lab personnel of your communication plan to ensure all are informed; if you do not have such a plan in place we urge you to create one

Plan Your Research:

- Identify procedures and processes which require regular personnel attention (e.g. cell culture maintenance, animal care).
Access and prioritize critical laboratory activities.
Identify any research experiments that can be scaled back or delayed.
If you are carrying out a long-term experiment and if it is possible to freeze or otherwise capture samples at specific steps, you might consider doing this more often.
Discuss with your lab members now what you will do if personnel are unable to come to work for an extended period of time. Planning ahead will help you make quick decisions should operations need to be suspended.
Cross-train research staff to fill in for others who may be out sick or unable to come to work.
Ensure staff have the appropriate training.
Document critical operating procedures.
Coordinate with colleague who have similar research activities to identify ways to ensure coverage of critical activities.
Maintain a sufficient inventory of critical supplies that may be impacted by global shipping delays.
Communicate the need to avoid performing high-risk procedures alone. If working alone is permitted, ensure a notification procedure is in place.
Ensure that high-risk materials (radioactive, biohazards, chemicals) are secured and freezers are labeled with emergency contact information.
If some things can be carried out remotely such as data analysis, literature reviews etc., ensure that personnel have remote access to such information.
If any of these steps generate unexpected costs, be sure to document the unanticipated costs for potential recovery.

Human Subjects Research – Important Update

In an effort to minimize the risk of contracting or spreading COVID-19 in human subjects research interactions, all human subjects research involving face-to-face interaction must be paused until further notice, unless they can be conducted remotely, and no study subjects should travel to UMaine/UMM.

Researchers may need to modify their procedures, to replace in-person study visits with "remote" options for questionnaires, surveys, check-ins, screening, and consenting. Remember that these changes must be approved in advance by the IRB as a Modification to the study. If you have any questions about whether a remote option is possible contact the IRB office at umric@maine.edu. The IRB staff and the IRB will prioritize these modifications.

Animal Research – Important Update – March 20, 2020

In order to provide clear guidance for research involving animals during this time of decreased operational activity, IACUC has provided the following guidance:

- All breeding of commercially available animals should cease immediately. No new breeding pairs should be set up for non-commercially available animals. If your research requires you to continue breeding (i.e., strains that are specially bred and/or irreplaceable), please email your request to UMaine's Attending Veterinarian, Jim Weber (jweber@maine.edu) with copy to the IACUC (umric@maine.edu). Your request should include the following information:
1. Animal strain, including all nomenclature
2. Current number of adults
3. Original source where strain was purchased / donated
4. Are live animals of this strain still available from this source? If not, are cryopreserved individuals available?
5. Is data currently being collected on these animals? If so, when do you estimate that the current replicate of this project will be completed?
6. Will the Lab need additional animals to complete data collection for this particular replicate?
7. Are these animals being managed for an experiment that is not currently active?

All requests will be reviewed within 24 hours by UMaine's Institutional Veterinarian, IACUC and the applicable lab manager.

- Only those experiments that are time-sensitive and already have animals present or on order should be completed as long as proper social distancing protocols, as recommended by the CDC, can be maintained. Permission by the applicable Lab Manager must be obtained prior to performing any experiments in close quarters. Please email your request to the appropriate lab manager with copy to the IACUC (umric@maine.edu). Your request should include applicable IACUC protocol number(s), a description of the experiment, and how it is essential research as defined above. All requests will be reviewed within 24 hours by UMaine's Institutional Veterinarian, IACUC and the applicable lab manager.

New animal experiments should not be started unless directly related to COVID-19 research and in consultation with IACUC.

- For animals that would normally be euthanized at end of study, please euthanize as soon as your data is collected. Also, review current animals in your colony and consider euthanasia if no longer needed. For USDA covered species, you should consult with UMaine's Institutional Veterinarian prior to any euthanasia decisions.

The IACUC, through the Office of Research Compliance, will continue to review submissions (both new protocols and amendments) to the committee during this time, however, while the University is directed to limit research to essential activities and animal husbandry no new animal studies are to be initiated during this period. We understand this guidance will be highly impactful to many research programs, and we appreciate your commitment to sustaining our UMaine animal research program through this challenging time.

Additional guidance to assist you in finalizing your contingency plans to ensure appropriate care for the animals in your facility in the event of reduced staff due to illness:

- Review and update facility/lab disaster plans to ensure emergency contact information is up to date.
Remind your lab personnel of your communication plan to ensure all are informed; if you do not have such a plan in place we urge you to create one.
Coordinate animal care responsibility, and back-up in the event of staff illness.
Maintain a sufficient inventory of critical supplies, such as food and bedding, that may be impacted by global shipping delays.
Consider reducing/postponing procedures that require intensive post-procedural care and/or intensive monitoring for humane endpoints. Please note that OLAW's expectation is that protocols are followed and non-compliance would still need to be reported to OLAW.
You may wish to consult with the attending veterinarian (jweber@maine.edu or 581-2774) while developing your plan.

Please contact the Office of Research Compliance for assistance (umric@maine.edu).

Hazardous Waste

If you intend on continuing to generate hazardous waste (flammable, corrosive, toxic, etc.) and storing it in a designated Satellite Accumulation Area (which would be within your work area), you are responsible for maintaining weekly inspections. Hazardous waste cannot be left unattended. Safety Management recommends that you consider removing all hazardous waste from your Satellite Accumulation Area. Please contact Pete Snow (peter.snow@maine.edu).

General Information

Please refer to the UMS Information page (https://www.maine.edu/health-advisory/) and the UMaine/UMM Information page (https://umaine.edu/coronavirus/) for the most current updates. Have more research-related questions? Please review the UMaine Research and Graduate School COVID-19 FAQ.