

May 2020

BEACH ACCESS DURING COVID-19

Expert Panel Recommendations



ABOUT THIS REPORT

In the face of beach closures and phased re-openings, the Surfrider Foundation worked with an expert task force to create this report to help guide decision-makers and the public on key considerations when managing beach access during the COVID-19 pandemic. The Surfrider Foundation assembled this highly accomplished group of experts with backgrounds in public health, coastal management, coastal law and policy, and environmental justice. They volunteered their time to assemble principles and management actions for consideration when regulating coastal access during COVID-19. It is important to note that both the pandemic and these management actions are unprecedented, and these recommendations will likely need to evolve as more research emerges about SARS-CoV-2, COVID-19, and the public response to management actions.

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INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 public health crisis has resulted in significant conflicts between efforts to protect the public's health and the people's right to access and enjoy the shoreline. Beaches across the U.S. have been closed, and communities are struggling to strike the right balance between public health and safety and public access and recreation.

The Surfrider Foundation has a 35-year history of promoting, protecting, and defending the public's access to the coast and ocean, which are public resources held in trust by the government for the use and benefit of all citizens. We believe that the public has a fundamental and universal right to access the beach and ocean, subject to state and local laws, for recreation and other activities, including surfing, swimming, paddling, kayaking and fishing. The COVID-19 public health crisis has necessitated unprecedented restrictions on beach and ocean access, directly impacting Surfrider's commitment to secure universal, low-impact beach and ocean access for all people.

This document offers guidance to local and state governments and the general public regarding how to strike a balance along our shorelines as communities work together to protect the public health and safety of all citizens who live, work, visit, and recreate on and near the world's beaches and ocean.

PRINCIPLES

1. Public Trust and Mental Health

The public has an inherent right of access to and along all beaches and shorelines. Beaches, coastal parks, and the ocean are public spaces, held in the public trust by the government. Beach access and coastal and ocean use are part of important traditional, historical and/or customary practices. Studies have shown that public beach access and ocean recreation are important contributors to good health and mental wellness.

2. Limiting Access When Necessary

Public health and safety – protecting the public from illness or injury – is a paramount concern. In order to prioritize public health, maintain physical distancing requirements, and avoid overcrowding beaches and coastal parks, some areas will require management approaches that limit access. Closing beaches or limiting access runs counter to the public's interest in shoreline access, except in situations where there is a severe threat to public health and safety or to prevent undue ecological harm. Restrictions on access should be temporary when possible and emergency public health issues should not be used to permanently exclude people from public spaces.

3. Science and Consultation

Restrictions on access and associated management practices should be based on science and determined by public health priorities in close consultation with public officials and other relevant management authorities. The necessary measures to protect public health and safety should take into account impacts on personal freedoms and privileges of access.

4. Equity in Coastal Access

Beach and ocean access have historically been exclusive of non-coastal communities, people with disabilities, communities of color, and other underserved communities. Efforts should be made to ensure equitable access to, and use of, beaches and coastal areas.

5. Public Open Spaces in Every Community

Compliance with most stay-at-home orders requires citizens to minimize travel outside of their home area (e.g. 5 miles) to avoid transmission of the virus from one community to another. To maximize compliance with stay-at-home orders and public access, efforts should be made to safely provide access to public open spaces in every community, coastal and non-coastal, to allow for physically-distanced essential recreation.

6. Public Responsibility

Safe access to the coast requires that the public follow the guidelines that have been established to promote public health. The effectiveness of beach restriction measures will depend upon the actions of the people who are visiting the beach. To keep beaches open, beachgoers must act as good stewards of our environment and communities and follow the best practices put forth by public health and coastal management experts.



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GENERAL MANAGEMENT GUIDELINES

- 1.** Where appropriate, access should be considered and coordinated at the regional level to address regional recreational use patterns, avoid concentrating uses in open areas, and to avoid public confusion.
- 2.** Successful management of public spaces requires effective public communication in languages appropriate to the users and public education, as well as adequate monitoring and equitable enforcement.
- 3.** Alternatives that effectively protect public health should be explored before complete beach closures or other access restrictions. When required, restrictions on beach access should be temporary and specifically tied to official public health data.
- 4.** As the COVID-19 threat level changes, restrictions on access to the coast and ocean should be adjusted to allow for increased or decreased beach activities, such as active recreation and other beachgoing activities. Activities should be permitted based on the public health recommendations concerning the nature of the activity and its risk trajectories.
- 5.** Beach access and coastal recreation should be managed across all facets of the experience, including, but not limited to, transportation, parking areas, entry ways, paths, other facilities, adjacent parks, the beach and the ocean. These different areas may require different management actions and allowable activities.

POTENTIAL MANAGEMENT ACTIONS

1. Activity-Based Limitations

Access, essential activity, and physical distancing can be managed by allowing or limiting specific activities. Beach and ocean access, surfing and other coastal recreation activities can be distinguished by the intensity of activity, including a delineation between active recreation and stationary beach use.

Certain recreational activities can be conducted individually or with family or households while maintaining physical distance, including walking, running, swimming, paddling, fishing, and surfing.

Other activities that tend to encourage gatherings that exceed group limitations as prescribed in local guidance and regulations may not be appropriate and could increase the likelihood for crowding and the inability to meet necessary physical distancing guidelines.

2. Temporal Limitations

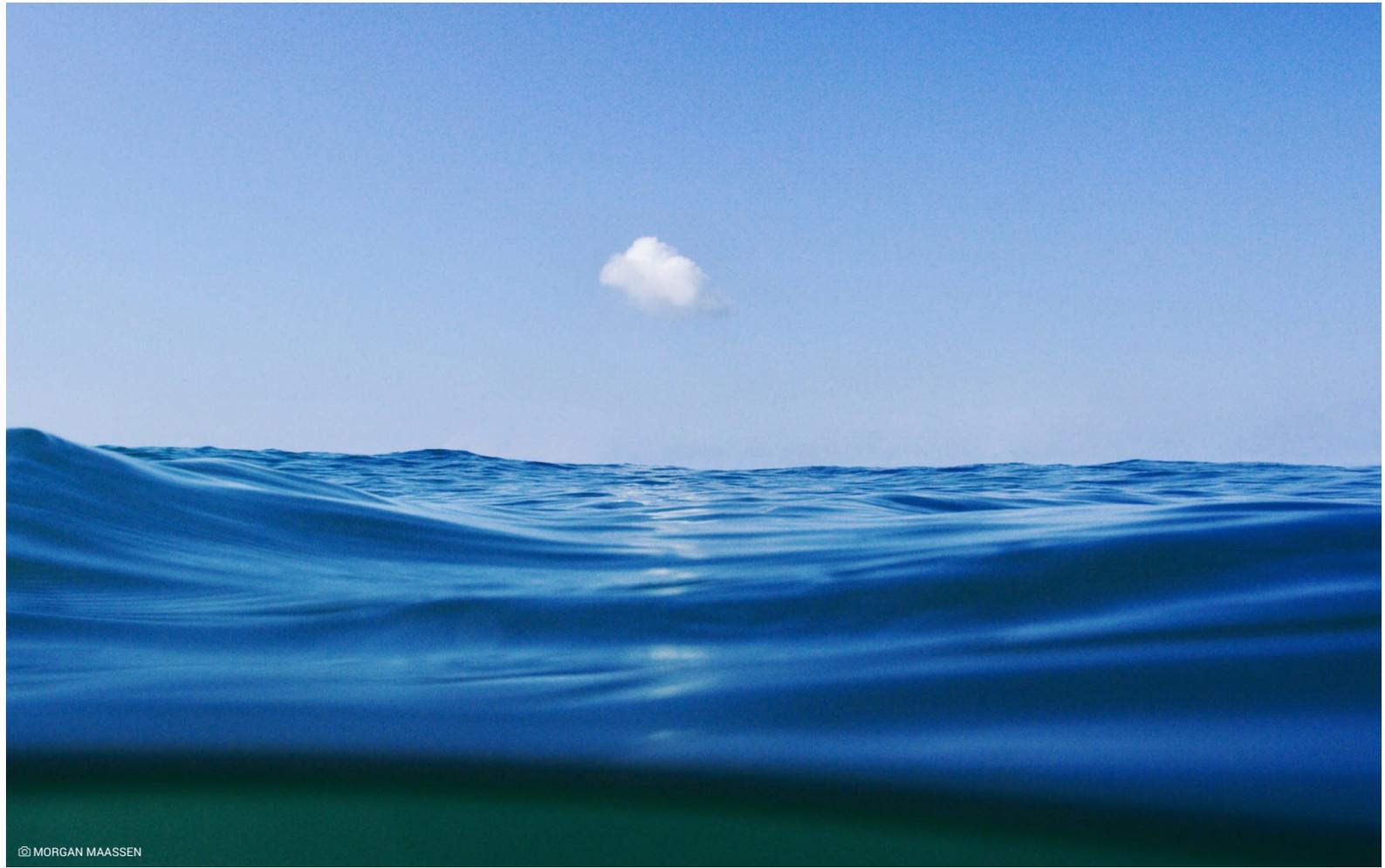
Temporal closures can effectively provide opportunities for access while avoiding overcrowding. Closures or limitations can be based on specific dates (July 4th), days of the week and/or specific times (e.g. mornings or evenings). This should be done in coordination across the state, cities, counties and/or regions.

3. Spatial Limitations

Spatial limitations can include limiting specific areas for use or by use (e.g. restricted periods for surfing), limiting specific accessways, or parking (e.g. blocking off every other parking space).

CONCLUSIONS

The COVID-19 public health crisis has brought protection of public health and safety into significant tension with the people's right to access and enjoy our shorelines. The Surfrider Foundation is committed to assisting local and state governments, the surfing community and the general public in striking a balance to protect the health and safety of all people who live, work, visit, and recreate on and near the world's beaches and oceans while still allowing the general public to enjoy our coasts and ocean as much as possible.

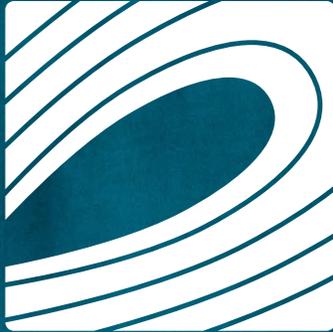


APPENDICES

Surfrider Foundation's Beach Access Initiative

COVID Beach Access Resources:

Includes updated beach access plans, signage, photographs, etc.
go.surfrider.org/covidbeachaccess



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