



## **Marine Animal Response Society Volunteer Contingency Plan for COVID-19 Prevention Measures**

*Updated July 2020*

As MARS continues through our stranding season, we want to ensure that we provide volunteers with updates on our protocols surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic and what we are doing to ensure the safety of our volunteers, staff and the marine animals we respond to. MARS is following all federal and provincial guidelines and we will continue to do everything we can, along with our partners, to investigate incidents, assist live animals, and above all, to keep people safe. This document is based on the directives of the Nova Scotia Public Health Authority, the home base of MARS. Depending on provincial travel restrictions, the plan and response activities may be adjusted according to New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island Health Authorities. This plan is valid until further notice and will be updated in accordance with changes to provincial and federal government guidelines.

While travel restrictions between the Atlantic provinces are no longer in place, when appropriate, MARS will limit travel outside of Nova Scotia by working with Maritime Marine Animal Response Network (MMARN) partners to safely respond.

The use of MARS volunteers may be limited during the pandemic. Your possible involvement at this time only includes:

- Conducting an initial site visit to confirm if an animal is present,
- Obtaining basic information and samples from dead animals and,
- Only where possible to follow all COVID-19 restrictions of physical distancing and proper PPE, assist MARS staff onsite with dead and live large whale incidents and mass strandings.

All response activities will only be conducted where safe to do so, as per usual MARS response procedures and our updated COVID-19 response measures during the pandemic.

Anyone who is experiencing any cold or flu-like symptoms, quarantined due to potential exposure, waiting for COVID-19 test results, has quarantined family/ household members, or who is considered 'high-risk' (see below) by the guidelines set forth by the Government of Canada - Public Health Services, we ask that you please do not volunteer with MARS at this time.

## **General Information on COVID-19**

The main symptoms associated with COVID-19 are:

- Cough or worsening of a previous cough /sore throat / hoarse voice
- Fever (chills, sweats)
- Breathing difficulties / shortness of breath
- Muscle aches
- Sneezing / Nasal congestion or runny nose
- Headache
- Tiredness / Unusual fatigue
- Sudden loss of smell or taste without nasal congestion
- Diarrhea
- Red, purple or blueish lesions on the feet, toes or fingers without clear cause
- Symptoms can be mild (similar to a cold) or more severe (such as those associated with pneumonia and lung or kidney failure)

We suggest that you go through the Public Health Canada Self-Assessment Tool if you suspect you might have COVID-19. Please contact your health care provider or call 811 if you feel you need advice or medical attention.

Self-Assessment Tool: <https://ca.thrive.health/covid19/en>

## **Volunteer Risks**

There is an increased risk of more severe outcomes for Canadians aged 65 and over, with compromised immune systems and/or with underlying medical conditions. We ask that people who fall into any of these categories please do not volunteer with MARS at this time for their own safety and the safety of their fellow responders.

## **Animals and COVID-19**

The current spread of COVID-19 is a result of human-to-human transmission. There is no evidence to date to suggest that animals infected by humans are playing a role in the spread of the disease. And although evidence suggests that COVID-19 emerged from an animal source, there is currently not enough scientific evidence to identify the source or explain the original route of transmission to humans.

To date, the OIE (World Organisation for Animal Health) has received no reports of marine animals being infected with COVID-19. However, as this is a zoonotic disease and has the potential to transfer to more vulnerable animal species, it is important to utilize appropriate PPE at all times when dealing with marine animals and have anyone exhibiting symptoms or at high risk of infection to avoid contact with wildlife. This area is still being researched and MARS will continue to monitor all relevant information on human-animal interactions with COVID-19.

## **Volunteering during COVID-19**

MARS is very appreciative of our dedicated and passionate volunteers, and we want to ensure that we do our best to keep you and your family safe during this time. If you are volunteering with MARS, please make sure you are doing your utmost to keep yourself and fellow responders safe.

### **General principles for in-field response**

- If you're showing any symptoms, you will not be permitted to participate in a response. You should stay at home, self-isolate and contact 811.
- Those that are immunocompromised should not participate in a response at this time.
- Anyone not comfortable responding because of the pandemic for whatever reason, should not participate in the response.
- Follow cough and sneeze etiquette. Cover your mouth and nose when coughing or sneezing while using a tissue or bend your elbow. Wash your hands afterwards. Use disposable tissues and put them in the trash after use.
- When possible and appropriate, it is preferable to recruit volunteers from one household.
- When possible, MARS personnel will work to limit your response efforts within your local area.
- Stay connected and inform a MARS staff member if you feel unwell or are uncomfortable with any portion of your volunteer duties.
- MARS will inform volunteers responding to an incident on the most updated protocols and provide any specific instructions or extra safety measures surrounding that response.

**If you are called/ alerted to respond**, a MARS staff member will inquire as to your status regarding COVID-19. While you do not have to share medical information, if you are currently or have recently exhibited any COVID-19 symptoms (listed in the section above), please consider yourself unavailable to respond and notify MARS staff. Please adhere to all federal, provincial and municipal orders, including Public Health recommendations in order to keep yourself and all of our responders safe. We are relying on and trusting each team member to act responsibly to help keep all our team members safe.

While the directives for COVID-19 safety are ever-evolving, MARS advises volunteers to follow the safety measures listed below, as well as any additional staff directives:

- Follow the most up to date recommendations on **Social Distancing** (MARS staff will advise what this is)
- Be aware of what you are touching and wash your hands well before eating or drinking. **Wash hands frequently** with soap and warm water for 20 seconds, whenever possible or use the disinfectant wipes provided in MARS stranding kits. Do not touch your face.
- When responding, always **use appropriate PPE** (masks, gloves, possible glasses and visors), which will be provided by MARS.
- **Do not share the tools in the stranding kit with other people.** Limit handling/ touching of any gear and avoid passing around items, such as phones, keys, clipboards, pens, etc. Frequently disinfect commonly touched surfaces such as steering wheels, door handles, etc.
- The number of personnel at a response will be kept to a **minimum** at all times.
- A MARS safety officer will be appointed for each response to be mindful of PPE, distancing, MARS protocols, etc.
- For larger response efforts, MARS may assign volunteers to 'teams' and volunteers will work solely with their team for the duration of the response effort (following protocols related to group size, etc.).

### **Specific measures for in-field response**

#### Travel to incidents

As much as possible, you should respond in your own vehicle (members in the same household) can ride together). When this is not possible, the following instructions must be applied:

- At the start of vehicle use, disinfect frequently touched surfaces (steering wheel, gearbox, dashboard and door handles).
- If required, apply a physical barrier between the driver and the passenger (front/ rear separator), if possible or have PPE on when traveling.
- Keep the same places in the vehicle as much as possible for the duration of the response. In the case of long journeys, take regular breaks for the driver. If it is necessary to change the driver, disinfect frequently touched surfaces before changing the position.
- Wash hands and wear gloves when handling response equipment or disinfect surfaces after handling.

#### Response in the field

In the case of interventions on dead or distressed marine animals which require the presence of several responders, you will be advised on the safety measures to be followed. You must wear a mask, disposable gloves and safety glasses or visor, all of which MARS will provide. If your presence is not necessary near the animal, or if you are monitoring the animal's behaviour or condition you will remain at a distance of 2m (6ft).

For most scenarios, including response to dead or live pinnipeds or small cetaceans (including sampling in-field or the collection of carcasses to freeze for necropsy at a later date), the above guidelines will be followed.

Where response is deemed possible, additional measures will be required to respond to more complex situations including single and mass live animal strandings and dead large whales (beached). Response to these incidents will be evaluated in collaboration with all necessary partners on a case-by-case basis and responders will be notified of specific protocols.



Thank you in advance for adhering to these measures and for making an effort to keep us all safe while we continue to respond to marine animal incidents. MARS will continue to monitor the situation surrounding COVID-19 and notify all volunteers once restrictions have changed. If you have any questions regarding volunteering during COVID-19, please contact Danielle Pinder, Volunteer Coordinator, at [volunteer@marineanimals.ca](mailto:volunteer@marineanimals.ca).

## References

- 1) Government of Canada Public Health Services  
[https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/diseases/2019-novel-coronavirus-infection.html?&utm\\_campaign=gc-hc-sc-coronavirus2021-ao-2021-0005-10020125402&utm\\_medium=search&utm\\_source=google-ads-107800103024&utm\\_content=text-en-434525470053&utm\\_term=covid](https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/diseases/2019-novel-coronavirus-infection.html?&utm_campaign=gc-hc-sc-coronavirus2021-ao-2021-0005-10020125402&utm_medium=search&utm_source=google-ads-107800103024&utm_content=text-en-434525470053&utm_term=covid)
- 2) Official site of the government of Nova Scotia  
<https://novascotia.ca/coronavirus/>
- 3) World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE)  
<https://www.oie.int/en/scientific-expertise/specific-information-and-recommendations/questions-and-answers-on-2019novel-coronavirus/>
- 4) World Health Organization (WHO)  
<https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019>