

KEEPING INDIANA'S OUTDOORS OPEN:

Department of Natural Resources'
Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic



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Section 1: Overview of operations or services reduced or suspended during the COVID-19 pandemic, including: (a) Whether the suspension or reduction was required by an Executive Order or an internal agency decision? (b) To the extent applicable, include citations for the laws, rules, and policies affected by or authorizing the reduction or suspension.

The Department of Natural Resources' (DNR) State Parks, Fish and Wildlife Areas, State Forests, Nature Preserves, or Outdoor Recreation properties remained open during the pandemic. Keeping DNR's properties open allowed Hoosiers the opportunity to enjoy the benefits of the outdoors. To further this effort, DNR temporarily waived gate fees at State Parks.

Pursuant to the Governor's Executive Orders and Indiana's Back on Track Plan, the following activities were temporarily suspended or closed at DNR properties:

- Campgrounds and overnight stays
- Playgrounds
- Special events that did not meet social gathering limitations

In an effort to keep DNR properties open while protecting guests and reducing the spread, DNR temporarily closed or suspended the following buildings or activities to protect guests due to health concerns or where social distancing would not be practicable:

- Shooting Ranges
- Shelters and Recreation Buildings
- Inns
- Nature Centers
- Fishing Tournaments
- High Risk Trails
- Guided Tours
- In-person Hunter Education Courses

Executive Orders extended annual hunting and fishing licenses, passenger for hire boat inspection expiration dates, and wild animal possession permits. Even with these extensions, F&W saw a significant increase in licenses sales during the pandemic. For the 2020 Spring Turkey season, licenses sales were up 20% compared to 2019. On the fishing side, licenses sales were up 17%. Even more encouraging is that of the licenses sold, approximately 47% were either new or returning after a prolonged period without a license.

Section 2: Overview on preparations to address future emergencies and recovery from emergencies based on the state agency's experience with the COVID-19 pandemic. To the extent applicable, include citations for the laws, rules, and policies that are affected by or authorize the preparations.

As divisions update their computer systems, division directors will explore options to replace desktops with laptops that will allow greater flexibility for the staff to use in the office and for telework. Additionally, for employees utilizing personal or home computers, DNR has a Windows Virtual Desktop (WVD) subscription to allow secure work access. Divisions are exploring the expanded use of virtual platforms to conduct hearings or meetings and increasing the number of online options.

The Division of Fish and Wildlife (F&W) developed and implemented online tests for nuisance wild animal control permits, wildlife rehabilitation permits. In the past, these were paper tests that needed to be completed in-person. Thus far, F&W had over 20 applicants take the nuisance wild animal control permit test online. F&W is also developing and implementing virtual education programs such as the WILD workshops, Basic Fishing, and Learn 2 Hunt, which will allow DNR staff to provide information and interact with the public. As previously mentioned, the Division of Oil and Gas had to temporarily delay issuing two permits due to a rule requiring in-person informal hearings. The division identified this barrier and plans to amend 312 IAC 29-3-4(c) to allow for virtual hearings. The use of virtual platforms for hearings or meetings during the pandemic has shown an increased level of engagement from the public while also providing savings of staff time and travel expenses. These robust benefits warrant further development and adoption of expanded use of virtual platforms even in non-emergency situations.

Reducing the reliance on paper records and application is another area of preparation. Already prior to the pandemic, several divisions had already started digitizing records. The Division of Historic Preservation and Archeology (DHPA) had already begun digitizing paper records relating to cultural resources in Indiana, such as survey records for structures and archaeological sites, National Register nominations, cultural resource reports and associated maps. Prior to the pandemic, DHPA only accepted hard copy submissions for federal and state regulated projects but is now discussing options for accepting digital submissions, which includes developing a data management system so DHPA can provide a permanent electronic submission option.

Section 3: Recommendations, if any, for legislation that may be needed to help ensure the agency is prepared to address future emergencies.

The Department of Natural Resources does not have any recommendations.

Section 4: Recommendations, if any, for legislation to permanently repeal or modify any regulations or laws that were or are partially or fully suspended due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Department of Natural Resources does not have any recommendations.