

AC-OPP Ad Hoc Meeting-COVID Protocols for 2023/2024 Antarctic Season
May 17, 2023

Overview/presentations

- Philip Bart- Presentation on Subcommittee work
 - Met on April 24 and 25- NSF gave an overview on things of past years and got an idea of protocol for past season
 - Put together a report that they submitted to NSF on the 1st
 - Slide on COVID Positives for 21-22 and 22-23
 - COVID caused stress for deployers
 - Cancellation to the sciences due to COVID is not seen as a viable option
 - Charge statement: reviewed the draft document for the upcoming field season
 - Executive summary: The committee felt that NSF is justified in the approach that it's proposing
 - Recommending that all deployers be up to date on vaccines and that deep field camps accommodate those that are asymptomatic or mildly symptomatic
 - Introducing air filtration in indoor stations
 - Considered introducing targeted wastewater surveillance
 - Forward planning
 - Specific clinical/ public health recommendations
 - Requesting that NSF consider that everyone be vaccinated
 - Mandated respirator use periods (recommending that masking be longer than what was suggested in the report)
 - Recommended that deployers are wearing respirator or BFC
 - Upon arrival and before transfers, encourage masking
 - They felt there was a need to outline what would happen if people are not compliant, there has been varying degrees of compliance of personal in the past, therefore this needs to be outlined
 - Six Specific questions
 - What are the primary risks that COVID presents to deployed community?
 - The local outbreak which could result in traumatic injury
 - Are NSF's goals appropriate and achievable?
 - Subcommittee agrees that the goals are generally achievable
 - Are protocols likely to be effective, including the high-altitude locations such as the South Pole?
 - Five-day masking period upon arrival, allowing COVID positive patrons to remain at Pole, isolate in single-occupancy spaces
 - In the event of a sharp increase in cases, are the plans adequate?
 - NSF might request cohort to identify mission-critical personnel
 - Are monitoring plans sufficient to serve as an early indicator of impending increase?
 - proposed five different metrics and Committee thought it was reasonable

- Are there additional protocols, tools and resources that are recommended?
 - Recommend that deployers be up to date on vaccines and boosters
 - Consulting experienced heating and HVAC professionals to improve HVAC systems
- Peter Neff: Comments
 - Higher risk/higher reward sites are at more remote areas. Getting deployers to these areas will be more challenging, but there are simple steps to take
 - Could room all at McMurdo before going to the deep field
 - More detailed planning with these operations is needed
- Lori Newman
 - By ensuring that everyone is vaccinated, you allow the work to continue at the Pole
 - The tools that were explored were vaccinations and masking
 - Many vaccinated people will be asymptomatic could be allowed to continue functions if wearing a N-95 or working solo
 - There are many tools that would allow essential work to happen
- Meredith Nettles
 - Thought report was very thorough
- Jim Ulvestad
 - The report is fairly complex and they are eager to start engaging with the recommendations of the report
- Stephanie Short
 - Panel has made it clear the importance of the vaccine, want to go back to work on challenges with it
 - Will work with Office of General Council to see where there may be issues

Questions for AC and Attendees

- Q: Historic experience is that the gally is where most people get ill. There were no details on how to reduce exposure in high traffic areas and new cohorts. Are there more details on how to balance and move people around so they are not exposed to cases?
 - A: The Subcommittee recognized and proposed that people take more precautions prior to deployment. They recommend new personnel to mask for five days and if they deploy to a new site that they do the same.
 - A: Considering doing what was done at the end of last season, having timed eating in the gally. Based on the discussions, the gally is where they are exploring additional air filtration capabilities
 - A: One of the things that was done on the panel was have two or three infectious disease experts. The air filtration was something that they thought would be very helpful and so we should not discount it. It would be prohibitive in terms of fuel, so this will require more resources

- Q1: Does the Committee and plan consider specific recommendations for the vessels regarding pre-departure?
- Q2: Does the Committee have any recommendations for people planning to deploy on ships that are not stopping in?
 - A: The Subcommittee did think about this and bring it up. They thought there could be more precautions at the gateways and made recommendations that they take it seriously, prior to travel as well. There are tests that are required. If you test positive in NZ, you have to isolate for 8 days, in Puente Areas, it's 5 days.
 - A: The group brought in experience from DOD (Navy and Coast Guard). They have moved toward having the captain of the ship make the decision of what the guidelines are on the ship. This pertains to how to handle the gally in MCM for ex. There needs to be high level interventions that OPP states for the whole program. There needs to be leeway for leaders to implement what safety measures are important. The leader of MCM needs to look at what the flexibility and options are for staging meal times and creating pods of people where they sleep. Depends on how many people are going. Hard to come up with policy's at this level so it's important that the leaders are aware of the tools that they have and are empowered to make changes in accordance with context of situation.
 - A: We are obligated to follow countries National requirements. There was discussion that for cruises that are longer for two weeks that we consider upgrading medical care available on the vessel
 - A: Having trust and transparency in leadership as well as building modes of communication will go a long way
- Q: Comment about the possibility of freestanding air filtration units
- Q: Specific question about cruises in planning stages and details regarding mobilization
 - A: Some conditions may depend on which country the vessel is in port. It's hard to predict what the rules are ahead of time.
 - A: Will take the panels recommendations and rethink the draft within the next couple of weeks. Will see what modifications are needed and make sure that there is alignment throughout the agency. Will still be working within NSF and with contractor on specific issues and situations that come up.
- Q: What is the cruise ship industry required to do in PA/NZ?
- Q: What is the sense for the ability to change the PQ process based on findings?
 - A: Did intend to modify PQ based on where the deployment is and what the risks are. Changing the PQ guidelines won't bias anything. One of the indicators is COVID positives that are testing in the gateway.
 - A: Science community want to reduce infections, and wants to be compliant to avoid delays, so it is incumbent on communications on scientific side to build in more flexibility. Back and forth with program officers at NSF is needed so part of the plan needs to support ongoing dialogue

Vote on transmitting report to NSF

- Vote of yes is to submit report to NSF: 8 which is all of AC members online