Removal, Emergency Response, and the Pandemic

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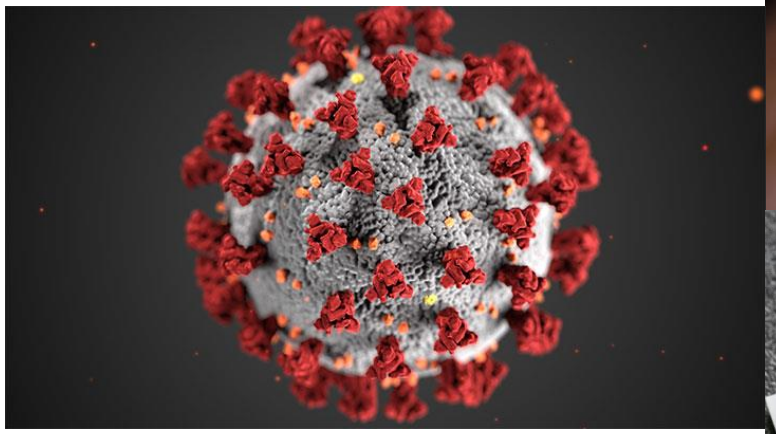
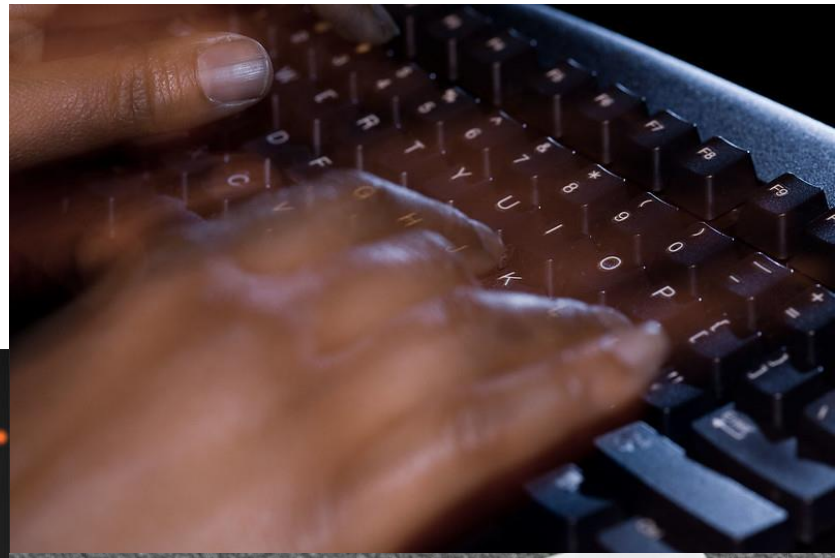
COVID-19 and Emergency Response

- Two-pronged approach:
  - Hybrid (virtual/in-person) operations
  - COVID-19 testing





Virtual Activation and the Incident Management Team (IMT)

- The EPA IMT generally operates near the incident location to support field operations.
- During the start of COVID-19, EPA converted many IMT positions into virtual-only support using MS Teams.
- Successes:
  - Ability to have a large IMT under pandemic conditions
  - Efficient information sharing
  - More continuity in staffing
  - Ability to conduct virtual Planning Cycle meetings
- Challenges
  - Internet connectivity
  - Lack of face-to-face coordination
  - Learning curve for MS Teams

Need for Health and Safety Protocols During Field Work

- Large emergency responses and Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) Disaster Mission Assignment field deployments are ideal environments for the transmission of infectious diseases, such as COVID-19
- Resulted in development of Interim EPA COVID-19 Testing Guidelines for Western Regions (R8, R9 and R10)

COVID-19 Standard Operating Procedures

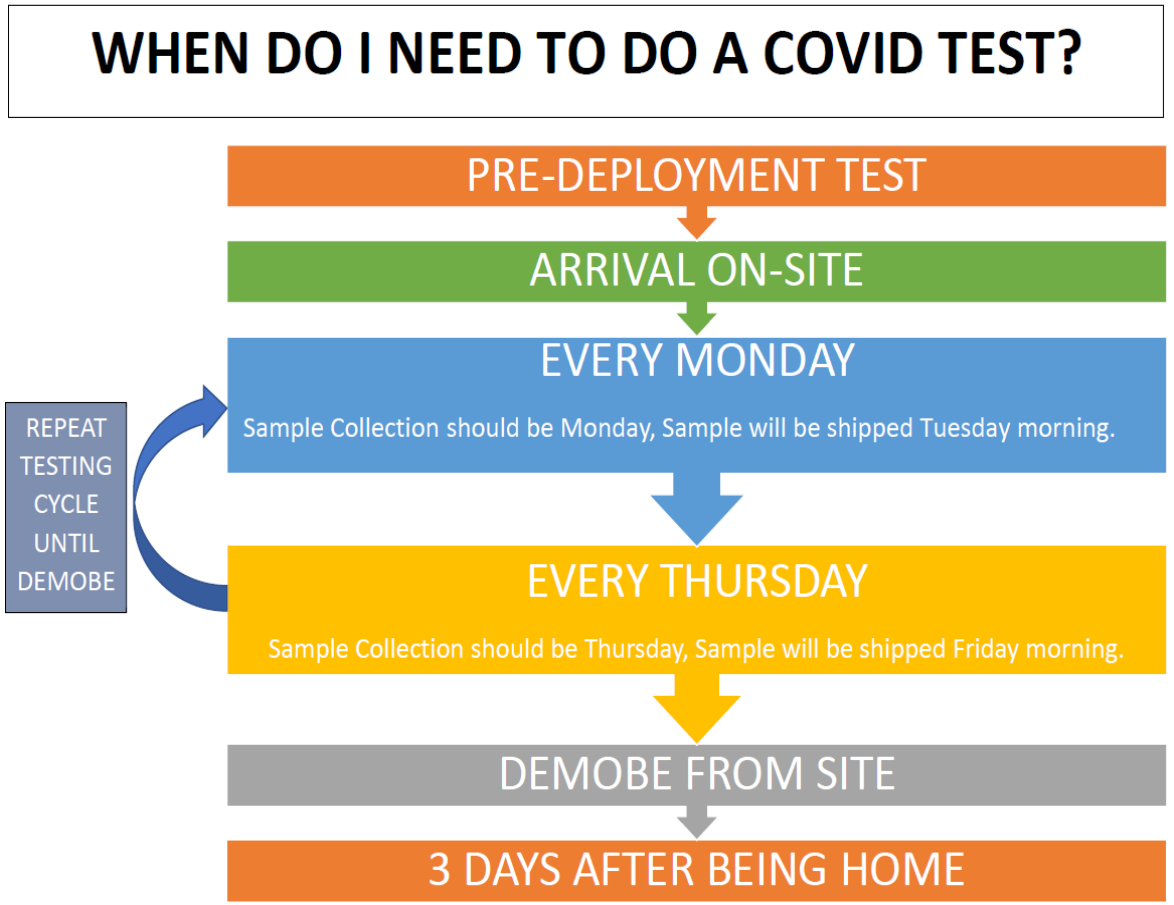
Interim EPA COVID-19 Testing Guidelines for Western Regions (Regions 8-10)

• Daily Symptom Screening

Go-Canvas mobile application

- Questionnaire used daily by everyone on site
- Pre-work questionnaire
  - Experiencing symptoms?
  - Contact with potentially COVID-19 compromised persons?
- Automatic notification to employee ***not to report to work***
- Automatic notification to employer AMEDL
- Notification to MEDL

• Routine COVID-19 Testing

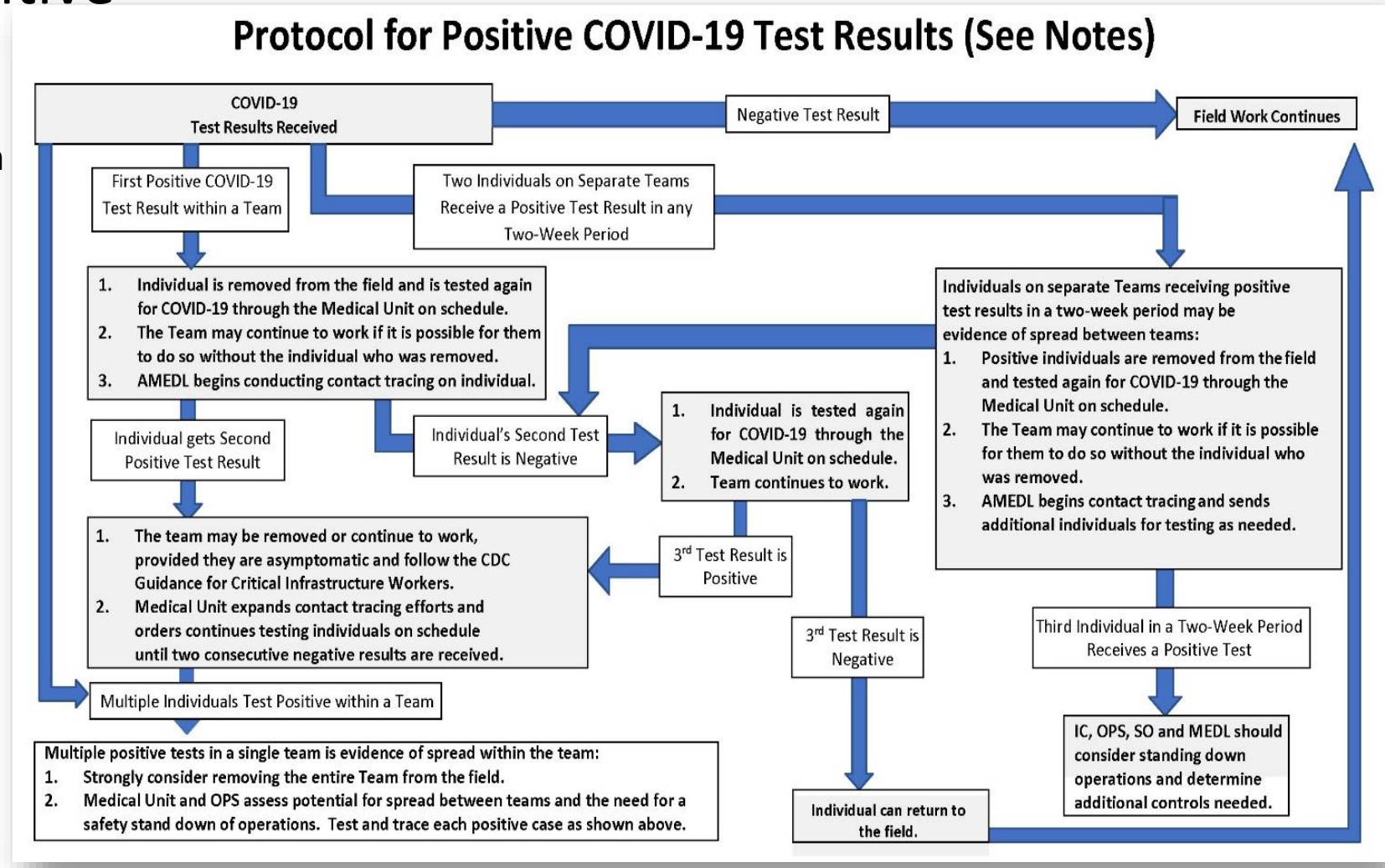


COVID-19 Standard Operating Procedures

Interim EPA COVID-19 Testing Guidelines for Western Regions (Regions 8-10)

- Suspected/Confirmed Positive

- Site notification procedure
- Handling of protected medical information
- Removal from site and quarantine at hotel
- Contact tracing
- Follow up medical consultation
- Follow up COVID-19 testing
- Return to work procedure
  - Negative COVID-19 tests
  - Medical clearance from health professional
  - In accordance with contractor COVID-19 protocols

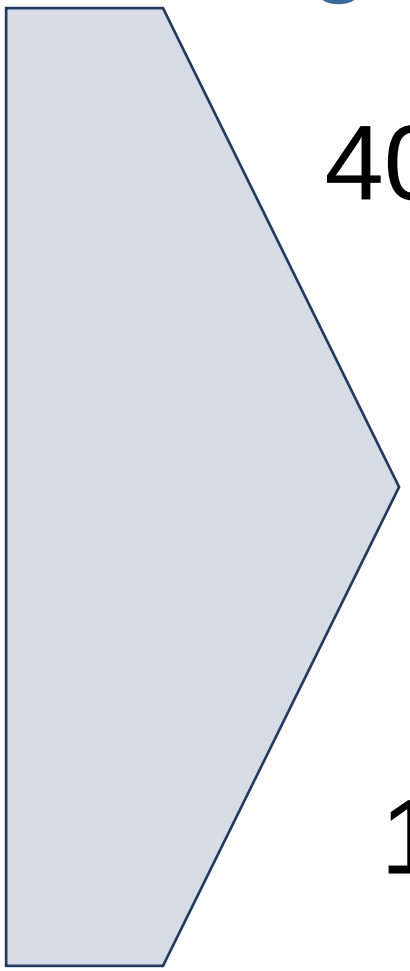


Field Operational Procedures

Interim EPA COVID-19 Testing Guidelines for Western Regions (Regions 8-10)

- CDC recommended protocols required for field personnel
- Asst. Safety Officers monitoring operations in the field
- Zero-tolerance for willful or repeat non-compliance with COVID SOP
- “Teams/pods” philosophy within field teams and task forces
  - During work and outside
  - Minimized potential for COVID spread among crews
- Encouraged minimizing contact with community outside work
- Non-contact procedures for picking and dropping off field equipment and waste

EPA Region 10 Oregon Wildfires



40+ days in the field

1,796+ COVID-19 tests sitewide

250+ deployed personnel

3 confirmed positive cases (asymptomatic)

1.4% positivity rate

The protocols worked: No evidence of COVID-19 spread within the project and minimal impact to operations

Key Takeaways

- Implementation of a regular COVID-19 testing program limits the spread of the virus, especially when staff must work/live in close quarters.
- For any significant testing program, including a Medical Unit in the Logistics Section with an on-call Physician for consultative services is recommended.
- COVID-19 testing creates occupational medical records and a records management plan compliant with HIPAA, the Privacy Act and other applicable rules or policies must be established prior to the implementation of testing.
- Implementation plans must include clear:
  - Guidance on types of tests, testing frequency and how results will be communicated within the organization.
  - Process for how COVID positive results will be addressed.
- Be prepared to adjust program/protocols based on changing guidance as well as lessons learned through implementation.

EPA COVID-19 Testing Guidelines – August 2022

Early August 2022, EPA finalized *EPA COVID-19 Testing Guidelines* to capture a broad set of scenarios where COVID-19 testing should be considered.

EPA COVID-19 Testing Guidelines cover:

- Screening tests for not fully-vaccinated employees
- Diagnostic tests for employees (both vaccinated and not fully-vaccinated) who are identified as COVID-19 close contacts
- Other scenarios where vaccinated employees might need testing

EPA COVID-19 Testing Guidelines – August 2022

	Not Fully Vaccinated	Fully Vaccinated
Testing Requirements	Testing 1-3 days prior to departure, every 72 hours thereafter, and 3-5 days after leaving the site	None, unless symptomatic, has a close exposure to a known COVID-19 positive case, or approving official/another agency requires it
Post-travel Quarantine	5 full days after travel, even if test is negative	None

EPA COVID-19 Testing Guidelines - August 2022

Requirements Applicable to Field Work/Emergency Response

Scenarios Where Vaccinated Employees Might Need Testing

- Employee is assigned to work on tasks/operations where:
  - Social distancing is impractical or difficult to maintain
  - It is difficult to ensure consistent adherence to administrative controls (e.g., face coverings, proper hygiene)
  - Continuity of operations is a high priority (e.g., emergency response operations, enforcement actions, time critical research)
  - Congregate housing is provided (e.g., large vessel work, base camps)
- Employee develops symptoms consistent with COVID-19 while on official duty at an EPA workplace or worksite (field work) or while on official travel
- Employee is working on a project where a federal, state, or local jurisdiction, a public health official, or a healthcare provider has the authority to require testing

Questions?