Permittees,

The health and welfare of the public, as well as our nation’s wildlife, is a top priority. Until we have a better understanding of the risk to North American bat species posed by SARS-CoV-2, we request that permit holders and subpermittees temporarily postpone activities that require direct contact with wild bats. We know that many mammals are susceptible to infection by a diversity of coronaviruses, and that these viruses can be found in wildlife just as they can in people. What is not currently known is whether the novel coronavirus responsible for COVID-19 (SARS-CoV-2) has the potential to infect, or cause illness in, North American wildlife, including bats.

To that end, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is working with the U.S. Geological Survey and a team of wildlife disease experts to quickly assess the risk the virus may pose to North American bat populations and will release recommendations to management agencies as soon as evidence-based guidance becomes available. In the meantime, consistent with universal precautions, and out of an abundance of caution to protect bat health, we are asking you to postpone activities requiring direct contact with bats. In cases where such activities are absolutely necessary, they should only be conducted with appropriate personal protective equipment (PPE) to prevent possible viral transmission.

This request does not apply to bat research activities that do not involve physical contact with or close proximity within 6 feet of bats, such as acoustic monitoring or emergence counts when an appropriate distance and protection can be maintained. This request also does not apply to conducting post construction fatality studies at wind facilities, including salvaging only dead bats.

We recognize that work being done under recovery permits is an important part of the Service’s Recovery Program. Given that many State Governors have issued shelter-in-place orders as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, we have been asked about how Recovery Permits and survey activities for all species (not just bats) will be affected. At this point, we urge you to follow your local shelter-in-place orders and CDC guidance on COVID-19 when deciding whether to conduct Recovery work (including surveys).

We recognize that information from biological surveys is important for future or ongoing effects determinations to comply with the Endangered Species Act (ESA), such as section 7 consultations or section 10 actions (HCPs, SHAs, CCAAs, etc.). Considering the current conditions related to COVID-19, we will be as flexible as possible working with project proponents and applicants to use alternative strategies that do not involve physical contact with bats to inform ESA determinations. We ask that you please work with your local U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Field Office to discuss these case-by-case situations and develop appropriate strategies as needed.
For more information, the USGS-National Wildlife Health Center has just released a Wildlife Health Bulletin (2020-03) with information on coronaviruses in wildlife, including mention of the assessment we are conducting and guidance for selecting protective equipment, available here: https://www.usgs.gov/centers/nwhc/science/wildlife-health-bulletins?qt-science_center_objects=0#qt-science_center_objects

Additionally, the Center for Disease Control maintains the latest information on COVID-19 associated risks for animals, with details found here: https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/faq.html#animals

If you have any questions about this request, please contact mailto:brian_fuller@fws.gov