



Potomac Appalachian Trail Club

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The COVID-19 Pandemic and Closing Trails

During the unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic, we want to express our condolences to all those who may have lost loved ones from the virus and hope that you and yours are finding the support you need to cope with this crisis.

Recently, the Appalachian Trail Conservancy (ATC) sent a letter to the Federal government advocating for the complete closure of the Appalachian Trail (AT). Many AT maintaining clubs signed the letter; we did not. Since we work closely with ATC and generally follow their lead on important matters affecting the AT, we believe our members are entitled to an explanation for our decision to abstain from the signing the ATC's letter. Also, we want our members to understand the Club's own response to the pandemic.

From the early days of the pandemic in the United States, PATC has taken all appropriate and timely actions to address the crisis consistent with those aspects of our activities and operations over which we have control. Early on, we implemented a telework policy for our staff and replaced all in-person meetings with video or teleconference calls. We stopped hikes and classes; closed our cabins, trail centers and campgrounds; and suspended all work trips, except for those that are essential for health, safety or property protection and where not otherwise prohibited by the governing authorities.

We have not, however, taken a position on matters outside our control, which includes the proposed shutdown of the AT. From the beginning, we have maintained that the status of trails for use by the public is a matter for the relevant landowner. We follow the guidance and mandates issued by the various state, local and federal governments. When they have closed trails or requested us to suspend operations, we have complied fully. We have refrained, however, from advocating for actions, including trail closures, when those actions are not within our authority. We have supported the state and federal government guidance that has largely, to date, allowed people to go outdoors for exercise as something important for physical and mental well being during this difficult time. We believe it is possible to use the trails that remain open responsibly. We continue to monitor the decisions issued by the various government authorities. As the governing authority guidance changes, we promptly adjust our own policies to comply with those directives.

There are many factors that need to be taken into account in a decision to close a trail, including the practicality of enforcing that decision. We believe it is prudent for PATC to defer to the judgement of the governing authorities, who have access to the data, information and expert analysis we do not possess, to make informed decisions on what should or should not remain open.

Nevertheless, we recognize there have been problems caused by inappropriate behavior on the trails. In this regard, we have supported efforts to encourage hikers to use the trails responsibly, including supporting calls to avoid crowded areas and group use, and to practice safe social distancing protocols, among other important safety measures. The safety of hikers, those they encounter on the trail and the communities they may visit along the trail is paramount. When the authorities decide to close a facility or trail, we will comply immediately. In the meantime, we believe our responsibility is to help ensure the proper use of the trails during this critical time.

We want you to know that the leadership of the Club takes the pandemic seriously and has concentrated its efforts on taking prudent actions on matters within our control to protect our members, including our valued volunteers and staff, as well as the general public. We are confident that working together we can accomplish that goal and get through this current crisis.

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