

# COVID-19 REOPENING PLAN YELLOWSTONE NATIONAL PARK

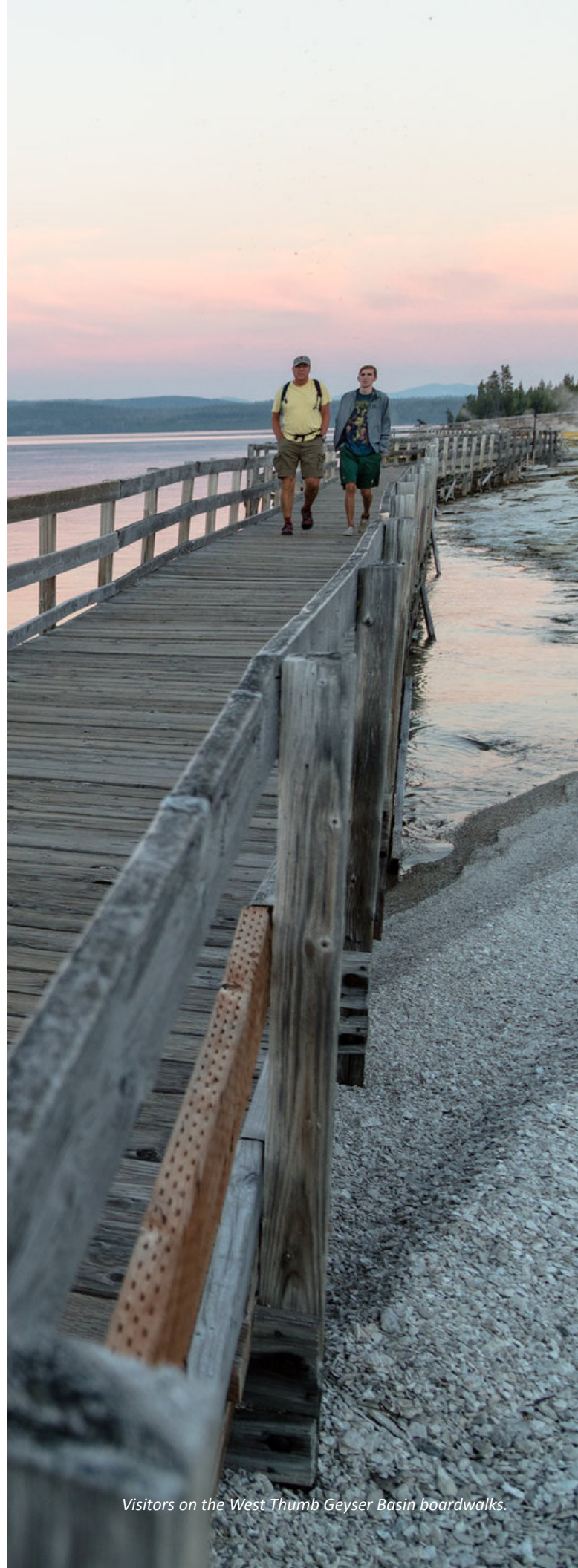




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*Visitors on the West Thumb Geyser Basin boardwalks.*

# Executive Summary

## Background

Yellowstone has been closed to visitors since March 24, 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The decision to close was based largely on requests and recommendations from local health officers in surrounding counties, governors, and communities. Over the course of the closure, the park has maintained very close contact with these partners. The adjustments to certain COVID-19 restrictions in Wyoming, Montana, and Idaho are indicators that the timing is appropriate to begin evaluating a phased reopening of Yellowstone.

This plan articulates a phased reopening sequence that is focused on protecting the Yellowstone team, its partners, and the public. Visitor service operations will start conservatively with the ability to expand if conditions are favorable, or contract if necessary.

Yellowstone sits in three states (WY, MT, ID), making decisions on reopening complicated, especially when certain states find themselves at different stages of virus transmission and recovery. While 96% of Yellowstone sits in Wyoming, three of the five entrance stations to the park reside in Montana, and a small portion of the southwest corner of the park is in Idaho.

## Partner Engagement

The decision to reopen the park is largely based on the opinions and recommendations provided by surrounding county health officers, leadership officials, and state governors. These professionals understand the transboundary nature of visitors traveling to Yellowstone and are best positioned to understand local and regional health concerns. This plan largely aligns with those opinions.

In the last two weeks of April, the park held Q&A sessions for over 600 business leaders and stakeholders from surrounding states and counties as well as the park's internal business partners. The park listened to these perspectives and considered them in the development of this phased

approach. While the timing of the park's temporary closure coincided with the shoulder season, the economic stress and impacts associated with the closure are continuing to grow substantially as the summer months approach. While these economic stressors do not override health concerns, they are being considered. The park's goal is to open safely, minimize risks to visitors and employees, allow visitors to access Yellowstone, and help restart local economies.

## Phased Approach

In general, the park's reopening will follow three flexible phases (Figure 1). Importantly, there is no major delineation between Phases 1 and 2, except operations and facilities outlined in Phase 1 would open immediately, and those in Phase 2 would open as they can be staffed and operated safely. Elements in Phase 3 will not be fully implemented until we (park and partners) have had time to evaluate impacts from opening operations and facilities outlined in Phases 1 and 2 and it is deemed safe to open more full-service facilities. Phase 3 also requires additional staffing for the National Park Service (NPS) and park partners, which means risks associated with shared employee housing will need to be considered.

## Implementation Timing

Since the park closed at the end of March, the Yellowstone superintendent has worked closely with the state governors to determine the proper timing for reopening due to differing COVID-19 conditions in the three states. Wyoming has requested the earliest possible opening. At present, Montana and Idaho have 14-day quarantine restrictions for out-of-state travelers.

To accommodate these varying conditions, the park will open Wyoming entrances on May 18, 2020 with access to the lower loop (Appendix 1) as well as facilities and operations outlined in Phase 1. The park will continue to work closely with Montana and Idaho to reopen the remaining gates as soon as possible.



Figure 1: Tentative Yellowstone National Park Reopening Sequence

## Reopening Priorities

### Be safe. Be flexible. Monitor. Adjust.

1. Protect employees and the public from transmission risks by implementing mitigation actions consistent with local, state, and federal health guidelines.
2. Develop consistent operating plans (NPS and partners) that focus on safe reopening actions.
3. Actively monitor changing conditions (in park and out) and adjust operations accordingly.
4. Ensure flexibility to expand, adjust, or contract operations depending on conditions and risk factors.
5. Support communities and partners.

## Visitor Messaging

The park and its partners will actively message to visitors to reduce chances of COVID-19 exposure.

- Visitors who are sick will be asked not to come to the park.
- Use of a face covering will be voluntary, but visitors will be strongly encouraged to wear appropriate facial protection during their visit. Visitors who choose not to wear a face covering should follow social distancing guidelines.
- Visitors will be asked to self-adhere to CDC and local health guidance regarding social distancing and other actions designed to reduce virus transmission.
- Visitors will be advised to prepare for limited food and lodging services prior to traveling.

## Summary of Mitigation Actions

A range of mitigation measures both indoor and outdoor will be implemented throughout the park to protect both visitors and employees.

### Indoor

Public indoor facilities will not open until proper risk assessments have been conducted and mitigation measures have been developed and implemented. Some examples include protective barriers, facial coverings, metering visitors, increased cleaning frequency, and signage about adherence to CDC and local health guidelines.

### Outdoor

The park is evaluating high-congestion areas to determine what actions may be appropriate. Some examples include additional signage, parking considerations, one-way traffic on boardwalks, and visitor spacing at public restrooms. The park may also actively manage high-congestion areas by limiting the number of vehicles and/or people entering a specific area. No commercial tour buses will be allowed during Phases 1 or 2.

**Yellowstone Visitor Guide 2020**

**Travel Alert:** The road between Tower-Roosevelt and Chittenden Road will be completely closed to travel this year. See page 16 (back page) for details.  
More information available at [go.nps.gov/yellroads](http://go.nps.gov/yellroads).  
Plan plenty of time to get to your destination. **Yellowstone is worth pulling over for!** The speed limit in Yellowstone is 45 mph (73 kph) except where posted slower.

**COVID-19 Precautions**  
Yellowstone is modifying visitor services to help prevent the spread of infectious diseases. Some facilities and events will be closed or cancelled. Please check locally, on the park website, and in the park app for current information and continue to follow CDC guidelines. As circumstances continue to change and we modify our operations as necessary, we thank you for your patience and cooperation.

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Visitor messaging in the park newspaper.

**Yellowstone National Park** ✓  
May 5 at 10:02 AM · 🌐

With over 2.2 million acres in the park, there are plenty of places to find solitude. But when nature calls and you find yourself around other people, be sure to give plenty of space while you're waiting.

1,775,621 People Reached      58,309 Engagements      Boost Post

👍❤️😄 26K      469 Comments 2.6K Shares

Sample visitor messaging on social media channels.



# Phase 1

## Initial Services

May 2020

Road Access  
Limited Stores  
Public Restrooms  
Gas Stations  
Trails & Boardwalks  
Medical Clinics  
Approved Tours  
Entrance Stations

Phase 1 begins May 18, 2020. Public access to roads, trails, and boardwalks will be permitted, although initially, only the lower loop of the road and adjacent trails will be open. Limited essential services including gas stations, medical clinics, and certain restrooms will open. Risk assessments and mitigation actions will be developed for each facility. Visitors should understand prior to trip planning that operations and facilities open in Phases 1 and 2 will be limited and open along different timelines.

[Phase 1 facilities and operations:](#)

### Road Access

Staffing to manage the frontcountry road system will be in place at the time of opening to ensure law enforcement patrol, emergency medical service, and fire coverage. Additional staffing will focus on visitor/wildlife interface and other services as needed.

### Limited Stores

Some store operations and food services will open as it is safe to do so. Park partners will provide addendums to their operating plans to outline how they will mitigate COVID-19 transmission risks. Actions will include: metering the numbers of patrons in stores, protective barriers for employees working registers, one-way directional traffic flow within stores, and additional cleaning measures.

### Public Restrooms

The NPS will operate a range of public restrooms throughout the park and is developing the safest methods for these facilities to be cleaned and disinfected on a frequent basis (following CDC and NPS guidance). Personal protective equipment (PPE) and specialized cleaning and sanitizing equipment will be used to maximize cleaning efficiency.

### Gas Stations

The Yellowstone Park Service Stations concessioner will prepare a COVID-19 addendum to its operations plan, outlining mitigations and best practices for gas stations, restrooms, and store facilities.

### Trails & Boardwalks

Visitors can use trails and boardwalks that are accessible via open park roads. High-use areas will be signed and monitored. However, the park may not actively manage visitation in all high-use areas and will depend on the public to adhere to CDC and local health guidelines.

### Medical Clinics

Due to difficulty recruiting specialized physician's assistants and nurses, in addition to other factors, Yellowstone will initially operate only two of three medical clinics during Phases 1 and 2.

### Approved Tours

Limited commercial tours (transporting 10 people or fewer with proper social distancing) may commence in Phase 1 after tour operators have submitted required COVID-19 mitigation plans to the park and have received approval. Larger commercial tours will be restricted initially.

### Entrance Stations

The opening of some entrance stations may not coincide with the opening of park roads, initially. Park entrance stations will open once proper mitigation measures are in place and staffing configurations allow for safe operations. All entrance stations will be fitted with appropriate protective barriers. The park will encourage the use of credit cards and institute other measures to mitigate COVID-19 exposure.



*An NPS employee interacts with a visitor through a protective barrier. An extension arm prototype used to maintain a safe distance.*

# Phase 2

## Expanded Services

May/June (As health conditions allow)

Campgrounds  
Backcountry Permits  
Visitor Cabins  
Additional Stores  
Expanded Tours  
Takeout Food Service  
Boating & Fishing  
Limited Visitor Centers

The park will open facilities listed in Phase 2 when safe and appropriate mitigation measures have been identified and are in place. This means that Phase 2 services will begin at different times. Similar to Phase 1, these facilities and operations will undergo risk assessments and be subject to a range of mitigation actions consistent with local, state, and national guidance. Phase 2 will likely extend through June, at a minimum.

Phase 2 facilities and operations:

### Campgrounds

Campgrounds will open with dates and capacity to be determined and posted on NPS and partner websites. Cleaning frequency of campground restrooms will be increased.

### Backcountry Permits

Backcountry access will be available on a normal schedule. Changes are being made to the permitting system and permits will initially be issued by telephone and electronically. Staffed backcountry permit offices will not open in Phase 1 or 2.

### Visitor Cabins

Xanterra Travel Collection will open visitor cabins for overnight accommodations at multiple sites across the park including Old Faithful, Lake, and Mammoth. An addendum to their operating plan will outline mitigation plans for cleaning, check-in, and other operations associated with cabin rentals.

### Additional Stores

The NPS will provide maximum flexibility to park partners to adjust operating hours and make other modifications as necessary. Book store operations will be subject to the same measures outlined for Visitor Centers. Park partners will be responsible for determining their opening schedules.

### Expanded Tours

More commercial tours (transporting 10 people or fewer with proper social distancing) will resume as operators submit mitigation plans. The sheer number of operators with different business models prevents the park from issuing a blanket approval. The park will work with individual commercial use operators to ensure operating procedures conform to CDC and local health guidelines.

### Takeout Food Service

Xanterra and Delaware North will offer takeout food service during Phase 2. No sit-down dining will be allowed until Phase 3. Both businesses will develop addendums to their operating plans to outline mitigation actions.

### Boating & Fishing

NPS will open marinas, fishing, and boating per normal schedules and regulations. Aquatic invasive species inspection stations will be operational at Grant Village, Bridge Bay, and Lewis Lake Ranger Station.

### Limited Visitor Centers

Once proper mitigation measures have been implemented, select visitor centers may begin to open. Prior to opening, park staff will install protective barriers at desks, meter the number of visitors entering the building, create clear one-way directional foot travel, and increase cleaning frequency. Visitors will be strongly encouraged to wear appropriate facial covering prior to entering.



An NPS employee interacts with visitors through a protective barrier while all are wearing facial coverings.



# Phase 3

## Full Services

*As health conditions allow*

Hotels  
Full-Service Dining  
Commercial Tour Buses  
Ranger Programs  
Additional Facilities  
& Services

The park will open facilities listed in Phase 3 once safe and appropriate mitigation measures have been identified and implemented. The primary trigger for Phase 3 is when states lift large-gathering restrictions and the risk associated with shared employee housing has been reduced (see workforce section). Similar to Phases 1 and 2, these facilities and operations will undergo risk assessments and be subject to a range of mitigation actions consistent with local, state, and national guidance. It is unknown when the park will transition into Phase 3.

Phase 3 facilities and operations:

### Hotels

Similar to visitor cabin accommodations, Xanterra Travel Collection will provide an addendum to their operating plan to outline how they will manage full-service hotel operations.



*Phase 3 allows for additional overnight accommodations to open.*

### Full-Service Dining

Full-service dining will largely be predicated on public health guidance and staffing availability. Park partners will evaluate feasibility and ability to provide full-service dining as more is known regarding COVID-19 transmission risks. When venues reopen, they will operate with physical distancing protocols.

### Commercial Tour Buses

Commercial tours will fully resume in Phase 3, expanding from Phase 2 once restrictions are relaxed. Commercial operators will provide COVID-19 mitigation plans to the NPS for approval prior to resuming normal operations.



*Phase 3 allows normal activities to resume with precautions.*

### Ranger Programs

Resumption of ranger-led programs will be predicated on health guidance regarding large groups and staffing availability.

### Additional Facilities & Services

Services not listed will be evaluated on a case-by-case basis.



*Phase 3 allows for in-person ranger programs to resume.*

## Workforce Protection, Housing, & Staffing

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### National Park Service

The NPS will reduce exposure potential to employees by:

- Limiting public/visitor interface substantially during Phases 1 and 2. The NPS has identified certain facilities that will need to operate during Phase 1, including entrance stations and public restrooms.
- Putting protective measures into place to reduce exposure risks in areas open in Phase 1. They include: PPE and special equipment to allow for more expedient and thorough cleaning of facilities; established response protocols for first responders; and adjustments to the types of medical calls to which NPS personnel respond.
- Coordinating with primary care providers on response to both COVID-19 and non-COVID-19 patients.
- Providing maximum flexibility for jobs eligible for telework. Supervisors will ensure employees physically coming to work are protected, use staggered schedules, similar vehicles, etc.
- Assigning seasonal employees separate housing units with individual bedrooms and bathrooms for the duration of Phases 1 and 2. No dormitories or large shared housing configurations will be authorized initially.
- Distributing the employee COVID-19 Guidebook (Appendix 2) and employee training (Appendix 3) which contain procedures and tasks to minimize risk of COVID-19 spread and describes the contingency plan should an employee become symptomatic in the park.

### Park Partners

- Concession and partner operators will develop specific guidelines for workforce protection, consistent with the openings of facilities.
- Every effort will be made to provide seasonal employees individual rooms (individual bathrooms where possible). Shared bathroom configurations will be subject to approval and with adjustments to the COVID-19 operating addendum explaining what actions are being taken to reduce exposure risks.



*Handheld sprayer prototype used to disinfect surfaces.*



*Payment system prototype at North Entrance Station.*

## Commercial Use Operators & Contractors

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### Commercial Use Operators

As outlined in Phases 1 and 2, limited, small-scale commercial operators (10 people or fewer) will be allowed to operate once they have submitted COVID-19 mitigation plans to the NPS and have received approval. With exceptions, the responsibility for proper COVID-19 mitigations will be the responsibility of the individual business operator. Large operations, like tour buses, will not be considered until Phase 3.

### Contractors

Contractors are required to provide COVID-19 plans to the NPS and receive approval prior to beginning work. These plans should outline actions taken to protect contract employees at work, in remote housing areas, and in other areas contractors frequent.



*Horseback day-ride commercial tour.*



## Surveillance & Monitoring

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The NPS will continue working with in-park medical clinics and surrounding county and state health officials to share information regarding COVID-19 infection rates, hospital and testing capacity, monitoring actions, and the ability to isolate infected employees. The park is also preparing response protocols for visitors who test positive for the virus.

The NPS is working with counties to test wastewater systems for the presence of COVID-19. As testing capacity grows, the NPS will work with local health officials to initiate more widespread surveillance testing of employees who have direct public interface. The NPS will work with surrounding counties to report and monitor new cases over time, conduct active monitoring and contact tracing, and continue instituting the best available surveillance actions possible.

Wyoming has directed additional health and medical resources to help the park with surveillance, testing, and monitoring. The park is working with Montana counties and public health officials to expand testing and surveillance capacity.

## Contingency Planning

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Should states and counties reinstate major health restrictions due to unacceptably high COVID-19 infection rates, the park is prepared to scale back facilities and operations as necessary, in conjunction with those actions. The detection of community spread in the park will trigger the closure of facilities and potentially affected geographic areas.

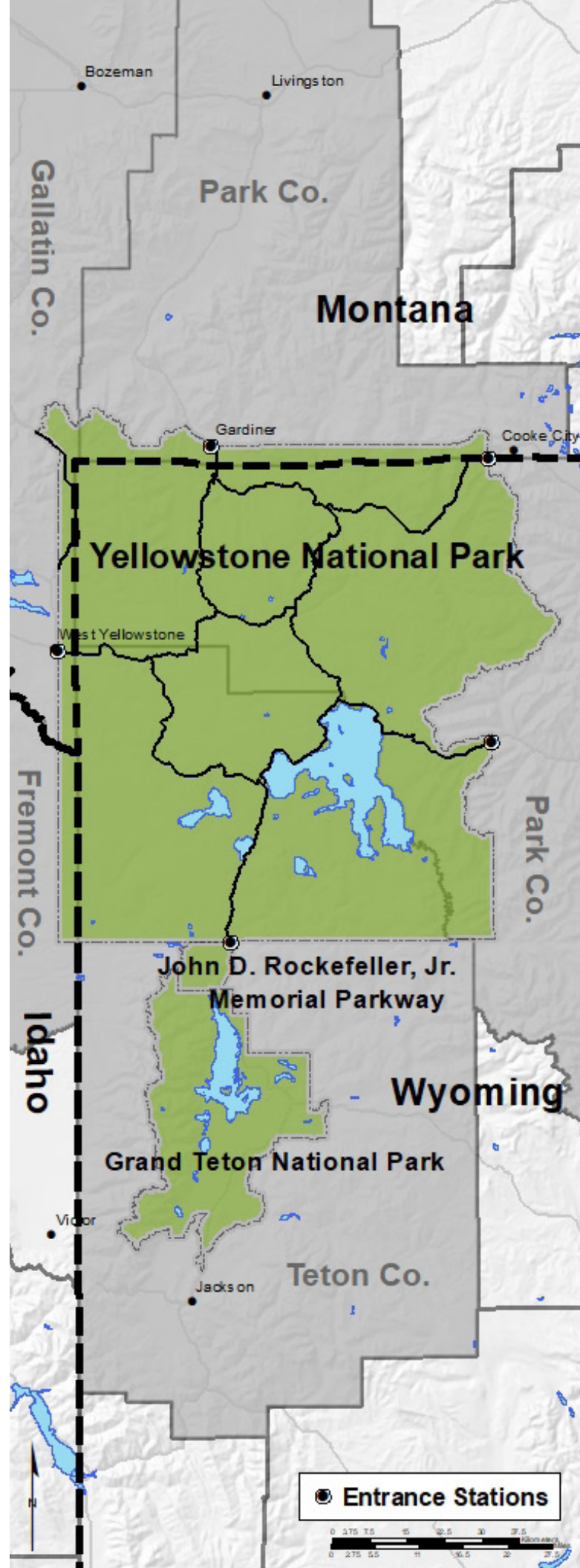
## State/County Jurisdictional Considerations: Alternative Opening Options

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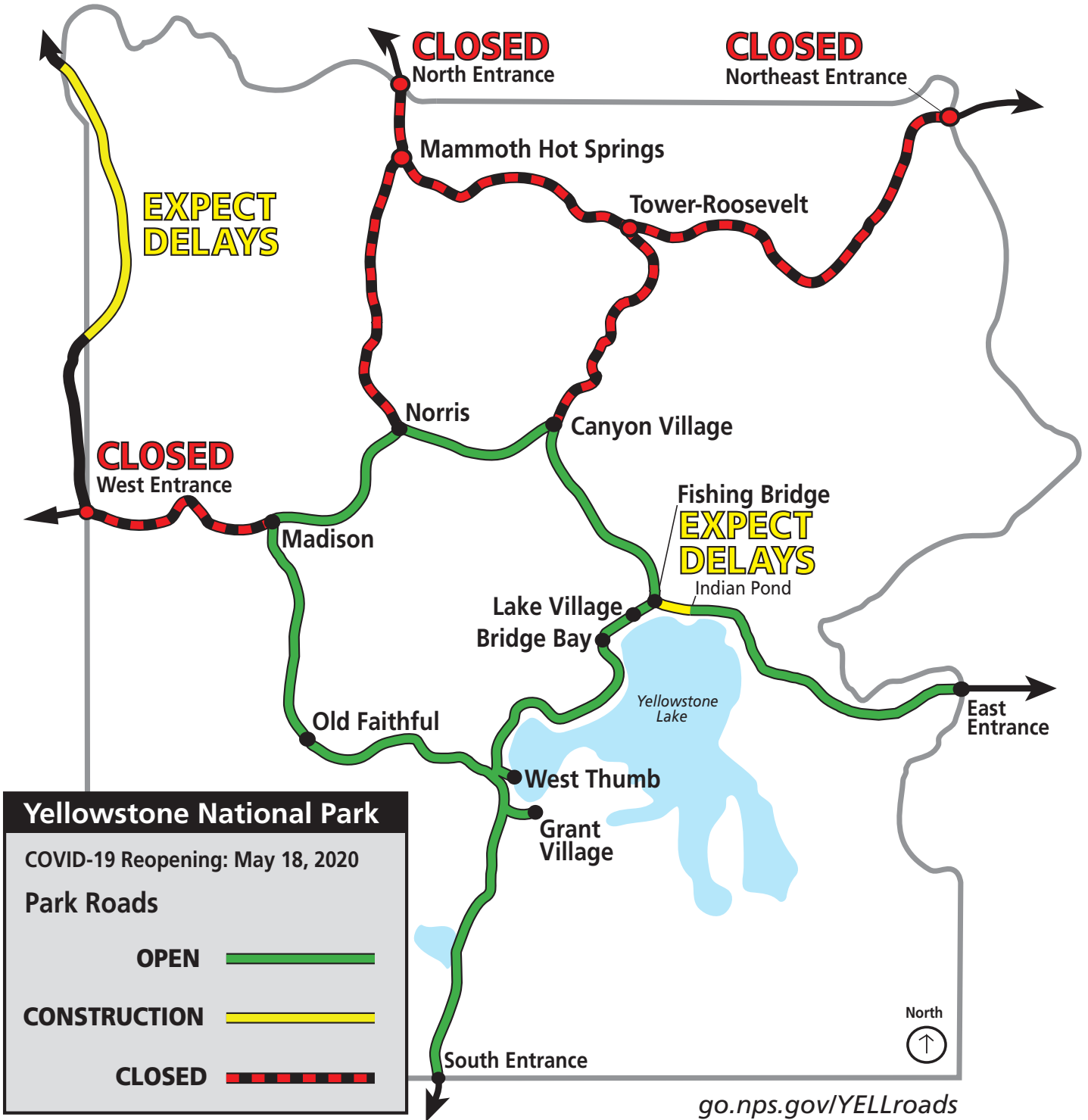
Surrounding states and counties have varying levels of virus infections, death rates, hospital capacity, and readiness measures. For example, in one county surrounding the park, there is only one positive COVID-19 case; however, in another county, there are nearly 150 cases. These variances make decisions difficult for health officials and local/state leaders. While every effort is being made to open Yellowstone with the consensus of surrounding partners, these variances in COVID-19 cases are driven by very different health opinions and restrictions, thereby making the simultaneous opening of all entrances impossible.

Since the park closed at the end of March, the Yellowstone superintendent has worked closely with the state governors to determine the proper timing for reopening due to differing COVID-19 conditions in the three states. Wyoming has requested the earliest possible opening. At present, Montana and Idaho have 14-day quarantine restrictions for out-of-state travelers.

To accommodate these varying conditions, the park will open Wyoming entrances on May 18, 2020 with access to the lower loop (Appendix 1) as well as facilities and operations outlined in Phase 1. The park will continue to work closely with Montana and Idaho to reopen the remaining gates as soon as possible.



Appendix 1: Park Road Map - Reopening May 18, 2020





# Employee COVID-19 Guidebook



## Yellowstone National Park

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## Purpose

This guide outlines the procedures and tasks to be followed by employees to minimize risk of COVID-19 spread and describes the contingency plan should an employee become symptomatic in the park.

Job-specific protocols will be available in the park’s Covid-19 intranet page, and will include guidance for tasks such as:

- Facility Cleaning
- Law Enforcement Contacts
- Guidance for First Responders
- Fee Collection
- Etc.

National Park Service  
US Department of the Interior



# COVID-19 Employee Training

Yellowstone National Park

May 2020

