**Frequently Asked Questions for NOAA Travel Advisory 21-5**

**(updated 10/14/2021)**

The purpose of this document is to address frequently asked questions for all personnel involved in official NOAA employee travel following the release of [NOAA Travel Advisory (NTA) 21-5, “Updated Travel Approval Process”](https://docs.google.com/document/d/10zbKoOoaT-sS1dJDo5seRl4Lm1YN15aV-1GzvoVNzUE/edit?usp=sharing). Pursuant to [OMB Memorandum M-21-15](https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/M-21-15.pdf), Federal employees should adhere strictly to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) guidance for domestic and international travel before, during and after travel. Vaccination is suggested for NOAA employees.

**For all NOAA employees**

1. **Where can I find out more about official travel for federal employees as it relates to the COVID-19 pandemic?**
	* As noted in NTA 21-5, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) posted an update on travel on June 10, 2021 that may be found here: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/travelers/travel-during-covid19.html>
	* Also noted in NTA 21-5, additional information was posted by the Safer Federal Workforce here: <https://www.saferfederalworkforce.gov/faq/travel/>
2. **If I am fully vaccinated, am I required to submit any kind of mission critical justification paperwork prior to official travel approval?**
	* At this time, no mission critical justification is required for fully vaccinated individuals who confirm their vaccination status with their supervisor. However, this relaxation of requirements does not supersede budgetary or other standard considerations for or against authorizing official travel.
	* Per recent CDC guidance for domestic and international travel, unrestricted travel is allowed for official travel for employees who are ***fully vaccinated*** while following all CDC safety guidelines and protocols, destination policies, specific transportation vendors (airlines, trains, etc.) guidance, and bureau (NOAA) travel policies.
3. **What does “fully vaccinated” mean?**
	* According to the CDC:

“*In general, people are considered fully vaccinated:*

* + - *2 weeks after their second dose in a 2-dose series, such as the Pfizer or Moderna vaccines, or*
		- *2 weeks after a single-dose vaccine, such as Johnson & Johnson’s Janssen vaccine*

*If you don’t meet these requirements, regardless of your age, you are NOT fully vaccinated.*”

* + For more information please refer to the [**CDC Website linked here**](https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/vaccines/fully-vaccinated.html).
1. **What is required for me to confirm my vaccination status to my supervisor in consideration of official travel?**
	* Supervisors may verify vaccination status by viewing official vaccination documentation. Examples of appropriate documentation include an original vaccination card, a photo of a vaccination card, or a copy of a vaccination card. Photos can be displayed in person or on a smartphone screen or computer screen. An individual’s name and date(s) of vaccination must be visible.
2. **If I’m fully vaccinated and go on official travel, do I still need to take any precautions during or after traveling?**
	* Yes, fully vaccinated personnel should still take measures to protect themselves and others, such as wearing a mask over their nose and mouth on planes, buses, trains, and other forms of public transportation. Fully vaccinated travelers are not required to wear a mask in outdoor areas of a conveyance (e.g. on a ferry or top open deck of a bus), but they must follow all state and local recommendations and requirements.
	* After travel, fully vaccinated employees should self-monitor for COVID-19 symptoms, and they should isolate and get tested if they develop symptoms.
	* More travel precaution information [may be found on the CDC website linked here](https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/travelers/travel-during-covid19.html).
3. **If I am fully vaccinated, is it okay for me to go to conferences and/or participate in other official travel that may have been deemed “high risk” before vaccines were available?**
	* Yes, as fully vaccinated individuals have no restrictions on official travel, they may attend conferences or go on other official travel previously considered “high risk” while following all CDC safety guidelines and protocols, destination policies, specific transportation vendors (airlines, trains, etc.) guidance, and bureau (NOAA) travel policies.
4. **What does it mean for travel to be considered “high risk”?**
	* The classification of “high risk” travel during the COVID-19 pandemic considers health risk potential through evaluation of several risk factors, including:
		+ Duration of travel (longer is higher risk)
		+ Number of people encountered while on travel (greater number is higher risk)
		+ Duration of encounters with others (longer duration is higher risk)
		+ Environment of encounters with others (enclosed spaces with limited/poor ventilation is higher risk)
		+ Proximity of people encountered (shorter distance between is higher risk)
	* Examples of high risk travel missions include:
		+ Vessel operations
		+ Widely attended events (e.g. conferences, sporting events, trade shows)
5. **Will my vaccination status be recorded anywhere if I am being considered or approved for official travel?**
	* No. Regardless of whether or not an employee is identified as fully vaccinated, no documentation of vaccination status is allowed by employees or supervisors/managers. At this time, any documentation of medical status will remain strictly between an employee and a medical professional as part of an official medical record or in support of medical treatment or advice.
6. **If I am not fully vaccinated, am I allowed to go on official travel? Will I be required to go on official travel if I’m not fully vaccinated?**
	* Individuals who do not confirm fully vaccinated status to their supervisor may go on official travel only if it is deemed ***mission critical*** by their supervisor.
	* Employees are encouraged to actively communicate with their supervisor about travel requirements.
7. **What does it mean to say that travel is deemed “mission critical”?**
	* A “mission critical” travel determination is made by an employee’s travel authorizing official, and is evaluated by considering such factors as whether:
		+ the purpose of travel is to perform essential duties related to the protection of life and property;
		+ the travel is required by statute or contract;
		+ the travel is for systems or equipment inspections if those systems or equipment are integral to security, safety, or proper functioning of the mission;
		+ the travel is to meetings or trainings required by a grant or to maintain grant funding;
		+ the travel is for training to meet certification or licensing requirements or to maintain critical functional or occupational competencies; or
		+ the travel is for activities essential to national security.
	* In making a “mission critical” determination for a particular official trip, travel authorizing officials should also strongly consider whether:
		+ the meeting can alternatively be conducted by phone or video conference;
		+ the travel is to attend training for the purposes of professional development as opposed to maintaining existing accreditation that cannot easily be postponed;
		+ the travel is not time-sensitive and can be performed at a later date;
		+ the travel is for the sole purpose of giving a presentation; and
		+ the travel can be postponed, canceled, or handled remotely.
8. **What is the process for being approved for official travel if I do not confirm for my supervisor that I am fully vaccinated?**
	* Individuals who do not confirm that they are fully vaccinated may be approved for mission critical travel only.
	* The supervisor will review with the employee their proposed travel and determine if it is mission critical (see FAQ 10).
	* Previously approved blanket mission critical travel approvals may be used as a basis for determining whether a particular trip is mission critical.
	* The travel authorizing official, after confirmation from a traveler’s supervisor, will ensure a notation of “As [Employee Name]’s supervisor, I affirm that the employee is permitted to be placed on travel orders in accordance with Departmental policy.” is included in the Remarks section of all travel authorizations in E2.
	* Any additional TA remarks may be entered thereafter.
9. **If I choose not to share my vaccination status with my supervisor, or if I’m not fully vaccinated, am I allowed to go on official travel to conferences or other widely attended events?**
	* Travel must be deemed mission critical by an employee’s travel authorizing official (with confirmation from the employee’s supervisor) for individuals who do not confirm a fully vaccinated status to their respective supervisor.
10. **If I choose not to confirm my vaccination status, and my travel is determined not to be mission critical and therefore denied, is it a discriminatory action?**
	* No, it is not considered a discriminatory action so long as it’s based on safety purposes related to vaccination status.
11. **As an employee, what other considerations should I take into account before engaging in official travel?**
	* All prospective travelers are encouraged to review CDC guidance (e.g. [the CDC Travel Planner](https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/travelers/travel-planner/index.html)) prior to traveling.
	* If an employee has a concern about their specific circumstances, they should consult with their supervisor prior to engaging on any travel that is not deemed mission critical.
12. **What are my options if I think I became ill while on official travel?**
	* Employees who believe they have become ill as a result of official travel may file a Workers' Compensation claim by contacting [Managed Care Advisors (MCA) via the link here](https://sites.google.com/noaa.gov/ohcs/employee-resources/workers-compensation).

**For Supervisors and Travel Authorizing Officials**

1. **I am a travel authorizing official, and I have determined that an employee (who has not confirmed being fully vaccinated) should embark on official travel to a conference after assessing it to be mission critical. Are there any other considerations I must take into account before approving this official travel?**
	* Yes. Per 41 CFR §301-74.1 (Conference Planning, Agency Responsibilities), costs for conferences should be minimized, including with respect to conference attendees’ travel and time costs. As such travel approvers should take into account potential costs associated with any needed self-quarantine or testing before and/or after official travel.
2. **As a supervisor or travel authorizing official, what other considerations should I take into account before approving travel in this ever-changing environment of the pandemic?**
	* As a supervisor, you should remind your employees to follow [CDC health and safety protocol guidance](https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/travelers/travel-during-covid19.html#:~:text=CDC%20recommends%20that%20travelers%20who,at%20least%2060%25%20alcohol).) for travel, such as practicing social distancing, hand washing, mask wearing, etc., as well as following state and local guidance.
	* For travelers who do not confirm fully vaccinated status, it is important to assess the health risk potential for planned mission critical travel. The following risk factors should be considered in determining if travel is “high risk”:
		+ Duration of travel (longer is higher risk)
		+ Number of people encountered while on travel (greater number is higher risk)
		+ Duration of encounters with others (longer duration is higher risk)
		+ Environment of encounters with others (enclosed spaces with limited/poor ventilation is higher risk)
		+ Proximity of people encountered (shorter distance between is higher risk)
		+ Examples of high risk travel missions include:
			1. Vessel operations
			2. Widely attended events (e.g. conferences, sporting events, trade shows)
	* For official travel (1) for individuals who do not confirm fully vaccinated status, and (2) that is mission critical, approved travelers should follow minimum health and safety protocols (based on CDC and NOAA public health guidance) [listed here.](https://www.corporateservices.noaa.gov/~finance/docs/Travel/NOAAHealthandSafetyProtocolGuidance-20211014.pdf)
	* For official travel (1) for individuals who do not confirm fully vaccinated status, (2) that is mission critical, and (3) determined to be “high risk”, travel authorizers should consult with the Office of Marine and Aviation Operations (OMAO) Office of Health Services (OHS) regarding the adequacy of intended traveler health and safety protocols (email: gary.montgomery@noaa.gov).
		+ Consultation communications to OMAO OHS should include discussion of intended health and safety protocols based on those listed [here.](https://www.corporateservices.noaa.gov/~finance/docs/Travel/NOAAHealthandSafetyProtocolGuidance-20211014.pdf)
3. **[I](https://www.corporateservices.noaa.gov/~finance/docs/Travel/NOAAHealthandSafetyProtocolGuidance-20211014.pdf) am a travel authorizing official, what am I required to include in the Remarks section for ALL travelers per NTA 21-5?**
	* Travel authorizing officials, after confirmation from a traveler’s supervisor, will ensure a notation of “As [*Employee Name*]’s supervisor, I affirm that the employee is permitted to be placed on travel orders in accordance with Departmental policy.” is included in the Remarks section of all travel authorizations in E2.

1. **I am a supervisor or travel authorizing official, and I still have questions about NTA 21-5. Is there someone I can contact?**
	* For additional questions on the travel advisory, please contact:
		+ Rachael Wivell: Rachael.S.Wivell@noaa.gov or (301) 444-2136
		+ Chasity Grimm: Chasity.N.Grimm@noaa.gov or (301) 444-2129
2. **Where can I find more information on NOAA COVID-19 policies?**
	* The [OHCS site](https://sites.google.com/noaa.gov/ohcs/current-event) has comprehensive information on NOAA policies and communications related to COVID-19, including Return to Onsite Work, Health and Wellness, and Human Resources Guidance.