



environmental affairs

Department:
Environmental Affairs
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

PO BOX 52126 Waterfront · CAPE TOWN / East Pier Shed, East Pier Road, Waterfront
Tel (+ 27 21) 405 9400 · Fax (+ 27 21) 405 9424

Enquiries: N Devanunthan
Email: ndevanunthan@environment.gov.za
Telephone: 021 405 9482

Dear Marion Island Voyage Participants

Update on status with regard to pre-departure arrangements

The Covid-19 pandemic has brought about significant difficulty for the world at large and for our country. Preparation for this Marion Island voyage has not been an easy task. The Department sought advice from experts in various fields and the Director-General of the Department of Environment, Forestry and Fisheries obtained approval from the COVID19 NATjoints to proceed with the voyage. The directive however required a reduction in the number of participants, to include only those essential to the upkeep of infrastructure and resupply of the base.

A letter was sent to each of your organisations to carefully select voyage participants while adhering to these guiding principles. We were continuously updated on the best approach to follow in order to make this voyage successful with minimal risk to the passengers, crew, as well as the overwintering team members. In particular, careful consideration was given to how to ensure effective quarantine of all participants. A quarantine protocol was prepared with guidance and inputs from, among others, Port Health. On 6 April 2020, passengers were briefed on the strict quarantine protocol (at East Pier, in the Stoker Room), received a copy of the document together with the necessary PPE, and then boarded the SA Agulhas II. All hand luggage was sanitized and hand sanitizer was distributed to all passengers upon boarding. The meal, tea, walk and later smoke time schedule was circulated electronically to all participants. I am aware that this was not an easy exercise and I want to thank you all sincerely for your patience and cooperation, and further, for making the ongoing quarantine period work effectively.

We are fully cognisant of the discomfort that goes with being on the vessel and not having the freedom to roam around. We are continuously engaging with the Vessel Management to help address some of the challenges that have been expressed by yourselves. For example, while recognizing the importance

of strict adherence to the quarantine protocol, we have been able to review some of the decisions to make it more amenable for you. The smoking ban was uplifted with the proviso of strict control measures. We are also looking at the entertainment options for persons without laptops. In addition, we have requested that wifi be made available for all passengers and would encourage you to stay in contact with your families and loved ones.

We were fortunate to have secured a service provider to take the COVID19 test specimens on the 9 April 2020 from all of you. I also want to thank you sincerely for your cooperation in this regard. Our essential objective is to ensure that everyone on board remains healthy, and that we do not take an infection to Marion Island. Test results should be available on or close to 15 April 2020.

The next question is: "how much longer?" and "what can be expected in the coming days?" Today the number of Covid-19 infections in South Africa are 2415, a significant increase since we started the quarantine on 6 April. The quarantine is an absolute necessity as we all come from different areas, and were probably in contact with a number of people in the week before boarding. So it is possible that anyone could have been in close contact with the virus, though not necessarily having any symptoms. According to the National Institute of Communicable Diseases (NICD), *"Close contact means that you had face-to-face contact within 1 metre or were in a closed space for more than 15 minutes with a person with COVID-19. This contact may have happened while the person with COVID-19 was still 'infectious', i.e. from 2 days before to 14 days after their symptoms began."*

Together we need to manage the risk and the Department must make decisions based on a balance of probability of occurrence of the virus. I would like to take this opportunity to advise what a positive or negative test result means for quarantine. Again to quote the NICD, *"A negative test result in a person with no symptoms does not mean that you do not have COVID-19. You could still be in the early stage of COVID-19 and develop symptoms later. Therefore, testing when you do not have symptoms could give a false-negative result. Even if your laboratory test result was negative, you would still need to stay at home in quarantine for 14 days..... If you tested negative and mistakenly interpreted this to mean that you were not infected, you could go back to your usual activities and spread the virus while you still had an early infection."*

I therefore must remind and implore all passengers to adhere to the quarantine measures put in place. They are a protection for yourself and others. We need to allow the full quarantine period to be in place

to ensure that nobody develops symptoms even after having tested negative. We will then initiate departure procedures. This will entail Port Health Services screening everyone onboard the vessel and we are hopeful that the vessel will then be allowed to depart. If anyone onboard has a positive Covid-19 test result, they will be counselled, and will leave the vessel, to avoid the risk of compromising others. Port Health Regulations and mandatory compliance requirements will then be necessary.

We recognize that you are being managed by the clock, but the aim of the schedule is to restrict the interaction on the vessel between passengers and thus mitigate against potential infection amongst passengers should the virus have crept in. Though these measures might seem harsh, it is a necessary precaution and should be perceived as such. We are planning a second test before arrival at the Island, provided that we are able to source rapid test kits. This will give all of us a greater degree of confidence that we have no infections on the vessel.

To conclude, the quarantine measures form an integral part of the success of this relief voyage and I want to thank every one of you for your cooperation, patience and dedication to making this a success.

Stay healthy and well.

Regards



Ms Judy Beaumont

Deputy Director General

Department of Environment Forestry and Fisheries - Ocean and Coast

Date: 14 April 2020