



NEW JERSEY CHAPTER

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www.SierraClub.org/NJ

Catherine R. McCabe, Commissioner
New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection
401 E. State St.
P.O. Box 402
Trenton, NJ 08625-0420

May 12, 2020

Re: Concern About Keeping Bathroom Facilities Closed in State Parks

Dear Commissioner Catherine McCabe,

We are in the middle of trying and unprecedented times. Governor Murphy has taken strong action to protect the people of New Jersey during the coronavirus pandemic. The Governor signed Executive Order 118 on April 7 to close all state and county parks. On April 29, he signed Executive Order 133 to reopen the parks. We supported closing the parks because at the time we believed that it was necessary to help keep people safe and healthy. We wanted there to be a phased reopening so that facilities could also open. Instead, all of the parks were reopened at once, putting pressure on resources and facilities. Now that the parks are opened, we are concerned about the impacts of keeping facilities closed.

People have been regularly visiting the parks since they reopened over a week ago. Many of the parking lots have been filled because the public needs to recreate and be outside with their families. Park visitors have overwhelmingly still been practicing social distancing, which is critical to protect public health. However, we are concerned that bathroom facilities being closed has led to health and public safety consequences. Now that the parks have been opened, it is important to reopen certain facilities or make sure that areas without access to bathrooms are clearly marked. New York has kept some bathroom facilities opened during the pandemic and has reopened their seasonal bathroom facilities as well. Pennsylvania has recently reopened many of their bathroom facilities. Both states are posting signs to warn visitors about parks with no accessible facilities.

Keeping bathroom facilities closed has serious health impacts. If people visit a local park, they can go home if they need to. Many people are driving to visit some of our most iconic parks, like Liberty State Park and Ringwood State Park. As people go on long hikes or bike rides along the D&R Canal or spend the day at Washington Crossing State Park, however, they have no access to bathroom facilities. This is even more important because nearby restaurants and shops are closed during the public health emergency, which leaves people stranded.



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Now that state and county parks have been reopened, bathroom facilities need to be opened at least part of the day. They could be open for a limited number of hours per day, like from 10am to 5pm. Opening facilities during limited time windows would allow staff to monitor and clean facilities and to make sure social distancing protocols are being followed. Not all park bathrooms need to be opened, but parks with heavy use need some access to bathrooms for public health and safety. Parks that do not have access to bathrooms should be clearly marked with signs warning people to make other arrangements.

It is important to have the staff and funding necessary to make sure our parks are safe and clean now that they are open again. Our park system has been significantly underfunded for years, with many parks and facilities in severe need of repair. The Department of Environmental Protection has almost 2,600, or 57%, less staff members now than in the mid-1990's. We need to make sure our environmental programs get more funding so that the people of New Jersey can safely enjoy the outdoors during the public health emergency.

We supported Governor Murphy's decision to close our parks and forests because of the cutbacks. Now as it gets warmer, it is good that New Jersey is slowly phasing in reopening parks for recreation and hiking while maintaining social distancing. It is important for people to get out and enjoy nature, especially during these uncertain times. We also believe that keeping pavilions and picnic areas closed during this time of social distancing is appropriate. Now that the parks are open, we need to make sure that people have access to bathroom facilities. Where this is not possible, there need to be clear signs warning people to plan accordingly.

If you have any questions, or if there is any additional information that I can provide, please feel free to call me at (609) 558-9100.

Sincerely,

Jeff Tittel

Director of the New Jersey Sierra Club