

## **ATC Conservation and Trail Management Guidance for Volunteers’ Return to Work After Disasters**

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The Appalachian Trail Conservancy (ATC), a §501(c)(3) nonprofit organization, works closely with Appalachian Trail volunteer maintaining clubs (“Clubs”) and other public and private partners to ensure the protection and stewardship of the natural, cultural, and experiential resources of the Appalachian National Scenic Trail (known as ANST, A.T., or “the Trail”). Approximately fifty federal, state, or other public agencies have authority or jurisdiction over lands and resources within the protected A.T. corridor. ATC has a central management role by virtue of its Cooperative Agreement with the USDI National Park Service and its close working partnership with the USDA Forest Service and other agencies.

ATC’s Trail management and conservation policies are meant to provide guidance for (a) dissemination to the public; (b) use and implementation by the ATC and the Clubs; and (c) recommendations for land-managing and other agencies. It is the agencies who work within their defined procedures to propose, administer, and enforce public policy. ATC policies are recommendations developed to support appropriate, coordinated Trailwide management.

**Overview:**

Disasters have different consequences and severity. A disaster may span land management agencies and club boundaries and multiple miles of the A.T. may be impacted. Volunteer safety is a critical factor in recovery efforts following a severe natural disaster on the landscape.

This document is intended to provide information to ATC and A.T. Clubs coordinating trail volunteers for addressing return-to-work field-based activities.

The goal of this guidance is to support evaluation after disasters “in the calm,” so that volunteers within A.T.

In some cases, agency partners, ATC, or club leaders may be able to send advance advisories to volunteers to request attention to potential storms and communicating about likely hazards. General guidance related to caution may be issued along with this reference.

Clubs are empowered to be effective partners rather than to restrict or prohibit volunteerism as a default.

A clear reintegration process for volunteers can minimize the number of people on the land immediately after a disaster in order to prevent compounding emergencies while services and systems are under strain. The methodical approach outlined here is intended to help ensure that the right resources are deployed on the right areas, or to reveal locations where volunteer work may effectively occur or may not occur.

For severe disasters, the value of distinct recovery phases outlined in this guide will aid in decision-making in periods of high stress and may reduce errors or accidents that could arise when assessment and work happen concurrently or in an uncoordinated manner.

In significant disasters, the A.T. is not likely the highest priority due to other impacts and emergency response capacities. Enthusiastic volunteers eager to support recovery may be encouraged to use their skills and energy to assist other local recovery efforts until it is clear that the A.T. has become the priority.

**When a return for volunteers to the field is appropriate, best practice is to have an assessment-only period followed by a work period** to support a methodical and safe approach to recovery.

Land managers and trail clubs should view this as an opportunity to renew and strengthen their relationships by clearly establishing communication channels and exchanging timely, detailed

information with each other.

Open the can of cool. There's no urgency or emergency to reopen the A.T. Resist the urge to fix things immediately – The goal is to provide accurate and timely knowns during an unknown situation.

### **Definitions:**

**Natural Disaster:** Severe wildfires, flooding, wind events, ice or snow damage, tornadoes, hurricanes, etc. It can be difficult to know how impactful the event is until after it has occurred.

**This guidance relates specifically to severe disaster impacts.**

**Priority Assessment-Only:** When a return for volunteers to the field is appropriate, typical best practices are to conduct an assessment-only period of up to several weeks, then followed by a field work period to support a methodical and safe approach to recovery that makes best use of available resources. For the assessment period, establish protocols that emphasize safety and communication with land managers and ATC on severity, appropriate access, and reporting channels.

If it is determined that some field work must occur in order for an accurate assessment to be performed, then pause and consult again with the land manager. Assess whether field work may occur without straining emergency response capacities.

**Field Work:** Actions to clear the footpath and restore public access to facilities and other recreation resources after a period of assessment.

**Rolling Open:** Attempting to assess conditions and clear damage at the same time on a given section of treadway or a facility.

**Stand down:** A directive from land manager to suspend work entirely. When a disaster is significant enough, club leaders and volunteers should be aware that notification from the land manager may be impaired, including no immediate communication. Lack of communication does not imply permission to return to work. Trail clubs or ATC mobilizing volunteers should wait until they are explicitly told to begin assessments or field work.

### **Guidance:**

Work closely with the land manager to ensure return to work is authorized. After Return to Work is authorized, apply a measured response to recovery.

- **Response Plans:**
  - Ensure the use of check-in/check-out protocols for work teams. Ask if the land manager can offer support for communications. Examine the opportunity to have a local staff from the land manager unit join the work team as a direct point of contact to the emergency response network.
  - Ensure the Trail Club's Emergency Response Plan resources have been evaluated given the changed environmental or access conditions.
  - Provide a methodical approach to work such that squads on workdays have known whereabouts, procedures for communication, and parameters for their activities.
- **Assess other available emergency response resources across A.T. Cooperative Management System partners.** This could include saw strike teams, advanced level Sawyers, assessment teams with GIS skills, engineers--where these resources exist and their mobilization readiness is sufficient.
  - Outside assistance may help to reduce potential cumulative fatigue of club volunteers and help to reduce preventable errors.
  - Accept offers from other clubs so that volunteers from a broader geography can benefit from collective training and mutual support.
- **Resist a Rolling Open:** Instead, follow the best practice of assessments first, prioritization of work, then fieldwork and recovery efforts.
- **Adhere to A.T. recognized saw policy:** Storms inherently present increased hazards from multi-directional forces on trees and limbs. Familiarity and adherence to the OHLEC framework within the USFS Thinking Sawyer program is paramount to ensuring individual volunteers do not work above their competencies based on complexity--compromising their own or the group's overall safety.
- Report progress and document conditions that require further mitigation to the land manager and your ATC regional office.

Land managers are encouraged not to open the resource for recreation before it is opened for volunteer maintenance. When volunteer stand-downs occur, organizations mobilizing volunteers appreciate understanding the rationale as well as when the next notification related to continuation or resumption of work could be conveyed.

For questions related to this guidance please contact the Appalachian Trail Conservancy at [www.appalachiantrail.org](http://www.appalachiantrail.org), or P.O. Box 807, Harpers Ferry, WV, 25425-807.

The Appalachian Trail Conservancy's mission is to protect, manage, and advocate for the Appalachian National Scenic Trail.