THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN
Animal Resources Center

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UPDATE:

Adjustments to Level 3 guidelines regarding animal research mid-October 2020

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FROM: Glen Otto, DVM, Director

Researchers studying animals,

Although the campus remains at Level 3 in regard to pandemic precautions, research operations have resumed safely under the university's Research Restart plan, with few COVID-19 cases among researchers and only one incident of coronavirus transmission in the context of the university research environment since June 1, 2020. This has led to a recent change to the cohort restrictions, which now allow up to 50% of research lab personnel to be on campus during each scheduled daily cohort shift.

In order to allow for incremental increases in animal-based research to occur in parallel, we are now adjusting restrictions and guidance for allowable animal studies. Approval of the overall scope of animal research performed by each laboratory (and the assignment of personnel to cohorts) will continue to be handled at the level of the CSU. However, the ADRs have asked the ARC Director to work with PIs to evaluate the specifics of new animal studies to be activated on a case-by-case basis so that the work performed remains appropriate. In many cases, the experimental plan may just require some tweaks so that the work can be performed, but there may be situations where the planned work still cannot be accommodated and will need to be postponed to a later date. As needed, the relevant ADR may be consulted as these difficult decisions are made.

These are some of the main considerations that PIs and the ARC Director must take into account when planning and approving new studies:

1) **Cage census** - In order to accommodate additional studies, animal populations will need to increase. However, t**he overall rodent census will need to remain lower than "normal"** due to a number of factors, including ongoing issues with PPE availability, the campus mandate to decrease the overall personnel density in research areas and the simple fact that most rooms in the animal facilities cannot accommodate more than one person at a time as per the social distancing requirements for research areas (200 sq ft/person). **Researchers planning studies that will increase their daily rodent cage counts by more than 25% compared to September levels must discuss their plans in advance with the ARC Director.** Larger increases may be possible in some situations but must be carefully planned and coordinated.

2) **Housing room use by ARC staff** - Currently the animal care staff is attempting to finish their daily tasks in the animal rooms by 11AM. As the populations build, the ARC staff will need to spend more time in each room, so this work period will gradually extend later into the day. In order to achieve the social distancing and separation of functional groups that Level 3 precautions require, **ARC staff will maintain priority access to the animal rooms when performing animal care.** PIs should minimize morning staff entries into the facility, especially into animal rooms and those procedure rooms used for euthanasia. If it is absolutely necessary to enter housing rooms briefly to remove animals so they can be taken to a dedicated procedure or wet lab area, these brief entries should be planned to avoid typical cage changing times for the room. If ARC staff are performing routine health/food/water checks at other times, researchers should wait until they are done to enter the room or, maintaining distance, should briefly enter to get the attention of ARC workers and discuss a mutually agreeable path forward. Labs with significant in-room needs should discuss daily and weekly schedules with the local ARC supervisor so we can work together on a plan that will eliminate any conflicts. **Researchers have been very cooperative and understanding when working around ARC staff in the facilities throughout this pandemic, and this is much appreciated!**

3) **Housing room use by researchers** - As a corollary to #2, **researchers should utilize the afternoon cohort period to perform procedures inside the housing rooms whenever possible.** Routine procedures that are normally performed in ARC-managed animal rooms (weighing, drug administration, breeding management, etc.) should be assigned and scheduled during the afternoon cohort to minimize research traffic in animal rooms. Alternatively, researchers can reserve a procedure room during the morning cohort schedule so they can work around the animal care staff by quickly removing animals from the housing room, taking them elsewhere for manipulations, and then returning them when finished. NOTE: It is recognized that critical procedures such as observing post-operative animals twice a day will necessitate members of the research team to be evaluating animals in the housing room during BOTH cohorts (see #7 below).

4) **Long-term studies are now acceptable** - Based on the past six months of campus experience as the prevalence of SARS-CoV-2 infection in the community has waxed and waned, there is now less of a concern that another shutdown of campus research on short notice might be required. The majority of animal studies that have been activated since June have been planned to run no longer than 6-8 weeks, but at this point **the length of the study does not need to be a deciding factor on whether or not to reactivate research projects.**

5) **Expansion of rodent breeding must be justified and approved** - Many labs have continued to perform small scale maintenance breeding to preserve valuable strains during the shutdown, and as the months have dragged on, the purchase of replacement breeders has been approved as needed. As experiments continue to ramp up during the successful restart process, there will be labs proposing to expand their efforts by beginning production breeding to create sufficient animal numbers for newly activated studies. However, production breeding is an activity that can very quickly cause a significant increase in cage census, which will need to be managed in consideration of #1 above. In addition, breeding management (setting up mating cages, weaning and separating, sampling for genotyping, placing ear tags/punches) leads to many hours of work that is normally performed in ARC-managed animal rooms which will need to be managed in consideration of #3 above. For these reasons, **production breeding must be approved by the ARC Director and should be limited to time-critical studies where alternatives are not available.** For example, internal breeding of commercially available rodent stocks and strains would be a poor use of limited university resources at this time if those animals can be readily purchased from a vendor. Another alternative for expansion breeding that some UT labs are currently utilizing is to develop a research support contract with one of the rodent vendors that can provide custom strain breeding programs in their commercial facilities. NOTE: There are accreditation and compliance requirements that must be met in order to enter into such agreements, so PIs must clear their plans with the IACUC and incorporate these agreements into their animal care and use protocols as necessary.

6) **Procedures should continue to be performed by experienced and proficient personnel.** Researchers performing studies involving anesthesia, surgery, post-procedural monitoring, frequent monitoring for humane endpoints, etc. must have skill and prior experience. Social distancing requirements and the mandated decrease in research area personnel density do not allow for significant direct and hands-on training and oversight, which is required before unskilled personnel can work alone. **Conditions are still not conducive to the training and supervision of new students or staff.**

7) **PIs must consider all-day coverage when assigning trained personnel to cohorts**. When performing surgical procedures, experiments that include the induction of disease or toxicity and other experimental manipulations that require close observation and possible intervention, a research group must check animals multiple times per day. Because a researcher may not cross shifts/cohorts for the purpose of providing all-day coverage, **the PI must designate sufficient persons to both the morning shift and the afternoon shift to provide adequate coverage for type of experiments planned..** This will ensure that proficient personnel listed in the approved protocol are available from early morning through the late evening. If sufficient trained personnel are not available, such studies must be postponed.

8) **Prior IACUC-imposed monitoring conditions for specific protocols remain in effect**. A number of projects active before the pandemic were given approval by the IACUC that was conditional on those labs contacting the ARC Training/Compliance Manager prior to commencing particular procures, so that targeted monitoring could be scheduled.

PIs must remain cognizant of any conditional IACUC approvals and must work with the ARC to determine if/when the monitored procedures can be scheduled.

9) **ARC technical assistance may be limited.** The ARC clinical/surgical team is a small group, and under the best of conditions are very busy. The pandemic precautions have resulted in additional obstacles and inefficiencies, and a previous lessening of restrictions on large animal studies caused a recent surge of demand as many labs planned new procedures. **Researchers should plan on scheduling procedures requiring ARC assistance (or monitoring, see #8 above) well in advance.**

Thank you in advance for your patience and cooperation as we deal with the current crisis.

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