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Record visitation seen at public lands during COVID-19 pandemic; public reminded to maintain social distance

RALEIGH – Visitation at many state forests in North Carolina is two and three times greater than what is typical for this time of year, which is stretching the resources of the sites and making it harder for people to practice proper social distancing. Visitors are asked to strictly follow social distancing guidelines to help keep public lands safe, available and open to the public during the COVID-19 pandemic.

“Public lands, including state forests and parks, and national forests are experiencing record-high attendance, making social distancing difficult to achieve,” said Agriculture Commissioner Steve Troxler. “While public lands are a great natural resource, we are urging visitors to observe the CDC and public health’s recommendations of 6 feet of spacing between each other, frequent and thorough handwashing and staying home if you do not feel well.”

Many public lands have temporarily closed, restricting public access until further notice due to heavy visitation. N.C. Forest Service officials note that some visitors are following social distancing guidelines while others are not. Many state parks, state forests and national forests are experiencing large congregations of visitors in parking areas.

For anyone planning to visit public lands during the COVID-19 pandemic, here are some helpful social distancing guidelines to help you recreate responsibly:

- Stay close to home. Enjoy outdoor recreation in your neighborhood. Faraway places are wonderful but traveling long distances can increase your potential to spread illness.
- Pay close attention to guidance in your community before heading outside. Acknowledge any guidelines, restrictions or closures mandated by your local or state government.
- Expect closures. Use the restroom before leaving home.
- Avoid times and places of high use. Visit early in the day or in the middle of the week.
- Keep hiking groups to three people or less.
- Wash your hands and follow CDC guidelines carefully.
- Be a good steward for nature and the people around you.

To download Social Distancing Guidelines for North Carolina State Forests and for updated information about public access to state forests during the COVID-19 pandemic, visit ncforestservice.gov/COVID19.htm. For status of North Carolina State Parks, visit <https://www.ncparks.gov>. For a complete list of closures across the National Forests in North Carolina, please visit: <http://www.fs.usda.gov/goto/currentclosures>.