



Surfers in the ocean found a way to reach the beach on Friday, May 15, 2020. ZACH URNESS / STATESMAN JOURNAL

## Director

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that seemed really important, this is back to the foundation. It brings you back to what's really important.

**Zach:** Currently, there are 18 state parks closed, either because of COVID, staffing shortages or wildfires. There are limits on renting yurts and cabins, a lot of campgrounds don't have showers open. What's the outlook in the short and longer-term?

**Lisa:** As of October 1st, we have restored some of the field budgets for the parks. Our goal is to be fully staffed for next March. You'll start seeing the cabins and yurts re-opening this week. Our intent, depending on what else happens between now and the end of the year, is to have the system ready to be fully receiving all of its visitors by (next) March.

**Chris Havel:** Between January and March, we'll have time to experiment with different procedures, making sure that we can have the supplies and staffing and time to keep showers open and clean. For things like yurts and cabins, how can we keep those open in a way that's best for the visitor and best for the facility? That can mean things like requiring reservations sometimes or requiring a resting period between stays for some of those facilities. Between that January-March timeframe, you may see some facilities pop open with different procedures just to try things out, so that when we hit the full season next year, we've got a good test behind us and are ready to go.

**Zach:** Cool. Well, that's good news. In thinking about other places that have challenges facing them, a few parks were hit by wildfires, what's their status?

**Lisa:** We're looking at those initial disaster assessment and trying to figure out what exactly is the damage on the ground, how can we get the park system back up and functioning to the best of its ability. Some of them will be slow.

**Havel:** A place like North Santiam Recreation Area isn't a single thing. There's an area to get down to the river, there is a small campground there, there are picnic areas, there's even a cute little trail. What we try to do is figure out which experiences are the most important to bring back first and put the effort into getting those back online sooner.

**Zach:** Before we jump into what happened this year, I want to ask about the extra fee you imposed on out-of-state campers. At least with Oregonians, this is very popular. Will that stay long-term?



Lisa Sumption, director of the Oregon Parks and Recreation Department, stands with J.R. Beaver, mascot for the Junior Ranger Program. SPECIAL TO THE STATESMAN JOURNAL

our intent is to remove the out of state fee. We can have a much larger dialogue about fees going forward and this created the opportunity to have a dialogue, but I don't feel comfortable in the middle of a crisis making a decision that would later look like we did it just to make money because it did not have the effect. It did bring in additional revenue, so we do thank the out of staters for that and we're thankful that the (COVID) numbers didn't go up, but it was just another tool to add to the toolbox to see if we could try to be more responsible in the middle of a global pandemic.

**Zach:** Let's jump back in time. When COVID first popped up in February and started spreading, how did you think it would impact Oregon's state parks?

**Chris:** We knew it was going to be dramatic. I don't think any of us imagined how quickly things would evolve, and I think that's probably the single largest thing that we didn't prepare for. We had a plan to gradually shut down the park system and it was, originally, it was like a 30-day plan. It was like, you know what? That's not aggressive enough. Let's get really aggressive and make a two-week plan. Two days later, we closed the entire state park system in 48 hours.

**Zach:** That was a weekend I'll always remember. Gov. Brown had advised people to stay home but look, it was a beautiful weekend on

spring break, and Oregonians did what Oregonians do. They flooded out to the Oregon Coast and that kick started a really remarkable series of events.

**Lisa:** On Friday, everything seemed OK. Saturday morning, it just started blowing up. I mean, my phone literally, county commissioners, mayors, all nine cities, all five counties, and just having the dialogue of like, what are you going to do about this? It was like... so how are we going to get, I mean, at Fort Stevens there was 5,000 people in one park, and you think about the city of Warrenton, its total population isn't anywhere near that. You could see the things on social media where people from Portland were going in and saying, 'Look, we finally found toilet paper,' and they were loading their cars and... For the community perspective, they were just like, this is very insensitive, and nobody cares. The emotions were high, the patience was low, the fear was high, so we talked through it. (Officials) were very, very anxious for their communities, so we just agreed, go ahead and hold your public meeting, ask us to leave, we've got the team on the ground ready to go, we'll get folks out of there."

**Zach:** And people did leave pretty quickly. It wasn't a drawn-out fight. The Oregon Coast became a ghost town pretty quick. On March 23rd, you made the official decision to shut down all

the Oregon state parks — not just the ones on the Coast. What was that moment like, I mean, pulling the trigger for the entire system because we're not just talking about the coast here, we're talking about eastern Oregon and central Oregon? I mean, was it a surreal moment? Is there a red button you push?

**Chris:** There was a little numb shock around the room in that moment, but it was very short because then you move on and you do your job.

**Lisa:** The hardest part is you always have a finish line and there's no finish line. Once we do this, then what? It was kind of like, well, we've adapted so much in the last two weeks — let's go.

**Zach:** That began what was really a surreal time. Because following state parks, all of Oregon's outdoor recreation was shut down. I mean, I wrote stories about the police stopping a guy drifting down the Siletz River and surfers getting cited for trying to get out onto the beach. Instead of rangers inviting people in, they're trying to keep them out. What was that period like for you and your staff as your mission almost flips on its head?

**Lisa:** I can't even imagine what it felt like for a ranger in that moment because that's not what you sign up to do. You don't sign up to keep people out of your parks. You want people in, and you want to welcome them, and you want to interpret the space and you want to make the experience

great. All of a sudden, we're in this weird space of trying to keep people out. And once we reopened, and we're ready to let people back in, it's come in ... but don't come near me. It's been a very interesting time for all of us because it's a very unusual way to do business.

**Zach:** After a little more than two months, you slowly started re-opening parks. But that extended closure, and pandemic in general, brought a pretty big financial hit to the agency that led to some parks staying closed and reduced services. Can you explain how the shutdown and all the things were happening hit your budget so hard?

**Lisa:** We were closed for 13 weeks and that was our prime season. Once spring break hits, we make most of our money in that three-month window. Being closed for 13 weeks was significant. We don't receive general fund dollars, so there are zero tax dollars coming into the organization. We're split about half and half with user fees and the Oregon Lottery. And not only did we shut down the park system, we shut down bars and we shut down restaurants in places where people could play video poker and have those lottery opportunities. All of that was closed at the same time. It was like the faucet went off. It translated to about a \$22 million shortfall.

We didn't hire almost 371 seasonal rangers. We laid off 47 full-time equivalent employees. We reopened up to the best of our ability, which meant in some places there weren't showers, there weren't facilities available, there weren't cabins and yurts, there weren't interpretive services. Trying to lower the standard, I think, was probably the hardest part for us because (our rangers) want to give the best experience possible and we had to keep going back

and saying, 'It's okay. It's okay to be C students right now.' Just getting access and getting people out there is going to be the best we can do. It's been incredible to watch what they've been able to pull off."

**Zach:** In looking back, was it worth it? Oregon's numbers did stay low — but once everything reopened the numbers ticked up, and we just had our highest two day total since the pandemic started. So was all that pain worth it?

**Lisa:** It would be really neat to be able to look back and say which way you could or should or might have gone, and I still don't know that we know enough. Through the entire process I've been talking to my brothers and sisters across the country that run other state park systems and every one of us handled it differently. Some stayed open the entire time and others were completely shut down. New Mexico opened up camping to their own residents for the first time on October 1st because they didn't know how to keep out of staters out, so they just closed the entire system down.

I have no regrets for how we handled it. We had a plan, but people were not complying with the travel restraints. They were told to stay in their bubbles and people weren't doing that, so it seemed like the right thing to do and I think if we had it in front of us again, I wouldn't change any of it actually.

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