



DATE: August 30, 2019

TO: USMS House of Delegates

FROM: Open Water Strategy Task Force

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SUBJECT: Open Water Strategy

This document contains a working list of priorities that the Open Water Strategy Task Force has explored and are recommending for 2020 and beyond to refocus efforts to grow the number of sanctioned USMS open water events and participation in them. This outline was discussed and accepted by the Board of Directors during the July 2019 meeting. Investments in open water are included in the 2020 budget proposal.

1. Open Water Results Database

- a. Project is nearing completion with recent sanctioned events being used for testing purposes.
- b. Template will need to be circulated with event directors so timing companies can provide results in the format required for upload.
- c. Recommend that event directors transfer membership IDs to timing system so it may be included in results template.

2. One-Event Registrations

Within the open water community, the USMS One Event registration (OEV) has been a source of concern for event directors and a barrier to sanctioning with USMS for others. Many perceive that a USMS sanction is too expensive, but after surveys and direct conversations with event directors, the main objection is that the cost of the OEV registration is limiting the potential participation.

In parallel, USMS has revised its marketing approach with new database tools to build a database of potential members to which we will create targeted marketing campaigns. Providing more opportunities for swimmers, whether members or not, to participate specifically in USMS-sanctioned open water events is a goal. And with the capability to capture that information for future



marketing purposes, greater participation is more valuable than a higher price point for the one-event fee (that wasn't driving more membership anyway). For comparison, USA Triathlon charges a \$15 OEVT and given the large audience of triathletes interested in our open water swims, we recommend aligning our fee at \$15.

Given the work that LMSCs perform to facilitate open water swims in their regions, we want to provide incentive for LMSCs to promote open water swimming. In parallel, the concept of a Unified Membership fee structure is being socialized to pave the way to be able to offer numerous desired membership products and benefits. So, the OEVT fee recommendation also includes a percentage of the fee that will be distributed to the sanctioning LMSC. The % currently being evaluated is 20%. The final recommendation will be determined based on the feedback from unified fee discussions.

The budget and strategy will allow LMSCs that offer open water an opportunity to opt-in to this structure in 2020 to test the concept before making a final decision on the structure for 2021. Those that opt in will receive a % of the final OEVT fee for 2019. Those that don't may still add a fee on top of the final OEVT (as has been past practice).

Because the OEVT fee has developed a negative connotation with event directors as an add-on fee, we are also recommending we guide event directors to add this fee to their standard event registration fee, and offer the combined fee as their total event fee/cost available to the general public (i.e., nonmembers). The event fee can then be marketed to USMS members as a \$15 discount, rather than a \$15 add-on for nonmembers.

Below is an example that incorporates these recommendations:

Gulf of Mexico Open Water Swim

Registration Fee: \$65

USMS Member Fee: \$50

USMS Receivable from Event Director***:

\$5 per USMS member (capped at \$1,000)

\$15 per nonmember (\$3 to LMSC, \$12 to National)

Finally, we are also recommending that all events, particularly those that sell out, offer an exclusive early registration window for USMS members, in advance of offering OEVT registration. This provides another added value for USMS



members and incentive for OEVT registrants to become members to ensure they have a spot in the swim.

3. Marketing

- a. More visible and easier navigation to open water content, results, events, etc.
- b. Add pre-event article / paragraph that links to event page
- c. Event preview link on event page
- d. Post-event wrap-up for open water national championships and other large events

4. New Event Recruitment

- a. The open water strategy task force and National Office have compiled a list of open water events in the U.S. to better understand existing events and to use for outreach to potential sanctioned events
- b. Benefits document is being created to be able to circulate with organizers of potential sanctioned events.
- c. Outreach: As these priorities are implemented, USMS staff will take the lead on a event recruitment campaign but local influence and personal connections are welcome and appreciated.

5. Rules

- a. Bob Bruce has taken the lead on this topic with the OW and LD Committees. The swimwear rule change specifically will be appealing to potential event directors to provide more flexibility within the established policies.

6. Added Value for Event Directors

- a. USMS to cover costs of fees from registration providers (i.e., the \$1.50 that Club Assistant charges per participant), which effectively lowers the per swimmer sanction fee from \$5 to \$3.50
- b. Other providers (i.e., IM Athlete, RunSignUp, etc.) are being explored and considered, but Club Assistant is the most immediate viable option and have agreed in principle to the partnership.
- c. Using an API (data integrations between systems), USMS will be able to gather entry data in real time, which has several benefits:
 - i. Matching results with member records post-event
 - ii. Marketing: target/segment USMS membership better to promote open water content and upcoming races on behalf of event directors
 - iii. Simplify process of transferring sanction and OEVT funds/data to reduce administrative work for LMSC and event directors, and allow timely communications with OEVT swimmers to upsell membership and participation in other sanctioned events



- iv. Cost forecasted at \$12,000 with current participation levels (\$1.50 x 8k entries).
 - 1. Cost will increase with growth of events/participation (a very good thing).
 - 2. Approximately 266 new memberships would need to be generated to offset the \$12k entirely in year one (i.e. expect that at least 50% of those new members will renew for future years)

- 7. Allow registration to start before membership year that the event is held
 - a. Opening entries early in the year gives event directors more time to market their event and when feasible capture excitement from race day to the following year (e.g., open entries for 2020 at the 2019 event).
 - b. Club Assistant has seen success from events utilizing this strategy, already has the ability to set up events over a year in advance, and can easily assist event directors with membership verification (i.e., if entries open August 2019 for an August 2020 event, membership can be verified in July 2019) .
 - c. USMS will communicate with LSMC sanction chairs and event directors to educate them on the process and associated benefits so events can be sanctioned prior to registration opening. Standard practice has been to not sanction until Nov. 1 registration begins.

- 8. Sanction process adjustment
 - a. The Open Water Strategy Task Force has found many of the issues/confusion around the sanction process are due to a delay in responses and/or inconsistent/incomplete information that is provided to event directors.
 - b. Open Water Compliance Coordinator role to be expanded into an OW Event Coordinator and serve as a resource throughout the process rather than simply approving safety plans
 - i. Having a dedicated person in this role will help navigate issues commonly found throughout the country, including coordination with USA Swimming to streamline the process for dual-sanctioned events.
 - ii. Coordinator will have more accountability than an LMSC Sanction Chair to ensure inquiries are responded to in a timely manner.
 - iii. Coordinator will receive the application when it is originally submitted so review process can be expedited. Currently the Coordinator only receives the application after it is “approved” by the LMSC and many “approved” applications lack critical details.
 - iv. LMSC will still have final approval to ensure the date works and local knowledge is utilized. However, if LSMC does not respond in a timely manner (i.e., Sanction Chair is on vacation or otherwise unavailable) the



Coordinator will reach out to other LMSC leadership to facilitate approval within reasonable timeframes.

- v. Coordinator will assist with the recruitment process of getting established (nonsanctioned) events to sanction with USMS and be a resource for event directors interested in starting a new event.
- vi. David Miner, the current Open Water Safety Coordinator, has already been engaged to start working toward this new model.

9. Open Water Workout Guidelines

- a. The task force and an Open Water subcommittee both recognized the need to better educate our clubs and coaches on the differences between event and workout requirements for open water swimming.
- b. USMS is currently working with Colorado Masters Swimming Association on a plan to implement workouts at a reservoir in Colorado. This will be used as a template to build guidelines documents that can be used as a resource in other areas of the country. (Colorado lost over 1,000 members due to the loss of this one venue several years ago.)
- c. Lane 4 Swimming in Potomac Valley is also working to reinstate its open water workouts and will serve as another opportunity for best practices. (Lane 4 Swimming estimates it lost roughly 250 swimmers because it couldn't continue its open water workouts.)
- d. These 2 examples amount to a loss of 2% of USMS membership nationally

10. Partnerships

- a. USMS has had (and will continue) dialogue with USA Swimming, USA Triathlon, and WOWSA to share best practices and explore ways to partner and grow the sport.
- b. USA Triathlon added two open water swims at two of its events:
 - i. [Legacy Triathlon](#) – Long Beach, CA, on July 19
 - ii. [Age Group Nationals](#) – Cleveland, OH, on August 9
 - iii. USMS sent emails to local members to help promote the events
 - iv. USAT waived their \$15 one-event fee for USMS members
 - v. Both events were owned/operated by USAT's national office. David Miner reviewed USAT's plans to ensure they meet our safety standards.
 - vi. Support from the LMSCs involved was appreciated by USAT (and USMS)
 - vii. Results were mixed but provide a great learning opportunity and build plans for continued development.



Next steps for Task Force in 2020

- Consider the concept of an Open Water / Triathlon Membership
 - Based on outcome of unified fee discussions
 - Data driven analysis (Without a results database, we have had virtually no useful data on USMS open water swimmers.)
- Evaluate results from 2019 priorities
- Long Distance Event Discussion
 - Participation/growth
 - Build demand from event directors
 - Focus on distances that are in demand
 - Process simplification
 - National Office / Committee Partnership – Volunteer Task Force Recommendations
- Legislation?
- Education on insurance requirements and structure for open water workouts vs. open water events
- Event Cancellation Insurance (explored in 2019, too pricey, possible to consider again in future)