

Emergency Communication Guidelines For Remote Activity Providers

PURPOSE

These guidelines describe how best to communicate with emergency services. They are for providers of organised recreational, sporting, educational or guided activities undertaken in remote areas.

Please consider these guidelines when developing your own emergency plans.

BACKGROUND

WHAT IS A REMOTE AREA?

A remote area is considered to be **a land area not easily accessible by road** (including whitewater or wilderness rivers). There may be no roads to your location, ruling out the evacuation of patients by land and deeming any rescue effort more likely to be managed by helicopter or some other specialised method (e.g. 4wd, boat or Search and Rescue team).

Note: for emergency communications at sea and on large inland lakes, please refer to the Maritime NZ guidelines maritimenz.govt.nz/recreational/safety/communications/default.asp

WHAT IS AN EMERGENCY?

An emergency is considered to be any situation where:

- people are lost or trapped and unable to resolve their situation safely on their own;
- there is a threat to life;
- people have a non-life-threatening illness or injury but are unable to travel safely out of the remote area without external specialist assistance.

IN ADDITION:

- An emergency **does not** include the loss of equipment unless that results in any of the situations above or where the loss of equipment may present a significant hazard.
- Activity providers should establish procedures for their own management of non-emergency events, particularly for those incidents that can be foreseen.

IN AN EMERGENCY:

While calling **111** is preferred by the emergency services it may not be feasible in many remote areas.

In general, we recommend using a Personal Locator Beacon (PLB) AND sending a message via another method to help confirm the location of your emergency.

1 GET AN EMERGENCY MESSAGE TO POLICE (IF POSSIBLE)

CALL **111** if you have coverage – ask for Police.

Coverage/call length may be restricted. Police can pass your call on to other relevant services as required.

Use a **Satellite Phone** to call Police or RCCNZ

- North Comms (North of Turangi): **+64 9 571 2800**
- Central Comms (South of Turangi): **+64 4 381 2000**
- South Comms (South Island): **+64 3 363 7400**
- RCCNZ: **+64 4 577 8030**

Use **Mountain Radio** or send a **text** message to a **third party (cellphone, satellite phone or satellite messaging service)** to relay to **emergency**

- A third party can relay this information to Police
- Establish these protocols in advance

2 IF YOU CANNOT GET AN IMMEDIATE, CLEAR RESPONSE, OR IF SITUATION IS URGENT, SET OFF A PLB

This provides an emergency alert to RCCNZ and gives your location.

3 MAKE YOURSELF AS VISIBLE AS POSSIBLE

Even when your location has been identified, responders (especially helicopters) can have a hard time finding parties that need help. See further information (on the following pages) on how to make your party more visible to rescuers.

PRE-PLANNING

WHAT FORMS OF EMERGENCY COMMUNICATION ARE AVAILABLE?

The pros and cons of most remote communication devices are provided by the NZ Mountain Safety Council at mountainsafety.org.nz/resources/toolbox/communications/#Comms

These include:

- Cellphones
 - Personal Locator Beacons (PLBs)
 - Satellite Phones
 - Satellite Messenger Devices
 - NZ Mountain Radio Service
- Relying on just one form of emergency communication is not good practice for organised outdoor activities. There is no backup if a device is lost, damaged, outside coverage or inoperable for some reason (e.g. a flat battery).
 - Cellphones should not be relied on as a sole source of emergency communications in remote areas.

WHO SHOULD CARRY EMERGENCY COMMUNICATIONS?

Activity providers need to establish procedures for notifying emergency services at the earliest opportunity.

- Any organised activity in a remote area should have the necessary communication equipment to summon emergency help anywhere in their operating area.
- In large events, it may not be practical for every individual to carry communications. Provided they are following the same route, this risk can be managed by having communication available at control points, with marshals, or carried by 'tail-end charlies'. As a guideline we suggest participants should be no more than 30 minutes travel from a location with emergency communications.

COMMUNICATION DEAD SPOTS

Most operating areas will have dead spots where one form of communication or another will not work.

- Activity providers should know where dead spots are and have coverage maps for their operating areas that they have verified on the ground.
- In some cases, dead spots can be effectively managed by having planned 'call in' times along an established route. If your base does not receive a call back within a set time frame, a response can be initiated.

HOW TO PLAN

- Run scenarios of likely emergencies, including any communication challenges that relate to your operating area. These could be both field based or theoretical. Incorporate these learnings into your emergency communication plan.
- Complete the emergency *Communications Planning Template* (Appendix 1). This should be shared with your local Police SAR coordinator (see below).
- If you are using PLB or Satellite Emergency messaging, the *Planning Template* should also be emailed to the RCCNZ at RCCNZ1@maritimenz.govt.nz
- We strongly recommend that activity providers speak with their local Police SAR coordinator before their event (or on an annual basis for ongoing activities). You can do this by contacting your local Police station on the non-emergency number during office hours. Your Police SAR coordinator may be able to help you develop an emergency communication plan that is tailored to your needs.

FURTHER INFORMATION

WHY DO WE RECOMMEND CALLING POLICE FROM REMOTE AREAS?

- Police have the ability to access other services (including ambulance rescue helicopters and specialist rescue teams) ensuring flexibility of response.
- If you have lodged an emergency communications pre-plan with your local Police SAR coordinator, Police Communication Centres can take advantage of these.

HOW CAN WE GET A POLICE COMMUNICATIONS CENTRE TO UNDERSTAND WE ARE IN A REMOTE LOCATION FASTER?

Typically, all calls to the 111 system go through a set of screening questions. This may seem frustrating, particularly if you are having communication difficulties.

- Inform the Police Communicator at the start of the call that you are in a **remote location with communication difficulties**. They do not necessarily have to follow their script and can gather relevant information more efficiently.
- Police may set up a scheduled call back time (if you have limited battery life or cannot talk for long for any reason).
- If you have access to mobile data and your phone has GPS signal, they may send you a 'mobile locate' text which once accepted lets them know your exact location.
- If calling Police on 111, you need to allow time for this and have sufficient phone coverage and battery strength. Using a satellite phone from a valley where you may only have limited call time before losing connection is not effective.

WHAT INFORMATION SHOULD WE PROVIDE IN AN EMERGENCY MESSAGE?

1. Your communication status e.g. “I am calling from a remote location with communication difficulties” (modify this statement as appropriate – this will signal to the Police Communicator that you have limited time to exchange critical information).
2. An alternate form of communication such as a cellphone carried by another member for the party, or radio equipment and channel(s) you have access to.
3. Coordinate **location of the emergency** (if known). Latitude and Longitude (Lat.Long) in the form: Degrees, Minutes. Decimal minutes is used by rescue helicopters. Other standard coordinate forms can be used such as different Lat.Long formats (e.g. degree, minutes, seconds), 14 figure Easting Northing (UTM), and six figure map references.
4. Physical **description of the location** (e.g. Mackley River 1km E of Wilderness Stream junction, Mt William Range). A physical description is recommended in case of an error in the coordinates.
5. **Identification**. Your name or the name of your party.
6. **Situation**. What is wrong (injury severity, type of illness, trapped, lost?).
7. **Number** of people requiring assistance.
8. Type of **assistance required**.
9. **Resources** you have available. Include number of unaffected people, training, first aid and shelter resources.
10. Your **plan**/what you intend to do while waiting for assistance.
11. Location of the **caller** (if different from the location of the emergency).
12. The **weather** at the location (especially wind and visibility).
13. **Landing options** for a helicopter and a description of the area and terrain including hazards such as overhead wires (this information can be used by the helicopter to assess a winch rescue).

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN WE SET OFF A PLB?

The Rescue Coordination Centre NZ (RCCNZ) coordinates the initial response to PLB activations in NZ. RCCNZ will coordinate with Police to organise a response.

The process of responding to a beacon is summarised at beacons.org.nz/ActivatingaBeacon.aspx

HOW CAN WE ARRANGE SPECIALIST TECHNICAL RESCUE SUPPORT IN AN EMERGENCY?

- If you are an activity provider routinely working in a context that could require a specialist rescue response such as avalanche, swift water, steep terrain/glacier or cave environments, you should make a plan with your local Police SAR coordinator regarding how best to communicate to mobilise emergency resources quickly.
- For providers who need this support but do not usually work in this terrain, please contact Police before other emergency services. They are best placed to mobilise emergency resources if required
- If you set off a PLB in a location that is obviously a steep, technical environment (e.g. on a glacier or in a canyon), RCCNZ will arrange the appropriate response and support. Beacon registration is important in assisting RCCNZ with rescue requirements.

WHAT ELSE SHOULD I CONSIDER WHEN CHOOSING AN APPROPRIATE COMMUNICATION METHOD?

- Choose communication methods that you know will work in the operating area. Keep these systems well maintained and regularly practice using them (and any emergency communication protocols).
- PLB's are the most consistently reliable way of summoning emergency assistance and identifying your location throughout remote parts of NZ. They have the best satellite coverage and emit a radio homing signal which can help rescuers find you. However, a PLB does not allow you to communicate any specific needs other than a simple distress signal and location. Additional communication through another means can substantially improve the effectiveness of the response.
- In situations where generic communication systems are inadequate, customised radio networks including permanent or temporary repeaters may be appropriate. Alternatively, you could establish mandatory call in points in areas with known reception.
- If your emergency alert messages rely on a third-party service provider (e.g. Mountain Radio Service, satellite messaging services), operators should ensure they know how quickly these third parties can respond to alerts and how quickly a message will be routed to the appropriate emergency service.
- Not all satellite phones have the capacity to call directly into the New Zealand 111 system – please check with your phone provider or talk to your local Police SAR coordinator if you need an alternative number.
- In the case of Satellite Messaging Services distress messages are normally forwarded to the RCCNZ via a commercial third party (e.g. GEOS worldwide in the case of FindMeSpot or Garmin Inreach) but you should confirm that this will happen with the devices and subscriptions you have.

HOW CAN WE ENSURE THE MOST EFFICIENT RESPONSE TO A PLB ACTIVATION?

1. Register your beacon(s) by downloading a registration form from beacons.org.nz/Registration.aspx and emailing the completed form to: 406registry@maritimenz.govt.nz
 - When registering your beacon be sure to add as much relevant information about your activity to the registration form (e.g. ‘Used for guided bushwalking groups in remote terrain’ or ‘used by marshals at adventure racing events’)
 - Ensure that the contact information is accurate and up to date (review this regularly to ensure it is current). These numbers will be called in the event of an activation.
2. You can also email a completed Emergency Communications Planning Template (Appendix 1) to RCCNZ at RCCNZ1@maritimenz.govt.nz

IS IT OK TO CALL THE NZ RESCUE COORDINATION CENTRE DIRECTLY IF I SET OFF A DISTRESS BEACON?

Yes; they will work with you as appropriate depending on your situation.

IF WE HAVE A MEDICAL INCIDENT IS IT OK TO CONTACT AMBULANCE DIRECTLY?

Yes; but you should consider the following:

- Allow more call time to establish your location and explain your situation
- If you are not sure of your location or if you need any specialist rescue support, call Police first.

HOW CAN WE MAKE OURSELVES VISIBLE TO A HELICOPTER OR OTHER SEARCHERS?

If possible, find open terrain where you are visible from above.

Consider the following signalling methods:

- Day: smoke from small smokey fires or smoke flares, signal mirrors, waving brightly coloured materials, shaking smaller canopy trees (if you cannot find open areas).
- Night: strobing lights or swinging lights, shining lights on to overhead tree canopy
- Whistles are useful for helping ground search parties to identify your location.

HOW SHALL WE CONTACT THE EMERGENCY SERVICES FROM REMOTE AREAS IN NON-URGENT INCIDENTS (E.G. BADLY SPRAINED ANKLE, UNABLE TO WALK)?

Larger activity providers or event organisers should have a plan for managing their own non-urgent incidents.

If a participant is immobilised by injury or illness and the activity provider is unable to evacuate them, this situation meets our criteria for an emergency (see 'what is an emergency' above) and the process for contact will be the same as for other emergencies. Ideally get a message out explaining the nature of your incident. In some cases a group may be able to walk out to an area of coverage to contact emergency services. If you are not able to get a response within a reasonable time (this will vary depending on your context), you should activate your PLB.

ABOUT THIS DOCUMENT

This work has been initiated by New Zealand Search and Rescue with the assistance of the Recreation Aotearoa and in consultation with NZ Police, Ambulance Services, the Rescue Coordination Centre NZ, Tourism Industry Aotearoa and a variety of activity providers.

APPENDIX 1: Page 1 of 2

Emergency Communication Plan for Remote Outdoor Activity

ID: _____ DATE OF ACTIVITY: _____

Organisation name: _____

Office address: _____

CONTACT NAMES:

1. _____ role: _____
phone no. _____ email: _____
2. _____ role: _____
phone no. _____ email: _____
3. _____ role: _____
phone no. _____ email: _____

ACTIVITY:

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GENERAL AREA OF OPERATION:

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GROUP INFORMATION AND RESOURCES:

Number of leaders/guides: _____ Level of training/
experience: _____

GROUP INFORMATION AND RESOURCES: continued

Number of participants: _____ Description: _____
Assistants/parents
/helpers: _____

Age range of participants: _____

Important characteristics
of participants:
*(e.g. high school, hearing
impaired, retirees)*

Overnight shelter carried _____ Yes _____ No _____ Emergency Bivvy gear only

Cooking equip/food carried _____ Yes _____ No

Communications carried:
*(Communication ID No.
e.g. cellphone and satphone
numbers, PLB Hexadecimal
ID numbers, Satellite messenger
identifier numbers)*

Are PLB's registered with RCCNZ? _____ Yes _____ No **Register at: <https://beacons.org.nz/>**

Copy of this form emailed to Rescue
Coordination Centre _____ Yes _____ No

Additional
notes/comments:

Any alternative emergency
comms arrangements
made with Police SAR/
RCCNZ