Your Safety Management System

A Safety Management System (SMS) is a set of processes that enable you to manage health and safety in your workplace. The content of your SMS will depend on the context and purpose of your operation and any specific sector good practice and legal requirements.

Your SMS could include these facets:

* An overarching safety policy that states your organisation's commitment to safety and continuous improvement.
* Your Safety Management Plan (SMP).
* Risk identification, assessment, and control documentation.
* Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs).
* Specific awareness of and processes to manage areas of increased risk, eg environmental factors, natural hazards, hazardous goods, and specific tasks and tools.
* Clear allocation of roles and safety responsibilities.
* Staff induction, training, and competency procedures.
* How you look after staff fitness and wellbeing.
* Contractor and visitor management.
* Incident reporting and investigation processes and tools.
* Emergency procedures.
* The involvement of staff across all facets of managing safety, underscored by a strong and transparent safety culture.
* Processes for review (at all levels across the system), audit, and clear plans for continuous improvement.

All these facets need to be clearly documented and with clear records.

Structure

SMS structures vary depending on the operation's size and complexity, and the risks involved.

A common approach is to separate the policies from the operational procedures by using a Safety Management Plan (SMP) and Standard Operational Procedures (SOPs), forms, and checklists.

Safety Management Plan (SMP)

Your SMP is at the heart of your SMS. It describes your plan for managing and improving safety across your entire operation.

Note! The SMP should include your health and safety policy, overarching safety processes, and reference all your operational documents such as Standard Operating Procedures, forms, and checklists.

Your SMP is the document your safety auditor will use as the basis for reviewing how you manage safety in your operation.

Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs)

An SOP describes how an activity should be conducted.

Note! SOPs should follow from your risk identification and assessment processes, and communicate your risk controls.

SOPs can be:

- Generic and outline processes that occur across your whole operation, eg how you collect and disseminate information about client medical conditions.

- Activity or site specific.

- Associated with other operational areas, eg driving, hazardous goods.

Clear and concise SOPs should reduce miscommunication and guide uniformity of performance.

Forms and tools

At another level of your SMS are the various safety-related tools – checklists and forms that are used to gather, record, and provide safety information.

Examples include staff induction checklists and training records, hazard-update boards, staff meeting minutes, risk assessment and management tables, trip and incident reporting forms, safety signage, and client-briefing videos.

How to build your SMS

Start by being clear about the purpose and context/s of your operation – does it vary for different participants or activities?

Then use your risk management processes, considering:

- All your activities and jobs, eg driving, guiding, and food handling.

- The separate locations where you undertake your activity/ies.

- Seasonal differences and environmental effects.

Check the good practice information and/or the approach taken by other providers running similar activities.

Think about your staff, contractors, volunteers, and others – how will they know what is expected of them?
If you're looking for ideas, check:

- The templates and tools section.

- That you know and have covered all your legal requirements.

- The adventure activities standard as a series of questions and see if you can answer them.

Involve your team as much as possible in developing your SMS. They'll be a great source of information about safety, and the system must work well for them.

Documenting your SMS

Your SMS needs to work well for your team and be tailored to fit your specific context/s. It should be clear and simple, but provide enough detail to be useful:

- Describe what you typically do (don't include things that you won't actually do).
- Clearly differentiate your must-do procedures from those where greater degrees of judgement and initiative are allowed or expected.
- Use language that works for your team.
- Keep your terminology and layout clear, simple, and consistent.
- Avoid large blocks of text – use bullet points, check boxes, flow charts, images, or maps.

A diagram that shows the structure and components of your SMS is a useful way to describe how your system works.

Historically, an SMS has been paper based, but increasingly operators are using technology to capture, record, and communicate safety information. [Phone-based apps](#) can be used for incident reporting, checklists, or to make SOPs more readily available. A ready-made software solution could be the basis of your entire SMS.

Communicating your SMS

All stakeholders, including staff, contractors, participants, and land managers, must know how their role fits within your SMS, and where to find the information they need. Consider how you'll communicate this information to your stakeholders, and ensure they get it when they need it, and in a way that works for them.

Communications strategies should include:

- Clearly identifying where various elements of the SMS are kept.
- Staff SMS induction and training.
- Regular staff meetings, with notes made available to all staff.
- Safety updates through notice boards or group messaging (via email or chat).
- Staff involvement in safety management committees.
- Participant briefings.
- Written agreements, inductions, and regular meetings with other PCBUs, eg contractors and land managers.

Document control

Your SMS documents need to be current and accurate to be safe.

- Keep track of page numbers, file name, version number, and dates (footers can help).
- Include the version number in the title and only have the current versions in circulation.
- Use consistent and clear document names, including appendices.
- Clearly show when your documentation will next be reviewed.
- State where your documents will be kept (hard and electronic copies, back-up copies, archives).

- Know how amendments will be made and tracked, including who is responsible for signing off changes and preventing use of out-of-date versions.

Reviewing

You should use a review system of regularly check that your safety systems are:

- The best they can be.
- Captured accurately in your safety management documentation.
- Aligned with sector good practice and legal requirements.
- Being implemented in the field – your team are 'walking the safety talk'

Someone must have responsibility to ensure that reviews take place, and any resulting actions are followed up.

In-house reviews

You should plan time for the in-house review of your SMS and your activities.

SMS

Your safety system review should, over time, cover all aspects of your SMS and include checking:

- Your systems against external measures such as activity safety guidelines, audit standards, and current legislation requirements.
- Your risk assessments, SOPs, forms, and other safety tools. Are they correct, useful, and being used as intended?
- Your staff on the job. Are they following agreed procedures and, if not, why not?
- That safety lessons are communicated to, and implemented by, staff.
- That learnings from previous reviews, feedback from Technical Advisors and others have been implemented.
- That the SMS still works when things change – including key staff, hazards, incidents, new or changed activities, and legal requirements.

Activities

As well as the overall components of your SMS, you should regularly check the safety aspects of each of your activities. Consider:

- Reviewing all aspects of the activity – risk assessments, SOPs and other tools, the actual running of the activity, participant information and briefing, staffing matters (competence, qualifications, supervision levels), the equipment used, and rescue and emergency procedures.
- Who should lead the review – the perspective of experienced staff is valuable.
- Involving an external expert (a Technical Advisor) who will bring knowledge of good practice and alternative ways of doing things. This is particularly important for owner-operator businesses and other small businesses.
- Using a peer – maybe a reciprocal arrangement with another provider.

External reviews

External reviews range from regulatory and voluntary audits, to using an external safety advisor to review a part of your SMS.

Note! External audits are mandatory for activities subject to the Adventure Activities Regulations, but it's good practice to have an external safety audit even if you're not legally required to do so.

To get maximum value out of an audit:

- Organise it well in advance and for a time that suits your operation, but ideally during a busy normal operation rather than with a mock or controlled situation.
- Select an audit provider that suits your needs and your operation.
- Contact your auditor early to ensure that you both have all the information you need, including their audit criteria.
- Know the audit standard that you'll be checked against and use it to do your own internal check before the audit.
- Ensure that as many of your team are onsite as possible, especially key staff.
- Allow time for required follow-up actions and audit completion.

Incidents and emergencies

These provide excellent opportunities to review how well your SMS is supporting your operation, and to learn and improve for the future. See Incident Reporting.

Documenting reviews

It's important to record reviews, and include details about:

- What was checked, when, and who was involved.
- How the checking occurred and against what measures, eg by observing staff running an activity or by reviewing checklists and forms.
- Follow up, and subsequent action planning and close out.

We have a rolling roster for checking our systems. Every three months two of our team check our systems, eg is the guide training up to date? Is the crisis plan accurate? Are the first-aid kits sealed and in the right place? It's done on a weather day and helps to keep all our staff involved with the running of the place....