

AN EFFECTIVE PLAN

New Mexico conducts all wilderness Search and Rescue (SAR) missions under a centralized, highly-structured system utilizing volunteer search and rescue teams and resources. The



Photo courtesy of Atalaya Search & Rescue

carefully-structured response plan, authorized by the New Mexico Search and Rescue Act in 1978, assures that a formidable array of resources can be quickly mobilized under the time-tested protocols of the Incident Command System (ICS).

Unlike many other states, where local law enforcement agencies assume responsibility for managing a SAR mission using official agency resources, the New Mexico system operates under a system of volunteer SAR responders acting under the authority of the New Mexico State Police.

Through the ICS, a direct line of authority flows from the Governor to the State Police to the on-scene Incident Commander (IC). The responding IC has the authority to activate any emergency responders needed, some possibly from surrounding states, to help find or rescue a person or persons.

DID YOU KNOW?

- In the last three years, New Mexico has averaged **160** SAR missions per year.
- Each SAR mission averages more than **15** different agencies and/or volunteer teams. More than **1,600** trained volunteers and an additional **250** Civil Air Patrol personnel reside in New Mexico.
- More than **600** uniformed State Police officers are trained to investigate potential SAR missions.
- New Mexico has more than **42** trained SAR Incident Commanders.
- You can learn about teams in or near your home by visiting www.nmsarc.org.



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WILDERNESS SEARCH AND RESCUE IN NEW MEXICO



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WHAT IS A “MISSION?”

When a person is reported lost or missing in the wilderness, the call, whether from an individual or local law enforcement, is directed to the New Mexico State Police. The state police officer who first investigates the report is called the **Mission Initiator (MI)**. He or she is trained to evaluate missing person reports and to work with the state’s SAR command structure.

If a search is warranted, the **MI** will assign a mission number and contact the on-call volunteer SAR **Field Coordinator (FC)** who will serve as the mission **Incident Commander (IC)**. Most **FCs** have years of experience in managing and participating in SAR missions.

The SAR **IC** has the overall responsibility and authority to conduct the search and rescue mission. In addition to local volunteer SAR teams, the **IC** may activate other state and federal resources, as well as other volunteers who may be able to help. If the size and length of the mission warrants, the **IC** may expand the scope of the incident command structure to include section chiefs for logistics, planning, and operations, as well as other mission related elements.

An incident base is established, becoming the communications center, volunteer dispatch site, and command center for the **IC** and his or her staff. Communication with teams in the field is established using specific radio channels. Search team locations are constantly tracked and updated on maps.

WHAT IS NOT A MISSION?

Cases where the initial report is not considered reliable, or where the probability exists that the subject(s) may not be missing in the wilderness, are not considered SAR missions. Neither are volunteer searchers dispatched to find felons or

other possibly dangerous subjects. Since SAR missions in highly populated areas usually involve entirely different challenges and risks, wilderness SAR teams are not routinely deployed for urban SAR incidents. However, in some situations, such as a missing Alzheimer’s patient or a missing small child, wilderness search and rescue teams can be called in to help.

MEDIA ON-SITE

Response time for search and rescue resources is normally one to two hours, sometimes longer. When responders arrive at the incident base, activity becomes intense. The activities around an incident base may seem confusing at first but despite this appearance, the mission is organized and is unfolding.

On-site media relations are managed by a designated **Public Information Officer (PIO)**, who is responsible, upon request, for providing accurate information without jeopardizing the privacy of the subjects and volunteers. The **PIO**, with access to the latest information available from the **IC**, is better informed than individual searchers or search teams, who are not aware of the mission’s complete complexity.

With multiple search teams being dispatched, the **IC** and the incident base staff must deal with myriad critical details. Responsible for both the effectiveness of the Search Plan and the safety of sometimes dozens of searchers, the **IC** and on-site personnel should not be interviewed as news sources. Instead, ask for the mission’s **PIO** (However, if no **PIO** has been assigned, the **IC** will handle that responsibility).

At the search staging area, volunteer teams will be organizing their gear, synchronizing radios and GPS navigation units, and departing as rapidly as possible after being given a search assignment. Sometimes deployed before a **PIO** is available, they will not be available for interviews. They will have been instructed to refer media inquiries to the **PIO**.

WHO ARE THE SEARCHERS?

The actual search and rescue operations are carried out by teams of volunteers—individuals who generally have years of outdoor experience and have trained intensively to learn valuable skills in searching and properly caring for a subject in the wilderness. Teams can be activated in their local area or in some circumstances state-wide. Some teams are highly specialized. Skill-specific teams available to **ICs** can include ground pounders, high-angle rescuers, medical professionals, cave rescuers, missing aircraft Emergency Locator Transmitter (ELT) teams, canine and horse search teams, four-wheel drive/

All-Terrain Vehicle (ATV) teams, snowmobile teams, and winter backcountry experts.

While friends or family of the subject(s) are often able to provide valuable information, they are asked to stay out of the field. Searches often involve dangerous terrain, nighttime wilderness navigation, and high levels of fitness. Unqualified or under-equipped searchers, such as family or friends, can easily jeopardize a mission.

WHAT KIND OF TRAINING DO SEARCHERS HAVE?

Many searchers have completed a Field Certification exam, demonstrating knowledge of ICS search command structure, backcountry navigation, communications, and equipment (including a personal pack check). Others undertake more extensive training and most purchase their own equipment at their own expense. With a radio, GPS unit and survival gear, a rescuer’s pack can easily hold \$1,000 worth of gear, not including specialized medical, communications, or possibly high angle (rock climbing) equipment. As a result, New Mexico enjoys an extremely valuable volunteer resource, comprised of some of the nation’s most capable SAR teams and individuals.

ARE SEARCHERS PAID?

The only full-time paid search and rescue person in the state is the **Search and Rescue Resource Officer** operating under the Special Operations Bureau of the New Mexico State Police. Duties of the state **SAR Resource Officer** include training Field Coordinators, maintaining liaison with the volunteer search teams, maintaining records of missions and compiling annual summaries of SAR statistical information. The **Resource Officer** can be contacted in Santa Fe at **505.827.9228**.

IS THERE A STATEWIDE SAR ORGANIZATION?

The **New Mexico Search and Rescue Council**, a state-wide 501(c)(3) non-profit organization of teams, provides training for SAR volunteers and promotes outdoor safety. **ESCAPE**, the **Council’s** annual SAR training conference is usually held in May, providing both general and technical training for all aspects of SAR. Other training sessions are held throughout the year. The organization also provides a web site, **www.nmsarc.org**, where comprehensive information is available.