

Personal beacons save lives on dangerous, remote North Slope

Search and rescue officials statewide are enthusiastic over the Personal Locator Beacon (PLB) test program currently being conducted in the state. It's a joint project of the Alaska State Troopers, North Slope Borough Department of Public Safety, U.S. Coast Guard, U.S. Air Force, And the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

The system is working extremely well and is making emergency rescues simpler, quicker, and safer, according to officials from the Alaska State Troopers, Air Force Rescue Coordination Center (RCC), and North Slope Borough Public Safety. Two recent incidents validate both the system accuracy and speed, as well as excellent cooperation between federal, state, and local search and rescue resources.

The first incident involved two persons missing from Barrow who became stranded after their snowmachine broke down 23 miles from Barrow. They determined they needed assistance and activated the PLB they had checked out from Public Safety. The signal was immediately picked up by satellite and transmitted to the United States Mission Control Center in Washington, D.C. and coordinates were sent to State Troopers at the Emergency Operations Center in Anchorage. The location was pinpointed and the alert coordinated with NSB Search and Rescue personnel who responded by helicopter directly to the scene and rescued the people.

The second incident occurred in June. The COSPAS -SARSAT Satellite System picked up an alert from a PLB Beacon and relayed the distress signal to the Mission Control Center, and sent to State Troopers. NSB officials were notified and responded to the location where they found two individuals stranded due to rising water on the Utukok River. The river began to rise and flow on both sides of the camp. Their rubber raft had a hole in it, and one of the two people could not swim. They activated the PLB they had checked out from Public Safety. The NSB Search and Rescue Department responded to the alert and rescued them without incident. On May 8, 1995, the Alaska State Troopers became the coordinating agency and point of contact for the PLB Program in Alaska. Officials in Washington State and Oregon are closely monitoring progress in Alaska. PLBs have been permitted in Canada on a national basis since July 1990, and the program is successful there.

Additional information can be obtained by calling 1-800-478-2332 (Anchorage), or the Alaska State Troopers at 907-428-7222. Currently, there are about 160 PLBs assigned to organizations and registered through a PLB working group.
