Emergencies

You must have written and practised procedures for all the emergencies relevant to your operation, from preparing for an emergency, to incident management and crisis response.

Safety monitoring and backup

Monitoring

Designate an experienced staff member to be responsible for overall monitoring of the operation's safety and ensuring that procedures are followed.

This doesn't remove the responsibility of each guide or instructor to manage the safety of the participants under their care.

Backup

Every activity should have a backup person responsible for providing emergency response support. They must not be involved in the activity itself and must be as contactable as possible during the activity.

Specified call-in times are a useful way to enable a backup person to monitor the progress of the activity. Consider scheduling these calls for before or after parts of the activity involving serious risks or communication blindspots, eg before and after entering a cave.

A back-up person may not be practicable for sole operators who may need to bolster their security in other ways, such as carrying more than one type of communication device.

Scenarios

Emergency planning is more than developing procedures around an incident – it also includes civil emergencies.

Note!

Ideally, you'll practise a field incident, but talking through procedures for a scenario with field staff, administration staff, and emergency services can be a valuable exercise.

Identify the emergency scenarios for your operation – what could actually happen – and plan for them. Include your team in this process and review past-incident information, both internal and sector incidents.

You need to consider multiple layers of incidents, such as when you have a major injury in a remote location and external help can't access you quickly.

Scenarios should cover the following areas:

- Incidents that can be managed internally, eg a client minor health issue or a vehicle breakdown.
- Incidents that require external support, eg a broken-down vehicle or a serious injury.
- A crisis involving loss of life, which will primarily be managed by the police or a search and rescue agency.
- A crisis in a remote area where terrain or weather delays a rescue.
- A civil emergency, eg a fire, flood, tsunami, pandemic, earthquake, or volcanic eruption where emergency services and infrastructure may be overwhelmed.

Response procedures

Establish response procedures for each of the above relevant scenarios. When developing civil emergency response plans, involve other providers and local emergency services.

You should include:

- Step-by-step action plans.
- Equipment needed, including first aid and where it will be located.
- How you will ensure that everyone is accounted for.
- Communication systems in the field and at base.
- Locating client and staff details, including medical information and next-of-kin or contacts.
- Recording and reporting requirements during and after the event, eg phone or radio logs.
- A list of who to call and at what stage, eg company owner, regulators (WorkSafe NZ, MNZ, CAA), police, next of kin.
- Contact information for other stakeholders, eg associations and business partners.
- A victim-support plan – support during and immediately after an emergency and any longer-term needs for you and your staff.
- A media response plan, including the media spokesperson.

When developing emergency response plans that will involve local police or search and rescue services, contact them and ask for their input.

Our operation is based in a small community. We use the local policeperson as a sounding board. It's reassuring to have another pair of eyes look over our thinking.

Checking your procedures

Check that your procedures are:

- Consistent with current sector practice – discuss your procedures with other providers and technical advisers to see what they do in similar circumstances.
- Easily communicated within your team. Consider establishing definitions for severity that enable your team to clearly communicate which emergency-response procedure is required.
- Clear on roles and responsibilities, including who's responsible for calling for outside help.
- Readily accessible by staff – kept in the right place and in a useable form, eg flowcharts or laminated wallet cards.
- Regularly reviewed and up to date.

Training

Realistic emergency procedure training must be a positive and regular part of your operation.

The more familiar you and your team are with your emergency procedures, the better you'll manage a crisis.

Training processes should be:

- Included in induction and training every season at least.
- A learning process that ensures procedures are improved over time.
- Realistic and relevant.
- Include scenarios involving your entire team, including people who will be managing the base and communications. Consider including emergency services.
- Part of your everyday safety culture, eg ask a staff member where an emergency plan is located, or give a staff member a scenario and ask how they would respond.
- Focused both on practising procedures and reviewing them.
- Documented, eg what you did, who was there, any learning points, and any follow-up actions to be taken.
- Fully debriefed – allow time for this important process.

Training with local search and rescue personnel helps to increase their awareness of site access and evacuation options and identify gaps in equipment and expertise.

I walk into our base some days and throw out a 'what would you do if..' scenario. It's simple, basic training, but it keeps our crisis plan top-of-mind.

Communication systems

Communication systems need to cover communication between staff on the activity, with backup staff, and with external emergency support services.

Between staff on the activity

Communicating between staff in the field is often difficult due to distance, enclosed spaces such as caves and canyons, or noise from water or wind. Develop a communication system that meets the operational and emergency requirements of the activity.

This may involve technology but operations often relies on signals such as hand, whistle, or rope signals. Many activities have good-practice standards for using signals.

External support

There should be a primary system, and a backup system if the primary system is likely to be compromised, eg due to getting wet. The primary system should enable two-way communication.

The type of communication equipment used will depend on the context and the activity, the potential hazards and risks, and the emergency response plan in place.

Choose the most effective option practicable, eg:

- Cellphone – ensure that you record blindspots, usually on a map.
- Satellite phone.
- Two-way satellite texting device.
- Two-way radio, eg UHF radio.
- Emergency Position Indicating Radio beacon (EPIRB).
- Personal Locator Beacon (PLB).
- Tracking devices.
- Emergency flares.

Good pre-activity briefings will help ensure that everyone is aware of the communication equipment, requirements, and procedures for that activity.

Note!

Ensure that emergency communication procedures are understood and actionable by more than one person on the activity. Where there is only one staff member, ensure that participants know how to contact emergency support if the staff member is incapacitated.

Have a backup communication plan to cover what to do if the communication tools don't work.

Remote areas

Dialling 111 for incidents in remote area may not always get emergency support – you may need more than a cellphone.

These Emergency Communication Guidelines provide a communications planning template to share with local police, and advice including how to ensure that responders understand that you're in a remote area, what information you should convey to get the right support, and what to expect if you set off a beacon.

The Rescue Coordination Response Center New Zealand (RCCNZ) is responsible for all major maritime, aviation, and land-based missions arising from someone activating a distress beacon.

Accessing emergency support

Ensure that suitable external emergency support is available within a planned period of time, and specify this period of time in your emergency procedures. For a day trip, this would ideally be within daylight hours.

Emergency planning and procedures should consider factors that could impact on the availability of suitable external emergency support, eg:

- The ability to call for support from the activity location.
- The type of external support required by each emergency scenario.
- Site access and evacuation options.
- Capacity and ability of local rescue resources such as other providers and community rescue agencies.
- Bad weather or rugged terrain in a remote location.

Contingencies for limited access to emergency support

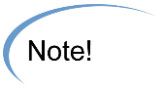
Where access to suitable external emergency response is limited, there is a risk that groups will spend longer in the field. This is particularly the case when bad weather prevents helicopter flying.

Factors to consider include:

- Informing participants of the risk of a prolonged stay in the field in the event of an emergency.
- Considering accessibility when assessing participants and determining the supervision structure.
- Finishing activities early in the day to allow time for an overdue response and rescue.
- Training with rescue-response personnel.
- Permanently rigging access and escape routes.
- Storing evacuation equipment in the field.
- Using more experienced guides or instructors and ensuring they're competent to manage emergency scenarios for extended periods of time.
- Taking extra care throughout the trip and excluding avoidable higher-risk activities.
- Having resources available to maintain group safety for an extended stay in the field, eg food, warm clothing, and heat sources.

Emergency equipment

Emergency equipment must be sufficient for the size of the group and suitable for dealing with the provider's emergency scenarios.



When choosing emergency equipment, give careful consideration to how long it'll take before external emergency support arrives.

Where this may be slow consider:

- Shelter and heat sources including ground insulation, high-energy food, and spare warm clothing.
- How you will manage the safety of your entire group while waiting.

Emergency equipment must be accessible to manage all the provider's emergency scenarios. There are a range of options, including caching equipment along a route, carrying it in a vehicle, distributing it across the group, and carrying it in a pack or directly on your body.

First aid

Staff must have first-aid skills suited to the provider's emergency scenarios. In many adventure activity situations, they could be managing an injured person for a long time before help arrives. For these scenarios, they should have an in-depth first-aid qualification such as a suitable pre-hospital emergency care qualification or outdoor first-aid qualification.

First-aid kits must also be suited to the operation's emergency scenarios. Here are some suggestions for a first-aid kit suited to most outdoors activities.

Ensure you have procedures to:

- Check that first-aid kit contents are complete before taking into the field.
- Check that sterile products aren't contaminated and perishable medication is within its expiry date.
- Dispose of and replace contaminated or expired products.
- Store medications appropriately.

Managing serious allergic reactions in the outdoor environment can be particularly problematic. Here is an Outdoor Industry Guide for Using Adrenaline.