



Position Opposing the Requirement that Climbers Carry Emergency Communication Devices

The Mountain Rescue Association (MRA) established on January 10, 2010, a position opposing any requirement that mountain climbers be required to carry emergency communication devices such as Personal Locator Beacons or Mountain Locator Units.

The MRA acknowledges that Personal Locator Beacons (PLBs) and Mountain Locator Units (MLUs) are important rescue devices that can aid in the search for lost climbers, hikers, hunters or other outdoor users. The MRA strongly advises all outdoor users to consider carrying such a locating device with them.

However, a locator should never be taken in lieu of basic survival gear, nor should trip planning be undertaken in the belief that a locating device provides a 'safety net'.

Locating devices can be of great aid when the victim's location is unknown, but this situation is infrequent; 'search' makes up a very small component of mountain search and rescue. Typical of almost every search and rescue (mountain or otherwise) is the need for basic survival gear to sustain life while awaiting rescuers' arrival. In the mountains, above treeline, the minimal survival gear any climber should carry is a shovel, pad and stove. This gear, along with the properly-applied skills, would provide far greater benefit to both victims and rescuers. Once you have these, then please do carry a locator, too! The likely impact of carrying a locator without the survival gear is the ease with which searchers can locate the body.

Based on our collective experience in mountain rescue, we believe mandating emergency communication equipment will have the following consequences

1. Uninformed climbers will prioritize a mandatory but non-critical beacon over optional life-saving survival gear.
2. Mandating a piece of emergency gear creates trust in its effectiveness. In the cases of safety belts and helmets, this effect is well understood. But locating beacons do nothing to save lives until rescuers arrive – the lost or injured victim must be self-sufficient until then. Neither will a beacon significantly hasten most rescues. But if a climber makes plans based on misplaced reliance on the beacon's life-saving ability - above their own survival skills and gear - unfortunate results may occur. We are concerned that mandating a piece of emergency gear might encourage the recreationalist to push the envelope beyond his/her skill set. For example, a climber with limited navigation experience, might still climb into a whiteout believing s/he is safe with the locator
3. Climbers who have not brought a locator are more likely to delay calling 911 for fear of being fined. We are concerned that delays will cause increased risk to both the victim as well as searchers.

Based on our extensive organizational experience with mountain rescue and the strengths & weaknesses of the MLU, it is the position of the MRA that mandating the use of locating beacons will negatively impact behavior in such a way that will result in greater risk, not less.

There is a large public outcry in favor of mandating locating beacons for mountain climbers, based upon the desire to reduce the public cost of searches as well as save lives. In considering a mandate, two important factors must be taken into consideration:

1. Only 3% of all search and rescue is climbing-related. When considering the impact on public resources, far greater impact can be gained by requiring all outdoor users carry locating beacons.
2. A beacon can not save your life – only survival gear and skills can do that. When considering a mandate, critical survival gear must be included and placed as a higher priority than a locating beacon.

The Mountain Rescue Association strongly urges both lawmakers and the public to consider the full impact of well-meaning legislation. A mandate for climbing beacons will have a trivial effect upon safety and resources, and amounts to little more than window dressing on a difficult problem.

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