

Proposed Position Opposing the Requirement that Climbers Carry Mountain Locator Units on Mt. Hood

The Mountain Rescue Association recognizes that locating devices such as 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 carry such a locating device with them.

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 rare; '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, 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.

Mandating that climbers carry locator beacons will have three well-known, but unquantifiable effects upon climber safety:

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.
3. Climbers who have not brought a locator are more likely to delay calling 911 for fear of being fined. Delays will cause increased risk to both the victim as well as searchers.

The above behavioral changes caused by mandating safety equipment are well understood, but extremely difficult to quantify. Based on a thorough understanding of mountain search and rescue, coupled with great familiarity with the limitations of locator beacons, 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. The impact of a climber-only mandate would be trivial.
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. But if legislation is deemed the most effective solution, then we urge that a mandate be enacted that will actually have the greatest impact for both lost victims and rescuers.