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Federal Land Management Agencies: Search and Rescue (SAR) Operations

Each year, thousands of visitors to federal lands require the assistance of search and rescue (SAR) services. SAR operations take place in a wide range of environments and conditions and can include brief searches of buildings, medical assistance on trails, or more significant multiday aviation and maritime rescue efforts. This CRS product provides an overview of SAR operations and policies across the four federal land management agencies: the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), National Park Service (NPS), and Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS), all within the Department of the Interior (DOI), and the Forest Service (FS), within the Department of Agriculture (USDA).

What Is Search and Rescue?

According to the National Search and Rescue Plan of the United States (NSARP), SAR consists of operations “provided to assist persons and property in potential or actual distress in a non-hostile environment.” The NSARP is a voluntary agreement among several federal agencies, including DOI (although not USDA) that provides a uniform policy and guidelines for SAR services. The NSARP specifies that SAR services include “distress monitoring, communication, coordination and SAR functions, including provision of medical advice, initial medical assistance, or medical evacuation, through the use of public and private resources including cooperating aircraft, vessels and other craft and installations.”

SAR Activities by Agency

SAR operations vary across agencies, regions, and individual federal land units. Each federal land management agency has general authority to conduct SAR activities on federal lands under a variety of statutes; however, the authority is discretionary. For example, FS has authority to incur necessary expenses in SAR operations, but this authority does not require FS to provide such services (16 U.S.C. §575). Similar authorities apply to DOI agencies (43 U.S.C. §1742). Due to a number of factors, the degree to which agencies conduct SAR activities varies. Some federal lands may not see enough visitation or demand for SAR services to require a fully staffed and trained SAR team. In other instances, agencies view SAR operations as the responsibility of local authorities or entities. As a result, depending on where an incident takes place, SAR responses by federal land management agencies range from support of local law enforcement authorities and volunteer groups to primary SAR coordination and operations.

SAR Response on FS, BLM, and FWS Lands

On FS, BLM, and FWS lands, the responsibility for SAR response efforts generally lies with the local law enforcement authority in the county where such lands are located. (For agency lands in Alaska, which has no

counties, Alaska State Police is the authority responsible for SAR activities.) According to these agencies, SAR responses on their lands are typically led by the applicable nonfederal authority that has adequate SAR resources and with whom the agency has a standing agreement or relationship. Agencies may occasionally take a lead role in SAR emergencies if an immediate and quick response will reduce suffering or save lives; however, once designated local authorities are available, the agency assumes a supportive role to provide assistance where requested.

BLM, FS, and FWS also may serve as the primary SAR responder in certain scenarios. Typically, these are small-scale or minor SAR incidents where agency personnel can respond without outside assistance or incidents that do not require substantial resources to conduct.

SAR Response on NPS Lands

NPS is the lone DOI agency that generally serves as the primary responder to SAR incidents on its lands. NPS management policies direct the agency to “make reasonable efforts to search for lost persons and rescue sick, injured, or stranded persons” (NPS, *Management Policies 2006*, §8.2.5.3). Agency policy also allows for qualified SAR organizations or authorized local authorities to conduct or assist with SAR efforts pursuant to a formal agreement; however, local authorities are typically not the lead entity in such scenarios.

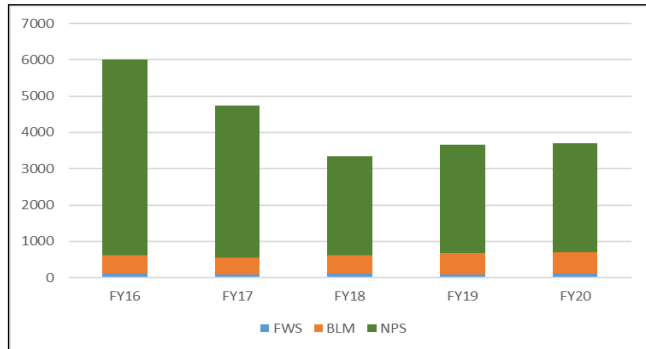
SAR Data Tracking

There is no comprehensive source of SAR data across federal land management agencies. Some agencies track SAR data on an annual basis, whereas others do not. For example, since FS is not the entity primarily responsible for SAR operations on National Forest System lands, the agency does not track annual SAR data.

For DOI agencies, data are more readily available. DOI’s Office of Law Enforcement and Security oversees implementation of the Incident Management Analysis and Reporting System (IMARS), which tracks law enforcement incidents across DOI agencies, including those requiring SAR services. However, use of the IMARS system is not mandatory and agencies have not used the system consistently since its introduction. For example, FWS uses its own Law Enforcement Management Information System (LEMIS) to track SAR incidents. As a result, data on SAR incidents across DOI agencies are not contained in a single system. In addition, in 2018, NPS established a new system of record for reporting SAR incidents. According to the agency, that system has not reached 100% reporting compliance, which may account for the apparent decrease

in SAR incidents for NPS beginning in that year (see **Figure 1**).

Figure 1. SAR Incidents on NPS, FWS, and BLM Lands: FY2016-FY2020



Source: Data provided to CRS by NPS, FWS, and BLM Offices of Legislative and Congressional Affairs.

Notes: Totals do not reflect SAR incidents on FS lands. In addition, due to changes in reporting, NPS figures for FY2018-FY2020 do not reflect all SAR incidents on NPS lands for those years, resulting in the apparent decrease in incidents. BLM data include all calls for service to which BLM Law Enforcement responded between FY2016 and FY2020. This includes SAR operations as well as other calls for assistance.

For agencies that have available data, NPS reported the vast majority (85%) of SAR incidents on federal lands from FY2016 to FY2020 (as mentioned, FS data are not available). The NPS units reporting the highest number of SAR incidents over this period were Lake Mead National Recreation Area, Grand Canyon National Park, and Yosemite National Park, in that order.

Cost Considerations

The funding for SAR programs and operations is largely borne by the entity responsible for providing such services in a given region. Program costs can include training, supplies and equipment, vehicles, personnel costs, and registration fees for obtaining and maintaining SAR certifications. The cost of individual SAR operations varies widely depending on the type of incident and the complexity of the rescue needs.

Generally, agencies do not have statutory or appropriations authority to reimburse outside entities for SAR activities, even when incidents occur on federal lands and waters. However, units of local government—typically counties—that contain certain tax-exempt federal lands may receive annual payments for SAR services through various federal programs. For example, the Payments in Lieu of Taxes program (PILT; 31 U.S.C. §§6901-6907) provides annual formula-based payments to local governments that contain certain federal lands to carry out public services, such as firefighting and police protection, construction of public schools and roads, and SAR operations. See CRS Report R46260, *The Payments in Lieu of Taxes (PILT) Program: An Overview*, by R. Eliot Crafton.

There are no nationwide figures for SAR costs across federal lands. Not all federal agencies track cost data, nor are there nationwide figures for the costs borne by local

authorities. As the lone agency that generally serves as the primary responder to SAR incidents, NPS tracks annual SAR cost estimates; only those incidents classified by the agency as *major* are tracked annually. *Major* SAR incidents are those that incur unprogrammed costs in excess of \$500 and are paid for through a national NPS account. By contrast, costs of *minor* SAR incidents are borne by the local park unit and are not tracked annually. **Table 1** shows cost figures for major SAR incidents.

Table 1. NPS Total Cost of Major SAR Incidents: FY2016-FY2020

(total cost figures in thousands of dollars)

	FY16	FY17	FY18	FY19	FY20
# Incidents	805	760	750	833	671
Total Cost	\$3,600	\$2,989	\$3,173	\$3,522	\$3,035

Source: CRS correspondence with National Park Service, Office of Legislative Affairs, December 2021.

Notes: Total Cost figures are in real dollars. Major SAR incidents are those that incur unprogrammed costs in excess of \$500. Table does not include incidents classified by NPS as minor.

At the federal level, agency-led SAR operations are provided at no cost to the individual. In contrast, a minority of states have implemented laws that allow the state to recoup costs directly from the person in need of rescue. The provisions of these laws vary, but they can take into account negligence on the part of the individual or the violation of applicable laws resulting in SAR incidents.

Issues for Congress

Congressional and stakeholder interest in SAR operations on federal lands has focused on a variety of issues. For one, the degree to which the federal government is responsible for providing and funding SAR services on land under its jurisdiction has been of interest. Because state and local jurisdictions are responsible for most SAR operations on federal lands outside of the National Park System, concerns have been raised regarding the financial burden placed on local government in providing such services. Since federal funding for local SAR services is often tied to broader federal payment programs (e.g., PILT), issues related to reauthorization, formula calculations, and other issues regularly arise.

In addition, issues have been raised regarding restrictions on the use of third-party SAR groups to aid in rescue or recovery efforts. In 2019, following alleged delays in NPS permitting of volunteer SAR groups to assist with the search for individuals missing in Lake Mead National Recreation Area, Congress enacted the Good Samaritan Search and Recovery Act (43 U.S.C. §1742a). Among other provisions, the statute directed the Secretary of the Interior and the Secretary of Agriculture to expedite access to federal lands for search and recovery missions conducted by certain individuals or organizations.

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