

December 2016

## Policy for the use of WTMC Personal Locator Beacons on club trips

### 1. Summary

- It is compulsory to carry a personal locator beacon (PLB) on all club trips unless the trip leader has determined that mobile phone coverage is available during the time of the trip—and that a party member is carrying a working mobile phone.
- PLBs should only be activated in situations of grave and imminent danger (but refer to 3 below).
- The decision to activate a PLB will be made by the trip leader, unless he/ she is incapacitated, in which case the person who has assumed the leader's role will make the decision.
- If a PLB is activated outside the criteria in 3 below then, at the discretion of the committee, the person responsible for the activation may be held liable for any costs associated with the callout of rescue personnel.

### 2. Personal Locator Beacons

- WTMC owns a number of PLBs. These are kept in the club gear lockers and are available for use on club trips along with other club gear.
- It is compulsory to carry a personal locator beacon (PLB) on all club trips, unless the trip leader has determined that mobile phone coverage is available during the time of the trip and that a party member is carrying a working mobile.
- We expect all club gear to be treated with care. PLBs may not function as intended if mistreated, and additionally they are a particularly expensive piece of equipment.
- A PLB is not a substitute for thorough trip planning and execution. The club expects all trip leaders and club trip participants to abide by the club's policies and procedures relating to club trips (these are available on the WTMC website [www.wtmc.org.nz](http://www.wtmc.org.nz)). Our policies and procedures are designed to keep trip participants safe and are consistent with the principles set out in the NZ Mountain Safety Council Outdoor Safety Code:
  - Plan your trip
  - Seek local knowledge. Plan the route you will take and the amount of time you can reasonably expect it to take
  - Tell someone your plans and leave a date for when to raise the alarm if you haven't returned (see club procedures for club contact people)
  - Be aware of the weather. NZ weather can be highly unpredictable. Check the forecast and expect sudden weather changes
  - Know your limits
  - Challenge yourself within your physical limits and experience (WTMC grades its trips to help you decide which trip is suitable for you)
  - Take sufficient supplies

- Make sure you have enough food, equipment and emergency rations for the worst case scenario. Take an appropriate means of communication. In some circumstances mobile phone coverage is available, for longer trips to remote areas hiring a mountain radio is an option  
<http://www.mountainradio.co.nz/bookings.html> (South Island)  
<http://www.wmrs.org.nz/wmrsfaq.htm> (Wellington).

### **3. When to activate a PLB**

- PLBs should generally be activated only in situations of grave and imminent danger. Examples would be a major injury to a party member, or a party that has become dangerously trapped by rising floodwaters.
- Before activating a PLB consider whether a mobile phone call to 111 is a practical option. If you are able to talk to the Police you will be able to provide context and receive advice.
- Notwithstanding the above it would be acceptable to activate the PLB when a person in the party has suffered a lesser injury or an illness that immobilises them to a degree that a rescue by Search and Rescue (SAR) personnel would almost certainly be required anyway. Note that this would not include a simple ‘sprain’ that may be relieved over time by rest.
- It would also be acceptable to activate the PLB if your party is overdue to the extent that a search will be certainly launched for you (usually at least more than one day overdue). Note that being late out does not, in most circumstances, constitute a life-threatening situation. We have a club contact system in place to deal with instances when a trip is overdue.

### **4. What to do once a PLB is activated**

- While waiting for rescue you should look after injured person(s) and attempt to make the party as safe and comfortable as possible. Give consideration to clearing a helicopter landing site if possible.
- If a PLB is inadvertently activated, or it is activated and then decided it was not necessary to do so, **do not** deactivate it. If the signal from a PLB disappears a search will still be launched and it is preferable for SAR personnel to be able to track an actively transmitting beacon than have to search a wider general area.
- If a PLB is activated the trip leader (or leader’s delegate) must inform the club contact person when the group is safe, as soon as is realistically possible, and then provide a full written account of the incident to the Chief Guide.

### **5. Care of PLB on Club trips**

- Generally the trip leader is responsible for looking after the PLB during the trip.
- The trip leader must agree to abide by this PLB policy.
- If the PLB is activated, damaged, destroyed, lost or stolen the trip leader is responsible for notifying the Gear Custodian and the Chief Guide or Assistant Chief

Guide as soon as possible. If the trip leader is unable to do so another member of the party should do so.

- If the PLB is activated in a manner consistent with this policy, the club will meet the cost of getting the PLB checked and any battery replacement.
- If the PLB is damaged, destroyed, lost or stolen, the committee has the discretion to determine whether the trip leader or other accountable person shall be responsible for paying for the PLB to be replaced by an equivalent make/model.
- If the PLB is activated or damaged, destroyed, lost or stolen and the trip leader believes there are extenuating circumstances the trip leader may ask the Committee to use its discretion to waive the trip leader's obligations, or impose them on another trip member.
- The trip leader must return the PLB on the date indicated to the Gear Custodian or their delegate. This will usually be the Wednesday evening following receipt of the PLB.
- If the PLB is not returned on the date specified the Committee reserves the right to charge the trip leader a late fee. This fee is to cover the cost of the Club having to hire a replacement PLB to cover trips until the PLB is returned.

## **6. When a personal PLB is substituted for a Club PLB**

- A personal PLB can only be taken instead of a Club PLB if the trip leader agrees and the PLB owner:
  - agrees to abide by the WTMC PLB policy; and
  - advises the club contact person that the PLB is theirs and that it has been registered with RCCNZ; and
  - advises the club contact person of the contact person's name and contact details (you will have nominated someone when you filled out your ownership paperwork); and
  - ensures that the contact person for the personal PLB and the club contact person each have a copy of the trip plan and are advised when the trip is completed; and
  - the contact person for the personal PLB is instructed to advise the club contact person asap if they are made aware that the PLB has been activated.
- If the conditions above are satisfied and a personal PLB is activated in accordance with the WTMC PLB policy or damaged, destroyed, lost or stolen, the PLB owner may request that the Committee, at its discretion, approve the cost of having the personal PLB checked and its battery replaced or replacement cost as appropriate.

## **7. When a personal PLB is additional to a Club PLB**

- If you are taking a personal PLB in addition to a Club PLB on a Club trip you must:
  - Ensure it is registered with RCCNZ; and
  - advise the trip leader so they can include this fact in the trip plan; and
  - advise the club contact person of your contact person's name and contact details; and

- ensure that the contact person for the personal PLB has a copy of the trip plan and are advised when the trip is completed; and
  - ensure that your contact person is instructed to advise the club contact person asap if they are made aware that your PLB has been activated.
- If your PLB is activated in accordance with the WTMC PLB policy you may request that the Committee, at its discretion, approve the cost of having your personal PLB checked and its battery replaced
- The club will not meet the cost of replacing an additional PLB on club trips in circumstances where it is damaged, destroyed, lost or stolen.

## **8. Use of WTMC Personal Locator Beacons on Private Trips**

- Club PLBs are not to be taken on private trips. This is essentially due to the additional workload that is imposed on volunteers if a club PLB is used for private trips. PLBs are available for hire from various sources including many local outdoor shops (Bivouac, or Department of Conservation regional offices).

## **9. Review of PLB policy**

- This policy for use of WTMC Personal Locator Beacons on WTMC trips will be reviewed by the committee after any PLB activation.

## **For information only—how search and rescue is co-ordinated in NZ**

New Zealand has two agencies mandated to co-ordinate Search and Rescue. Maritime NZ via the Rescue Co-ordination Centre (RCCNZ) and the NZ Police. Both agencies are empowered to take a decision on whether to rescue the person or group (or not) once they've assessed if the situation warrants it.

The NZ Police coordinate *Class I* operations, which are generally land-based operations where a personal locator beacon (PLB) is not involved. Back-country operations of this class are typically invoked by reports of overdue people, emergency calls to 111, requests for help via the various mountain radio services, and so on. These operations often don't start with an exact position, so can involve large search components. This may mean first learning about a person's plans, abilities and preparations. Search staff can spend much of their time attempting to predict the most likely places for a person or group to be found, and how urgently they may require assistance. *Class I* operations are also likely to include coordination of wider resources and volunteers such as the trained search specialists of LandSAR. A search and rescue operation of this type could be over quickly, or could last for days or weeks.

WTMC trip planning systems are primarily designed to fit with *Class I* operations as you would expect for an organisation that specialises in running trips into the NZ backcountry. Trips are carefully organised so that if one is overdue we are positioned to efficiently communicate good information to the NZ Police and therefore expedite any search and rescue. Those of you familiar with our contact person system will know that if one of our trips is overdue the club contact person for that trip will contact the NZ Police and supply them with the trip plan (this generally includes information about where the group planned to go, any alternative plans, equipment, who is in the party and party contact people) and any other information they have. You will also be aware that WTMC is a strong supporter of the work of LandSAR and some WTMC members are LandSAR volunteers.

The RCCNZ coordinates *Class II* operations. These equate to any operation triggered by the activation of a PLB. Even PLB's owned by the Club which are clearly designed for land use, are technically marine devices, and so the RCCNZ's monitoring of PLBs is a sub-set of a greater responsibility to coordinate major maritime and aviation searches. For back-country search and rescue where a PLB is activated an exact position will usually be known. The RCCNZ's typical response, after calling the registered contact numbers for that PLB, is to send a response crew straight to the location where the beacon signal is coming from (usually by helicopter), assess the situation, and deal with it.

WTMC PLBs are registered with the RCCNZ using the Club's cell phone number. This number is diverted every week to whoever is the duty club contact person. If a Club PLB is activated the RCCNZ contacts the registered number and if they do not get hold of someone they ring the next number on the registration list, then the next.

For more information on locator beacons and the RCCNZ check the link below.

<http://beacons.org.nz>