

Search and Rescue – A 2013 Week of the Arctic Summary

The Arctic Search and Rescue Agreement, an international treaty concluded among the Arctic Council member states was established in 2011 to recognize the need to coordinate international search and rescue (SAR) coverage and response in the Arctic. Such an agreement recognizes and reflects the Arctic region's growing economic importance and significance due to improved accessibility. In response to the agreement and in response to the need for further capabilities for the whole of Alaska, current, new and future capabilities were discussed among experts at this Week of the Arctic event on Search and Rescue in the Arctic.

Search and rescue (SAR) in Alaska consists of over 20 sectors and organizations and local, state and federal partners with the United States Coast Guard playing the largest role. Department of Defense (DOD) capabilities in Alaska are immense with the majority of their assets in Anchorage and the ability to call on an active duty army at Fort Wainwright and the Army National Guard that has the capabilities to move assets around for easier access.

Civil air control assets are also high but are limited to the southern half of the state due to the far distances and regions of the North, fuel prices and harsh weather conditions. DOD, however, maintains two super huey helicopters in the North Slope Borough. These capabilities give Alaskans an idea of the type of SAR efforts that can be currently carried out throughout Alaska. From real world responses corresponding to, but not limited to, traditional human activities in the Arctic, an increase in maritime transportation, adventure tourism and extreme adventure expeditions to scenario planning with Canada, Alaska is at the forefront of diversified approach to SAR efforts.

Despite the immense DOD and USCG capabilities in Anchorage and throughout Alaska, the inland regions of the state continue to lack some or any SAR capabilities. And at the end of the day, the greatest problem for SAR response is the geographic size of Alaska and the Arctic. We know in the short term we are not going to have great infrastructure in the North. The coast guard will go up to places like Barrow on occasion but there are no current plans to build a base there. Owing to this recognition are efforts from experts to develop new capabilities to deal with Alaska's geographic size and improve SAR efforts in ways unique to the Arctic.

Forward operating locations (FOL) are consistently used to increase a presence in various regions to build interagency partnerships and increase Arctic maritime domain awareness. July 2013 saw the opening of FOL Kotzebue as part of Coast Guard Arctic Shield 2013 to prepare for the increase of maritime activities in Western Alaska and the Bering Strait. Efforts to leverage existing partnerships with the Army National Guard to use their hangar in Kotzebue are evidence of remarkable synergy that exists throughout Alaska. Such synergy is also evident in joint and international SAR response exercises such as SAREX which is a maritime mass rescue scenario to demonstrate the interoperability of SAR responders along the US-Canada international border.

Past efforts in joint exercises are pushing for future efforts at the end of October this year in which Alaska and Canada will host an event in Alaska's interior. This exercise will be the second test for Alaska and will determine the usability and effectiveness of the "proof concept kit" as part of the Arctic Sustainment Package (ASP). The ASP is an airdrop capable kit of personnel and material designed to support increments of 25 people in extreme Arctic conditions in two increments. The kit is meant to function for up to 72 hours and comes with all equipment, survival gear, medical capability and personnel that are transported to any site inland through a C130 or similar aircraft.

The role of the coast guard in Alaska is unique and flourishing in light of Alaska's unique geographic location in the Arctic. With major challenges come innovative ways of thinking and carrying out operations as well as increased resources and funding. USCG Sector Anchorage (the largest USCG base in the country), for example, continues to be a robust one stop shopping center for all partners in the state that play a role in SAR and continues to receive additional coverage in communications infrastructure as well as other resources as a result.

This is testament to the major challenges we face in Alaska and the Arctic and proof that doing operations in Alaska is unlike anywhere else. Despite improved efforts, Anchorage and other sectors are still struggling with communications infrastructure, geographic distance and SAR response capabilities that are required if the USCG is to continue to live up to its motto, "all threats, all hazards, always ready."