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EMERGENCY COMMUNICATION DEVICES SAVE LIVES: UPGRADE TO A 406 MHZ DISTRESS BEACON BY 1 FEBRUARY

Mountain Safety Council is urging those venturing into the outdoors to ensure they upgrade to a 406 MHz distress beacon immediately to ensure they can be helped out in an emergency.

Mountain Safety Council Outdoor Leader/Bush Programme Manager Chris Tews says that from February, the old 121.5 MHz and 243 MHz distress beacons become obsolete as the satellite system that supports them will cease to operate. Globally, all distress beacon signals will be transmitted and monitored on the 406 MHz frequency.

“The Mountain Safety Council strongly recommends all those venturing into the outdoors, including trampers, mountaineers and other adventurers on land, carry a 406 MHz Personal Locator Beacon to alert rescue services in case of emergency,” says Mr Tews.

Mr Tews says that recent examples over the last year demonstrate the importance of always carrying a personal locator beacon when venturing into the outdoors.

- A Palmerston North couple got into trouble tramping in the Taraua Ranges when the woman fell and was injured. The man had to walk out of the bush the next day and drive an hour to get cellphone reception before he was able to alert police.
- A woman who fractured her ankle on the third day of a five-day tramp used her emergency mountain radio to alert police and was rescued within two hours. To get cellphone coverage would have involved hours of walking.
- A party of six climbers were rescued after being stranded on the side of Aoraki Mt Cook in chest-deep snow and blizzard conditions. The climbers used their emergency locator beacons to alert rescue services and were found safe and well after being snowed in for 36 hours.

Mr Tews advises people to choose their 406 MHz Personal Locator Beacon wisely, bearing in mind the following guidelines.

1. Upgrade to a 406 MHz distress beacon before 1 February 2009

Distress beacons operating on the 406 MHz frequency are the new standard for Personal Locator Beacons. From 1 February 2009, the signal from the old 121.5MHz and 243MHz beacons will no longer be monitored by satellite. This means if you need help in an emergency and try to use an old beacon to alert rescuers, the satellites will have no way of hearing you. The signal is already unreliable as there are fewer satellites monitoring the old frequencies.

Mountain Safety Council strongly cautions against using other commercial satellite tracking and messenger products available on the market as distress beacons. Such products are not part of the international Search and Rescue emergency response system, which means there could be a delay or even no response to your alert. Choose a 406 MHz distress beacon instead.

2. Only use New Zealand-coded 406M Hz distress beacons

Each country has an individual code to ensure the correct national rescue coordination centre is notified. New Zealand's country code is 512. When you purchase a 406M Hz distress beacon, make sure it is coded for New Zealand. If you buy one from overseas or over the Internet, it could be an expensive mistake. When it is activated the satellite may notify the wrong rescue centre which could mean a long, potentially life-threatening delay in your rescue.

3. Opt for distress beacons with built-in GPS

Mountain Safety Council strongly recommends you use a Personal Locator Beacon with in-built GPS (global positioning system) as this dramatically improves its accuracy. With in-built GPS, your location can be identified by Rescue Coordination Centre New Zealand on the first contact with a satellite. Without GPS it would require two satellites to pick up your beacon signal, to resolve the ambiguity of the satellite positions. The time between satellite passes varies greatly, ranging between 20 minutes and 4.5 hours.

4. Register your 406 MHz distress beacon before 1 February 2009

406 MHz beacons are free to register and operate. Registered 406 MHz distress beacons are fully integrated into New Zealand's search and rescue response system. The signal is picked up by satellites and provides an accurate location. You can find out how to register at your 406 MHz beacon www.beacons.org.nz.

5. Dispose of your old beacon properly

It is important to dispose of your old 121.5 or 243 MHz beacon properly. If you do not, it could still be accidentally activated, triggering a false alarm. There is also the risk that someone may assume one of the old beacons is a useful safety device. There are suppliers throughout New Zealand who can help you dispose of your old beacon safely. See www.beacons.org.nz for contact details.

For more detailed information about 406 MHz beacons visit www.beacons.org.nz or www.mountainsafety.org.nz.

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