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## Search and Rescue (SAR) Operations on Federal Lands

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 air-, water-, and land-based rescue efforts. This CRS product provides an overview of how SAR operations take place on federal lands—including agency responsibilities, common types of SAR activities, and the prevalence of SAR incidents in these areas. Specifically, this product addresses SAR incidents located on lands administered by four agencies that, together, administer more than 95% of land owned by the federal government: 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).

### National SAR Policies and Guidance

Various federal entities set broad—generally voluntary—standards for SAR activities that take place both on and off federal lands. The National Search and Rescue Committee (the Committee) is the primary entity responsible for providing guidance and setting standards for federal agencies to meet national and international SAR obligations. The Committee is an interagency body comprising representatives from several federal agencies—including DOI (though not USDA)—and oversees the creation and implementation of *the National Search and Rescue Plan* (NSP). The NSP is a voluntary agreement that provides for the coordination of SAR operations, describes federal agencies' responsibilities in responding to SAR needs, and establishes national guidance for the development of SAR-related systems. Implementation of the NSP is the responsibility of the Committee and typically entails the adoption or issuance of supplemental national-level or agency-specific SAR guidance.

For multi-agency, emergency, or disaster-related SAR responses, agencies also may follow certain standards or directives developed or administered by the Federal Emergency Management Agency within the Department of Homeland Security. This includes the Incident Command System of the National Incident Management System (NIMS), which is a preparedness and response management model that establishes a scalable response structure and can be used by all jurisdictions, agencies, and organizations to ensure a unified response to complex events. For more information on SAR efforts undertaken in the context of major disasters or emergencies, see CRS Report R46696, *National Preparedness: A Summary and Select Issues*, by Shawn Reese and Lauren R. Stienstra.

Federal land management agencies have, to varying degrees, adopted NSP and NIMS standards and procedures in their respective policies (see “SAR Operations on Federal Lands”).

### SAR Operations on Federal Lands

Each of the four federal land management agencies (BLM, NPS, FWS, and FS) has authority to conduct SAR activities on lands under its jurisdiction pursuant to a variety of statutes; however, doing so is typically discretionary (e.g., 16 U.S.C. §575 and 43 U.S.C. §1742 for FS and BLM-specific SAR authorities). SAR operations on federal lands may take different forms depending on the agency responsible for administering the land in question, location of the incident, type of SAR response required, and other contributing factors. For example, 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, SAR responses by federal land management agencies range from support of local law enforcement authorities and volunteer groups to primary SAR coordination and operations.

On FS and BLM lands, the responsibility for SAR response efforts generally lies with the local law enforcement authority in the county where such lands are located and with whom the agency has a standing agreement or relationship (see FS Manual §1596.03 and BLM Manual Series 1703). According to these agencies, FS and BLM occasionally may take a lead or first responder role in SAR emergencies if an immediate and quick response will reduce suffering or save lives, or due to their presence in remote and rural areas. However, once designated local authorities are available, the agency assumes a supportive role to provide assistance where requested. Agency officials also may serve as primary responders in small-scale or minor SAR incidents where agency personnel can respond without outside assistance or incidents that do not require substantial resources.

For SAR incidents occurring within the National Wildlife Refuge System, FWS federal wildlife officers (FWOs) typically are the primary responders until such time that the incident grows or exceeds the technical complexity of the capacity or level of training of FWOs. Examples where the FWOs typically serve as the primary responder for SAR incidents include lost or missing persons, injured persons, water rescues, emergencies involving weather or wildfire, and vehicle accidents.

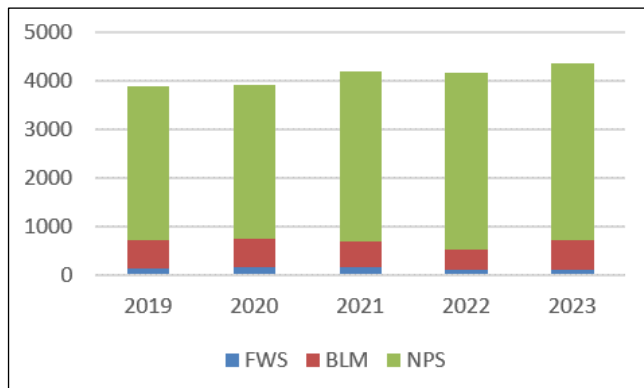
NPS generally serves as the primary responder to SAR incidents on lands in which the agency has exclusive

jurisdiction. 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). On lands or property in which the agency has concurrent, partial, or proprietary jurisdiction (i.e., federal lands on which a state may be able to enforce its laws to varying degrees), NPS efforts typically are in support of the local sheriff’s office. Agency policy allows for qualified SAR organizations or authorized local authorities to conduct or assist with SAR efforts pursuant to a formal agreement.

## 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 maintain a centralized system for tracking 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, which tracks law enforcement incidents across certain DOI agencies, including those requiring SAR services. For recent SAR incidents occurring on BLM, FWS, and NPS lands see **Figure 1**.

**Figure 1. SAR Incidents on NPS, FWS, and BLM Lands: 2019-2023**



**Source:** Data provided to CRS by NPS, FWS, and BLM Offices of Legislative and Congressional Affairs, April 2024.

**Notes:** Figures are for calendar year totals. Totals do not reflect SAR incidents on FS lands. BLM data include all calls for service to which BLM Law Enforcement responded between 2019 and 2023.

For agencies that have available data, NPS reported the majority (84%) of SAR incidents on federal lands from 2019 to 2023 (as mentioned, FS data are not available). The NPS units reporting the highest number of SAR incidents over this period were Grand Canyon National Park, Lake Mead National Recreation Area, and Yosemite National Park, in that order.

## Cost Considerations

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. For the five-year period from 2019 to 2023, NPS reported \$21.6 million in total SAR costs; only those incidents classified by the agency as *major* (in excess of \$500) are tracked. BLM, FS, and FWS do not track SAR costs.

Generally, agencies do not have statutory or appropriations authority to reimburse outside entities for SAR activities, even when incidents occur on federal lands. 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 (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 Carol Hardy Vincent.

At the federal level, agency-led SAR operations are provided at no cost to the individual. Agencies are not to delay SAR due to cost considerations. There have been rare cases where individuals requiring rescue have been cited and convicted for high-risk or particularly egregious behavior and required to pay restitution for costs incurred in SAR operations (e.g., see *United States v. Lantis*, 17 F.4<sup>th</sup> 35, 37 [10<sup>th</sup> Cir. 2021] wherein an individual requiring helicopter rescue in Yellowstone National Park was convicted for “disorderly conduct” pursuant to 36 C.F.R. §2.34(a)(4) and required to pay NPS restitution).

## Issues for Congress

Congressional and stakeholder interest in SAR operations on federal lands has focused on various issues. One such issue is the degree to which the federal government is responsible for providing and funding SAR services on land under its jurisdiction. Because state and local jurisdictions are responsible for most SAR operations on federal lands outside of NPS and FWS lands, concerns have been raised regarding the financial burden placed on local government in providing such services. In the 118<sup>th</sup> Congress, H.R. 439, the Public Land Search and Rescue Act, would require the Secretary of the Interior to establish a grant program to assist or reimburse nonfederal entities that conduct remote SAR activities conducted on DOI and USDA lands.

In addition, issues have been raised regarding restrictions on the use of third-party, nongovernmental 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.

**Mark K. DeSantis**, Analyst in Natural Resources Policy

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