

Newsweek

PRINT THIS

A Mountain of Bills

Who should have to pay to rescue stranded climbers?

By David A. Graham | Newsweek Web Exclusive
Dec 17, 2009

What's the cost of a life—or really, what's the cost of saving one? When climbers, hikers, skiers, and rafters get caught in tight situations and need to be found and rescued, the answer can be a large number of taxpayer dollars. Recently suspended efforts to locate two climbers lost on Oregon's Mount Hood have re-raised questions about who should foot the bill for search-and-rescue operations, which can sometimes rack up large expenses for everything from helicopters to hours of overtime pay. "Depending on conditions, it can cost a lot," says Gerry Gaumer, a spokesman for the National Park Service, which spent nearly \$5 million on search and rescue in 2008. "A lot of it depends on things like how much equipment you use. You're endangering your own people too."

The Mount Hood search—which included recovery of a third climber who was found dead—has involved sheriff's deputies, a military helicopter, and staff from Portland Mountain Rescue, a local volunteer organization. Maureen McLaughlin, a public information officer at Alaska's Denali National Park, says a large search operation like the Mount Hood one could involve dozens of people, from rangers on the ground to pilots and spotters who scan high-resolution photographs pixel by pixel for clues. *(Article continues after video...)*

Rescue services have traditionally been provided free of charge, like police and firefighting, but public anger over costs has led several states to implement charges, often when officials determine that the rescues have acted negligently. In a notable case, New Hampshire fined a Boy Scout \$25,000 after he departed from marked trails, sprained an ankle, and required a rescue, using a 1999 law that allows for recovery of costs in cases in which the state department of fish and game determines negligence. Seven other states have similar laws, with a variety of limits and conditions, often passed in response to costly incidents.

But that move is controversial in the search-and-rescue community, says Howard Paul, a spokesman for the National Association for Search and Rescue. "There are documented cases where someone is afraid of the cost and they're put in this horrible position where they know they need help, but they'll delay calling for help," he says. "That should never figure into the equation."

SPECIAL ISSUES
T-SHIRTS
COFFEE MUGS
SUBSCRIPTIONS

Gifts for everyone.

available at:
Newsweek.com/store

There are several other factors that complicate charging rescues for their rescue. Negligence is also tough to measure—even experienced climbers and hikers can get ambushed by whiteouts, avalanches, and unexpected injuries, despite precautions and preparation. "What's an undue risk?" Paul asks. "I have a greater risk of being seriously injured or killed driving to the mountains on an interstate." Furthermore, "the public's perception [of risk] is different from [that of] search-and-rescue personnel."

In other cases, costly rescue efforts might be launched even when they're not necessary, says Phil Powers, executive director of the American Alpine Club. "Experienced climbers are very resourceful. The problem comes when rescuers who have nothing but the best intentions operate on standard timelines," he says. "Let's say I'm a climber and I go out and don't come [back] for the night. It might not be that big a deal, I might just be waiting for dawn, but my wife, or other people who don't climb, might think it's a big deal."

Even then, however, the cost to taxpayers may not be as large as people fear. Many rescuers are often volunteer groups like the one in Portland, and although military support may be needed, rescues provide practice for units that need to log a quota of flight hours anyway, Powers says.

One alternate method is charging climbers a fee for higher-risk activities. Visitors to Denali, which includes Mount McKinley, the nation's highest peak, pay a small entrance fee (\$10) but mountaineers have to pony up an additional \$200, which the park uses to cover expenses directly related to climbing, including stationing rangers at high altitudes and providing orientation, services that are intended to reduce the chance that climbers will need rescuing, McLaughlin says. "We've had it since 1995, because we had a few years in there—1992 was a particularly bad one—where we had big storms and many fatalities," she says.

Colorado uses a different approach. A state fund collects money through small levies on recreational fees, like hunting and fishing licenses, and puts the money into the State Search and Rescue Fund, says Steve Denney, who manages the program. The state, which also allows for cost recovery from those rescued in some cases, helps local governments defray the cost of major rescues.

Mount Hood is a popular climbing site, attracting thousands of climbers every year, but it's also a lethal one. Since 1896, more than 130 people have died on the mountain, including seven students and two teachers from a Portland school who froze to death in 1986. And ultimately, it makes sense that preventing those sorts of deaths would be state officials' highest priority, no matter the cost.

Find this article at

<http://www.newsweek.com/id/227009>

© 2009