Exercise Evaluation Report

Hawkes Bay SAREX 2025
Operation “Taniwha”

Location: Eastern Police District

Date: 7th -9th November 2025

Report version: Final

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Executive Summary

Hawkes Bay Police SAR carried out a full-scale back country exercise early November 2025. The aim of the exercise was to test the structure and resource management of the IMT as well as the field team response capability.

Two broad objectives were established prior to the SAREX. One concerning the IMT and the other field focussed. For the IMT applying the CIMS model and resource management when challenged was the SAREX design intent. For the field teams there was a concentration on field capability that included leadership and tracking skills.

The challenge within the SAREX design rested on the IMT managing an initial response for one SAR incident before being presented with another, that was more complex in responder and subject risk. Of interest, the evaluation was able to isolate out the effects that delays in restructuring the IMT had on field teams, and how fatigue compromises the effectiveness of in-field decision making and eventual search outcomes. More detail on this is contained in the ‘Findings’.

Operation ‘Taniwha’ was also used to trial and experiment new communication technology. The functionality of this technology proved to have distinct advantages in the range of frequencies it can transmit, the ability to record transmissions and capacity to remote monitor.

The evaluator found the SAREX tested to the point of failure some of the IMT and field teams systems and processes, and as such satisfied the aim. While the IMT used previous experience to adapt, there was a greater challenge for field teams in terms of managing the effects of fatigue. Six recommendations are made to help address these observations and context can be found in the wider report.

A total of twelve Police were involved. Those new to IMT roles and in particular the IC role were mentored. LandSAR provided administration support and fifteen field responders. AREC had responsibility for communications and logging transmissions.

1. Recommendations- more detail is given under findings

Consider for IMT functioning:

- Using the information collection plan as a basis for investigations and further developing the communications plan for operational use and the search file
- Better facilitation within the communication unit to maximise the skills and knowledge on offer
- When there are two concurrent or overlapping SAR incidents occurring, separate and fully populate an IMT and resources for each incident.

Consider for field team functioning:

- The role that fatigue and environmental conditions have on effectiveness, leadership and decision making. Develop strategies to support and strengthen these factors to enhance search outcomes.
- The team leader using more than verbal cues to monitor team welfare and effectiveness.

Consider for a SAREX:

- Brief subjects specifically to find locations or areas that fit with the SAREX intent.

2. Introduction

The Hawkes Bay Police Area held its 2025 land based SAREX in the Mohaka River catchment on the eastern side of the Kaweka ranges. This full-scale backcountry search was managed by an IMT located in Napier approximately 50 km from the search area.

Two scenarios were implemented semi simultaneously. The first scenario lent itself to a search resolution within 48 hours while the second within 12 hours. These scenarios and their sequencing were designed to apply decision making and resource allocation pressure on the IMT. This replicated recent experiences where multiple SAR operations have occurred at the same time. The scenarios were also designed to test the capability and skills of the field teams.

The SAREX plan was for a party of two to depart on the Thursday for an overnight trip along the Makino track, clearing a trap line. They expected to be back at their vehicle by midday Friday, however one of the party had a lower leg injury on the first day which was communicated via a text message to their contact person.

While planning and putting into action a response to this scenario another Police response was needed to a potential suicide situation that held some risk for field operatives. This required armed police working with a LandSAR tracking team.

D4H was used to call out teams and in field communications used VHF and In Reach. The SAREX took the opportunity to trial the Instant Connect Enterprise (ICE) Box that allows secure, interoperability across communication channels, devices and networks.

Subjects for both scenarios were found by using sound and tracking techniques under challenging weather and terrain conditions.

Responding agencies were the Police, LandSAR and AREC; with the IMT coordinating one Police and four LandSAR field teams. Mentoring ‘new to role’ personnel featured in the IMT, field teams and the communications unit.

The exercise culminated in hot debrief that was marked by frank and honest reflections by those involved.

3. Background

3.1 Background to the Exercise

There is a reasonable likelihood of a land-based search or rescue occurring in the Eastern Kaweka Range given its proximity to both Hastings and Napier cities, easy access and many formed tracks and huts. The area selected for the SAREX also contains hot pools that are popular with tourists and others. Activities in the area are fishing, hunting, rafting, tramping and day walking.

Topography is steep and very exposed to weather systems. The SAREX area ranged from 400m to 600m, however the highest point in these ranges is over 1700m. The vegetation is principally fire induced manuka and mature forest complexes which in places would be described as ‘tight’. Helicopter extractions may not always be possible.

Below are the bases that underpinned the aim - *to test and challenge systems and operating procedures*- for the Hawkes Bay 2025 SAREX.

- To test and experiment with communications equipment in this terrain and gain confidence when using a remote Incident Control Point.

- Recently there have been a number of SAR incidents occurring simultaneously and further IMT experience was seen as necessary. There was also a need to introduce risk management around an armed response within a search and to practice collaboration between LandSAR and Police field teams particularly around a last known point.

- Hawkes Bay LandSAR have a long term commitment to both tracking and administrative support training. Stretcher management has also been undertaken with a wheeled stretcher. This SAREX provided an opportunity to test these and other search skills.

- The police continue to focus on building their SAR capacity in the district, particularly in the IC role. Most of the police and LandSAR volunteers have SAR experience but may not have performed the specific roles allocated. This SAREX provided the space and opportunity for experiential learning.

3.2 Dates, location, organising agency(s), key people

The exercise was conducted from Friday 7th to Sunday 9th November, 2025. The field operation centred on the mid to upper reaches of the Mohaha river catchment of the Kaweka ranges. The IMT were located in the Coastguard Building, Napier.

A SAR response was initiated on early afternoon Friday, the 7th November.

The organising agency was the NZ Police.

Key people were-

Andy WALKER (Police)

Pat NOISEUX (Police)

Alex SIMISTER (Police)

Mike HAWTHORN (LandSAR)

Gerald BLACKBURN (LandSAR)

John NEWSON (AREC)

3.3 Participating organisations

NZ Police, LandSAR, AREC

3.4 Exercise aim

The exercise aim had 2 components:

To test the structure and resource management functionality of the IMT in the initial and subsequent operational periods; and field team response capability when challenged by the demands of the exercise.

3.5 Exercise objectives

Two broad objectives were established with seven contributing. These were:

Objective 1. That the IMT effectively manages the exercise

1.1 In accordance with the CIMS model and

1.2 The IMT activates and manages appropriate resources to meet the demands of the exercise.

Objective 2. To assess Field Team effectiveness in the following:

2.1 Capability

2.2 First response field teams deployment times

2.3 First Aid management

2.4 Team leadership

2.5 Field search skills.

3.6 Exercise Scenario

Two people entered the Makino/Te Puia track area with the intent to clear predator traps along these tracks. Their intent was to have lunch at Makino Hut then over night at Te Puia hut before returning to their car midday Friday. Their contact person in Hawkes Bay received a text message on Thursday afternoon reading “on Makino track, injured ankle, slow going, sticking together and heading to “the hut”. Phone on 5%, going flat, aiming to be out midday Friday”. A photograph was also received showing a trap number. The group had no other form of communication and did not make contact as expected by 1pm Friday. They were experienced and well equipped. This scenario was expected to receive a measured response from the IMT with field teams entering the area that Friday afternoon.

During this response but later in the afternoon, a second SAR call was received from a farmer who has seen person in distressed state crossing farmland, carrying alcohol and a knife. The initial vehicle check finds an empty gun case, suicide note and empty alcohol bottles.

This scenario was expected to create an urgent response where the IMT needed to reorientate, prioritise resources and manage the inherent risk, while still attempting to provide assistance for the less urgent case of those missing on the trapline.

Both scenarios occur in the same geographical area.

4. Evaluation Methodology

4.1 The agreed outcomes of the evaluation activity

A report with recommendations based on the objectives and their KPIs. See appendix.

4.2 Evaluation scope

To measure how well the exercise meets the stated aim through its supporting objectives and KPI's.

4.3 Aspects of the exercise observed, what was not observed

The planning and the initial execution of the field response for the first scenario was observed. Also, the action taken by the IMT when challenged by the need to prioritise resources and manage two concurrent searches.

The evaluator accompanied the field response for the despondent scenario that included observation of the Police armed response, its collaboration with the tracking team and the tracking systems applied.

With the successful resolution of the despondent search early Saturday morning, the remaining time was spent in the ICP observing the IMT manage to conclusion the first scenario. This included observing all functions and a management change.

During the demobilisation phase conversations were undertaken with team leaders, and the subjects, as to field conditions and search techniques.

Notes were also taken during the hot debrief.

4.4 The process followed in preparing and submitting the report

The planning documents, and a selected list of objectives and their KPI's, drawn from the NZSAR SAREX resources, were supplied prior to the exercise. The objectives and KPI's were further discussed with the scenario designer, modified and adapted to the groups focus.

These KPI's were agreed to as being appropriate measures against the objectives and the SAREX purpose.

Evidence was collected against these KPI's by interviews, observation, notes taken at the time, photographs, the radio, GPS track and fatigue logs.

A search for previous Hawkes Bay SAREX reports was also undertaken by accessing the NZSAR website. Three previous reports were found applicable to the groups involved and have been referenced where appropriate.

Where observed practice deviated from commonly accepted 'better practice', comparisons were made with the LandSAR competencies, Response Guidelines, Emergency Management and SAR course standards and material.

A draft report was submitted for comment to the Police SAR Coordinator and relevant personnel. The final version contains what the evaluator and the acting Police SAR Coordinator consider appropriate.

4.5 Other information: Nil

5. Findings: These will be discussed by scenario then their whole of operation impact.

Objective 1. The IMT effectively manages the exercise

1.1 Objective: IMT operates in accordance with the CIMS model

Trapper scenario: The IMT adopted the CIMS model with all functions identified. There appeared to be a minimum of mixed functions within a role, beyond what was necessary, particularly in the early phases of the search.

The action plan was initially discussed then displayed in the ICP. As the objectives changed during and over operational periods the action plan was updated.

The IC held regular meetings to update all of the IMT of search developments. Documentation existed both on paper and electronically. The written file contained the IAPs, missing person reports, search urgency form, initial team tasks, scenario weightings, message forms, debrief forms and the written logs, intel notes and changeover briefs by the IC. The electronic files contained the radio log, personnel fatigue status and team GPS tracks. On whiteboard displays were timelines, missing person profiles, IAPs, field teams and their composition, clue board and a demobilisation plan. The radio log, maps, team tracks could also be displayed electronically on a large screen. Paper maps and acetates were also utilised by planning and operations.

Displayed in the ICP were large formatted charts for the CIMS structure and Forms Flow.

At no point did the evaluator see a fully developed communication plan. A field to ICP plan did exist on the white board IAP ‘s as DOC 8 and ICE: number. For current and future reference, a communications plan should note key person contacts for the lead and support agencies for that operational period. For a multi period search this becomes increasingly important.

Within the communications unit (comms) there appeared to be two leads. One for the AREC component and one for the LandSAR component who were trialling ICE technology. There was potential for conflict that could impact operationally and a full briefing between the AREC and LandSAR lead people would help reduce any tension.

Within the Intelligence and Planning function information was on file and there was direction. A displayed Information Collection Plan could be considered to better inform the IC, IMT and for briefing purposes.

This search was resolved within 27 hours.

Despondent scenario: Apart for duration (resolved within eight hours) there was no significant difference between the CIMS structure and functionality for the IMT managing this scenario.

Whole of operation impact: There was a similar structure adopted for managing both scenarios. The impact of managing both responses under one IMT is discussed below.

Recommendation:

Have a written full communication plan on file relevant for the operational period. Using a written information collection plan would help inform and structure investigations.

Key people in the comms unit, need to be better briefed and informed particularly, where there is potential for conflict.

1.2 Objective: The IMT activates and manages appropriate resources to meet the demands of the exercise

Trapper's and Despondent scenario: Hawkes Bay SAR uses the D4H system for call outs. While use of the system is new there appeared to be no issues. It is common for a field brief and initial task to be emailed or transferred via another means to teams enroute.

As this was an exercise, resource availability was known and equipment readied prior to the callout. Radio channels and a communication network had been discussed for this exercise and some interagency training done on ICE prior. There is also a communications District wide preplan being developed. Considering the need for redundancy in the system (In Reach had some transmission problems) communication issues in between field teams and the ICP were be managed effectively.

However, in the communications log where two concurrent responses were being managed , there was a mix up as to what message belonged to which response. This was partly but not wholly due to a transcribing error in team numbers.

In writing the IAP's there were common misunderstandings by some IMT members on what is an objective, strategy and task. As this was a training exercise, novices to a role were given mentoring by a senior Police person. Resources were controlled in line with the IAP. The strategies employed for finding the missing people were tracking, sound search, and an armed police response. These strategies were appropriate for the task and resourced by trained personnel.

All verbal and written IMT briefings followed a GSMEAC format

Whole of operation impact: The exercise was designed to test management structure and its flexibility with an initial concentration on one search then 3-4 hours later a refocus on another that required a more urgent response. Some teams had already been deployed or tasks written for them on the first scenario so the ability to resource the more urgent case required reorientation. In the first instance reorientation had mixed results. Combining the two responses with the same IMT lead to confusion on intelligence, communications, resource allocation and briefings. Examples of confusion transmitted to the field teams were:

a) briefed for the operation to which they were not allocated,

b) some information such as sked times, omitted from briefings

c) told to respond then stood down an hour later

d) an inappropriate allocation of a person to the despondent incident.

Being able to better manage was recognised over a one-hour period with the result another short staffed IMT and control point was activated. Having an IMT for each incident with a controller is described in CIMS as best practice. In the case of Police lead SAR incidents, the controller could be the Area Commander.

Recommendation:

When there are two concurrent or overlapping SAR incidents occurring, separate incidents early. Each incident to include fully populating a separate IMT that includes separate administration and logistical support. A controller would help the distribution of resources between the incidents.

Objective 2. Assess Field Team effectiveness

2.1 Objective: Field teams have capability

Trapper's and Despondent scenario: Field team members were able to complete their tasks in a timely manner. Teams had more than one communication device, PLB's and were dressed appropriately for the terrain and environmental conditions encountered.

Navigation, sound search, tracking, interviewing, decision point awareness and first aid assessments were techniques successfully employed in the field.

Whole of operation impact: Field teams were proficient and field capable.

Recommendation:

Nil

2.2 Objective: Hasty Teams are deployed promptly

Trapper's and Despondent scenario: Hawkes Bay SAR have a deployment standard of being ready within one hour of being alerted for a SAROP. The first advice concerning the missing trappers came at 1305hrs and the first team deployed was at 1609hrs. Within this period an IMT was formed, investigations started and administration organised. As this was an exercise, teams were aware to be ready by 1500hrs. In terms of the exercise, the standard was meet, but for a SAROP, deployment many take longer. The group has worked to minimise this time for hasty team deployment where teams can receive a briefing and task enroute by connecting to different communication systems.

Trapper scenario:

Teams were tasked with a full brief and given information updates.

Despondent scenario:

A police and one LandSAR team were allocated to this scenario. The police team was initially briefed at the ICP and updated with further information when they arrived on site. The objectives were to locate the vehicle, get direction of travel and establish contact with the subject, while controlling risk. The LandSAR team had some, but not full awareness of their task prior to arrival. A more detailed briefing would have added impetus to the initial action in the field.

Whole of operation impact:

There was some in-field planning delay on how to go about the task for the despondent scenario due to IMT functionality delays and slow information flow to the field teams. This cost time and the teams redeployment the following day was delayed due to fatigue.

Recommendation:

As for 1.2

2.3 Objective: Manage First Aid

Trapper's and Despondent scenario: The exercise plan called for scene management when confronted with difficult behaviour, psychological issues and manoeuvring a stretcher over variable terrain. Both scenarios had this potential but was largely not achieved.

Trapper scenario:

The subjects were found mid afternoon on the Saturday. They were assessed and treated for dehydration only, as the sprained ankle had self resolved. The team demonstrated patient care.

Despondent scenario:

The potential of this scenario covered all the KPI's**.** The time taken to find the subject and the inclement weather mitigated against realising these indicators. A shorter track to the find location would have allowed time for managing a first aid situation. This was intended in the SAREX design.

It should be noted 50% of despondent find locations are in excess of that travelled by the subject of this SAREX (700m) so the length of track was not extraordinary for an operation.

Whole of operation impact: Objective achieved in part only.

Recommendation:

For a SAREX, brief subjects specifically to find locations or areas.

2.4 Objective: Demonstrate Leadership Skills

Trapper scenario: The evaluator was not able to directly observe this demonstrated in the field. On the debrief forms and during the hot debrief no issues were mentioned.

Despondent scenario: The evaluator was embedded into this field response. The time span for this deployment was from approximately 1700hrs to 1:00hrs the following day. Morale varied mostly due to the lack of sign being found, weather and tiredness. The team leaders used humour, participatory decision making and frequent team meetings in managing their teams which helped keep the team task orientated. The tracking team leader segmented tasks and gave responsibility by allocating to team members. Discipline was maintained until later in night when frustration built in not finding confirming sign. This led to contamination in an area around a clue site.

The team leaders were frequently asking on member welfare. This was done by questioning the team 'Is everyone OK?'. Considering peer pressure, group think, responsibility shift and other biases acting on an individual there is commonly a predetermined answer. Some team members were indicating tiredness by more frequent sitting down, lagging behind the group and limiting engagement. Placing the team leader at the rear of a tracking formation would allow better observation of body language and control.

Whole of operation impact: Leadership within the team was of a high standard but fatigue and frustration were affecting performance. Using other options to reassess effectiveness should be considered by the team leaders and the IMT to improve search outcomes.

Recommendation:

Team leaders to use a variety of cues for monitoring team welfare and effectiveness.

2.5 Objective: Apply Sign Cutting

Trapper scenario:

Teams were not directly observed however information was obtained by interviewing team leaders and from the radio log. All teams had track awareness and river banks and likely track traps were sign cut. The subjects were found by a team who picked up sign on a clay sidling off a ridge. Subjects reported that teams were using sound search.

Despondent scenario:

The evaluator was able to directly observe the Police and LandSAR team assigned to this scenario. On arriving at the location, the vehicles were parked approximately 200 metres from the subject's vehicle. Discussion on the approach included:

- the need for the Police to investigate the vehicle first

- the need to minimise the Police team's contamination
- a method on how to do this- mark way in and around vehicle.

The Police team contaminated the site with unmarked sign which didn't impact on this particular search and on an armed response the expectations of a tracking team may be unrealistic. However, it was noted there was 'on site' consultation between the teams and an agreed process to minimise contamination which was not adhered to.

Once the vehicle was cleared, the LandSAR team led the sign cutting of the vehicle and perimeters. Buildings close-by were checked. Substantiating sign was found close but not linked to the vehicle and this, used with likely subject behaviour, led to a clue site that contained beer bottles, similar to that in the car. No direction of travel (DOT) was obtained at this clue site so a further perimeter and probing search was carried out on likely barriers that would have been crossed or broken. This resulted in 'time relevant' footprints being found which gave DOT, but these were lost after following for approximately 150m. Further sign was found but interpreted as not being relevant before the team decided to return to the site containing the beer bottles. The team then conducted further sign cutting at this site using a purposeful wander technique with no result.

The IMT gave the subjects location at 2253 hrs and was found using sound at 2348 hrs at a walking distance of 770 metres from the clue site. The subject had travelled 800 metres from the vehicle to this site.

There was a variety of sign cutting techniques used that required team work. While the clue site had only substantiating sign, it had a high probability of belonging to the subject. Casting could have been employed which may have confirmed DOT, however it would have taken time. Within 50 metres of the 'time relevant sign' being lost, further substantiating sign was found at approximately 2156 hrs but not fully investigated. This sign was where the subject had got under an electric fence and crossed a gully to his eventual location. Factors mitigating against not investigating were probably team fatigue and the electric fence (interview notes).

Fatigue was probably a factor in the relative loss of discipline on returning to the beer bottle clue site. Also probably a factor in the decision to go to that clue site rather than the more logical return point being, where the footprint sign had been lost and cast/ probe from there. Members of the tracking team had spent a day working before being deployed and had been awake for over 16 hours at that time. The tracking team applied appropriate sign cutting methods and found sign belonging to the subject, however greater attention to the clue sites may have produced more positive results.

The team's awareness of fatigue, weather and the limitations of tracking at night needs to be factored into their performance assessment and when impacted, solutions should be discussed and contributed to by the IMT. An example of a mutual decision for a better outcome could be to fly a drone with thermal imaging over the area. A hand-held thermal imaging device was used in the field and proved useful but was limited by its horizontal view.

Whole of operation impact:

Field teams in both scenarios expressed the need for the Police to mark and control their contamination around vehicles of interest or last known points. This contamination can cause delays.

For the despondent scenario the subject brief was for a shorter track. A shorter track would have meant teams could have been redeployed earlier the following day.

Recommendation:

Team leaders to be aware of the negative impact of fatigue and environmental conditions on tracking; and use a consultative process with the IMT, to enhance decision making capability.

Other comment

a) The subject of the despondent scenario reported the range of sound being 150m while those subjects in the trapper scenario heard sound only when teams were close. Using sound calibration in the field by teams would give a guide to search effectiveness on debrief and indicate any need to re-search an area.

b) There was some frustration for the IMT in the delays between asking for field information and getting a response. This could be partly due to the SARTrack and messaging system. Where a prompt response is required, Operations can fit into the current system by going direct to the Comms unit and using the radio. Having a ‘listening’ radio in the IMT or having the ICE Box/Instant Connect App on a phone in the IMT could help give more immediate awareness.

6. Conclusions

‘Taniwha’ was a well executed SAREX that identified points for failure in the systems and processes. It introduced the need to manage risk when dealing with an armed despondent and explored solutions when searching for them.

The SAREX design allowed an evaluation of both the management and field responses that produced some recommendations on managing concurrent or overlapping incidents for the IMT. The role of fatigue and environmental conditions on field teams’ effectiveness, and in particular tracking and decision making, could not be discounted. To an extent these have been isolated and quantified. Strategies to give better search outcomes and support need to be considered.

Call out, briefing procedures and communications help minimise time delays for the initial response. The introduction of the ICE Box/Instant Connect repeater adds a valuable tool not only for communications between the IMT and the field, but also for remote monitoring and message recording.

There were opportunities missed to explore apply supportive search options given the difficult tracking conditions and in executing the first aid objective.

The Police members involved gave extraordinary logistical support to the field teams during the demobilisation phase. This support went beyond relationship building and expressed a strong concern for the well being of the volunteers. There is a strong culture of ‘well being’ in how both the IMT and field teams operate.

This SAREX tested the structure and resource management of the IMT and the field team response capability when challenged.

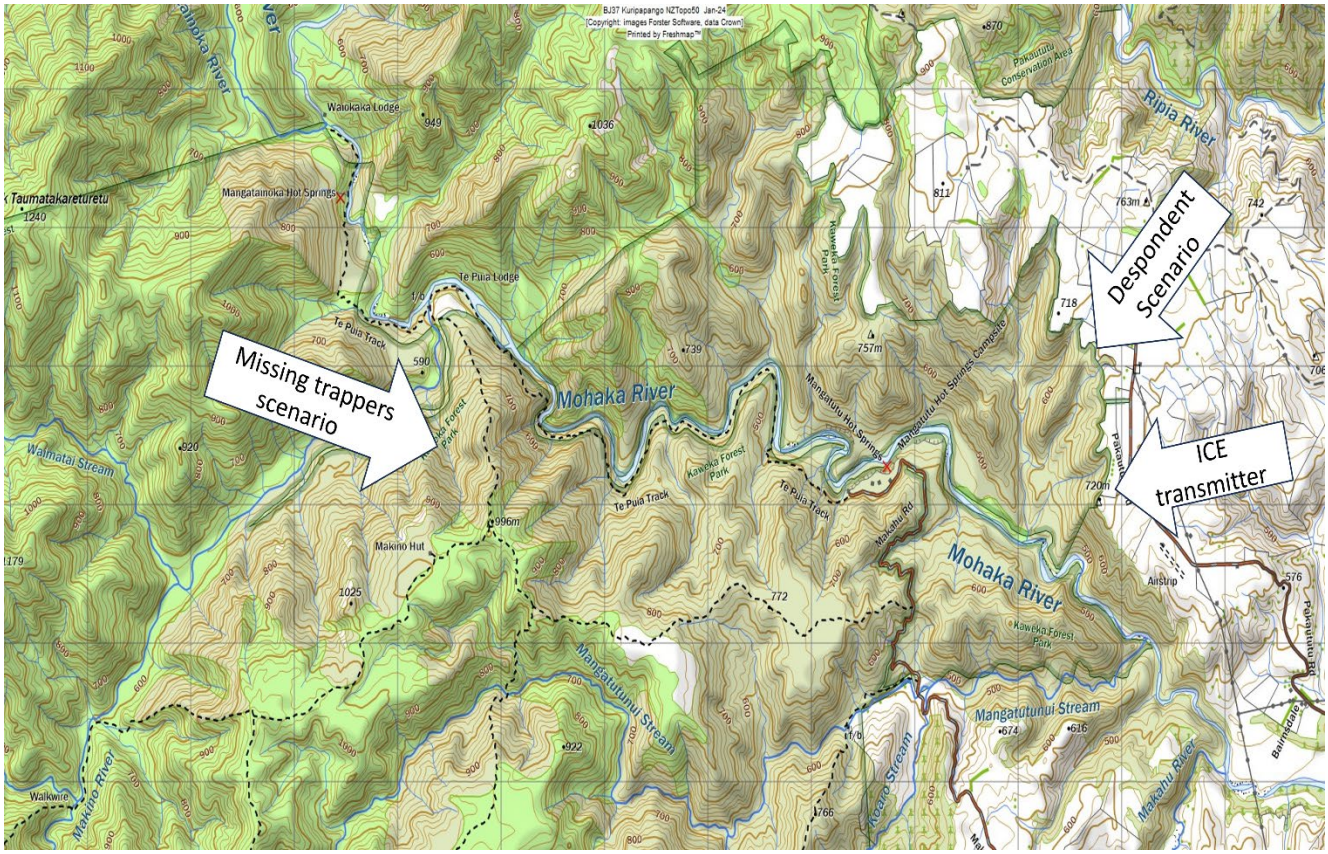
7. Appendix

7.1 SAREX Objectives with KPI's

Objective 1	**The IMT effectively manages the exercise**
1.1 Objective (contributing)	**KPI's**
IMT operates in accordance with the CIMS model	• IMT structure is in accordance with CIMS model • Relevant documentation is completed • IAP is established for the initial operational period • IAP is updated for subsequent operational period • IAP review meetings are conducted by the I/C • I/C leads regular IMT briefings • IMT function managers undertake regular team briefings.
1.2 Objective (contributing)	**KPI's**
The IMT activates and manages appropriate resources to meet the demands of the exercise	• IMT executes stand-up SOPs (pagers, apps, phones, etext) • IMT briefings follow GSMEAC format • IMT confirms the availability and response of resources • IMT sources equipment for the response • IMT ensures suitable communications for the incident are established • Tasked resources are controlled and coordinated in line with the IAP • Taskings are appropriate to the resources.
Objective 2.	**Assess Field Team effectiveness**
2.1 Objective (contributing)	**KPI's**
Field teams have capability	• Team members are fit • Field team members are properly equipped • Field Team Members can implement their training in field situations

	• Field Team Members are proficient at utilising various search techniques in the field.
2.2 Objective (contributing)	**KPI's**
Hasty Teams deployed promptly	• Hasty Teams are briefed and deployed within one hour of IMT advising of the search • Hasty Teams are updated promptly by IMT with any new information.
2.3 Objective (contributing)	**KPI's**
Manage First Aid	• Manage environmental emergencies • Scene Management • Psychological Issues • Manage difficult behaviour and/or deceased persons • Demonstrate Patient Care • Safely manoeuvre stretcher across variable terrain.
2.4 Objective (contributing)	**KPI's**
Demonstrate Leadership Skills	• Maintain morale within teams • Maintain discipline in Teams • Communicate effectively • Delegate roles within the team effectively • Involve team members in the decision-making process where appropriate.
2.5 Objective (contributing)	**KPI's**
Apply Sign Cutting	• Appropriate sign cutting methods are applied • Number and DOT of subjects are established • Effectively process clue sites.

Operational Area of SAREX



Team track logs