

NEW ZEALAND SEARCH AND RESCUE

Rapu Whakarauora Aotearoa



Speech delivered by Hon Michael Wood at the 2020 NZ Search and Rescue Awards

Introduction

Good evening, and thank you for the opportunity to speak to you tonight. It's a privilege to be a part of this year's New Zealand Search and Rescue Awards.

I would like to acknowledge my Parliamentary colleagues; the Chair of the New Zealand Search and Rescue Council, Peter Mersi; as well as New Zealand Search and Rescue Council members, award recipients, and leaders from the search and rescue sector.

The search and rescue sector plays a vital role for our country – especially considering we are responsible for a search and rescue region stretching 30 million square kilometres!

At the heart of this sector are dedicated, committed, and courageous individuals and teams. I am here tonight to recognise you and your efforts on behalf of our community.

Recognise the great work the SAR sector does

New Zealand is an outdoor enthusiast's paradise. From our spectacular hiking tracks, to our snowy mountains and golden beaches, we take great pride in our abundance of outdoor activities.

Unfortunately, what might start out as a fun school trip to the beach, or family day in the bush, can quickly turn into a stressful and life-threatening situation.

At any given moment, you may be called upon to locate a missing tramper, track down an elderly person who has left their care home, rescue a group of kayakers or assist a skipper from their overturned boat. The scenarios and circumstances are endless.

But for every scenario, there are people like you – exceptionally skilled and with specialist knowledge.

For a number of tonight's award recipients, you have devoted many years to search and rescue, and have made tangible contributions to the SAR community during this time.

This speaks not only to your outstanding commitment, but to your dedication to help others. It is this passion and dedication that resonated with me as I read through the details for these awards.

Behind each recipient there is a story of courage, a focus on safety and the conscious decision to place the wellbeing of others above your own.

There is also an outstanding display of teamwork. From operating the radio and coordinating the response, to crewing the rescue vessel, every member has a vital role to play.

No matter what the conditions, you don't hesitate to say "yes, I'll go." Because of you, families are reunited and loved ones are returned home.

Nearly 13,000 people are directly involved in the search and rescue sector – and 95 percent of you are volunteers.

Being on-call 24 hours a day, 365 years days a year is a big commitment, not only for you but for your families, friends and workplaces as well.

I want to take a moment to acknowledge all those people whose support and personal sacrifice allows their partners, loved ones and colleagues to perform this vital service for the New Zealand community.

I acknowledge the family dinners missed, the work deadlines that can't be met and the personal commitments that are put to one side whenever a call comes in.

I also want to recognise the people behind the headlines: the ones who ensure team members are receiving the necessary training, those who check and clean the gear, the volunteers who sit through the long but necessary committee meetings taking minutes, and those who generously give their time to fundraise.

In the year to June 2020, 128 lives were saved because of your efforts. Another 506 people were rescued, and 783 assisted. Words cannot express the gratitude felt for you by these people and their loved ones.

None of this would be possible without the extraordinary number of hours contributed by people in the search and rescue sector. During the year ending June 2020, SAR agencies provided more than 35,000 hours in support of search and rescue operations.

Government commitment to the search and rescue sector

This Government has made a clear commitment to supporting the search and rescue sector.

Ten months ago we committed an additional \$58 million to fund new initiatives, and bolster existing initiatives, across search and rescue in New Zealand. This was on top of the \$62 million invested in Coastguard, Surf Life Saving and Water Safety New Zealand in Budget 2020.

This unprecedented level of Government support is revolutionising the way the sector is led and works together. The projects and initiatives that are planned and underway will futureproof many of the SAR organisations represented here tonight. They will also significantly enhance your collective ability to locate and save people in distress.

Collaboration and new initiatives across the search and rescue sector

A common thread to your success is the collaboration and information-sharing that happens between the many organisations which make up the search and rescue sector.

Many of the newly funded initiatives are collaborative in nature and I expect them to deliver sector wide improvements and efficiencies over time.

The sector's joint post operational information system, SARdonyx [*SAR-don-ix*] is an important information sharing tool which provides a multi-agency, system wide understanding the sectors operational performance.

As many of you know, distress beacon activations are now the catalyst for many search and rescue operations. Distress beacons help to remove the 'search' from search and rescue, allowing you to pinpoint almost exactly where someone is, so a rescue can be completed quickly and efficiently – weather allowing, of course.

We know that one in three land-based rescues this past summer was the result of a beacon activation. Five years ago, that figure was one in six. There are over 105,000 beacons registered in New Zealand, and more being sold or hired every day.

The Safer Walking Framework brings SAR agencies and the wider health sector together to improve the safety of those at risk of wandering.

Searches for people with dementia and other types of cognitive impairment (called wanderers by the sector) make up 20 percent of land searches, and this number will only increase as the number of older people in our communities grows.

In addition to the time spent on search and rescue operations, there are also countless hours of training. This is needed to ensure the safety of all our rescue teams, but it's also a valuable way for you to share knowledge, gain new ideas and make valuable connections across the sector.

I'm heartened by the number of search and rescue training exercises, or SAREXs [SAR-ex-es] that are happening around the country. From the beaches of Pauanui, the mountains above Queenstown to the rocky coastlines of the Catlins, individuals from many of the organisations represented here tonight have come together for training, and the sector benefits hugely from it.

Conclusion

Once again I thank you all, and especially our volunteers, for the time and energy you spend searching for, and finding, people in distress.

I would particularly like to congratulate the recipients of this year's Awards, and will now ask Peter Mersi to help me present the New Zealand Search and Rescue Gold Awards and Certificates of Achievement.