



Connecting the search and rescue sector

Link is a quarterly publication of
New Zealand Search and Rescue

A Herculean effort

The proud legacy and exciting future
of the C-130 Hercules aircraft



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New Strategic Plan for NZSAR
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About

Link magazine is a publication of New Zealand Search and Rescue.

Staff writer and editor: Daniel Clearwater.

For enquiries or contributions, please email info@nzsar.govt.nz

Link magazine will no longer be printed

Visit nzsar.govt.nz/news to download back issues of Link magazine. Plus read select Link stories and NZSAR System news directly on our website.

You can also follow NZSAR on LinkedIn or sign up to our Link email newsletter. Visit nzsar.govt.nz/subscribe or scan the QR code.



Leading the NZSAR System

The New Zealand Search and Rescue Council plays an important role in shaping the future of our national SAR System. As the strategic governing body, we provide leadership, oversight, and direction to ensure the system meets both current and future needs. Our work sets the strategic direction for how we operate, how we fund the sector, and how we measure success.

Earlier this year, we released our updated Strategic Plan, outlining the Council's priorities for the next three years. This plan is anchored in our mission:

To find and rescue people in distress throughout New Zealand's Search and Rescue Region so that they can come home safely.

To achieve this, we are focussing on three key outcome areas:

- **System leadership** – establishing clear expectations and a unified direction for the sector.
- **System capability** – ensuring we have the right tools and people prepared to adapt quickly to changing demands.
- **System partnership** – strengthening collaboration and leveraging the unique strengths of each organisation involved.

We're aiming to make focused improvements in each of these areas. While some changes may appear subtle on the surface, they are already making a difference. For example, under System Leadership we have established an Operational Leadership Group. This group brings together those involved in planning and delivering SAR operations to identify opportunities for system-wide improvements. Their work is already identifying ways to enhance how we operate and innovate.

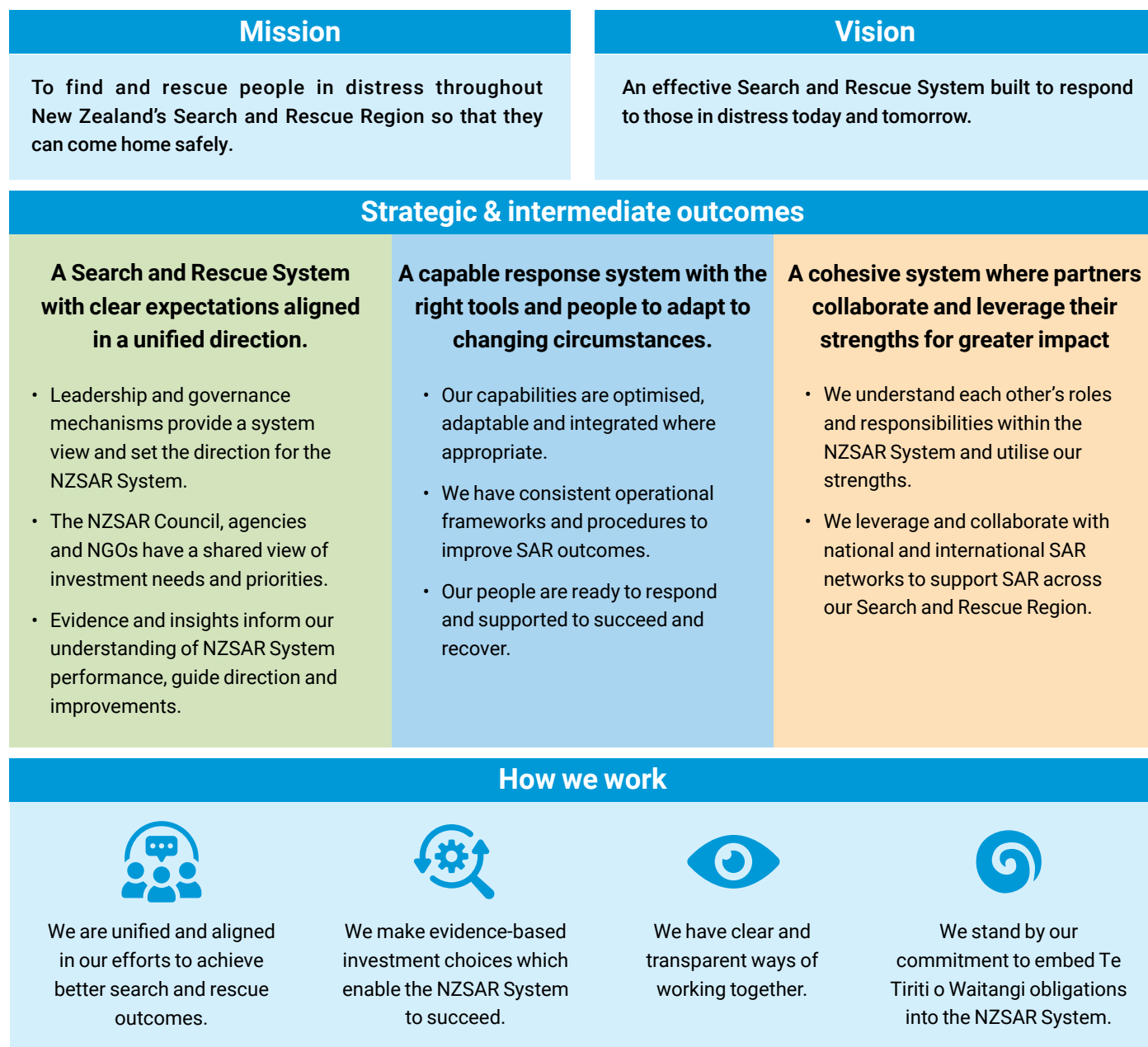
The Strategic Plan is more than a document – it's a collective vision. Developed collaboratively by all Council members, it reflects a shared understanding of where we are today and where we need to go. We've deliberately kept the plan high-level, recognising that our existing operational frameworks already guide day-to-day delivery.

Looking ahead, the Council is prioritising the work needed to bring this strategy to life. Much of this is already underway across the sector. For example, take the recently announced fuel excise duty funding under section 9(1) of the Land Transport Management Act. A look at page nine will remind you of how that \$76.7 million investment will help SAR organisations build the capacity and capability needed to deliver effective operations. We invite you to explore the full Strategic Plan and join us in shaping a stronger, more resilient SAR system for New Zealand.

Ruth Fairhall
Acting Chair, NZSAR Council

Learn more online: www.nzsar.govt.nz/strategicplan

The NZSAR System Strategic Plan



Operational Leadership Group

The NZSAR Council has established an Operational Leadership Group to provide nationally consistent coordination of operations across the SAR system. The group is co-chaired by the Police and Maritime New Zealand's Rescue Coordination Centre (RCCNZ) as the coordinating authorities. The group members are senior operational managers from across the sector, including representatives from the SAR non-governmental organisations. Members are expected to take a national view of SAR in their discussions ahead of their separate organisational SAR interests.

It's early days but the group have already started to have discussions relating to operational trends, lessons management and areas where the commissioning processes could be improved.

Co-Chairs Police Inspector Simon Kernahan and General Manager of RCCNZ Justin Allan, say that the group has an opportunity to discuss and provide operational advice directly to the Council and to influence the direction of the sector. The potential scope of work they could undertake is large, so the group's focus is to identify the highest priority issues they can collectively consider. They can both see the need for this group and appreciate the level of support and engagement that they are getting from its members.

The Operational Leadership Group meets quarterly. You can find its terms of reference online:
nzsar.govt.nz/governance/operational-leadership-group

A Herculean effort

How the Royal New Zealand Air Force’s five new C-130J Hercules contribute to our search and rescue capability.

“The last few years have been the start of a significant transitional period for the Air Force. With the recent arrival of the C-130J and P-8A Poseidon, the majority of our Air Force is operating very modern aircraft and helicopters,” says Wing Commander Gareth Russell, Commanding Officer of the C-130J Transition Unit (JTU). “In the past, the Orion maritime patrol aircraft was considered the go-to aviation platform for search and rescue at sea. But with our improved breadth of capabilities, when the Defence Force is asked to support a SAR operation, it’s about choosing the most suitable platform to deliver the effect needed.”

The fleet of five C-130J aircraft arrived in New Zealand between September and November 2024, then went quickly to work. Within two months of arriving, they were flying to one of the harshest environments on the planet, providing logistical support to the New Zealand Antarctic Programme. To an outside observer, the transition to the new aircraft was seamless, but behind the scenes has been a lot of hard work. Our personnel trained for 18 months with the United States Air Force, and developed procedures for how the New Zealand Defence Force will operate them.



“The Hercules is fundamentally a transport platform, but we can use them for a range of missions, including search and rescue,” says Gareth. “The United States Air Force didn’t teach our personnel SAR procedures; it’s the US Coast Guard (USCG) who operate the C-130J for SAR in the most similar way to us. We applied our own knowledge on how SAR works within our region, and supported by USCG procedures, integrated that into the ways the new aircraft are operated.” Although the C-130J airframe,

engines and mechanical systems are significantly improved versions of the original 1960’s design, the electronic systems which the crew uses are a step change in technology. “So, although it’s still a Hercules, we have to review, adapt and rigorously test the integration of our procedures into the New Zealand Defence Force context, basic flight operations, maintenance, training and specific missions.”

Gareth and his team at JTU have two main responsibilities. Firstly, planning and executing the trials and development of the C-130J capability, then coordinating the Operational Testing and Evaluation in support of the Directorate of Evaluation (Operating). “Everything gets covered to make sure that we operate the new platform safely and effectively.”

Compared to the legacy C-130H(NZ), the C-130J Hercules climbs faster and higher, flies further at a higher cruising speed, carries more cargo and takes off and lands in a shorter distance. “Since it’s broadly a more capable version of its predecessor, we’re starting with releasing the equivalent SAR capabilities, such as visual searches by day and distress beacon searching by night,” says Gareth.

Two noteworthy new systems on the C-130J are the JetWave high-speed internet and the MX20 visual and infra-red camera. “The way we’re using these new tools is still being developed, but it’s clear that they present opportunities to enhance our capability across many of our roles, including search and rescue. Everyone is looking forward to continuing the proud legacy of Hercules support to vital missions worldwide on behalf of New Zealand.”

C-130H(NZ)		C-130J	
Length: 29.8m		34.4m	
Wingspan: 40.5m		40.4m	
Height: 11.7m		11.9m	
Passenger Capacity: 92		128	
Max Payload: 17 tonnes		21 tonnes	

Read more in Air Force News issue 273 | October 2024

This 42-page issue is dedicated to the new fleet of C-130J Hercules, with a homage to the legacy of the H-model. After 60 years of service, more than 155,000 accident-free flying hours and nearly 100,000 landings, the last three aircraft in the C-130H(NZ) fleet were retired on 31 January 2025. Image courtesy NZDF

https://www.nzdf.mil.nz/assets/Uploads/DocumentLibrary/AirForceNews_Issue273.pdf

The helicopter isn't coming...

Practising multi-agency collaboration in a complex environment when air evacuation isn't an option.

Police receive a call from a distressed fisherman, saying his two mates have been swept off the rocks at Anawhata Bay, on Auckland's west coast. Bethells Beach Surf Life Saving Patrol SAR Squad are the nearest responders, just a few kilometres away, and they respond within minutes with Inflatable Rescue Boats (IRB) and Rescue Water Craft (RWC).

This scenario is unfortunately all-too familiar to Jimmy Kendrick, the Bethells Beach Surf Life Saving Patrol - SAR Training coordinator. "There's several real incidents at Anawhata each summer, sadly not all with happy endings." During a SAREX held in March this year, surf lifeguards began the search for the three simulated fisherman, injured on the rocky shoreline that was being pounded by the surf.

"We're usually the first on the scene, but because the surf is so consistently large, it'd be too rough to evacuate a critical patient by sea," says Jimmy. "We generally do our best to stabilise the patient and wait for an Air Ambulance to arrive."

However, the SAREX scenario aimed to test multi-agency interoperability when helicopter evacuation wasn't an option. The Surf Lifeguards provided first aid on the rocks until Piha Volunteer Fire Brigade, Hato Hone St John Piha First Response Unit and Special Emergency Response Team were able to access the scene to provide advanced life support. There's no phone coverage or radio repeaters in the vicinity, so the multi-agency team used a common emergency liaison simplex channel to coordinate their efforts.

Once the patients were stabilised, they were transported to the nearest four-wheel drive access point. "There's no public vehicle access to the beach," says Jimmy. "In the past it's been a quick call to the landowner for access, but through the preparation for this SAREX we were able to get ongoing permission for emergency vehicles."

The activity was successful in fine-tuning a complicated response to a likely scenario, highlighting the benefits of multi-agency training and collaboration.



The patients had to be transported over rocks and sandy beaches to the vehicle access point. "That challenge showed another instance of the benefits of the multi-agency team," says Jimmy. The Hato Hone St John Special Emergency Response Team brought a Skiboo stretcher which was light and compact to deploy on foot. "The Skiboo allowed us to drag one patient fairly easily across the sand. The Firefighters also had a wheeled Stokes basket which made light work of transporting another patient over uneven ground for longer distances."

Top image courtesy Kathryn Lydiard, lower image courtesy Dave Comp



Rocky shoreline rescue is a core skill for surf SAR squads, who deploy with helmets, wetsuits and short surf fins. "It's a balance with personal protective equipment and effective movement in the environment," says Jimmy. "We judge whether to use a personal flotation device. Too much buoyancy and we can't duck dive beneath incoming waves to avoid being smashed on the rocks." Local knowledge and experience with the surf conditions allows the responders to time the swell to get on the rocks. Once on the rock, they stow their short fins on a belt, and begin to assist the person in distress.

Rescue water craft (RWC) have the manoeuvrability to reverse right up to the rocks, so a surf lifeguard can often step directly to land. In contrast, Inflatable Rescue Boats (IRB) are less manoeuvrable and get pushed around more in the swell. The Bethells SAR Squad were some of the first surf lifeguards to operate RWC, and have more than a decade of experience in this environment.

Image courtesy Stephanie Kendrick

King's Birthday Honours

Three individuals were recognised in June for their services to Search and Rescue.



Mr Ronald Bruce Ealam, of Oxford, was made a Member of the New Zealand Order of Merit for services to Search and Rescue.

Mr Ron Ealam has been contributing to Land Search and Rescue for more than 50 years and has contributed 25 years of service to the New Zealand Land Search and Rescue Dogs. He has been a qualified national trainer and assessor for search dogs for more than ten years.

Elected Group Chair for Oxford Land Search and Rescue for more than 10 years, Mr Ealam received a New Zealand Land Search and Rescue Certificate of Excellence in 2023 for his contributions.

He has been also been a member of the Oxford Fire Brigade since 1996. During the 2011 Canterbury earthquakes, he was part of the initial response in the first three days in the Redcliff area.



Mr Aaron Mark Halstead, of Queenstown, is now a Member of the New Zealand Order of Merit for services to Search and Rescue and the tourism industry.

Mr Aaron Halstead has contributed to alpine Search and Rescue (SAR) at regional, national and international levels for more than 30 years.

Since 1991, Mr Halstead has been involved with more than 200 rescues. He joined the Land Search and Rescue Wakatipu Alpine Cliff Rescue (ACR) Team in 2000 and is currently Team Leader. He was the manager of the Department of Conservation Search and Rescue at Aoraki Mount Cook from 2005 to 2008. He has provided moderation on national SAR exercises as an expert advisor. He was Vice President from 2006 and President from 2008 to 2010 of the New Zealand Mountain Guides Association, leading the organisation to a positive outcome through challenges with its financial structure. He has represented the New Zealand mountaineering industry through training and advisory roles with mountaineering organisations in other countries, or as part of SAR operations.

Mr Halstead has also contributed to the governance of building a biking and walking trail network linking 30 communities in Central Otago, as well as supporting youth development within outdoor recreation organisations.



Mr Marius Jean Bron, of Fox Glacier was awarded the King's Service Medal for services to Search and Rescue and the community.

Mr Marius Bron has served the Fox Glacier community in various volunteer emergency service roles since 1999. On a voluntary basis Mr Bron leads the local branches of South Westland Land Search and Rescue Group, the Civil Defence service and the Community Committee. He is also a local volunteer firefighter for Fire and Emergency New Zealand and a St John Ambulance first responder.

He and his team have received national recognition for their search and rescue efforts, including the successful rescue of two climbers on Mt Rolleston and the successful overnight rescue of an injured person on a glacier.

He was involved in the creation of important facilities for the Fox Glacier community, including the Emergency Services Centre and the Community Centre. His efforts included driving the concept stage, fundraising and project managing.

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Research to inform mutual understanding between the NZSAR System and Emergency Management

As our nation adapts to the increasing frequency and intensity of severe weather events, it is important that the NZSAR System and Emergency Management authorities have a shared view on when and how they provide support to each other's core work.

Aly Curd is doing a PhD at the Joint Centre for Disaster Research, focusing on the role of Search and Rescue Non-Governmental Organisations (SAR NGOs) in declared states of emergency.

"I'm reaching out to a broad range of people involved in emergency response, including SAR volunteers, emergency management professionals, and community members," says Aly. "I want to hear their experiences, perspectives, and ideas around SAR NGO involvement in large-scale emergencies. It's an important opportunity to inform future policy, training, and integration across the sector."

The research survey takes around 20 minutes to complete and is fully anonymous unless participants choose to provide contact details for a follow-up conversation. Visit <https://forms.office.com/r/W99EYv2URs> to participate.

A huge thank you to SAR volunteers

Over 10,500 volunteers. 29,000 hours on operations. One shared purpose.

Spread across the country, in roles as diverse as the regions themselves, are thousands of incredible SAR volunteers. Each of them is ready, at a moment's notice, to put their lives on hold to come to the aid of people they have probably never met.

For each hour spent on a SAR Operation, there are many more they have dedicated to training and preparation. They've sacrificed precious time away from their own lives and families to be ready for when the call comes.

These dedicated individuals aren't paid for their time, but the results of their efforts are priceless. Their motivation is simply to help others when they need it the most, and their success is counted with the most valuable measures of all: in lives saved and families reunited.

Making up 88 percent of the total SAR workforce, volunteers are an essential part of the New Zealand Search and Rescue System. Without them, we simply couldn't provide the range of world-class capabilities that our society relies on to assist those in distress.

Last month, National Volunteer Week celebrated millions of volunteers all over Aotearoa New Zealand. It served as an excellent reminder to demonstrate our appreciation for everything volunteers do for Search and Rescue.

To every volunteer as well as your families, employers and communities who support you, we offer our deepest and most sincere gratitude. Thank you, on behalf of the NZSAR Council and the people and communities you serve.



Over 4,600 volunteers



Over 3,300 volunteers

29,000
hours

on operations
in 2024



Over 500 volunteers



Over 2,100 volunteers

Sources: Estimated volunteers in each organisation, to the nearest hundred as supplied by the organisation. Total volunteer hours on SAR Operations and Incidents sourced from SARDonyx for the 2024 calendar year.

Precision under pressure at Godley Head

Flexibility, teamwork and technical expertise enable a challenging coastal rescue near Christchurch.

An evening walk took a turn for the worse when a man slipped while walking at Godley Head. Sliding down a steep and loose rocky gully, the man somehow avoided serious injury. However he was completely boxed in by sheer cliffs either side, the steep gully and choppy seas.

Around 6.30pm, the man was located by a friend flying a drone in the area. The man sent a text saying he was uninjured but stuck near the water's edge. This message was viewed by the drone operator and Police were notified.

Senior Constable Rob Stokes, the Police Incident Controller, assessed the situation and formed an initial action plan with the assistance of Senior Constable Dennis Arthur. With the man at the water's edge, just a few kilometres from the nearest Coastguard and Surf Life Saving bases, rescue from the sea seemed the most appropriate response. Rob asked the Coastguard Operations Centre to activate Coastguard Sumner, then got on the phone with the local responders. "We discussed the situation, and agreed that water-based rescue was the best initial course of action," says Rob. "They were confident a combined Coastguard and Surf Life Saving team could do the job."

Blair Quane, Unit President of Coastguard Sumner recalls the conditions that day. "There was a stiff north-easterly wind behind a rising tide, making for deteriorating wave conditions in the gut. It was a cool evening, with about 90 minutes of daylight remaining, so time was of the essence." Shortly afterward, the Sumner-Taylors Surf Life Saving SAR Squad were also tasked.

The 100-metre-tall rock walls around the man were loose and narrow. Any rocks dislodged by helicopter down-draft or a rescuer on rope could pose a significant hazard to the man. Senior Constable Rob Stokes couldn't be certain rescue by sea would work. "So with the rockfall risk in mind, I called the Hato Hone St John Air Desk, and had a GCH Aviation Christchurch rescue helicopter placed on standby. In addition, I placed members of the Christchurch based Alpine Cliff Rescue Team on standby until we knew we had safely recovered the man."

With the onshore wind, swell and rocky shore, the responders knew that a rescue vessel probably couldn't get close enough to the man; they'd have to enter the water to bridge the gap to the shore. "Operations in the surf zone and from the rocky shore is our bread and butter," says Blair. "Our vessels, PPE and training are optimised for this sort of task."

Three volunteers, who were geared up in wetsuits, helmets and flotation aids, deployed on Coastguard Sumner's *Hamilton Jet* Rescue within six minutes of being tasked. The scene was only two nautical miles from their base, and by 7.07pm, they had located the man. One responder swam to the man and assessed his condition. Miraculously, he was fully conscious, able to walk, and only suffering from bruising and abrasions to his front.

One by one, a further four vessels arrived on-scene ready to assist: Coastguard Sumner deployed *Ian Dewe Rescue*, a jetski with an inflatable rescue sled and *Blue Arrow Rescue*, a larger all-weather rescue vessel. The Sumner-Taylors Surf Life Saving



Overview of the incident scene, recorded on a different day to the actual operation. The approximate position of the man and the slide he took to get there are shown in red. Image courtesy Coastguard Sumner



The stranded man aboard the rescue sled is pulled to the waiting *Hamilton Jet* Rescue, with swimmers from Coastguard Sumner and Sumner-Taylors Surf Life Saving SAR Squad alongside for support and security. Image courtesy Coastguard Sumner

SAR Squad deployed two Inflatable Rescue Boats (IRB) with rock rescue swimmers on board. Blair explained, "We train regularly with one another for these types of jobs. Each of the vessels and crews bring slightly differing and complementary capabilities. When the job is time-critical, it's better to have all the capabilities on-scene, so we can quickly get the best combination into action."

Meanwhile, the Police Incident Controller maintained an overview of the incident, with a combined Coastguard-Surf Life Saving Incident Management Team supporting the response.

"Due to the proximity of the operation to rocky headlands, direct comms by VHF radio or cell phone were impossible," said Blair. "The jetski was sent further offshore, until they could become a radio relay between the Incident Management Team and the on-scene coordinator aboard *Blue Arrow Rescue*." Footage from a Coastguard drone was also being live-streamed back to the incident control point and on-scene coordinator. The comms relay and real-time footage provided a high level of situational awareness for the incident managers allowing them to make better-informed operational decisions.

As the responders analysed the scene, it became clear that none of the vessels could safely perform a standard shore extraction from that narrow gut. It was too tight to effectively manoeuvre with the wind and irregular 1-metre swell. The swell was also exposing shallow rocks, which could damage or capsize a rescue vessel or IRB.

Together, the team quickly brainstormed a solution. The rescue sled from the back of the jetski was a person-sized platform, which was easy enough for a couple of responders to swim into the gut, plus small and light enough to avoid damage from the shallow rocks.

Once the sled got to shore, the man would be equipped with a lifejacket and helmet. Meanwhile, one responder would swim a towline from the sled to *Hamilton Jet Rescue*, which would be waiting at the mouth of the gut. With the man on the sled, and responders swimming alongside for stability and security, they would be pulled by the towline to safety.

In fading daylight, the plan was executed successfully. The man was transferred to *Blue Arrow Rescue* at 8.00pm, just as the sun set. The man was medically reassessed, dried off and kept warm during the journey back to base, where he was transferred to a waiting ambulance.

The entire operation was conducted with speed, clarity, and professionalism under challenging environmental conditions. Responders later likened the operation to "a well-oiled machine" – a testament to the training, inter-agency coordination, and technical skill of everyone involved.

Insights

Multi-agency training and trust leads to effective coordination.

This swift and synchronised response shows the value of interagency training and relationship building. Each agency contributed to the range of capabilities available, both on scene and back at the Incident Control Point. Most importantly, personnel understood and trusted each other's abilities. This enabled the combined team to conduct the rescue safely in difficult conditions and under time pressure.

Deploying a range of capabilities provides options

Efficient use of resources is always a consideration. However, deploying a range of assets and capabilities in a time-critical scenario when there is limited information gives a better chance that the right capability will be present to do the job. The number and spread of rescue vessels and IRBs provided for on-scene coordination, comms relay, as well as the right tools for a successful rescue.

Technical expertise and adaptability are critical in dynamic operations.

Once on-scene, responders realised that their standard rescue procedures couldn't be used due to the narrow gut and deteriorating environmental conditions. Their experience and technical expertise meant they fully understood the capabilities and limitations of their various platforms and rescue equipment. This allowed them to adapt quickly, build a new plan to safely extract the man.

Coastguard welcomes new Chief Executive



Carl McOnie began as Chief Executive of Coastguard Tautiaki Moana on 3 June. He comes from Land Search and Rescue, where he served as CEO since 2018, leading major organisational change and supporting a strong volunteer network.

"I feel incredibly privileged to have worked alongside the dedicated volunteers and staff at Land Search and Rescue – their passion and commitment have left a lasting impression on me. As I step into this new chapter with Coastguard, I'm excited to support another incredible group of people who give their time to help others. I look forward to contributing to and supporting the great work done by the volunteers, units and staff in serving our boating communities across Aotearoa New Zealand."



Recognition for exceptional achievements and dedication

On Tuesday 6 May 2025, the Hon James Meager, Associate Minister for Transport presented the 2024 New Zealand Search and Rescue Awards at Parliament.

These awards are presented annually in recognition of outstanding achievements within New Zealand's Search and Rescue Region.

"The tales of determination and commitment to search and rescue are truly inspiring," says Acting NZSAR Council Chair Ruth Fairhall. "Each of these recipients have gone above and beyond to help reunite the lost, missing and injured with their friends and whānau."

"On behalf of all New Zealand, we congratulate the Award recipients. Your contributions to our society are incredibly important, and we are very grateful for your exceptional dedication and service."

Twenty-nine nominations were received for 2024, with two Gold Awards and seven Certificates of Achievement being awarded at this year's ceremony. The full citations are available in a commemorative booklet: nzsar.govt.nz/awards

Congratulations to all the Award recipients!



Gold Award
OPERATIONAL ACTIVITY

Raglan Surf Lifesaving Club

For the rescue of three people from a boat overturned on the Raglan Bar.

Surf Lifeguards, who were training nearby with Inflatable Rescue Boats, responded quickly to the capsiz, rescuing two people from the water within four minutes of being notified. Unable to locate the third person in the swells, a Surf Lifeguard entered the water and cut his way through a tangle of fishing line to reach the boat. The Surf Lifeguard was able to locate the third person, who was trapped under the boat's hull, and pull him to safety. These swift actions almost certainly saved the man's life.



Gold Award
SUPPORT ACTIVITY

Ian Trethowen

For the development and ongoing support of WanderSearch.

Ian Trethowen has made a profound impact on the effectiveness of search and rescue for people with cognitive impairments. With support from others, Ian was the original developer of the WanderSearch technology. A small device is issued to a person with a cognitive impairment who is at risk of going missing or becoming lost. Trained responders with specialised equipment can track these devices, quickly narrowing down a search area and improving incident outcomes. Ian's has shown exemplary dedication and commitment to improving the technology for over 19 years.



Certificate of Achievement

OPERATIONAL ACTIVITY

Coastguard South Taranaki

For the search for a missing diver near Pātea Bar, South Taranaki.

Zack Armstrong and Hernan Holliday, GCH Aviation – Greymouth team members

For the rescue of a tramper trapped between boulders in the Taipo River.

Far North Surf Rescue

For the rescue of fishermen swept from rocks near Tapotupotu Bay.



Certificate of Achievement

SUPPORT ACTIVITY

Bart Kindt

For the development of SARTrack Incident Management Software.

Graeme Hill

For his service and commitment to New Zealand Land Search and Rescue Dogs and SAR in the Waikato region.

Ngāti Hikairo ki Tongariro – Tūwharetoa

For Iwi support to Police SAR in the Central North Island and Bay of Plenty.

Don Robertson

For his service and commitment to AREC.

All recipient images supplied

Nominations open for the 2025 Awards

Anyone can nominate an individual or group for an Award. All the information on eligibility and nomination forms can be found online: nsar.govt.nz/awards

Nominations close 31 January 2026

Farewells for AREC

Don Robertson is looking forward to a well-deserved retire-ment after stepping down as CEO of Amateur Radio Emergency Communications.

Don joined AREC in 1979 and held a range of leadership roles at local and regional level. In 2019, he took on the National Director role in a voluntary capacity, with a vision to raise the standards of training, governance and capability for the organisation. Don developed a business case for Government funding, which included paid staff, and he became the organisation's first CEO. On behalf of the NZSAR Council, congratulations to Don for his Certificate of Achievement, and our thanks for more than four decades of service to AREC.

FED funding for the next three years confirmed

Government announces \$76.7 million investment that ensures the New Zealand Search and Rescue System is well supported.

The fuel excise duty or 'FED funding' as it is commonly known, describes Government investment under section 9(1) of the Land Transport Management Act 2003. This legislation enables Government to invest the revenue from fuel excise paid by recreational boaties and aircraft operators back into search and rescue and safety services.

This Government investment in 12 search and rescue organisations is to ensure those agencies have the right resources and capabilities to respond during SAR operations for the coming three years.

There are other Government investments which make up the total public investment in the sector. For example, Budget 2024 included \$23 million over three years for non-Government SAR organisations to repair and replace assets damaged in the North Island severe weather events. Also, Coastguard Tautiaki Moana and

Surf Life Saving New Zealand received Budget funding to provide Frontline Safety Services. These are crucial services, such as surf beach patrols and non-emergency boatie assistance, but are not considered search and rescue activities.

Associate Transport Minister James Meager says the New Zealand Search and Rescue System "provides critical services including distress monitoring, communications, and the coordination and delivery of search and rescue, including medical advice, initial medical assistance, or medical evacuation. The funding package ensures the continuation of those critical services for the next three years so that people can come home safely."

The Government's FED investment into the SAR sector is determined after a review by the Ministry of Transport. Reviews occur every three years, with the last in 2022.

The new three years funding package includes:

- Amateur Radio Emergency Communications (AREC) will receive \$3.2 million to support the organisation's operations.
- Land Safety Forum will receive \$1.1 million for its work to improve collaboration between 15 government agencies and volunteer organisations working across the search and rescue sector.
- Marlborough-Nelson Marine Radio Association will receive \$279,000 to continue to operate its Very High Frequency (VHF) channels that ensures the safety of recreational boat users in the Tasman, Nelson and Marlborough regions. The funding will be used for operator channel costs, maintenance and upgrades of its marine VHF repeater sites.
- NZ Police will receive \$0.795 million to support the continued employment of 11 District Search and Rescue Assistant Coordinators.
- NZ Search and Rescue Council (and Secretariat) will receive \$1.4 million to implement its Strategic Plan.
- Coastguard Tautiaki Moana will receive \$11.3 million to continue to deliver search and rescue activities, including funding for training, and information and business improvement.
- The Department of Conservation (DOC) will receive \$189,000 to cover its baseline SAR activities.
- Maritime NZ will receive \$17.2 million, which will cover costs incurred by operators for rescues performed, its search and rescue coordination role, and recreational craft safety activities.
- Mountain Safety Council will receive \$1.3 million, which will ensure it can continue to deliver the New Zealand Avalanche Advisory (NZAA).
- Surf Life Saving New Zealand will receive \$8.3 million, which will fund training, volunteer support, and the organisation's SAR operations.
- Land Search and Rescue will receive \$30.1 million, which will support the organisation's SAR activities and operations and ensure its volunteers meet personal protective equipment requirements.
- Youth Search and Rescue (YSAR) will receive total funding of \$1.56 million to support the organisation's activities.

Cooperation in the river corridor

Complementary skills and capabilities improve river search effectiveness in the lower North Island.

"It all started during our response to Cyclone Gabrielle," says Rob Bigwood, Area Coordinator for the Manawatu / Taranaki Surf Lifesaving SAR squad. "The Fire Emergency NZ Urban Search and Rescue (USAR) teams needed to get into flooded buildings to search them. Our team had Inflatable Rescue Boats (IRB) and the training to safely navigate the floodwater. We took responsibility for safe transport, and when the USAR experts were in the building, they took the lead for the search with us in support."

Closer to home, a search and rescue operation on a flooded Hutt River saw Rob's team deployed to search for a missing person last seen on the banks. "Our team is specifically trained for river searches, as we get called to jobs on the Manawatu River fairly regularly," says Rob. Standard procedure is to search in sections. "We travel downstream a short distance from the last known point, and then motor slowly upstream against the current, carefully searching around river hazards such as trees and rocks which could entrap a person."

A Land Search and Rescue CanyonSAR team from Wellington was also deployed to the Hutt River operation. "That flooded river had lots of nooks and crannies that needed to be cleared, but also large sections of open riverbank in between," says Alex Waterworth, who is the CanyonSAR Group and Volunteer Support Officer as well as a CanyonSAR volunteer team member. "It was just going to be too slow for us on foot to cover that search area, so we teamed up with the surf lifeguards and it worked really well."

The combined crews could move quickly between areas of interest. They were agile enough to access difficult spots in the swift water, and thorough enough to conclusively search each entrapment hazard. "It played perfectly to the strengths of each

group," says Alex. "The IRB crew would skilfully get us to a position where we could access a rock or [tree] strainer, then we could get amongst the hazard with avalanche probes and dive masks to thoroughly search it. Meanwhile the IRB would loiter downstream, ready to grab us if we slipped into the current." Rob agreed that it was an effective collaboration. "Our skills in that environment were best used on the water, whereas the canyon guys were really at home in the water around those hazards."

Just over a month later, Rob's team were called to another search, this time on the Manawatu River. "I'd seen the value of the combined team, so I immediately asked the Police if we could get CanyonSAR on the job," says Rob. Over the previous seven years, Rob has participated in seven searches in that river, where they have found the missing person, unfortunately deceased. "We're always looking for improvements, for ways to return the missing person sooner to their families. We've developed our river-specific capability to cover the rocky whitewater in the Manawatu Gorge, as well as the wide, tree-lined banks above and below the gorge. We have used poles to search into hazards, worked with the Police National Dive Squad, and also with USAR teams that have rugged waterproof cameras. In my opinion, the collaboration with the CanyonSAR teams really stood out as an effective tactic in these situations."

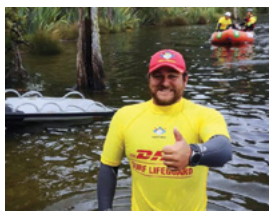
This combined search capability seems to suit the nature of the rivers and operational tasks in the lower North Island, so the two groups are looking at formalising the relationship with ongoing training and a memo of understanding. Just another great example of SAR agencies working together, for better outcomes for the lost, missing and injured.



An Inflatable Rescue Boat loiters in the eddy downstream, whilst Canyon SAR volunteers use avalanche probes to search the undercut upstream edge of the boulder. Image courtesy Alex Waterworth

Coordinating Cat II

Meet the newly graduated staff members coordinating SAROPS from Maritime NZ's Rescue Coordination Centre (RCCNZ).



Sam Blackmore

Born in the deep south and raised in Christchurch, Sam has been a volunteer Surf Lifeguard since he was 14. A qualified lawyer, Sam worked for two and a half years for Surf Life Saving New Zealand as National Life Saving Development Officer, using his legal skills on a range of policy projects.

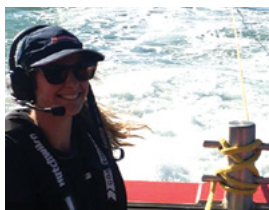
"When the SAR Officer role came up, it was the perfect mix of my lifelong interest in helping people, systems, structures and high level tactics and strategies."



Ari Olds

Originally from a farm in Zimbabwe, Ari spent nearly 20 years in Australia before coming to New Zealand in 2024. Careers in outdoor instruction and then paramedicine took Ari all over Australia, searching out the most interesting and remote contracts, often working on helicopters.

"Fulfilling an interest in climbing mountains brought me to New Zealand. The SARO role is going to be a fantastic challenge, but I'm really looking forward to working with a great bunch of dedicated people with really diverse backgrounds."



Bailey Lovett

Growing up in a fishing family in Bluff, Bailey pursued a passion for the sea. She completed a PhD in Marine Science and then worked as a marine biosecurity scientist at the Cawthron Institute, undertaking research on aquatic pests and diseases. Over this time, she also joined Coastguard Nelson.

"The SARO role is the perfect combination of two of my great passions: helping people and protecting the environment. I seem to thrive in a crisis and can see what needs doing. I really value the meaningful work within the SARO role and at RCCNZ more generally, and I'm grateful to have the opportunity to contribute."



James Simpson

Roles in finance, local government, charity and paramedicine make up James's professional background. Most recently, he has held senior leadership roles and emergency management positions for ambulance services in his native Scotland.

Outside work, James volunteers for the Hutt City Emergency Response Team (NZRT-18), as a training manager, and at the local radio station using his sound engineering skills. During the last 18 months in New Zealand, he's got right into tramping, and has the goal to visit every lighthouse in the country. James is particularly impressed at the calibre and dedication of the SAR volunteers in New Zealand and is looking forward to working with everyone in the sector.

All images supplied

Careers as a Search and Rescue Officer

Staff turnover at RCCNZ has traditionally been very low, a testament to how engaging and satisfying the work is. But a gradual shift towards more regular recruitment and training of new staff is expected as the highly experienced cohort naturally move on to retirement or other roles.

Training courses are scheduled when there are vacancies, and are delivered in-house at RCCNZ in Wellington. Applicants need to be very adaptable and excellent problem solvers. A background in the maritime, aviation or SAR sectors is highly desirable.

The 13-week intensive course has a mix of theory, practical scenarios and visits. "Frontline SAR experts assist with the training," says recent graduate Bailey Lovett. "For example, we learnt from Police SAR coordinators with decades of experience, who then acted in those roles during our scenarios. That makes it about as real as it can get during training."

"During the course we visited several SAR units, and learnt from experts in the aviation and marine sectors. We got to visit a

large research vessel, meet the ship's Master, and understand how they would manage an emergency on board, so we can assist in the best way possible."

Successful graduates spend around three months working day shifts under supervision, to gain exposure to a range of situations, before they join one of the five 'watches' as permanent staff. Each watch does a 12 hour shift, rostered on two day shifts, two night shifts, then four days off.

The five watches give RCCNZ the ability to surge extra staff during major incidents (such as Cyclone Gabrielle), as well as a regular capacity for ongoing professional development, project work, leave and sickness.

"Being a Search and Rescue Officer is a fantastic role, which is quite unlike any other job in New Zealand," says Mike Clulow. "Our people have such a range of interesting backgrounds. Everyone is dedicated to helping others, which shows in the outstanding teamwork and supportive culture. No two days are the same: it's a very rewarding career."

SAR by scent

Collaborations with local and international experts vital to the high standards of New Zealand Avalanche Dog Rescue capability.

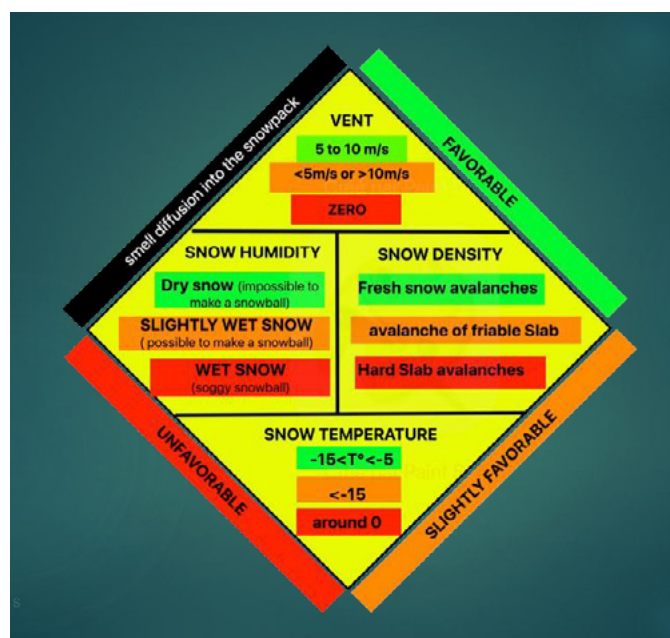
An avalanche transceiver is a small personal device that allows your companions to locate you quickly if you were buried in an avalanche. But without a properly functioning transceiver and the training to use it, one of your best chances of survival is the rapid deployment of an Operational Avalanche Rescue Dog team, to sniff out your burial location amongst the debris.

Search and Rescue Dogs Avalanche (SARDA) New Zealand is the volunteer organisation which provides the operational teams based at most major ski areas across New Zealand.

“For a relatively small capability, the standards of our teams are surprisingly high when measured against our peers worldwide,” says Karyn Robertson, SARDA National Coordinator. “A lot of the credit for our high standards goes to our strong relationship with the NZ Police Dog Training Section.” The SARDA volunteers have access to cutting edge Police training resources, and highly experienced Police trainers are fully involved in the avalanche dog training and assessment pathway.

SARDA is fostering international relationships and keeping up with best international practice and advanced research. One promising study, involving highly experienced french avalanche dog handler Fabrice Huot, models how the scent of a buried person travels through avalanche debris. “Interestingly, the research evidence shows that scent only travels vertically upwards through the snow, unless there’s a horizontal air pathway between debris blocks,” says Andy Hoyle, SARDA operational handler and volunteer committee member. “This challenges some of the traditional thinking here, and could help refine our response algorithms.”

Timeliness is crucial to achieving a live recovery with an organised avalanche response. Applying the right resources, in the right order to the right places means everything for a successful outcome. “A small improvement in our algorithm could be the difference between life and death” says Andy. SARDA has invited Fabrice out to New Zealand, to participate in a training camp and to conduct a similar study here. “We have a maritime snowpack, which is generally wetter and denser than a continental European pack. Evidence from a New Zealand study could refine the size of our [avalanche] probe pattern when the dog indicates a scent. The right size means we don’t waste precious minutes in areas of little to no probability.”



Avalanche burial incidents are less common in New Zealand than in the much busier northern hemisphere mountains. According to ‘Avalanche Incidents in New Zealand from 1998-2023’ published by the Mountain Safety Council, there’s a yearly average of 31 reported incidents and just over 1 fatality. “Fabrice personally attended multiple fatal burials in the Alps last season,” says Andy. “So there’s a whole other level of expertise that we want to learn from.”

As well as being a SARDA volunteer, Andy works as the General Manager - Quality at Whakapapa Ski Area. Although the SARDA members volunteer a massive amount of time to train and care for a dog, most are snow industry professionals based at the ski areas. “It has been great to see that SARDA and the voluntary aspects of the dog capability are getting better and better support from most ski areas. This reinforces that good relationships and collaboration are fundamental to an effective capability.”

Looking across the wider SAR sector, Andy is delighted that SARDA has been invited to collaborate with MountainSafety.info, an international hub of industry-leading research and best practice guidelines for avalanche safety and response. “Coming together with the undisputed international experts means that we all are following the same procedures with a common language. After all, we don’t respond alone, it’s always a multi-agency effort, with Police, local helicopter operators, plus Land Search and Rescue Alpine Cliff Rescue volunteers. SARDA is 100% committed to working constructively and collegially for the best outcomes for avalanche response.”



Andy Hoyle with Echo (left) and Karyn Robertson, SARDA National Coordinator.
Images courtesy Jane Dunn Photography

Learn more about SARDA avalanche search dog capability and training pathways at www.searchdogs.co.nz

Scent diffusion diagram reproduced with permission of Fabrice Huot.



10 questions with ...

Rob Hewitt

Rob Hewitt has been at the forefront of engagement between tangata whenua and water safety as well as the search and rescue system in recent years.

Tēnā Koe Rob, can you please introduce yourself?

Ko Takitimu te waka
Ko Tamatea Arikini te tangata
Ko Ngāi Te Rangikoianake te hapū
Ko Kahuranaki te maunga
Ko Poukawa te waiu
Ko te Hapuku te tangata
Ko Tumapuhiarangi te tekoteko
Ko Te Whatui-Apiti te Rangatira
Ko Kahuranaki te marae

Can you tell us a little more of your story before you fully engaged with search and rescue?

I grew up on a sheep and beef farm near Pōrangahau, central Hawke's Bay. It was 1986 when I joined the Navy straight out of boarding school with five mates. I contributed to search and rescue when our ship worked with P-3 Orion aircraft to retrieve lost fisherman who'd been found, but I didn't fully understand how much coordination and collaboration goes into that work. Later on I became a navy ship's diver and part of the role was body recovery, often with Police.

In 2006, you were rescued after drifting for four days in a diving incident. How did that change your life's path?

I stepped away from the ocean, leaving the Navy and focusing on my passion for rugby league. I built a career in management for elite level teams, including as assistant manager for the kiwis at two world cups.

So what brought you back to the ocean?

In 2010 I was invited to be a trainer of polynesian crews on ocean-going double hulled waka for an environmental documentary. I initially said no, but people I respected challenged me: "How are you giving back to the oceans which helped you survive your ordeal?" We trained in Devonport for two years, then I spent two further years sailing from New Zealand to California and back.

How did that lead to tangata whenua engagement work around water safety?

On the voyage, none of the polynesian crew had formal skippers tickets, so I reached out to Coastguard to get them qualified. In our discussions I learned how Māori and Pasifika were over-represented in the drowning statistics, and I asked what Coastguard was doing to teach the right skills in an accessible way to those communities.

Image supplied

And what was Coastguard's answer?

They had no Māori or Pasifika tutors, and weren't teaching in places where those at-risk communities could access the training. Together, we developed the Kia manu kia ora programme, delivering that training at marae and local churches with tutors from the ocean-going waka project. The programme acknowledged and respected the way those communities interacted with the water.

How did your work broaden into the wider SAR sector?

My rescue back in 2006 left me with a strong desire to give back to search and rescue. The Coastguard relationship brought opportunities to kōrero with other SAR organisations, and I challenged them on what they were doing to engage with tangata whenua or develop cultural competency. The sector has begun to face those challenges by bringing on Kaihautū Māori (cultural leaders) and supporting engagement and cultural projects.

Can you give us some examples of some of those successful projects in the SAR space?

A volunteer survey about developing their Te Ao Māori knowledge told us they wanted to get a better understanding of rāhui. We've conducted detailed research, iwi-volunteer engagement as well as educational videos for volunteers, land managers and the public. We've also helped create karakia (incantations) for several agencies, which helps clear the mind and focus on the gravity of the situation during an operation, and a vehicle for closure at the end of the job.

In 10 years time, where would you like to see our SAR sector in its Te Ao Māori journey?

I'd hope for the understanding that the journey is a long one. There needs to be respect within the relationship, and an ongoing, consistent commitment to resource and develop it.

In closing, can you share a whakataukī (Māori proverb) that you'd like members of the SAR sector to reflect on?

"Ehara taku toa i te toa takitahi" translates to "My strength is not that of a single warrior, but that of many." This emphasizes the importance of collective effort and acknowledges that success is often the result of teamwork and support from others. With this in mind I'd like to thank the other Kaihautū Māori, and the Tatai Heke group for their support and leadership. Dr Chanel Meads, Te Manawa, Ngatokorua Miratana, from NEMA, Pererika Makiha from Coastguard Tautiaki Moana, Mark Pirikahu from Land Search and Rescue, Wayne Rhodes from Maritime New Zealand, Brent Matehaere, Surf Life Saving NZ, and Andy Greig, NZSAR Secretariat.