

FSM 1500 - EXTERNAL RELATIONS**CHAPTER 1590 - DISASTER AND EMERGENCY OPERATIONS AND HOMELAND SECURITY****1596 - SEARCH AND RESCUE OPERATIONS****1596.01 - Authority**

The payment of necessary expenses incurred in search and rescue operations is authorized by 16 U.S.C. 575.

This statute imposes no duty, the breach of which would be actionable at law, on the Forest Service to search for and rescue persons lost in the National Forest. It merely authorizes the Forest Service to incur necessary expenses in search and rescue operations.

1596.02 - Objective

To render assistance in cases involving persons lost in the National Forest, transporting persons who are seriously ill or injured, or who die inside National Forest System lands, to the nearest place where the sick or injured person or where the body may be transferred to the appropriate authorities.

1596.03 - Policy

The Forest Service may render assistance in cases involving persons lost in the National Forest, transporting persons who are seriously ill or injured, or who die inside the National Forest System lands, to the nearest place where the sick or injured person or where the body may be transferred to the appropriate authorities.

The role of the Forest Service in search and rescue is one of supporting and developing strong State and local leadership. The local public authority, such as the county sheriff or State Fish and Game Department, has primary responsibility for the protection of life and property in search and rescue incidents. Field personnel must continue to be responsive to the public needs as they involve these aspects, with emphasis toward supporting and cooperating with the local officials.

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The Forest Service will take a temporary lead role in any search and rescue emergency in which immediate and quick response will reduce suffering or save lives. The concept of closest forces must be used, and the lead role maintained only until the predetermined local responsible authority is available to assume its leadership. After transferring the leadership role, the Forest Service will assume a supportive role and provide assistance to the fullest extent possible. In limited situations, it may be necessary to document the Forest Service leadership role in Search and Rescue missions with a Memorandum of Understanding or other appropriate agreement document based on closest resources, technical expertise and the coordination of a predetermined response. Unique situations requiring the Forest Service to take a predetermined lead role would require a Memorandum of Understanding signed by the Regional Forester.

When the Forest Service has assumed the lead role, direct expenses incurred must be paid from Forest Service appropriated funds. Instructions covering overtime must be followed whenever overtime is incurred in search and rescue missions (FSM 6153).

When the Forest Service has assumed a supporting role, the following exceptions apply:

1. Contract aircraft, when possible, must be released to the responsible search and rescue agency, and payment for services rendered must become the responsibility of that local agency.
2. When local lead agency requests volunteers from the Forest Service, the volunteers become agents of the lead local agency, and expenses are borne by the employee or by the lead local agency.

The benefited party must not be billed for costs that the Forest Service incurs during search and rescue missions.

The Forest Service has no authorities in place to expend Forest Service funds to render search and rescue assistance to persons outside the exterior boundaries of the National Forest System. However, if a search starts inside the exterior boundaries of the National Forest System, it may extend to areas immediately outside these boundaries if the circumstances of the situation demand.

Full support and encouragement must be given to local agencies to cooperate and coordinate with the Air Force Rescue Coordination Center at Tyndall Air Force Base, Florida. The Forest Service will not duplicate, or compete with, existing resources.

1596.04 - Responsibility

1596.04a - Chief

The Secretary has delegated to the Chief the responsibility to administer policies and procedures related to search and rescue in the National Forest System.

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1596.04b - Director, Law Enforcement and Investigations

The Director of Law Enforcement and Investigations is delegated search and rescue responsibilities in the Washington Office.

1596.04c - Regional Forester

Each Regional Forester is responsible for developing standards and guides necessary to coordinate with search and rescue activity in each Region.

1596.04d - Forest Supervisor

The Forest Supervisor is responsible for developing search and rescue plans and provide guidance to the District Rangers. Search and rescue activities on Experimental Forests must be coordinated with the local research administrator.

1596.04e - District Ranger

District Rangers are responsible for deciding when to render search and rescue assistance, and for conducting search and rescue activities within established guidelines.