

After climber deaths, Oregon faces beacon question

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PORTLAND, Ore. - When a rescue team came on Luke Gullberg's body at the top of a Mount Hood glacier and tried to figure out what had become of his climbing partners, they looked up at a forbidding rise of ice and snow.

They saw no sign of Katie Nolan and Anthony Vietti on the 1,500-foot Reid headwall, no gear in bright color standing out from the monochrome, no trail. And they heard no radio signal.

Had Nolan and Vietti rented a \$5 locator beacon and had they been able to activate it after whatever misfortune ended their climb on Dec. 12, the searchers below might have been able to pinpoint their location. The two are presumed buried beneath several feet of snow and ice.

It's the second time in three years that a search and rescue operation on the 11,239-foot mountain has failed to turn up climbers who went up the mountain without signaling devices and got into deadly trouble.

So, politicians, rescue crews, mountaineers and others are debating once again whether to require such climbers to carry locator beacons.

The recent rescue mission has raised the question, "When are you going to stop the carnage on Mount Hood?" said Jim Bernard, a commissioner in Clackamas County on the south side of the mountain.

"People are dying for no reason," said Bernard, a longtime climber who said he had been up Mount Hood several times. "We need to find a way to protect them and we need to find a way to protect the people's resources."

A bill to require Mount Hood climbers to carry beacons on winter expeditions failed in the Oregon Legislature in 2007. Bernard hopes the Legislature will revisit the question, or the state's congressional delegation will take an interest.

He said the county commission will take another stab at a requirement that climbers carry locator beacons. Commissioners have previously run into a restriction on the kind of agreements they could make with the U.S. Forest Service, which manages the mountain.

It's a mystery to many who don't venture above timberline why the stiffest opposition to requiring beacons comes from the elite mountaineers who volunteer their time and put themselves at risk to get people off the mountain.

Beacons can be useful, but climbers should have the freedom to weigh the safety benefits of any piece of equipment against its weight or how it might impede their agility on a mountain that can rain down ice and rock at any moment, said Steve Rollins of Portland Mountain Rescue, a leader of Mount Hood search and rescue operations.

Mountaineers also warn that requiring the devices can lead some climbers to take undue risk, figuring on a rescue if they get into trouble, and that beacons aren't always going to lead to rescues.

Even as they found Gullberg's body, Rollins said, the snowpack beneath the feet of the members of the mountain rescue team was "shooting cracks" and making a "whumping" sound.

It was, he said, Mother Nature screaming about avalanche danger. That only rose during the search.

"I do not believe that we could have gotten there even if we had a beacon," said Rollins.

One state official argues against such a requirement on grounds of personal liberty.

"The land is public, and I'm not a real big fan of mandating what people have to take with them when they want to go for a walk," said Georges Kleinbaum, search and rescue coordinator for the Oregon Office of Emergency Management.

Besides, he said, enforcement would be impossible. "It's a big mountain," he said. "Are you going to put a ring around it, or force everyone through an entry point?"

As many as 10,000 climbers attack Mount Hood each year, based on the free permits for which they-self register.

"That argument that it infringes on their freedom, I just think that's baloney," said Sheriff Joe Wampler of Hood River County on the north side of the mountain.

Wampler led the 2006 search and rescue that ended with one climber's body found in a snow cave. The bodies of two others have never been found.

Cost is a consideration, Wampler said. The 10-day effort in 2006 cost the county \$5,000 a day in overtime, part-time pay, food, fuel and other expenses. There's also the cost of military aircraft missions, sometimes accounted for as part of training or flight-hour requirements.

But, Wampler said, the safety of searchers and the potential for rescue is paramount.

"I just want every opportunity to find them if they turn up missing," he said.

Even if a beacon signal doesn't lead to a rescue, he said, it would tell authorities where eventually to find the body, often a concern of relatives. He calls for beacons to be required above timberline throughout Oregon.

Charley Shimanski of Evergreen, Colo., president of the national Mountain Rescue Association, said the group knows of no similar requirement anywhere in the country, for beacons or any other safety equipment. At Mount McKinley in Alaska, he said, climbers have to sit through an instructional video before they go up.

There are a variety of locator devices, of a size between cell phones and TV remotes. The \$5 Mount Hood rental beacon is older technology, and rescuers wouldn't tune in until somebody is reported overdue. Outdoor stores sell devices that use GPS and satellite technology to send immediate distress signals. They can weigh 5 to 9 ounces and cost up to \$400.

In 2007, the Oregon House passed a bill to require Mount Hood climbers in winter to carry locators. It passed the House but died in the Senate when committee Chairwoman Vicki Walker wouldn't hold a hearing.

"I got lobbied heavily by the climbing community," she said. A family friend and climber argued, "We know what we're doing. We'll take them if we want them. Don't force this on us," she said.

"Well, I'm not so sure anymore," she said. "We're losing a lot of folks out there."

She has since left the Senate for a federal job. Senate President Peter Courtney said he hasn't heard strong calls yet for a bill to be considered at the Legislature's monthlong session in February, and the topic should get a full hearing.

That might mean no action until the Legislature's full session in 2011, and the urgency for it will fade, said State Rep. Carolyn Tomei of Milwaukie, a backer of the 2007 bill.

"When these tragedies are in the people's minds," she said, "that's when we can get the public's support."