# OPERATING PROCEDURE NO. 11
# GUIDELINES FOR OPERATING AROUND WATER

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## REVISION RECORD

| Revision | Release Date | Description | Affected Sections |
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# OPERATING PROCEDURE NO. 11: GUIDELINES FOR OPERATING AROUND WATER

## FOREWORD

The Washington State Animal Response Team (WASART) is a private, non-government organization dedicated to preparing, planning, responding, rescuing, evacuating, recovering, and sheltering animals during natural, human-made, or technological emergencies or disasters such as flooding, fires, volcanic eruptions, earthquakes, terrorism, or chemical spills, etc. WASART works in affiliation with state and local emergency management agencies utilizing the principles of the Incident Command System (ICS). As some of these emergencies take place in/on/near water (rivers, lakes, flooded areas, etc.), this document serves as a set of guidelines for keeping WASART responders safe and determining when specialized water rescue teams should be requested.

This document is for official WASART use only.

DO NOT DISSEMINATE

Members are prohibited from publishing this document in any form to any non-member and may not release any information contained herein to any other person or entity without receiving written authorization from the WASART President, Vice-President, or Training Director in advance.

## 1.0 WASART DEPLOYMENTS AROUND WATER

WASART does not currently maintain a swiftwater rescue team and generally does not conduct water rescues. However, there will be situations in which teams encounter water while in the field and will need to make go / no-go assessments and decide if outside resources are needed. Situations may include:

- Fording rivers
- Operating at the edge of a body of water
- Being requested by an outside agency to board their boat to assist with animal handling tasks

This document outlines the decision-making process surrounding water-related hazards encountered on deployments, not a new type of deployment. This document is not meant to be an exhaustive resource for water rescue, but rather an overview of basic hazards and risk mitigation steps to decide when outside resources are needed.

## 2.0 CALLOUT PROCEDURES

Call-out procedures for deployments involving water remain the same as any Sheltering or TRT deployment.

## 3.0 INCIDENT COMMAND SYSTEM

Deployments involving water will follow the same ICS structure as defined in the Sheltering and TRT deployment procedures.

## 4.0 JOINT OPERATIONS WITH OTHER TEAMS AND AGENCIES

When a request for WASART aid is made or WASART requests aid from an outside team or agency on a deployment involving water-related hazards, WASART call-out procedures will be followed. Upon arrival at the incident, the WASART person in charge (the Operations Chief, or OC, in a WASART-only deployment) or designee will contact the Incident Commander (IC) or their designee of the Agency Having Jurisdiction (AHJ). The ICS structure will be reviewed and mutually agreed upon. If no Incident Command system is in place upon arrival, WASART responders on scene will assume the role of Incident Command based on direction from the AHJ. WASART's OC should make it clear to the IC that WASART does not have formal water rescue training and, if applicable, communicate the specific water-related training that the animal handlers possess. The WASART OC or Safety Officer may halt operations if they believe that conditions are unsafe, becoming unsafe, or beyond WASART's capabilities.

## 5.0 BASIC WATER-RELATED HAZARDS

Basic hazards associated with water rescue:

- Foot entrapments
    - Foot entrapments occur when a foot or leg gets wedged between rocks, logs, or debris on the riverbed. The force of the current can push the subject underwater and downstream, often making self-rescue impossible.
    - If you fall in, keep your feet on the surface to avoid foot entrapments.
- Strainers
    - Debris like trees / branches / fences that allows water to flow past while trapping people / gear either up or downstream.
- Trauma
    - Current can send debris downstream and collide with subjects / responders, and subjects / responders can also be swept downstream into obstacles.
- Drowning
- Slippery surfaces
- Pressure
    - Water is extremely powerful; rivers do not stop flowing if you get into trouble.
    - According to NOAA (National Oceanic and Atmospheric Association), "A mere 6 inches of fast-moving flood water can knock over an adult. It takes just 12 inches of rushing water to carry away most cars and just 2 feet of rushing water can carry away SUVs and trucks. It is NEVER safe to drive or walk into flood waters." (https://www.weather.gov/safety/flood-turn-around-dont-drown)
- Weather

- Low head dams (more on this in *Section 8. No-Go Conditions*)
- Releases of water from dams
- Hypothermia
- Laryngospasm
    - Sudden cold water exposure can cause an involuntary "gasp", which can lead to swallowing or inhaling water. The larynx then spasms, sealing off the windpipe to protect the lungs. In most cases it resolves on its own, but can be panic-inducing and is particularly dangerous if it occurs in water.

## 6.0 SCENE SIZE-UP AND RISK MITIGATION

Due to the dynamic nature and power of water coupled with the multitude of visible and invisible hazards associated with it, it is easier and safer to rule situations out, instead of ruling them in.

- Attempt to minimize exposure to water.
- Always choose the least risky option that will still accomplish the goal.
- Consult maps and other available resources to scout a path where the water level is lower and slower.
- Remember the priority list (you, your team, the public, the subject, and humans before animals).
- **If any of the No-Go Conditions listed in Section 8 are present, or if the team's safety will be compromised with the resources at hand, readjust the plan, or stand down and call for additional resources.**

At minimum, conduct a complete SAR-GAR assessment with your team and evaluate the following a couple hundred feet up- and downstream before moving forward:

- What is the speed of the water? To approximate this, throw a stick into the stream and count the seconds it takes to move an estimated distance.
    - The Whitewater, RiverApp, and CalTopo apps all have river gauges and other useful water flow information.
- Are there white caps (frothy, faster-moving water near obstacles like rocks)?
- How deep is the water?
- Can you see through the water to the bottom? What material is the substrate (sand, pebbles, boulders, branches)? The smoother the substrate (like pavement or smooth rocks), the harder it will be to stay upright, while gaps between rocks create the potential for foot entrapments.
- What are your team members' abilities and outside training?
- How cold is the water? What season is it?
- Do you see stationary or moving strainers?
- Is there an upstream or downstream dam with scheduled or unscheduled releases of large volumes of water? If scheduled, when?
- What is the weather currently, what were the rain and snowmelt levels over the past week, and what is the forecast for the duration of the mission?
- Will you be able to cross back to the near side of the river if need be?

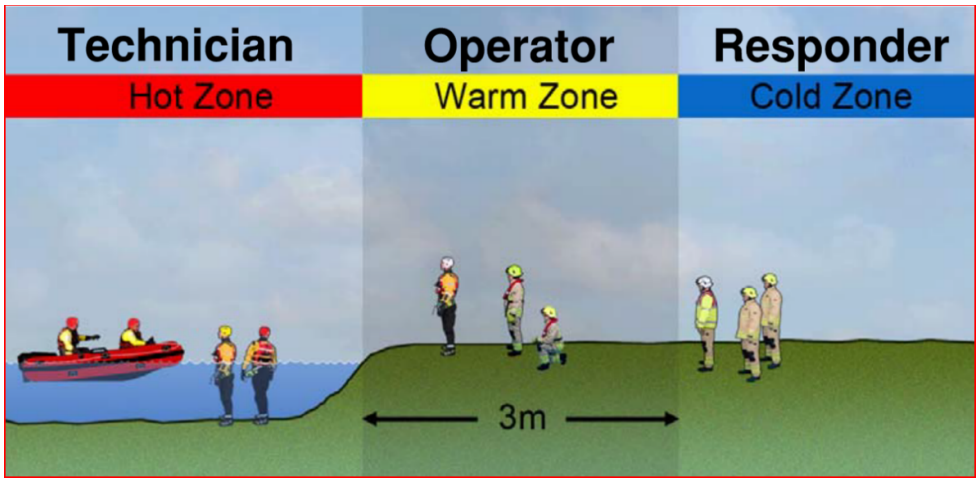
- What are the consequences if a rescuer falls into the water? What if their boots and socks get soaked?
    - Do you have sufficient resources (personnel and gear) to rescue such an individual, prevent and treat hypothermia, continue the deployment, and make it back to the Command Post without injury?

If the decision is made to operate in or near water, responders should have proper PPE according to the zone in which they are operating **(Section 7: Hazard Zones)**. Have a Medical Lead and first aid supplies (AED and hypothermia care) on standby, with a plan for drowning, hypothermia, and trauma. If CPR is needed for a drowning subject, start with 2 rescue breaths, then begin normal compression / rescue breath cycles.

## 7.0 HAZARD ZONES

Operations are conducted in geographical zones in relation to the water. These zones should be clearly identified (bright-colored webbing is useful for establishing zone borders) and communicated prior to operation. Individual responders' abilities and comfort level should be factored in when assigning roles in different zones.

- **Hot Zone** is *the water*.
    - Minimum PPE for responders working in this zone (including being on a boat operated by an outside team or agency):
        - Swiftwater-rated helmet
        - Personal flotation device (PFD): Type III inherently buoyant (not inflatable) vest designed and labeled specifically for swift water rescue.
        - If the water is still (like a pond), a Type II Near Shore Buoyancy Vest is acceptable as a PFD.
        - Non-waterproof, close-toed boots/shoes
    - Responders in the hot zone should know how to swim.
- **Warm Zone** is within 3 meters (10 feet) of the water.
    - This distance may be adjusted depending on the slope of the bank.
    - A responder working in this zone should be tied into an edge restraint line that prevents them from entering the water (same setup as TRT responders working in the Hot Zone by a cliff edge).
    - Minimum PPE for responders working in this zone:
        - All PPE outlined for a typical TRT high angle operation.
- **Cold Zone** is established outside the Hot and Warm Zones.




## 8.0 NO-GO CONDITIONS

On a case-by-case basis, if hazards can be safely mitigated by on-scene responders, operating near or even in water may be appropriate, including when under the direction of an outside team or agency. However, WASART responders should not be in the Hot Zone when any of the following conditions are met:

- Wide area flooding
    - Flooding-specific hazards include but are not limited to:
        - Unseen underwater hazards like holes and sharp objects
        - Electrocution from downed power lines
        - Unknown structural integrity of flooded structures / areas
        - Contaminated water from human / animal waste, chemicals, etc.
- Swiftwater
    - Swiftwater is defined by the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) as water moving faster than one knot or ~1.15 mph. By comparison, the average walking pace is 3.3 mph.
- Downstream low head dams
    - Due to the horizontal symmetry of low head dams, coupled with decrease buoyancy of the frothy, aerated water as it comes over the dam and swirls back upstream, it is extremely difficult to swim out into calm waters. This is one of the deadliest downstream hazards.
- Large strainers (moving or stationary)
- Nighttime operations
- Thunder or lightning in the area
- Note about throwbags:
    - Throwbagging is a skill that takes significant practice, and without accuracy and efficiency is anywhere from useless to potentially dangerous (once the ropes are in the water, they become an entanglement risk). If there is a need for a throw-bagger due to the risk that someone could be swept downstream without

the ability to self-rescue, operations should halt and outside resources should be contacted.

In the case of certain no-go conditions being met while up trail (example a dog across a raging river), WASART may hand over water operations to an outside resource and remain on scene if safe to do so, assisting outside the Hot Zone. Once the water-related portion of the operation has ended and the outside resource has handed the subject back to WASART, WASART may resume the rescue (example by leading or packing out the dog) from the scene back to the Command Post.

## 9.0 COMMUNICATION

Use of a whistle and hand signals are the desired modes of communication in / near swiftwater as radio transmissions and voice commands are typically hard to hear. Signals should be repeated by the receiving party to confirm the message and action conveyed. These signals should be agreed upon and modified for specific mission needs during the pre-mission briefing. The further away one is from the receiver, the slower and more exaggerated the hand signals should be.

**Whistle Signals:**


1 Blast – Attention! 3 Blasts – Help!

**Hand Signals:**

"Go"

"Stop". A single arm held horizontal is sufficient

"Okay"/"Go" (fist overhead, stationary)

"Are you OK?" (Tapping head repeatedly). The same signal in response means, "I'm OK"

"I'm not OK" (Arms crossed over chest)

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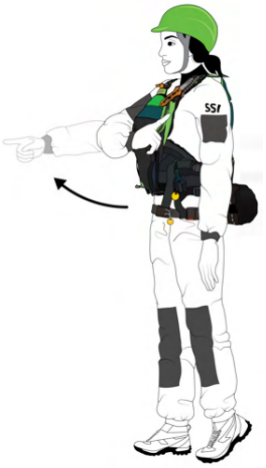
| "I need a rope" (with a fist, touch your head and move your hand away from your head with an open palm, repeatedly) | "Swimmer" (Make a freestyle stroke and point to the swimmer) | "Rock" (Hit your fist with an open palm and point to the hazard). |



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| "Entrapment" (Holding the forward bend, point in the direction of the entrapped subject) | "I'm watching you" | "I'm coming to you". If you point to yourself, it means "You come to me" |