



National
Operational
Guidance

Control measure

Safety officers: Water rescue



NFCC
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Control measure knowledge

Safety officers should be appointed, briefed and positioned as soon as practicable. They should have an understanding of the nature of the incident and the environment that personnel are working in. The hazard area and activities being carried out should influence the number and location of safety officers required at water incidents. Safety officers should not carry out their duties in isolation and should always have an appropriate method of communicating. For more information refer to [Effective communications: Water rescue](#).

The effective use of personnel and equipment, particularly when waiting for additional resources to arrive, will need to be prioritised. It may be necessary to implement either downstream safety teams or upstream spotters according to a risk assessment.

The following safety officer roles are suitable for water incidents:

Upstream spotters

Upstream spotters should be appointed to identify hazards, such as debris that may present a risk to personnel and the casualty in the water. This information should be communicated to personnel, including the incident commander, at the earliest opportunity. Upstream spotters should also communicate any changes in conditions, or sudden releases of water.

Downstream safety officers

Downstream safety officers are positioned to retrieve personnel and provide assistance to casualties.

Situational awareness and a risk assessment should be promptly used to determine if downstream safety teams will be required. This should take into account the urgency of the rescue and the available resources.

Personnel should be positioned at a suitable point downstream to perform rescues. When using safety systems, such as downstream safety lines, the time required to establish and deploy them is a factor to be considered. It may be necessary to adopt alternative downstream safety until systems have been established.

Safety systems of work, personal protective equipment (PPE) and equipment should be appropriate



for the water environment; for example, when working near large static bodies of water, watercraft may be used to recover personnel who accidentally enter the water. A fixed downstream safety line, or teams positioned on the bankside, may be appropriate to perform in water or bank-based rescues.

Downstream safety officers should be positioned with safe entry and egress points in mind. Entry and egress may not necessarily be the same point; water and bank conditions may make a point further downstream more suitable for egress.

Downstream safety teams should be comprised of a suitable number of personnel and appropriate equipment, with the ability to rescue all people committed to the water, including personnel in watercraft and casualties.

If downstream safety officers are not deployed, another means of recovering casualties or personnel should be considered, such as hose inflation kits or a safety boat.

Safety officers for the management of tethers or lines

If watercraft or personnel are tethered, trained personnel should manage any lines or tethers in use. They should be positioned at a point of relative safety, considering the requirements of the rescue.

Appointed safety officers should perform checks of equipment and personal protective equipment (PPE), confirm communication signals, hazards, control measures and any expected tasks. Safety officers should ensure that the clean line principle is maintained throughout the rescue. For more information refer to [Clean line principle: Working near, on or in water](#).

Any member of personnel managing a line should always have a clear line of sight to the tethered member of personnel or personnel in the watercraft and maintain verbal or visual communication with them.

Controlling hazards entering the area of operations

Members of the public, including swimmers, divers and those using vessels, may be unaware of operational activity. They may affect search and rescue activities or endanger personnel, casualties and themselves. Moving vessels can also cause water movement, making searching and rescues more difficult.

To provide a safe working environment, spotters should be positioned a suitable distance from the area of operations so that they can inform personnel of potential hazards entering the area. They may also need to stop members of the public from entering the area while a water search or rescue is in progress. When positioning spotters, consider the speed of flow and physical restrictions of the location, to allow the best opportunity for early identification and communication of hazards.

Control of cordons

It may be necessary to appoint a safety officer to ensure that the cordons are maintained and that the personnel operating within the cordons are wearing the necessary PPE in line with the identified risks, such as unstable riverbanks and unguarded hazards.

The cordons may need to be extended or reduced, following a risk assessment. The safety officer should monitor the situation and make recommendations for changes to the incident commander. The safety officer should also ensure personnel are kept advised about any changes to the cordons. For more information refer to [Cordon controls: Water rescue](#).

Strategic actions

Fire and rescue services should:

- Provide equipment suitable for establishing safety systems at water incidents

Tactical actions

Incident commanders should:

- Consider appropriately deploying adequate safety officers at water rescue incidents
- Consider using safety systems when carrying out water rescues
- Appropriately restrict members of the public from entering the area of operations while a water search or rescue is in progress