

Program aims to make people safer in the backcountry

Existing safety programs will be consolidated

BY GLENN BOHN
VANCOUVER SUN

THE PROVINCE | A new outdoor safety program to reduce the number of people lost or injured in B.C.'s backcountry, has been announced by the provincial and federal governments.

Solicitor-General Rich Coleman outlined the AdventureSmart education program, which will consolidate existing programs and start up new ones, at a news conference in North Vancouver Monday.

"It's a simple message," said Coleman, who is also public safety minister. "Get informed and go outdoors. We don't want people to feel they can't go out and enjoy the great province of B.C., but we want them to do it safer."

The RCMP's existing Hug-a-Tree and Survive program for children aged five to 12 is to be presented by volunteers in B.C.'s school system. In addition, teen peers are to go to schools, bike races, ski hills and other places to talk about outdoor safety with youths in Grades 7 to 12.

The government has already launched a new website, www.adventuresmart.ca, which provides information and links to outdoor safety programs, for both youths and adults.

The emphasis is on the simple precautions that backcountry safety advocates have preached for decades, such as taking along extra clothing in case of bad weather, and always telling someone where you're going and when you expect to return.

Over the next three years, the AdventureSmart program is to get \$985,000 from the federal government's National Search and Rescue Secretariat, \$94,500 from the B.C. government-funded B.C. Search and Rescue Association, and administrative help from the Provincial Emergency Program.

That bill is smaller than the cost of



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Solicitor-General Rich Coleman announces new initiative to promote outdoor recreational activity and safety.

rescues and medical care.

Jim Mcallister of the Provincial Emergency Program said PEP alone spent \$1.1 million in search and rescue operations last year. It's been estimated those operations would have cost as much as \$6 million if the search and rescue volunteers in groups like North Shore Rescue had been paid.

In 2001, shortly after the B.C. Liberal government came to power, Coleman's ministry eliminated its \$20,000 grant to the Revelstoke-based Canadian Avalanche Centre, a group that gives the public information about avalanche conditions.

However, Victoria did an about-face after several deadly avalanche seasons. The avalanche centre's Clair Israelson, who attended Monday's news conference, said the centre is now getting \$125,000 in B.C. government grants.

Last year, search and rescue volunteers were called out 955 times in the province to help find people like hikers and snowboarders.

Most of the time, they manage to find them alive, give them first aid, and save their lives. But 82 people died in the backcountry last year, and another 221 were injured.

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