

Volcano Rescue Team gets BPA snowcat

Local News

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Southwest Washington's Volcano Rescue Team is better equipped for winter emergencies in the rugged Mount St. Helens region, following the Bonneville Power Administration's Wednesday donation of a track-driven snowcat to the volunteer rescue group.



Increasing winter recreation has led to a rising number of search and rescue calls for the Rescue Team, including many where a snowcat would have provided faster and safer transportation for rescuers and evacuation for victims. Until now the Rescue Team usually responded to winter emergencies on snowmobiles or foot, with members providing all their own personal equipment.

The Volcano Rescue Team is based in Yacolt, Wash., and is part of North Country Emergency Medical Service, which responds to emergencies across more than 1,000 square miles of southwest Washington, including Mount St. Helens National Volcanic Monument.

"We're often going far into backcountry areas where there is no other way in," said Tom McDowell, director of North Country EMS. "With a snowcat you can get a large number of people out in the field without our guys having to hike in and without people being exposed to the snow and the cold."

In some conditions a snowcat could make the difference in saving lives, he said.

BPA used the snowcat to maintain transmission lines and typically sells such used equipment or transfers it to other federal agencies to get the best return for ratepayers. However, the agency determined in this case that donating the snowcat to the Volcano Rescue Team would provide lasting

benefit to the region BPA serves.



“For a search and rescue agency that’s covering the area around Mount St. Helens, it’s a huge piece of equipment that would be very expensive to acquire on their own,” said Ulrik Larsen, BPA’s property disposal officer. “Our responsibility is to get the best value for ratepayers. In this instance, if even one life is saved, that’s a very large payoff.”

Larsen is a mountain climber himself. “I knew exactly the sort of thing they’re going out there to deal with,” he said.

The snowcat is valued at about \$15,000, making it one of BPA’s largest donations in terms of dollar value and the largest in several years. BPA used the four-person 1979 Bombardier snowcat to access remote transmission lines in winter, but is now replacing the vehicle as the agency updates and standardizes its snowcat fleet.

BPA is a not-for-profit federal electric utility that operates a high-voltage transmission grid comprising more than 15,000 miles of lines and associated substations in Washington, Oregon, Idaho and Montana. It also markets more than a third of the electricity consumed in the Pacific Northwest. The power is produced at 31 federal dams operated by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and Bureau of Reclamation and one nuclear plant in the Northwest and is sold to more than 140 Northwest utilities. BPA purchases power from seven wind projects and has more than 2,300 megawatts of wind interconnected to its transmission system.