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News Release

For release March 1, 2010

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Intermittent emergency beacon frustrates rescuers for two months

A "Personal Locater Beacon" (PLB) designed for emergency notification for wilderness and remote-area travelers had sheriffs and search and rescue teams scrambling for more than two months, when it was inadvertently triggered nine times from Berthoud Pass to Crested Butte. The device doesn't indicate what the emergency is, so emergency responders must assume it is a life-threatening emergency and each time search and rescue resources were immediately called to respond to the signal.

The owner of the beacon, an ACR Electronics PLB-300 MicroFix, was a resident of Fraser, Colorado, and is an active backcountry skier who frequently skis the Berthoud Pass area. Last year he received the PLB as a birthday present from an out-of-state relative who knew he skied a lot. The message from his relative was that this was an avalanche beacon and that they wanted him to be safe. Having not read the information in the box or on the back of the device, he would turn-on the beacon every time he began to take a run in the backcountry. After returning to the road he would then turn it off.

He had no idea that every time he turned it on it he was broadcasting a distress signal to international satellites that send the signal to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and the U.S. Air Force Rescue Coordination Center. And the PLB was never on long enough to pinpoint its exact location. Had the owner registered his PLB as required, authorities would have known his name, address and contact information the first time the distress signal was broadcast. PLBs are an outstanding emergency beacon and save lives when used correctly. They do not work like an avalanche beacon, which only works in conjunction with another avalanche beacon to find someone buried under snow and has a short range.

On February 11, several law enforcement agencies and three search and rescue teams tracked the PLB from Berthoud Pass to Winter Park and then into Boulder. Members of the Rocky Mountain Rescue Group were able to use "Direction Finding" equipment to locate the PLB, and its owner, in the City of Boulder.

But long before that, the owner first triggered the emergency beacon on December 14, 2009 near Berthoud Pass. The PLB was repeatedly set off in December and January, 2010 resulting in rescuers and sheriff's departments to initiate a search for the errant signal.

On February 11, 2010 an emergency signal was again received from the same unit and the Clear Creek County Sheriff was notified. What was different this time was that the PLB continued to send data bursts to the passing satellites. The owner had forgotten to turn it off and left it in his car. Finally the PLB could be tracked and it was found, in the car, at a medical building parking lot in Boulder, where the owner was at a doctor's appointment.

The Clear Creek County Sheriff's Office began an investigation once the PLB was found. Investigators met with the owner and determined he was not aware of the consequences of turning on the beacon each time he was skiing. No charges will be filed and the PLB device has been returned to its owner. A sheriff's officer watched the PLB owner register this PLB.

The Clear Creek County Sheriff's Office believes that PLBs and similar devices will assist all rescue teams in locating lost or injured people. To improve the effectiveness of PLBs, owners should read all of the instructions in their manual and become totally familiar with their PLB's operation. Owners are also responsible to register their unit as required by law, so in case of activation, the Air Force Rescue Coordination Center can quickly validate the alert with a friendly telephone call to the designated emergency contact. The Clear Creek County Sheriff's Office reminds users that PLBs should only be used as a "last resort" if someone is injured or lost in the wilderness.

To register a PLB visit: www.beaconregistration.noaa.gov