

Taxpayers Pay Millions for Rescues

By Jonathan D. Salant

The federal government spends millions of dollars a year to rescue capsized boaters, stranded hikers and injured campers but doesn't seek reimbursement--even from people whose own risk-taking puts them in danger.

In Michigan, where at least 95 ice fishermen have been rescued from lakes in one area alone this winter, lawmakers are considering charging for rescues of people who were reckless or ignored warnings.

But the U.S. Coast Guard and the National Park Service, two federal agencies that handle thousands of rescues a year, say they don't want to send out bills because it might discourage those in need from calling for help.

"One of the last things we want is somebody who would not want a rescue because of the potential of having to pay for it, and therefore losing a life," said Coast Guard Cmdr. Mike Lopinsky.

Even relatively simple rescues can be costly.

In December, the Coast Guard and local agencies spent a total \$85,000 to rescue 18 fishermen from an ice floe that broke off in Michigan's Lake St. Clair and was sinking in a snowstorm. The operation, conducted in gusty winds that drove wind chills below zero, required several boats and a helicopter.

Officials said the fishermen used bad judgment by going out on the lake too early in the season, before the ice was safe.

The same month, the Coast Guard spent \$130,275 to rescue three balloonists who failed in their attempt to circle the world and ditched their craft off Oahu, Hawaii, on Christmas Day. The balloonists included Richard Branson, the British chairman of the Virgin records, soda and airlines empire, and U.S. millionaire Steve Fossett.

After the rescue, Branson said he would pay if asked. But the Coast Guard didn't ask.

The National Taxpayers Union, a Washington-based group that advocates less government spending, says such individuals should foot the bill when they intentionally put themselves in danger.

"People who knowingly take a risk to try to set a record ought to assume the financial costs," said Peter Sepp, the group's spokesman. "These are people who know the dangers but are going ahead anyway. Taxpayers should not subsidize thrill seekers."

The Coast Guard spent \$380 million of its \$4 billion budget in 1997 on search-and-rescue operations, while the National Park Service spent \$3.4 million the same year, the most recent figures available. The Air Force also helped with rescues but did not have figures immediately available.

The totals include rescues of people who became endangered by unforeseen circumstances as well as those who were taking risks.

Coast Guard spokesman Lopinsky said the money is well spent: His agency saved almost 4,000 lives and \$878 million worth of property in 1997.

Just last week, a Coast Guard helicopter in Petit Bois Island, Miss., that was looking for a sunken barge instead rescued a 7-year-old boy, four adults and three golden retrievers from two boats stranded near an island. "At one point we had five survivors and three big dogs in our helicopter. It was crowded, but it was a neat rescue," Coast Guard Lt. Tim Grimes recalled.

The rescues of at least 95 fishermen in the one area of Michigan prompted state lawmakers to introduce legislation requiring those who put themselves in danger by ignoring warnings to pay rescue costs, or perform community service.

“Some of these people just defy the laws of consequence,” said Democratic state Rep. William Callahan, a sponsor of the measure. “They will think twice before they do something stupid again.”

Similar bills have been introduced annually in Hawaii, where federal and county rescuers spent \$75,000 in 1992 to rescue a movie cameraman trapped in a steaming volcanic crater. The cameraman had been shooting movie footage of the world’s most active volcano, Kilauea.

The National Park Service in 1993 considered requiring mountain climbers and others engaged in risky adventures to pay for their own rescues, but dropped the idea.

“If we had to think about charging a victim, does that mean we’re going to be hesitant to call in two or three helicopters because the family can’t afford it?” asked Ken Phillips, the search and rescue coordinator at Grand Canyon National Park, which charges only for transporting an injured person to a hospital.

“If we start taking shortcuts, that might wind up compromising somebody’s life,” he said.

Instead, some national parks are stepping up efforts to discourage reckless behavior and thrill seekers.

At Denali National Park and Preserve in Alaska, hikers who wish to climb Mount McKinley, North America’s highest peak, must register in advance and list previous mountain climbs. In addition, each climber is charged \$150, which helps finance rescues.

J.D. Swed, the South District ranger at Denali, said the pre-registration has reduced the number of mountain rescues. The government spent an average of \$461.33 per hiker for rescues in 1992, but that number dropped to \$63.15 per hiker in 1997.