NOMINATION FOR THE
2016 USGS GROUP SAFETY AND HEALTH
AWARD OF EXCELLENCE

BRIAN LOVING, GUY FOSTER and COLIN PAINTER
The Kansas Water Science Center Field Work "Safe Return" Plan

The U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) has long had a policy requiring field personnel to report to their supervisor, a family member, or another co-worker when field work had been completed and the employee had safely returned to either their temporary duty station (hotel) or office. The Kansas Water Science Center (KSWSC) began seeking a more comprehensive "Safe-Return" plan in early 2013 with the goals of (1) establishing a more clearly defined set of responsibilities for ensuring the safe return of field personnel, and (2) providing failsafe methods should an accident occur early in the day. Mr. Brian Loving, Mr. Guy Foster, and Mr. Colin Painter have been instrumental in developing a plan that improves the chances of early and swift assistance to field personnel if necessary. This new plan, referred to as the KSWSC Field Work "Safe-Return" Plan, was first implemented by the KSWSC in March 2013, with subsequent refinement resulting in the latest publication in May 2015. The "Safe-Return" plan is a multi-faceted approach using Global Positioning System (GPS) location reporting technology and an established hierarchy with clearly defined roles and responsibilities for the field worker, supervisor, and watchperson (person tasked with ensuring the safe return of field personnel).

In the "Safe-Return" Plan, supervisors and the watchperson, as well as the field personnel themselves, can take a passive role in the process until an incident requires action. GPS devices from GPS Insight are deployed in field vehicles. The GPS sends a report to the watchperson when a vehicle leaves or returns to an office, warehouse, or a pre-established hotel. The GPS also reports if the vehicle remains stationary for greater than 2.5 hours indicating that the watchperson should contact the field personnel for a check on their welfare. Additionally, if long-term work is performed a distance away from a vehicle or in a high-risk situation such as from a manned boat, then SPOT emergency reporting devices are used and persons in need of assistance can notify emergency responders in the event of a life threatening emergency, notify the watchperson in the event of a non-life threatening emergency, or notify the watchperson periodically that all is okay, even when outside the range of cell phone signal. Thanks to the location reporting components of these tools, if an emergency in the field does arise, the watchperson can organize a search and rescue mission with the critical knowledge of the field person's last known location and time.

A tool is only as powerful as the operator's knowledge of how to use it. In the case of these advanced tools implemented in the "Safe-Return" plan, extensive definition of roles and responsibilities for the field personnel and watchperson provides clarity and accountability for all parties involved. This plan can truly be used as a reference any time there is a question of who, what, or when in terms of ensuring safe return of persons working in the field.

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