

TRADE THE CLASSROOM FOR THE WILDERNESS

Field training improves worker safety in remote locations

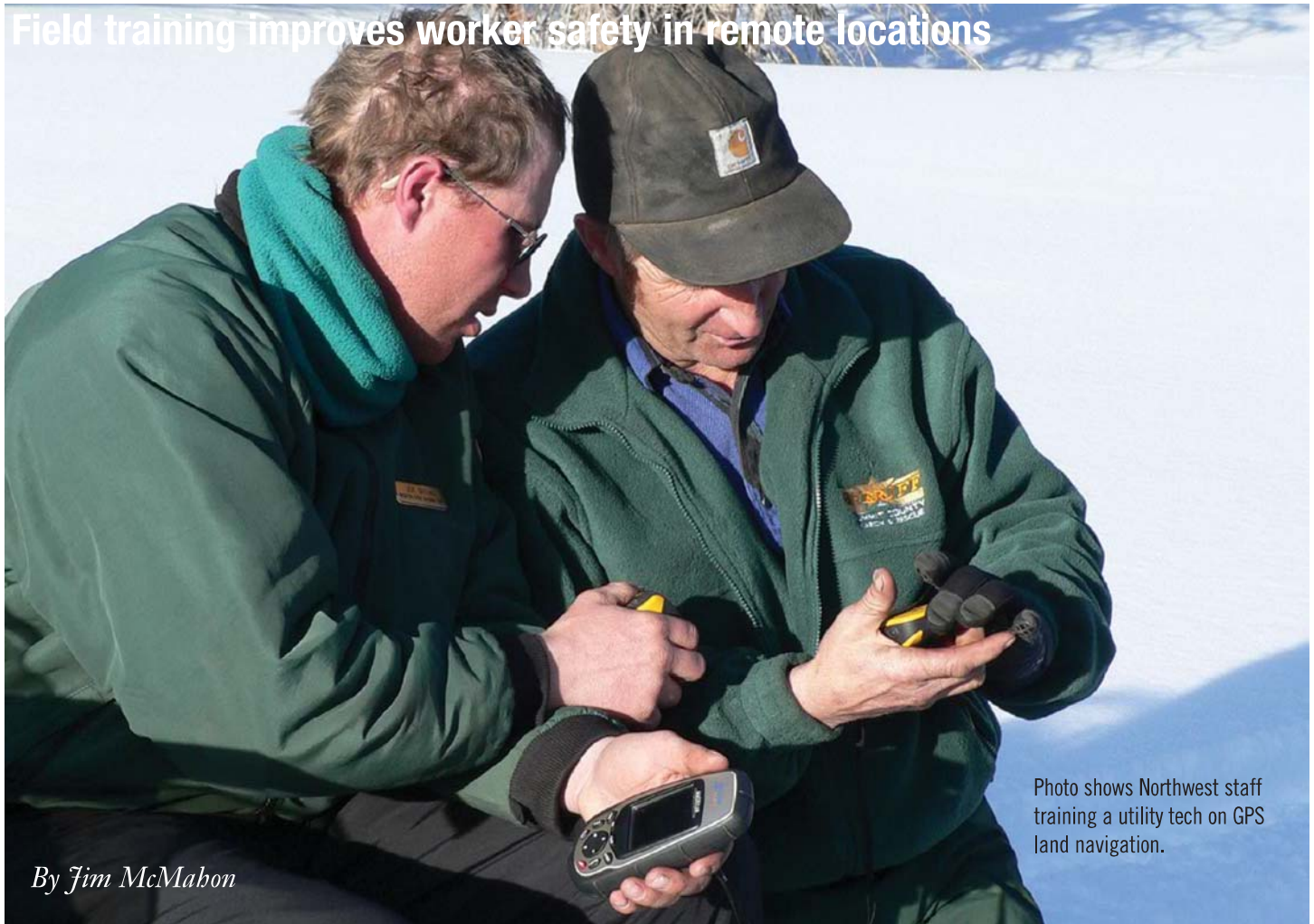


Photo shows Northwest staff training a utility tech on GPS land navigation.

By Jim McMahon

Let's say you're a field engineer en route to perform maintenance on a microwave station in a remote area of the central Sierra Nevada mountains. It's late December, there's a light dusting of snow on the one-lane, hardly-paved Kaiser Pass Road, as you and your support tech slowly ascend the mountain. Starting at the 7000-ft elevation at Huntington Lake, your 4X4 is hugging the granite cliffs as you snake your way around boulders, conifers and ditches, up the 10% grade toward the 9200-ft elevation White Bark cutoff at the top of Kaiser Pass.

The first heavy snows have not yet hit the region, but the mountain road in the Sierra National Forest was officially closed for the onset of winter four weeks earlier. After travelling seven miles up the road you reach the crest of Kaiser Pass, and take the White Bark

Forest Service dirt road to your objective—the microwave equipment two miles further in.

The temperature at the top is a brisk 24°F with a 32 mph wind, overcast skies and snow flurries. But, as is typical in the high Sierras, weather can change quickly and unexpectedly. After a couple of hours the winds pick up to 60 mph, storm clouds thicken, snow squalls prevail, and you suddenly find yourself in full-scale blizzard conditions that show no signs of letting up.

Your one road out is now inaccessible to your 4X4—extremely dangerous even with chains—and visibility is almost down to zero with snow accumulating an inch per hour. You face the fact that, unless a snowcat can be brought up there to get you out, you may be spending the night. But are you prepared to weather these extreme cold conditions? Have

you been properly field trained in wilderness survival? Enough to make it through the night? In one piece?

Field technicians working for power, telecom, water and transportation providers are challenged by similar extreme weather conditions throughout many areas of the continent. But the danger is not limited to cold climates, as extreme heat can be equally life threatening. Regardless of the extremes you face, the remoteness of the location only magnifies the level of danger.

Classroom wilderness training

Naturally, you increase your chances of surviving such harsh conditions through training. Unfortunately, to many companies, the extent of their safety training consists merely of a two- to four-hour indoor semi-

nar every two to three years, and sometimes a little training in the parking lot. Students learn a lot of theory, and may even learn how to operate an ATV or snowcat on flat terrain (well, at least receive instructions on how to stop, brake and turn, and keep the machine from flipping over).

That's about it as far as hands-on training goes. Afterward, the techs get certification cards and go on their way, with only a minute improvement in their ability to survive the next blizzard, operate equipment in extreme weather or terrain conditions, or properly cope with a bout of altitude sickness—or even a confrontation with a Grizzly.

Some companies see this as a way to fulfill a legal or insurance requirement rather than the best way for ensuring the safety of their employees. Classroom-dominated survival training—where 80% of the training is conducted indoors—presents a low-budget, time-friendly format for certification, to be sure. But let us be clear: survival training in the absence of real-world wilderness experience lacks the practical hands-on, do-it-yourself factor students need.

Like our microwave techs on Kaiser Pass, a life-threatening blizzard is not the time *to try and remember* how to survive. Instead, the techs' responses to their environment should be automatic. There will always be some confusion when a situation turns into a possible struggle for survival, but there should be no confusion when it comes to handling the tools for survival.

The case for wilderness training... in the wilderness!

Hands-on, real-world training in environments closely resembling actual severe conditions in the wilderness is the best guarantee of surviving in a remote location.

For example, a really comprehensive and effective winter survival program that would give students a high degree of survival potential might include:

- cold weather survival tactics
- navigation, including use of GPS, maps and compass
- First Aid
- shelter finding and building
- fire skills
- hypothermia, frostbite and altitude issues (prevention, recognition and treatment)
- avalanche training
- snowcat, snowmobile, ATV and 4X4 training
- training with chainsaws and winches

Packed into a five-day program—with 20% classroom and 80% real-world study—this training would produce graduates that could very competently take care of themselves in a remote winter environment.

“There is no substitute for onsite survival training in mountainous and remote locations,” says Austin Toole, an emergency medical technician operating in the County of Los Angeles who's also a Sierra Nevada high-altitude wilderness expert. “Weather conditions can change fast in the mountains, posing serious challenges that didn't exist an hour before. Downed trees, washed-out roads and trails can present difficult hazards when trying to get around them with ATVs and 4X4s.”



Avalanche survival training is a necessity with Alltel technicians in mountain environments.

Even the most seasoned mountain hikers get themselves into life-threatening situations, Toole explains. Hypothermia, altitude sickness, snake bites, plant poisoning and broken legs—even a badly sprained ankle—are just some of the more common maladies plaguing those entering mountain areas.

“The remoteness of the environment is the real issue,” he continues, asking you to just consider for a moment everything it would take to get emergency medical care when *you're 30 miles away from the nearest paved road!*

Alltel's wilderness adventure

Alltel Wireless has embraced the concept of hands-on wilderness field training for its site technicians in Montana, Idaho, Nevada, Utah, Wyoming and Colorado, who frequently perform maintenance on equipment in remote and mountainous regions. Alltel serves over 12 million customers across the country.

“Winter survival becomes a significant issue for us,” says Alltel's Doug Fouch. “It's not unusual for us to have to send in a team of techs on snowmobiles 20 miles into

Yellowstone National Park in the dead of winter to service our cell towers.”


“Mountaintop towers provide our most extreme site issues,” explains Fouch. “Cold-weather survival skills, snowmobile handling, navigational training with GPS, and avalanche training become an absolute necessity. This is not an environment where you want to come ill-equipped,” he says.

“We have tried a number of wilderness training programs, but settled with Northwest School of Survival for our wilderness training,” Fouch continues. “We have trained with them for years, and have found their program to be the most comprehensive and flexible for our specific needs.”

Northwest provides a customized program for its utility and corporate clients, integrating varying elements of skill sets to ensure multiple facets of training are covered. Its programs are heavy on real-world field training to maximize the learning experience, and extensively span harsh-environment scenarios. The program not only includes extensive training, but also helps its clients evaluate their specific wilderness safety risks so they can develop safety protocols and standards. Such actions help establish rescue pre-planning and procedures, survival and First Aid kits, clothing, footwear and equipment evaluations and recommendations.

“Even bear safety is an issue for us,” explains Fouch. Alltel's techs frequently come upon Grizzlies in their habitat, he says, which is why bear encounters are part of Alltel's survival training.

The customized training approach also ensures that new Alltel team members requiring specific training get it when and where needed, rather than waiting for an ‘open-enrollment’ course to be offered. Northwest can also bring the training onsite to Alltel's desired locations when needed.

“When a company's employees work in remote wilderness conditions, they could be at risk 80% of the time,” explains Brian Wheeler, president of Northwest School of Survival. “Even if a company has never had a remote location incident, it is better for them to maintain a proactive stance toward training that actually mimics their specific work applications, rather than fall prey to a reactive position after someone has sustained injuries or died on the job.” 

Jim McMahon writes on wilderness and survival training. For more information on Northwest School of Survival, visit www.nwsos.com.