

# *National Search Dog Alliance (NSDA)*

## *Avalanche First Responder Field Test*

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### **1. STATEMENT OF PURPOSE:**

- This test has been promulgated by NSDA to assess Ski Patrol handler/K-9 teams and volunteer handler/K-9 teams as to operational suitability for an avalanche incident.
- The NSDA prerequisites represent those items that we believe will allow the candidate to have the opportunity to safely and successfully complete the Avalanche Field Test.

### **2. OBJECTIVES:**

- The Avalanche Field Test evaluates the proficiency of a K-9 team (handler and K-9) to locate hidden subjects in a one (1) acre area, within a prescribed time period.
- To test the ability of an avalanche team to locate two hidden subjects, combined with demonstrating the ability of the handler to correctly read the behavior of the K-9 and the ability of the K-9 to show a trained recognizable change in behavior when it detects a person. The handler must demonstrate the ability to formulate and execute a search plan within the parameters of the NSDA avalanche field qualification certification for the First Responder K-9 team.
- This test is designed to simulate an actual avalanche search with a deep burial event.
- To provide local, state and federal agencies with reliable, certified, operational avalanche dog teams.

### **3. GENERAL GUIDELINES:**

- All paperwork shall be presented to the Evaluator prior to the start of the test. If you are requested to submit copies of your documents to the Evaluator via mail or e-mail prior to the test, they may not be returned.
- The subjects may be known to the K-9; however, family members, close friends and regular subjects shall not be used. People who have been a subject for the testing team within the last forty-five (45) days shall not be used as a subject.
- Testing shall be of the handler and K-9 only.
- The NSDA Avalanche one (1) acre Field Test shall be conducted as a mock search, emulating a "real world" avalanche search.
- This test is not a training scenario. You will be asked to approach it as a search.
- The K-9 team shall be evaluated on their ability to perform as an effective team, and their ability to successfully find the avalanche victims. It is the obligation of the handler to show that they clearly understand their responsibilities as a skilled handler (scene management, delegation of duties, search strategy, etc.) in a rescue situation.
- The test is designed to simulate the human contamination one might expect to find when responding to avalanches.
- The K-9 is not to mark, urinate or defecate within ten (10) feet of the hidden subject.

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- Food rewards are prohibited within the search area.
- No electronic correction collars are permitted to be operational while the team is being evaluated. The K-9 may wear an electronic correction collar as long as the transmitter is turned off and given to the Evaluator until the test is completed.
- Females in heat shall be tested last

#### **4. EVALUATORS:**

- Two (2) designated NSDA Evaluators are recommended, with at least one (1) being a NSDA Principal Evaluator. One (1) designated Principal Evaluator may conduct the test, with the option of a second Evaluator or Apprentice Evaluator.
- The Evaluator shall remain within normal speaking distance of the handler at all times during the evaluation so as not to interfere with the work of the handler/K-9 team.
- The Evaluator(s) shall have discretion in the administration and evaluation of all portions of the test.
- The Evaluator(s) shall brief the K-9 team on the search requirements and area.
- The Evaluator(s) shall terminate the test if, in their opinion, it becomes hazardous to any of the participants.

#### **5. PRIOR TO TESTING**

- At a pre-determined time, prior to the commencement of the evaluations, the Evaluator shall brief all handlers by reading the handler briefing.
- The testing order shall be selected by a lottery drawing. At the briefing, all requirements shall be re-checked, the team shall be checked for proper verification of their credentials and a quick equipment check shall be performed. All handlers shall be briefed on testing expectations.
- Handlers shall demonstrate that the K-9 is under control and comfortable being transported on a snowmobile.

#### **6. AT THE SITE**

- Upon arrival at the site, the handler is expected to have their K-9 on lead with all of their necessary equipment in hand, ready to respond. The handler will be expected to take charge of the search, with their K-9, ready to work.
- There shall be a ten (10) minute delay from the time the subjects are placed in the hole until the K-9 is released, in order to allow time for scent percolation.
- The handler is to assemble and carry their shovel and probe, or assign a helper to carry the equipment, for aeration and confirmation, as directed by handler.
- The handler is required to place flags in order to identify points of interest and the location of finds.
- The handler's ability to read their dog and the skills and confidence they display as a working K-9/handler team is confirmed by their ability to articulate areas of interest and confidently call their finds.

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### **7. TEST SITE PREPARATION:**

- The search area shall be approximately 209 x 209 feet (1 ± acre). The shape may vary, with the boundaries being either obvious natural features (streams, ridgelines, etc.), manmade boundaries like roads or trails, or marked or flagged boundary lines that are present on the ground.
- The depth of the burial hole shall be three (3) feet, from top of the hole to surface level.
- There shall be Evaluator oversight on burials to verify the depth, size and safety of the burial holes.
- If a boundary is not easily found or clearly marked, upon questioning by the handler, the Evaluator may assist the handler with finding the boundary.

### **8. DISTRACTIONS:**

- Distractions such as rescue equipment, shovels, probes, flags may be left in the search area. Debris such as skis, ski poles, snowboards or snowmobile parts may be left in the search area. This simulates the majority of the avalanche search and rescue conditions.
- The entire area should be contaminated with snowshoe, ski and/or snow machine tracks, old and fresh holes, and non-K-9 active searchers.
- One food distraction (i.e. a standard package of french fries) shall be scattered in the search area, in a four (4) foot by four (4) foot area, on the upwind side of the search area.
- One pack or jacket shall be buried six (6) inches in the open and a second pack/jacket partially buried/exposed next to a natural obstruction.
- Neither the food distraction nor articles shall be placed in the immediate area of a subject or placed in such a way to trick or confuse the K-9's trained response.

### **9. EQUIPMENT REQUIREMENTS:**

- Avalanche Transceiver
- Collapsible Avalanche Probe
- Avalanche Shovel (metal).
- Ten (10) wands (search flags) with handler name and phone number
- Appropriate clothing for spending a night out in the winter environment
- Skis or snowshoes, as needed.
- Although a pack check is not part of the evaluation, if the handler is inadequately prepared, (i.e. improper clothing, cotton, etc.) this may be a reason for the exam to be terminated and considered a failure. The Evaluator(s) may stop the test, at any time if there is a danger to the health and well being of the handler and/or K-9.
- The handler is expected to carry adequate first aid, supplies and water for the handler/K-9 team. NSDA has published a recommended equipment list but, for this test, it is the responsibility of the handler to be adequately equipped and attired.

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### **10. SAFETY:**

- Safety is of paramount importance.
- The Evaluator shall be assured that the handler has proper safety equipment and supplies for the team when beginning the field test.
- Before beginning the test, the Controller of the scene (Evaluator) shall ensure that the subject(s) are supplied with a transceiver and a radio that is on a different channel than that used by the Evaluator and handler testing and that each demonstrates knowledge of their use.
- The Handler will wear a transceiver but it will be turned off during the test.

### **11. KNOWLEDGE AND PERFORMANCE OBJECTIVES/CONDUCT OF FIRST RESPONDER TEST:**

- The testing scenario is set up to test the K-9 and handler's responsiveness/flexibility in a situation that emulates a real time evolving search, complete with searchers, human/K-9 contamination and changing conditions.
- The Evaluator(s) shall identify themselves as the reporting party and as the Search Commander. The Evaluator(s) shall brief the handler on the search requirements and the area.
- The K-9 handler must inquire as to the immediate needs of the rescue situation. The handler is to explain to the Evaluators their K-9's capabilities, their search plan and strategy, and articulate any modifications to their plan, as needed. The handler needs to be situational aware of safety, conditions, their K-9's efficiency, and search coverage.
- Open, used holes shall be identified verbally by Evaluator(s) as "holes where recoveries were made earlier", as would be expected in an actual event.
- The handler is not allowed to probe with the avalanche probe, dig or expose the subject. Probing blade deep with the shovel at points of interest for aeration is allowed.
- The K-9 must be able to perform an effective, independent search without continuous handler guidance, search among distractions, and be able to recognize scent emanating from a live person(s) and then respond to that scent with their final response/alert.
- The handler is required to articulate their K-9's response to scent, and to flag all locations of interest. When the handler sees the K-9 commit and alert/indicate to an identifiable location with digging, barking, re-find or other communication, the handler is to place two (2) flags at that location, and articulate their commitment by calling a "Find". They shall then call for a shoveler and continue to search for other potential subjects. The Evaluator(s) shall immediately confirm the status of the call, correct or incorrect. If the call is incorrect, the test shall be terminated.
- The K-9 is not allowed to dig up or expose the subject, either when found or while being rewarded.
- The K-9 shall demonstrate strong dedication to the hole.
- Once the test is completed or terminated, the handler is to reward their K-9 away from the test site, in order to expedite the progression of the test operation.

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- During or at the conclusion of the test, as applicable, the K-9 handler team must:
  - ✓ demonstrate the ability to plan an efficient search, best utilizing wind, terrain, topography, and existing environmental conditions to provide efficient and effective coverage of the terrain given the time constraints of the test.
  - ✓ demonstrate the ability to work and control the K-9 to effectively search the area.
  - ✓ demonstrate that the handler and K-9 have adequate agility and stamina to effectively work an avalanche search area.
  - ✓ demonstrate that the handler recognizes when the K-9 is alerting to human scent.
  - ✓ demonstrate the ability to judge sweeps of areas as to their suitability for conditions.
  - ✓ demonstrate that the handler recognizes when either member of the K-9 team is working ineffectively and takes action to compensate for or remedy the situation.
  - ✓ demonstrate that the handler and SAR K-9 have the ability to work effectively to find a subject with an additional person or persons accompanying the K-9 team.
  - ✓ demonstrate that the handler behaves professionally during the test.
- Passing this evaluation is not only predicated on locating the buried subjects, but also on effectively searching the area as a team (handler and K-9).
- No K-9 team shall be certified until they have successfully completed all components of the evaluation.

### **12. TEST TIMING:**

- Both subjects must be located within twenty (20) minutes. The start time shall commence once the handler has advised the Evaluator(s) of the search plan and has deployed the K-9 in the search area.

### **13. DE-BRIEFING:**

- The K-9 handler shall debrief the Evaluator(s) on the thoroughness of their effort in their designated search area, any additional search efforts that may be required, and their Probability of Detection (POD), upon request from the Evaluator(s).
- At an appropriate time, the Evaluator(s) shall give the K-9 handler the outcome of the test and the team's perceived strengths and weaknesses.

### **14. RE-TESTS:**

- If a K-9 team fails their initial evaluation, they may be eligible for an immediate re-test, but only if time permits and there is justification. It shall be left to the discretion of the Evaluator(s) whether or not the team is ready to be re-tested.
- One (1) testing fee covers an initial test and a re-test, if necessary, within one (1) year of the time of the test payment.
- If, in the opinion of the Evaluator(s), the team has failed because of training issues/needs further

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- training before re-testing, the Evaluator(s) may request training logs of at least thirty (30) days, showing that the training issues have been resolved.
- If a handler would like to re-test during the same testing event of an initial failure, the scoring sheet of the initial test must be marked with “re-test immediately”.
- A re-test shall be of the entire test and not just the portion of the test that was failed.
- Should weather, time or something out of the control of the handler or Evaluator cause a test to be stopped (rain, wind, snow, etc.) the Evaluator, at their own discretion, may offer a re-test at the same testing event. If time does not allow for a continuation, the scoring sheet shall be marked “Discontinued” with the reason for being discontinued and the Handler shall be allowed an attempt in the future. The testing fee shall not be returned.
- A copy of the Scoring Sheet shall be given to the handler.

### **15. RE-CERTIFICATION:**

- Re-certification is required every two (2) years.