

# *National Search Dog Alliance (NSDA)*

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## **AVALANCHE FIELD TEST**

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

- This standard is to be used for the evaluation of a SAR K-9 Avalanche Team.

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### **2. OBJECTIVE:**

- The objective of the NSDA Avalanche Field Test is to evaluate the proficiency of the handler and K-9, in an authentic reconstruction or emulating a "real world" avalanche search.
- To provide local, state and federal agencies with reliable, certified, operational avalanche dog teams.

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

- The NSDA Avalanche Field Test will be conducted as a mock search.
- The K-9 team will 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.
- 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.
- Two (2) designated NSDA evaluators are recommended with at least one being a principal evaluator. If two (2) NSDA evaluators are not available, one (1) principal evaluator may conduct the test.
- The K-9 is not to mark, urinate or defecate in the search area.

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## **4. EVALUATORS:**

- The evaluator(s) shall have discretion in the administration and evaluation of all portions of the test. The evaluator(s) will brief the K-9 team on the search requirements and area.
- The evaluation shall preferably be "double blind", whereby the evaluator(s) conducting the test does NOT know where the subjects have been placed by another evaluator.
- The evaluator(s) shall terminate the test if, in their opinion, it becomes hazardous to any of the participants.

## **5. PRE-TESTING:**

- The testing order will be selected by a lottery drawing. A pre-test briefing will be conducted before the first team to be evaluated is brought to the site. At the briefing, all pre-test requirements will be re-checked, and the team will be checked for proper verification of their credentials and a quick equipment check will be performed. All handlers will be briefed on testing expectations.
- All teams being tested are to be advised that, during the administration of the test, they are required to remain in the staging area which will intentionally be out of sight of the testing site. The next team up will be promptly notified when they are to report to the test 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. Upon arrival, the handler will be expected to take charge, with their K-9, ready to work.
- There will be a fifteen (15) 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. No probing will be allowed, however a shovel can be used to aerate scent source.
- The handler is to assemble and carry their shovel and probe, or assign a helper to carry equipment, for aeration and confirmation, as directed by handler.
- The handler is required to place flags identifying 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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- False alerts identified by the handler by calling a false alert/find or the K-9 locking into a false or old hole will result in an automatic failure and will terminate the test.
- Food rewards are prohibited within the search area.

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### 6. TEST SITE PREPARATION:

- The search area will be approximately 70 x 70 yards (1 ± acre). The shape may vary, but one side must have a 70 yard leg and be visibly identified at two corners. Site selection and preparation the day before is advised. This is especially true if on site manpower will be limited on the day of testing, or the site is unfamiliar to the evaluator(s). The test site is to be set up so as to not compromise the testing procedures. The entire area should be contaminated with snowshoe, ski and/or snow machine tracks, old and fresh holes, and non-K-9 active searchers.
- There must be adequate holes prepared to allow for multiple burials at different locations in the search area. Fresh, open holes, as well as used holes are to remain open. Several false or mock holes should be dug and covered. The test holes must be constructed with an adequate air space, and large enough for free movement for the subject. The integrity of the test demands the proper construction and sealing of the holes. The openings are to be sealed with a minimum of three (3) feet of snow and packed to prevent cave-ins. This provides adequate snow for digging without breaking through into the subject's compartment. If needed, hardened structures, such as snowshoes, can be used to block holes to aid closing. As the test progresses, additional holes can and should be dug, if necessary. Re-using holes is not allowed. Used holes will be left open. Partial burials are not allowed.
- *The site may be re-used for up to six (6) K-9 evaluations within a 24 hour period.*

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### 7. 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.
- One food distraction (i.e. a standard package of french fries) will be scattered in the search area, in a 4 foot by 4 foot area, on the upwind side of the search area.

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- One pack or jacket will 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 will 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.
- K-9s who mark and/or defecate in the search area will be scored down accordingly, and will be left to the discretion of the evaluator(s).

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## **8. EQUIPMENT REQUIREMENTS:**

- Avalanche Transceiver
- Collapsible Avalanche Probe
- Avalanche Shovel (metal).
- Ten (10) wands with handler name and phone number
- Appropriate clothing for spending a night out in the winter environment
- Skis or snowshoes, as needed.
- A pack check is not a pre-test requirement but the handler is expected to carry adequate first aid, supplies and water for the handler/K-9 team. NSDA will publish 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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## **9. SAFETY:**

- Safety is of paramount importance
- The subjects must wear a transceiver; it must be set to transmit, and they must have a working radio
- Radio communications, emergency beacons, and safety personnel are mandatory whenever any subject is buried. Radio contact will be verified prior to entry into the cave and being covered by snow. Radio checks will be conducted every five (5) minutes, except when the K-9 is in close proximity.

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- Each subject's location will be marked and observed by two shovelers at all times and placed in such a way as not to clue the handler/K-9 team to the subject's location. A chief shoveler will be appointed for each hole, to lead all extrications, as they will be most aware of the subject's placement in the assigned hole
- The subjects may request extrication at any time and will be dug out immediately
- A cord or ribbon will be run from the buried subject and will be extended outward and away from the entrance of the hole. The cord will not be visible to the dog handler or K-9. It will not be exposed and will be placed so that the K-9 cannot dig it up while working the hole. This will be done in order to expedite easier identification of the entrance.

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### **10. PLACEMENT AND BRIEFING OF SUBJECTS:**

- Two (2) people will be buried in the search area and will be in holes at least three (3) feet but not more than six (6) feet in depth. An effort shall be made to have three (3) feet of compacted snow in front of the opening.
- Subjects should be dressed appropriately to be comfortable under snow for up to 60 minutes.
- Anyone who has been a subject for the testing team in the last 45 days cannot be used as a subject for that team.
- Personal items of the handler/K-9 team will not be allowed in the hole with the subjects.
- No food is allowed in the hole with the subjects.

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

- The testing scenario is set up to test the K-9 and handler's responsiveness/flexibility in a situation which emulates a real time evolving search, complete with searchers, human/K-9 contamination and changing conditions.
- The evaluator(s) will identify themselves as the reporting party and as the search commander. The K-9 handler must inquire as to the immediate needs of the rescue situation. The evaluator(s) will brief the handler on the search requirements and area.
- Used holes will be identified verbally by evaluator(s) as "holes where recoveries were made earlier", as would be expected in an actual event.

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- The handler is not allowed to probe with the avalanche probe, dig or expose the subject. Probing head deep with the shovel at points of interest for aeration is allowed. The K-9 is not allowed to dig up or expose the subject.
- 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". The evaluator(s) will immediately confirm the status of the call, correct or incorrect. If the call is incorrect, the test will be terminated.
- 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.
- 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 to conditions.
  - ✓ Demonstrate that the handler recognizes when either member of the K-9 team is working ineffectively and take action to compensate for or remedy the situation.
  - ✓ Demonstrate that the handler and SAR K-9 have the ability to work effectively and find a subject with an additional person or persons accompanying the K-9 team.
  - ✓ Demonstrate that the handler behaves professionally during the test.

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## **12. TEST TIMING/DE-BRIEFING:**

- 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.
- 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) will give the K-9 handler the outcome of the test and the team's perceived strengths and weaknesses.
- Passing this evaluation is not only predicated on locating the buried subjects, but on effectively searching the area as a team (handler and K-9).
- Note to the Readers and Users of the NSDA Avalanche Field Test: This test has been promulgated by NSDA to assess a handler and K-9 team as to the operational suitability for typical avalanche search incidents. The testing criteria may or may not meet the proposed NIMS avalanche search criteria currently under review. When the NIMS criteria are finalized, NSDA will make provisions to offer tests meeting or exceeding those criteria.

## **13. FAILURE TO PERFORM:**

- No K-9 team will be certified until they have successfully completed all components of the evaluation.
- If a K-9 team fails their initial evaluation, they may be eligible for an immediate re-test, but only at the discretion of the evaluator(s) (i.e. if there is adequate time to re-test). If, in the opinion of the evaluator(s), the team has failed because of training issues/needs further training before re-testing, the evaluator(s) can request training logs, showing that the training issues have been resolved. It will be left to the discretion of the original evaluator(s) whether or not the team is ready to be re-tested. Otherwise, the team will be eligible for a re-test within one (1) year from the date of the last fail.

## **14. RE-CERTIFICATION:**

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