

Helicopter rescues up amid fight for funds

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The Nelson Marlborough Rescue Helicopter is attending more emergencies every year, but is still battling to find the community sponsorship it needs.

Pilot and base manager Tim Douglas-Clifford said the Nelson Marlborough Rescue Helicopter attended 374 missions last year.

In the first two months of this year it has already been called out 101 times. Mr Douglas-Clifford said in 2006 the rescue helicopter service did 129 missions a year and 29 missions over January and February.

For the past 14 months the service has been running two helicopters - the smaller Squirrel helicopter which is used as backup and for police search and rescue operations as well as the new BK117 helicopter.

Mr Douglas-Clifford said the larger helicopter had many benefits.

It enabled the service to transport two patients at a time.

If space allowed it also meant that family members or others linked to the injured person could be flown from the accident site.

However, the newer bigger helicopter, which was introduced in line with new Civil Aviation Association regulations, also came with increased operational costs.

Nelson Marlborough Rescue Helicopter marketing and communications manager Paula Muddle said it had doubled its fundraising costs from \$500,000 to \$600,000 a year to \$1.2 million.

The service was given "band-aid" funding by the Canterbury Community Trust of \$120,000 which helped fund new paid crew members the helicopter has.

Mrs Muddle said the Nelson-based helicopter rescue service was busier than Wellington and some of the other larger centres.

However, its smaller population base to ask for corporate sponsors, especially in the tough economic climate, meant it has to work harder to find the funding.

Mrs Muddle said the community and the Government were getting a good deal.

"They are getting a world-class service run on the smell of an oily rag."

Mr Douglas-Clifford said it cost \$100,000 a year just to service the helicopters' existing equipment.

"We've got that equipment sitting there. Just to keep it on service and keep it calibrated and operational costs over \$100,000."

The lack of funding meant the service was being stifled, preventing it from providing the kind of service it wanted to.

Mr Douglas-Clifford said over the past year the number of callouts to injured mountainbikers had increased.

So had callouts to farm accidents including people using quad bikes.

The number of calls to people using personal locator beacons had increased as more people were carrying them.

However, the improvement in technology used for personal locator beacons meant those who had activated them could be located much more quickly. The cost of searchers was "considerably less" and more efficient.

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The helicopter had attended about the same number of search and rescue callouts for police as other years.

The number of forestry workers who were injured had also tracked about the same.

Mr Douglas-Clifford said the number of vehicle crashes it attended last year fell last year.

With an ageing population in the region, the helicopter was being called to more medical jobs in Golden Bay and the outer Marlborough Sounds.

"That's been quite significant."

He said the winter months used to be quiet, but for May, June and July last year it did about 30 callouts each month.

The service is funded by ACC, the Nelson Marlborough District Health Board and the police.

Some jobs it was not funded for, such as if it brought back a body from an accident site.

This accounted for 40 per cent of its costs. The other 60 per cent had to be fundraised from the community, through corporate sponsorship, gaming funding, sponsorship, donations and fundraising.

Mr Douglas-Clifford said there was some negative comments that the service was overused.

However, the call to send a helicopter was made through the 111 dispatch system, not the helicopter service.

BY THE NUMBERS

Nelson Marlborough Rescue Helicopter call outs: ACC, accidents, emergencies – 68 per cent. Medical emergencies – 17 per cent. Inter-hospital transfers – 6 per cent. NZ Police – 5 per cent. Rescue Co-ordination Centre beacon searches – 3 per cent. Fire – 1 per cent.