



Mines Safety Significant Incident Report No. 163

Exploration employee lost in remote bush

Incident

In January 2010, during site demobilisation, a contract driller went missing at an exploration tenement site in the Pilbara for about 30 hours.

He had attempted to walk through scrub to retrieve a support vehicle located about 6 kilometres from the exploration campsite. He left the site in the morning but became lost when he failed to find the support vehicle and then failed to intersect the cleared access tracks and gridlines in the area.

The driller became dehydrated and disorientated, and spent the night in the bush. By the next day he was in a weakened state and, having found shade under a rock ledge, waited there for assistance.

When his colleagues raised the alarm some six hours after he was last seen, a search was organised involving local police, SES volunteers and other exploration company employees, who were assisted by a light plane and helicopter.

The contract driller was found about 10 kilometres from the exploration campsite and rescued by helicopter. He was taken to the local regional hospital and treated for dehydration. He was discharged the next day.

Contributory factors

- The contract driller chose to walk via the shortest route through the bush, instead of along access tracks and cleared gridlines, even though transport vehicles and personnel were available. The route chosen was not clearly delineated.
- The bush was sufficiently dense to obscure the support vehicle's location, access tracks and cleared gridlines.
- The contract driller was poorly equipped for remote bush walking, having only 500 ml of water, no hat and no emergency equipment such as an emergency position indicating radio beacon (EPIRB), or handheld global positioning system (GPS) or satellite communication equipment.
- The weather conditions at the time were hot and dry.
- There was no site induction or procedure documentation established for the exploration site covering the safety rules for working in remote bush.
- There were no clear instructions issued by the contract drill supervisor to the contract driller on the method to be used to retrieve the support vehicle on the morning of the incident.
- The person responsible for the safe management of all activity on site on behalf of the owner and the exploration manager was absent from the site.

Comments and preventative actions

To avoid a recurrence of this type of incident, the following preventative actions should be considered.

- As per section 47(2)(b) of the *Mines Safety and Inspection Act 1994*, the tenement owner and exploration manager must ensure that all exploration work carried out on site is under the direct control of a site-based person responsible for the management of all activities.

- A comprehensive induction and operating procedures appropriate to remote exploration work must be developed and all exploration employees trained in the procedures before commencing remote exploration work, as per regulations 3.6 and 4.13 of the Mines Safety and Inspection Regulations 1995.
- There must be consultation between exploration management, supervisors and employees about how work tasks are to be performed, and clear instructions issued before they are carried out.
- Exploration employees should be prohibited from walking unnecessarily in remote bush. Adequate transportation should be readily available and used.
- Where work on foot in remote bush is unavoidable, employees should be trained in bush survival techniques and equipped with appropriate personal protective equipment (PPE), such as personal survival kit, an EPIRB, GPS equipment, satellite communication equipment, sufficient water and sun protection. Journey management and call-up procedures must be in place.
- Access tracks and gridlines should be clearly delineated with signposts or tape markers.
- Emergency procedures must be in place to manage a search for employees who are lost, and should be enacted immediately in a coordinated manner when an employee(s) fails to call in on schedule.
- People lost in the bush during hot, dry conditions should avoid direct sunlight where possible but not wander further than is necessary to find shade. Attempts should be made to highlight their location, such as drawing in sand, using rocks to make an "SOS" or displaying colourful or reflective objects to attract attention from ground and aerial searches.

Resources Safety has produced a Mine Safety Matters brochure on travelling in remote areas that may be useful for inductions or preparing operating procedures.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'S. Ridge'.

Simon Ridge

STATE MINING ENGINEER

20 April 2010