



Working Alone legislation the catalyst for invention at Crystal Mountain

What do you do when you manage a small ski hill with 24 runs, you employ just one groomer whose regular work hours are from 4 p.m. to 4 a.m. and you must comply with Working Alone legislation?

If you're Mike Morin, who was educated as an electronics engineer but has been the General Manager of Crystal Mountain in West Kelowna for the past 15 years, you invent a new safety procedure using pre-existing technology that meets WorkSafeBC standards and is cost effective for a small, seasonal operation.

It's a snowy afternoon in January and Leishan Keller is checking in for her shift as the only groomer at Crystal Mountain. She's been doing the job for 7 years and her shifts can range anywhere from four to 12 hours depending on snowfall. Prior to the working alone legislation, Morin slept with a two-way radio on his bedside table. If there was a problem, he'd get a call from Keller. In 15 years, he says, he's only been called twice. Nevertheless, it wasn't a system that accounted for the groomer being rendered unconscious and therefore didn't meet the requirements of the new legislation.

"I didn't want to hire someone to sit around all night to keep track of her and I didn't want to have to stay up all night myself," he said. He even considered initiating some type of communication process in conjunction with the local RCMP but that would have been too costly as well.

His first thought was to try the SPOT Personal tracking system that relies on GPS and the push of a button to tell others of personal location. But, once again, it required the individual to be conscious at all times.

Instead, he brainstormed and came up with a way to use Crystal Mountain's two radio frequencies—one for operations, the other for First Aid emergencies - to create a workable solution using a piece of equipment that cost around \$250 US and he estimates the entire system was put in place for around \$400.

Now, when Keller begins her shift, she presses 0 on a keypad on the microphone in the groomer on the Operations channel. This starts a 15-minute timer and replies with time and date. After 10 minutes, a reminder comes over her radio telling her there's 5 minutes left. She presses 1 to add 15 minutes or 2 to add 60 minutes to the timer and that timing can be changed at any time throughout the sequence. If Keller fails to enter new times after the five minute warning, when the five minutes runs out, the system transmits a distress message on the First Aid frequency alerting Mike Morin or whoever is in charge on that frequency at that time.

“The hill is small enough,” said Morin, “that if I received that distress call, I can figure out relatively quickly from the tracks where she has been and where she’s likely to be on the mountain.”

At the end of her shift, Keller enters the number 3 to stop all timers and the time of day is announced over the radio. This works just as well in the winter, as in the Fall, when Keller is likely to be out walking all the ski runs, and pruning branches that have become overgrown.

To comply with WorkSafeBC’s need for communications to be documented, Morin set up a computer to record all transmissions and save the audio files on a hard drive with date and time recorded automatically.

There’s been an unexpected bonus as well. Morin uses the communication over the operational frequency to remind ski patrollers to be at their stations by 9 am when the mountain opens. Every day at 8:45 am, an announcement comes over their radios. It’s just two words: 15 minutes. Those two words are enough of a reminder for them to know they need to be in place within that time period.

It’s a system that means, on the hill, no matter the time of day or night, nobody ever really feels like they’re working alone or in isolation.
