

**COMMONWEALTH OF VIRGINIA
DEPARTMENT OF EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT
SEARCH AND RESCUE PROGRAM**

STANDARDS FOR EQUINE SEARCH (MSAR) MEMBERS

I. Scope

- A. These standards are intended to define the minimum qualifications expected of an equine search (Mounted Search and Rescue/MSAR) unit.
- B. The certification issued under this standard is required only for those personnel who wish to voluntarily participate in the equine search and rescue program of the Department of Emergency Management.
- C. An equine search unit should be able to perform the following functions in the general environment of the Commonwealth of Virginia:
 - a. Search for missing persons in wilderness, rural and suburban areas.
 - b. Work with and support other search units.
 - c. Assist in evacuating the subject (where equine evacuation would be appropriate).
 - d. Help evaluate, organize and investigate missing person incidents.
- D. The unit should be capable of performing these functions any time of the year, day or night, and in all weather conditions. The unit may work with a variety of individuals and organizations, including law enforcement, fire and rescue, casual volunteers and family members of the missing subject(s). To do this, the handler/rider should be able to:
 - a. Understand the search and rescue system used in the Commonwealth.
 - b. Understand the theory and practice of a missing-person search.
 - c. Plan, execute, debrief and document a variety of search tasks.
 - d. Navigate accurately on land.
 - e. Be equipped and trained to survive an unexpected wilderness emergency.
- E. Equine requirements
 - a. These standards do not address any particular species, breed, size, age or gender of the equine family. However, the animal must have the stamina for long hours of work under varied conditions of terrain and weather.
 - b. The animal must be sociable and controllable in situations involving crowds, noise, traffic, other equines, dogs or other domestic animals, and other distractions encountered.

II. Terminology

- A. The definitions listed here are for the purposes of these standards only. They may or may not reflect definitions used by other groups, individuals or organizations.

- a. Aggressive Equine Behavior - Biting, lunging, kicking or striking out at people or other animals.
- b. Area Search - Search of a specific geographical area. The area could be urban, suburban, rural or wilderness.
- c. Equine - Any member of the equine family, being any breed of horse, mule, donkey, etc
- d. Equine Search Unit – The combination of a certified equine and a certified handler/rider, for the purposes of performing search and rescue.
- e. Handler/Rider - The person who is controlling the horse while on foot or in the saddle. The person need not own the horse, but is required to have taken the horse through the test included in this standard.
- f. Equine Search/Strike Team - should consist of at least two but not more than three equine units.
- g. Mounted - The act of riding an equine while in the performance of the duties of search and rescue: Being on an equine.
- h. Ponied - The act of leading a riderless equine at the end of a lead line while the handler/rider is mounted.
- i. Rural - Country often given to farming or to woodland and sparsely to moderately populated.
- j. SAR Equine Standards Committee - A committee of representatives of each equine search team that has an M.O.U. with VDEM. Each team may have up to two voting members on the committee. The VDEM may also appoint a member to the committee.
- k. Suburban - Moderately to heavily populated areas given primarily to business and residential development.
- l. Urban - Characteristic of cities or towns; metropolitan area.
- m. Wilderness- - An area generally uncultivated and uninhabited, and often inaccessible by road.

III. Handler Knowledge and Performance Expectations

- A. The handler/rider must have a current FTM (Field Team Member) or equivalent certificate.
- B. The handler/rider must also have current certificates in Basic First Aid or higher, and CPR.
- C. The designated Equine Team Leader should periodically inspect each unit for proper SAR equipment and tack to ensure that each equine unit is qualified for search conditions. The Team leader should report Equine Team status to base command prior to participating in search operations. It is the responsibility of each handler/rider to ensure that tack and SAR gear is in safe and operational condition.
- D. Each handler/rider shall maintain compliance with the applicable FEMA National Incident Management System (NIMS) Standards, as required.

IV. Equine Performance Expectations

A. Behavior

- a. Behave quietly and well-mannered.
- b. Show no aggression toward people and domestic animals.
- c. Demonstrate the ability to transport between search sites easily.
- d. Stand quietly while tethered.
- e. Work independently of other equines, as well as with other equines.

B. Agility

- a. Move forward smoothly in a variety of gaits.
- b. Back on command.
- c. Ford creeks and streams.
- d. Cross bridges.
- e. Negotiate obstacles normally found in urban, rural and wilderness areas.

V. Test Methods

- A. Handler/Rider Written Test - the handler/rider will complete a written test containing questions representative of these standards and must achieve a passing score of at least 80%. The test will incorporate aspects of common horsemanship knowledge as well as mounted SAR knowledge. The testing required by these standards may only be conducted by a VDEM certified/approved Instructor. Testing materials and checklists will be supplied to evaluators, upon request, by the State SAR Coordinator.
- B. Equine Field Test - The field test is designed to approximate potential conditions that may be found in the field while on a search. The equine unit will perform the following tests at a walk unless otherwise indicated. During the evaluation, the handler/rider must maintain control of the equine, and the equine should act in a mannerly and calm fashion. The evaluator has the prerogative to discontinue testing should a control or safety problem be noted.

The equine must perform the following tasks while the handler/rider is not mounted.

- a. Stand quietly while the handler/rider mounts, from either side.
- b. Load in a horse trailer within five minutes. The time begins when the equine approaches the entry point of the trailer, and ends when the equine is secured in the trailer with all trailer doors closed. The handler/rider may use one assistant.
- c. Unload from a horse trailer within two minutes. The time begins when the exit door is opened and ends when the equine is off the trailer. The handler may use one assistant.
- d. Stand calmly for at least 30 minutes while tied.
- e. Stand quietly for at least two minutes while being held with one other equine by a handler/rider other than the owner.
- f. Be ponied by another handler/rider (100 feet).

The equine must perform the following tasks while the handler/rider is mounted.

- g. Stand quietly on the flat for 2 minutes.
- h. Negotiate three complete figure eights or 6 serpentines, with a complete stop between each pattern, while the handler/rider is holding the reins in one hand.
- i. Turn 180 degrees within a 7 foot diameter circle.
- j. For a distance of at least 100 feet, slowly move up and down perpendicular to the ridge of a hill that has an incline of at least 45 degrees.
- k. Stand quietly for at least two minutes on a hill with an incline of at least 45 degrees.
- l. Walk through a body of water at least three feet wide and six inches deep.
- m. Cross a bridge.
- n. Cross an area of mud requiring a minimum of four steps.
- o. Travel through heavily wooded and/or brushy areas.
- p. Back a minimum of six feet (in a straight line) between parallel poles.
- q. Cross over an obstacle at least 18 inches in height.
- r. At a walk, move out of sight of people and other equines at a minimum distance of 100 feet without difficulty.
- s. At a gait faster than a walk, move out of sight of people and other equines for a minimum distance of 100 feet without difficulty.
- t. Simulating a line search, maintain a two-unit formation (side by side), with 10 to 12 feet between each equine, for at least 100 feet.
- u. Stand quietly for one minute while being subjected to loud noises from whistles, sirens, automobile horns, etc.
- v. While being subjected to distractions such as opening umbrellas, flying flags, moving trash bags, and road flares, stand quietly for at least two minutes after the distractions have stopped.
- w. Walk and/or stand quietly while being subjected to bright, flashing lights.
- x. Stand quietly for at least two minutes while the handler/rider is holding one other equine.
- y. Pony a riderless equine for 100 feet.

The equine may perform this task with or without the handler/rider mounted:

- z. Stand quietly and under control while vehicular traffic moves past.

C. Equine Field Evaluation Procedures

- a. Except as required for specific examination purposes, evaluations will be conducted on an individual basis without interference from other equines or people.
- b. Each unit will be observed by one evaluator, who must be certified according to the requirements listed in Appendix D.

Evaluation scoring

- 1) The evaluator will have a separate checklist for scoring each of the equine units. (See Appendix C.)
- 2) The performance of the equine unit will be rated as either “Satisfactory” or “Unsatisfactory.”

D. Retesting

- a. If an equine unit receives a score of “Unsatisfactory” on any individual test component, the unit may repeat the test component once, at the discretion of the evaluator.
 - b. If the unit receives a score of “Unsatisfactory,” on the second attempt at a test component, the unit may be re-evaluated no earlier than one month or later than six months after the initial test date.
 - c. The evaluator who originally tested the unit on the first two attempts must be the evaluator for the third attempt.
 - d. An equine unit that receives three “Unsatisfactory” scores on any individual field test component may not be used as a SAR asset until it can pass the entire field test at the next scheduled opportunity.
 - e. If the handler/rider feels he (he/she) is being unfairly rated, he/she may request a retest with a different evaluator at the next scheduled testing date. The evaluator who originally rated the unit as unsatisfactory may observe the test, but will have no input on the evaluation results. The handler/rider must submit the request for retesting through his/her SAR unit’s designated liaison officer, and include the reason(s) he/she feels the unit was unfairly rated.
- E. Groups whose internal evaluation procedures meet or exceed these standards may use those procedures for certification testing, provided the following conditions are met:
- a. The procedures, checklist and field test are accepted by VDEM.
 - b. The group is a member in good standing of the Virginia SAR Council.
 - c. The approved field test is completed and signed by the evaluator(s).

VI. Certification Procedures

A. Prerequisites

- a. To be certified as an “Equine Search Unit,” the handler/rider must be an active member in good standing of a SAR group currently operating under a Memorandum of Understanding (M.O.U.) with the Commonwealth of Virginia.
 - b. The applicant must hold a current FTM (Field Team Member) or equivalent certificate.
 - c. The equine must have a current copy of a negative Coggins test issued from the Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services, or from the state of origin if the equine is not boarded in the Commonwealth.
- B. An Equine Unit must satisfactorily complete all written and field tests to be considered for certification.

C. Unit Certification Application Instructions

- a. The SAR unit or candidate must submit an application for certification to the office of the State SAR coordinator.
- b. The application must be signed by both the applicant and either the group leader or training officer, and must include the following items:
 - 1) a photocopy of the applicant's FTM or equivalent certificate;
 - 2) written documentation of a passing score of at least 80% correct on the written Equine Unit Evaluation; and
 - 3) the checklists from the equine field testing, signed and dated by the evaluator.
- c. Upon receipt of the above documentation, the State SAR Coordinator will send confirmation of certification to the applicant's SAR unit. (See the next section for more information.)
- d. Upon completion of all the requirements outlined in this document, the certified equine search unit may respond as a state SAR resource on any State Mission with a valid mission number designation, as a representative of the SAR organization holding the M.O.U.

D. Conditions of Certification

- a. Provided that all requirements are met, the unit will be certified by the VDEM as an "Equine Search Unit."
- b. This certification does not constitute a license to practice the skills tested, but signifies only that the equine unit holding the certification has met an established standard of knowledge and performance and has demonstrated competency at the level indicated.
- c. The initial certification will be valid for one year. Thereafter, it will be renewed for an additional three years. (See the next section for information on re-certification.)
- d. The certification will be for the handler/rider and equine (the equine unit) that completed the testing together. If the handler/rider wishes to certify as a unit with another equine, the entire testing procedure must be repeated with the new equine.
- e. The certified handler/rider will be allowed to ride only the equine upon which he/she certified. However, during an emergency a certified handler/rider may be authorized to ride an equine that is certified by another handler/rider.

VII. Re-Certification Procedures

A. Initial Certification Revalidation

- a. At the end of the first year, the equine unit must revalidate the certification.
- b. To revalidate the certification for three additional years, the handler/rider must submit a letter from his/her SAR unit leader or training officer requesting that the unit's certification be renewed and stating:
 - 1) The handler/rider is an active member in good standing.
 - 2) The number of searches and training exercises in which the equine unit has participated within the past year. The application should include photocopies

of the pertinent TAF forms (mission task sheets), or documentation of tasks in team training logs.

3) The handler/rider shall provide documentation of no less than three (3) completed mounted tasks from a search, mock search and/or training exercise within the past year.

c. This documentation must be submitted to the State SAR Coordinator within 60 days of the certification's expiration date.

d. The certification will be renewed for three additional years from the anniversary date.

B. Renewal of Certification

a. To maintain certification, the handler/rider must submit a copy of his/her current FTM or equivalent certification and retake the equine field test, as specified in Section V, Item B.

b. If a handler fails to re-certify within three months of the expiration date, the certification will be dropped and the candidate will be required to complete the entire evaluation process. The unit cannot be used again as a SAR asset until certification is completed.

APPENDIX A
GUIDELINES FOR PERSONAL EQUIPMENT
FOR THE EQUINE SEARCH UNIT

These items are suggested.

1. Standard FTM or equivalent equipment.
2. Additional suggestions will be provided upon request.

APPENDIX B EVALUATOR INSTRUCTIONS

1. All tests and evaluations will be scored on forms that have been approved by the State SAR Coordinator and will be signed by the evaluator(s).

2. The behavior and agility evaluations are designed to help ensure the equine and handle/rider can work together as a unit safely, efficiently and in conjunction with other units and personnel. Performance on these evaluations should be as written.

APPENDIX C EQUINE PERFORMANCE EVALUATION CHECKLIST

Rider: _____ Equine: _____ Breed: _____
 Color: _____ Gender: _____ Age: _____ Location (housed): _____
 Coggins Verified: Yes No Date: _____ Accession Number: _____ Location/State: _____
 Location of Evaluation Site: _____

TEST	SATISFACTORY	UNSATISFACTORY 1 st Attempt	UNSATISFACTORY 2 nd Attempt	RETEST 3 rd Attempt Sat/Unsat/Date	TEST	SATISFACTORY	UNSATISFACTORY 1 st Attempt	UNSATISFACTORY 2 nd Attempt	RETEST 3 rd Attempt Sat/Unsat/Date
RIDER DISMOUNTED					RIDER MOUNTED				
Load on trailer (5 minutes)					Cross bridge				
Unload from trailer (2 minutes)					Cross mud (4 steps)				
Tied on lead (30 minutes)					Cross an 18" obstacle				
Stand quietly while rider is mounting (from both sides)					Travel through heavily wooded areas and/or brush				
Held with one other equine (2 minutes)					Back 6 feet through parallel poles (straight line)				
Ponied by another handler/ rider (100 feet)					Search formation - 100 feet				
					Leave others - Gait 1 for 100 feet				
RIDER MOUNTED					Leave others - Gait 2 for 100 feet				
(3) Figure 8's or (6) serpentines with one hand to include complete stop between each pattern					React to loud noises - stand quietly (1 minute)				
					React to distractions - stand quietly (2 minute)				
Turn 180 degrees within a 7 foot diameter circle					Stand quietly while subjected to bright, flashing lights				
Move up and down hill at 45° angle (100 feet)					Rider/handler holds an additional equine (2 minutes)				
Stand quietly – Flat (2 minutes)					Pony a riderless equine (100 feet)				
Stand quietly – on 45° angle (2 minutes)					OPTIONAL – MOUNTED or DISMOUNTED				
Cross water – Minimum 3' wide and 6" deep					Stand quietly and under control near vehicular traffic				

Evaluator Name (printed)

Signature

Date

Pass

Fail

Retest Evaluator Name (printed)

Signature

Date

Pass

Fail

APPENDIX D

CRITERIA FOR STATE EVALUATORS

To be a recognized evaluator of the Standards for Equine Search Units, you must satisfy the following criteria:

1. Hold a current FTM or equivalent certification.
2. Be, or have been, the handler/rider for a state-certified Equine Search Unit.
3. Have responded to a minimum of five searches, search simulations, or training exercises and have completed a total of nine task assignments within the past three years.
4. Have been nominated by your SAR unit to become a state evaluator and have been accepted by VDEM as an evaluator.