

Extended IER Cycle for Established USAR Teams

Concept Note

1. Executive Summary

1.1 This concept paper evaluates the feasibility of extending the INSARAG External Reclassification (IER) cycle beyond the current five-year requirement for established Urban Search and Rescue (USAR) Teams, and proposes a flexible, structured framework to govern such an extension.

1.2 The INSARAG Guidelines mandate reclassification every five years to ensure continued compliance with minimum operational standards, with only a one-year extension permitted under exceptional circumstances.¹

1.3 During the Covid-19 pandemic, the INSARAG Steering Group (ISG) endorsed in May 2020 for a two-year extension to the classification validity of USAR Teams, balancing the imperative to protect the system's quality standards against the constraints imposed by global travel disruptions, uncertainties and finite resources. Several teams subsequently opted to undergo reclassification at the 6th or 7th year of their cycle², with no noticeable degradation in quality standards observed.

1.4 It is therefore assessed that extending the IER beyond the five-year cycle is viable for established USAR Teams, provided it is grounded in a structured and flexible assurance framework that ensures the continued maintenance of quality standards and operational readiness. Rather than a rigid extension, the framework should accommodate different team profiles and workstream contributions, allowing eligibility to be assessed holistically and proportionately.

2. Background

2.1 The Covid-19 pandemic demonstrated that an extended IER cycle did not result in a compromise of operational standards. Teams that underwent reclassification at beyond the 5th year were successfully assessed and met the required standards, providing a credible precedent for a more flexible approach to the reclassification cycle.

¹ INSARAG Guidelines 2020 Volume II, Manual C, paragraph 2.6.1.

² There were 9 and 20 USAR Teams which had their reclassification at the 6th and 7th year cycle respectively. In addition, another 9 USAR Teams had their reclassification after the 7th year. Refer to **Annex A** for details

2.2 The INSARAG network has grown considerably since its establishment in 1991, with 62 INSARAG-certified USAR Teams currently active. This growth, while a positive reflection of the global commitment to USAR capacity, has correspondingly increased the workload and resource demands placed on UN OCHA, INSARAG member states and the classifiers community to plan, resource and execute an ever-growing number of IEC/R cycles. There is therefore a pressing need to manage this workload sustainably without compromising the rigor and integrity of the INSARAG classification system.

2.3 While member states and USAR Teams remain deeply committed to the mission of saving lives and helping those in need, the current reclassification model places considerable demands on finite financial and manpower resources. As such, a more calibrated and flexible approach to the reclassification cycle for established teams would allow these resources to be better optimised, supporting both operational readiness and the broader sustainability of the INSARAG network.

3. Principal Considerations

3.1 The following principal considerations underpin the proposal to accord an extended IER cycle for established USAR Teams:

a. Maintaining Quality Control and Readiness.

The integrity of the INSARAG classification system is foundational to the trust and interoperability that sustains international USAR response. Any extension to the IER cycle must therefore be accompanied by robust safeguards to ensure that the assessment regime remains rigorous and that the operational readiness of USAR Teams on an extended cycle is not compromised. This includes establishing clear benchmarks for continued capability demonstration, structured self-assessment mechanisms, and periodic validation by INSARAG to provide assurance between reclassification cycles. The intent is not to reduce the rigor of the process, but to ensure that quality assurance is continuous and performance-based rather than solely time-bound.

b. Balancing Resource Commitment.

The reclassification process is resource-intensive, requiring significant investment of financial, manpower and organisational resources from USAR Teams, member states and the UN OCHA. As the INSARAG network continues to grow, the cumulative demand on these finite resources – including the rostering of qualified classifiers and the logistical planning required for each IEC/R – will only increase. An extended cycle for established teams would enable resources to be better optimised and more strategically directed, supporting the integrity of the reclassification process without

diverting capacity away from core operational readiness, training and other broader INSARAG contributions.

c. Sustaining Global Participation in the INSARAG Network

The continued growth of the INSARAG network reflects the global commitment to building USAR capacity and must be supported sustainably. A calibrated approach to the reclassification cycle would allow INSARAG and its member states to manage the expanding demands of the network more effectively, while reducing the barriers to sustained participation – particularly for teams where resource constraints are more acute. Affording established teams greater flexibility in their reclassification timeline supports broader and more equitable participation in the INSARAG network, ensuring that resource limitations do not inadvertently disadvantage committed and capable teams.

4. Proposal

4.1 The proposal is to establish a flexible and calibrated framework that provides established USAR Teams with the option of an extended reclassification cycle, while maintaining quality standards and sustaining the INSARAG mission. In this regard, the framework is built upon three core pillars: (i) clear criteria to define an established USAR Team, (ii) a holistic and flexible eligibility assessment that considers diverse workstream contributions, and (iii) robust control measures to ensure that minimum quality standards and operational readiness are maintained throughout the extended cycle.

a. Criteria for an Established USAR Team

An established USAR Team is one that has successfully completed a minimum of two IERs and is preparing for its third reclassification. This would mean that the team has been active within the INSARAG network for at least 10 years, excluding the initial IEC process. This baseline ensures that only teams with a demonstrated track record of response experience and operational capacity are considered for the extended IER cycle. Refer to Diagram 1 below for illustration of the proposed IER cycles.

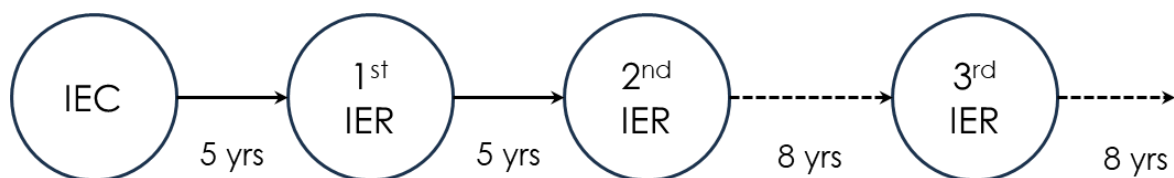


Diagram 1: Illustration of the proposed IER cycles

b. Flexibility in Eligibility Assessment

Eligibility for the extended cycle should be based on a holistic assessment of a team's maturity, track record, and sustained contributions to the INSARAG network. To

ensure that eligibility decisions are consistent, transparent, and equitable across different team profiles and regional contexts, a structured decision-making matrix is proposed as the primary tool for evaluating a team's suitability for the extended cycle framework.

This matrix would assess each team across four eligibility dimensions outlined as follows – (i) Operational deployment record, (ii) Training and exercise participation, (iii) INSARAG workstream contributions, and (iv) Classifier and Mentor contributions – using a tiered scoring or rating system. This multi-dimensional eligibility framework ensures that the assessment of an established team reflects the full breadth of a team's engagement with and contributions to the INSARAG network, rather than being limited to a single parameter. Further details on each proposed assessment dimension are elaborated below.

- i. Operational Deployment Record – The team should have a demonstrated record of responding to international emergencies, reflecting its commitment to the INSARAG mission and its ability to perform under real operational conditions.
 - ii. Training and Exercise Participation – The team should demonstrate sustained participation in major national and international USAR exercises, including INSARAG-related exercises, reflecting continued investment in operational readiness and interoperability.
 - iii. INSARAG Workstream Contributions – Active and sustained contributions to INSARAG working groups, advisory bodies, capacity building programmes, mentorship initiatives, guidelines development, and other network workstreams should be recognised as meaningful indicators of a team's commitment and institutional maturity. Teams that have made significant contributions in these areas should be accorded appropriate weight in the eligibility assessment, even where operational deployment opportunities may have been limited by geographic or resource factors.
 - iv. Classifier and Mentor Contributions – Teams that have contributed qualified classifiers or mentors to support IEC/R processes for other teams demonstrate a high level of institutional knowledge and commitment to the network, and this should be recognised as a positive indicator of eligibility.
- c. Control Measures and Quality Standards.
- To ensure that quality standards and operational capacities are maintained throughout the extended cycle, it is proposed that the USAR Team be required to submit a Pre-

CPoE³ at the 5th year to INSARAG to validate the team's continued readiness. The 24-month IER preparatory process will commence from the 6th year onwards, with the reclassification taking place at the 8th year, mirroring the timeline adopted during the Covid-19 pandemic. Refer to Diagram 2 below for illustration of the proposed timeline for extended IER cycle.

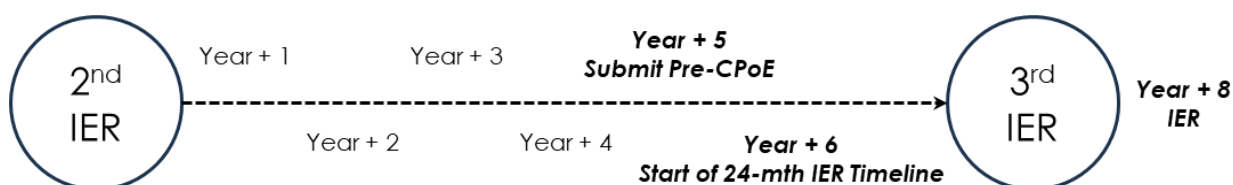


Diagram 2: Illustration of proposed timeline for extended IER cycle

Throughout the extended IER cycle, the USAR Team must also demonstrate a minimum level of activity across the eligibility dimensions outlined in para 4.1(b). This includes a commitment to respond to regional emergencies where viable, sustained participation in INSARAG workstreams and activities, and continued investment in training and exercises. Failure to maintain this minimum level of activity may result in INSARAG requiring the team to revert to the standard five-year cycle.

An additional self-declaration of continued readiness and compliance may be required from teams on the extended cycle. This declaration, submitted to INSARAG, will provide a structured yet lightweight mechanism for assurance prior to the Pre-CPoE submission due at the 5th year. It also ensures that the team's eligibility profile remains current and that any emerging concerns are identified and addressed in a timely manner.

5. Other Considerations

5.1 It is worth noting that quality standards in USAR are arguably more assurance-dependent than time-dependent. While the five-year reclassification cycle provides a structured mechanism for compliance, a performance-based and continuous assurance model may be equally effective in sustaining standards for established teams. This approach would also align with INSARAG's broader push for localisation and sustained capacity building across the network.

³ This will entail the USAR Team submitting a streamlined C-PoE (hereby termed as Pre-CPoE) to INSARAG, with evidence of continuous capability development, training and involvement in INSARAG-related activities to maintain quality standards, response and operational capacities. These activities provide ongoing assurance and commitment to the INSARAG standards.

5.2 The current reclassification model, while robust, is resource-intensive and requires large-scale planning and execution that can inadvertently divert capacity from core operational readiness. As INSARAG approaches its fourth decade, it is timely to review whether the existing model remains optimal, and to explore refinements that support the long-term sustainability of the network while preserving its mission of saving lives.

5.3 Nonetheless, the principal risk of an extended reclassification cycle is the potential for undetected capability degradation, particularly given that teams preparing for their third reclassification may vary in their level of maturity and capabilities. Any erosion of quality standards within the INSARAG network would have implications for the network's global standing, international trust, and interoperability during international emergency responses. Therefore, the proposed framework addresses this risk through a multi-layered, calibrated approach, whereby eligibility for the extended IER cycle is conditional on a demonstrated track record across multiple dimensions, including operational deployments, training and exercises, and INSARAG workstream contributions.

5.4 In addition, should a USAR Team undergo any major structural or capability change that materially affects its ability to meet INSARAG minimum standards, it will be required to revert to the standard IEC process on a five-year timeline. This provision ensures that the extended IER cycle remains a privilege accorded to teams that have demonstrated and continue to demonstrate the requisite maturity and capability, and not a permanent relaxation of standards.

6. Conclusion

6.1 The five-year reclassification cycle remains a robust and important assurance mechanism for the INSARAG network. However, a uniform approach may no longer be optimal in the current global context, where USAR Teams must balance resource prioritisation with the imperative to sustain the INSARAG mission and uphold quality standards. For established teams with a proven track record, extending the IER cycle is assessed to be viable, provided it is grounded in a structured, flexible and performance-based assurance framework that ensures continued compliance with INSARAG minimum standards.

7. Next Steps

7.1 To build broader consensus and ensure that the proposal is robustly discussed and refined before formal adoption, the following steps are proposed to advance the proposal for an extended IER cycle for established USAR Teams:

- a. To present the proposal at the INSARAG Global Meeting for initial discussion and feedback from member states and stakeholders. This will provide an early opportunity

to surface diverse perspectives and refine the proposal in response to feedback received, before it is advanced to a higher decision-making forum.

- b. Following the Global Meeting, the proposal will be tabled at the INSARAG Steering Group (ISG) Meeting for formal consideration. The ISG Meeting will provide the appropriate platform for member states to deliberate further on the proposal at the strategic level and determine the way forward for its implementation across the INSARAG network.
- c. In parallel, the proposal will be presented to the Quality Assurance IEC and IER Working Group for detailed technical review, feedback and comments.