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For Immediate Release:

As we hear of worsening conditions in Colorado and of all the people who have lost their homes or who are still stranded and awaiting help, we are overwhelmed with gratitude towards family, friends, NEMO Equipment, rescue teams, fellow adventurers, and others who went to great lengths to help us return safely from Longs Peak. We know we are truly fortunate to be safe.

We set out Friday, September 6th on a 7-day backcountry hike, a recommended loop from *Backpacker Magazine* that circles Rocky Mountain National Park, with the last three days partially off trail. Before we began, we discussed the entire trip with the RMNP backcountry office, reviewing the 5-day weather forecast for the park and specifically for Longs Peak (highs of 80°F, lows of 40°F, potential for afternoon thunderstorms every day). Based on anticipated and historical weather conditions, we carried appropriate gear, including a small backpacking tent, a 2-person 30°F sleeping bag, ultra-light sleeping pads, long underwear, warm mid-layers, thin puffy down jackets, hats, socks, headlamps, first aid, GPS device, multiple maps, camera, cell phone, spare batteries.

For the first few days, the weather was as forecasted: each afternoon there were thunderstorms, heavy rain, even hail, but each evening the dry western air dried us out for the next day's hike. On Monday, September 9th the weather took a turn for the worse. The afternoon storms came early and increased in intensity throughout the day, with temperatures around 40°F. Although conditions were cold and uncomfortable, this was something that we had experienced many times for extended durations on previous trips. September 10th continued with the same weather. We cross-country hiked over a steep pass and camped at around 11,500 feet, below Keplinger's Couloir.

On Wednesday, September 11th we were scheduled to climb over Longs Peak and descend to a campsite at Boulder Field. The often-traveled route begins with scrambling up a scree-filled gully and traversing a route known as Clark's Arrow to the Keyhole.

At daybreak, visibility was very poor with driving rain. When visibility improved slightly, we still had time to cover the short but difficult distance to our intended campsite. We hiked cross country as planned, since there is no trail in this area, and then started climbing the gully described in the route description, reaching the top about an hour and a half later. It was cold and raining, with about 20 to 30 feet of visibility. The conditions were uncomfortable, but we felt strong and were optimistic that we could get through Clark's Arrow to the Keyhole and down into Boulder Fields.

We searched for several hours for the entrance to Clark's Arrow, often ending up at the edge of 200-foot cliffs, only to down-climb and reassess the route. With every forward

step we were sure we were closer to finding the route that was only a quarter mile to safety instead of miles of dangerous descending. Unfortunately, the GPS altimeter and location were unreliable due to the cloud cover.

Using all of the information we had available, we concluded that we were searching in an area that was a critical 100 feet too high above the entrance. The end of the day was nearing as we descended, still looking for the entrance, and we discussed our situation. We were soaking wet, very cold, occasionally convulsing in shivers, with slowed reflexes and increasing clumsiness and disorientation. With the steady rain, sharply dropping temperatures, and poor visibility, we knew we were getting in trouble, fast.

Even if we found the entrance immediately, we would be attempting the most exposed part of the route under extremely dangerous conditions while suffering from the initial stages of hypothermia. So we decided to bivouac on a small rock ledge at 13,400 feet to warm our bodies as fast as possible. With numb fingers, we spent longer than we would have liked exposed outside of our tent, securing it in place with guy lines and rocks, expecting that we might need to hunker down for a while. Everything was wet and beginning to ice over.

After a couple of hours, the driving rain turned to sleet and snow, accumulating on the tent, threatening to collapse it. For the rest of the night we made sure to clear snow off the tent about every 15 minutes and bolster it against the heaviest winds. During the night, we combed maps and the GPS and discussed our options.

In the morning, as a lightning storm came through, lit up our tent, and shook the mountain, the number of potential serious and life-threatening situations became clear. We had no idea whether the highly unusual weather would continue or even worsen. Though we were prepared to wait out the storm, we also realized we were one bad event away from complete disaster. If our tent ripped away in the wind or the poles broke or we got caught in a flash flood or broke an ankle, it could be the end. We didn't sleep at all. We spent all night battling to keep the tent free of accumulating ice, warm our bodies, and dry out some of our gear. We were exhausted, and that only made it more difficult to keep ourselves warm.

At about 7am on Thursday, September 12th, conditions were worsening. Everything was covered with ice. Visibility was non-existent. Most of our gear was wet, and we were still shivering uncontrollably. We had no way to know how long the weather would last. We were exposed at over 13,000 feet and couldn't realistically move, since we hadn't found the trail opening and the area was iced over in every direction, with steep slopes and unprotected cliffs. We had no idea how long we'd be stuck. We felt that in the present conditions, we wouldn't survive long.

Though our cell phone battery had died the day before from the cold, we warmed the battery and texted the conditions of our situation to Connie's sister. We tried to give as much information about our location as possible considering the low visibility. We also tried to be clear about our exposure and the threat of hypothermia. After each text, we

received an error message saying it couldn't be sent, but the warning would disappear, and after 30 seconds the cell phone died. We had texted a lot of information, but we weren't sure if the messages ever sent.

Either way, we had to sit tight. If we had had crampons and a working GPS, it might have been a different story. Walking could have warmed us up eventually and helped dry out our clothing. But the forecast and the research beforehand hadn't led us to expect winter conditions. The weather had predicted thunderstorms, but this was much worse.

Hoping our messages for a rescue might have gone through and unable to move anyway, we stayed put and worked to improve our defenses. We reinforced anchors, tied internal guy lines, conserved our food, and collected snow in pots and cups for drinking water. We did what we could to dry out our gear in the sleeping bag, but we hardly had the warmth ourselves to have much effect. We knew that even if our message got out, it could be a long time before conditions improved enough for rescuers to make a safe approach to our location, whether on land or in the air.

As the day progressed, the sleet changed to rain and remarkably, over a few hours, some of the snow and ice melted off the peak. We knew this was a lucky break – it could have been days before the weather got better. We agonized over leaving our last known location, since a rescue might possibly be underway, but we didn't even know for sure that our messages had gotten through. We knew we couldn't depend on the favorable conditions lasting long after days of unusual and unpredictable weather – and if our texts hadn't gone through, and a rescue wasn't coming, waiting it out meant our survival was at stake. We decided to take advantage of the break in the weather.

Visibility still wasn't good enough to attempt the exposed traverse to Boulder Fields, but without ice, a descent was dangerous but possible. There was no trail; we would have to find a natural feature to follow down, but our mission now was to get to safer ground as expediently as possible. In a photo of a hand-drawn, no-scale map we had from the backcountry office, we noted a lake and a stream in the couloir below us and, at some distance away, a ranger station with an emergency telephone. Assuming we were able to make it off the peak, this was likely the closest available help. We figured it would be easy to stay with the stream; with the ranger station almost directly in its path, it seemed like a sign – this was what we needed to do.

At about 1pm on September 12th, we made the decision to attempt to descend the gully and make it to the ranger station. The excessive water from snowmelt and rain had turned the rock surface into a mudslide. The center of the gully was gone, and in its place was a rushing flood of mud, water, falling boulders, and rocks. We slowly and carefully down-climbed and several hours later made it into the valley, putting the exposure of Longs Peak behind us. We continued climbing down the valley, bushwacking through extremely rough terrain, rock ledges, tree fall, thick vegetation, and pooling water in steady rain. At this point, even with the hard work, we were still shivering uncontrollably. The river and stream volumes were many times their normal flow. We set up camp for the night and at first light continued onwards in cold rain.

After about 10 hours of bushwacking since leaving Longs Peak, we spotted the ranger station. All the roads were shut down, so the rangers helped us get out of the park with ATVs before continuing with the many rescues and challenges they are even now still undertaking. It was only then that we learned about the destruction and devastation in other parts of RMNP, Estes Park, Lyons, and surrounding areas of Colorado.

Our story is not unique. Choosing to adventure in the mountains brings risks, no matter how hard you try to keep them under control. We believe we prepared sufficiently and correctly and made good choices, and in the end we were fortunate to escape in good health. Many others in Colorado in the last week have not been so lucky.

There's always risk when heading to the mountains. But we remind ourselves that those risks, except in unlikely circumstances, such as the exceptionally extreme weather we've seen in Colorado in the last week, are usually manageable, and for us are outweighed by the rewards of enjoying the outdoors and embracing the challenges of adventure. We hope that what we faced will not discourage others from heading to the mountains, but remind everyone of the importance of planning carefully, bringing the right equipment, and making careful choices. And it certainly makes us appreciate, on a profound level, such brave and compassionate people as the RMNP rangers, who are willing to put themselves at risk to support the community of people that enjoy the use of those mountains. We will be reflecting on this experience for a long time to come.

When our text messages were received, our families and our employer jumped into action to ensure our safe return. We have many people to thank; these are just a few. Thank you, Senator Shaheen of New Hampshire, Representatives DeGette and Polis and Senator Udall of Colorado, and of course the National Park Service and RMNP rangers.

Colorado is facing a serious disaster right now. If you would like to show your support, please consider donating to the ongoing efforts or to Rocky Mountain National Park. Thank you to our friends and families for your tireless efforts and unquestioning support.

Our thoughts remain with those in Colorado who are still dealing with the immense loss and destruction there. We urge everyone to offer help in any way they can.