



Hank Lunsford

Search and rescue team members search for avalanche victims Jan. 7 at Silver Mountain Resort in Kellogg, Idaho.

New technology helps search teams in Pacific Northwest

Help from drones

By COURTNEY FLATT
Northwest News Network

Last year, Washington state's King County Search and Rescue was looking for a man who'd fallen in a very fast-moving river. They thought he might still be in the water, but the banks were super steep and slick with mud.

It'd be easy for even an experienced searcher to fall in and be swept away, no matter if they were wearing a floatation device.

To make things safer — and faster — they turned to technology. Specifically, a drone.

The drone was able to zoom along the river, up and down the bank. The man wasn't there, and search teams were able to quickly move along.

"(Drones) allow us to search areas that would be more dangerous to rescuers," said Glenn Wallace, the former president of King County's search and rescue team. "It's really about thinking about places like avalanche fields over a cliff, along a fast-moving river — places that we would hesitate to send people to."

In those cases, drones help teams quickly figure out whether the person they're looking for is over that cliff or in that dangerous river, instead of spending precious time getting into that area and putting the searchers at-risk.

Or, if the drones see clues that a person might be in a precarious spot — like a jacket the missing person was last wearing — that helps rescuers know, "it's worth the effort and the risk to send a team in there to look," Wallace said.

The volunteer group has used drones in about eight missions so far, Wallace said, with around 20 trained pilots. They work in tandem with the sheriff's office, although the drones are owned either by the rescue group or individual volunteers. The group first started to look into using drones to help with search and rescue efforts in January 2019.

Like with any technology, there are drawbacks. Drones can be hard to use when there are lots of trees around, which can limit both drones and helicopters.

"A lot of our search and rescue efforts are still going to be on foot, calling out the subject's name and trying to find them," Wallace said.

The weather, the Federal Aviation Administration flight rules for drones and the resolution of the camera can also limit drone efforts.

In Oregon, Mountain Wave Search and Rescue formed in the early '90s, a few years after a group from Oregon Episcopal School became stranded on Mount Hood. Nine people died in the disaster.

Paramedic Russell Gubele decided to co-found a volunteer rescue group specializing in technology and communications, after struggling through communications setbacks during the Mount Hood rescue.

Nearly 30 years later, with the group's technological bent, it wasn't surprising to Gubele that his team

was one of Oregon's first to include drones in their search and rescue missions. They started a yearlong training about three years ago.

"I always thought that we would try to push the envelope a little bit on technology," Gubele said. "The whole goal was to try to leverage the technology that was available to find missing people."

Gubele said many groups use different types of drones in their rescue missions, depending on the situation. Some rescuers may hike with more hobby-style drones they can use to peek over cliffs.

Other times, groups will use more high-tech drones, outfitted with multiple video cameras, and at times, thermal cameras. Software also allows searchers to filter out colors to, say, search for a red backpack. The drone Mountain Wave uses also has the ability to deliver small rescue items, like radios or survival equipment, to stranded or injured hikers.

The group has used drones at the Oregon Coast and in the Columbia River Gorge, among other missions, Gubele said.

"I do think that there is going to be a lot more usage of (drones). We've already seen that since we started," Gubele said. "What to watch out for, just like with any technology, is if you don't use it a lot or don't train a lot with it, you might not be as effective as you need to be."

Other technology that has aided traditional search and rescue efforts have actually been cell phones, Gubele said.

"That's made it a lot easier to find lost people, provided they can get some cell coverage," Gubele said. "That technology has gotten better and better."

Emergency cell calls can be less accurate when coming from very remote locations. That's where a program called Enhanced-911 can help. King County's Glenn Wallace said E-911 has reduced the number of multi-day missions search crews have to go on.

"It'd say it is now seldom that we have an overnight or multi-day mission for someone who is missing in the wilderness," Wallace said.

New mapping technology, called SARTopo, also helps groups better plan their searches before they start. Recently, RECCO technology, which is a reflector sometimes found in clothing and boots, helped find the body of the third person killed by an avalanche on Silver Mountain, according to the Spokesman-Review.

The King County group also outfits their searchers with GPS dog collars on carabiners, Wallace said. That makes it easier to track each individual searcher in the field.

While new technology may aid search efforts, it's not meant to replace traditional on-the-ground rescuers or in-the-air helicopter pilots. Search and rescue groups say they use each tactic differently — drones could be good for steep ravines, whereas helicopters could better search large areas.

"Both things are always going to have to exist side by side," Wallace said. "It's sort of art and science that we use, and I think it's just going to keep evolving."

'(DRONES) ALLOW US TO SEARCH AREAS THAT WOULD BE MORE DANGEROUS TO RESCUERS.'

Glenn Wallace | former president of King County's search and rescue team

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