

Drones used for first time in major search at Grand Canyon

By ASTRID GALVAN
Associated Press

PHOENIX — The desperate effort this week to find two hikers who disappeared at the bottom of the Grand Canyon represented the National Park Service's most extensive use yet of drones in a search-and-rescue mission.

The Grand Canyon is the only national park with its own fleet of unmanned aircraft for locating people who have gotten lost, stranded, injured or killed. Under a program that began last fall, it has five drones and four certified operators.

While the aerial search for the two hikers came up empty, it threw a spotlight on technology that can enter crevices and other rugged spots unreachable by foot while sparing searchers the dangers of going up in a helicopter.

With its steep cliffs, nearly 2,000 square miles and mesmerizing views, the Grand Canyon can be as dangerous as it is captivating. Rangers were confronted



Brandon Torres/Grand Canyon National Park via AP Photo

In these undated photos from 2016, a Grand Canyon National Park employee operates a drone at the park. The Grand Canyon is the only national park with its own fleet of unmanned aircraft for reaching people who have gotten lost, stranded, injured or killed.

with 1,200 medical emergencies, 293 search-and-rescue missions and 17 deaths in 2016, a year in which the park had nearly 6 million visitors. Last summer, a 35-year-old Yelp executive tripped while hiking, fell backward and was found dead 400 feet below.

"Our historic model was to take the helicopter to look and see," said Grand Canyon chief ranger Matt Vandzura.

But now, drones can offer "that same close look but without putting any people at risk. It has dramatically increased our ability to keep our people safe."

The drones are about 18 inches across and 10 inches high, with a battery life of about 20 minutes. Drone operators watch the video in real time and then analyze it again at the end of the day.

SOLAR: Bill remains a work in progress

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Natural Resources Committee — if the utility exceeds the 12-acre limit for future solar arrays in the area, it would cost between \$150,000 and \$250,000 for each application and drive up rates for customers, he said.

On the other hand, Campbell said it would take at least 50 solar arrays at 12 acres a piece to add up to the 100 megawatts they need.

"Many of them will have to be placed where we do not have existing substations and transmission lines, so those facilities will have to be constructed as well," he said.

In response, Smith has spearheaded House Bill 2023 which would allow UEC to build solar farms in the Columbia Valley AVA, but only if the site does not have an existing water right and is not otherwise suitable for high-value crops.

"The last thing I want to do is take away agricultural land," Smith said. "That's not part of this conversation."

Yet that is exactly the concern from opponents who argue agricultural land must be protected. Dave Price, with the Blue Mountain alliance, said the bill would potentially sacrifice high-value farmland by making it available for non-farm use.

"It would be easy to get rid of the existing process, Goal 3 exception, to solve the UEC and other energy users' need to satisfy the (renewable energy) mandate issue," Price said. "This would be a mistake, and would have long-term effects on our high-value farmlands."

Irene Gilbert, with Friends of the Grande Ronde Valley, also criticized the bill, saying UEC should not be allowed to alter the definition of high-value farmland and circumvent local land use planning.

"This decision process should remain with the local counties who are in the best

position to make a determination on a case-by-case basis," Gilbert said.

The issue was also raised at the Umatilla County Planning Commission, where members opted not to recommend expanding the Moyer-Tolles station last month. However, the Umatilla County Board of Commissioners gave UEC the go-ahead anyway, with commissioner Bill Elfering saying solar generation was the best use for the land.

Smith said he wants to help UEC meet its renewable energy mandate in an affordable manner.

"Remember, this is state law," he said. "UEC has no other alternative but to do this."

The bill remains a work in progress, Smith said. It has already undergone four

revisions, and will likely be changed further. Specifically, Smith said they are narrowing the language down to ensure UEC builds on rocky, scabby land without a water right.

The bill did pass out of the House Agriculture and Natural Resources Committee on Tuesday and was referred to the House Rules Committee. Smith said he is working closely with UEC, the Oregon Farm Bureau and other stakeholders to come up with a mutually agreeable solution.

"For our co-op that does so many good things for our community, I think I owe it to try and help them out," Smith said.

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LEGISLATURE: Many of the proposals address state pensions and healthcare costs

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exhaustive or all-inclusive.

The group also proposed two immediate steps to take to address the upcoming two-year budget — freeze hiring of "non-essential" state positions and stop automatically granting inflationary increases for services and supplies.

Legislators also released a list of "principles" to guide budget decisions, such as requiring analysis of program costs on an ongoing basis rather than just their initial costs; and not creating programs or funds without money to pay for them.

Many of the proposed long-term proposals address costs associated with state employees such as pensions and healthcare costs, resulting in pushback from union groups.

SEIU 503 President Steve Demarest said in a statement that the cost containment measures presented an "effort to scapegoat people who have dedicated their lives to public service" and called for changes to state business taxes — another source of contention this legislative session. Another group of lawmakers is evaluating possible adjustments to the state's revenue system.

"We're doing this not

because we think that this is solely an issue for public employees," Devlin said. "Obviously I do believe that public employees should be compensated justly."

House Minority Leader Mike McLane, R-Powell Butte, said after the proposals were announced Friday that the ideas represented a "starting point."

"The bottom line is Oregon's state government must have structural spending reform to meet our commitments in the long term," McLane said in a statement.

Patrick Criteser, chair of the Oregon Business Plan — a coalition of business leaders and a prominent voice weighing on state public finance — said the ideas proposed Friday were an indication legislators are "looking seriously" at ways to address the state's budget for the long haul.

"We know addressing these costs will not be easy," Criteser said in a prepared statement, "and this memorandum shows that legislators are prepared to have hard conversations about the state's structural spending issues, including the need to rein in the costs of the public sector healthcare benefits and making sure that the public pension system is secure for all employees."

While it's been known since January how much may need to be trimmed from areas of the budget more generally, a list of proposed cuts to specific programs released this week has highlighted the possible effects of budget reductions on education and services for people with disabilities and the elderly.

On Thursday, Gov. Kate Brown announced a state government hiring freeze on each agency until its budget is approved by the legislature. That could leave higher starting balances for the upcoming biennium, which begins July 1. Her proposal differs from what legislators have suggested — a hiring freeze for nonessential employees for the next two years of the budget.

On Friday, a separate work group on public safety spending also presented proposals focused on measures to restrain growth of the state's prison population. Early estimates from the Legislative Fiscal Office indicate the state could save at least \$19.75 million of general fund money in the upcoming budget cycle by making certain changes, such as extending the duration of a program that allows certain prisoners to be released early in favor of community-based supervision.

BMCC: College defends gun free zone on campus

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any individual or damage upon a building or grounds of the College, regardless of whether they are the holder of a concealed weapons permit."

White-Zollman explained the Family Educational Rights to Privacy Act prevents college from disclosing the identity of the student or whether or not the student faces discipline for violating college policy.

Pro-gun rights advocates call such policies unlawful and unconstitutional.

"Statewide, public colleges and universities

have grappled with this issue for a long time," White-Zollman said. "BMCC is able to set policy that it believes is in the best interest of its college community."

The Oregon Court of Appeals in 2011 in the case of Oregon Firearms Education Foundation vs. Board of Higher Education, found the board's "broad scope ... to control and manage its properties includes the authority to make rules regarding the conduct of visitors or members of the public on institutional properties." However, the court ruled, the board exceeded

its authority when it regulated firearms, which is the purview of the Legislature.

Still, White-Zollman stated, Oregon Revised Statute 341.290(4), allows boards to "control use of and access to the grounds, buildings, books, equipment and other property of the district."

She also said the college is committed to doing its best "to provide our students, employees and visitors with a safe learning environment."

Contact Phil Wright at pwright@eastoregonian.com or 541-966-0833.

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