Being prepared takes on new meaning

Oconee County hosts statewide training event

BY NORMAN CANNADA
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In a best-case scenario, emergencies would always occur in easily accessible places, where rescue officials could arrive within minutes, stabilize a situation and have a victim on the way to the hospital.

But, in some of the more remote mountainous areas of Oconee County, best-case scenarios are not available. Those cases often require more creativity and planning and a variety of rescue methods.

Oconee County Emergency Services hosted a statewide training event recently with the S.C. Helicopter Aquatic Rescue Team (SCHART). The SCHART program is a partnership between local government, the S.C. Fire Marshal's Office and the S.C. Army National Guard.

"It allows us hands-on experiences and preplanning access to sites that we know are trouble sites for us," said Oconee County Fire Chief Charlie King. "We also get to work with people from the state and we know each other's capabilities and equipment resources for when that bad day comes."

Oconee County has had 10 incidents this year in which rescue operations required special considerations.

The SCHART Black Hawk helicopter was put on standby this summer when a person was injured in a whitewater rafting accident. Workers at the scene were able to float the injured person down the river to safety, and the helicopter was not needed. King said the last time the helicopter was used was about a year and a half ago, before King came to Oconee County.

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A member of the South Carolina Helicopter Aquatic Rescue Team (SCHART) is hoisted to a Black Hawk helicopter with the person he "rescued" during recent training exercises in Oconee County.

TRAINING: 'We want to identify shortfalls that need to be addressed'



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A member of the South Carolina Helicopter Aquatic Rescue Team (SCHART) simulates a rescue operation as part of recent training exercises in Oconee County for the team and rescue workers from around the state.

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"When we have a situation where a rescue is needed, we do a risk-benefit analysis," said King. "When you have a helicopter rescue there is an increased danger, so we look to other means to see if there is another way. If we can use our Gators or ATVs, or can hike in and out, we will go with that."

Recently, a hiker suffered an apparent broken ankle at Yellow Branch Falls. Rescue workers had to hike in and hike out several miles to get the victim.

"The remote areas we have here do make it more difficult," said King. "The terrain is a big player in areas that are hard to access. Some of these locations take three to four hours to get to an emergency."

King said one of the benefits of the weekend of training was the opportunity to evaluate where they need to improve.

"We want to identify shortfalls that need to be addressed," he said. "We have gotten to the point of getting picky. We see the need for additional equipment and cutting down our exposure time."

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