

Landing zones take flight; increase safety

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OCONEE COUNTY
Oconee County emergency responders are now prepared for critical situations with a new electronic program outlining predetermined landing zones in each fire district. With a partnership of Oconee County's Geographic Information Systems department, Oconee Medical Emergency Management Services and county fire departments, at least 70 predetermined landing zones were chosen and established to make the job easier and safer for helicopter pilots responding to emergency situations.

EMS Director Kent Whitten said in the past, helicopter pilots depended on first responders at accident scenes or medics on a health-related call to establish a nearby landing zone.

"We were at the mercy of the environment," Whitten said. "That put the helicopter at risk because of power lines" and other hazards, such as large trees in a helicopter's

path.

Whitten asked the county for support and research from all fire departments to choose landing zones in their districts. Originally, Whitten and Lisa Simmering, of the county's GIS department, received about 230 potential landing zone requests. That number was narrowed down to include four to five landing zones in each district.

Each landing zone is 100-feet by 100-feet. If a zone is smaller than the suggested measurements, Whitten said that means the area has no potential landing hazards.

With the electronic landing zone program, Whitten explained that maps were created with all of the potential landing areas identified. When a helicopter is called to a scene, they are given only the fire district number and the landing zone number. For example, if station 16 called out a request for a helicopter and it has four landing zones in its district, it would give the dispatch landing number 16-03 for



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Finding safe landing zones has always been an issue in Oconee County. Now, however, a new mapping system has

changed all that, making the landing of helicopters in emergency situations safer for both pilots and those on the ground.

landing zone three.

"The benefit to that is communication," Whitten said. "Before if you went out, you get a GPS reading, then relay that to dispatch and then to the helicopter. It was a flawed system that could be improved."

Currently, Oconee County has service with four helicopters — Greenville, Anderson, Franklin, Ga., and Spartanburg. When one of the four helicopters

respond to a landing zone, the electronic mapping provides potential hazards for that zone, the exact longitude and latitude for the location and the amount of time it will take to arrive.

In the future, Whitten said he wants to create an interactive online database that's live to show the most current updates, if any, made to a landing zone. As for right now, Whitten said the helicop-

ter staff is notified immediately if there is a change to a zone.

The program has not been used yet, and Whitten is working to create books of the landing zones for all the county ambulances.

"The full implementation has not been done, but we are not too far from it," he said.

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