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Oconee dive team and hazardous materials team train for tragedy

Ray Chandler/Special to Independent Mail

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OCONEE COUNTY — The report of a drum submerged in Lake Keowee at Oconee County's South Cove Park sent the county dive and hazardous materials teams scurrying Saturday morning.

But no alarm was raised. It was all a drill.

That didn't make the participants take the exercise any less seriously.

"There are some aspects of what each team does that the other team might not know that they need to know," said Capt. Mike Head of the Oconee County haz-mat (hazardous materials) team and Saturday's incident commander.

For Bob Kinder, head of the county dive team, the first step of the operation is to guide an ROV, remote operating vehicle, into position near the drum, which was detected submerged off a dock in about eight feet of water.

The robot has a camera that Kinder, joystick in hand, can guide around the drum, looking for clues in the view screen of the portable control unit.

"There it is," said Kinder, reading off a code on the drum that sent Head thumbing through a thick book.

The "haz-mat Bible" is a South Carolina Department of Transportation publication detailing every sort of hazardous material transported through the state, Head said, and the code read off the drum lets the responders try to pin down what they're dealing with.

No diver will be sent down to the drum without that vital bit of info.

For the numbers on the drum, the book gives three possibilities, none of them good - methyl parathion, parathion, or tetraethyl pyrophosphate, Head said. All three are hazardous pesticides.

Worse, according to Kinder, the smaller of the two standard bungs (plugs) in the drum is missing. A diver will have to plug it.

Once the camera is not longer needed, Kinder brings the ROV back to the surface, marking the location of the drum so a "recovery operation" can begin.

A divers suit up and enters the water. The bung is replaced with an adjustable rubber one the haz-mat team uses for just such emergencies. An "over packing," or casing, is placed over the drum before it is raised from the depths.

The drum is then sealed in a container and readied for a disposal contractor to handle. Haz-mat team members then decontaminate the divers involved in the operation and anything else that came into contact with the drum.

Dealing with such an emergency is unfortunately not unusual for the haz-mat team, Head said, recalling an incident from September 2009 when two drums found to contain amounts of the potentially toxic chemical sodium hydrosulfite were found floating in the Chauga River at Oconee County's Chau Ram Park.

The drums were presumed to have washed into the river due to prior heavy rains but their ultimate source has never been discovered.

Working with the dive team on drill of a hazardous materials contamination of the lake provides more training and experience for both teams, Head said, because the exercise is drawn from very real possibilities.

"This kind of emergency could actually come up at any time, that we'd have to work together on," Head said. "And that's where this kind of drill pays off."



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