

Searching in safety



The Oconee County Sheriff's Office's new underwater drone, donated by Airworx Unmanned Solutions, stands ready to dive in. The drone can reach depths up to 330 feet. Below: Oconee County Sheriff's Office officials stand with Airworx owner Stephen Baxley, left, as he demonstrates how to use the sheriff's office's new underwater drone.

PHOTOS BY ANDREA KELLEY | THE JOURNAL

OCSO receives underwater drone donation

BY NORM CANNADA
THE JOURNAL

WEST UNION — The Oconee County Sheriff's Office has a new tool officials expect will help cut the time for some underwater searches and provide more safety for divers responding to an emergency.

Oconee Sheriff Mike Crenshaw, Capt. Jimmy Dixon and other officials were on Lake Keowee at Crooked Creek RV Park on Friday for the donation and demonstration of the forensic recovery underwater remotely operated vehicle (ROV).

The ROV, valued at \$10,000, was donated to the sheriff's office by Airworx Un-

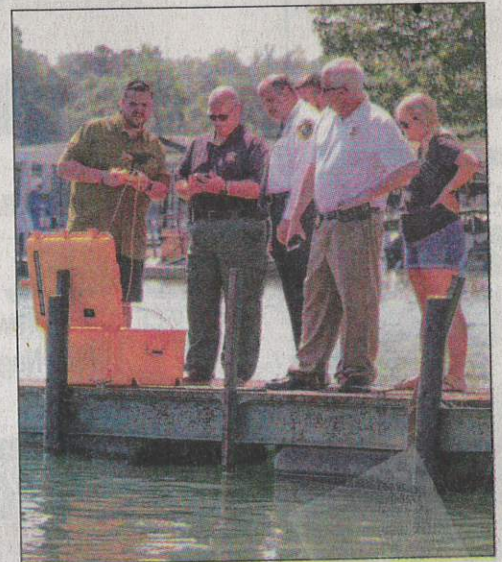
manned Solutions, an Easley-based public safety robotics firm. It will be used by the sheriff's office's cold case unit and made available to the Oconee County Undercover Search and Recovery Team when needed, according to a news release from sheriff's office spokesman Jimmy Watt.

'SO MUCH MORE TERRITORY'

"Basically, it's an underwater drone," Crenshaw told The Journal, adding the cold case team will be in charge of the device.

"We've had some reports in the past

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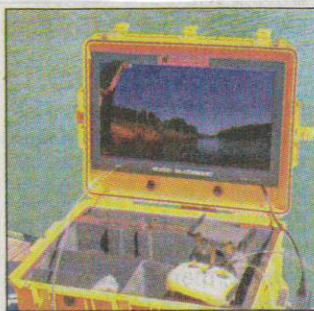
that some of our missing persons may be in a pond, may be in a lake somewhere," he said. "We've done some extensive searches on some of our missing persons already in some of our ponds in the county. With this technology, we can put it in and cover so much more territory underwater. It's quicker, more efficient, more effective."

The release said the ROV is "equipped with a robotic claw to retrieve and manipulate objects on the floor of the lake," and has LED lighting and a 4K camera system. It has 636 feet of tether line and can dive to depths of 330 feet.

"It's got a grabber on the end of it, so if there's something that we need to pick up — if there's a crime and somebody chunks a gun in the water — we can actually use this to go down to find it and retrieve it," he said.

The sheriff's office spent about \$4,000-\$5,000 to purchase an above-ground drone from Airworx that has been used in a variety of scenarios.

"We've used it with our SWAT (Special Weapons and Tactics) team with barricaded subjects," Crenshaw said. "We've got



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The carrier case for the underwater drone shows a drone's eye view of the lake.

a smaller drone we can actually send inside a home. It saves lives."

Dixon, who oversees the criminal investigations division and the cold case unit and has been an underwater search and recovery diver for 30 of his 46 years in law enforcement, said the ROV has many potential uses.

"With this device, we'll be able to put it in the water no matter what the water temperature is," he said. "It will actually go 330 feet (from the surface of the water), which, for a diver, that is considered a decompression dive, which is very dangerous. So utilizing this device, we're able to still search deep bodies of water if we need to, as well as retrieve various pieces of evidence or things like that that may be in different parts

of lakes or ponds around the county."

He sees many scenarios where the ROV could be used.

"Any current missing person ... children, heaven forbid, but drownings — this would be very instrumental in locating a possible drowning victim — more expedient than having divers do search grids down on the bottom. We can put this down, locate the body, the divers can then go down and retrieve the body a lot more quickly without having to do a full search on bottoms of lakes. It will find it quicker. With this, we can video as it's taking place, whereas with an undercover diver, we've got to put a video camera in their hands along with all of the other equipment."

WEEKEND INITIATION

Dixon's comments proved to be accurate. A little more than 24 hours after Friday's demonstration, Dixon took the ROV to another site at Lake Keowee where a Spartanburg man had gone under the water and hadn't resurfaced. While divers were getting ready to go into the water, the ROV searched and was able to eliminate some of the search areas, narrowing

the area for the divers who retrieved the body.

Sgt. Barry Owens, a member of the cold case team, said the safety potential and getting into tighter spaces are advantages to the ROV.

"I see it being able to help faster without injury to any of our personnel," he said. "I think that's a huge plus to be able to go into more confined spaces."

SAFETY

Oconee County deputy emergency manager Scott Smith and dive team chief Daniel Picotte got a first-hand look at a similar device last year during the response to an airplane crash on Lake Hartwell in Hartwell, Ga.

"For us, safety is a big thing," Smith said. "This gives us an opportunity to actually do the search

while divers are getting ready. They can go down to whatever depth it has the capability to. That saves our divers any stress from going down and having to do all that searching and then once they find whatever they're looking for, they can clamp onto it with the claw. It's easier for our divers to follow that yellow line down and actually get to the object and start working as opposed to getting down and having to search and then start working in the water."

"The other thing is, this gives us an opportunity to look at what the area looks like for our divers to go."

'THE PROPER TOOLS'

Airworx founder and owner Stephen Baxley, an Oconee native who has worked as a police officer

in Easley, said his family comes back to Oconee to spend time on their property at the lake.

"I have children, and if we were to be in need, I would want the county to have proper tools that they could use to help with any of those things, and then also to help kind of close some of these cold cases and bring some closure to families," he said.

"A simple dive for an anomaly in the water might take an hour, and there's a lot of risk for that diver going up and down," Baxley said. "This can do it in minutes, sometimes seconds, depending on how far it is. You can go straight down to an anomaly and identify what that is and bring it right straight back up."