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Underwater Search Equipment Helps Law Enforcement and Dive Teams

Many law enforcement agencies and public safety dive teams are adding underwater search equipment to help make their operations easier, safer, and faster. Placer County Sheriffs Department and Solano County Dive Rescue Team in California, Rochester Police Department in New York, Providence Fire Department in Rhode Island, and the Snohomish County Sheriffs Department in Washington are a few of the diverse group of agencies using metal detectors, video cameras, and sonars in their search and recovery missions.

Placer County has 95 square miles of water which includes forty percent of Lake Tahoe. To ensure this area has adequate law enforcement and public safety coverage, the Placer County Sheriffs Department has two dive teams and a marine patrol. Dive team members are assigned to the marine unit and perform accident investigations on sunken vessels, victim recoveries and evidence collection. Operations are conducted from a 14 foot zodiac, two 24 foot Jetcraft boats, and a custom built 30 foot aluminum Almar capable of cruising at 40 knots. The boats carry an array of equipment including scuba gear, underwater communications, photography equipment, lift bags, and a JW Fishers SSS-100K/600K side scan sonar which produces detailed images of anything on the bottom regardless of water clarity. The sonar was employed in the search for a small plane that crashed in the lake with several people on board. The sonar was also put to work in the search for alleged marijuana dealer Neal Forrest King who went missing in 2013. Law enforcement agencies had unsuccessfully searched several lakes at the time of his disappearance, but now with water levels in the lakes at historic lows, new underwater terrain can be explored. Sgt. David Pabst reports their recently upgraded side scan is working great, and since completing training with Team Lifeguard Systems' Skeeter Porter, "everyone is much more confident in the use of the sonar and its ability to help us find bodies."

In nearby Solano County the Dive Rescue Team is directed, managed, and financially supported by the by the Solano County Sheriffs Department's Office of Emergency Services. A full time deputy specially trained in diving and marine operations coordinates and oversees all aspects of the team. To assist in their search and recovery operations the team acquired a JW Fishers TOV-1 towed video system. Unaffected by cold, darkness, and depth, the towed video can stay submerged all day and all night without concern of decompression sickness or running out of air. Propelled by the moving boat, the system's low light camera and powerful 100 watt lights provide a clear picture of the underwater environment. The Solano Dive Team, like many others, believes the towed video is more useful than an ROV for their search operations. Whereas an ROV is typically deployed from a stationary vessel to inspect a site directly below, towing the camera allows a larger area to be surveyed relatively quickly. And using the TOV-1 with Fishers DDW-1 depressor wing lets them to obtain deeper tows with less cable deployed.

But many agencies still find an ROV to be the most effective tool for the varied search operations they must perform. The Snohomish County Sheriffs Office in Washington purchased a JW Fishers SeaLion-2 ROV through a federal grant. Deputies nicknamed the underwater robot "Batman". In March 2013 Batman found the body of a fisherman who drowned in Silver Lake. Later that month, Batman helped gather underwater surveillance before the team dove on a car at the bottom of Snohomish River. The bodies of two missing people were found inside. The department's Lt. Rodney Rochon says, "Rescues are our team's top priority. However in cases where they can't make a rescue, we need to recover the victim so the family can get closure." The SeaLion-2 provides information on the underwater environment, which increases safety and helps limit the amount of time divers spend on the bottom.

Rochon went on to say, “the ROV can weather harsher conditions and dive deeper, up to 1,000 feet, and stay longer than people can.”

Dive teams with the Rochester Police Department in New York and Providence Fire Department in Rhode Island have found the underwater metal detector to be an essential tool in their search operations. Many criminals mistakenly believe if they dispose of a knife or gun in a waterway, it will be lost forever. JW Fishers Pulse 8X detector routinely assists in locating evidence, weapons, shell casings, stolen property, and explosive devices.

A few of the many other agencies using JW Fishers search equipment are the Washtenaw County Emergency Management Agency in Michigan, Alameda County Sheriffs Dept Underwater Recovery Team in California, Lower Township Fire District 2 in New Jersey, Indian River County Fire Rescue in Florida, Thomasville Police Dept in Georgia, US Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), Dubai Police in the UAE, and Indonesia’s National Search & Rescue Agency.

For more information on Fishers complete line of underwater search equipment go to <http://www.jwfishers.com>.

Photo attached: Members of the Placer County Sheriffs Department with their JW Fishers side scan sonar, Inset photo – Snohomish County Sheriffs deputies prepare to deploy their SeaLion-2 ROV.

