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Vehicle, equipment aim to aid in water rescues in Boone Co.

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Dramatic rescues from capsized boats or of drivers trapped in vehicles in fast-rising creeks can be extremely dangerous.

In Northern Kentucky, the men and women who perform these feats, and do so voluntarily, will soon get some equipment to make the job a little safer.

In December, the Boone County Fiscal Court authorized the purchase of a remote operating vehicle and hazmat diving equipment for the Boone County Water Rescue squad.

"Boone County Water Rescue provides an important and a fairly quiet service in Northern Kentucky," Jeff Earlywine, Boone County administrator said. "Many people don't know much about it and maybe have never heard of it, but if you're out on the water and in trouble it's great asset to be able to call upon."

Boone County Water Rescue is made up of 57 people who give up time on weekends in the summer and, as necessary, throughout the year to make the region's waters safer.

"There are certain times when the risk is really high for our divers in trying to locate or get a person out of the water," Capt. Dale Appel, said. "If we can use this equipment, we're going to reduce the risk of human life to our people and that is always the biggest concern. This is one of the most sophisticated vehicles that operates within our realm,"

Appel is a retired traffic technician for the State of Kentucky and, like everyone else is a volunteer. He has been involved in water rescue since 1967 and has served as captain of Boone County Water Rescue since 1989.

"We have dentists, mechanics and, of course, some fire personnel and EMTs," Appel said. "They all share a common interest and a commitment to serve."

Also on the squad is Appel's wife, Lynette, an EMT who has been with the team for more than a dozen years.

"There are a few husband and wife teams on the squad," Appel said.

Put simply, Appel says, the unit's primary function is to enhance the safety and welfare of people on the water and to promote water safety. In addition to its patrol and rescue functions, members speak at schools and encourage safety procedures, such as the use of life jackets while on the river.

Boone County Water Rescue combined operations with Campbell County last year to form a combined unit that serves throughout Northern Kentucky. Previously Kenton County contracted with Boone County to provide rescue services and Campbell County's water rescue unit operated as a separate, non-profit organization.

By combining services and sharing resources the counties are able to save about \$24,000 per year.

Each county contributes \$36,000 and Bracken County, which is also served by the unit, adds \$3,000, reducing the total operating budget to \$111,000 from \$135,000.

Before the merger, the 36 senior members of the Boone County alone had more than 341 years of combined water rescue experience.

Because of its wealth of knowledge, the unit is often called on to assist and support recovery efforts in other states. Appel says that help is only provided if there is no risk to the primary areas the squad serves.

"Our first concern is our own people, but we will help out if we can," Appel said.

Among the equipment in the unit's fleet are 10 boats and seven vehicles, including a dive truck.

The units generally patrol the river on weekends from mid-April to October and work on an as-needed basis at other times. There are about 16 members on the water on a given weekend in the summer.

Tasks can include anything from the rescue of potential drowning victims and the recovery of bodies to evidence retrieval and vehicle recovery.

Appel recalls one instance where the unit retrieved a duck that had become stuck in a rapidly freezing pond.

"Just about anything that can happen on the water, has happened to us," he said. "You can't imagine how many times we are on the water and we get there in time and everybody goes home safe."

The remote operating vehicle approved by the Fiscal Court is equipped with retrieval arm and camera equipment that can be used for evidence collection, to check hulls of boats and piers in the water

In this age of domestic terrorism, the equipment will be used to perform tasks that were not previously a function of rescue squads.

The remote unit will allow the department to take stock video of all of the piers and bridges in the area and compare them to more recent images in advance of major events such as Tall Stacks or the annual fireworks show on the Ohio River.

The remote vehicle will cost \$117,781 and the diving equipment will cost \$91,332. The funds will come from grants, except for \$1,961, which will come from the Water Rescue Department budget.
