



Posted: Aug 27, 2015 8:44 PM CDT
Updated: Aug 27, 2015 8:44 PM CDT

GIS technology used in search for Wimberley flood victims

By Jennifer Lira

In Wimberley, Texas, hundreds of volunteers searched 67 miles of rough terrain along the Blanco River. They were looking for eight people swept away in a Memorial Day weekend flash flood.

Part of that search included the use of a smart mapping tool called Geographic Information Systems or GIS.

GIS uses a combination of drones, manned aircraft, and space-based imaging to collect detailed images used to map-out sites like disaster areas. Those maps give searchers an organized look at areas that may otherwise be inaccessible and impossible to see.

Devon Humphrey is a GIS consultant. He ran the system during the search in Wimberley and discussed it at Del Mar College Thursday.

"GIS was tracking in real time what the field crews and search and rescue teams were seeing in the field," said Humphrey.

The GIS maps were used in Wimberley two days after the flash flood and they're still being used today.

During the heart of the search, the 1,500 volunteers were linked up through a smart phone app that was used to input details about what they found as they searched. That information then popped up on the maps in real time to update everyone involved in the search.

Humphrey said GIS has been used in disasters across the world. "GIS itself has been around for about 30 years. And it's used in all major emergency responses, whether it be a hurricane like Katrina or the Nepal earthquake that happened this year."

Ultimately, the searchers using GIS in Wimberley recovered six of the eight victims. Two Corpus Christi children remain missing.



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(KRIS)