

Decomposed body found in Priest Lake



Gene Ralston deciphers an image of the lake bottom, captured by the sonar device.

—Photo by SUZY STERNER

Sandy and Gene Ralston prepare to submerge the side-scan sonar in an attempt to find the body suspected to have drowned near Eight-Mile Island in Priest Lake.

By SUZY STERNER
News editor

PRIEST LAKE — A search for a missing Benton, Wash. man uncovered the decomposed remains of an unidentified human body, approximately 1,200-feet off the southern shore of Eight-Mile Island and 320-feet below the water's surface.

On Sept. 3, after a week-long search for Kennewick, Wash. fireman, David Eugene Lewis, 54, a rescue team consisting of Bonner County Sheriff's deputies, the Priest Lake Search and Rescue team, under water rescue dogs, an environmental consultant and members of the Kennewick Fire Department made the discovery.

The body was found approximately 250-feet from a 23-foot aluminum, motor operated submerged boat. The body is estimated to be between 10-and 20-years-old, said Gene Ralston, an environmental

consultant specializing in water related issues, who even worked on the Laci Peterson case.

Gary Johnston, a detective with BCSO, said Lewis was last seen in his 25-foot Catalina sailboat on July 28. Ralston, PLSAR and a Missoula, Mont.-based dog handler that specializes in water trained cadaver dogs, were called in to assist in the search.

With the dogs on the prowl for human scent, Ralston led the crew.

Using a side-scan sonar device, which uses sound much like an ultra sound. It creates an image on a computer screen of objects that can't be seen with a regular camera or light, Ralston explained.

They began searching on the West and Southwest side of Eight-Mile Island and extended it to the East.

"It was here we found a suspicious object," Ralston said.

Because they weren't sure if it was a

body until they had visual confirmation, Ralston said a "drop camera" was brought in. However, this proved unsuccessful as well due to the water depth and weather conditions.

A remote operated vehicle (ROV) was donated to the group. The video on the ROV confirmed the object was a body.

"It was readily apparent the body had been there a long time," Ralston said. "It was not the missing firefighter."

A small portion of the remains were recovered and transported to the Bonner County Coroner.

"At this point, we are attempting to extract DNA from the remains, so we can identify the body" Johnston said.

The search for Lewis is ongoing, however Ralston said he has suspended his part of it until next spring.

If anyone has any information that may be helpful in solving the identity of the body, call Johnston at 448-1521.

—Photo by SUZY STERNER