



High-tech sonar – a string in the bow of Mallee VICSES units



A sophisticated type of sonar technology used in search and rescue operations has proven a game-changer for VICSES units in the Mallee area, with more of it on the way.

During the summer holiday period (December 2019 to February 2020) volunteers assisted in several search and rescue operations between Kerang and Mildura, with an unfortunate six local drownings recorded.

During one incident in Mildura, the specialised sonar was used to reveal detailed shapes of rocks, trees and more – ultimately making the work of divers clearer. VICSES were instrumental in police then locating the body of a person that had sadly drowned in the Murray River.

The public has been very proactive since, and have helped raise enough funds for the VICSES Swan Hill unit to afford a sonar unit.

In addition, Expansion Review Funding has ensured that half a dozen boats fitted with Hummingbird Helix 7 sonar are also heading to the North-West. Swan Hill, Mildura, Robinvale and Kerang units will all benefit.

The vessels vary in size, and will replace aging boats used by VICSES around inland waterways. Some will arrive by late March and others by Christmas 2020.

Mildura unit Controller Michael Hellwege maintains that the Helix 7s will be welcome across units in the North-West, and will help families with missing loved ones get closure sooner.

Michael has seen first-hand how valuable the technology can be, and is excited to see it rolled out further.



It is also understood that VICSES units in Frankston, Hobsons Bay, Mallacoota, Morwell, Horsham, Ballarat, Kyabram, Marong, Rushworth, Alexandra, Benalla, Cobram, Wodonga, Tallangatta, Yarrowonga, Balmoral, Dartmore and Hamilton are also on the list for new boats and sonar technology during 2020.

This means our volunteers trained in water-based rescues will soon have extra resources to help keep Victorians and visitors safe around coastal and inland areas.

Quotes from Mildura SES volunteer unit Controller Michael Hellwege:

- “The most important thing about this sonar technology is that it makes the difficult work of police divers quicker and easier, and ensure that families can then move on with the grieving process.”
- “Helix 7s and other similar technology can read 2-3 metres down in the water, which is particularly useful in areas along the Murray River that contain a lot of snags and debris.”
- “We are grateful for the extra support from NSW Police during a difficult summer, and look forward to getting volunteers around the Mallee region fully trained on this valuable technology.”

Michael is happy to speak to media about the importance of additional sonar technology in the Mallee region and across the state. He is unavailable on Tuesdays, between 8am and 12pm.

Note: * Six drowning deaths have occurred along the Murray River this financial year so far, according to official stats from the Royal Life Saving Society of Australia.