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Search continues for missing West Fork man

BY KATE WARD Northwest Arkansas Times

Swift-water rescue crews sifted through piles of debris for signs of a missing West Fork man on Wednesday, as currents of murky brown water pounded against their legs.

"We'll be searching for points of entry all the way to Interstate 540 until it hits the White River," said Willie Watts, deputy coordinator for the Washington County Emergency Management Team. "We'll continue searching until we clear this stream area."

West Fork firefighters, along with volunteers from Washington County Search and Rescue, the Washington County Sheriff's Office, and Emergency Management and Technical Rescue teams, were among those who took part in the search for 48-year-old Clint Caudle on Wednesday. Caudle disappeared Tuesday morning after reportedly getting two vehicles stuck on a low-water crossing on Dye Creek, just outside West Fork.

"He told his wife he was going to McDonald's to get some breakfast and that he'd be right back," said Jay Cantrell, Washington County chief deputy. "That was the last time she saw him."

Authorities believe Caudle was returning home when he became stuck on the lowwater crossing. He reportedly borrowed a neighbor's tractor in an attempt to pull his vehicle from the water but was unsuccessful. When Caudle's neighbor arrived home, he noticed the tractor missing and went to search for it. After discovering it in the creek, he reportedly noticed Caudle's cell phone lying in the driver's seat. Moments later, he discovered Caudle's older model Ford truck submerged in the water nearby.

"He didn't even see the truck at first because it was completely underwater," Cantrell said.

West Fork police and swift-water rescue crews were called to the scene at about 10 a.m. and spent Tuesday morning hunting for Caudle. The search was eventually called off due to safety concerns associated with heavy rainfall. Search teams reconvened at about 9 a.m. Wednesday and continued their look.

"Our swift-water rescue teams are using long poles to search through debris piles downriver," Watts said. "We also have downstream spotters with Washington County Search and Rescue along the banks."

Swift-water rescue teams wore wet and dry suits to maintain a stabilized body temperature, along with helmets and life vests, as they rummaged through the bonechilling waters of the creek.

Midway through their search, rescue teams discovered Caudle's checkbook on top of a railroad track, nearly a half mile downriver. Authorities think the checkbook may have washed out of Caudle's vehicle before being carried to the railroad by rushing waters.

According to the National Weather Service in Tulsa, most areas of Washington County received more than 6.5 inches of rain late Monday and all of Tuesday. The last time Washington County received more than 3 inches of rain in a 24-hour period was in 2004.

"I know the West Fork of the White River was in the 25-foot range, and it's normally in the 3-foot range," Watts said. "We're down by about 5 to 7 feet from what it was (Tuesday), but it's still pretty high."

The Sheriff's Office conducted an aerial search of the creek by helicopter, but as of 6:30 p.m. Wednesday, Caudle had not been found.

Watts said emergency management teams plan to scale back their search today and allow search and rescue crews to take over. As river levels decline, he said, rescue teams plan to expand their search into the White River.



BROOKE McNEELY Northwest Arkansas Times Members of the Washington County Search and Rescue Team walk downstream while looking for Clint Caudle on Wednesday after crews pulled his truck from Dye Creek near West Fork. Caudle is believed to have gone missing while trying to pull his truck out of the river Tuesday morning.



BROOKE McNEELY Northwest Arkansas Times Members of the Washington County Search and Rescue Team check underneath a truck pulled from Dye Creek. Rescue workers were looking for Clint Caudle, who went missing Tuesday.