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Local nonprofit uses GPS to assess damage

Grand Isle GPS unit survived Katrina

By Todd Neff, Camera Staff Writer
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A Boulder-based nonprofit group specializing in global positioning systems is helping damage-assessment flights over Louisiana find their mark in the wake of Hurricane Katrina.

Warren Gallaher, a network engineer with Unavco, left Thursday for Louisiana with a portable satellite-communications system and clunky metal mount in his checked baggage. His destination: Grand Isle, 60 miles south of New Orleans on the Louisiana coast.

Unavco provides Earth-science researchers with GPS systems sensitive enough to measure the micro-movement of tectonic plates. Gallaher is on his way to repair a GPS unit that is part of a Louisiana State University network designed to report on how much the Mississippi Delta is sinking.

But the network also is used by the National Geodetic Survey to augment satellite GPS accuracy for aerial photography, said Giovanni Sella, a senior geodesist with the National Geodetic Survey. In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, such photography is needed for damage assessment, Sella said.

The Grand Isle GPS unit is at a U.S. Coast Guard station with backup power, and the unit itself survived the hurricane, Sella said. But its communications line was knocked out.

Gallaher will install the satellite-communications system to go around the problem, said Frederick Blume, a program manager with Unavco.

Blume said the land-based system can improve GPS accuracy from roughly 20 meters to about a meter.

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