

Need a better Hand Held GPS ?

Like most technology we see now days, it takes only a year or two and the product you purchased that was state of the art equipment at the time, is now obsolete.

In Search and Rescue, field crews already have years of experience knowing how to navigate and for search teams that regularly work in the same areas, a GPS is just a supporting tool. But more and more search coordinators need better data from the field. When a search turns into a crime or when weapons have been involved enforcement officials are asking for precise tracks of search teams.

Search coordinators are becoming more high tech as better software and hardware becomes available to correlate the areas searched by search teams and to accurately plot the tracks of these teams and the locations of clues and evidence. The accuracy and the retention of this data become critical as searches progress from hours into days and are passed onto replacement coordinators and or overhead teams.

Two common factors for hand held GPS to loose satellite signal is the amount of sky visible and the amount of foliage overhead. If you are in hilly terrain such as deep narrow valleys or areas like the South Dakota badlands where the cut can be very deep there you know that the deeper you go the less sky is visible overhead and that translates to less line of sight to satellites closer to the horizon. A dense tree cover overhead is always a problem when working in forested areas and this will decrease the strength of the signal getting to the GPS.

Garmin International introduced a high sensitivity receiver and has added the option to a number of its most popular hand held units. I purchased the eTrek Vista HCx and I was amazed at it's sensitivity. I have used Garmin products for many years and the unit I use in my truck is a marine type with upgradeable software maps and the standard on board antenna. I switched antenna to an external active type (active antennas typically have a built in amplifier to boost reception but require power). This antenna was so efficient it would lock onto satellites while still inside my shop in less than 30 seconds.

My new eTrek Vista HCx locks onto satellites while also inside my shop in less than 30 seconds. This unit has memory that can be replaced and expanded with standard solid-state memory used in many cameras and cell phones (typically a microSD card). This is much better for the consumer than the proprietary memory that Garmin use to require. This also means that you can load lots of maps into your unit and that can greatly increase the data stored on the system from just a few counties to just a few states.

I have yet to see a consumer-mapping program that did not support the most of the Garmin product line and updates are typically available from the software manufacture because of the continual changes in the GPS industry.

If you do purchase an newer GPS don't forget to order the interface cable for your unit. This will be required for updates to your unit and for when you need to transfer a track log from the unit to the search manager. Another thing to remember is that laptop computer manufactures have dropped the availability of a serial port from their products. This will leave you with the USB interface as your only option.

If you look at the Garmin product lineup, look for the models that have the H after the model name. The H identifies models that have the high sensitivity receiver and the C identifies models that have a color display. I would also suggest getting a copy of Garnin TOPO USA this is topographical map information that can be added to your Garmin GPS (Check individual model for compatibility)

You can always go to www.garmin.com for current product information.