

Ameren Illinois utilizing drones in the interest of safety and community service

by Cory Davenport, Contributing Writer
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ALTON - Ameren Illinois crews have another tool in their arsenal against outages and natural disasters - DJI Phantom 4 drones.

The power company now has 36 drones being utilized to safely observe damage after a storm. They are also being used to survey terrain and inspect thousands of miles of

poles, power lines and natural gas facilities, according to a release from Ameren Illinois. According to the release, the drones "provide a safe and effective way to pinpoint where Ameren Illinois crews should be dispatched to perform work."

Recently, the drones have been used in the field in Beardstown, Illinois to identify a problem with utility lines running along the swamp. According to a release, the alternative to a drone would have involved linemen in a boat navigating the swamp for what could have become hours. Instead the drone located the issue in a matter of minutes.



With a mounted camera and a highly-trained professional eye, Ameren Illinois claims an operator can perform an initial assessment on such damages within minutes. The drones can also be used to conduct routine maintenance inspections on blue-sky days, and survey land for new infrastructure possibilities.

The drones also contribute to workplace safety, Ameren Illinois said, by keeping them far from the proximity of live electrical wires. In an emailed response to questions from Riverbender.com, Ameren Illinois representative, Brian Bretsch, said the drones will "definitely increase co-worker safety."

Utilizing drones would allow workers to know the exact location and nature of many of the hazards accompanying downed wires, allowing for safer, and possibly even faster repairs.

"While every outage situation is unique, drones can certainly help shorten outage duration," Bretsch said in an email. "In addition to employee safety, drones increase efficiency and streamline resources."

Ameren Illinois does not want to use drones to replace human workers, however. Drones are only aiding the linemen.

In the future, Ameren Illinois hopes to have at least one drone at each of its operating centers across Central and Southern Illinois. It is also looking at infrared technology, which could be used to more quickly identify gas leaks. Ameren Illinois also acknowledges drone technology is constantly evolving, and vows to continue harnessing that innovative technology to improve safety, reliability and customer service.