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<b>Scene Search and Recovery</b>	ANTH-005	4
Approved by: Forensic Anthropology Director		Effective Date: 1 May 2023

**1. Policy**

The Forensic Anthropology Unit (FAU) may assist the medicolegal investigators (MLIs) and law enforcement personnel during search and recovery of potential human remains.

**2. Scope**

This document provides the guidelines for the FAU's deployment to a scene to assist with the search and recovery of potential human remains. These protocols apply to all members of the FAU, visiting scientists, and interns.

**3. Definitions**

Dry Screening: Dry screening is where excavated soils/sediments are shaken or pressed through a wire mesh screen allowing materials greater in size than the wire mesh to be retained.

Wet Screening: Wet screening is where excavated soils/sediments are passed through a wire mesh screen using water pressure and water flow to dissolve soluble materials, leaving the non-soluble material greater in size than the wire mesh.

Incident-sterile soil: Incident-sterile soil is defined as being free of human remains and any associated evidence.

in situ: When skeletal remains and associated evidence are found undisturbed in the location where they were last deposited.

**4. FAU Scene Response**

The FAU may be called upon to assist with the search and recovery process at a variety of scenes in which potential or definitively human remains are partially or completely skeletonized, burned, buried, dismembered, fragmentary, or any other scenario where anthropological assistance may be considered beneficial.

**4.1 Notification/Activation of the FAU Scene Response:** Most commonly, the OCM, MLI or law enforcement will contact the FAU when anthropological assistance is potentially needed at a scene. Based on the information provided by the MLI or law enforcement, the FAU shall decide whether anthropological assistance is required.

**5. Scene Search and Recovery Procedures**

The methods employed during the search and recovery process should ensure the recovery of potentially relevant material, as well as gather the relevant contextual information.

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**5.1 Initial Planning and Preparation:** Prior to scene arrival the FAU shall:

- Speak with the assigned MLI or lead agency personnel to gather initial information about the scene/case.
- Determine equipment and resource needs (e.g., excavation equipment, lighting equipment, assistance from other agencies).
- Determine time and weather constraints (if applicable).

**5.2 Initial Scene Survey:** Whenever feasible, the FAU should perform the following tasks during the initial scene survey:

- Assess and document the scene context, including distribution and condition of visible remains or other evidence (personal effects, items associated with the remains, etc.).
- Determine the initial search perimeter.
- Determine additional equipment and resource needs (e.g., excavation equipment, lighting equipment, assistance from other agencies).
- Perform a safety assessment and identify any potential hazards.

After the initial scene survey, the FAU shall formulate an appropriate search and recovery strategy. It is the responsibility of the FAU to determine the most appropriate search and recovery plan while always considering safety concerns.

**5.3 Scene Search Plan:** In coordination with law enforcement and the MLI, the FAU shall develop and implement a search plan based on the investigative information and scene context provided. The type of search performed (i.e., surface, subsurface/burial survey) depends on the investigative information and scene context provided, as well as environmental factors such as the type of terrain and vegetation. The following describes the typical techniques for scene searches.

**5.3.1 Surface Survey:** A surface survey is a systematic and controlled search of a scene where the searchers line up in a row and as they walk in unison they visually inspect the areas in the immediate vicinity for possible evidence of human remains. As evidence/human remains are found they are marked for subsequent evaluation and documentation.

During the surface survey, searchers are not only looking for human remains and evidence on the surface, but also looking for changes in soil and vegetation including soil depressions or backfill mounds, lack of vegetation or different vegetative growth. Changes/disturbances of the soil and/or vegetation may indicate the need for subsurface survey for potential buried remains.

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5.3.2 **Subsurface/Burial Survey:** A subsurface/burial survey may be required when elements are partially buried or covered with vegetation or when searching for clandestine burials. When performing a subsurface/burial survey, the terrain should be systematically searched for disturbed areas with attention to unexplained variation in vegetation, soil depressions, and backfill piles. Vegetation and soil disturbed or removed during the search operations may require screening or examination for possible evidence. Search techniques involved in subsurface/burial survey include, but are not limited to:

- Clearing overlying vegetation
- Use of soil probes
- Shovel test pits and larger test pits
- Examination of exposed soil profiles
- Hand excavation
- Screening
- Trenching
- Exploration with mechanical equipment

5.4 **Recovery Scene Excavation:** Excavation principles must be flexible, adaptable, and are determined by the unique circumstances of the scene. The following guidelines outline the basic field methods for the processing of recovery scenes with possible buried human remains.

5.4.1 **Excavation Techniques:** Based on the conditions of the scene (e.g., environment and safety), the FAU shall determine the appropriate excavation strategy for processing the recovery scene with possible buried human remains.

Typical excavation techniques utilized by the FAU include, but are not limited to:

- Hand excavation (e.g., trowels, brushes and other small tools)
- Large tool excavation (e.g., shovels and picks)
- Mechanical excavation (e.g., backhoe, excavator)

The soil and other materials should be removed in a systematic manner and excavated until incident-sterile soil is identified. When possible, the remains and associated evidence should be completely exposed *in situ* prior to removal. The following describes typical ways an excavation may be performed:

- Excavation by determined increments
- Excavation by strata

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- Excavation from the center of the bisected feature to the edges
- Excavation by units or features

5.4.2 **Screening:** The excavated soils and sediments should be screened (either wet or dry depending on the consistency and/or moisture content of the soil/sediment and availability of water) through one-quarter-inch wire mesh unless operations dictate otherwise.

The screening area(s) should be established in a location far enough away from the excavation area in case the excavation area needs to be expanded.

5.5 **Other Search and Recovery Scenarios:** Other scene scenarios such as fire fatality scenes, mass fatalities, and scenes with commingled remains may require additional procedures or deviation from the standard search and recovery protocols.

5.5.1 **Scenes Beyond Operational Capabilities:** Scene responses that are beyond the technical and/or logistic capability of the FAU (e.g., aquatic recovery) shall be handled by law enforcement or an appropriate agency. The FAU may act as a consultant for these types of recovery.

5.5.2 **Mass Fatality Incident:** Any scene response associated with the activation of OCME MESORT (Medical Examiner Special Operations Response Team) will be carried out in accordance with the OCME Mass Fatality Management operations and shall be coordinated with the OCME incident commander or designated lead.

5.6 **Recovery of Remains/Evidence:** Prior to collection, all human remains and associated evidence should be photographed and mapped, if necessary. Human remains and associated evidence shall be placed into appropriate evidence containers (e.g., human remains pouch or paper bags) and labeled with the unique case number.

Note: Associated evidence refers to relevant items found on the body with the remains (e.g., clothing, wallet, jewelry). Evidence not associated with the remains will be handled by law enforcement.

5.6.1 At any point during a search and recovery operation, the FA may direct the recovery/collection of items at risk of being altered, damaged, or lost.

5.7 **Temporary Halt in Operations:** If a known or unexpected constraint requires operations to be temporarily halted (e.g., time, weather, safety) the FAU should document the reason for the delay, date, and time. Date and time of continued operations should also be recorded.

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5.8 **Remains Transportation:** Human remains shall be transported to the Medical Examiner's office by METT (Medical Examiner Transport Team) or the FAU (see ANTH-001: Evidence Security and Management, section 7.1 Receipt of Evidence procedure).

5.9 **Termination of FAU Scene Response:** The FAU shall notify the MLI and the law enforcement personnel as to when the FAU recovery effort is complete. Termination of a FAU recovery effort will typically occur when it is unlikely that additional remains will be recovered.

6. **Documentation**  
Documentation of a scene search and recovery must be sufficient to establish the context from which the evidence was recovered.

6.1 **Field Notes:** Anthropology field notes shall contain any relevant information pertaining to the contributions of the FAU to the search, excavation, and recovery of potential human remains. There may be circumstances where field notes cannot be recorded in the field. For these exigent circumstances, field notes can be written on a later date; however, the notes shall be written in a timely manner (see ANTH-003: Analytical Notes, Documentation, and Reports clause 4.1).

6.2 **Scene Photography:** If necessary, the FAU personnel at a scene should take, at a minimum, the following photographs:

- Overall scene photographs
- Mid-range photographs of evidence and human remains before any element is removed
- Close-up photographs of evidence and human remains that the FAU determines to be important (e.g., perimortem trauma, fragile remains that may become damaged during recovery and transport)

6.2.1 When applicable, the photographs should include a north arrow, standard scale, and/or other object(s) indicating orientation and dimensions.

6.3 **Mapping:** FAU Personnel shall determine if an FAU generated map of a scene is appropriate and necessary.

6.3.1 Before mapping the scene a datum should be selected and documented. It is at the discretion of the FAU what scene information should be included on the map and its level of detail.

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6.3.2 Standard methods for hand drawn mapping include using a baseline, triangulation, and/or grid. Additional or alternate means of mapping may be used, if applicable.

6.3.3 At the discretion of the FAU personnel, a site sketch map (not drawn to scale) may be generated.

6.4 **Anthropology Reports:** When a scene response results in an official Anthropology Report, the assigned lead anthropologist shall follow the protocol outlined in SOP ANTH-003: Analytical Notes, Documentation, and Reports.

## 7. Safety

Scene search and recovery have the potential to occur under hazardous conditions. Consequently, safety issues shall be addressed during the development and implementation of a search and recovery plan. FAU personnel shall avoid unnecessary risks, watch for potential dangers, and respond appropriately when injuries occur. All FAU and assisting personnel shall maintain situational awareness at the scene and follow the safety instructions communicated by the lead agency.

FAU personnel and assisting personnel (contractors and visiting scientists) shall wear the appropriate protective attire for that particular situation. What is considered appropriate attire will vary depending on the context of the scene (e.g., environmental factors, location, and temperature). The FAU shall wear the appropriate personal protective equipment (PPE) at all times when working with human remains or any biohazardous materials.

## 8. Revision History

REV.	DATE	SUMMARY OF CHANGES
0	27 June 2018	New document.
1	3 July 2018	Fixed numbering issues between 5.3 and 5.4.2.
2	28 February 2020	Corrected header date (previous version should have been 3 July 2018). Also made minor editorial changes.
3	14 March 2022	Added “If necessary” to the beginning of the statement in clause 6.2.
4	1 May 2023	Added the following statement to clause 6.1: “There may be circumstances where field notes cannot be recorded in the field. For these exigent circumstances, field notes can be written on a later date; however, the notes shall be written in a timely manner (see ANTH-003: Analytical Notes, Documentation, and Reports clause 4.1).”