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Funds sought to put GPS in Riverside County fleet

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By JULIA GLICK
The Press-Enterprise

Riverside County is seeking funds to outfit its vehicles with GPS tracking devices, a tool that San Bernardino County and Eastern Municipal Water District say has made their fleets more efficient.

Riverside County could use Global Positioning System units to monitor location, speed, emissions and other real-time information about county cars and trucks. But the technology also worries some employees who fear their every move could be monitored.

Riverside County officials have applied for federal stimulus money to defray the cost of tracking units for 500 of the county's 5,300 vehicles, said Bob Howdyshell, director of fleet services and purchasing. He estimates the units and two years of service would cost about $500,000. Federal grant money, if approved, would cover about half that amount, he added. The county would pay the rest.

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Kurt Miller / The Press-Enterprise
Danny Lehman, fleet supervisor for the Eastern Municipal Water District, shows the GPS installed in most of the fleet.

Riverside County is tightening controls on its fleet after a recent audit criticized department heads and the county executive office for lax oversight of take-home cars and other inefficiencies.

The county spends about $43.7 million a year purchasing, fueling and maintaining its vehicles.

San Bernardino County began installing GPS devices in its cars and trucks in 2005. The county can now track about 1,200 of its 5,000 vehicles on a computerized map, said county spokesman David Wert.

The county does not have any measure of whether the system has saved money overall, Wert said. But departments that distribute interoffice mail, maintain county facilities and repair computer systems can easily adjust service routes to make them more efficient. The county also uses the GPS to track the progress of snowplows in winter storms and vector control teams spraying for insects, Wert said.

Eastern Municipal Water District, headquartered in Perris, launched a GPS system March 30 for about 300 of the district's 350 road vehicles. Officials there say they saw immediate savings and are close to making up the cost of the technology.

The district, which covers a 555-square-mile area from Moreno Valley to Temecula, purchased the system from Fallbrook-based RMJ Technologies. The district paid $310,000 to install GPS and start service. The agency expects to pay about $130,000 to continue the service next year, said Mark Iverson, the district's maintenance director.

Employees have driven 106,000 fewer miles than average since the introduction of the GPS four months ago, he said. The system has cut fuel costs by about $54,000 and reduced labor costs by about $228,000, he added.

"I think, overall, employees see the benefit of it," Iverson said of the GPS system. "But there was some concern about the big brother aspect."

The agency emphasizes that the system can be a big help for employees, Iverson said. For example, GPS readings can prove drivers were not speeding at the time of an accident, he said. Howdyshell said GPS devices could help protect Riverside County employees with risky jobs or remote service calls.

The San Bernardino Public Employees Association, the county's largest union, has worried the technology would enable bosses to selectively punish out-of-favor employees for minor infractions, said Bob Blough, the union's general manager. So far, there is no evidence that has occurred, he said.

"The employees definitely felt it was intrusive on their activities, but the law clearly allows the county to install GPS on its county cars," Blough said. "We really don't have any choice."