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GPS attacks oilpatch thieves

By HARLEY RICHARDS Advocate business editor

The threat of vehicle theft is prompting some oilpatch companies to seek salvation from above.

Global positioning systems have long been used by governments and businesses to manage their fleets and improve communication with drivers. Now, the technology is also being used to recover stolen vehicles.

Kevin MacDonald, vice-president of marketing and communications with Calgary-based GEOTrac International, said thieves are stealing trucks from oil and gas companies, as well as boats, quads and motorcycles.

"It is a systemic problem in Grande Prairie, Fort St. John, Fort Nelson, Prince George, Red Deer."

Roger Soucy, president of the Petroleum Services Association of Canada, said the severity of oilpatch theft seems to ebb and flow. He thinks companies become more vigilant when such crime increases, and relax their guard when losses decline.

"We've even had issues with hotel parking lots where trucks were being stolen when guys were over-nighting," he said, adding that thieves also target equipment stored in remote places, such as a corner of a farmer's yard.

Some thefts are crimes of opportunity, while others are carefully planned, he added. "A lot of times they go out and actually steel stuff to spec."

Soucy said some energy companies are adopting methods to track stolen property. At PSAC's 2005 spring conference in Red Deer, Telus business rep Grant Sterling described how GPS equipment has helped his company track vehicles stolen from it. He said that during the preceding year and a half, 10 Telus vehicles had been stolen. Nine were recovered intact, while the other was found badly burned.

GEOTrac has its own success stories.

One of its customers, Raven Oilfield Services of Fort St. John, B.C., was recently able to track a stolen GPS-equipped truck to Prince George. It notified police, who were able to recover the vehicle.

Another GEOTrac subscriber, Unger Construction of Grande Prairie, was able to direct RCMP to a remote location, where they found a thief removing the decals from an Unger vehicle.

Such results are possible when satellite tracking is used in conjunction with a detailed mapping system, said MacDonald.

"The last couple of instances we've had, we've been actually able to talk to the RCMP



Photo by RANDY FIEDLER/Advocate staff

Brent Gyori of Wellco Energy Services readies the global positioning unit in his truck. Such technology is helping the oilpatch reduce losses from theft.

while they're en route and say, 'No, no, not that building, this building,' and 'No, no, not that driveway, this driveway.'

He said GEOTrac has developed a detailed map of northern roadways, with much of the data collected by putting GPS devices on construction equipment and vehicles subsequently travelling there.

"We're focused on remote areas and roads that are owned by oil companies," he said.

"That just doesn't show up on most maps.

"We have the ability to track vehicles right to the Arctic circle."

The GPS modem that GEOTrac places in vehicles is simple to conceal, said MacDonald.

"We've installed them under the seats, we've installed them in the dash, we've installed them in the headliner up on the top of these trucks.

"It's very easy to put these in."

The cost of this hardware starts at about \$800 per vehicle, with the associated monitoring service as low as \$35 to \$45 a month.

MacDonald said his company has Red Deer customers, including Wellco Energy Services.

Brent Gyori, Wellco's operations co-ordinator in Red Deer, said his company's motivation for installing GPS equipment in 11 of its trucks was to more efficiently manage its fleet. None of its vehicles had previously been stolen, although there had been attempts.

"I know there's a lot of oilfield theft," said Gyori, expressing confidence that the high-tech equipment would help Wellco recover a vehicle if one went missing.

"If it's inside a building, or wherever, we could find it."

He added that the satellite-based system offers other features, such as enhanced communication and the means for employees working alone to summon help — including by not checking in at a specified time.

Another features GEOTrac customers can avail themselves of is geo-fencing, said MacDonald. They can designate a perimeter around a specified area — such as a well site — and receive notification when GPS-equipped vehicles leave or enter.

"It (GPS technology) has been popular for quite a few years, but I think that the technology has really come into its stride."

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