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Thermal imaging technology burning safety violators

Province first in using high-tech devices to pull unsafe vehicles off road

By BILL KAUFMANN, Sun Media

The heat is on wayward truckers now running an Alberta gauntlet of thermal imagers snooping out safety violations.

Alberta's the only place in North America to deploy the hi-tech sensors that detect everything from impaired brakes to hazardous liquid levels in commercial trucks.

The black bowling ball-size camera scans moving vehicles, feeding the data to monitors inside a van scanned by transport officers like Greg Arlett.

"When you have 4-500 trucks coming through your area in a day we pick out some of the trucks that need to be looked at," said Arlett as he viewed semi trucks at an inspection station just west of Strathmore yesterday.

The sensor can detect overheated brakes or dangerous leaks — the troubles showing up as brighter shades on the monitor, said Arlett.

"We can make sure the bearings aren't leaking so a wheel won't come off," he said.

The units can also detect false compartments, perhaps raising suspicion among some truckers the sensors are being used to snoop beyond safety concerns, said Alberta Transportation's Sgt. Troy Hasil.

"People think you're X-raying their load," said Hasil, adding the detectors have proven themselves repeatedly.

"We do find violations on a continual basis and when the thermal imager senses something, we usually do find a violation...it picks up things our eyes can't."

The province first began testing the \$400,000 devices in 2004 and started using them operationally last year.

Three are now deployed throughout the province, said Alberta Transportation spokesman Jerry Bellikka.

“We don’t have to waste time doing random checks — you go fishing where the fish are,” he said.

Two weeks ago, said Bellikka, the detectors proved their worth in northern Alberta when they picked up a wheel problem unknown to a semi driver.

“When the driver pulled in, the wheel fell off,” he said.

Last September, inspectors yanked from the road one-third of the 554 commercial vehicles they’d probed at Calgary check stops due to safety violations.



Picture supplied by Alberta Transportation



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Provincial officials say there’s been a rise in the number of violations, possibly due to corner-cutting prompted by higher fuel prices.

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