



# DAILY Herald-Tribune

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## The heat is on Thermal Imaging Unit helps detect unfit vehicles

TAMAS VIRAG  
Herald-Tribune staff  
Tuesday June 12, 2007

Think of Rob Sapinsky as the Superman of traffic safety officers: He sees the invisible to help keep motorists safe on Alberta's highways.

Sapinsky is the co-ordinator for Commercial Vehicle Enforcement's Thermal Eye Unit, Alberta's newest tool for removing unsafe vehicles from public roads.

The unit made its first appearance in Grande Prairie on Monday.

"Commercial vehicles in Alberta make up a big portion of our highway users. They're large vehicles (and) they're heavier vehicles and it is important that their mechanical components such as brakes, wheels, rims are in top-notch condition," he said.

"The thermal imaging allows the commercial vehicle enforcement and the officers to concentrate on directly identifying mechanical problems with a commercial vehicle. Once we identify a mechanical problem with the Thermal Eye, there's officer intervention to confirm that that problem exists."

At the heart of the operation is a sophisticated and versatile \$300,000 infrared camera, known as the Thermal Imaging Unit or Thermal Eye.

This advanced technology is restricted; the only other camera like it in Alberta – outside of the military – resides on a RCMP helicopter in Edmonton.

The Eye is attached to a van that, on the inside, resembles NASA's Mission Control in Texas: It's filled with LCD screens and a computer records everything the Thermal Eye sees – both in black and white and in colour.

From that, officers can burn information onto a DVD or a portable memory stick for use in courts. Inside the van is where Sapinsky, and the other three trained officers in the province, sit and watch trucks as they roll into the weigh station.

Sapinsky focused on the wheels, tires and brakes: Too cold means the brakes are not working, too hot means they're overheating, to give a simple example.

Right now, there's only one such van in the province, and it makes its rounds all over the province.

During its first 2 1/2 hours in Grande Prairie on Monday morning, Sapinsky took eight trucks off the road for inspection by officers on-hand.

And with a track record of 98 per cent accuracy, just about every truck Sapinsky's team singles out for an inspection is potentially dangerous.

Once the officers determine there is a problem with the truck, it isn't allowed to leave until the problem is fixed.

In addition to being able to detect malfunctioning and overheating brakes, the Thermal Imaging Unit can be used to identify false compartments – a favourite among drug runners – overheated bearings, underinflated tires, overloaded units and retread separation – all common causes of accidents.

Its other potential uses include fire source detection and cargo profiling.

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