



TECHNOLOGY AID COASTAL ENFORCEMENT

By David Rainer, Staff Writer

Enforcement for the officers of the Department of Conservation and Natural Resources' Marine Resources has moved into the 21st century with technology that maximizes the resources used to patrol Alabama's coastal waters.



BILLY POPE

The days of hand-written tickets are gone, as are the days when repeat violations might go unnoticed. Marine Resources officers now have laptop computers and wireless connectivity as parts of their enforcement tools.

PAPERWORK REDUCTION

Major Chris Blankenship, chief of enforcement with Marine Resources, said the division contracted with the University of Alabama to develop an e-citation program that models the e-citation program the university developed for the Department of Public Safety several years ago.

"We are the first agency (in the Department of Conservation and Natural Resources) to begin using the program," Blankenship said. "Currently, we're using it to print the ticket. We still have to turn them into the courthouse. Used to, we'd have to use three pieces of paperwork every time we wrote a ticket. With the new system, it's all on the one

ticket. We print out a copy for the defendant and a copy for the courthouse.

"Along with that, it captures the GPS coordinates where the ticket was written. It captures all the statistical information. The university is also developing an analytics program so we can take all this information and be able to see it graphically to be able to plan our patrols and really see where our manpower is going and where our problems are."

Officers have a driver's license scanner attached to a laptop. If the officer is going to issue a ticket or warning, he or she takes the driver's license and slides it through the scanner. It populates the ticket or warning with all the pertinent information from the driver's license. The GPS location is captured from the laptop and the officer selects the offense from a pull-down list. The ticket is then ready to print. For multiple violations, there is a replicate function where the officer just changes the charge.

“It can be done in less than a minute and we don’t have handwriting problems anymore,” Blankenship said. “It’s much more legible for the defendant and the court system. They have a template for court date. They don’t have to select a court date. The court date is printed on the e-citation.”

A bill in the Alabama Legislature that would have aligned the DCNR procedures with that of the Department of Public Safety failed to make it to the floor for a vote before the legislative session ended.

“This bill would have allowed tickets to be transmitted electronically to the courthouse,” Blankenship said. “We wouldn’t have to take anything to courthouse. It will all be sent from the officer’s computer. That’s the way traffic tickets are done now. Traffic defendants can pay their tickets online. It gives the public more options on how to take care of the ticket other than to go down and stand in line at the courthouse. It would be cost and time savings for us, as well.

“We will work to pass the legislation next year and continue to use the system at a lesser level until then.”

Blankenship said the computer program will allow enforcement personnel to cross reference a great deal of information – locations of certain types of violations and the time of day certain violations are more likely to occur. “There will be a lot of useful information we can glean from those tickets and help in our patrols,” he said.

Marine Resources has 17 enforcement officers, each with laptop, printer and scanner on the boat. Blankenship said since the new system was put into place in June 2009, there have been more than 1,350 citations or warnings issued. He also said the system is configured so that enforcement officers with Marine Police and Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries can use the same system at a later date.

Marine Resources Enforcement Officer Trey Pose was among the beta testers to use the new equipment and he considers it a significant improvement in many areas. He said the laptops and software allow officers to run NCIC (National Crime Information Center) checks in the field without having to call a dispatcher.

“E-citation has been an extremely useful tool,” Pose said. “Officers can scan a driver’s license and they can keep focused on the person they’re dealing with. The computer automatically runs the check and actually tells you if the person is dangerous or not dangerous.

“The officers have really embraced it. They say it makes them much faster in the field in making contact if there is a citation or warning issue. It’s much easier to keep track of what they’ve issued. It automatically goes into the system and they can pull the information up and see – say, for instance – if someone was issued a warning last week and they have contact again this week, the officer can immediately see the person had been issued a warning the week before. The whole process is much easier. We’re not pulling paper tickets and warnings and we’re not storing a great deal of paperwork.”

Pose also said the computer system will prompt officers if pertinent information has not been entered into the com-

puter. “It won’t let you print the ticket if any information has been left off,” he said. “It’s much more accurate than hand-written tickets. And much easier. It has improved the speed and efficiency of the officers and increased the safety of the officers.”

CAMERA SYSTEM

Officers can also use their laptops to monitor a new camera system that Marine Resources has installed through a grant from Homeland Security. Currently seven cameras have been positioned at the mouth of the Mobile River, the mouth of Mobile Bay at Fort Morgan, three in Theodore Industrial Canal and two on Dauphin Island.

“These cameras are a force multiplier for our division,” Blankenship said. “They will allow us to observe more areas. If we get a complaint at Fort Morgan and the officer is at Dog River, they’ll be able to look on their laptop and view the area through the camera and see if it is a valid complaint. It’s going to help us in our patrols not spending wasted time going from place to place. We will have some situational awareness over the bay. Officers, when they begin their shift, will be able to look at the cameras and see where the activity is and better plan their patrols.

“Eventually we’ll have about 30 cameras with infrared and thermal capabilities to be able to monitor day and night. We’ve applied for additional grants to expand the program, especially in Baldwin County. We will continue to add locations as funding becomes available.

Pose said the camera system is extremely user friendly and easily accessible as long as officers get a signal on their wireless cards.

“Right now, we’re still looking at still images that update every 30 seconds,” Pose said. “They are working on technology to give us live coverage and be able to pan, tilt and zoom the cameras. As an enforcement tool, not only for port security and coastline monitoring, this allows us to monitor a larger area with fewer people with less fuel usage.”

Images from the cameras will also be stored on servers and the data can be retrieved for further review. “We can go back in time to look at an area,” Pose said. “To be able to go back and look at activity the day before, it’s a big help, especially when we’re trying to run down a complaint in a certain area. We don’t have to physically be in the area where you might be spotted, but we can watch the area to try and make your case. It’s going to be a great tool.

“The ability to go back and look at footage is going to be extremely useful. We can see how much activity has been going on in that area and we can direct patrols more efficiently with the limited numbers of officers we have.

With the two systems together, we not only will have the ability to look at violations and warnings and see the types of vessels and activity, but we will also have video of the area. That will be a great help.” 