
Documenting Leased Vehicle Condition During Emergency Events

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INTRODUCTION

As the historic 2000 fire season goes into the history books, it is fitting to reflect on what went right and what could have been done better. The decision to videotape the condition of vehicles used for fire suppression during pre- and post-event inspections of vehicles had a positive impact on the Kootenai National Forest. The results were unequivocally successful in saving inspection time, in clearly documenting vehicle condition, and in quickly resolving most vehicle damage claims against the Government, usually in the Government's favor.

HISTORY

In 1994, and again in 1998, the Kootenai NF had several large fires that required the purchase of support vehicles and equipment to help suppress fires. In both years, prework inspectors documented vehicle body and operating condition by conventional written methods. A few still photographs illustrated any major damage, and overall conditions were recorded as well as possible. We found that much of the minor damage—such as small dents, dings, and scratches—was not noted in sufficient detail to support the post-event inspection and closeout. This lack of detailed information was particularly true when large numbers of vehicles were inspected quickly at the beginning of a large fire buildup. In addition, many of the vehicles were rented from car dealers, who did not have exact knowledge of the condition of the vehicle at the time of the initial leasing. As a result, at closeout time, claims were filed for many dents, scratches, and dings. Contracting officers paid many of these claims because there was no documentation to the contrary.

In 2000, the Kootenai NF decided to begin videotaping each vehicle to document body condition. As a parallel exercise, digital cameras were also used for photographic documentation. This latter effort was soon abandoned, however, because the digital images were less effective in revealing vehicle damage than were the videotapes. After just 1 week into the 2000 incidents, our "experiment" was about to pay off. A pickup truck was demobilized from the fire, and the owner filed a \$780 claim for damage to the vehicle—mostly dents and scratches that were going to require repair and repainting. It was typical of the type of claims we had paid in the past. We reviewed the videotape that clearly showed the prefire condition of the vehicle with the contracting officer. He then reviewed the video with the claimant; the claimant withdrew all of his claims for damage and walked out with a stern warning from the contracting officer not to make false claims.

This is not to say that we did not settle any claims for damage. There were ample legitimate cases of vehicle abuse and damage that we settled, usually in a timely manner after reviewing the tapes. Mechanics Bob Kooken and Ray Hammons, who were equipment inspectors for the fires, agree that there is no objection to paying for legitimate damage that occurs to leased vehicles

because the owner is legally entitled to such payment. However, vehicle users who frequently abuse these private vehicles during fire duty are of concern.

As a result of using the video cameras, the Kootenai NF believes that we saved tens of thousands of dollars that otherwise might have been paid by the Government for false claims.

VIDEO TECHNIQUES

The Kootenai NF selected a super 8 video camera to document vehicle conditions for two reasons. First, the camera provided sufficiently detailed images. Second, the camera is easily operated by multiple users, many of whom personally own such a camera.

After viewing more than one thousand inspections, most reviewers agree that the most successful shots included the following basic steps:

1. The best documentation occurs when an inspector, standing in front of the camera operated by another person, does voice documentation as well as pointing at the feature he or she is trying to depict. Often the camera operator can then help by zooming into the feature and pointing out features the inspector may have missed. Wide-angle shots, which are then zoomed down, also help in the documentation.
2. It is best to have a date and time stamp appear at least periodically on the camera, which helps with the video search when a vehicle is returned.
3. During slow periods in the vehicle inspections, one inspector can create an index of vehicles that appear on each tape to help locate a particular vehicle. In our case, 12 tapes were shot, which creates a logistical nightmare without such an index. The index identification included the equipment number ("E" number), the license plate number, and a brief description of the vehicle, such as "Chevy 4x4 pickup extended cab blue." We found that not all "E" numbers are in numerical order for inspection, and we had five complexes that each created their own "E" numbers.

To make taping easier, we recommend taking the following steps regarding accessories:

1. Keep one set of batteries in the recharger at all times.
2. Have extra batteries on hand. Even rechargeable batteries will not keep a charge after several recharges. It is frustrating to have a long line of vehicles and no working camera available.
3. Acquire a second camera or a playback machine to enhance efficiency. Demobilized vehicles can be viewed at the same time as other vehicles are being signed up, which happens when several fires are burning at once. The second camera can be hooked up to a monitor for better viewing. The second camera can also serve inspectors during extremely busy periods or when one camera is required to document equipment offsite or at another location. This is also a situation in which date and time stamps are essential because two tapes are being created at roughly the same time. Often the tape on the second camera may be used for several days before it is fully used.

4. Locate a dust-free, darker viewing station away from the main inspection area for easier viewing, cataloging, and negotiating with vendors at the end of the event. When vehicles were being demobilized, we found that the owners also wanted to view the tapes. They would inspect their returned vehicles and make notes. The inspector and the owner would then sit down together to review the tape. Often the two of them could agree upon the vehicle's prefire condition versus project damage and document it for the contracting officer. This effort would free up the contracting officer's time so that he or she could negotiate legitimate claims.

SUMMARY

Videotaping vehicles at signup time for emergency events is a cost-saving and time-saving tool. The axiom of a picture being worth a thousand words is true, and a moving picture with narration is a thousand times better than that. The tapes do not have to be professionally done, but attention to the documentation job is essential. The use of a team approach for videotaping is recommended. It is much more effective for one person to operate the camera while another person narrates and points out damage than to rely on a single person to manage the camera while chronicling damage. Both vehicle owners and the Forest Service agree that the tape is an impartial representation of the vehicle's appearance before the incident, because several weeks may go by between the pre-inspection and the final inspection. We also found that fewer claims were filed when the Forest Service used professionals to detail personal vehicles and to buff out brush scratches, especially when personal vehicles on loan were newer model pickups and sedans. Videotaping heavy equipment can help to indicate project damage versus preproject damage conditions—particularly for logging equipment that may be worn and damaged already.

Several buying team members and administrative people from other forests and regions, who observed the techniques firsthand, commented favorably on the videotaped documentation. As a result of the successes during FY 2000 fires, the Kootenai National Forest intends to make videotaping of equipment standard operating procedure. We will be conducting classes for Kootenai NF equipment inspection personnel on how to videotape a vehicle for the best documentation for future claims.