
Electronic Physical Security at Forest Service Facilities

—Andy Trent, project engineer, Missoula Technology and Development Center, Missoula, MT

The physical security of Forest Service facilities is an increasing concern. Facilities include not just district, forest, and regional offices, but many other storage facilities and buildings at remote locations. With the continuing advances of electronic technology, electronic equipment commonly is used to monitor facilities or to deter intruders. Electronic equipment, such as closed-circuit television, can monitor an entire facility or just a building's entrances and exits. Key cards or devices that scan a person's thumbprint or retina can be used to control access to a facility.

Electronic physical security systems may cost from several hundred to thousands of dollars. Determining the equipment that is best suited for a particular situation can be a daunting task for Forest Service facility managers, engineers, law enforcement officers, and others in charge of physical security. Facility managers who do not have expertise in this field may have to rely on the advice of vendors or colleagues. The managers may end up purchasing sophisticated and sometimes overpriced equipment when simpler equipment would have been adequate.

In September and October 2004, the Missoula Technology and Development Center (MTDC) facilities program funded a pilot physical security help desk for the Forest Service. MTDC contracted with R. Grossman and Associates (RG&A) to run the help desk, which provides professional consultation for Forest Service employees who need help designing, documenting, procuring, operating, and troubleshooting electronic security systems.

Purpose of the Help Desk

The physical security help desk should save the Forest Service money on electronic security systems and should educate Forest Service employees about the benefits and drawbacks of different security measures. Additionally, as help desk personnel gain experience assisting with Forest Service security projects, standardized solutions will be developed for specific applications.

Employees can call the help desk with assurance that the consultant will recommend practical solutions, because the consultant is not a vendor with specific products to sell. All project details remain in strict confidence.

Pilot Help Desk Project

The pilot help desk project (figure 1) originally was funded for just a month to evaluate the need for such a service. An e-mail message describing the help desk was sent to Forest Service facility managers, engineers, and law enforcement officers. The project was extended from September through October 2004.



Figure 1—Forest Service employees can get answers to their questions about electronic security at the Web site, <http://www.tech-answers.com/ForestService.htm>.

Employee Questions and Impressions

One employee requested help in comparing color and black-and-white cameras with infrared illuminators and an infrared filter. The help desk answered promptly. The employee commented that unless you stay engaged in the physical security industry, it is easy to fall behind the technology. The employee was confident that information from the help desk would produce savings and was a worthwhile service, even if it was needed just occasionally.

Another employee had questions concerning digital video recorders, wireless transmitters, cameras, and housings. The employee felt the help desk answered the questions thoroughly, gave good advice, and discouraged the purchase of expensive, unneeded equipment.

During an office remodeling project, an employee needed general information regarding the design of a security system. The help desk advised the employee to focus on the required level of security for the facility to determine the equipment that would meet the need. The employee appreciated the help of a consultant who provided unbiased information and recommended cost-effective products. This employee recommended that any employee with questions about electronic security check out the help desk's Web site (<http://www.tech-answers.com>, click on the Library tab). The employee would like to see the help desk continued.

Other help desk inquiries included:

- Review of plans to add cameras and upgrade a closed-circuit television system at an interpretive center
- Information on securing a temporary office
- A high-resolution logo for identification cards
- Suggestions for overall security requirements for a facility
- Questions about controlling access to a headquarters office

Conclusions

Those who used the help desk were pleased with the assistance and recommended that the help desk continue. They felt that having an unbiased consultant who is fully knowledgeable about the latest electronic security equipment saved them time and money.

Based on the results of the pilot program, MTDC continued the help desk through September 2005 for a limited number of hours. This longer trial period allowed employees more time to use the service and also allowed managers more time to alert Forest Service employees to the services provided by the help desk. MTDC will evaluate the help desk's usefulness at the end of the fiscal year to determine whether the service should be continued.

Contacting the Help Desk

RG&A

Phone: 609-926-9264

Fax: 609-601-6190

Web site: <http://www.tech-answers.com/ForestService.htm>

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