

Secure communication for Torres Strait

By Everett Hornick

The backbone to every operation is effective communication and the upgrade of the Customs radio communications in the Torres Strait to a secure network has provided a high-tech system assisting with detections of illegal activity in the area.

"Customs officers are in regular communication with the people and communities living on the islands from southern Papua New Guinea to the north of Cape York Peninsula," Customs officer Mr Mick Eyles said.

An officer in the region for two years, Mr Eyles said the ultra high frequency (UHF) radio network is supporting Customs work in the area.

"The system allows Customs officers to communicate securely without the risk of unwelcome monitoring, bringing the Torres Strait in line with the standard of secure communications available to Customs and law-enforcement agencies throughout mainland Australia," he said.

The UHF microwave-linked wide-area secure network replaced a local area VHF network which had only one base station at Thursday Island installed in the early

1980s. The network included 20 portable handsets also capable of secure communication.

Not all the new talk groups are secure. Customs provided the local island councils with their own radio transmitters. If they need urgent assistance, they have access to immediate communication.

According to Ms Jenny Anderson, supervisor for Coastwatch on Thursday Island, under the old system it was not always possible to give and receive timely communication.

"The increased efficiency in Customs response time under the new network has put everything back in our favour," Ms Anderson said.

The secure network also enables Customs to keep in constant radio contact with other agencies such as Australian Federal Police, Queensland Police, Queensland Fisheries, the Australian Quarantine and Inspection Service, Royal Australian Navy, the Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs and the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, as well as Papua New Guinea Customs office in Daru and the Torres Strait Island Council offices.

Mr Eyles said the extensive coverage of the new communication system is one of the major advantages. Because of the number of repeaters scattered on high points throughout the Torres Strait, the system has excellent coverage.

"There is also the safety factor," Mr Eyles said.



A radio mast located at Banks Peak on Moa Island in the Torres Strait has assisted in bringing secure communication to the region.

“Under the old system, Customs officers had to make scheduled calls. If you missed a call, it could indicate an oversight, an emergency or just that you are in an area of poor coverage.

“It could easily happen that, after a Customs patrol had missed its scheduled call, the base station would be arranging a search party, only to find that the officers had been late returning to their vessel or just moving to a location with better reception.

“The isolation of some of the outer islands has the potential to produce dangerous situations. Officers relying on scheduled calls as their only protection could expect long delays if they were in trouble.

“Some of the waters out here can be very choppy. If a boat capsized, the old seaphones attached to the boat would be inoperable. The handheld UHF radios have an emergency alarm button that alerts the base station that officers are in danger.”

The UHF system allows officers landing at an island to keep in constant communication with each other, the base station and the local island councils.

A \$4.5 million contract to design, install and maintain a digital UHF radio system for the Torres Strait was awarded to Motorola Australia Pty Ltd in June 1998. The contractor has supplied a system that uses the digital radio standard developed for worldwide emergency services.

The network is part of the \$7.8 million package under the National Illicit Drugs Strategy.



Cairns based Customs officer Phil Sherlock and a drug detector dog conduct a search at Saibai Island (top), while Thursday Island officer Carol Yamashita searches through the scrub during a patrol (centre). Customs officers and air crew prepare for a helicopter flight from Lockhart River at Cape York (bottom).