

# 24-hour



The National Monitoring Centre is staffed 24-hours a day to provide a continual Customs presence at Australia's major ports.

## Customs 24-hour presence on the waterfront

In a world first for a Customs organisation, Australian Customs national closed circuit television (CCTV) monitoring centre is now fully operational and delivering around the clock surveillance of Australia's major ports.

The National Monitoring Centre (NMC) is the apex of Customs waterfront CCTV network, and differentiates the system from anything seen before on a Customs world stage. From a bank of monitors in Melbourne, NMC staff are able to keep an eye on any one of more than 220 cameras in 88 separate port locations around the country. The network also links each of the cameras to the closest Customs House and to regional monitoring centres in each state.

Routine daytime surveillance at the waterfront is usually managed from the local Customs House, but after business hours the innovative national system really comes into its own.

According to Dick Sibthorpe, Manager Surveillance Technology, "A person coming down a gangway at

some late hour of the evening, or early hour of the morning, will set off the automatic video motion detection system. The camera will then dial into the NMC and set off an audible alarm, alerting the Melbourne staff on duty.

"NMC staff can move the camera on the waterfront to follow the person, perhaps following them to a car, reading the car number plate, and gathering other valuable information, before returning to the gangway field of view.

"Without the national monitoring capability, the person would walk down the gangway and out of the view of the camera, and that is all we would have recorded for later intelligence evaluation.

"The NMC can set up a remote camera on a ship berthing at, say 2 am, and then set the local district office equipment to record the gangway movements, covering the intervening period until local staff arrive to clear the ship."

The advantages in having a national monitoring system are very real, but just as importantly they are also outstanding value for money.

What the \$18 million project has bought is comprehensive waterfront surveillance coverage, at what is, by industry standards, a low ongoing resource commitment—around \$1 million per annum, or six per cent of the capital cost.

“With all the start up costs in placing this expensive camera infrastructure at wharves, but without centralised monitoring, for two-thirds of the day, the investment would potentially be under utilised by Customs. That is how the NMC concept was conceived,” said Mr Sibthorpe.

Although the NMC is a very new development, Customs has been using elements of CCTV technology for over a decade, and Mr Sibthorpe has been managing the program the entire time.

“CCTV began in the early 1990s, with cameras used for short term operations. From there, we piloted a fixed system in Melbourne, Geelong and Portland, which proved the concept value of having a permanent CCTV presence in both regional and city ports.”

The national program to roll out the CCTV infrastructure to all major ports began with the allocation of \$12 million in the 1998-99 Federal Budget and concluded some four years later, with the last cameras installed in early 2002.

The overall installation program was a mammoth and challenging task, involving some of the most remote ports in the world and some of the harshest conditions imaginable for operating sophisticated camera technology. For example, Cape Lambert pier in north-west Australia stretches about 2.5 kilometres out to sea, and two cameras ensure that Customs officers in the nearest Customs House at Dampier, some 60 kilometres away, as well as NMC staff some 3,500 kilometres to the south-east, can see what is happening on the pier.

There were many and varied environmental challenges encountered during the rollout, which also ensure the maintenance program, according to Mr Sibthorpe, “remains interesting”. The

endless red dust that characterises Port Hedland in Western Australia has meant that the cameras located there need far more regular and thorough cleaning just to keep them operational than the four-month interval that is standard for, say, Sydney Harbour. Local sulphur crested cockatoos also wreak havoc from time to time eating away some of the cabling.

On top of this, all of the cameras are located in busy industrial areas where they are exposed to bumps, knocks, conveyor vibration, marine corrosion, lightning, electrical interference and general wear and tear—key factors in determining where and how to initially position them.

But, despite the significant physical challenges, according to Mr Sibthorpe, “the front-end camera installation was the easy part. The hard part is the bit in between, getting the pictures from the cameras at the wharf back to the local Customs House, the regional monitoring centres, and the NMC in Melbourne - and then being able to manipulate the cameras from ‘way back there’. That is really value added.”

The NMC allows Customs to know what is going on at the waterfront any time of the day or night. This information is then used to determine the most appropriate course of action for

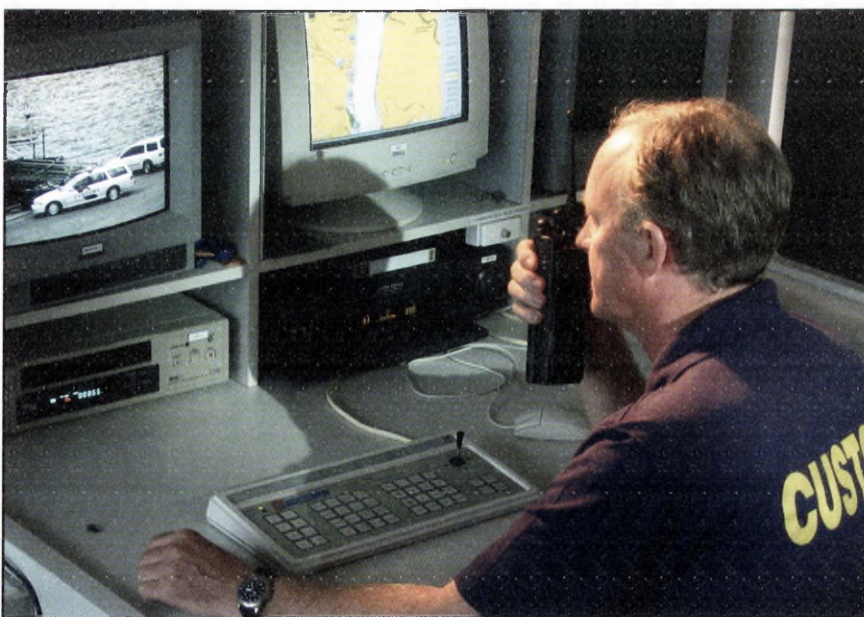
each particular set of circumstances.

This may include further CCTV surveillance, or a physical response from Customs, or from any one of our partner agencies.

In addition to the strategic placement of Customs rapid response teams, which can be deployed around the country when the operational need arises, Customs has worked hard to establish links with partner agencies that maintain a full-time physical presence in remote areas, such as local police and immigration, to ensure that there is an appropriate force available to respond to illegal activity on the waterfront, no matter where it occurs.

The end benefit, according to Mr Sibthorpe, is the most effective, efficient use of our available force.

“By combining our nationally monitored CCTV network with sophisticated intelligence techniques, we are able to use our most valuable resource, our people, where they are most needed,” he said.



Regional Monitoring Centre staff work closely with officers from the local Customs House to manage CCTV operational taskings. The high-quality video produced can be used as evidence in the prosecution of border offences.