

Protecting water crews

Nov 1, 2005 12:00 PM

City uses signs to slow motorists near roadside work zones.



Worker safety is a priority for the Portland, Ore., Water Bureau, which dispatches a large percentage of its 500 employees daily to repair and maintain the city's drinking water system. "One of our greatest assets is our employees. Accidents are expensive both in direct and indirect costs," says Eric Fullan, safety manager for the bureau.

The Water Bureau's field forces typically perform construction and maintenance during busy traffic periods along roads where inattentive drivers and bad weather can create dangerous conditions for crews. To ensure worker safety, crews distribute cones and post warning signs to encourage drivers to obey traffic laws and use caution around the bureau's work sites. "Motorists will only slow down if they perceive a need. With that in mind, our crews are well trained in traffic control and sign/cone placement," Fullan says.

However, after several close calls, Fullan considered a number of additional options to help guarantee proper speeds are maintained near bureau work sites. He was searching for a portable device that could be used in a variety of environments, weather conditions and along high-volume traffic roads.

After reviewing several products, in spring 2004, Fullan decided to begin using signs that monitor car speed by radar and display the speed digitally. "The signs set off the motorists' radar detectors, so they think there may be police enforcement in the area," says Crew Supervisor Dave Johnson. "So slowing often begins long before they even see the signs, which slows everyone else down significantly. In other cases, drivers don't realize how fast they are going until they see their posted speed. The signs work as an effective reminder of the posted limit."

The water bureau purchased two portable units from Beaverton, Ore.-based Information Display Co. One can be displayed on the trunk of a stationary car and powered by the vehicle's battery. The other has a collapsible stand and a battery. As work crews relocate, they can reposition the signs accordingly. "The sign should be placed in a way that gives the motorist time to slow down, yet close enough to the site to benefit them slowing," says Crew Leader Mike Kane. "Once they have passed the site their speed typically resumes."

Since the bureau has added the signs to its safety equipment arsenal, crews and other city departments have noticed changes in drivers' behavior. "We've seen a significant reduction in traffic speed when the signs are used," Fullan says. "Our colleagues with the Portland Parks and Recreation Department were impressed too, and asked us to loan them the signs. We're always looking for new and innovative ways to promote worker safety."

