

ITWire
15 August 2007

Final testing of SUNA broadcast traffic alerts

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14 August 2007

SUNA Traffic Channel - Australia's first Traffic Message Channel (TMC) road information service - is set to go live in Melbourne by Christmas, spreading to Sydney and Brisbane by the end of the first quarter of 2008. Adelaide and Perth will be added later that year.

Developed by RACV subsidiary Intelematics Australia, SUNA aggregates and processes data collected by the traffic light control system plus human observation and messages from probe vehicles to identify trouble spots. Other data sources include the tow truck allocation system, and highway ice and wind sensors. Warnings of events such as major sporting fixtures and street parades are inserted ahead of time.

Data is broadcast piggybacked on conventional FM radio signals, and can be decoded by suitably equipped in-car navigation systems. "Virtually all the world's navigation brands" including Garmin, Medion, Navway, Neo and Siemens are compatible, according to Intelematics CEO Adam Game. Some low-end models advertised in Europe as being TMC-enabled are sold here without being described as such, he noted.

The navigation hardware generally interprets the messages and displays appropriate symbols on the map, and issues a verbal warning of incidents on the selected route. Some models offer dynamic guidance, which routes around obstructions that are likely to cause a delay greater than a threshold value.

"Basically, you use the navigation system the way you usually do... and you start getting warnings," said Game.

"We think traffic [information] is the hook" that will promote the adoption of embedded navigation systems, he said. Currently, less than five percent of new Australian cars are purchased with navigation systems, compared with around 25 percent in Europe. Current Australian sales run at 600,000 accessory navigation systems, compared with around one million cars. It is possible that more navigation systems than cars may be sold during 2008, Game suggested.

"Once the connection is there, there's a range of things you can provide" such as parking and fuel information, he added.

The service is not offered to the public by Intelematics, instead it is wholesaled to navigation system vendors who can offer it as an additional service to their customers. A "lifetime" subscription is likely to add between \$A200 and \$A300 to the cost of a navigation unit.

While unencrypted TMC is common in Europe, Game said the encrypted version was being used in Australia to preserve the vendors' business model.

While the company will also be offering an XML feed that could be delivered by GPRS or 3G, Game pointed out that the costs involved for those channels make them more suitable for 'pull' content as opposed to the stream of data delivered by TMC at zero marginal cost to the recipient.

An interoperability agreement between map vendors, hardware manufacturers and Intelematic was reached after 18 months of negotiations, paralleling those in Europe and North America.

Apart from helping individual drivers to reduce their journey times by avoiding trouble spots, the service may have a broader benefit. Game points out that most roads function well until they come within a few percent of their capacity, so moving a small proportion of vehicles onto alternative routes can make a big difference. With traffic expected to double during the next 20 years, systems like this can be a cost-effective way of reducing congestion.

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