

# Customs Coastwatch's new eye in the sky



Customs Coastwatch training and standards manager, Kingsley Woodford-Smith (left), demonstrates the capabilities of the Inmarsat system to the Minister for Justice and Customs, Senator Chris Ellison.

Customs Coastwatch has launched a world-first satellite communication system which significantly boosts the operational effectiveness of its aerial surveillance activities.

The Inmarsat high-capacity satellite link allows the transmission of data, voice and imagery from surveillance aircraft in flight direct to the Customs National Surveillance Centre in Canberra.

This means that for the first time staff in the centre operations room can witness events unfolding at the same time that crews on board Customs Coastwatch Dash-8 surveillance aircraft identify targets of interest, anywhere in Australia's maritime patrol zone.

The data can also be received by portable equipment that can be located wherever necessary.

It is believed to be the first time the technology has been developed for use in the civil maritime surveillance environment.

The technology was commissioned by the Minister for Justice and Customs, Senator Chris Ellison, during a visit to the centre in December.

It provides Customs Coastwatch with a major operational boost in helping to enforce border laws and

provide a civil maritime surveillance and response service across Australia's expansive offshore maritime area

At more than 12 million square kilometres, this area is 20 per cent larger than the Australian mainland. Customs Coastwatch also provides surveillance coverage of Australia's 37,000km coastline.

The Dash-8 fleet patrols out to the limits of Australia's 200 nautical mile Exclusive Economic Zone. Where necessary it can operate beyond this zone.

Using the Inmarsat system, real time video and high quality still images captured by patrolling aircraft can now be transmitted live into the centre, along with voice, data and radar imagery.

This allows improved decision-making by Customs and other Federal agencies during regular surveillance operations.

During tactical operations conducted in response to an identified threat to the border, imagery can also be beamed to portable receiving units deployed with a forward command post.

This satellite communications system was specially developed to meet the unique needs of Customs Coastwatch in consultation with contract partners Surveillance Australia and TC Communications.

Project funding of \$8.1 million was announced by the Federal Government in the 2002-03 budget.

The system was developed, fully tested and installed in only six months, a testament to the commitment of Customs to develop the capability quickly in a heightened world security environment.

Its successful introduction reinforces Customs Coastwatch's position as a world leader in the field of maritime surveillance, with the new capability already attracting interest from the US Coastguard and New Zealand Air Force.

In commissioning the system, Senator Ellison said Customs now had world-class technology with which to fulfil its mission of protecting Australia's borders.

"This is the technology we need if we are to look out for Australia's borders ... this is the sort of technology that our Customs officers need," he said.

"This is of increasing importance in the current security environment," Senator Ellison said.

Coastwatch Director-General, Rear-Admiral Max Hancock, said the introduction of the Inmarsat system also sent a strong message to individuals and groups threatening Australia's border security.

"Can I say to those people who would be interested in breaching the integrity of Australia's borders, or those people who would hope to avoid detection by Coastwatch aircraft and try to mask illegal or inappropriate activities, the game has changed.

"The risks of being found are now much greater and with a bit of luck, we'll be putting you out of business completely," Rear-Admiral Hancock said.

Footnote: A valuable side benefit of the new system was revealed during the recent bushfires in Canberra and surrounding areas. A Coastwatch Dash 8 was used to transmit live pictures generated by the planes forward looking infrared system (FLIR). The FLIR System was able to pierce dense smoke and pinpoint fire hot spots.

## Extra Customs Coastwatch surveillance finalised

Customs Coastwatch signed a revised contract with Surveillance Australia confirming enhanced surveillance of the Australian coastline and territorial waters for the next three years, in Canberra in late December 2002.

It follows the allocation of an extra \$28.5 million over three years in the 2002-03 Federal Budget for increased Customs Coastwatch surveillance operations.

Sophisticated Customs Coastwatch Dash-8 aircraft operated by Surveillance Australia will now fly an additional 1600 hours per year.

The aircraft conduct visual and electronic surveillance along Australia's 37,000km coastline and across its 12 million square kilometre offshore maritime area.

Surveillance Australia provides fixed-wing civil maritime surveillance services to Customs under a contract awarded in 1994. The contract runs until mid 2005 for the Dash-8 aircraft.



Customs Coastwatch Director-General, Rear-Admiral Max Hancock, praised the cooperation shown by all parties in delivering the world-leading technology on time and on budget.