

Ports to Adopt RFID Security System

RFID tracking technology is designed prevent terrorists from sneaking weapons of mass destruction into cargo containers.

July 17, 2002 -- The world's three largest seaport operators -- Hutchison-Whampoa, PSA Corp., and P&O Ports -- have agreed to deploy RFID tracking technology originally developed for the U.S. Department of Defense. The aim is to plug one of the most gaping holes in the domestic security of the United States.

More than 17,000 containers, carrying roughly 80 percent of U.S. imports, arrive daily at U.S. seaports. Less than 2 percent of these containers are opened and inspected. U.S. officials say the biggest concern now is that terrorists could exploit the lack of security at ports to sneak weapons of mass destruction into the U.S.

Several U.S. government-backed projects are looking at ways to secure U.S. ports. The Department of Transportation has a pilot in which electronic seals are put on cargo containers before they leave a port in Japan. This new initiative, called "Smart and Secure Tradelanes" (SST), is the first major private sector project.

The ports will be working with Savi Technology, which played a key role in creating the RFID-based Total Asset Visibility network for the military. The ports are putting up US\$8 million to set up a network that will be used initially to track a small percentage of cargo containers. The first ports to be outfitted with the technology will be Hong Kong, Rotterdam, Singapore, and Seattle-Tacoma.

"We're creating a platform for action-orient research," says Blair LaCorte, Savi's executive VP of business development. "This is not a study or a test or a pilot. This is the first deployment of an operational system that allows us to learn and to extend the system's capabilities."

The U.S. Department of Defense's Total Asset Visibility network was built to improve the tracking and security of shipments from the U.S. to forces overseas. It features RFID tracking of cargo containers, electronic event-driven alerts, anti-tamper systems, virtual inspections and authenticated audit trails.

The TAV network is built on existing U.S. and international standards and on the Universal Data Appliance Protocol (UDAP), which allows open "plug and play" integration of automatic data collection devices, such as RFID and GPS, along with sensors, scanning, and biometric systems. The ports will be able to add best-of-breed technologies to the basic system as they become available.

"TAV is the world's largest deployment of RFID technology," says Savi's LaCorte. "We just got an endorsement and startup funding to create the world's largest RFID network, which would cover all the commercial shipments in the world. It's an extremely significant move forward."

The first phase of the deployment, which should be completed at the participating ports by the end of the year, calls for a single system that can secure containers using e-seals, register individual port employees, and authorize roles. The system will capture relevant information and is designed to complement other security initiatives sponsored by the U.S. government.

In addition to Savi, technology and services will be provided by Sandler, Travis Advisory Services, an international trade consulting firm; Qualcomm, a leader in mobile fleet management using satellite communications and GPS systems; SAIC, a leading systems and technology company for ports and transportation companies; and Parsons Brinckerhoff, the largest transportation and infrastructure engineering firm in the world.

The port operating companies backing in the Smart and Secure Tradelanes initiative account for 70 percent of the world's container port operations. Mic Dinsmore, CEO of the Port of Seattle says the SST initiative "will make a real difference immediately upon its deployment."

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