

The Age (online)
17 August 2007

Traffic reports beamed live to your GPS



GPS systems capable of displaying real-time traffic information are expected to reach Australia this year.

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August 17, 2007 - 3:22PM

Australian cars and GPS navigation systems will soon display real-time traffic information so drivers' can plot journeys along the least congested routes.

The feature now comes standard on GPS systems in Europe, North America and Japan, and is expected to be switched on for some Australian capital cities by the end of the year.

Intelematics Australia, a subsidiary of the Royal Automobile Club of Victoria, officially launched the technology this week but says it has been shopping it to GPS and car makers for months.

The feature is based on traffic data collected in real-time from various sources including road sensors and even human operators in key locations, which Intelematics processes to determine average delays.

A "congestion model" is then broadcast over FM radio waves to GPS receivers, which overlay the information on maps and direct the driver to the least-congested route, said Brian Smith, Intelematics's general manager for traffic.

Drivers would be warned when there was an accident or other hazard ahead and updated on changes to their travel time.

Smith said Intelematics was in "advanced" discussions with the majority of Australian car manufacturers and some importers, as well as producers of GPS units including Navman, Garman and Mio, to have the feature bundled with their products by default.

He expected GPS receivers with the technology would be available to people in Melbourne before Christmas and in Sydney in the first quarter of next year, after which it would be rolled out to other capital cities within a year.

Smith said car manufacturers had longer lead times than makers of stand-alone GPS units, but he hoped "that in the next 12 months we'd see the first cars coming with factory-fit traffic capabilities".

Earlier this year, Google added a similar traffic information feature - developed by its Australian team - to Google Maps, but it is so far only available for 30 US cities. Google said it was looking for ways to provide the feature to its Australian users.

There were already 6 million users of real-time traffic information services in Western Europe and North America, and this was growing by 2 million users a year, Smith said.

In Japan, where a number of car makers like Toyota include the feature on some models by default, there were between 13 and 15 million users.

"If it takes you an hour to get to work nine days out of 10, then putting a traffic service in isn't going to make that half an hour," said Smith. "But if one day out of 10 it takes you two hours, then that's the sort of thing we can help you avoid."

While the feature - dubbed SUNA Traffic Channel - is marketed as a real-time traffic service, Intelematics admitted there was a 5 or 10 minute delay in broadcasting traffic information to GPS receivers.

Smith said this was done purposely to avoid annoying motorists as the information needed to first be processed to remove short-term delays, such as when a car is stalled at traffic lights.

"We add a delay so we can be a bit more confident that it really is congestion and then we transmit it," he said.

<http://www.theage.com.au/news/articles/traffic-reports-beamed-live-to-your-gps/2007/08/17/1186857747226.html>