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Damn - now you'll need another excuse for being late to work

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The Suna traffic monitoring system

Being stuck in time-wasting traffic jams may soon be just a nasty memory as a new monitoring and broadcast system is rolled out in capital cities around Australia.

Called Suna, the service went live in Melbourne just before Christmas and is scheduled to begin operation in Sydney within the next 10 weeks. Other mainland capitals will follow before the end of the year.

Suna collects data from traffic monitors installed at major intersections and transmits details of delays and congestion to compatible GPS units where it's displayed as an overlay on an electronic map.

There are already two Suna-compatible devices on the market. One, called Navway, is being distributed by directory company Ausway. The other is the 720t GPS unit from MIO. Other vendors such as Navman and TomTom are expected to launch compatible units within the next couple of months.

Suna has been established by Australian company Intelematics, a wholly-owned subsidiary of the Royal Automobile Club of Victoria. Intelematics chief executive Adam Game says delivering real-time traffic information to GPS devices takes them to a "whole new level".

"We are very excited about what's going to happen when we have the service covering 70 per cent of the Australian population," he told APCMag.com. "At this point it's at the early adopter phase but I believe it will quickly go mainstream."

Information collected by roadside and intersection monitors in major cities is fed into the Suna system where it is analysed and converted into a data stream. This stream is broadcast using a technology called Radio Data System (RDS). RDS makes use of spare signal capacity that sits alongside existing FM radio broadcasts, using the power of the radio transmitter to get signals to GPS units.

Data is transmitted in the internationally recognised Traffic Message Channel (TMC) format which allows the service to work at speeds of just 1.2 kilobits per second. Each intersection being monitored has its own unique code number as does each type of traffic disruption. Broadcasts comprise the code identifying the type of traffic problem and the numbers of the intersections between which it has occurred.

When received by a TMC-compatible GPS unit, this information is plotted on the electronic map, showing the driver exactly where the disruption has occurred. Some high-end GPS units can use the information to automatically recalculate the route, guiding the user around the trouble.

Game says that many mid-range and high-end GPS units sold in Australia during the past couple of years are likely to be TMC compatible, however they may require an additional cradle that contains an antenna capable of picking up the FM transmissions.

One example is the MIO 520 unit for which an extra cradle is now available. For \$149 users get a TMC-enabled cradle and access to the Suna service.

Meanwhile Navman sales and marketing director Marcus Fry says his company's S90i model is compatible with Suna. An accessory pack containing the licence needed to access the service will be released "within the coming weeks".

Users with GPS-enabled mobile phones may have to wait a little longer before they can take advantage of the Suna service. A Nokia spokesperson told APCMag.com that, while navigation was an area of focus for the company, no announcement had been made on the introduction of real-time traffic data capabilities.

For phones to use the service they would have to incorporate an RDS-TMC receiver to allow access to the broadcast traffic data. However as many phones now incorporate FM receivers, adding TMC capability would not be a huge step.

The process is aided by the fact that TMC services have been in widespread use in Europe for many years and handset manufacturers have significant real-world experience to use when designing new units.

Intelematics has also taken the decision to make its traffic data available in standard XML-based form, allowing it to potentially be added to the growing number of internet-based mapping services.

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