
Fresno cracks down hard on drunken driving, using night-vision goggles and GPS devices

By GARANCE BURKE

Associated Press Writer

FRESNO, Calif. (AP) — Police in Fresno are throwing up roadblocks, conducting stakeouts and using night-vision goggles, satellite tracking devices and video cameras in an extraordinary crackdown aimed not at terrorists or drug lords, but at drunken drivers.

The muscular tactics have made Fresno one of the toughest cities in America for those who dare to get behind the wheel after drinking.

"This is a chronic problem and we're trying to attack it from all different angles," said Detective Mark Van Wyhe.

While police say the four-year-old crackdown has yielded a dramatic drop in deadly car accidents, bars and restaurants complain it is hurting business and putting a damper on Fresno's nightlife. And defense attorneys and civil liberties advocates warn that the city of 461,000 has gone too far.

"The enforcement is so tight here and it's worth so much money to them that it clouds the judgment of the arresting officers," said Kendall Simsarian, a Fresno defense attorney who works on driving-under-the-influence cases. "It takes less and less of a reason to get pulled over."

Among other things, Fresno police are putting undercover officers near bars to watch for drinkers stumbling to their cars. They are setting up multiple drunken-driving checkpoints, sometimes even on weeknights. And they are surreptitiously planting Global Positioning System devices on the cars of convicted drunken drivers to monitor whether they are going to bars or liquor stores in violation of their probation or parole.

"This is the best, longest sustained effort that we've ever made regarding traffic safety and we're seeing the results in the reduction in human carnage," said Sgt. Eric Eide, who joined the force in 1975.

Fresno's attack on drunken driving has been called the nation's best by the International Association of Chiefs of Police. Mothers Against Drunk Driving has pronounced it "among the most aggressive in the nation." The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration ranks Fresno among eight cities demonstrating "sustained, high-visibility, impaired-driving enforcement."

In this city in central California's rich agricultural region, drivers can work up a lot of speed on the wide, flat streets with long cruising distances between stoplights. Fresno also has large number of Latin American and Southeast Asian immigrants, some of whom are thought to be driving illegally or are unfamiliar with the rules of the road.

In 2002, more people in Fresno died in automobile accidents than in homicides, a statistic that prompted Police Chief Jerry Dyer to beef up the traffic bureau from 22 officers in 2002 to the current 76. Under Dyer, the department also made wider use of checkpoints, and soon began using GPS devices. In May, after a burst of alcohol-related crash deaths, the bar stakeouts began.

Thirty-four people have died this year in automobile accidents, compared with 52 in 2002, according to police. The number of alcohol-related crashes that resulted in injuries has fallen from 125 in 2002 to 105 this year. And the number of DUI arrests has risen steadily from 2,169 in 2002 to a predicted 3,000 this year, police said.

“The Fresno experience is showing good results. They’re aggressive in keeping us safe, aggressive with enforcement, and are always coming up with innovative projects,” said Misty Mosye, a MADD spokeswoman. “We support whatever it takes to keep people from re-offending.”

Officers are using night-vision goggles and cameras to keep track of about 150 people who have been convicted of serious DUI offenses. The terms of their parole or probation often allow officers to search their homes at any time for evidence they have been drinking, and they can be re-arrested should police find alcohol there, no matter who bought it.

“It comes down to what’s more important: living in that residence or having alcohol in the home,” Van Wyhe said. “We have to keep them away from that temptation. If they’re having a bad night, they could take to it again.”

As for the covert planting of GPS devices, authorities say the practice is permissible under the terms of the offenders’ probation or parole. But the American Civil Liberties Union finds it troubling.

“The devices don’t just tell police where someone is going. They create a permanent, uploadable record of exactly what the person has been doing and for how long,” said Michael Risher, an attorney with the ACLU in San Francisco. “For the police department to be saying that everyone who has this type of conviction needs this type of loss of privacy doesn’t seem warranted.”

Some residents say the program has made them think twice before going out for a beer.

“I stay home and drink,” said Cheri Stark, 41, a mother of three. “I’m glad they’re cracking down because it takes a lot of the drunk drivers off the streets.”

Bob Pierce, owner of a Fresno bar and restaurant, said sales have fallen by 25 percent since his businesses were targeted in the stakeouts.

“People are afraid to go out and have dinner and cocktails,” he said. “They’re leaving early or not coming at all.”