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Vehicle control system and method for implementing safety procedure

Abstract

A system includes a controller, an activation device, and a communication device. The controller may control movement of a first vehicle system absent an operator input onboard the first vehicle system. The controller may control a propulsion system and a braking system of the first vehicle system. The controller may be positioned off-board the first vehicle system. The activation device may receive a status signal indicating a presence of a work marker proximate to the first vehicle system. The communication device may communicate a lockout signal from the activation device to the controller to direct the controller to prevent activation of the propulsion system and engage the braking system to prevent movement of the first vehicle system.

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Background/Summary

CROSS-REFERENCE TO RELATED APPLICATIONS (1) This application is a continuation of U.S. patent application Ser. No. 16/713,861, which was filed on 13 Dec. 2019, which is a continuation of U.S. Pat. No. 10,549,763, which was filed on 17 Jan. 2017, the entire disclosures of which are incorporated herein by reference.

FIELD

(1) The subject matter described herein relates to controlling vehicle systems.

BACKGROUND

(2) Due to the complexity of vehicle systems and harsh conditions experienced by vehicle systems, the vehicle systems may be periodically inspected, maintained, and repaired to ensure that the vehicle system is in proper working order and to reduce the likelihood of breaking down during a trip. A recognized safety concern is injury to a first operator (e.g., inspector, mechanic, lineman, engineer, etc.) caused by a second operator controlling the vehicle system to move while the first operator is performing inspections, maintenance, or repairs on the vehicle system. In order to reduce the risk of moving a vehicle system while a worker is in a vulnerable position relative to the vehicle system, there is a safety procedure in the railroad industry known as Blue Flag. The Blue Flag safety procedure has been implemented by railroad companies by requiring all personnel working on or near a vehicle system to place a visual indicator, such as a blue flag, an identification card, or the like that is specific to each person in a designated location, such as in a cab of a locomotive. The Blue Flag safety procedure mandates that the vehicle system is not permitted to be moved until all of the blue flags or other objects have been removed by the corresponding personnel, indicating that all of the personnel are in a safe position relative to the vehicle system.

(3) As the capabilities of control systems and communication systems advance, there may be a desire to remotely control the movement of vehicle systems along routes. For example, a remote operator of a vehicle system may be miles away from the vehicle system such that the vehicle system is not in the line of sight of the remote operator. The remote operator is not able to see a visual indicator representing an active safety procedure, such as the Blue Flag safety procedure.

The remote operator may be unaware of an active safety procedure associated with or proximate to the vehicle system. There is a concern that the remote operator may attempt to move the vehicle system in an unintentional violation of the safety procedure that risks harm to operators on or near the vehicle system.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION

(4) In an embodiment, a system (e.g., for implementing a safety procedure) is provided that includes a safety mode activation device disposed onboard a vehicle system and operatively connected to a controller of the vehicle system. The safety mode activation device is configured to receive a status signal indicating a presence of one or more of an operator or an active work marker in a location proximate to the vehicle system. The safety mode activation device is further configured to transmit a lockout signal to the controller to prevent movement of the vehicle system along a route responsive to receiving the status signal.

(5) Optionally, the transmission of the lockout signal prevents the movement of the vehicle system by not implementing control signals that include operational settings for controlling one or more of tractive efforts and braking efforts of the vehicle system. The control signals may be received from one or more of an operator input device onboard the vehicle system or a remote control system disposed off-board the vehicle system. Optionally, the safety mode activation device receives the status signal from a mobile device carried by the operator. The safety mode activation device may receive the status signal from the mobile device responsive to the mobile device determining that the mobile device is located within a designated proximity distance of the vehicle system.

Alternatively, the safety mode activation device may be configured to determine a location of the operator based on the status signal received from the mobile device carried by the operator, and the safety mode activation device may transmit the lockout signal to the controller responsive to determining that the location of the operator is within a designated proximity distance of the vehicle system. Optionally, the safety mode activation device receives the status signal from a detection sensor mounted on the vehicle system and transmits the lockout signal to the controller responsive to determining that the one or more of the operator or the active work marker is located within a detection proximity threshold of the detection sensor. Optionally, the safety mode activation device receives the status signal from an operator input device in response to an operator using the operator input device to selectively initiate transmission of the status signal by providing a personal identifier to the operator input device.

(6) In another embodiment, a method (e.g., for implementing a safety procedure) is provided that includes receiving, by a safety mode activation device onboard a vehicle system and operatively connected to a controller of the vehicle system, a status signal that indicates a presence of at least one of an operator or an active work marker in a location proximate to the vehicle system. The method also includes transmitting a lockout signal to the controller to automatically prevent movement of the vehicle system along a route responsive to receiving the status signal.

Description

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

- (1) The present inventive subject matter will be better understood from reading the following description of non-limiting embodiments, with reference to the attached drawings, wherein below:
- (2) FIG. 1 illustrates one embodiment of a communication system used to activate a safety mode of a vehicle system to prevent movement of the vehicle system along a route;
- (3) FIG. 2 is a schematic diagram of the communication system showing the vehicle control system, the remote control system, and the mobile device in accordance with an embodiment;
- (4) FIG. 3 illustrates a top-down view of the vehicle system on the route according to an embodiment; and

(5) FIG. 4 illustrates a flowchart of a method for controlling a vehicle system along a route to prevent movement of the vehicle system in a safety mode according to an embodiment.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION

(6) One or more embodiments of the inventive subject matter described herein relate to systems and methods that enable implementation of safety procedures on vehicle systems able to be controlled remotely by remote control systems. The systems and methods provide a safety mode on a vehicle system that guarantees the safety of personnel working on or around the vehicle system by ensuring that the vehicle system does not move while in the safety mode. The systems and methods are configured to automatically detect an operator and/or an active work marker in a location proximate to the vehicle system, and the safety mode is triggered responsive to detecting the operator and/or the active work marker proximate to the vehicle system. The systems and methods described herein are also configured to allow operators to selectively initiate the safety mode of the vehicle system using an operator input device, which may or may not be on the vehicle system. For example, the operator input device may be a mobile device carried by an operator proximate to the vehicle system, an onboard input device utilized by an operator on the vehicle system (e.g., in a cab of a locomotive), or a remote input device utilized by an operator located at a remote control system. Any operator with certain job-related qualifications may be allowed to initiate the safety mode of the vehicle system using a corresponding operator input device, such as by selecting a button and providing a personal identifier. The operator initiating the safety mode is not required to be physically present at the vehicle system to deposit an object (such as a blue flag), swipe an identification card, or the like.

(7) In the systems and methods described herein, the activation of the safety mode prevents the vehicle system from moving. For example, the activation of the safety mode may cause automatic engagement of a brake of the vehicle system and may disregard implementation of any received control signals instructing the vehicle system to move. Furthermore, the activation of the safety mode may also prevent an engine of the vehicle system from starting, prevent the engine from increasing a speed of the engine, prevent a power bus on the vehicle system from powering up, or the like. The systems and methods may ensure that control signals instructing the vehicle system to move are not implemented while the vehicle system is in the safety mode by mechanically and/or electrically isolating or disconnecting a propulsion subsystem of the vehicle system from a vehicle controller that conveys control signals to the propulsion subsystem.

(8) The systems and methods described herein may notify workers proximate to the vehicle system that the vehicle system is in the safety mode by providing a designated visual and/or audible representation of the safety mode. The designated visual and/or audible representation may include generating a lighting effect of a specific color or pattern, such as shining a blue light, generating a specific sound effect, and/or the like. The operator at the remote control system may also be notified that the vehicle system is in the safety mode by a designated visual and/or audible representation of the safety mode, such as providing a blue operating screen on a display device visible to the operator and/or a text-based message on the display device. The safety mode may be deactivated to allow for controlled movement of the vehicle system along a route. Systems and methods described herein may allow for deactivating the safety mode of the vehicle system in response to determining that no operators and/or active work markers are located proximate to the vehicle system.

(9) The inventive subject matter described herein may be used in connection with rail vehicles that move along rails. However, the inventive subject matter may also be used in connection with other types of vehicles, such as automobiles, trucks, mining vehicles, other off-highway vehicles (e.g., vehicles that are not designed or are not legally permitted for travel on public roadways), aerial vehicles (e.g., fixed wing aircraft, drones or other unmanned aircraft, etc.), or marine vessels.

(10) The vehicle systems described herein can include only a single vehicle or, alternatively, multiple vehicles operatively coupled to travel together along a route. For example, the multiple

vehicles in the vehicle system may be mechanically coupled with each other. In another example, the multiple vehicles in the vehicle system are not mechanically coupled with each other, but have coordinated movements to travel together along the route. For example, two or more vehicles may wirelessly communicate with each other to coordinate the movements of the vehicles.

(11) FIG. 1 illustrates one embodiment of a communication system **100** used to activate a safety mode of a vehicle system **102** to prevent movement of the vehicle system along a route **108**. The vehicle system **102** in the illustrated embodiment includes a propulsion-generating vehicle **104** and two non-propulsion-generating vehicles **106**. The propulsion-generating vehicle **104** generates tractive effort for propelling the vehicle system **102** along the route **108**. The non-propulsion-generating vehicles **106** may include brakes but do not include propulsion systems to generate tractive effort. The non-propulsion-generating vehicles **106** may be used for carrying passengers and/or cargo. The vehicles **104**, **106** are mechanically coupled with each other in the illustrated embodiment, but may not be mechanically coupled in an alternative embodiment. Although the vehicle system **102** includes one propulsion-generating vehicle **104** and two non-propulsion-generating vehicles **106** in FIG. 1, the vehicle system **102** may include more than one propulsion-generating vehicle **104** and/or more or less than two non-propulsion-generating vehicles **106** in other embodiments. In one alternative embodiment, the vehicle system **102** includes a single propulsion-generating vehicle **104** and has no non-propulsion-generating vehicles **106**. In the illustrated embodiment, the propulsion-generating vehicle **104** is disposed at one end of the vehicle system **102**, but the arrangement of the propulsion-generating vehicle **104** and the non-propulsion-generating vehicles **106** may also be different in other embodiments, such that by locating the propulsion-generating vehicle **104** at the other end of the vehicle system **102** or between the two non-propulsion-generating vehicles **106**. The vehicle system **102** is shown in FIG. 1 as a railway train, such that the propulsion-generating vehicle **104** is a locomotive and the non-propulsion-generating vehicles **106** are rail cars. But, the vehicle system **102** can represent other types of vehicles, such as passenger automobiles, tractor trailers, and marine vessels in other embodiments.

(12) The vehicle system **102** includes an onboard vehicle control system **114**. The vehicle control system **114** is disposed on the propulsion-generating vehicle **104** in the illustrated embodiment, but alternatively may be disposed on one of the non-propulsion-generating vehicles **106** or distributed among multiple vehicles **104**, **106** of the vehicle system **102**. The vehicle control system **114** includes at least a vehicle controller **202** and a safety mode activation device **140**. The vehicle controller **202** (also referred to herein as controller **202**) includes one or more processors (e.g., one or more microprocessors, field programmable gate arrays, and/or integrated circuits) that include and/or are connected with hardware circuits or circuitry. The vehicle control system **114** can control movement of the vehicle system **102**. For example, the controller **202** may convey control signals to propulsion-generating components and braking components of the propulsion-generating vehicle **104** to control the movement of the vehicle system **102** along the route **108**. The safety mode activation device **140** also includes one or more processors (e.g., one or more microprocessors, field programmable gate arrays, and/or integrated circuits) that include and/or are connected with hardware circuits or circuitry. The safety mode activation device **140** is configured to activate a safety mode of the vehicle system **102** to prevent movement of the vehicle system **102** along the route **108** when the vehicle system **102** is in the safety mode, as described in more detail herein.

(13) The communication system **100** also includes a remote control system **112** that is located off-board the vehicle system **102**. The remote control system **112** is configured to remotely control movement of the vehicle system **102** along the route **108** by transmitting control signals to the vehicle control system **114** onboard the vehicle system **102**. One or more operators may be located at the remote control system **112**, and may manually manipulate the remote control system **112** to select the control signals that are transmitted to the vehicle system **102**. The control signals may include operational settings such as throttle settings, brake settings, speed settings, or the like. Upon receiving the control signals, the controller **202** may be configured to implement the

operational settings to control the movement of the vehicle system **102** according to the remote control signals. However, if the vehicle system **102** is in the safety mode, the operational settings are not implemented such that the vehicle system **102** does not move according to the control signals. The remote control system **112** may also transmit status signals to the safety mode activation device **140** which are used by the safety mode activation device **140** to activate (and subsequently) deactivate the safety mode.

(14) The remote control system **112** is separated from the vehicle system **102** by a distance **126**. The distance **126** may be 0.5 kilometers (km), 5 km, 50 km, 500 km, 5000 km, or the like. The distance **126** between the vehicle system **102** and the remote control system **112** may be beyond or outside of a line of site of an operator that is located at the remote control system **112**, such that the operator cannot see the vehicle system **102** from the remote control system **112** relying on eyesight alone without the use of cameras or other machine vision. The distance **126** may extend between different time zones and/or different delineated geographical areas (e.g., different towns, counties, states, countries) or the like. For example, an operator located at the remote control system **112** in New York may be able to control the movement of the vehicle system **102** when the vehicle system **102** is located in Utah. In an alternative embodiment, the distance **126** to the vehicle system **102** may be within the line of site of an operator at the remote control system **112**.

(15) In an embodiment, the remote control system **112** is configured to communicate with the vehicle control system **114** on the vehicle system **102** via one or more long range wireless signals. For example, the remote control system **112** may be communicatively linked with the vehicle control system **114** using one or more satellites **110**. In the illustrated embodiment, the remote control system **112** transmits the control signals and status signals (for activating and deactivating the safety mode) as long range wireless signals to a first satellite **110A** by a first communication link **118** between the remote control system **112** and the first satellite **110A**. The first satellite **110A** transmits the status signals to a second satellite **110B** by a second communication link **120** between the two satellites **110A**, **110B**. The second satellite **110B** transmits the status signals to the vehicle control system **114** onboard the vehicle system **102** by a third communication link **122** between the second satellite **110B** and the vehicle system **102**. The satellites **110A**, **110B** and communication links **118**, **120**, **122** may also be used to transmit long range wireless signals in the reverse direction from the vehicle control system **114** to the remote control system **112**. In other embodiments, more or less than two satellites may be used to communicate long range wireless signals between the remote control system **112** and the vehicle control system **114**.

(16) Since the vehicle system **102** is able to be controlled remotely by an operator at the remote control system **112**, the vehicle system **102** optionally may not have any operator present on the vehicle system **102** as the vehicle system **102** moves along the route **108**. Therefore, there may be no operator onboard the vehicle system **102** to activate or initiate the safety mode of the vehicle system **102** to prevent the vehicle system **102** from moving in response to another operator moving proximate to the vehicle system **102** to perform work on the vehicle system **102**, on the route **108**, and/or on another vehicle system nearby. Furthermore, since the vehicle system **102** is controlled remotely, the remote operator may not be able detect the presence of any operators or visual indicia (e.g., colored flags) on or around the vehicle system **102** that would indicate to the remote operator that the vehicle system **102** should be placed in the safety mode to prevent movement of the vehicle system **102**.

(17) In various embodiments described herein, the safety mode activation device **140** (also referred to herein as activation device **140**) is configured to receive a status signal from one or more sensors, operator input devices, or other input devices. the safety mode activation device **140** may analyze the status signal or signals received. If the status signal indicates the presence of an operator (other than an operator in a cab of the vehicle **104**) or an active work marker **142** within a certain designated proximity of the vehicle system **102**, the safety mode activation device **140** is configured to communicate a lockout signal to the controller **202** to initiate the safety mode. For

example, the safety mode activation device **140** may determine, based on a received status signal, that an operator or another person (e.g., a trespasser) is under one of the vehicles **104**, **106** or on one of the vehicles **104**, **106**. The active work marker **142** is a visual indicator that represents the presence of operators in the area performing work, such as inspection, maintenance, or repair on the vehicle system **102**, the route **108**, and/or another vehicle system nearby. In the illustrated embodiment, two active work markers **142** are shown in the form of flags (e.g., blue flags), but the active work markers **142** may have other shapes and/or indicia in other embodiments. Although one active work marker **142** is mounted on the propulsion-generating vehicle **104** in the illustrated embodiment, it is understood that an active work marker may also or alternatively be mounted to a non-propulsion vehicle **106**.

(18) The activation device **140** may be configured to transmit the lockout signal automatically upon receipt of a status signal from an operator input device or a sensor that indicates the current or anticipated presence of an operator within a designated proximity of the vehicle system **102**. The sensor may be a camera, a proximity sensor, a motion sensor, an audio sensor, a radio frequency identification (RFID) sensor, or the like. For example, the activation device **140** may transmit the lockout signal based on a status signal from a sensor that indicates detection of an operator or an active work marker **142** within a designated proximity distance (such as three meters or the like) of the vehicle system **102**. Furthermore, the safety mode activation device **140** may transmit the lockout signal based on a status signal received from an operator input device, which may be user-initiated or autonomously transmitted to the activation device **140**. For example, an operator proximate to the vehicle system **102** may use a mobile device **144** or an onboard input device on the vehicle **104** to selectively transmit, via a user interface on the device, a status signal to the safety mode activation device **140** that commands the activation device **140** to transmit the lockout signal, initiating the safety mode. The mobile device **144** may be a mobile phone, a tablet computer, a personal digital assistant (PDA), a handheld personal computer, a walkie talkie, or another mobile communication device. For example, one operator tasked with performing scheduled maintenance on the propulsion-generating vehicle **104** may use that operator's mobile device **144** to transmit the lockout signal to the vehicle system **102** prior to starting the scheduled maintenance. An operator located remote from the vehicle system **102** at the remote control system **112** can also selectively transmit a status signal to the safety mode activation device **140** commanding initiation of the safety mode. The status signal sent from the remote control system **112** may be transmitted as a long range wireless signal using the communication links **118**, **120**, **122**. Therefore, the activation device **140** may activate the safety mode based on detection of a triggering condition (such as a person or work marker on or near the vehicle system **102**) and/or reception of a command selectively transmitted by an operator using an input device.

(19) In response to the safety mode activation device **140** receiving a status signal indicating the presence (or anticipated presence) of an operator or an active work marker **142** in a location proximate to the vehicle system **102**, the safety mode activation device **140** is configured to transmit a lockout signal to the controller **202** to activate the safety mode. In response to receiving the lockout signal, the controller **202** is configured to prevent movement of the vehicle system **102** along the route **108** according to a designated safety procedure or protocol associated with the safety mode. In the safety mode, the vehicle system **102** is prevented from moving to prevent injuries caused by the vehicle system **102** moving while one or more operators or other persons are in a vulnerable location relative to the vehicle system **102**, such as on the route **108**, on the vehicle system **102**, or under the vehicle system **102**. Although the vehicle system **102** may be controlled remotely by the remote control system **112** when not in the safety mode, the vehicle system **102** is not controlled by the remote control system **112** when the vehicle system **102** when in the safety mode. For example, the controller **202** may automatically initiate one or more default actions, such as engaging a brake of the vehicle system, preventing the disengagement of the brake, preventing an engine of the vehicle system from starting, preventing a currently-operating engine from

increasing its speed (e.g., revolutions per minute (RPMs)), preventing a power bus of the vehicle system from energizing, preventing implementation of any control signals received while in the safety mode, providing an audio and/or visual notification that the vehicle system **102** is in the safety mode, or the like. For example, since the vehicle system **102** is not controlled remotely when the vehicle system **102** is in the safety mode, the controller **202** may disregard or at least delay implementation of any control signals received from the remote control system **112** while the vehicle system **102** is in the safety mode. The power bus may be associated with the propulsion subsystem, such that the power bus may be energized prior to supplying power for releasing an air brake, for generating a tractive effort, or the like.

(20) FIG. 2 is a schematic diagram of the communication system **100** showing the vehicle control system **114**, the remote control system **112**, and a mobile device **144** in accordance with an embodiment. All of the components of the vehicle control system **114** shown in FIG. 2 may be disposed on the same vehicle of the vehicle system **102**, such as the propulsion-generating vehicle **104**, or alternatively may be distributed among two or more of the vehicles **104**, **106**.

(21) The vehicle control system **114** includes the controller **202**, the safety mode activation device **140**, and various other components that operate to perform one or more functions described herein. For example, the controller **202** includes one or more processors **204** that perform operations based on instructions stored on a tangible and non-transitory computer readable storage medium or memory **206**. The controller **202** may additionally or alternatively include one or more hard-wired devices that perform operations based on hard-wired logic of the devices. The controller **202** may represent the hardware that operates based on software or hardwired instructions, the software that directs hardware to perform the operations, or a combination thereof. The memory **206** electrically and/or magnetically stores data, and may represent or include a computer hard drive, random access memory, read-only memory, dynamic random access memory, an optical drive, or the like.

(22) The controller **202** is operatively or communicatively connected with the safety mode activation device **140** via a wired or wireless connection. The activation device **140** also includes one or more processors (not shown) that perform operations based on instructions stored on a tangible and non-transitory computer readable storage medium or memory (not shown). The activation device **140** may additionally or alternatively include one or more hard-wired devices that perform operations based on hard-wired logic of the devices. The activation device **140** may represent the hardware that operates based on software or hardwired instructions, the software that directs hardware to perform the operations, or a combination thereof. The activation device **140** operates according to one or more safety mode protocols stored on the memory. The activation device **140** uses the safety mode protocols to analyze the status signals received to determine if and when a lockout signal should be transmitted to the controller **202**. The activation device **140** also uses the safety mode protocols to determine the content of the lockout signal, and any supplemental actions to take after transmitting the lockout signal, such as controlling lights on the vehicle system **102** to provide a designated lighting effect, activating an electrical switch to electrically disconnect the controller **202** from the propulsion subsystem **216** (or a component thereof), or the like. Furthermore, the activation device **140** uses the safety mode protocols to determine when to transmit a release signal to the controller **202**, turning off the safety mode and allowing controlled movement of the vehicle system **102** along the route **108**. Although the safety mode activation device **140** is shown as a separate device from the controller **202**, in an alternative embodiment the safety mode activation device **140** may be incorporated into the controller **202**, such as representing at least one processor of the processors **204**.

(23) The vehicle control system **114** further includes a communication device **208** operatively connected to the controller **202** and the safety mode activation device **140** via wired or wireless connections. The communication device **208** can communicate with an off-board location, such as the remote control system **112**, the mobile device **144** carried by an operator, another vehicle system, a dispatch facility, another vehicle in the same vehicle system **102**, a wayside device (e.g.,

transponder), or the like. The communication device **208** communicates with the off-board locations via wireless connections (e.g., via radio frequency). For example, the communication device **208** may include a wireless antenna **211** and associated circuitry and software to communicate wirelessly, such as a transceiver, a separate receiver and transmitter, or the like. Optionally, the communication device **208** may be connected with a wired connection via a cable to another vehicle in the vehicle system **102**. For example, the cable may be a trainline, a multiple unit cable, an electronically-controlled pneumatic brake line, or the like. The communication device **208** can be used to receive a variety of information described herein, such as control signals received from the remote control system **112**, status signals received from the mobile device **144**, the remote control system **112**, an onboard input device **212**, and sensors **116**. The communication device **208** may also transmit information remotely, such as location data obtained by a location determining device **210** onboard the vehicle system **102**, mode status information indicating whether or not the vehicle system **102** is in the safety mode, movement information (e.g., speed, power output, fuel efficiency, fuel remaining, etc.) and the like to the remote control system **112** and/or the mobile device **144**.

(24) The location determining device **210** determines a location of the vehicle system **102** along the route **108**. The location determining device **210** may determine the location of the vehicle system **102** as a geographic location, an absolute location (e.g., using geographic coordinates), or a relative location (e.g., relative to a reference location or object). The location determining device **210** may be a Global Positioning System receiver that obtains location data representative of the location of the vehicle system **102**. The controller **202** and the safety mode activation device **140** are configured to analyze the location data to determine the location of the vehicle system **102**.

(25) The controller **202** is operatively connected with an input device **212** and an output device **214**. The input and output devices **212**, **214** may be disposed within a cab of one of the vehicles **104**, **106** of the vehicle system **102**. The input device **212** receives manual inputs from an operator, and may include one or more keyboards, throttles, switches, buttons, pedals, microphones, touchscreens, and/or the like. The output device **214** provides information to the operator onboard the vehicle system **102**, and may include one or more audio emitters (e.g., speakers), displays, lights, and/or the like. Although shown as two separate devices, at least some components of the input device **212** may be integrated with at least some components of the output device **212**, **214**, such as a display with an integrated touchscreen for receiving user touch inputs. As described above, the input device **212** may be used by an operator onboard the vehicle system **102** to command the safety mode activation device **140** to initiate the safety mode. The input device **212** may be used in a similar way as the mobile device **144** and the remote control system **112** to selectively transmit a status signal commanding implantation of the safety mode via an operator input on a user interface of the input device **212**. The input device **212** is integrally connected to the vehicle system **102** and may be located within the cab of the propulsion-generating vehicle **104**. When the vehicle system **102** is in the safety mode, the safety mode activation device **140** (and/or the controller **202**) may control the output device **214** to display and/or generate a safety mode notification representing that the vehicle system **102** is in the safety mode. The safety mode notification may be a lighting effect using one or more lights, a sound effect using one or more audio emitters, a graphical display effect using one or more displays of the output device **214**, and/or the like. For example, the activation device **140** may control various lights of the vehicle system **102** may emit a designated lighting effect, such as a blue light, when the vehicle system is in the safety mode. The designated lighting effect is understood by personnel to represent that the vehicle system **102** is in the safety mode.

(26) The controller **202** is operatively connected with the propulsion subsystem **216** of the propulsion-generating vehicle **104** of the vehicle system **102**. The propulsion subsystem **216** provides tractive efforts and/or braking efforts for the propulsion-generating vehicle **104**. The propulsion subsystem **216** may include or represent one or more engines, motors, alternators,

generators, brakes, batteries, and associated components, that operate to both propel and slow the vehicle system **102** along the route **108**. The propulsion subsystem **216** is controlled by the controller **202**. The controller **202** transmits control signals to the propulsion subsystem **216** along an electrically conductive circuit **218**, which may include one or more wires, cables, or the like. The electrically conductive circuit **218** allows the controller **202** to control the components of the propulsion subsystem **216** individually, such as by transmitting a first signal to an engine and a second signal to a brake. The control signals transmitted to the propulsion subsystem **216** may be prompted by an operator utilizing the input device **212** or the remote control system **112** to control the movement of the vehicle system **102**. For example, when the vehicle system **102** is controlled locally by an operator onboard the vehicle system **102**, the controller **202** may receive onboard control signals from the operator input device **212**. The controller **202** then conveys the onboard control signals (or other signals based on the received onboard control signals) to the propulsion subsystem **216**. When the vehicle system **102** is controlled remotely by an operator at the remote control system **112**, the controller **202** receives the remote control signals via the communication device **208** and conveys the remote control signals (or other signals based on the received remote control signals) to the propulsion subsystem **216**. The controller **202** may also be configured to transmit some control signals to the propulsion subsystem **216** autonomously (e.g., without operator consent) based on operational settings of a designated trip plan and/or settings of the safety mode. For example, in response to receiving the lockout signal from the safety mode activation device **140**, the controller **202** may automatically transmit control signals to the propulsion subsystem **216** activating or instructing engagement of the brakes of the vehicle system **102** to prevent movement of the vehicle system **102**.

(27) In one embodiment, the vehicle control system **114** includes an electrical switch **222** disposed along the electrically conductive circuit **218** between the controller **202** and the propulsion subsystem **216**. The safety mode activation device **140** is configured to control the switch **222** to electrically connect and disconnect the controller **202** from the propulsion subsystem **216**.

Although the switch **222** is broadly shown as located between the controller **202** and the propulsion subsystem **216**, in one or more embodiments, the switch **222** may be disposed between the controller **202** and a specific subset of one or more components of the propulsion subsystem **216**, such as traction motors. The switch **222** is controllable between a closed state and an open state. In the closed state, the electrically conductive circuit **218** between the controller **202** and the propulsion subsystem **216** is closed, such that electrical current representing the control signals transmitted from the controller **202** is allowed to flow along the circuit **218** to the propulsion subsystem **216**. Conversely, when the switch **222** is in the open state, the electrically conductive circuit **218** is open or disconnected such that the current representing the control signals transmitted from the controller **202** does not flow along the circuit **218** to the propulsion subsystem **216**.

Therefore, when the switch **222** is activated in the open state, control signals received at the controller **202** from the remote control system **112**, the onboard operator input device **212**, and/or a trip plan from an energy management system **220** are not implemented because the control signals are not received by the propulsion subsystem **216**. The safety mode activation device **140** controls the state of the switch **222** by transmitting a switch signal, such as a designated current, voltage, or the like, which activates the switch **222** to close or open depending on the characteristics of the switch signal. The switch **222** may be any electrical switch, such as a contactor, a transistor, a MOSFET, a relay, or the like.

(28) In an embodiment, in response to receiving a status signal that indicates the presence of an operator and/or an active work marker within a proximity distance of the vehicle system **102**, the safety mode activation device **140** is configured to automatically activate the switch **222** to cause the switch **222** to transition from the closed state to the open state to prevent the propulsion subsystem **216** from receiving any control signals from the controller **202** while the vehicle system **102** is in the safety mode. The safety mode activation device **140** may activate the switch **222**

concurrently with transmitting the lockout signal to the controller **202** or after transmitting the lockout signal to the controller **202**. For example, in one embodiment, the activation device **140** transmits the lockout signal to the controller **202**, which causes the controller **202** to automatically engage the brake of the vehicle system **102**. The activation device **140** activates the switch **222** after the brake is engaged to thereafter prevent the controller **202** from causing disengagement of the brake while in the safety mode. In another embodiment, the activation of the switch **222** does not prohibit the controller **202** from causing the brake to engage, so the activation device **140** may transmit the lockout signal to the controller **202** concurrently with activating the switch **222**. In an embodiment, when the safety mode activation device **140** receives a status signal indicating an absence of an operator and an active work marker proximate to the vehicle system **102**, the safety mode activation device **140** is configured to transmit a release signal to the controller **202** and also deactivate the switch **222**, closing the switch **222** to reestablish the closed circuit path between the controller **202** and the propulsion subsystem **216**. The activation device **140** may deactivate the switch **222** by sending a deactivation signal to the switch **222** or ceasing transmission of an activation signal to the switch **222**.

(29) The vehicle control system **114** optionally includes an energy management system **220** communicatively coupled with the controller **202**. The energy management system **220** can create and/or obtain a trip plan, which designates operational settings of the vehicle system **102** (e.g., throttle settings, power outputs, speed, braking efforts, and the like) as a function of at least one of location, time elapsed, or distance traveled during a trip along the route **108**. A trip plan can differ from a schedule in that the schedule may direct the vehicle system **102** where to be located and at what times the vehicle system **102** is to be at the locations of the schedule. The trip plan, however, may designate the operational settings in order to control the vehicle system **102** within external constraints while achieving one or more goals, such as traveling according to a schedule, reducing fuel consumption, and/or reducing total travel time to complete a trip. The external constraints may be limits on the amount of fuel consumed, the amount of emissions generated, speed limits, noise limits, and the like. For example, the vehicle system **102** traveling along the route **108** from a starting location to a finishing location within a designated time according to a trip plan may consume less fuel or produce fewer emissions than the same vehicle system **102** traveling along the same route **108** from the same starting location to the same finishing location within the same designated time, but according to another trip plan or according to manual control of the vehicle system **102**. Various examples of trip plans (also referred to as mission plans or trip profiles) and how the trip plans are determined are provided in U.S. patent application Ser. No. 11/385,354, the entire disclosure of which is incorporated herein by reference.

(30) The energy management system **220** can include hardware circuits or circuitry that include and/or are connected with one or more processors. The energy management system **220** may create a trip plan, retrieve a trip plan from a memory of the energy management system **220** or the memory **206** of the controller **202**, and/or receive the trip plan from an off-board location via the communication device **208**. The controller **202** (e.g., the one or more processors **204** thereof) can refer to the trip plan in order to determine the designated operational settings to be implemented by the propulsion-generating vehicle **104** of the vehicle system **102** at specific locations along the route **108**.

(31) The vehicle control system **114** further includes one or more detection sensors **116** mounted along an exterior and/or an interior of the vehicle system **102** and operatively connected to the safety mode activation device **140** via wired or wireless connections. The detection sensors **116** can obtain sensor data that is indicative of an area proximate to the vehicle system **102**, such as the area in the vicinity of the vehicle system **102**. For example, the detection sensor **116** may obtain sensor data in an area in front of the vehicle system **102** in a direction of travel of the vehicle system **102**, in an area behind the vehicle system **102** in the direction of travel, in an area along the sides of the vehicle system **102**, in an area underneath the vehicle system **102**, and/or the like. The detection

sensors **116** may include a camera that obtains still and/or motion image data of the area proximate to vehicle system **102**. For example, the detection sensor **116** may be one or more cameras that capture still images or video in the front and the rear of the vehicle system **102**. Optionally, the detection sensors **116** may include a radar system that sends and receives pulses reflected off of an object in order to detect a presence of an object in an area proximate to the vehicle system **102**. Optionally, the detection sensors **116** may include a radio frequency identification (RFID) reader that uses electromagnetic fields to automatically identify RFID tags located within a designated proximity distance of the RFID reader. Optionally, the detection sensors **116** may include a different proximity sensor that uses electromagnetic fields and/or radiation (e.g., infrared radiation) to detect the presence of an object in the area proximate to the vehicle system **102**. The detection sensors **116** alternatively or additionally may include motion sensors, audio sensors, or the like. The detection sensors **116** may obtain sensor data (e.g., image, statistical, radar, RFID, or the like) within a distance of 2 meters, 3 meters, 5 meters, 10 meters, or the like from the vehicle system **102**. The number, types, and placement of the detection sensors **116** on the vehicle system **102** may vary.

(32) The detection sensors **116** may transmit the sensor data as status signals to the safety mode activation device **140**. The activation device **140** is configured to analyze the sensor data in the status signals to determine whether the sensor data indicates the presence of any persons or active work markers within the designated vicinity of the vehicle system **102**. The activation device **140** transmits the lockout signal to the controller **202** to initiate the safety mode in response to confirming the presence of a person or an active work marker within the designated vicinity of the vehicle system **102** based on the status signals received from one or more of the detection sensors **116**.

(33) FIG. 3 illustrates a top-down view of the vehicle system **102** on the route **108** according to an embodiment. The vehicle system **102** includes multiple detection sensors **116** mounted to the vehicle system **102** for detecting (e.g., optically, electromagnetically, and/or acoustically) the presence of operators and/or active work markers **142** in a location proximate to the vehicle system **102**. In the illustrated embodiment, the vehicle system **102** includes a first camera **302** mounted to the propulsion-generating vehicle **104** and facing frontward along a direction of travel **304** of the vehicle system **102**. The first camera **302** may be mounted on a cab **306** of the vehicle **104** and oriented to have a field of view **308** that includes a front end **310** of the vehicle **104** and an area of the route **108** in front of the vehicle system **102**. The camera **302** obtains still and/or video image data representing the front end **310** of the vehicle **104** and the area of the route **108** in front of the vehicle system **102**. The vehicle system **102** also includes a second, rear-facing camera **312** mounted to the rear-most non-propulsion-generating vehicle **106**, and configured to obtain still and/or video image data representing the area of the route **108** behind the vehicle system **102** along the direction of travel **304**. The cameras **302**, **312** transmit the image data as status signals to the safety mode activation device **140**. The safety mode activation device **140** may perform image analysis on the image data to determine the presence or absence of an operator and/or an active work marker **142** within the respective fields of view **308** of the cameras **302**, **312**. Upon detection of an operator or active work marker **142** within a certain designated proximity of the vehicle system **102**, such as 5 m, 10 m, 30 m, 50 m, or the like, the activation device **140** may transmit the lockout signal to the controller **202**, activating the safety mode. In an alternative embodiment, the cameras **302**, **312** or a processing device associated with the cameras **302**, **312** analyze the image data to determine the presence or absence of an operator or an active work marker **142**, and send the status signal to the activation device **140** in response to confirming such a presence of an operator or an active work marker.

(34) In the illustrated embodiment, the front-facing camera **302** obtains image data that includes two different active work markers **142**, with one active work marker **142A** on the front of the propulsion-generating vehicle **104** and the other marker **142B** along the route **142**. Upon detection

of the markers **142A**, **142B** using the image data transmitted as a status signal, the activation device **140** transmits the lockout signal to the controller **202** to automatically initiate the safety mode of the vehicle system **102**. In addition, the activation device **140** and/or the controller **202** may communicate the safety mode status of the vehicle system **102** remotely to the remote control system **112** (shown in FIG. 2) using the communication device **208** to notify the operator at the remote control system **112** that the vehicle system **102** is in the safety mode and currently prevented from moving. The markers **142A**, **142B** may be blue flags, ID cards, signs, or other objects. For example, the marker **142A** on the vehicle **104** may be a flag placed on the vehicle **104** by an operator that is going to perform some work on the vehicle system **102**. The marker **142B** along the route **108** may indicate that a segment of the route **108** ahead of the vehicle system **102** is being worked on, such as inspected or repaired. Therefore, the vehicle system **102** should be placed in the safety mode to avoid entering the flagged segment of the route **108**. Although the markers **142A**, **142B** may be visible to other operators proximate to the vehicle system **102**, the activation device **140** and/or the controller **202** uses the communication device **208** to notify the remote operator located beyond the line of sight of the markers **142A**, **142B**.

(35) In the illustrated embodiment, the vehicle system **102** also includes RFID readers **314** mounted to the vehicles **104**, **106**. The RFID readers **314** are configured to automatically detect the presence of any RFID antennas **318** within a designated proximity distance (also referred to as designated proximity threshold) **316** of the readers **314**. The multiple RFID readers **314** are set up to define a controlled detection zone **320** around the vehicle system **102**. The RFID readers **314** may be active readers designed to transmit interrogation signals that receive response signals from active or passive RFID antennas **308**. Alternatively, the RFID readers **314** may be passive readers designed to receive radio signals from active RFID antennas **318** within the detection zone **320**. In the illustrated embodiment, the RFID readers **314** detect the presence of a first RFID antenna **318A** within the detection zone **320**. In response, the RFID reader(s) **314** that detect the presence of the first antenna **318A** transmit a status signal to the safety mode activation device **140** indicating the presence of the RFID antenna **318A** within the detection zone **320**. The first RFID antenna **318A** may be carried by a first operator, such as embedded within an ID card, a mobile device, or the like. The operator may be approaching the vehicle system **102** to perform maintenance on the vehicle system **102**. The RFID reader **314** may obtain various information from the first RFID antenna **318A**, such as an identification of the operator by name, employee ID number, assigned task to perform on the vehicle system **102**, or the like. Some or all of this information obtained from the RFID antenna **318A** may be transmitted to the safety mode activation device **140** as a status signal. Upon receiving the status signals from the RFID reader **314** that indicate the presence of the specific operator, the activation device **140** may automatically transmit the lockout signal to the controller **202** to initiate the safety mode. The status signals sent to the activation device **140** may include additional information, such as information identifying the specific RFID reader or readers **314** that detected the antenna **318A**, the location that the antenna **318A** was detected relative to the vehicle system **102**, or the like. Optionally, the active work markers **142** may also include RFID antennas that can be detected by the RFID readers **314** of the vehicle system **102** when the markers **142** are within the designated detection zone **320**.

(36) The RFID readers **314** are also able to detect the absence of the RFID antenna within the detection zone **308**. For example, the RFID readers **314** can detect when the operator carrying the first RFID antenna **318A** exits the detection zone **308** such that the operator is located beyond the designated proximity distance **316** from the vehicle system **102**. The RFID readers **314** may transmit a status signal to the safety mode activation device **140** that indicates that the operator carrying the antenna **318A** has moved beyond the proximity distance **316**. In response to receiving such a status signal, the activation device **140** may transmit a release signal to the controller **202** which deactivates the safety mode, permitting controlled movement of the vehicle system **102** along the route **108**. As shown in FIG. 3, a second RFID antenna **318B** on another operator is

outside of the detection zone **320** and is not detected by the RFID readers **314**. The operator carrying the second RFID antenna **318B** is far enough away from the vehicle system **102** that the operator is not at risk of harm from the vehicle system **102**. Therefore, when the activation device **140** determines, based on the status signals received from the RFID readers **314**, that both antennas **318A**, **318B** are outside of the detection zone **308**, the vehicle system **102** can be permitted to move along the route **108** without risk of harm to the operators (assuming that any other persons or active work markers **142** are also absent from the area proximate to the vehicle system **102**).

(37) The detection sensors **116** are also configured to detect the presence of operators and/or markers **142** on and underneath the vehicle system **102**. For example, the RFID readers **314** shown in FIG. **3** and/or motion sensors, cameras, audio sensors (e.g., microphones), radar sensors, ultrasonic sensors, infrared sensors, heat sensors, or the like may be mounted on the vehicles **104**, **106** to detect operators moving underneath the vehicle system **102**.

(38) Although not shown in FIG. **3**, the operators may carry mobile devices (e.g., smartphones, tablet computers, handheld personal computers, wearable computers, personal digital assistants (PDAs), and the like), that are used to determine the relative locations of the operators to the vehicle system **102**. For example, the mobile devices may transmit status signals to the safety mode activation device **140** that allow the activation device **140** to determine the location of the operators carrying each mobile device. The mobile devices may communicate with the safety mode activation device **140** onboard the vehicle system **102** via establishing a communication link, such as a Bluetooth or other wireless connection, with the communication device **208**. The status signals transmitted from the mobile devices may include location data, such as GPS coordinates or relative location data between the mobile device and the vehicle system **102**. The location data may indicate absolute locations (e.g., in geographical coordinates) or relative locations (e.g., location of the mobile devices relative to the vehicle system **102** or vice-versa). In an embodiment, the activation device **140** is configured to analyze the location of each mobile device relative to the vehicle system **102** based on the location data received from the mobile devices. The activation device **140** transmits the lockout signal to the controller **202** responsive to determining that at least one of the mobile devices is within the designated proximity distance **316** of the vehicle system **102**. In an alternative embodiment, the activation device **140** may control the transmission of location data of the vehicle system **102** to the mobile devices, and the mobile devices may determine the proximity of the respective mobile device to the vehicle system **102** based on the location data received from the activation device **140**. In such embodiment, upon a mobile device carried by an operator determining that the mobile device is located within the proximity distance **316** of the vehicle system **102**, the mobile device transmits a status signal to the activation device **140** indicating the presence of the operator within the proximity distance **316**. The activation device **140** transmits the lockout signal upon receipt of such status signal.

(39) FIG. **4** illustrates a flowchart of a method **400** for controlling a vehicle system to prevent movement of the vehicle system **102** in a safety mode along a route. The method **400** may be performed using the communication system **100** shown in FIG. **1**, such as using the safety mode activation device **140** and/or the controller **202** onboard the vehicle system **102**. At **402**, a control signal is received at the onboard vehicle control system **114** of the vehicle system **102**. The control signal may be a control signal received from an operator using the remote control system **112**. The control signal is received by the communication device **208** and relayed to the controller **202**. Alternatively, the control signal may be received from an operator onboard the vehicle system **102** using the operator input device **212** or from the energy management system **220**. At **404**, the movement of the vehicle system **102** is controlled according to the control signal. For example, the controller **202** conveys the control signal, or another electrical signal based on the received control signal, to the propulsion subsystem **216**. The control signal includes operational settings, such as throttle settings, brake settings, speed settings, or the like. The propulsion subsystem **216** implements the operational settings of the control signal to provide thrust and/or braking for

controlling the movement of the vehicle system **102** according to the control signal.

(40) At **406** and **408**, it is determined whether or not a status signal is received that indicates the current or anticipated presence of an operator and/or an active work marker in a location within a designated proximity distance of the vehicle system **102**. For example, at **406**, a determination is made whether a status signal has been received from any operator input device, such as the onboard input device **212**, the remote control system **112**, and/or the mobile devices **144** carried by operators. An operator may use the operator input device to selectively initiate transmission of a status signal that includes a lockout command from the input device to the safety mode activation device **140**. Upon receipt of the lockout command signal, the activation device **140** is configured to transmit the lockout signal to the controller **202** to initiate the safety mode.

(41) For example, an operator that is assigned the task of performing a repair on the vehicle system **112** may use that operator's mobile device to selectively transmit the status signal. In an embodiment, the operator may use a user interface of the mobile device (or the other operator input devices **112**, **212**) to transmit the lockout command by providing a personal identifier that identifies the operator and also proves the operator's authorization to place the vehicle system **102** in the safety mode. The personal identifier may include a password, a name of the operator, a serial number (e.g., an employee number or social security number) of the operator, or the like that is entered using the user interface. Optionally, the personal identifier may be a biometric signal, such as a fingerprint or a retina scan. The operator input device may transmit the status signal including the lockout command to the safe mode activation device **140** at a time that the operator is prepared to perform the scheduled repair work on the vehicle system **102** or in advance of the time that the operator is going to perform the work. For example, the status signal may also include additional information such as a designated start time for the repair work, an estimated duration of the repair work, identification of the vehicle system **102**, and the like. The operators may use the mobile devices and other operator input devices to transmit the status signals to the activation device **140** using network connections between the input devices and the communication device **208** of the vehicle system **102**. For example, in order to transmit a signal including a lockout command, the operator may be required to log-in to a secure network or website using a password.

(42) As described above with reference to FIG. **3**, the mobile device of an operator may transmit a status signal automatically to the safety mode activation device **140** upon detecting that the operator carrying the mobile device is within a designated proximity distance of the vehicle system **102**. Furthermore, the mobile devices of the operators may also periodically, or upon request, transmit status signals to the activation device **140** that include location data of the mobile devices. The activation device **140** may determine whether or not any operators carrying the mobile devices are within the designated proximity distance of the vehicle system **102** based on the location data received from the mobile devices.

(43) If one or more of the status signals received from the operator input devices, such as the mobile devices **144**, the remote control system **112**, or the onboard input device **212**, indicate the presence of an operator (including trespassers and other non-employee persons) in a location proximate to the vehicle system **102**, the flow of the method **400** continues to **410** and a lockout signal is transmitted from the safety mode activation device **140** to the controller **202** to initiate a safe mode of the vehicle system **102** that prevents movement of the vehicle system **102**. If, on the other hand, the status signals received (or the lack thereof) indicate no operators within a designated proximity threshold of the vehicle system **102**, then flow of the method **400** returns to **402** to wait for the receipt of additional control signals.

(44) Regardless of whether or not a status signal indicating the presence of an operator proximate to the vehicle system **102** is received from any operator input device, at **408** a determination is made whether or not a status signal indicating the presence of an operator or an active work marker proximate to the vehicle system **102** is received from any detection sensors **116** mounted on the vehicle system **102**. For example, the detection sensors **116** may include one or more of a camera,

an RFID reader, a motion-activated proximity sensor, an audio sensor (e.g., microphone), a radar sensor, an ultrasonic sensor, a thermal imaging camera, or the like. The detection sensors **116** transmit status signals that include sensor data (e.g., image data, RFID data, audio data, etc.) to the safety mode activation device **140**. The safety mode activation device **140** analyzes the sensor data to determine whether or not the sensor data received indicates the presence of any operators, other people, or active work markers within a certain area surrounding the vehicle system **102**, including underneath and on the vehicle system **102**. As with step **406** above, if any of the status signals received from the sensors indicate the presence of an operator or an active work marker in a location proximate to the vehicle system **102**, the flow of the method **400** continues to **410** and a lockout signal is transmitted from the safety mode activation device **140** to the controller **202** to initiate a safe mode of the vehicle system **102** that prevents movement of the vehicle system **102**. If, on the other hand, the status signals received indicate no operators or active work markers within a designated proximity threshold of the vehicle system **102**, then flow of the method **400** returns to **402** to wait for the receipt of additional control signals.

(45) At **410**, the activation device **140** transmits a lockout signal to the controller **202** to initiate the safe mode. In response to receiving the lockout signal, the controller **202** may prevent movement of the vehicle system **102** by automatically engaging a brake of the vehicle system **102** and preventing the brake from disengaging while the vehicle system **102** is in the safe mode. The controller **202** also may prevent movement of the vehicle system **102** by disregarding (e.g., delaying implementation of) any control signals received while the vehicle system **102** is in the safety mode. The controller **202** may disregard remote control signals received from the remote control system **112** and onboard control signals received from the onboard operator input device **212** or the energy management system **220**. For example, if a received control signal dictates controlling the propulsion subsystem **216** at a throttle setting of 4 and release of the brakes to propel the vehicle system **102** along the route **108**, the controller **202** does not convey that control signal to the propulsion subsystem **216**. As a result, the propulsion subsystem **216** does not release the brakes and does not implement the dictated throttle setting. Optionally, the activation device **140** and/or the controller **202** may take additional actions including preventing an engine of the vehicle system **102** from starting, causing the engine to slow down or shut off, or preventing the engine from increasing the operating speed while in the safe mode. In one embodiment, after transmitting the lockout signal to the controller **202** such that the controller **202** controls the propulsion subsystem **216** to engage the brake, the activation device **140** may be configured to activate the electrical switch **222** along the electrically conductive circuit **218** between the controller **202** and the propulsion subsystem **216** to electrically disconnect the propulsion subsystem **216** from the controller **202**. Therefore, the controller **202** is not able to convey any control signals to the propulsion subsystem **216** while the switch **222** is activated in the open state.

(46) At **412**, a safety mode notification is provided to communicate to operators, remote and/or local, that the vehicle system **102** is in the safety mode. For example, the activation device **140** and/or the controller **202** may communicate a status signal to the remote control system **112** using the communication device **208**, and the remote control system **112** may generate a safety mode notification on a display screen to notify the remote operator that the vehicle system **102** is in the safety mode. The safety mode notification may be a blue screen, a text-based message on the display, or the like. The activation device **140** and/or the controller **202** may also provide a safety mode notification for operators proximate to the vehicle system **102** by communicating a notification message to the mobile devices carried by the operators. The notification message may cause a blue-colored graphic or text-based message indicating the safety mode to be displayed on the screens of the mobile devices. The activation device **140** and/or the controller **202** may also use the vehicle system **102** to provide the safety mode notification. For example, the activation device **140** and/or the controller **202** may generate a designated lighting effect using one or more lights of the vehicle system **102** and/or a designated sound effect using one or more audio emitters (e.g.,

speakers) of the vehicle system **102**. The designated lighting effect may include generating a blue-colored light in the cab and/or around the outside of the vehicle system **102**. The designated sound effect may be a designated beeping sound, a designated voice recording, or the like. The presence of the safety mode notification alerts operators that the vehicle system **102** is in the safety mode, and the absence of the safety mode notification may alert operators that the vehicle system **102** is not in the safety mode. Therefore, if any operator in a vulnerable position relative to the vehicle system **102** notices that the safety mode notification has ceased or not yet started, that operator should exercise caution and move immediately to a safe position.

(47) At **414**, it is determined whether a status signal indicating an absence of all operators and/or active work markers from the area proximate to the vehicle system **102** is received at the safety mode activation device **140**. The status signal indicating such absence may be received from a sensor, such as a sensor that previously detected the presence of an operator proximate to the vehicle system. The status signal indicating such absence may also be received from an operator input device, such that an operator may use a personal mobile device to transmit a status signal to the activation device **140** indicating that the operator is no longer proximate to the vehicle system **102**. In an embodiment, the activation device **140** does not transmit a release signal to the controller **202** to deactivate the safety mode until the activation device **140** confirms that no operators or active work markers are proximate to the vehicle system **102**. Thus, if four operators were working on the vehicle system **102**, the activation device **140** does not transmit the release signal until all four operators have been confirmed to be outside of the designated proximity threshold of the vehicle system **102**.

(48) If it is determined that status signals indicating an absence of all operators and/or active work markers from the area proximate to the vehicle system **102** have not been received, then the method **400** returns to **410** and the vehicle system **102** is still maintained in the safety mode and prevented from moving. If, on the other hand, the activation device **140** determines that no operators or active work markers are proximate to the vehicle system **102**, then flow of the method **400** continues to **416**.

(49) At **416**, the safety mode activation device **140** transmits a release signal to the controller **202** to deactivate the safety mode and permit controlled movement of the vehicle system **102** along the route **108**. The sending of the release signal does not automatically disengage the brakes, which could result in a runaway vehicle system **102**, but instead permits the vehicle system **102** to be controlled by control signals. For example, the activation device **140** may deactivate the electrical switch **222** to close the conductive path between the controller **202** and the propulsion subsystem **216** along the electrically conductive circuit **218**. In addition, the controller **202** may convey the control signals received during and after the time period that the vehicle system **102** is in the safety mode to the propulsion subsystem **216**. The controller **202** permits controlled movement dictated by control signals received from the remote control system **112**, the onboard input device **212**, and/or the energy management system **220**, but does not permit uncontrolled movement of the vehicle system **102**. After **416**, the method **400** may return to **402** for receiving additional control signals to control movement of the vehicle system **102** along the route **108**.

(50) In an embodiment, a system (e.g., for implementing a safety procedure) is provided that includes a safety mode activation device disposed onboard a vehicle system and operatively connected to a controller of the vehicle system. The safety mode activation device is configured to receive a status signal indicating a presence of one or more of an operator or an active work marker in a location proximate to the vehicle system. The safety mode activation device is further configured to transmit a lockout signal to the controller to prevent movement of the vehicle system along a route responsive to receiving the status signal.

(51) Optionally, the transmission of the lockout signal prevents the movement of the vehicle system by automatically engaging a brake of the vehicle system and preventing the brake from disengaging.

(52) Optionally, the transmission of the lockout signal is further configured to prevent one or more of energizing a power bus in the vehicle system, starting an engine of the vehicle system, or increasing a speed of the engine of the vehicle system.

(53) Optionally, the transmission of the lockout signal prevents the movement of the vehicle system by not implementing control signals that include operational settings for controlling one or more of tractive efforts and braking efforts of the vehicle system. The control signals may be received from one or more of an operator input device onboard the vehicle system or a remote control system disposed off-board the vehicle system.

(54) Optionally, the safety mode activation device receives the status signal from a mobile device carried by the operator. Optionally, the safety mode activation device may receive the status signal from the mobile device responsive to the mobile device determining that the mobile device is located within a designated proximity distance of the vehicle system. Optionally, the safety mode activation device may be configured to determine a location of the operator based on the status signal received from the mobile device carried by the operator, and the safety mode activation device may transmit the lockout signal to the controller responsive to determining that the location of the operator is within a designated proximity distance of the vehicle system.

(55) Optionally, the safety mode activation device receives the status signal from a detection sensor mounted on the vehicle system and transmits the lockout signal to the controller responsive to determining that the one or more of the operator or the active work marker is located within a detection proximity threshold of the detection sensor. Optionally, the detection sensor is an RFID reader that detects the presence of an RFID antenna located on the one or more of the operator or the active work marker responsive to the RFID antenna being within the detection proximity threshold of the RFID reader.

(56) Optionally, the status signal received by the safety mode activation device includes image data indicative of an area outside of the vehicle system captured by a camera disposed on the vehicle system. The safety mode activation device is configured to transmit the lockout signal to the controller responsive to determining the presence of the one or more of the operator or the active work marker in the area outside of the vehicle system based on the image data.

(57) Optionally, the status signal received by the safety mode activation device is a long range wireless signal transmitted from a remote control system that is off-board the vehicle system for remotely controlling the movement of the vehicle system.

(58) Optionally, the safety mode activation device is further configured to transmit a release signal subsequent to transmitting the lockout signal. The release signal is transmitted to the controller to allow movement of the vehicle system responsive to receiving the release signal.

(59) Optionally, responsive to receiving the status signal, the safety mode activation device is further configured to one or more of control a light on the vehicle system to generate a designated lighting effect or control an audio emitter on the vehicle system to generate a designated sound effect.

(60) Optionally, an electrical switch is electrically connected between the controller and a propulsion subsystem of the vehicle system along an electrically conductive circuit that is used by the controller to control operation of the propulsion subsystem. The propulsion subsystem provides tractive effort for moving the vehicle system. Responsive to receiving the status signal, the safety mode activation device is further configured to activate the electrical switch to electrically disconnect the propulsion subsystem from the controller to prevent the controller from controlling the operation of the propulsion subsystem.

(61) Optionally, the safety mode activation device receives the status signal from an operator input device in response to an operator using the operator input device to selectively initiate transmission of the status signal by providing a personal identifier to the operator input device.

(62) In another embodiment, a method (e.g., for implementing a safety procedure) is provided that includes receiving, by a safety mode activation device onboard a vehicle system and operatively

connected to a controller of the vehicle system, a status signal that indicates a presence of at least one of an operator or an active work marker in a location proximate to the vehicle system. The method also includes transmitting a lockout signal to the controller to automatically prevent movement of the vehicle system along a route responsive to receiving the status signal.

(63) Optionally, the method further includes receiving control signals that include operational settings for controlling one or more of tractive efforts and braking efforts of the vehicle system. The control signals are received from one or more of an operator input device onboard the vehicle system or a remote control system disposed off-board the vehicle system. Transmitting the lockout signal to the controller prevents movement of the vehicle system by not implementing the control signals that are received after transmitting the lockout signal.

(64) Optionally, the status signal is received from a detection sensor mounted on the vehicle system. The lockout signal is transmitted to the controller responsive to determining that the one or more of the operator or the active work marker is located within a detection proximity threshold of the detection sensor.

(65) Optionally, the method further includes transmitting a release signal to the controller subsequent to transmitting the lockout signal. The release signal is transmitted to permit controlled movement of the vehicle system along the route responsive to the safety mode activation device receiving an updated status signal indicating an absence of the at least one of the operator or the active work marker in the location proximate to the vehicle system.

(66) Optionally, the vehicle system includes a light and an audio emitter. The method further includes one or more of automatically controlling the light to generate a designated lighting effect or automatically controlling the audio emitter to generate a designated sound effect responsive to receiving the status signal.

(67) Optionally, transmitting the lockout signal to the controller further prevents one or more of energizing a power bus in the vehicle system, starting an engine of the vehicle system, or increasing a speed of the engine of the vehicle system.

(68) Optionally, the status signal is received from a mobile device carried by the operator. The method further includes determining a location of the operator based on the status signal received from the mobile device. The lockout signal is transmitted to the controller responsive to determining that the location of the operator is within a designated proximity distance of the vehicle system.

(69) As used herein, an element or step recited in the singular and proceeded with the word “a” or “an” should be understood as not excluding plural of said elements or steps, unless such exclusion is explicitly stated. Furthermore, references to “one embodiment” of the presently described subject matter are not intended to be interpreted as excluding the existence of additional embodiments that also incorporate the recited features. Moreover, unless explicitly stated to the contrary, embodiments “comprising” or “having” an element or a plurality of elements having a particular property may include additional such elements not having that property.

(70) It is to be understood that the above description is intended to be illustrative, and not restrictive. For example, the above-described embodiments (and/or aspects thereof) may be used in combination with each other. In addition, many modifications may be made to adapt a particular situation or material to the teachings of the subject matter set forth herein without departing from its scope. While the dimensions and types of materials described herein are intended to define the parameters of the disclosed subject matter, they are by no means limiting and are exemplary embodiments. Many other embodiments will be apparent to those of skill in the art upon reviewing the above description. The scope of the subject matter described herein should, therefore, be determined with reference to the appended claims, along with the full scope of equivalents to which such claims are entitled. In the appended claims, the terms “including” and “in which” are used as the plain-English equivalents of the respective terms “comprising” and “wherein.” Moreover, in the following claims, the terms “first,” “second,” and “third,” etc. are used merely as labels, and are not

intended to impose numerical requirements on their objects. Further, the limitations of the following claims are not written in means-plus-function format and are not intended to be interpreted based on 35 U.S.C. § 112(f), unless and until such claim limitations expressly use the phrase “means for” followed by a statement of function void of further structure.

(71) This written description uses examples to disclose several embodiments of the subject matter set forth herein, including the best mode, and also to enable a person of ordinary skill in the art to practice the embodiments of disclosed subject matter, including making and using the devices or systems and performing the methods. The patentable scope of the subject matter described herein is defined by the claims, and may include other examples that occur to those of ordinary skill in the art. Such other examples are intended to be within the scope of the claims if they have structural elements that do not differ from the literal language of the claims, or if they include equivalent structural elements with insubstantial differences from the literal languages of the claims.

(72) The foregoing description of certain embodiments of the present inventive subject matter will be better understood when read in conjunction with the appended drawings. To the extent that the figures illustrate diagrams of the functional blocks of various embodiments, the functional blocks are not necessarily indicative of the division between hardware circuitry. Thus, for example, one or more of the functional blocks (for example, communication device, control system, etc.) may be implemented in a single piece of hardware (for example, a general purpose signal processor, microcontroller, random access memory, hard disk, and the like). Similarly, the programs may be stand-alone programs, may be incorporated as subroutines in an operating system, may be functions in an installed software package, and the like. The various embodiments are not limited to the arrangements and instrumentality shown in the drawings.

(73) Since certain changes may be made in the above-described systems and methods, without departing from the spirit and scope of the inventive subject matter herein involved, it is intended that all of the subject matter of the above description or shown in the accompanying drawings shall be interpreted merely as examples illustrating the inventive concept herein and shall not be construed as limiting the inventive subject matter.

Claims

1. A system comprising: a controller configured to control movement of a first vehicle system absent an operator input onboard the first vehicle system, the controller configured to control the movement of the first vehicle system by controlling a propulsion system of the first vehicle system and a braking system of the first vehicle system, the controller configured to be positioned off-board the first vehicle system; an activation device configured to receive a status signal indicating a presence of a work marker proximate to the first vehicle system; and a communication device configured to be operatively coupled with the controller and the activation device, the communication device configured to communicate a lockout signal from the activation device to the controller, the lockout signal directing the controller to prevent activation of the propulsion system and engage the braking system to prevent movement of the first vehicle system.
2. The system of claim 1, wherein the communication device is configured to communicate the lockout signal to a second vehicle system.
3. The system of claim 1, wherein the communication device is configured to communicate the lockout signal to the controller to direct the first vehicle system to automatically engage a brake of the first vehicle system.
4. The system of claim 1, wherein the communication device is configured to communicate the lockout signal to direct the first vehicle system to prevent activation of an engine of the first vehicle system.
5. The system of claim 1, wherein the communication device is configured to communicate the lockout signal to direct the first vehicle system to prevent an increase of a speed of an engine of the

first vehicle system.

6. The system of claim 1, wherein the communication device is configured to communicate the lockout signal to the controller to direct the first vehicle system to prevent energizing a bus in the first vehicle system.

7. The system of claim 1, wherein the activation device is configured to receive the status signal from a mobile device.

8. The system of claim 7, wherein the activation device is configured to receive the status signal from the mobile device responsive to the mobile device being located within a designated proximity distance of the first vehicle system.

9. The system of claim 1, further comprising: a radio frequency identification (RFID) reader configured to detect a presence of an RFID antenna within a detection distance of the RFID reader, the RFID reader configured to communicate the status signal to the activation device via the communication device responsive to the presence of the RFID antenna within the detection distance of the RFID reader.

10. The system of claim 1, wherein the activation device is configured to receive image data as the status signal, the image data representing an area outside of the first vehicle system, the communication device configured to communicate the lockout signal to the controller responsive to determining the presence of the work marker in the area outside of the first vehicle system based on the image data.

11. The system of claim 1, wherein the controller is configured to activate lights of the first vehicle system responsive to receiving the lockout signal.

12. The system of claim 1, wherein the communication device is configured to communicate a release signal to the controller subsequent to communicating the lockout signal to direct the first vehicle system to permit movement of the first vehicle system.

13. The system of claim 1, wherein the activation device is configured to disconnect the propulsion system from the controller responsive to receiving the status signal.

14. A method comprising: receiving a status signal at an activation device of a first vehicle system, the status signal indicating a presence of a work marker proximate to the first vehicle system; communicating a lockout signal to a controller positioned off-board the first vehicle system that directs the first vehicle system to prevent movement of the first vehicle system; and communicating the lockout signal to a second vehicle system.

15. The method of claim 14, wherein the lockout signal is communicated to direct the controller to one or more of: automatically engage a brake of the first vehicle system; prevent energizing a bus in the first vehicle system; prevent activation of an engine of the first vehicle system; prevent an increase of a speed of the engine of the first vehicle system; or disregard a control signal received from one or more of an operator input device onboard the first vehicle system or a remote control system disposed off-board the first vehicle system.

16. A device comprising: one or more controllers configured to control a propulsion system of a first vehicle system and a braking system of the first vehicle system, the one or more controllers configured to be positioned off-board the first vehicle system; and one or more processors configured to determine whether a location of a person outside of the first vehicle system is within a threshold distance of the first vehicle system, the one or more processors configured to implement a safety mode of the first vehicle system that prevents movement of the first vehicle system responsive to determining that the location of the person is within the threshold distance of the first vehicle system, wherein movement of the first vehicle system is controlled absent an operator input onboard the first vehicle system, and wherein the safety mode is communicated to a second vehicle system.

17. The device of claim 16, wherein the one or more processors are configured to implement the safety mode of the first vehicle system by directing the one or more controllers to one or more of: automatically engage a brake of the first vehicle system; prevent energizing a bus in the first

vehicle system; prevent activation of an engine of the first vehicle system; prevent an increase of a speed of the engine of the first vehicle system; or direct the one or more controllers to disregard a control signal received from a control system disposed on-board the first vehicle system.

18. The device of claim 16, wherein the one or more processors are configured to determine whether the location is within the threshold distance of the first vehicle system based on output from a radio frequency identification (RFID) reader.

19. The device of claim 16, wherein the one or more processors are configured to examine image data to determine whether the location of within the threshold distance of the first vehicle system.

20. The device of claim 16, wherein the one or more processors are configured to disconnect a vehicle propulsion subsystem from the one or more controllers responsive to determining that the location is within the threshold distance of the first vehicle system.
