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Los Angeles minimizes brush fire threat with fast, effective inspections

Enterprise: Los Angeles City Fire Department

Industry: City Government

Application: Data collection enabling efficient inspection of potential fire hazards

Profile: The Los Angeles City Fire Department Brush Clearance task force inspects properties in areas most at risk for brush fires. The task force's 60 inspectors check for violations of brush fire prevention codes, send out notices of non-compliance and perform follow-up inspections.

Lush vegetation and hot weather make Los Angeles a desirable place to live, but also put the city at high risk for wildfires. A carelessly discarded cigarette or random burst of lightning could start a brush fire on the ridges and grasslands that surround the city's thickly populated neighborhoods. That's why the Los Angeles City Fire Department annually sends up to 60 inspectors out to high-risk properties to ensure they're clear of fire hazards.

In the past, inspectors visited residential properties and vacant lots carrying clipboards and forms, handwriting reports after each inspection. The process was thorough but highly inefficient. The City then had to hire clerks to enter data into the Fire Department's computer systems, causing delays between the time of the property inspection and issuance of non-compliance notice. Also, there was no way to tell how many properties inspectors had visited, since they only generated paperwork for properties with code violations.

Initially, the Fire Department considered automating the process with laptop computers. It found a better solution by combining portable, inexpensive Symbol SPT 1500 bar code scanning devices, based on the Palm Computing® platform, and Satellite Forms software from Puma Technology.

Inspectors now carry the SPT 1500 device in their hand while inspecting a property, recording hazards, such as "grass too high" and "brush too close to road." Pull-down menus let inspectors specify exactly what needs to be done by selecting actions like "cut down" or "remove," objects like "dead tree" or "garbage," and locations like "near fence." Upon returning to one of five fire stations in the high-risk area, inspectors synchronize their SPT 1500 devices with the station's computer, which sends the reports to a central server that automatically generates notices of compliance or non-compliance.

Thanks to the Palm Computing platform, the Brush Inspection Program now has a record of every property inspected and every inspector's activities. Inspectors complete inspections and reports faster and more accurately—and save hours of data entry with the new paper-free process. "This compelling data collection solution enables inspectors to enter violation information with a minimum of keystrokes," says Chief Alfred Hernandez, section commander in the Fire Prevention Bureau.

Using the Palm-driven solution, the Fire Department is taking more decisive action against violators. Compliance and non-compliance letters go out to property owners automatically within 24 hours of inspection. Collection rates for violations are improving, too. Financially, Los Angeles is saving $123,000 in inspections and data entry costs per year. The new system has delivered an 11-month payback and a 109% ROI that will soar to 302% after three years. Most importantly, the city has a stronger record combating fire hazards and reducing property damage. In the eyes of the Fire Department, that makes the SPT 1500 devices life-savers for fire-fighters and citizens alike.

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