



Highway ISAC

FIRST OBSERVER HIGHWAY INFORMATION SHARING AND ANALYSIS CENTER

Transportation Security Operations Center (TSOC)

Department of Homeland Security

Highway ISAC – 703.563.3275

Email: TSOC.HighwayISAC@dhs.gov

Cloned Vehicles: More than Meets the Eye (March 20, 2009)

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SUMMARY:

More and more often cloned vehicles have been appearing in illegal operations. As time passes, the vehicles have become increasingly popular to criminals. The vehicles are copied so well it is often very difficult to tell them apart from the real thing. The smugglers are using school buses, tractor trailers, delivery trucks and vans, even emergency vehicles and federal agency look-a-likes to accomplish their mission. This document will provide you with some specific examples of cloned vehicles used and confiscated in the past, along with tips to utilize in order to spot these forgeries in the future. If these tactics continue to prove successful, terrorist and extremist organizations will no doubt begin employing them during attack scenarios.

Why Should You Care??

As highway professionals or a member of law enforcement, it is up to you to detect things that are out of the ordinary and rouse even the slightest suspicion. Utilizing your experience and trained eyes can help to thwart criminal activity and prevent terrorist attacks. Cloned vehicles are used by criminals because they do not attract undue attention and would often legitimately be in the target vicinity. A cloned service van, emergency service equipment, school bus, ambulance, or postal van filled with explosives can sidle up to nearly any event, building or facility with little notice. Identifying vehicles that are forgeries can prevent unauthorized access to critical infrastructure and facilities, while at the same time making it that much harder on the criminals/terrorists to accomplish their mission. Detecting suspect vehicles will save money, critical resources, and most importantly lives.

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DESCRIPTION:

Cloned company vans – The following images depict vehicles that are made to look like legitimate corporate vans in order to distract the public eye. These vehicles are usually extremely difficult to distinguish between their genuine counterparts. Often times there will be minute details overlooked that spawn detection. In the cases below it was a metallic license plate cover, a missing license plate, multiple corporate logos on the same vehicle, or even misspelled words on the decal job. It is these types of items that should arouse suspicion and in turn warrant further investigation by law enforcement personnel. Keeping a watchful eye and knowing what to be conscious of will aid in limiting the success of these operations.



Mississippi police stopped this 2006 Ford van covered in decal markings for competing cable companies. Inside they found 786lbs of cocaine. There was no license plate attached, but there was a chrome license plate bracket. The company decals were visibly distorted due to enlargement, and the 800 Number for complaints referred calls to an adult chat line.



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This vehicle was caught in Georgia and was hiding over \$1 million in cash inside. The vehicle was figured suspicious due to the aftermarket license plate decals on the front and back, as well as an aftermarket CD player in the console, both items that companies will cut out due to cost savings. The money itself was inside of hollowed out spools of cable wire. The vehicle was not a member of the DirectTV fleet.



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This vehicle was nabbed in Arkansas and was outfitted to resemble a Dish Network van. Again the tipoff was a lack of license plate. When pulled over the man did not have any Dish network credentials and was acting nervously. Upon inspection of the vehicle, more hollowed out spools of wire were discovered and they contained just over \$140,000.



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This vehicle nearly resembles the vehicle mentioned earlier and was nabbed in Iberville Parish, LA. Same exact tipoff points: lack of license plate, bogus phone number connecting to an adult chat line, and several distorted rival cable company decals. Inside officers found nearly \$700,000 hidden under rolls of cable.



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Emergency vehicles like ambulances may not be clones, but in fact older unused models of the real thing. These vehicles, once outdated, are able to be purchased at many auctions or even different websites for as little as \$6,000. It is vital to pay attention to the behavior of the driver (s) and maintain awareness of the activity of the vehicle.

Cloned Federal Vehicles – The following are examples of attempts to clone federal vehicles. This is an alarming trend that can prove to be a serious security risk, especially when it comes to agency vehicles.

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This border patrol clone was caught by BP agents in Arizona. As the agents approached the van, the driver took off into Mexico, abandoning the vehicle and its 31 illegal alien occupants inside! The only way this vehicle was caught was the discrepancy in the ID number painted on the side. The code was inconsistent with a vehicle of that model.



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Texas authorities found 2 cloned Department of Transportation vehicles. The first vehicle was only found because it was wrecked. The driver and passenger were able to flee the scene. The vehicle contained drugs. The second vehicle was stopped due to excessive tint on the windows. Bales of marijuana were found inside the truck cab, the bed, and toolbox mounted in the bed of the truck.



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This vehicle was stopped in Texas. The upper left picture shows the cloned postal service mini-van compared to an actual postal service mini-van. This vehicle was spotted by a postal carrier and reported due to the lack of red, white, and blue stripes going down the side of the van. The eagle is facing backward, there is no visible cage, and is also missing a mirror on the rear of the vehicle. The verbiage on the door reads “United States Post Office” whereas on the real vehicles it will read “United States Postal Service” or “www.usps.com”

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Cloned Emergency Vehicles- Often another tactic used to disguise illegal operations as well as attempt to gain access to normally unauthorized areas. Making the necessary changes to vehicles to make them appear as emergency vehicles can cost as little as \$2000. These vehicles could easily be used for surveillance operations as well as carrying out attacks.



This vehicle was caught during a traffic stop. The interior of the vehicle resembled a legitimate ambulance; however there were no medical supplies inside. The driver was a known drug violator and had no explanation for why they were driving such a vehicle. No contraband was found inside, but the vehicle was obviously being used for operations other than emergencies.



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These are just a few of the many incidents tracked down by law enforcement personnel dealing with fake/cloned vehicles. Not only are these vehicles used in smuggling attempts, and threatening scenarios, they have also been used as portions of scams. FEMA vehicles have been cloned in natural disaster areas as individuals attempt to scam stricken families during times of need. Moving company, produce, oil tankers, and even Wal-mart trucks have been copied in order to obtain and transport stolen goods. These recent reports below shows these criminals will go to any lengths in order to accomplish their mission. It also shows a bit of ingenuity will go a long way.



A state highway trooper found more than 4 ½ tons of marijuana hidden inside an abandoned school bus along a highway in Webb County near the Mexico border. The pot, worth an estimated \$3.9 million was packaged in 560 bundles and concealed in a secret ceiling compartment and under cardboard on the bus floor. The bus bore decals of a Laredo-area school district and fake seat backs in rows atop the cardboard. Officials believe that the bus had come from Mexico and was abandoned along U.S. 59 after it developed engine problems.

Although the origin of the bus has still not been identified, the markings were that of a legitimate school district. The vehicle may have been purchased in an auction and brought up to visible standards of today's school buses.

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Thousands of pounds of marijuana were found inside an 18-wheeler disguised to look like a grocery store's truck. The HEB logo was on the sides of the trailer, on the back it said "low prices everyday." The detail is even down to the mudflaps, which read, "Going the extra mile for you."

State troopers said it's a fake. All the phony logos on the outside were allegedly created to hide pound after pound of marijuana packed inside. In all, officers and troopers said they unloaded 4,422 pounds – worth nearly \$2 million on the street. Sources said the truck was found abandoned and picked up by a wrecker on March 1. The wrecker company then called HEB, to pick it up, thinking it was authentic.

"We verified that the abandoned truck is not a part of our HEB fleet, and we are in no way affiliated with this truck, the driver or the truck contents," an HEB representative said. "We turned the 18-wheeler over to the DPS and Houston Police Department."

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These were just a few examples of the cleverness exhibited by criminals/smugglers. What if these vehicles were filled with explosives, or even serving as weapons caches instead of drug smuggling? As time passes, technology increases, and the ease of transforming vehicles into personal crime labs continues. With your assistance and attention to details on the road, we can help to prevent this activity in the future.

Possible Indicators of a Cloned Vehicle (Texas Department of Public Safety):

- Improperly displayed vehicle registrations
- No tag displayed
- Vehicle is registered to a person and not a specific company
- Personalized license plates
- Very low service vehicle numbers
- Display of names belonging to rival companies
- Display of several company names, but only one contact number
- After-market accessories (CD player, hubcaps, license plate brackets)
- Equipment attached to the vehicle that appears to not have been used in a long time
- Phone numbers listed on the vehicle that have no connection with the company name displayed on the vehicle
- Dark tinted windows
- Excessive amounts of decals
- Misspelled words

If you feel as though something is out of place or see activity that is suspicious, please contact the First Observer Call Center at 1.888.217.5902

CONTACT INFORMATION:

For any questions or comments regarding this product please contact Highway ISAC, Intelligence Analyst, Christopher Morrow at 703.563.3275 or via e-mail at TSOC.HighwayISAC@dhs.gov