Plan to use satellites to monitor British motorists

April 22 2010, by Lin Edwards

(PhysOrg.com) -- Britain may soon be using global positioning satellites and advanced speed cameras with number plate recognition technology to track speeding motorists, and according to a report released by the House of Commons, the system can be installed and operated at relatively low cost.

The system, dubbed SpeedSpike, is undergoing effectiveness and accuracy trials at two locations in London and Cornwall, with the AA (Automobile Assocation) monitoring the tests. The AA said they were watching the trials carefully, but do not regard the development as sinister, but a "natural evolution" of technologies already in use. They said they believed the system is probably intended for residential areas, and it would cover a network of roads rather than just a straight line.

A network of the devices could monitor thousands of vehicles over big areas, with cameras communicating with each other and using GPS information to calculate the average speed of vehicles between any two network locations. The cameras would use the same technology as is currently used in London to enforce their congestion charge, and would be similar to a system of average speed recorders used to monitor speeds around roadworks on major roads.

The system was developed by PIPS Technology Ltd., a Texas-based company with an office in Hampshire, and is said to be easy to install and affordable. The House of Commons report described the system as being capable of recognizing number plates in all weathers, and at any time of day or night. It also suggested the system could cut the need for speed bumps, and might "eliminate rat-runs". Rat run is the term used for using residential side streets and other minor roads to avoid heavy traffic and traffic lights on main roads.

Doubts have been raised by civil rights groups about the ethics of the system, with Geoffrey Cox, a conservative politician from an area near the test site in Cornwall, querying whether it is necessary to spy on and film motorists. He warned that it may become routine, and said it should never be routine for the state to spy on its citizens.

At present the system is under test, and has not yet been granted approval for use.

More information: SpeedSpike data sheet ([PDF])