

# **IDLING SHERIFF'S VEHICLES**

## **IT IS ABOUT DOLLARS AND SENSE**

### **SUMMARY**

The 2013-14 Santa Barbara County Grand Jury (Jury) received a complaint that unattended Sheriff's patrol vehicles are often observed with engines idling. The Jury looked into this practice and concluded that it results in an unnecessary risk as well as monetary and environmental costs. This practice does not conform to the county's Vehicle and Equipment Anti-Idling policy established in 2008. The Sheriff's Office fuel cost for idling patrol vehicles has exceeded \$1.25 million since that time.

After receiving a report from the Department of General Services in August 2013, and a subsequent inquiry from the Jury, in late March 2014, the Sheriff's Office began testing one system that is a potential solution. Every day of delay in enacting a remedy to the idling problem results in a further unnecessary cost to the county's taxpayers.

### **METHODOLOGY**

The Jury reviewed various documents including the current relevant Santa Barbara County and Sheriff's Office policies. These policies address vehicle administration,<sup>1</sup> employee use,<sup>2</sup> anti-idling,<sup>3</sup> and mobile audio video system.<sup>4</sup> The Jury interviewed senior staff of the Department of General Services, and the Sheriff's Office.

### **BACKGROUND**

The explanation offered by the Sheriff's Office for the need to leave patrol vehicles idling while unattended is that the computer systems, including the mobile audio video system, are required to be operational at all times. If the computers shut down, there is an unacceptable delay in an emergency response due to the estimated three to four minute required for these to boot-up. This explanation ignores several concerns. An unattended and idling vehicle, even if locked, is vulnerable to theft. The vehicle contains expensive equipment and at least two firearms. The idling engine also wastes fuel and generates significant hydrocarbon emissions.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *County of Santa Barbara On-Line Policies and Procedures Manual Administration of Vehicle Fleet*

<sup>2</sup> *County of Santa Barbara On-Line Policies and Procedures Manual Employee Use of County Vehicles*

<sup>3</sup> *County of Santa Barbara Vehicle and Equipment Anti-Idling Policy*

<sup>4</sup> *Santa Barbara County Sheriff's Office Mobile Audio Video Policy # 446, Lexipol, LLC*

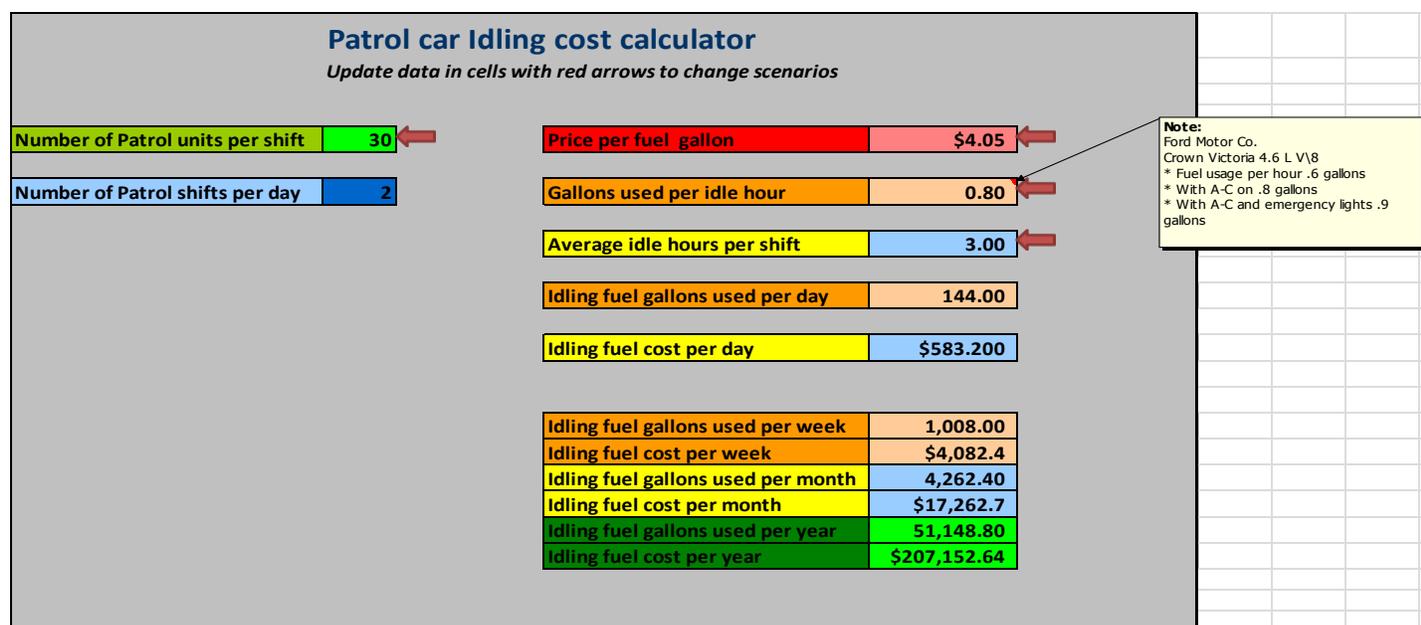
<sup>5</sup> [http://www.fueleconomy.gov/feg/contentIncludes/co2\\_inc.htm](http://www.fueleconomy.gov/feg/contentIncludes/co2_inc.htm)

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In addition, Santa Barbara County policies specifically state: (a) “Keys will not be left in unattended vehicles, even when parked in secured areas.”<sup>6</sup> and (b) “Santa Barbara County employees shall not cause or permit vehicles to idle for more than ‘five’ consecutive minutes, except as allowed under policy exemptions....”<sup>7</sup> None of the exemptions, except for K-9 vehicles, appears to apply to non-emergency situations.

### OBSERVATIONS AND ANALYSIS

In 2013, the Department of General Services studied the cost of unattended patrol vehicles left idling and determined it to be over \$207,000 per year for the extra fuel alone. The results (below) were submitted to the Sheriff’s Office in August 2013, but no discernable action to reduce the cost to the taxpayer or the environmental harm was taken until March 2014.



The consumption of 51,149 gallons of fuel due to idling during 2013 generated nearly one million pounds of hydrocarbon emissions.<sup>8</sup>

The *County of Santa Barbara Vehicle and Equipment Anti-Idling Policy*, with listed exceptions, specifically prohibits county vehicles from being left idling for more than five consecutive minutes. The Sheriff’s Office states it does not follow this policy because deputies are required to adhere to the mobile audio video system policy. This requires leaving the vehicles idling to keep the mobile audio video system powered up and ready for immediate activation. The Jury was informed that in addition to the added fuel and environmental costs, patrol cars left idling are retired earlier due to additional wear and tear on the engines.

<sup>6</sup> *County of Santa Barbara On-Line Policies and Procedures Manual Employee Use of County Vehicles*

<sup>7</sup> *County of Santa Barbara Vehicle and Equipment Anti-Idling Policy*

<sup>8</sup> [http://www.fueleconomy.gov/feg/contentIncludes/co2\\_inc.htm](http://www.fueleconomy.gov/feg/contentIncludes/co2_inc.htm)

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In late March 2014, a trial system was installed in one patrol car for evaluation. The system is a battery monitoring system with an “auto-start” feature that has not only a car alarm, but also a “Secure-Idle” feature designed to deter theft of the vehicle or its contents. The testing is estimated to take about a month. The system will monitor the vehicle’s battery and should significantly reduce the idling time for patrol vehicles. The estimated cost to modify the patrol fleet is \$36,000.

Among other options available is the use of alternate, or uninterruptible, power sources. These devices are used to provide a back-up battery system for computers and other electronic devices in the event of a power interruption and can be used in vehicles allowing equipment to remain operating with the engine off.

### **CONCLUSION**

Santa Barbara County’s Anti-Idling policy, in effect since 2008, is an integral part of an effort to reduce fuel costs and hydrocarbon emissions. Equipping Santa Barbara County Sheriff’s Office patrol vehicles with alternate solutions to reduce or eliminate idling will play a meaningful role in achieving this goal. The Sheriff’s Office’s idling fuel cost alone has exceeded \$1.25 million since that time. The Sheriff’s Office is now, after some delay, testing an economically viable solution to address this issue. The 2013-14 Santa Barbara County Grand Jury encourages the Sheriff’s Office to address other potential operational savings in the future with more vigor.

### **FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

#### **FINDING 1A**

The Sheriff’s Office does not comply with the county anti-idling policy.

#### **FINDING 1B**

The Sheriff’s Office non-compliance is based on its stated need to keep critical electronic equipment in the vehicles constantly operating.

#### **FINDING 2**

Alternate power and monitoring systems to keep this equipment operating are readily available.

#### **FINDING 3**

Considerable cost savings could be realized with installation of alternative power or monitoring systems for these vehicles.

#### **FINDING 4**

The Sheriff’s Office is testing a battery monitoring and alarm system.

#### **RECOMMENDATION 1**

That the Sheriff’s Office expedite the installation of an alternate power or a monitoring system to allow needed equipment to remain operational and in compliance with the County’s Anti-Idling Policy.

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**REQUEST FOR RESPONSE**

Pursuant to California Penal Code Section 933 and 933.05, the Jury requests each entity or individual named below to respond to the enumerated findings and recommendations within the specified statutory time limit:

**Santa Barbara County Sheriff – 60 days**

Findings 1A, 1B, 2, 3 and 4  
Recommendation 1