

WE THE ROAD



RECKLESS ACTS

Public officials flouting law by driving drunk, speeding in vehicles paid for with tax money

BY CHRIS HALSNE
KIRO-SEATTLE

In my hand, I held two videotapes. One of them documented – in full color – our fire chief getting drunk at a local bar. He knocked back more than nine beers in a couple of hours. The other tape showed the chief getting into his county-issued truck and driving away. For some reason, it seemed more pathetic than newsworthy.

I had the same thought the summer before. A tipster led our investigative team to a drunken driving case involving a government water supervisor. The guy was foolish enough to get caught in his marked King County truck, a bottle of Jack Daniels by his side. Drunken driving is serious business, but airing this man's mistake seemed like taking an awfully big club to a really small baby seal. I chose to squelch the story at the time, but now, I pulled the file back out of the drawer.

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Two cases. Two government workers. Two incidents in which they drove in a reckless manner. My hunt for a little context led me to a never-before requested database maintained by the Washington State Patrol.

It is that agency's responsibility to keep track of every highway traffic citation. I wanted to know how often police issued tickets to vehicles carrying a plate beginning with the letters XMT. In Washington, (and most other states) government agencies don't pay taxes for their license plates. Here, those are labeled as "exempt" or XMT. Many of the plates are put on take-home vehicles for state, county and city employees. Others are put on work vehicles such as road graders and school district vans.

Our Open Records Act request asked the State Patrol to run a simple query in their citation database, searching violations that began with XMT. The agency removed all fields that carried personal information, but e-mailed me a beautiful copy of two years of tickets (see graphic for sample file).

The coding was simple. The number of government workers getting traffic citations while on the job in government-issued vehicles surprised me. In just two years, we found 782 tickets, including 124 speeding citations, 10 arrests for aggressive or negligent driving, four DUI's, 24 cases of driving on a revoked license, and even a hit and run.

Officials driving drunk

Our investigative producer, Bill Benson, went to

work tracking down the most serious cases so we could add examples into our television story. He started with drunken driving and negligent driving cases. Remember: The data we received with our request was void of personal information. The computer did, however, give us a location of the traffic stop, time of day, a mile post, and even a notation if a citation was issued because of an accident. We could figure out which district or traffic court held the case file by mapping the mile post. After that, it was as simple as thumbing through files to spot notations by police that identified government cars

involved. Sometimes the driver's "occupation" field gave us solid leads as well.

Investigative videographer David Weed jumped into the undercover van to watch the county water supervisor. Right away it was clear that, despite a DUI conviction on his record, he was allowed to keep a taxpayer funded take-home vehicle. In fact, it was the very same truck he got caught drinking in a year earlier. A quick check of his driving record also uncovered something else. The water supervisor had received two more traffic citations after being convicted of drunken driving.

This raised all sorts of legal and financial questions.

XMT RECKLESS DRIVING SAMPLE						
License Plate	Date	Hour	Hwy No	Mile Post	V 1	V 2
XMT39554C	1/7/2002	15	167	12	79	
XMT501	8/10/2002	16	5	135	79	
XMT05349E	10/17/2002	22	82	35	49	
XMT08330U	5/23/2002	19	405	8	151	9
XMT20961D	3/15/2002	19	20	40	138	
XMT47678L	11/21/2003	17	9	50	118	
XMT15712C	10/17/2002	22	20		117	
XMT26343D	2/4/2004	15	14	10	96	
XMT11631E	12/3/2002	22	20	412	226	
XMT993	3/26/2003	2	5	198	14	
XMT039	8/3/2002	21	3	43	94	
XMT33170K	6/21/2002	3	5	153	124	
XMT37165C	8/7/2003	6	405	14	984	
XMT00390E	2/8/2002	23	5	190	124	
XMT42034C	1/25/2002	18	405	1	1524	
XMT33328K	8/23/2002	8	5	193	164	
XMT18203E	10/3/2003	17	5	115	3738	
XMT741309C	2/8/2002	14	5	213	537	

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From top: A government vehicle license plate with XMT for "exempt" from taxes; a hidden camera was used to record drinking and driving examples.

ON THE ROAD

Risky drivers cost more money to insure. It's simple. Drivers with tickets have greater statistical odds of getting into an accident. That makes sense to most of us, but I'll give you a warning: Expect the runaround when asking about insurance costs for known risky drivers like the fire chief and water supervisor. The majority of bigger government entities are self-insured. Risk managers say it's hard to calculate how a couple of dozen speeding tickets or accidents will affect rates. The bottom line: Taxpayers have to be concerned about the liability of a huge death or injury judgment. How would it look to a potential civil court jury if the government had known about reckless driving behavior, then didn't do anything to prevent it?

Our investigative team also found less-important data within the XMT citations report. Some of the traffic tickets were issued between midnight and 3 a.m. Was the driver really on government business?

The Department of Licensing also helped me track down which agencies were issued certain license plates. For example, the driver of a car registered to the Attorney General's Office received a ticket for driving 86 mph in a 60-mph zone. We never did figure out which employee was speeding, but it was a nice nugget for our viewers.

You're being followed

There are a number of variations to this story that could produce other investigative pieces. The Washington State Patrol has the ability to search for plates issued to military vehicles and other federal government vehicles, like border patrol and customs. Keep in mind the number of citations will be a conservative number. Police often give the driver of a marked government vehicle a break and let him or her off with a warning.

The results of our investigation have been extremely positive. The fire chief admitted he "acted inappropriately" and drove his government rig after drinking alcohol. The fire commission ordered a full investigation into his behavior. He began undergoing treatment. Risk managers for the state of Washington are using our investigation as an educational tool. In a recent employee safety seminar, one risk manager reportedly said, "Safer driving leads to fewer accidents, which leads to reduced costs. When you drive a government car, just pretend a television crew is following you all the time. That should do the trick."

Chris Halsne is lead investigative reporter at KIRO-Seattle.

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