



HFSC to Use Oil-Field Technology to Track Forensic Evidence

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The Houston Forensic Science Center has signed an agreement with a Houston-based firm to use oil-field technology to track forensic evidence.

The \$147,000 contract with JPL RFID will allow HFSC to expand the use of radio frequency identification (RFID) to track Forensic Biology evidence, case files and supplies starting from entry into the lab at HFSC and all the way through analysis.

“If the oil and gas world can use RFID to effectively track drilling samples from offshore rigs, there is no reason forensic science can’t use the same technology to ensure crucial evidence doesn’t get lost,” said Dr. Peter Stout, HFSC’s CEO and president.

“This contract is only the beginning of HFSC’s mission to continuously improve evidence handling and tracking,” Dr. Stout added.

RFID tags are currently being used for supply management and to track HFSC’s reference firearm collection.

Hurricane Harvey and the measures HFSC took to protect evidence ahead of the storm provided additional impetus to introduce technology that better tracks evidence.

HFSC is using federal grant dollars to expand the project into the Forensic Biology Section, including tracking sexual assault kits within the laboratory. The 17-month contract with JPL covers the setup and implementation of case file, supply and evidence tracking within that section.

RFID tracking occurs through a small chip and antenna. Unlike bar code technology, RFID tracking can occur without physically “scanning” a tag. Rather the antenna automatically communicates with a tag affixed to an item.

So, for example, if RFID tags prove to be useful in evidence tracking, HFSC could in the future put antennas on crime scene vehicles and tag all evidence packaging items. By doing this, the vehicle itself would “know” if an evidence packaging item had left the vehicle but never returned. This would allow crime scene investigators to properly account for all items prior to leaving a scene, minimizing the risk of leaving evidence behind.

Until now, JPL’s RFID tags have largely been used to track assets in the gas pipeline, medical and oilfield industries. The contract with HFSC allows JPL to further its mission of using their software and technology to provide forensic laboratories and law enforcement with comprehensive solutions to logistical issues.

“The agreement between JPL and HFSC is the beginning of what we hope to be a long, fruitful relationship,” said Jason Pitcock, JPL’s CEO and president. “RFID technology can help industries increase efficiency and safety. What better place to begin that expansion than with an area that benefits the community and justice system?”

HFSC is a local government corporation that provides forensic services to the City of Houston and other local agencies. HFSC is overseen by a Board of Directors appointed by the Mayor of Houston and confirmed by the Houston City Council. Its management structure is designed to be responsive to a 2009 recommendation by the National Academy of Sciences that called for crime laboratories to be independent of law enforcement and prosecutorial branches of government.

HFSC operates in seven forensic disciplines.

CONTACT INFORMATION:

Ramit Plushnick-Masti

Director of Communications/PIO

media@houstonforensicscience.org

<http://www.houstonforensicscience.org/>

713-929-6768 (office)

713-703-4898 (cell)

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