

Fireflies

Fireflies have arrived in the Indian Wells Valley! For the past couple of months, the Indian Wells Valley Water District has been installing a relatively new kind of equipment manufactured by Datamatic.

“Firefly” is the name of an automated meter reading (AMR) technology with a twist - the capability to interface with virtually any brand or model water meter, rendering it readable by a hand held radio receiver (called Roadrunner) from as far away as several hundred yards.

The process involved is actually quite simple. First, Firefly generates a light beam that bounces off the meter face. As the meter needle sweeps around, it interrupts the beam. Each Firefly is programmed to emit the light every three seconds and can even track usage by the minute for nearly a month. Typically though, this history is maintained by the hour on a 74-day basis.

Firefly technology offers a number of important convenience factors to a water purveyor. One real plus for the IWVWD is that virtually any meter can be retrofitted. This is important because meters made by four different manufacturers are scattered throughout District jurisdiction, having been installed at different times according to need and improving technology. Using Firefly, they can all be remotely read equally well. This system also makes it much easier to read meters that are difficult to access – in backyards harboring unfriendly dogs, for example. And the 74-day memory is a great conservation tool because it can help pinpoint the exact time and amount of any questioned usage.

IWVWD Chief Financial Officer Lori Williams first came across Firefly in a trade publication and was struck by the possibilities. In the ensuing months, she and Field Service Supervisor Jeff Blanton thoroughly investigated Datamatic’s product – as well as similar products manufactured by other companies. Williams and Blanton made field observations of several different remote read technologies distributed by Badger, Neptune, MasterMeter and Itron. They also contacted other water utilities to compare and contrast price, longevity, durability, company support and reliability.

As a part of its early research, the IWVWD entered into a pilot study with Neptune using its automated meter reading technology. Neptune’s products were relatively expensive and the District didn’t find the advantages to be as valuable as those of Firefly.

One Firefly interface device costs about \$85 and each comes with a ten year replacement warranty, boasts a waterproof casing and runs on a lithium/ion battery. As the District had already budgeted for the continuation of a pilot radio read meter study, the Board approved reallocating the money to install Firefly technology instead of continuing with the Neptune pilot project.

During this initial phase, the District acquired handheld Roadrunner remote readers, meter units, application software and Firefly hardware. Datamatic has provided extensive training with this package in the areas of installation, software and a billing interface. They also tailored the entire system to serve the specific needs of the IWVWD. Ultimately, Firefly devices will be installed District-wide over a three year period meaning the task is expected to be completed in 2010-11.

As you can see, Firefly will help us to assist our customers in a variety of ways. And as always, if you have any questions or concerns regarding your bill or water quality, don't hesitate to contact IWV Water District offices Monday through Friday from 8 AM to 5 PM at 375-5087. We are here to serve you.