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MOBILITY AND NAVIGATION

EXTREME WEATHER IN EUROPE HIGHLIGHTS THE IMPORTANCE AND VALUE OF GEOSPATIAL DATA AND LOCATION BASED SERVICES.

Looking at the articles submitted for this issue of the magazine, which focused on mobile computing, vehicle navigation and interoperability, one begins to realise how interconnected these themes are. Obviously, vehicle navigation is not possible without mobile computing power and high-quality spatial data – including the underpinning GIS and road networks datasets, for which real-time traffic flow information changes hourly, let alone the daily or weekly changes to the transport infrastructure.

Making good quality and timely information available to those in need, as widely and rapidly as possible, is also key in times of extreme weather events – for service providers (including schools and hospitals), firms and citizens directly. Interoperability of information services and analytical, decision-making tools also becomes more important for events that span wide geographical regions and occur over longer periods of time, as opposed to the purely local event, e.g. a fire, vehicle crash or localized flooding.

As I pen this editorial, the UK and much of western Europe is in the grip of an exceptionally cold winter, experiencing long periods of abnormal sub-zero temperatures (Centigrade, that is) breaking 50-year old historical records, and quantities of snow not seen for a quarter century or more – and it is still early in the winter season. Emergency services, transport operators, the haulage industry – and the retailers, hospitals and utilities who are supplied by hauliers – are all suffering from the extreme weather conditions, not to mention millions of motorists – or rather, potential motorists, as driving has become extremely hazardous as a result. The cost to the economy has already been forecast to amount to billions, not millions, due to lost business, lost retail sales, and lost work time as people cannot get to their jobs or are forced to remain at home to look after school children whose schools are closed for health and safety reasons.

In times like these, the importance and value of geospatial data and of the tools and services on offer to work with that data, and to serve it out to those in need, is all too obvious. The UK set up a central control

centre in London to ensure efficient and equitable sharing of rapidly dwindling grit/salt supplies to the 33 local authorities in the London area. This was only possible because of the rapid availability of highly accurate geospatial data for the region – road and rail networks and locations of supply depots, hospitals, schools and other critical infrastructure – plus the GIS tools and web services to make these resources work together interoperably, including access to databases not usually thought of as being especially 'spatial', i.e. quantities of salt/grit held in specific depots or available from the two main suppliers in the UK.

Tens of thousands of mobile computers and PDAs are at work in the emergency, utilities and transport services across the UK and Europe as this article is being written, not to mention the millions of vehicle navigation systems being used by motorists looking for alternative routes to avoid the worst ice conditions. Devices like the new Handheld NAUTIZ X7 rugged PDA reviewed in this issue are becoming ever more important and ever more useful as broadband communications infrastructure improves and chip technology – for processors and GPS and communications modules – produces ever more powerful devices at lower cost.

A final word of warning for those misinformed individuals who see this period of extremely cold weather in Europe as an indication that the scientists are wrong about global warming and the expected impact of climate change. Weather is weather – it happens and changes over days or weeks. Climate is climate – it changes over decades or hundreds of years. Weather forecasting models that often seem to fail for local or regional forecasts much more than a few days into the future have absolutely nothing to do with climate change models that have been validated by thousands of scientists over the past decade.