

State of California
Department of Motor Vehicles

Operational Efficiency

DMV Fire Disaster Response App Fights Fraud and Helps Victims

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Executive Summary

The DMV provided support to the CHP and other state agencies in identifying vehicles destroyed by wildfires that broke out on January 7, 2025, and devoured several Southern California neighborhoods. The Palisades and Eaton fires in Los Angeles County forced hundreds of thousands of residents to flee from their homes, destroyed approximately 15,000 structures, and left behind an estimated \$52 billion in damage.

When the flames were finally extinguished on January 31, 2025, the DMV and partner agencies began the tedious task of helping the burned-out communities recover and rebuild.

One of the recovery activities involved identifying charred vehicles and linking them to their appropriate owners. This effort required the consent of residential property owners to allow government agencies to inspect their properties for damage. The Governor's Office of Emergency Services (OES), U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, and a private clean-up contractor lead this task.

As authorizations were secured, DMV investigators collaborated with CHP officers to identify damaged vehicles and record their condition. The DMV labeled them as "salvage" or "junk," which allowed vehicle owners and insurers to begin processing claims. It also prevented titling fraud in California and other states.

To complete the large number of inspections quickly, the DMV developed the Fire Disaster Response (FDR) application, which transformed a heavily manual process into a streamlined digital one. Using a tablet, an inspector can input vehicle information into a centralized database that can be accessed at any time by participating motor vehicle regulatory agencies.

Having real time data available was more efficient and effective in supporting communities affected by the Palisades and Eaton wildfires and disasters that will arise in the future.

IDEA

The DMV developed a user-friendly tool to streamline efforts in identifying vehicles damaged by the wildfires. It replaced a slow-paced paper process with a state-of-the-art digital solution. The DMV developed a centralized FDR application where information could be input in real time and accessed by various motor vehicle regulatory agencies, when needed.

Historically, responding to natural disasters in which motor vehicle inspections were required was time consuming because of the lethargic, inefficient manual process.

The DMV and CHP, along with supporting civilian employees, would record inspections on paper that would be forwarded to be manually transcribed into another system, which would produce a digitized record. DMV technicians would then record the vehicle's junk status. This manual processing can add hundreds of extra hours for each event.

Extra costs and time can add up quickly between subsequent re-work and reconciliation efforts that happen with manually accounting and transcribing inspection records. Any unnecessary delay or inaccuracy in processing creates a roadblock to providing timely and quality services to Californians when they need it the most.

Cataloging damage records in a timely manner is important for vehicle owners and insurers to get on the road to recovery. It is also critical in preventing fraud. For example, by quickly marking a vehicle record as "junked" in both California records and the federal National Motor Vehicle Title Information System, criminals are unable to fraudulently use a Vehicle Identification Number (VIN) linked to a damaged vehicle because its status has already been updated in the national database.

The increase in timeliness, efficiency, and accuracy improves operations across local, state, and federal jurisdictions, expands consumer protections, and reduces false insurance claims because inspection records are current.

Game-Changer: FDR represents a major step forward in streamlining the reporting duties of law enforcement, regulatory, and state agencies. Representatives can deposit a myriad of information into live database tables and access them while working in a disaster zone. The result is simplified and streamlined reporting.

The DMV Investigations Division worked closely with the DMV Information Systems Division to leverage a prominent open-sourced Python web application framework to have FDR interface with the department's data warehouse. This digital solution was created within three days and delivered a fully functional application that incorporated database services, security, and role-based access controls.

State and federal agencies share responsibility for disaster response. While the speed, coordination, and skill in which this DMV led effort was executed may be rare within the public sector, it spotlights the dedication to the mission of

everyone involved. This tool and its benefits are not California-specific and can be utilized by government organizations throughout the country.

IMPLEMENTATION

The DMV made sure the FDR was aligned with the department's strategic plan by developing a system that delivers value to customers through a simpler and faster response using data and technology in conjunction with embedding measurable efficiency into DMV operations.

Following the containment of the fires in late January 2025, the DMV Investigations Division (INV) sought to improve the vehicle-related portions of property inspections. It integrated vehicle records available in DMV's data warehouse with CalFire information of identified affected properties.

In consultation with DMV's Information Systems Division, INV developed the Fire Disaster Response application. It allows DMV and CHP inspectors to link a property address with a listing of vehicles registered to that location.

Given the time constraints and focus on delivering value quickly, the DMV used a lean software development framework. Multiple daily check-ins were common in the initial development to identify and incorporate new high-level requirements or changes from business users, and review completed development. By keeping conversations high-level, developers were empowered to use their creativity to find the best solution they could imagine.

The INV Data Forensics Team led this effort in conjunction with DMV's Information System's data warehousing team, and CHP's Southern Division. The core teams consisted of an INV manager and 3 staff, one Information Systems Division developer, and a CHP officer acting as a liaison. Additionally, there were supporting officers from the DMV and CHP, and sponsorship from DMV's Directorate and its senior executives.

Costs to develop this application were minimal. It involved about 30 hours of a lead developers time, data storage costs were nominal, and application hosting averaged less than \$20 a day.

The technical architecture is a web-based Python application hosted on a cloud server connected to the DMV's cloud-based data warehouse. Security for both the application and the warehouse hosted data is ensured with the state's standard OAuth-based single sign-on (SSO) protocols, with role-based access controls in-place. Reporting is enabled with the DMV's standard business-intelligence tooling. The technology used for this effort was selected

because much of the needed infrastructure was already in place, including the application development environment, the secure connections to the warehouse, the state's in-place SSO protocols, and others. By leveraging these already-available resources, the development team and technical sponsors were able to deliver their products within the required timeframes that included extensive tests for reliability, technical security, and access controls.

IMPACT

FDR has greatly simplified the property inspection process. Before its implementation, teams from the DMV and CHP had to manually write out inspection records, pass them to civilian support staff to manually transcribe, then manually integrate records from two teams to generate reports from the results. The practice of retrieving and searching through bulk vehicle registration data further impacted the teams' limited time and resources.

FDR represents the work of committed civil servants who saw a better, cheaper, and faster way of doing their jobs, and spotlighted their commitment to assist Californians in re-building their lives and communities.

With the use of FDR, an inspection report can be generated in less than a minute and indexed securely, avoiding lost paperwork risks. To date, approximately 1,500 property inspections have been approved and completed.

FDR represents 1,500 cases in which 17-character VINs auto-populated, officers ensured addresses were valid, vehicle damage determinations could be populated in a few taps, officers could readily account for groupings of vehicles at a single address, as well as out-of-state vehicles, and support staff didn't have to manually transcribe records multiple times.

Feedback from CHP has been positive. The lead CHP officer and the DMV INV team have expressed their satisfaction with FDR and how it allows them to streamline their processes.

FDR was created to assist hundreds of thousands of wildfire survivors in Southern California. Despite its current considerable value, the teams are already learning and iterating to make it even better. Through ongoing discussions with other state agencies and the US Army Corps of Engineers, new functionality is being planned to streamline and facilitate the hand-off of inspections between federal and state agencies. This would include digitized authorization documentation from property owners to allow state agencies to inspect their property. DMV and CHP inspectors would have access to the documentation

through the FDR, further increasing efficiency and reducing the risk of unauthorized searches due to imprecision of the paper-based processes.

Similarly, changes to the application are under review to allow officers to automatically upload photos of property inspections, which could be made available to insurers as part of claims or processes on the vehicles' records.

The application and database services utilized are relatively low maintenance and will be maintained by the original developer until inspection efforts for the Eaton and Palisades fires are completed.

Given the initial up-front investment of staff time and financial costs absorbed by the DMV and CHP, the compounding savings are a big pay-off. While team members and state agencies enjoy the return-on-investment from streamlining 1,500 reports to date, as well as subsequent post-processing, the results mean a lot more to the Californians who rely the DMV to expedite its investigations, so they may focus on rebuilding their lives sooner.