For rural law enforcement agencies, communication in isolated areas can be challenging. Radio coverage can be spotty and cell phone signals nonexistent. A Nebraska sheriff’s office is finding that a device developed to help outdoor enthusiasts communicate from remote areas also has a place in law enforcement.

Kimball County encompasses 950 square miles in the extreme southwest corner of the Nebraska panhandle. The county sheriff’s office, composed of three deputies and the sheriff, can be called on to handle anything from plane crashes to range fires. The surrounding area also contains 168 live Minuteman 3 nuclear missile silos, and the sheriff’s office provides escort assistance when the U.S. Air Force moves the missiles from site to site.

To aid communication, the agency uses the SPOT Satellite GPS Messenger™. The sheriff’s office began using the device in 2009, after the sheriff attended the fall 2009 Office of Justice Programs’ National Institute of Justice (NIJ) Technology Institute for Rural Law Enforcement, where it was discussed, according to Chief Deputy Dwain Murdoch. The sheriff did some research and bought one to try it out, then obtained the funds to buy more, according to Murdoch. Murdoch gave a presentation about his agency’s use of the device at the spring 2010 rural law enforcement technology institute.

“The main reason we chose to go with these devices is because we have areas in the county with no radio or cell phone reception and if a deputy gets into a situation where he needs help, these devices will work anywhere as long as they have a clear shot at the sky,” Murdoch says.

Murdoch says the devices each cost about $150, with an additional cost of $100 per year for service on each unit. They attach to a vehicle’s dashboard with Velcro® and can be clipped onto a deputy’s belt when he is out of the vehicle.

“They are cost-effective, virtually indestructible, water proof and impact resistant,” he says. “They need to be in a position where you have a clean shot to the GPS satellite, so the device has to be on the dashboard or on your belt when you are outside.”

SPOT sends coordinates and messages via satellite to inform others of the user’s status. The unit is about 4 inches high and weighs less than 6 ounces. Features include:

- Real-time Internet tracking. This feature allows users to send and save their location to allow contacts to track their progress using Google Maps.
- Location detection to within 10 feet.
- Satellite tracking update every 10 minutes.
- A check-in Okay button for status checks.
- A Help button for nonemergency help requests.
- An SOS/911 button for critical emergencies.
- Automatic text and e-mail messaging to send mass HELP call that includes GPS coordinates.

“The neat things about the messages is that once you set up the account and a message list, whenever you send a message, no matter what kind of message it is, it will send it to every person on your list and give the GPS coordinates,” Murdoch says.

The county’s emergency management director also uses a SPOT and eventually the county’s severe weather spotters will have them as well. The devices are readily accessible and can be purchased at sporting goods stores.

For more information, contact Chief Deputy Dwain Murdoch at (308) 235-3615 or dwain.murdoch@leo.gov. For more information on NIJ efforts in position location technologies, contact Dr. John Kaplan at (202) 305-4503 or john.kaplan@usdoj.gov.