At the cutting edge

By Greg Willis

Customs, as well as airlines, airport owners, terminal operators and the travelling public look to advances in technology to maximise business and recreational opportunities. And they want to achieve these aims at the cheapest cost and the least inconvenience.

Customs has continued to develop successful strategies and technologies to improve the way we conduct our business and to meet challenges into the next century. The use of new and existing technology has been at the forefront of those efforts and they are used extensively at Sydney Airport. One of our main objectives is to move legitimate international travellers across our borders in the quickest time with the least possible intervention.

Customs will continue to identify ways that technology will improve our service while maintaining community protection at the border.

Some of the technology and initiatives that operate at Sydney Airport include:

Passenger Analysis Clearance and Evaluation (PACE). A system to process passengers crossing the Australian border, improving clearance rates and risk profiling.

Advance Passenger Clearance (APC). Provides faster clearance of passengers through electronic delivery of passenger information to Customs and the Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs before passengers arrive. Customs is hoping to clear about 60 per cent of passengers this way by 2000.

Advance Passenger Information (API). Provided by airlines participating in Advance Passenger Clearance, it includes passenger manifests and reservation information.

Electronic Travel Authority (ETA). A Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs initiative providing electronic visas for travel to Australia which can be issued by travel agents.

Advance Passenger Processing (APP). Integrates Advanced Passenger Clearance and the Electronic Travel Authority systems to enable airlines to use the ETA system to verify travel authorities at check-in and send high-integrity passenger information to Customs and Immigration.

Document readers. Electronic reading of passports, visas and Advance Passenger Clearance and Advance Passenger Processing magnetic stripe boarding passes.

Dynamic signage. Television monitors to speed processing of travellers such as Australian passport holders, APEC cardholders and APC and APP passengers.

Closed Circuit Television. Helps Customs and other law enforcement officers to monitor suspect passengers in the airport.

Terminal X-ray Unit. Customs is making greater use of X-ray technology in an effort to improve facilitation and detection. The units can increase initial baggage screening rates while reducing the number of physical examinations. The overall time taken on baggage examination should reduce and detection rates increase. The deterrent factor is also enhanced. Officers are being trained to use the units. With greater experience and skill we should see a marked increase in the detection rate.

Ionscan. A particle trace detector, originally developed to detect explosives and modified to detect and analyse minute narcotic particles. The machine is effective in passenger processing and is mobile and non-intrusive.

Sierra Tactical Operation and Planning System (STOP). A computer-based program for pre-flight risk assessment and selection of arriving and departing passengers. It records past drug seizures and has a pictorial library of concealment methods used. Its accurate profiling makes it a valuable risk management tool.

Passive Alert Dog Team. Comprising a dog, a handler and a 'scout', the team works with Sierra teams to target passengers who may warrant closer scrutiny.

Customs is committed to improving its service delivery to government and the community. To achieve this, we must lead in the research, development and introduction of new technology. We must show that we can respond positively and flexibly to the changing environment at the border.

History has shown that we have been more than equal to the task and that we are one of the leaders in our field when it comes to new ideas.

Greg Willis is an Inspector and a Sierra team leader. He joined Customs in 1976 and has worked at Sydney Airport for 18 years.