

Austria bids to 'spray away' car thieves

By David Cronin

Austria's EU presidency has recommended new legislation to compel car manufacturers to install state-of-the-art anti-theft devices in their vehicles.

In an internal Council of Ministers' document, Vienna contends that "pressure must be increased on the car industry" to take part in initiatives aimed at reducing car theft and recovering stolen vehicles.

Vienna suggests that the use of a technique known as microdotting could be made compulsory in the manufacture of new vehicles.

Microdotting involves spraying thousands of small discs made from metal or synthetic substances around a car. Each is usually one millimetre in diameter and is inscribed with the car vehicle registration number or other details to identify a driver, which can be detected under ultraviolet light and then magnified. The technology has been pioneered by the DataDot firm in Australia, where Ford, Audi and Porsche have installed it in new vehicles. But the Australian car industry has opposed police calls for its use to be mandatory. Microdot kits have also been distributed to the South African police force.

The Austrian recommendation has been made at discussions of the police co-operation working group in the Council.

Austrian diplomats say, however, that there have not yet been sufficient discussions at EU level on car theft. Finland and Germany, the next two countries to hold the Union's six-month rotating presidency, have agreed to host further meetings on the topic, together with Europol, the EU's police co-operation office.

Europol has estimated that 1.3 million vehicles are stolen each year within the EU's 25 countries, with 60-70% of these eventually recovered.

But in its latest report on organised crime, Europol states that the growing proportion of missing vehicles in some parts of Europe is a "strong indicator" that criminal gangs are involved. While vehicle theft has been partly reduced by the installation of special technology in new cars, there has been a rise in burglaries and other offences aimed at stealing car keys, as well as the hijacking of cars.

An EU official involved in the discussions said: "Of course, we should minimise car theft. The question is whether we should force European citizens to pay extra amounts of money for cars with anti-theft devices."

Alfredo Filippone from the European Automobile Manufacturers Association said that devices used for tracking cars could raise legal issues about privacy.

Laura Dellagaix from the European Consumers Association (BEUC) said: "It is a good idea that consumers are protected from car theft. On the other hand, it could be worrying if producers are able to follow the movement of people."