

Drug cops use thermal imaging camera

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A heat-sensing camera, similar to the kind firemen use to find victims in smoky fires, has been used for the first time by drug cops in Hancock County in an attempt to expose an indoor marijuana farm.

According to records in Findlay Municipal Court, a judge on Saturday authorized the Hancock METRICH drug unit to use a thermal imaging camera to photograph a home in the northeastern part of Hancock County. A sheriff's detective had been told that marijuana was being grown in the basement of the home.

Such cameras are capable of detecting patterns of heat coming from homes, and the technology has been used by police elsewhere to find in-home marijuana cultivation by detecting radiation emitted from plant "grow lamps."

Hancock County Prosecutor Mark Miller confirmed that the technology was used for the first time in a drug case here. He said the matter remains under investigation and no charges have yet been filed.

Miller said Hancock METRICH, a member of a regional drug task force based in Mansfield, has had access to a thermal imaging camera for some time, but has used it primarily to help track suspects at night.

Miller said the U.S. Supreme Court has ruled that such cameras can be used to take images of private homes, but only if police first obtain a search warrant.

To convince Municipal Judge Kevin Smith to issue the warrant, METRICH and Prosecutor Miller's office had obtained the electric utility bills for the suspected marijuana farm, and for a similar-sized nearby residence from July through January.

Miller said the bills were subpoenaed so they could be compared.

The bills revealed that considerably more electricity was used -- at least 1,000 more kilowatt-hours per month -- at the home where the suspected pot farm was operating.

Thermal imaging cameras are a tool more often used by firemen.

Findlay Fire Chief Tom Lonyo said the fire department has been using the technology for about 12 years. He said the cameras can be used to search for people trapped in a smoke-filled building, or to detect hidden hot spots in a smoldering fire.

"We use them quite a bit," he said.

The cameras are used so much, in fact, Lonyo said two of the department's four thermal imagers are in the process of being replaced.

Thermal imaging cameras detect infrared radiation, which is given off by all objects, and make it possible to "see" things like a human or a house, even at night. In an image, warm objects such as light bulbs, which give off a great amount of radiation, would stand out against cooler objects.

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