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Many state-owned vehicles unaccounted for, agency finds

Will work to improve paper records of buys

By DAVID M. DRUCKER
 New York Times News Service

SACRAMENTO - California's fleet of state-owned vehicles swelled to 70,000 last year, but officials in an aggressive new asset-management push have so far been able to pinpoint only about 40,000.

The effort by Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger's State and Consumer Services Agency -- which began its review when he took office -- marks a first for the state but is highlighting what administration officials say have been years of haphazard and inefficient management by both Democratic and Republican governors.

"It was very bad. We were amazed by how inadequate the information (was)," said Fred Aguiar in charge of the agency conducting the review. "The data coming from departments and agencies regards to procurement was terrible."

The agency is seeking to consolidate the information in an effort to maximize resources, improve and reduce government spending as part of a broader push across state departments by Schwarzenegger.

Tracking down the data has been difficult. When Aguiar's department began its review, the situation was "very bad," he said, that he learned that one government agency had purchased \$4 million worth of vehicles but didn't have any record of where it bought them.

So far the department has determined that California spent \$33.6 million on automobile acquisition in the calendar year 2004, but it is still compiling fleetwide data and does not yet know the total value of the state's fleet.

Steve Frates, a senior fellow at the Rose Institute of State and Local Government at Claremont State University and an expert on government management practices, said fleet-management inefficiencies are widespread.

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uncommon among state governments -- though they are not necessarily the rule.

"The fact that California didn't know where its fleet was is a little disconcerting," Frates said. "Taking corrective action is good, but long overdue."

Charged with managing state assets -- including vehicles, real estate and goods such as office State and Consumer Services Agency until recently had little power to require state department information.

Aguiar said legislation by former state Senate President Pro Tem John Burton, D-San Francisco Democratic Gov. Gray Davis signed in 2003, and by state Sen. Jeff Denham, R-Merced, which Schwarzenegger signed in 2004, has made it easier to gather such information.

The legislation required all executive agencies and the California State University system to acc State and Consumer Services' request for vehicle-fleet information. Denham's bill, in particular, departments to have vehicle purchases approved by the Department of General Services, a de State and Consumer Services.

In June, Aguiar hired a private consulting firm, The Gartner Group, for \$175,000 to develop a cc system that will allow the state to track the number, value and costs of all vehicles it owns at an The system also would track details such as each vehicle's purchase date, location and accrue

"In order to really manage assets effectively, you've got to have a lot of information about them, to have it on a routine basis," said Rob Cook, deputy director for the Interagency Support Divisi

Aguiar said his agency does not yet have a target date for completion of the review; nor are offi much money might be saved. But state officials and government analysts expect that at least sc be reduced over the long term.

A recent state audit of one department suggests that the figure could be substantial.

The Department of Fleet Administration under DGS owns 6,400 automobiles, many of which it r government agencies, according to the Bureau of State Audits. However, the state auditor foun department charges are not necessarily competitive, and its vehicle inventory might be larger th

"In addition to rate comparisons, Fleet should compare the actual cost of operating its motor po amount that the state would pay commercial rental companies," states one of the audit recomm potential cost savings.

The effort to manage state assets better has spurred broad interest.

Assemblywoman Gloria Negrete McLeod, D-Montclair, is carrying a bill for the governor that wo easier for the state to dispose of surplus property, which has been another asset-management project the Schwarzenegger administration has been working on since late 2003. Assembly Bill authorize the state to sell \$120 million worth of excess real estate.

Some worry that state officials might go overboard in declaring property to be surplus and tighte procurement rules, making it harder for California to adjust to changing needs. But McLeod saic reason why state government should not know what it owns and how much its assets are costir

"It's surprising to me. I always thought departments knew what they had," she said. "The more :

we have, the better it is."

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