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SMART GRID: U.S. Postal Service, GridPoint ink $28M deal

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Jenny Mandel, E&E reporter

Arlington, Va.-based GridPoint Inc. will supply energy management technology for as many as 2,250 post offices, under a contract designed to help the U.S. Postal Service meet its energy savings targets, the company announced today.

Under the agreement, USPS will install GridPoint's hardware and software in 750 medium-sized facilities in the first year, with options to add that number in each of two additional years to reach 2,250 sites in total. The maximum value of the contract is $28.7 million.

GridPoint Executive Vice President John Clark said the installations would include hardware that allows users to more finely control the operations of heating, cooling and lighting systems, and software that provides visibility into how individual components and the whole system are using energy. "We give our customers both a speedometer and a tachometer for their energy use to see how they're doing, as well as a gas pedal and a brake," he said.

The system is compatible with other vendors' smart grid tools through a compatibility standard called BACnet, which would allow USPS to roll the resultant data in with information collected from other compliant tools for a big-picture view, Clark said.

The system to be used splits control between local users and central planners, Clark added. A key feature allows a central facilities manager to set the default temperature for a number of linked facilities, but lets a local manager temporarily override that setting. If on-site employees want to increase the air conditioning level, for example, they can temporarily cool the facility more, but the setting eventually resets to the central office-approved default.

Clark said a pilot at 16 USPS facilities in North Carolina showed that from a user-acceptance perspective, long-term changes to climate control systems need to be made slowly.

"One of the things that we've learned is that as you do a rollout, you want to slowly start phasing in set points. So if a building has been set at a specific [temperature], you don't want to just overnight change that by 2 or 3 degrees; you want to slowly phase it in."

The demonstration resulted in an average savings of 15 percent in energy consumption at the facilities, Clark said, with some cutting their usage as much as 30 percent, while others saved much less.

While the full-scale rollout will take place across the country, with a wide range of weather and climate conditions, about the same 15 percent average savings are anticipated, he said.

Clark said the contract with USPS does not include specific cost-savings targets or payback criteria. GridPoint customers generally see the technology pay for itself within one to two years, he said.

USPS has a goal of reducing its energy use by 30 percent by 2015, though it has already gone partway toward meeting that target by reducing energy intensity, measured in units per square foot, by 21 percent since 2003 through conservation measures, according to GridPoint.