

STRI Vehicle Policies

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Vehicle Policies for STRI-Owned Vehicles

INTRODUCTION

This section describes the policies, procedures and guidelines for the safe and efficient use of STRI owned vehicles. The aim is to ensure that STRI vehicles are used efficiently in the conduct of STRI business and by so doing ensuring the maximum availability to entitled users.

GENERAL POLICY for USE

Smithsonian regulations dictate that motor vehicles are to be used for official purposes only (41 CFR, Part 101.38). STRI's need to conserve limited resources to support the objectives of the Institution is also an important consideration in restricting vehicle use to official purposes only.

STRI official vehicles have Mission International (MI) licence plates granted by the Ministry of Foreign Relations (MFR) of Panama. Law requires STRI, to comply with the Ministry of Foreign Relations' rules for International Missions. These rules require that vehicle users must agree to the regulations established by MFR and to Panamanian Traffic Law.

What is Considered an "Official Purpose"?

- Scientific fieldwork..
- Transportation between facilities on official business.
- When an individual is on official travel status.
- When a supervisor schedules work requiring use of a STRI vehicle.
- Transportation to attend official meetings, seminars, etc.

What is Considered a Non-Official Purpose?

- Personal business or convenience.
- Home-to-work or vice-versa travel.
- Traveling to restaurants or carryout, unless on official business or travel status.

Case-by-case Exemptions: In emergency situations where there is a clear danger to health or Government property, individual vehicle users must take responsibility for authorizing vehicle use to alleviate the situation.

Officers responsible for vehicles can grant exceptions on a case by case basis for special reasons. For example, a compelling operational consideration makes vehicle home-to-work use essential or significantly more efficient for the conduct of official business.

Special Circumstances: Due to the remote location of some of the STRI field stations, special vehicle use is authorized for users at Gamboa Field Station, Barro Colorado Nature Monument, Naos Marine Lab, Galeta Marine Station and Bocas del Toro. For these sites, official use also includes:

- Transportation for buying food for field use and or materials for projects.
- Transportation of individuals that occasionally need to work at other facilities.
- Transportation to and from airports for transportation of personnel and equipment.
- Group transportation for social activities that are official sanctioned by site managers or scientific coordinators.
- Group transportation for activities that are official and sponsored by STRI (i.e. Fellows' dinners, VIP receptions, etc.)

Users are reminded that while they are in charge of an STRI vehicle they should avoid parking officially marked vehicles near bars, nightclubs, movie theaters, tourist beaches, and other locations that may cause accusations of improper use of MI vehicles.

Exclusive use of STRI vehicles for research programs: All vehicles registered in the Republic of Panama as STRI's must be owned and managed by STRI.

The practice of non-STRI organizations owning vehicles registered as STRI's in Panama has been discontinued. Extramurally funded programs that wish to have an MI vehicle assigned for the program's exclusive use will be permitted to make a long-term rental arrangement with STRI for approximately the equivalent cost of purchasing a new vehicle. At the end of the project the disposition of the vehicle will at STRI's discretion.

Example: \$18,000 paid in advance (in 2002) plus annual maintenance and insurance costs would give a program exclusive use of a 4x4 double cabin pick-up truck until such time (approximately 5-7 years) as the vehicle was deemed by STRI to be below STRI-vehicle safety/condition standards.

Improper use of STRI vehicles: Disciplinary actions will be taken against those operators who are found to be improperly using a STRI vehicle as laid down in the above policies. The responsible officer will examine the facts of the case and will decide what disciplinary actions will take place, including possible removal of privileges for using STRI vehicles.

Seat Belts: Panamanian law and Smithsonian regulations require that vehicle operators and passengers wear seat belts. No children under 5 are allowed in the front passenger seats; they must be seated in a rear seat. The driver of a vehicle should ensure that all passengers are wearing seat belts before moving the vehicle. The fine for not complying is \$50.00 per person.

Safety Equipment: All STRI vehicles must be provided with a fire extinguisher, flashlight and a reflective road hazard sign.

Smoking Regulations: OM 840, "Smithsonian Smoking Policy", expressly forbids smoking in all SI Vehicles.

License Plate: The use of MI plate is not transferable. Thus, it can not be removed from any vehicle to be placed on another one temporarily. The penalty for improper use of licence plates is \$100.00

Mobile Telephones: Panamanian transit law prohibits use of mobile phones while driving. The fine for not complying if you are stopped is \$50.00

RULES FOR OFFICES RESPONSIBLE FOR VEHICLES "responsible offices"

The various offices responsible for vehicle pools should establish their own guidelines to ensure that access to vehicles is equitable and that vehicles are available to as many people, who require them for official STRI business, as possible.

Offices in charge of vehicle pools are responsible for insuring that all users are aware of the rules governing use of STRI vehicles (checking valid driver's license and US Government Motor Vehicle Operators identification card).

Responsible offices are also responsible for ensuring the operators are competent to drive the type of vehicle that is being issued to them. This includes familiarity with manual (stick shift) transmission, four-wheel drive and free wheel locking hubs, diesel engines and operation of two-way radios installed in the vehicle. How this is achieved is at the discretion of each responsible office, however, it is strongly suggested that abbreviated copies of these rules be posted in an easily visible location in each vehicle.

RECORDS and SIGN-OUT PROCEDURES:

Trip Log: Each office responsible for assigning vehicles must require the drivers to document each trip out of the immediate operating vicinity on a trip log. At a minimum, trip logs will contain mileage in/out, time in/out, fuel in/out, destination information, driver(s), and purpose of the trip. Responsible offices will be expected to keep records of inspections, damage reports and scheduling calendars.

Vehicle Inspection and Sign-Out Procedure: When a vehicle is signed-out it must be checked by the driver before use. At a minimum this inspection must include: fuel, oil, coolant level, battery electrolyte level, lights, mirrors, turn signals, brake fluid, spare tire and tools. Users

should also inspect vehicle body and report any damage immediately to responsible office; otherwise they may be held liable for unreported damages. Driver(s) are responsible for carrying out this inspection and for promptly reporting any deficiencies found in the vehicle.

Vehicle users must make every effort to pick up and return vehicles as scheduled. If for any reason they are unable to return the vehicle at the scheduled time, they must inform the responsible office of the delay and the new estimated return time. Vehicles must be returned clean (outside and in) with a full tank of fuel and with a fully completed checkout form to the responsible office.

MOTOR VEHICLE MAINTENANCE and REPAIR

Maintenance: All STRI vehicles will receive regular scheduled preventive maintenance (PM) inspections to ensure safe efficient operation and to minimize equipment breakdowns. PM services are scheduled according to the manufacturer's recommendations or according to the Facilities Management PM Program, whichever falls soonest. Users will receive advanced, one week minimum, notice when the vehicle must be returned to the workshop for PM. This schedule must be respected. If necessary during maintenance periods an alternative vehicle will be provided from the vehicle pool.

Breakdown: All vehicle failures must be reported to Facilities Management as soon as possible. Facilities Management will give instructions on how to proceed. If a vehicle breakdown occurs in an area not readily accessible to STRI's workshop services, users must get a quotation for the repairs locally. If the estimate for repairs, including towing, is more than \$100 users must obtain permission to proceed with repairs, from Facilities Management. Funds expended will be refunded if the breakdown was not a result of incorrect use of vehicle.

OPERATOR'S IDENTIFICATION CARD

A valid US Government Motor Vehicle Operator's Identification Card is required for anybody who operates STRI motor vehicles, in addition to a Panamanian, other national or international driver's license. STRI Facility Secretary issues this. Any driver who is at STRI for more than 90 days must obtain a Panamanian driver's license. Supervisors and offices responsible for STRI vehicles must verify that anyone operating these vehicles possesses a valid driver's license for the type of vehicle(s) to be operated (e.g. vans, trucks).

Note: It is necessary to make visitors and STRI employees aware that the US Government Motor Vehicle Operator's Identification Card is an internal document, which has no validity within the Republic of Panama.

ACCIDENT REPORTING PROCEDURES AND REVIEW

Accident Prevention: Accident prevention is the cornerstone of vehicle safety. It depends mostly on the following:

- Driving defensively.
- Operating the vehicle with consideration for the other road users, weather conditions, visibility, etc.
- Obeying local laws.
- Fastening seat belts.
- Limiting distractions (e.g. using mobile telephones, eating, drinking, playing music while driving).
- Not driving under the effects of alcohol, drugs or fatigue.
- Proper maintenance of the vehicles.

Procedure:

- All STRI vehicles should carry in the glove compartment copy of vehicle official documents (P-1 Form from the External Affairs Dept., insurance, “revisado”, certificate of ownership, customs clearance).
- If a driver is stopped for driving an MI vehicle, the driver should show his/her STRI ID and all the above mentioned documents.
- The driver must attend the scheduled appointment given by the Traffic Authority Officer in the citation to answer questions about the incident.
- All motor vehicles must, at all times, carry a STRI accident report form in the glove compartment. In the event of an accident, the operator must follow the instructions on the accident form.

If the accident involves another vehicle, the operator must ensure that the Panamanian Police are called to the site of the accident and that they issue an accident report. It is the user's responsibility to do everything possible to bring the vehicle back to STRI. Facilities Management will assume the cost of towing the vehicle. The user must communicate with STRI by telephone or radio if accident occurs during working hours.

No later than the next working day following the accident, the operator should complete an accident form and submit it to the supervisor or the responsible office for review, signature, and further processing by the Safety Officer. The Safety Officer should also be contacted to fill out form SI2120 (SI report of accidents and illnesses). Upon receipt, the supervisor or responsible office should forward a copy of the accident report to the Accounting office and to the Department of External Affairs office (DEA).

Review and Damage Repair Cost Recovery: The supervisor or office responsible for the vehicle will review the accident form and discuss the cause of the accident with the operator. In the event that an accident is determined to be the fault of the operator or that the operator was using the vehicle contrary to these policies or against Panamanian law, then STRI reserves the right to take disciplinary action against the operator. This could include one or all of the following: 1) garnish an employee's wages to cover damages; 2) sequester research project funds to cover damages; 3) charge the user directly to recover damages. The operator can appeal any decision made by the supervisor or office responsible for the vehicle to the Director or his designate. This appeal must be made no later than 2 working days after notification of the decision. The Director or his designate must respond within a period of no more than 10 working days after receiving the appeal.

INSURANCE

STRI vehicles are insured only for liability to third parties.

STRI or its underwriters are not responsible for any personal items transported or left in STRI vehicles.

GENERAL TO ALL USERS

These rules are mostly common sense. If they are followed they will improve the quality and availability of the vehicles you use. Remember that when you sign out a vehicle you are the person responsible for its safety. For example, if you have a breakdown, do not abandon the vehicle until you are sure it is safe. Or if you find a fault or hear an unusual noise from the vehicle, report it promptly. Your acting promptly could prevent a problem getting worse and causing greater down-time for the vehicle.

FEES

Unless officially exempted, all users of STRI vehicles are required to pay for vehicle use. Current rates are published and subject to change without prior notice.

USE OF PRIVATELY OWNED VEHICLES FOR OFFICIAL BUSINESS

Subject to normal procedures for control of STRI funds, staff are encouraged to use their own vehicle for official business. Any such usage will be reimbursed at the rate published in the Federal Travel Regulations. (The January 2001 rate is 21.4 cents per kilometer).

PRIVATELY OWNED MI VEHICLES

Personel permanently resident in Panama and accredited by the Ministry of Foreign Relations are entitled to privately own one vehicle that carries MI plates and has tax exoneration.

- Vehicle plate: Use of MI plates is not transferable. You may be fined \$100.
- If you are planning to travel or to go on sabbatical and your vehicle is going to be used by another person, you should issue an authorization letter with a copy to Office of External Affairs (STRI), who will in turn officially inform the Ministry of Foreign Relations.
- You must also inform your insurance company of the alternate driver so that the policy extends coverage.
- If you have an accident in a private vehicle show your MI drivers license, to the Panamanian Police and inform them that the matter will be handled through the Ministry of Foreign Relations. Under no circumstances should the police retain your identification.
 - If you have an accident while driving a privately owned vehicle, proceed in the same manner as indicated above, immediately inform DEA office of your accident and follow the procedure mentioned above.

EXPEDITIONS/TRIPS LEAVING THE REPUBLIC OF PANAMA

Several steps are required for using an **official vehicle** for expeditions/trips leaving the Republic of Panama: (This service is not available to visitors with “tourist” visas). These rules apply also for privately owned vehicles.

- I. Approval of the STRI Director
- II. Approval of the Panamanian authorities as follows:

Only for drivers of the vehicle who are accredited scientific staff members with MI ID, or a scientific associates with special permits properly authorized:

- A) Send an e-mail to STRI’s department of External Affairs (DEA) notifying your intended departure, at least one month in advance.
- B) The accredited scientist or associate must send a copy of his/her MI-ID to DEA
- C) The Facility Management Office will facilitate
 - c. 1 Copy of vehicle documents to DEA
 - c.2 Notify the insurance broker for authorization to cover the vehicle properly while abroad
- D) DEA will be responsible for:
 - a) Obtaining MI vehicle exit permit from Ministry of Foreign Affairs
 - b) Obtaining the exit authorization from:
 - b.1 PTJ (Technical Police Office)

b.2 Customs Authority, Vehicle Control Section.

The process described above is long, we suggest you send your request to DEA office at least one (1) month in advance.

IN CASE OF AN ACCIDENT

If you have an accident while driving an official STRI vehicle/Privatey onwed vehicle out of Panama

- If the driver is an accredited staff member, he/she will need to show his/her MI ID and inform the police that the case will be dealt through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Under no circumstances should the police retain your identification.
- Inform immediately the Facilities Management office of your accident and follow the procedure mentioned above.
- For privately owned vehicles you should immediately inform
 - your insurance broker
 - notify DEA/ STRI office.

Terms used in these rules/policies

User,

The individual who signs-out a vehicle and takes responsibility for abiding by these rules. In most cases, this individual will also be the driver.

Responsible Offices,

These are the offices that have a vehicle or vehicles assigned to them for management, the senior person in these offices is responsible for insuring the vehicles are managed in accordance with these policies.