



## Rolling through a town near you: Cops driving mine-resistant vehicles

By Rob Nikolewski  
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SANTA FE — For years, they've been used as armored vehicles for U.S. troops in places like Afghanistan and Iraq.

But [Mine-Resistant Ambush Protected](#) vehicles are now being operated by law enforcement agencies across the country and don't be surprised to see them patrolling the streets in towns across New Mexico.

In fact, many of the armored vehicles that [weigh up to 30 tons](#) and [cost about \\$658,000](#) are here now.

[New Mexico Watchdog](#) filed an [Inspection of Public Records Act](#) request with the [New Mexico Department of Public Safety](#) and learned that nearly 20 law enforcement agencies across the state — from the biggest city to some of the smallest — have received MRAPs.

Even the campus police department at New Mexico State University applied for, and received, an MRAP.

How does a vehicle designed originally to fight the Taliban and Iraqi insurgents end up on the streets of, say, Bloomfield — population 7,968?

Because the federal government has created what's called the [1033 program](#), which allows the Department of Defense to essentially give away spare military equipment to local law enforcement agencies that qualify.

In the past, the inventory available for local police departments consisted of old military weaponry, Humvees and, in special circumstances, a used helicopter.

But with the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan winding down, and [sequestration cuts](#), the 1033 program has offered police departments the [bullet-proof, diesel-powered](#) vehicles that run on four-to-six wheels, seat up to 20 people and are fast enough to comfortably zoom on the freeway.

The specially designed MRAPs were produced to protect American troops from [improvised explosive devices](#) planted by enemy combatants in places like Fallujah and Kandahar.

“The only cost we incurred was the gas it took to drive it back,” [Ruidoso Police Chief Joe S. Magill](#) told New Mexico Watchdog of the practically mint-condition MRAP the Ruidoso Police Department picked up a little more than a month ago from a base in Sealy, Texas. “The cost was zero dollars.”

The situation is not unique to New Mexico. Across the country, states have 1033 state coordinators who work with law enforcement divisions and the federal government to get the inventory.

“Being down here in a desert area, along the border, we have a lot of remote areas,” said [Brandon Gigante, the chief of police in Deming](#), population 14,793. “We can offer assistance to agencies like the Border Patrol and help move people out, evacuate or rescue (people) out in the desert (who may be) dehydrated.”

Deming is one of 18 communities in New Mexico that received an MRAP, according to documents obtained by New Mexico Watchdog:

<b>MRAPs in New Mexico</b>		
	Entity	Population
1	Alamogordo Department of Public Safety	31,500
2	Albuquerque Police Department	555,417
3	Bloomfield Police Department	7,968
4	Carlsbad Police Department	26,697
5	Cibola County Sheriff's Office	27,335
6	Clovis Police Department	39,197
7	Deming Police Department	14,793
8	Farmington Police Department	45,854
9	Hobbs Police Department	35,007
10	Los Lunas Police Department	15,168
11	New Mexico State Police	2,085,287
12	New Mexico State University Police Dept	14,276 (enrollment)
13	Ramah Navajo Police Department	2,167 (2000 census)
14	Rio Arriba County Sheriff – Espanola	10,240 for Espanola
15	Roswell Police Department	48,477
16	Ruidoso Police Department	8,005
17	Santa Fe Police Department	69,204
18	Valencia County Sheriff Department	76,284
	Source: NM Department of Public Safety	
	Population numbers from US Census Bureau, 2013 estimates	

But not everyone is happy with the sight of an MRAP coming down a city street.

Civil libertarians worry about the potential for abuse. Fiscal conservatives complain about the hidden costs of the 1033 program.

The rollout of an MRAP in South Carolina [prompted one critic to write](#), “Though the vehicle was ‘free’ (it was) purchased by taxpayer money. Five-hundred surplus military vehicles costing \$658,000 each adds up to \$329 million of surplus (Department of Defense) spending on vehicles which are so unnecessary to the military they are being given away to American cities. Though

this wouldn't fix the debt, it is yet another multi-million dollar piece of wasteful spending by the American federal government.”

Earlier this year, the [Hobbs Police Department came under fire](#) for broadcasting a TV advertisement that aired across the state featuring aggressive police tactics and the department's MRAP turning a corner to the sound of pulse-pounding music.

“It's kind of disturbing, the way they play up these militaristic tactics,” said [Tim Lynch](#), director of the [Project on Criminal Justice](#) at the [Cato Institute](#), a think tank based in Washington, D.C. “It seemed more like they were looking for people who wanted to join the Army instead of a police department.”

But Ruidoso's chief, Magill, said he jumped at the chance to get an MRAP.

“We here in Ruidoso have had several natural disasters,” Magill said, pointing to a large flood in 2008 and three wildfires, including the Little Bear Fire that destroyed more than 240 homes. “Because of those natural disasters, I thought this vehicle would be a great vehicle to provide us a mobile command post.”

Los Lunas is home to one of the smallest communities equipped with an MRAP. [Police Chief Naithan Gurule](#) said the vehicle potentially saved lives when a domestic violence call in May escalated and a suspect fired an estimated 70 rounds from his house.

“We used the MRAP, first to rescue four officers across the street who were having to take cover behind, you know, regular cars,” Gurule said. “Also, the neighbors were rescued using the MRAP.”

The thought of an MRAP on a college campus may seem a bit alarming, but [New Mexico State University Chief of Police Stephen Lopez](#) said the armored vehicle his department picked up two months ago will be used for emergency situations, and not for SWAT teams.

“That's very understandable,” Lopez said about critics of civilian use of MRAPs. “But I will point out that in the [North Hollywood shooting \(in 1997\)](#), officers were left to appropriate an armored vehicle from a bank ... That took an hour. As we saw in Columbine (High School in Colorado), if you lose an hour, some people don't make it.”

In the month since the MRAP has arrived at Ruidoso, Magill said the vehicle is getting a fresh coat of black paint and is being readied to hit the streets.

“I know in some communities they catch a little flak because (they're accused of having) the government militarize the police,” Magill said in a telephone interview. “It is not going to have a .50-caliber machine gun mounted in it. It is not going to have a bazooka on it. We're going to use it for police purposes. We're putting radios in it. We're putting maps in it. We're putting dry boards in it so we can use it effectively for emergencies.”