

Flock Cameras let Law Enforcement know where your car has been

By Linda Sutter September 10, 2026



Every time you drive across the Golden Gate Bridge without stopping at a toll booth, technology helps determine which vehicle crossed and where the toll bill should go. License-plate recognition is no longer futuristic technology. It is already part of modern life.

So why am I telling you this?

Because Del Norte County residents have been raising questions about the Flock automated license plate reader cameras being used by the Sheriff's Office—and those questions deserve straight answers.

According to Sheriff Scott, the Del Norte County Sheriff's Office currently has five Flock cameras operating in the area. These automated license plate reader, or ALPR, cameras capture vehicles and license plates. Flock says its system does not use facial recognition or collect driver-identification or biometric information. It does, however, capture license-plate images, vehicle characteristics, date and time, and camera location.

WHY DOES DEL NORTE COUNTY NEED THEM?

Put the cameras into the context of what is happening locally. Del Norte County is facing an approximately \$9 million budget shortfall. Positions that traditionally might have remained vacant are being cut, and according to Sheriff Scott, the department may have only two deputies on duty at a given time to cover the entire county.

If a domestic-violence call comes from Gasquet, Klamath, Hiouchi or Smith River, two deputies cannot magically be everywhere at once. If one deputy is tied up on a serious call, resources available to respond elsewhere become extremely limited.

According to Sheriff Scott, the department is currently using AB 443 public-safety funding for payroll. He says the five Flock cameras cost approximately \$20,000 per year and are funded through CALMET drug-enforcement money—not Measure R money.

WHAT HAVE THE CAMERAS ACTUALLY DONE?

The better question may be whether they work. According to Sheriff Scott, Del Norte County’s Flock system has already assisted in three significant drug cases and has been instrumental in investigations resulting in fentanyl and methamphetamine being removed from local streets. He also says the technology has assisted with MMIP—Missing and Murdered Indigenous People—investigations.

Consider another situation. Grandpa has dementia, gets into his car and drives away. His frightened family calls law enforcement and provides his license plate number. If that vehicle later passes an ALPR camera and produces a match, investigators may receive information helping establish where the vehicle was observed. A camera that sounded like “government surveillance” can suddenly become a tool that may help bring Grandpa home.

That does not mean the public should stop asking questions. It means we should ask the right ones.

DOES ICE HAVE ACCESS?

One of the biggest concerns I hear is whether ICE can access Del Norte County’s Flock information. According to Sheriff Scott, his answer is no. He states that his department does not provide its Flock or ALPR information to ICE for immigration enforcement and that he adheres to California law, including the restrictions of SB 54, the California Values Act.

Information-sharing—not merely the existence of cameras—is one of the most important questions surrounding any large ALPR network. The public should continue to scrutinize who can search the system, why a search is conducted and whether those searches are audited.

HOW LONG IS THE INFORMATION KEPT?

According to Sheriff Scott, Del Norte County’s Flock information is currently retained for approximately 30 days and then deleted unless particular information is lawfully preserved. Flock announced in August 2026 that it is recommending a seven-day retention period and making seven days the default for new law-enforcement customers. Existing customers can retain their locally approved settings.

That change makes the local policy question even more relevant: Should Del Norte County eventually shorten its retention period as well?

THEN CAME CHATRIE v. UNITED STATES

Privacy law involving large digital databases changed significantly on June 29, 2026. In *Chatrue v. United States*, the U.S. Supreme Court considered law enforcement's acquisition of historical Google cellphone-location information through a geofence warrant. In a 6–3 decision, the Court held that obtaining Chatrue's Location History constituted a search under the Fourth Amendment, vacated the lower-court judgment and remanded the case for further proceedings.

Chatrue did not involve Flock cameras, and the Supreme Court did not declare every geofence warrant unconstitutional. But the decision raises an important question for ALPR technology: At what point does searching a large historical database to reconstruct a person's movements implicate the Fourth Amendment and require greater judicial protection?

There is a meaningful difference between an alert that a stolen vehicle just passed a camera and retrospectively searching historical records to reconstruct where a vehicle has traveled. Courts will continue deciding where constitutional lines should be drawn.

CAMERAS ARE ALREADY EVERYWHERE

Removing five Sheriff's Office cameras would not suddenly create a camera-free Del Norte County. Businesses have surveillance cameras. Homeowners have Ring and similar doorbell cameras. Construction companies and engineers use cameras to document projects and traffic patterns. Government agencies use cameras. Traffic systems use cameras. Nearly everyone carries a cellphone capable of recording high-definition video.

The real public-policy question is no longer simply, "Cameras or no cameras?" That ship sailed a long time ago.

The better questions are: Who controls the information? What is collected? How long is it retained? Who can search it? Is every search logged? Can another agency access it? What safeguards prevent abuse? And when should a warrant be required?

With only a handful of deputies potentially covering hundreds of square miles, technology can provide law enforcement with something taxpayers cannot easily manufacture: additional eyes. But those eyes need rules.

Strong written policies, short retention periods, search logs, audits, restrictions on outside access and consequences for misuse are not obstacles to good policing. They are what make powerful technology accountable.

So should Del Norte County throw away a tool that the Sheriff says has already helped remove fentanyl and methamphetamine from our streets and assisted in missing-person investigations? I don't think the answer is that simple.

Public safety and constitutional privacy do not have to be enemies. We can demand both.

