

PERFORMANCE AND POSITION MONITORING OF A MOBILE HVAC&R UNIT

[0001] Applicant hereby claims priority benefits under 35 U.S.C. § 119(e) of U.S. Provisional Patent Application No. 61/219,560 filed June 23, 2009, the disclosure of which is herein incorporated by reference.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

1. Technical Field

[0002] This disclosure relates generally to monitoring a refrigerant system and, more particularly, to monitoring the performance and the position of a refrigerant system.

2. Background Information

[0003] Mobile refrigerant systems (also known as “heating, ventilation, air conditioning and refrigeration (“HVAC&R”) systems”) are used to control internal environmental conditions in mobile units. For example, environmental conditions within an internal compartment of a vehicle, a trailer or a shipping container may be controlled using heating and/or cooling components in a refrigerant system. Such refrigerant systems are used to maintain favorable conditions for occupants and/or to prevent/reduce damage to cargo.

[0004] To improve performance and control, environmental conditions within a compartment are monitored by an environmental monitoring system, whereas operational performance of components (e.g., refrigerant compressors, condensers, evaporators, fans, expansion devices and heating elements) is monitored by a performance monitoring system (also known as “diagnostics systems”). For example, an environmental monitoring system may monitor temperature and humidity within a compartment, whereas a performance monitoring system may monitor whether components of a refrigerant system controlling the environment in the compartment are operating within predetermined tolerances or whether the components are malfunctioning. However, prior art performance monitoring systems generally provide little or no data about how a mobile refrigerant system is being operated at a particular time and corresponding location or whether the system is being misused. This lack of data may lead to difficulty in determining the cause of equipment failure, how long the equipment can operate before failure occurs, responsibility/liability for a failure of the refrigerant system and/or for damage to goods within the compartment.

SUMMARY OF THE DISCLOSURE

[0005] According to one aspect of the present invention, a system for monitoring performance of a mobile refrigerant system including one or more system components is provided. The system includes a global positioning system, a performance monitor, and a processor. The global positioning system includes a receiver that provides a locator signal. The performance monitor provides a monitor signal indicative of operational performance of at least one of the system components of the refrigerant system. The processor is adapted to receive and combine the locator signal and the monitor signal, and produce a combined locator and monitor signal output.

[0006] According to another aspect of the present invention, a method of monitoring a mobile refrigerant system is provided. The method includes the steps of: a) providing a mobile refrigerant system having one or more system components and a processor having an output; b) receiving a locator signal indicative of a position of the refrigerant system; c) receiving a monitor signal indicative of operational performance of at least one of the system components; and d) combining the locator signal and the monitor signal using the processor into a combined signal representative of location and performance at a point in time.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

[0007] FIG. 1 is a diagrammatic illustration including the present system.

[0008] FIG. 2 is a diagrammatic illustration of an embodiment of a system for monitoring a mobile refrigerant system.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE INVENTION

[0009] Now referring to FIG. 1, a mobile refrigerant system 10 (“HVAC&R system”) is adapted to control environmental conditions within an internal compartment in a mobile unit 12 such as, but not limited to, a vehicle, a trailer, a shipping container, etc. The HVAC&R system 10 includes one or more system components such as, but not limited to, at least one heating system component and/or one or more cooling system components (e.g. a condenser, an evaporator and/or a compressor), and also includes a system 14 for monitoring performance of the HVAC&R system 10 (referred to hereinafter as a “monitoring system 14”).

[0010] An embodiment of the present monitoring system 14 is shown diagrammatically in FIG. 2. The monitoring system 14 includes a global positioning system ("GPS") receiver 16, a performance monitor 18, and a processor 20. In some embodiments, the monitoring system 14 further includes a memory 22 and/or a transmitter 24.

[0011] The GPS receiver 16 is configured to receive one or more GPS signals 25, for example, from a plurality of satellites 26 (see FIG.1) and/or cell telephone towers, and to provide a locator signal which is a function of the GPS signal. The GPS signals 25 may include, for example, satellite beacons from the satellites 26. The locator signal is indicative of a latitudinal position and a longitudinal position, and in some instances a relative elevation, of the HVAC&R system 10 and mobile unit 12 at a point in time. The point in time may represent a single discrete point in time or a period of time.

[0012] The performance monitor 18 is configured to monitor operational performance of at least one of the system components of the HVAC&R system 10. For example, the performance monitor 18 can be configured to monitor operational parameters such as, but not limited to, refrigerant pressure, temperature (e.g., of a liquid refrigerant, system components, compartment air, cargo, etc.), humidity, airflow, vibration, sound (e.g., acoustical emissions), operational speed (e.g., the rotational speed of the compressor or the fan, etc.), electrical current, electrical voltage, electrical frequency, and/or operational state (e.g., whether the monitored component or the entire HVAC&R system 10 is on or off). The performance monitor 18 is further configured to provide a monitor signal indicative of the operational performance of the monitored components and/or the entire HVAC&R system 10 at a point in time, which may be a discrete point in time, or a period in time. The point in time at which the operational data is collected may be the exact same point in time as when the location data is collected. Alternatively, there may be a difference between the two that is either known, or is of such a small amount so as to be inconsequential.

[0013] The processor 20 is configured to receive and combine the locator signal and the monitor signal into a single combined locator and monitor signal. The combined locator and monitor signal is indicative of the position of the HVAC&R system 10 and mobile unit 12, and the operational performance of the monitored system components at a particular point in time.

In the embodiment shown in FIG. 2, the GPS receiver 16 and the performance monitor 18 are in signal communication with the processor 20. The processor 20 is further in selective signal communication with the memory 22 and/or the transmitter 24.

[0014] In operation of the system in FIG. 1, the GPS receiver 16 receives the GPS signal 25 from one or more of the satellites 26 and outputs the locator signal which is indicative of the position of the HVAC&R system 10 and mobile unit 12 at a point in time. Concurrently or proximately thereto, the performance monitor 18 monitors the operational performance of one or more of the system components of the HVAC&R system 10 and outputs the monitor signal which is indicative of the operational performance of the monitored components and/or the entire HVAC&R system 10.

[0015] The processor 20 receives the locator signal from the GPS receiver 16 and the monitor signal from the performance monitor 18 and combines the signals into a single combined locator and monitor signal. In some embodiments, the processor 20 outputs the combined locator and monitor signal via a network (e.g., a wireless network) to the transmitter 24, where the signal 29 may be transmitted to a remote terminal 30 (see FIG.1); e.g., a terminal located at the business in charge of the mobile unit, etc. In some embodiments, the processor 20 outputs the combined locator and monitor signal to the memory 22 for storage and later retrieval.

[0016] Information about the performance of the HVAC&R system 10 may be determined from the combined locator and monitor signal data. The operational performance component of the combined signal data, for example, can provide information indicative of whether the HVAC&R system 10 malfunctioned, when it malfunctioned, or if it is likely to malfunction. For example, signal data indicating a rapid increase in the temperature or pressure of the fluid refrigerant, an increased sound level or irregular component vibrations, etc., may be indicative of an HVAC&R system 10 malfunction. Conversely, signal data may further indicate that the HVAC&R system 10 was being properly operated during a particular period of time at a particular location.

[0017] The locator component of the combined signal data corresponding to the operational performance component can provide information relating to where the HVAC&R system 10 was being operated and therefore who had control of it. For example, the locator component of the signal data corresponding to the time of the malfunction may indicate that the

HVAC&R system 10 was being operated on a mobile unit 12 (e.g., truck-trailer) while in transit between two shipping terminals.

[0018] The combined locator and monitor signal data available using the present invention can be used for instance in a determination of liability where the mobile unit 12 or the associated HVAC&R system 10 is damaged. A warranty covering an HVAC&R system 10 may include terms that void the warranty under certain operational circumstances, the existence of which circumstances may be proved or disproved based on the combined signal data.

Alternatively, where the combined signal data establishes that an HVAC&R system 10 was properly operating between destinations, the HVAC&R manufacturer may avoid liability for damage to contents. As another example, the combined signal data may be used to establish that the failure of the HVAC&R system 10 was a result of improper operation rather than system failure.

[0019] The combined signal data can also be used to schedule maintenance on an HVAC&R system 10 based on the combined signal data indicating the increased likelihood of a potential malfunction.

[0020] The combined signal data can also be used to switch HVAC&R system 10 to a less demanding operational regime, referred to as a “reduced” operational regime (e.g., where the HVAC&R system 10 uses less power and/or operates at a reduced speed than normal operating conditions, etc.). For example, where the combined signal indicates that one or more of the monitored components and/or the entire HVAC&R system 10 are likely to malfunction, the HVAC&R system 10 is switched to a less demanding operational regime until the HVAC&R system 10, or a system component therein, is repaired or replaced. A warning signal can also be issued to schedule a technician to perform the necessary repairs. In addition, as set forth above, the combined signal may also indicate who is liable for the costs associated with the necessary repairs.

[0021] While various embodiments of the present invention have been disclosed, it will be apparent to those of ordinary skill in the art that many more embodiments and implementations are possible within the scope of the invention. Accordingly, the present invention is not to be restricted except in light of the attached claims and their equivalents.

What is claimed is:

1. A system for monitoring a mobile refrigerant system including one or more system components, comprising:
 - a global positioning system receiver that provides a locator signal;
 - a performance monitor that provides a monitor signal indicative of operational performance of at least one of the system components of the refrigerant system, wherein the monitor signal includes data indicative of at least one of refrigerant pressure, refrigerant temperature, airflow humidity, vibration, sound, operational speed, electrical voltage and electrical frequency in at least one of the system components; and
 - a processor adapted to receive and combine the locator signal and the monitor signal, and produce a combined locator and monitor signal output.
2. The system of claim 1, further comprising a transmitter that receives and transmits the combined locator and monitor signal.
3. The system of claim 1, further comprising a memory that receives and stores the combined locator and monitor signal.
4. The system of claim 3, wherein the at least one system component is one of a refrigerant compressor, a fan, a heat exchanger, and an expansion device.
5. The system of claim 1, wherein the combined locator and monitor signal includes positional data associated with a point in time, and operational performance data associated with substantially the same point in time.
6. The system of claim 1, wherein the monitor signal further includes data indicative airflow temperature.

7. The system of claim 1, wherein the monitor signal further includes data indicative of at least one of temperature, electrical current and operational state in at least one of the system components.
8. The system of claim 1, wherein the mobile refrigerant system is configured to control an environment within a container.
9. A method of monitoring a mobile refrigerant system, comprising:
 - providing a mobile heat exchange system having one or more system components and a processor having an output;
 - receiving a locator signal indicative of a position of the refrigerant system;
 - receiving a monitor signal indicative of operational performance of at least one of the system components;
 - combining the locator signal and the monitor signal using the processor into a combined signal representative of location and performance at a point in time; and
 - analyzing performance of the mobile refrigerant system using the combined locator and monitor signal to at least one of
 - assign responsibility where a component or system malfunction has occurred; and
 - predict whether the mobile refrigerant system is going to malfunction.
10. The method of claim 9, further comprising the step of scheduling maintenance based on the predicted malfunction.
11. The method of claim 9, further comprising the step of providing a warning based on the predicted malfunction.
12. The method of claim 9, further comprising the step of transmitting the combined locator and monitor signal over a wireless network.
13. The method of claim 9, wherein a global positioning system receiver provides the locator signal to the processor.

14. The method of claim 9, further comprising switching the mobile heat exchange system to a reduced operational regime when a malfunction is predicted.