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Cooper et al.

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(54) **SYSTEM AND METHOD FOR INSPECTING A ROUTE DURING MOVEMENT OF A VEHICLE SYSTEM OVER THE ROUTE**

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(73) Assignee: **General Electric Company**, Schenectady, NY (US)

(*) Notice: Subject to any disclaimer, the term of this patent is extended or adjusted under 35 U.S.C. 154(b) by 0 days.

(21) Appl. No.: **14/864,243**

(22) Filed: **Sep. 24, 2015**

(65) **Prior Publication Data**

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Related U.S. Application Data

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(Continued)

(51) **Int. Cl.**

B61K 9/08 (2006.01)
B61L 23/04 (2006.01)

(Continued)

(52) **U.S. Cl.**

CPC ***B61K 9/08*** (2013.01); ***B61L 3/121*** (2013.01); ***B61L 23/04*** (2013.01); ***B61L 23/044*** (2013.01);

(Continued)

(58) **Field of Classification Search**

CPC B61K 9/10; B61K 9/08; B61L 23/044; B61L 23/047; B61L 23/048;

(Continued)

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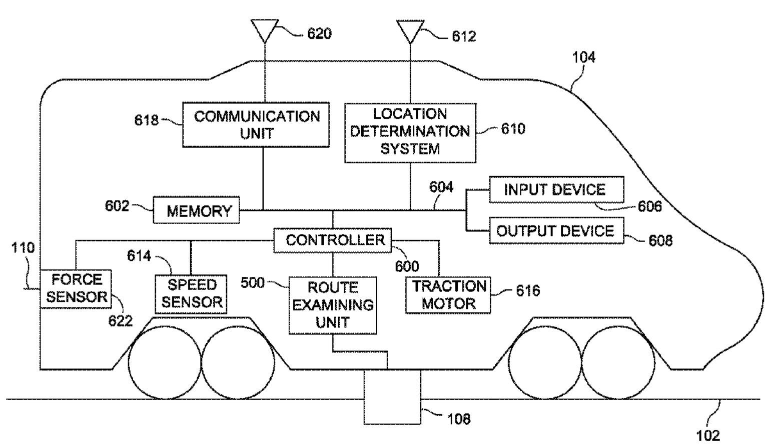
Assistant Examiner — Edward Torchinsky
(74) *Attorney, Agent, or Firm* — John A. Kramer; Global Patent Operation

(57) **ABSTRACT**

A sensing system includes a leading sensor, a trailing sensor, and a route examining unit. The leading sensor is onboard a first vehicle of a vehicle system that is traveling along a route. The leading sensor measures first characteristics of the route as the vehicle system moves along the route. The trailing sensor is disposed onboard a second vehicle of the vehicle system. The trailing sensor measures second characteristics of the route as the vehicle system moves along the

(Continued)



route. The route examining unit is disposed onboard the vehicle system and receives the first characteristics of the route and the second characteristics of the route to compare the first characteristics with the second characteristics. The route examining unit also identifies a segment of the route as being damaged based on a comparison of the first characteristics with the second characteristics.

23 Claims, 11 Drawing Sheets

Related U.S. Application Data

continuation-in-part of application No. 13/478,388, filed on May 23, 2012, now abandoned.

(51) **Int. Cl.**

B61L 3/12	(2006.01)
B61L 99/00	(2006.01)
B61L 15/00	(2006.01)
B61L 25/02	(2006.01)

(52) **U.S. Cl.**

CPC ***B61L 23/045*** (2013.01); ***B61L 99/00*** (2013.01); *B61L 15/0036* (2013.01); *B61L 25/025* (2013.01); *B61L 2205/04* (2013.01)

(58) **Field of Classification Search**

CPC B61L 15/0036; B61L 23/045; B61L 3/121; B61L 2205/04; B61L 25/025

See application file for complete search history.

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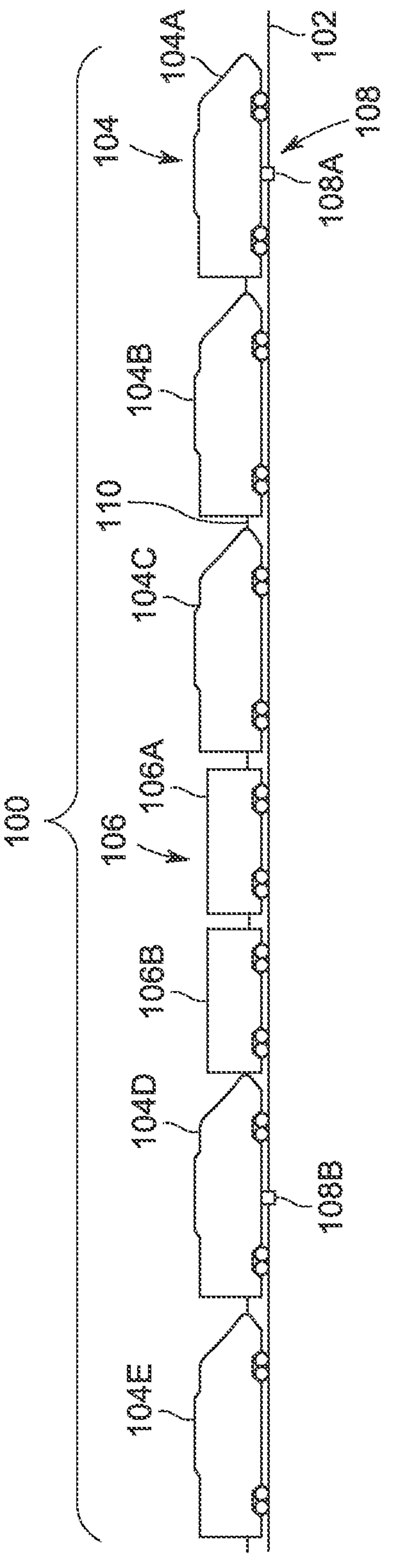

100
102
104
104A
104B
104C
104D
104E
106
106A
106B
108
108A
108B
110

FIG. 1

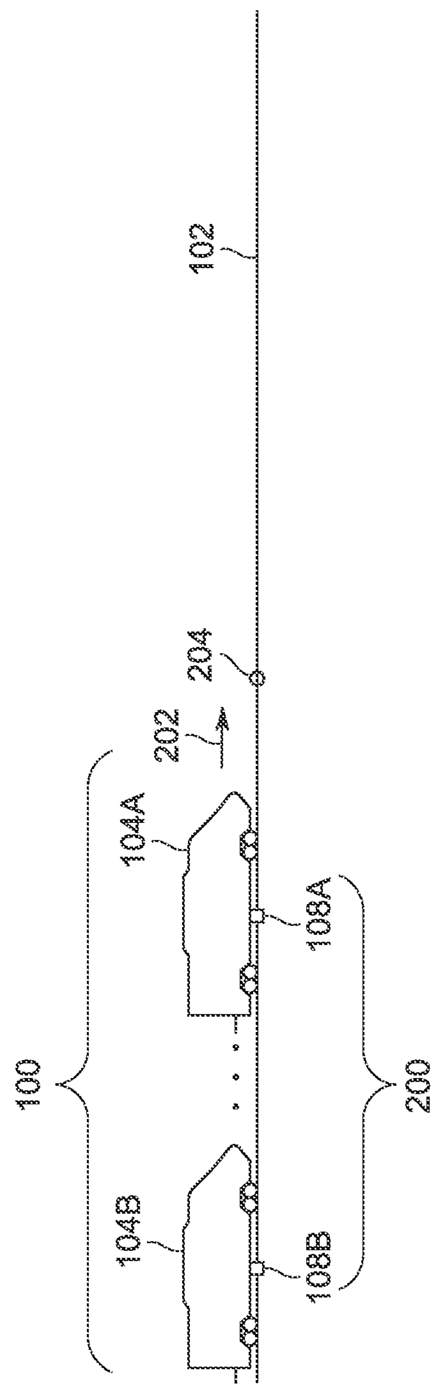
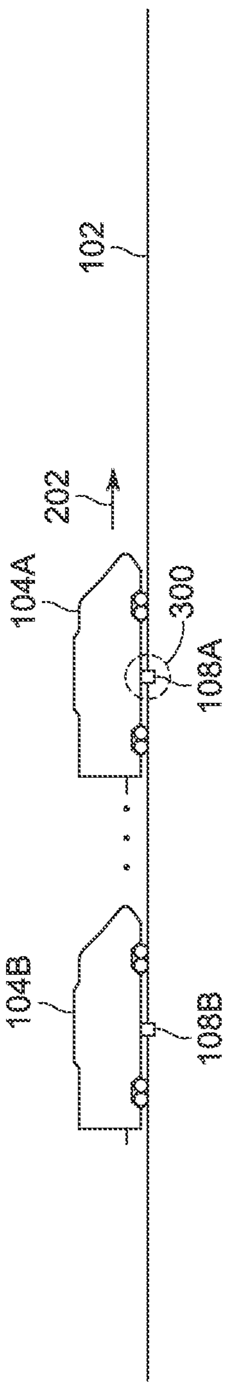
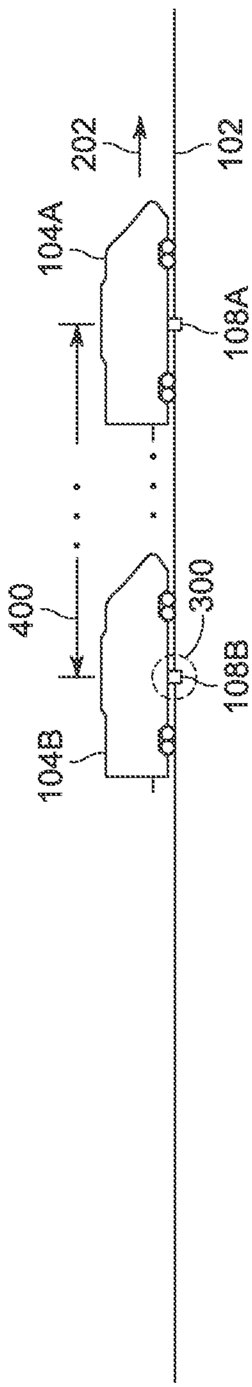

100
102
104A
104B
108A
108B
200
202
204

FIG. 2



102
202
104A
300
108A
104B
108B

FIG. 3



202
102
104A
108A
400
300
108B
104B

FIG. 4

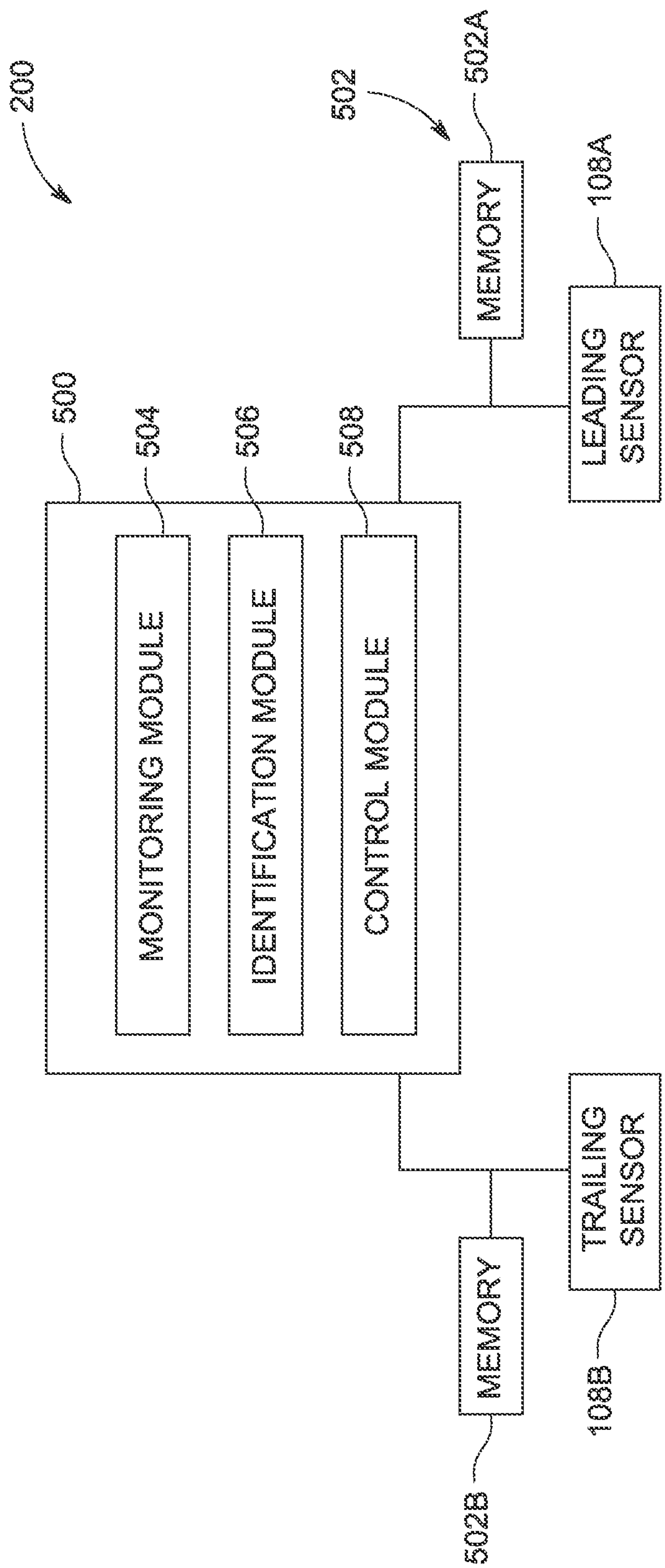
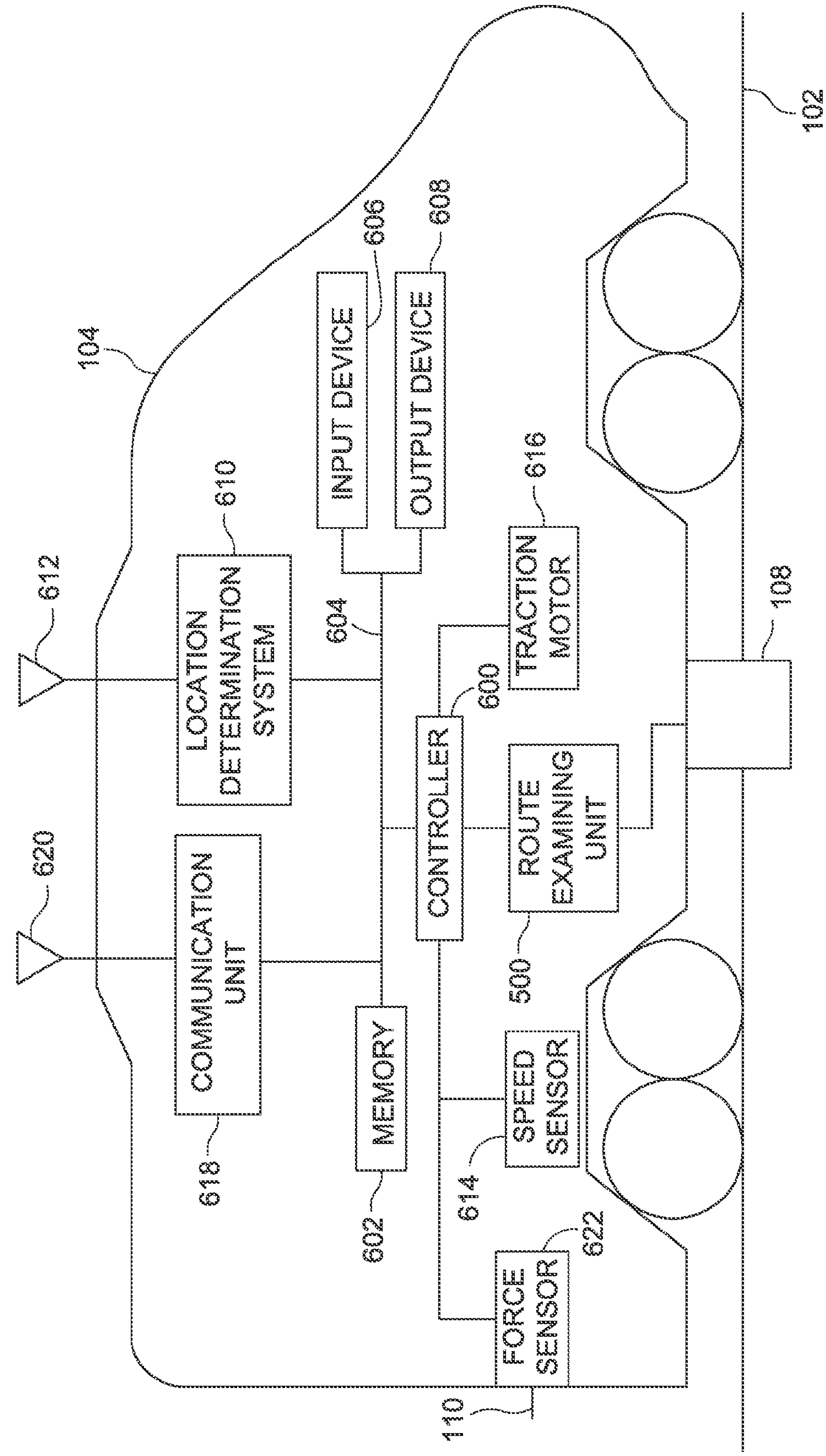

200
500
504
506
508
MONITORING MODULE
IDENTIFICATION MODULE
CONTROL MODULE
502
502A
MEMORY
108A
LEADING SENSOR
TRAILING SENSOR
108B
MEMORY
502B

FIG. 5



104
102
606
608
INPUT DEVICE
OUTPUT DEVICE
610
612
620
LOCATION DETERMINATION SYSTEM
COMMUNICATION UNIT
604
616
TRACTION MOTOR
108
600
CONTROLLER
ROUTE EXAMINING UNIT
500
MEMORY
618
602
SPEED SENSOR
614
622
FORCE SENSOR
110

FIG. 6

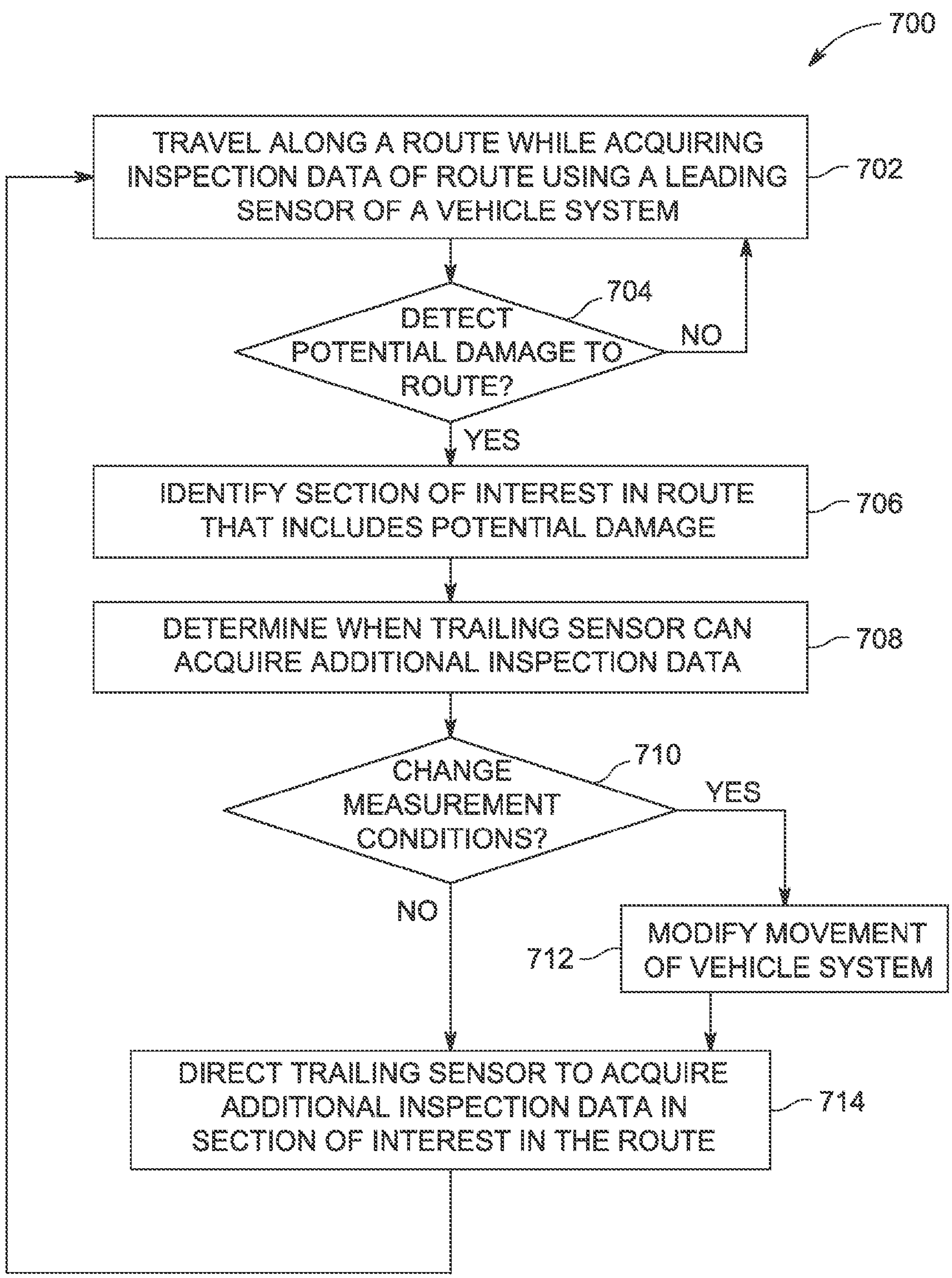

700
TRAVEL ALONG A ROUTE WHILE ACQUIRING INSPECTION DATA OF ROUTE USING A LEADING SENSOR OF A VEHICLE SYSTEM
702
DETECT POTENTIAL DAMAGE TO ROUTE?
704
NO
YES
IDENTIFY SECTION OF INTEREST IN ROUTE THAT INCLUDES POTENTIAL DAMAGE
706
DETERMINE WHEN TRAILING SENSOR CAN ACQUIRE ADDITIONAL INSPECTION DATA
708
CHANGE MEASUREMENT CONDITIONS?
710
YES
NO
MODIFY MOVEMENT OF VEHICLE SYSTEM
712
DIRECT TRAILING SENSOR TO ACQUIRE ADDITIONAL INSPECTION DATA IN SECTION OF INTEREST IN THE ROUTE
714

FIG. 7

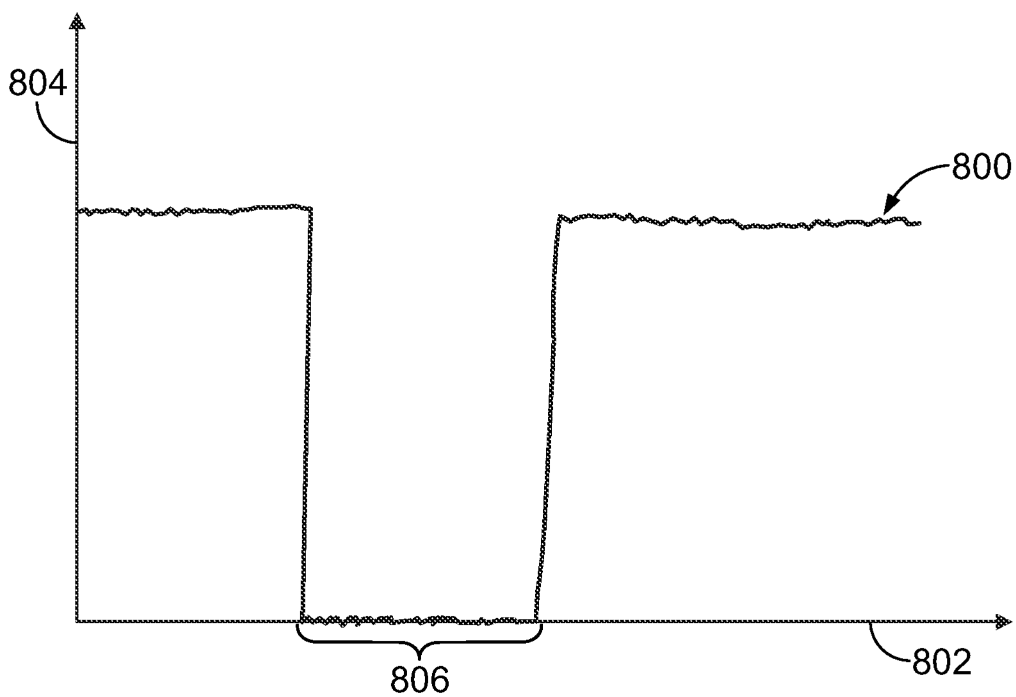


FIG. 8

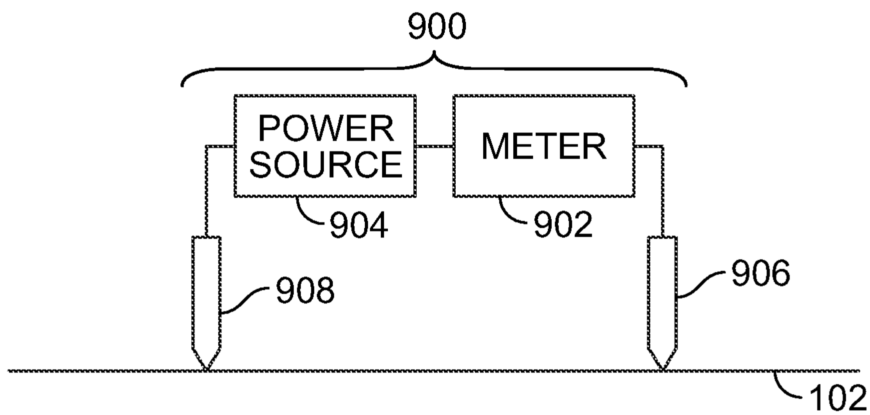


FIG. 9

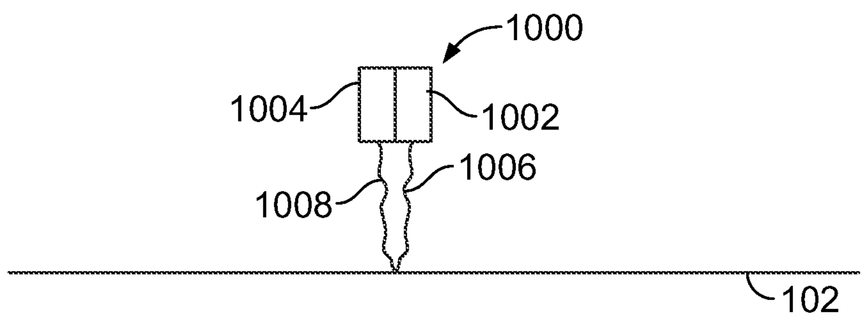


FIG. 10

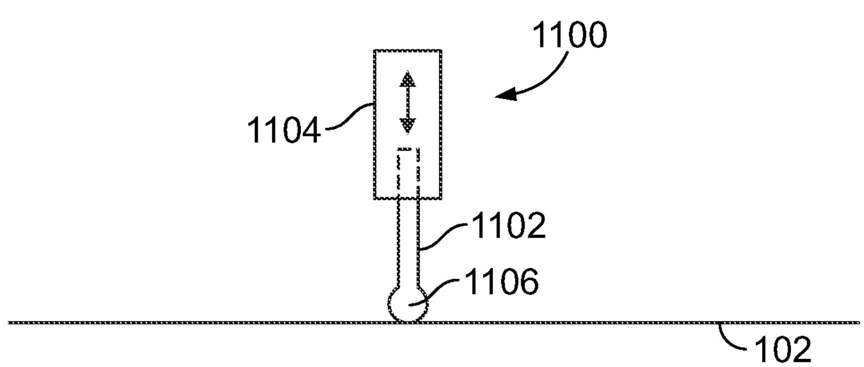


FIG. 11

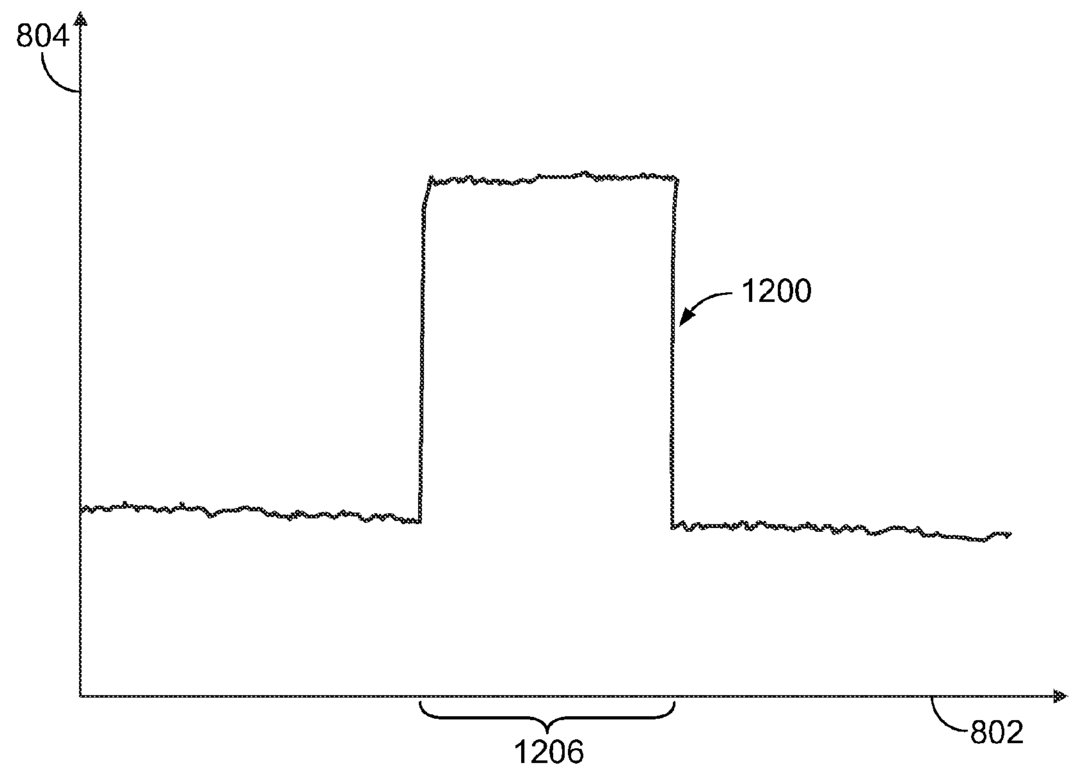


FIG. 12

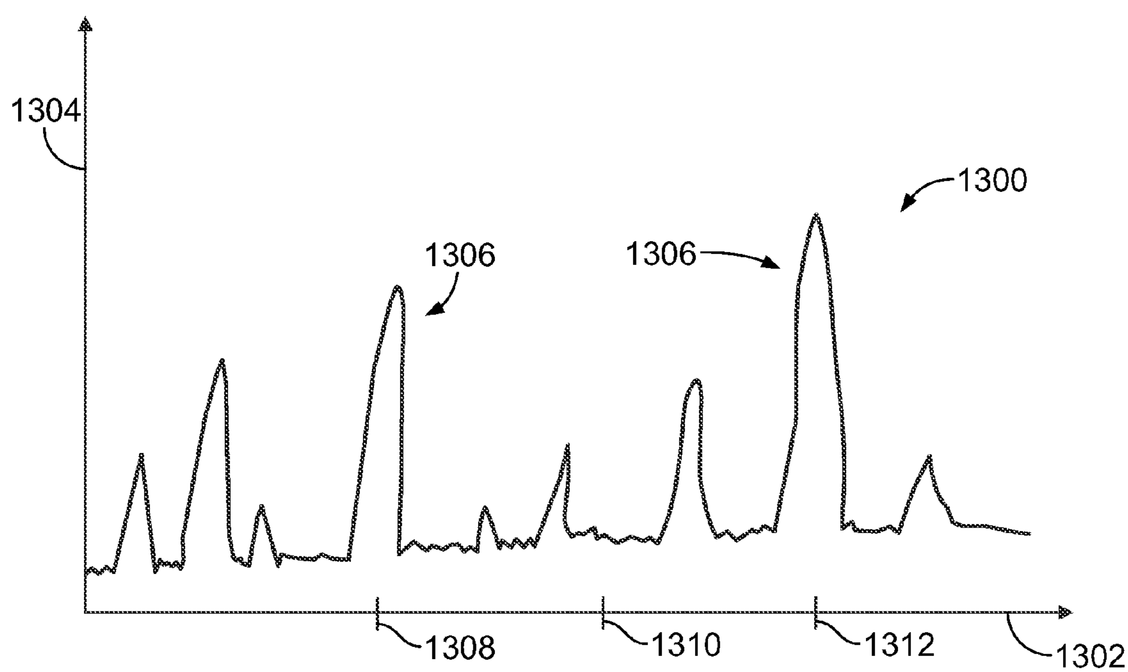


FIG. 13

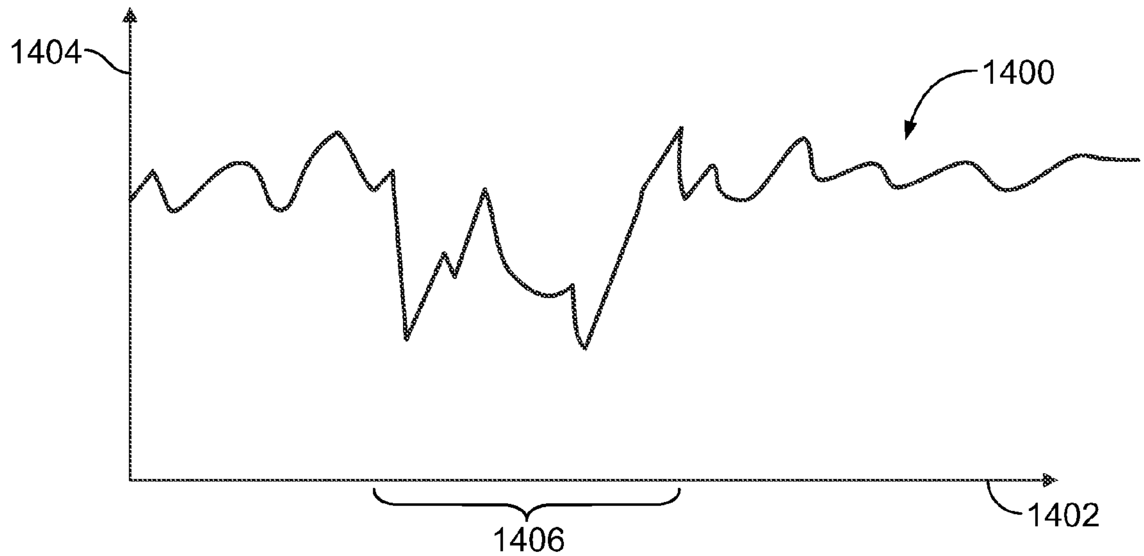
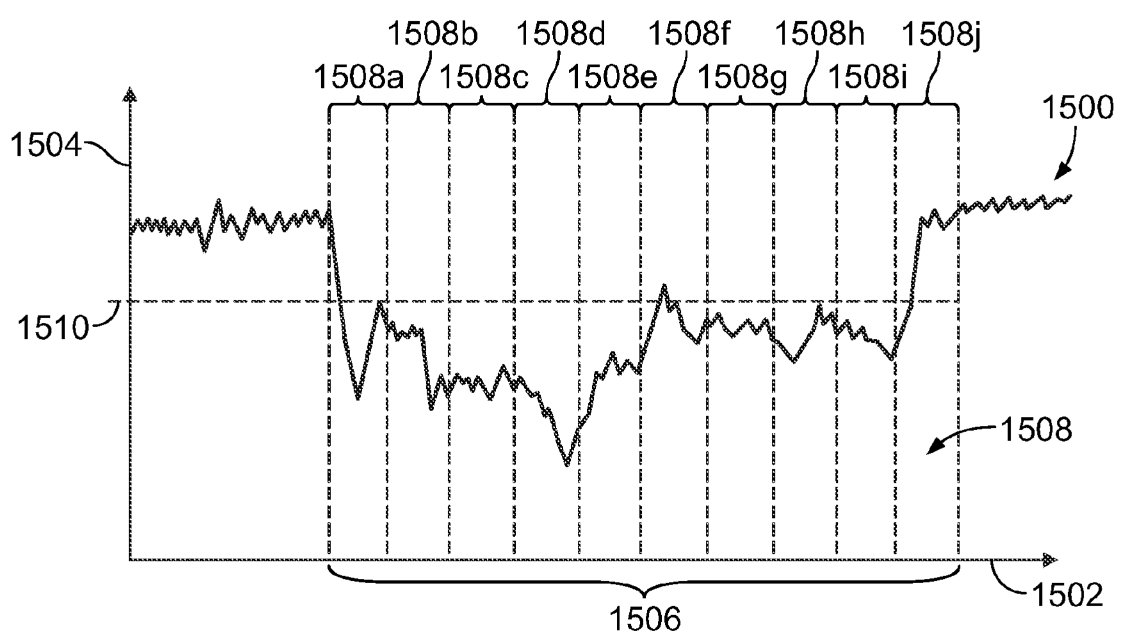

1404
1400
1406
1402

FIG. 14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1508d
1508f
1508h
1508j
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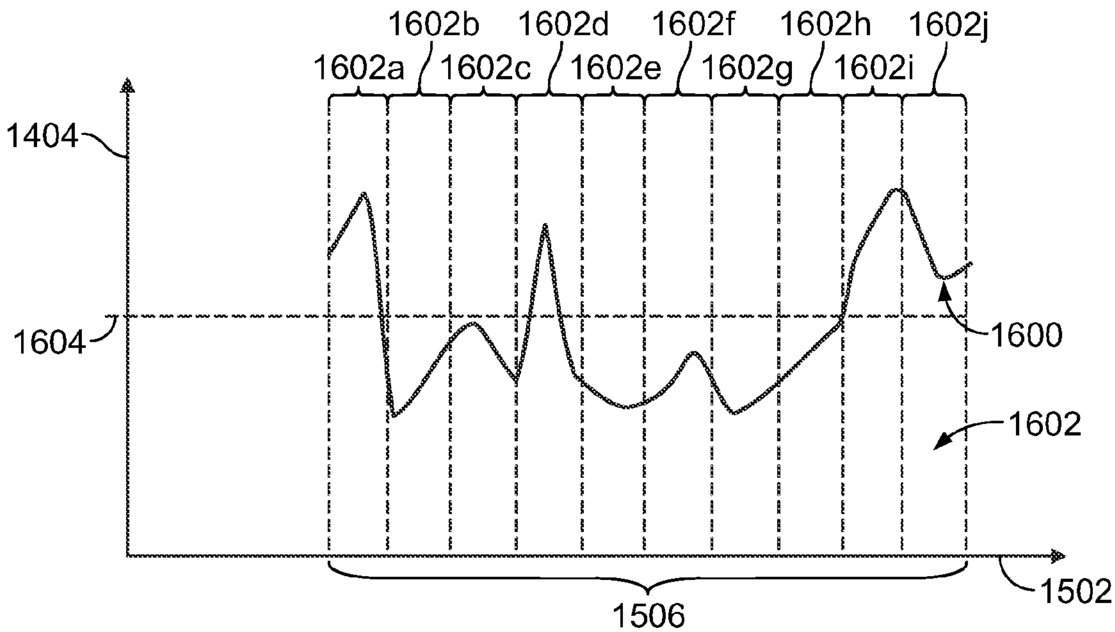
1508c
1508e
1508g
1508i
1500
1504
1510
1508
1506
1502

FIG. 15


1602b
1602d
1602f
1602h
1602j
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1602c
1602e
1602g
1602i
1404
1604
1600
1602
1502
1506

FIG. 16

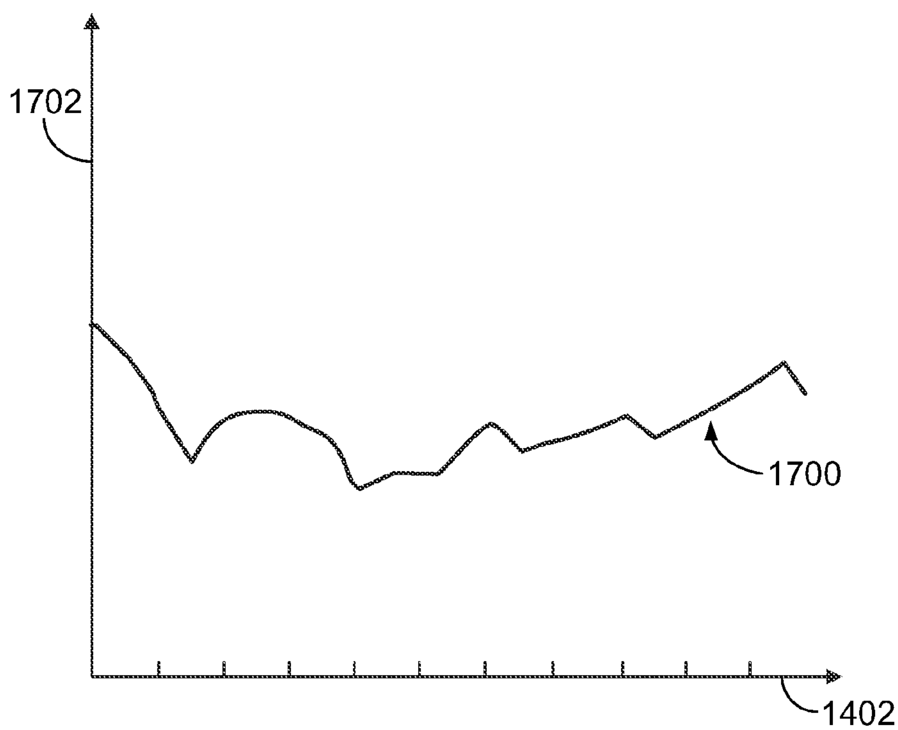
1702
1700
1402

FIG. 17

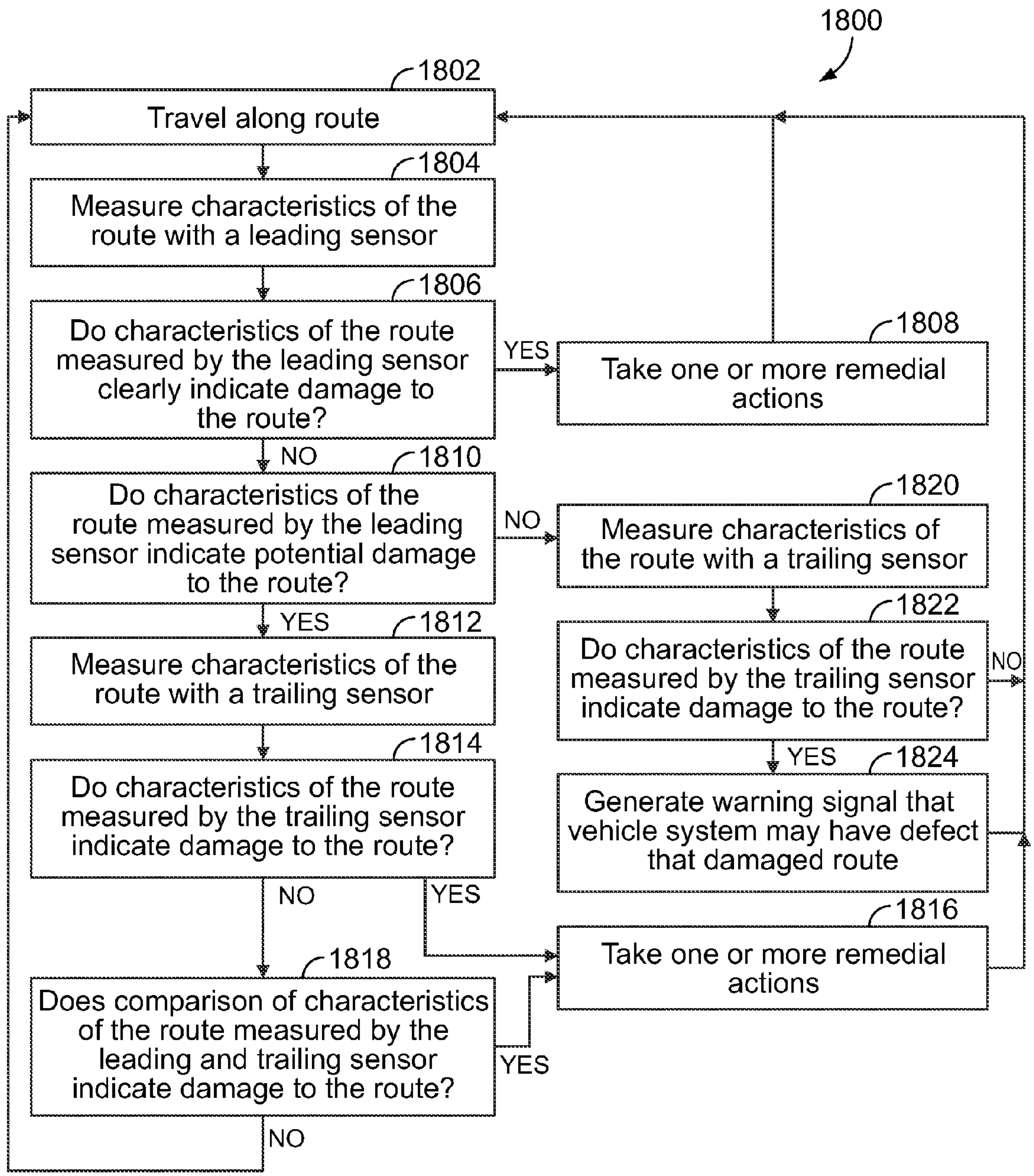
1800
1802
Travel along route
1804
Measure characteristics of the route with a leading sensor
1806
Do characteristics of the route measured by the leading sensor clearly indicate damage to the route?
YES
1808
Take one or more remedial actions
NO
1810
Do characteristics of the route measured by the leading sensor indicate potential damage to the route?
NO
1820
Measure characteristics of the route with a trailing sensor
1822
Do characteristics of the route measured by the trailing sensor indicate damage to the route?
NO
YES
1824
Generate warning signal that vehicle system may have defect that damaged route
YES
1812
Measure characteristics of the route with a trailing sensor
1814
Do characteristics of the route measured by the trailing sensor indicate damage to the route?
NO
YES
1816
Take one or more remedial actions
1818
Does comparison of characteristics of the route measured by the leading and trailing sensor indicate damage to the route?
YES
NO

FIG. 18

SYSTEM AND METHOD FOR INSPECTING A ROUTE DURING MOVEMENT OF A VEHICLE SYSTEM OVER THE ROUTE

CROSS-REFERENCE TO RELATED APPLICATIONS

This application is a continuation of U.S. patent application Ser. No. 14/152,159, filed 10 Jan. 2014, which is a continuation-in-part of U.S. patent application Ser. No. 13/478,388, which was filed on 23 May 2012 and is now abandoned (the "'388 application"). The entire disclosure of the '388 application is incorporated by reference.

FIELD

The inventive subject matter described herein relates to inspection systems.

BACKGROUND

Known inspection systems are used to examine routes traveled by vehicles for damage. For example, a variety of handheld, trackside, and vehicle mounted systems are used to examine railroad tracks for damage, such as cracks, pitting, or breaks. These systems are used to identify damage to the tracks prior to the damage becoming severe enough to cause accidents by vehicles on the tracks. Once the systems identify the damage, maintenance can be scheduled to repair or replace the damaged portion of the tracks.

Some known handheld inspection systems are carried by a human operator as the operator walks alongside the route. Such systems are relatively slow and are not useful for inspecting the route over relatively long distances. Some known trackside inspection systems use electronic currents transmitted through the rails of a track to inspect for broken rails. But, these systems are fixed in location and may be unable to inspect for a variety of other types of damage to the track other than broken rails.

Some known vehicle mounted inspection systems use sensors coupled to a vehicle that travels along the route. The sensors obtain ultrasound or optic data related to the route. The data is later inspected to determine damage to the route. But, some of these systems involve specially designed vehicles in order to obtain the data from the route. These vehicles are dedicated to inspecting the route and are not used for transferring large amounts of cargo or passengers long distances. Consequently, these types of vehicles add to the cost and maintenance of a fleet of vehicles without contributing to the capacity of the fleet to convey cargo or passengers.

Others of these types of vehicle mounted systems may be limited by using only a single type of sensor. Still others of these vehicle mounted inspection systems are limited in the types of sensors that can be used due to the relatively fast travel of the vehicles. For example, some sensors may require relatively slow traveling vehicles, which may be appropriate for specially designed vehicles but not for other vehicles, such as cargo or passenger trains having the sensors mounted thereto. The specially designed vehicles can be relatively expensive and add to the cost and maintenance of a fleet of vehicles.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION

In one example of the inventive subject matter described herein, a sensing system includes a leading sensor, a trailing

sensor, and a route examining unit. The leading sensor is configured to be coupled to a leading rail vehicle of a rail vehicle system that travels along a track. The leading sensor also is configured to acquire first inspection data indicative of a condition of the track in an examined section of the track as the rail vehicle system travels over the track. The trailing sensor is configured to be coupled to a trailing rail vehicle of the rail vehicle system and to acquire additional, second inspection data indicative of the condition of the track subsequent to the leading rail vehicle passing over the examined section of the track and the leading sensor acquiring the first inspection data. The route examining unit is configured to be disposed onboard the rail vehicle system. The route examining unit also is configured to direct the trailing sensor to acquire the second inspection data in the examined section of the track when the first inspection data indicates damage to the track such that both the leading sensor and the trailing sensor acquire the first inspection data and the second inspection data, respectively, of the examined section of the track during a single pass of the rail vehicle system over the examined section of the track. The leading sensor can be configured to acquire the first inspection data at a first resolution level and the trailing sensor can be configured to acquire the second inspection data at a second resolution level that is greater than the first resolution level such that the second inspection data includes a greater amount of data than the first inspection data at least one of per unit time, per unit distance, or per unit area.

In another example of the inventive subject matter described herein, a sensing system includes a leading sensor, a trailing sensor, and a route examining unit. The leading sensor is configured to be coupled to a leading rail vehicle of a rail vehicle system that travels along a track. The leading sensor also is configured to automatically acquire first inspection data indicative of a condition of the track in an examined section of the track as the rail vehicle system travels over the track. The first inspection data can be acquired at a first resolution level. The trailing sensor is configured to be coupled to a trailing rail vehicle of the rail vehicle system and to automatically acquire additional, second inspection data indicative of the condition of the track subsequent to the leading rail vehicle passing over the examined section of the track and the leading sensor acquiring the first inspection data. The second inspection data can be acquired at a second resolution level that is greater than the first resolution level such that the second inspection data includes a greater amount of data than the first inspection data at least one of per unit time, per unit distance, or per unit area. The leading rail vehicle and the trailing rail vehicle can be directly or indirectly mechanically connected in the rail vehicle system. The route examining unit is configured to be disposed onboard the rail vehicle system. The route examining unit also can be configured to automatically direct the trailing sensor to acquire the second inspection data in the examined section of the track when the first inspection data indicates damage to the track such that both the leading sensor and the trailing sensor acquire the first inspection data and the second inspection data, respectively, of the examined section of the track during a single pass of the rail vehicle system over the examined section of the track.

In another example of the inventive subject matter described herein, a sensing system includes a leading sensor, a trailing sensor, and a route examining unit. The leading sensor is configured to be disposed onboard a first vehicle of a vehicle system that travels along a route. The leading sensor also is configured to measure first characteristics of the route as the vehicle system travels along the route. The trailing sensor is configured to be disposed onboard a second vehicle of the vehicle system that is directly or indirectly mechanically coupled with the first vehicle. The trailing sensor also is configured to measure second characteristics of the route as the vehicle system moves along the route. The route examining unit is configured to be disposed onboard the vehicle system. The route examining unit is configured to receive the first characteristics of the route and the second characteristics of the route and to compare the first characteristics with the second characteristics, the route examining unit also configured to identify a segment of the route as being damaged based on a comparison of the first characteristics with the second characteristics.

In one embodiment, a sensing system is provided that includes a leading sensor, a trailing sensor, and a route examining unit. As used herein, the term “leading” is meant to indicate that the sensor, vehicle, or other component travels over a location along the route ahead of (e.g., before) another sensor, vehicle, or other component (e.g., a “trailing” sensor, vehicle, or component) for a direction of travel. For example, in a first direction of travel, a first vehicle or sensor may be the leading vehicle or sensor when the first vehicle or sensor travels over a designated location before a second vehicle or sensor. The second vehicle or sensor may be the trailing vehicle. But, for an opposite, second direction of travel, the second vehicle or sensor may travel over the designated location before the first vehicle or sensor and, as a result, the second vehicle or sensor is the leading vehicle or sensor while the first vehicle or sensor is the trailing vehicle or sensor.

The leading sensor is configured to be coupled to a vehicle system that travels along a route. The leading sensor also is configured to acquire first inspection data indicative of a condition of the route as the vehicle system travels over the route. The condition may represent the health (e.g., damaged or not damaged, a degree of damage, and the like) of the route. The trailing sensor is configured to be coupled to the vehicle system and to acquire additional, second inspection data that is indicative of the condition to the route subsequent to the leading sensor acquiring the first inspection data. The route examining unit is configured to be disposed onboard the vehicle system and to identify a section of interest in the route based on the first inspection data acquired by the leading sensor. The route examining unit also is configured to direct the trailing sensor to acquire the second inspection data within the section of interest in the route when the first inspection data indicates damage to the route in the section of interest.

In another embodiment, a method (e.g., for acquiring inspection data of a route) includes acquiring first inspection data indicative of a condition of a route from a leading sensor coupled to a leading vehicle in a vehicle system as the vehicle system travels over the route, determining that the first inspection data indicates damage to the route in a section of interest in the route, and directing a trailing sensor coupled to a trailing vehicle of the vehicle system to acquire additional, second inspection data of the route when the first inspection data indicates the damage to the route. The leading vehicle and the trailing vehicle are mechanically directly or indirectly interconnected with each other in the vehicle system such that the leading vehicle passes over the section of interest of the route before the trailing vehicle.

In another embodiment, a sensing system includes a leading sensor, a trailing sensor, and a route examining unit. The leading sensor is configured to be coupled to a leading rail vehicle of a rail vehicle system that travels along a track. The leading sensor also is configured to acquire first inspection data indicative of a condition of the track in an examined section of the track as the rail vehicle system travels over the track. The trailing sensor is configured to be coupled to a trailing rail vehicle of the rail vehicle system and to acquire additional, second inspection data indicative of the condition to the track subsequent to the leading rail vehicle passing over the examined section of the track and the leading sensor acquiring the first inspection data. The route examining unit is configured to be disposed onboard the rail vehicle system. The route examining unit also is configured to direct the trailing sensor to acquire the second inspection data in the examined section of the track when the first inspection data indicates damage to the track such that both the leading sensor and the trailing sensor acquire the first inspection data and the second inspection data, respectively, of the examined section of the track during a single pass of the rail vehicle system over the examined section of the track.

In one aspect, a sensing system comprises a leading sensor configured to be coupled to a leading rail vehicle of a rail vehicle system that travels along a track. The leading sensor is also configured to automatically acquire first inspection data indicative of a condition of the track in an examined section of the track as the rail vehicle system travels over the track. The first inspection data is acquired at a first resolution level. The sensing system further comprises a trailing sensor configured to be coupled to a trailing rail vehicle of the rail vehicle system and to automatically acquire additional, second inspection data indicative of the condition of the track subsequent to the leading rail vehicle passing over the examined section of the track and the leading sensor acquiring the first inspection data. The second inspection data is acquired at a second resolution level that is greater than the first resolution level. The leading rail vehicle and the trailing rail vehicle are directly or indirectly mechanically connected in the rail vehicle system. The sensing system further includes a route examining unit configured to be disposed onboard the rail vehicle system. The route examining unit is also configured to automatically direct the trailing sensor to acquire the second inspection data in the examined section of the track when the first inspection data indicates damage to the track, such that both the leading sensor and the trailing sensor acquire the first inspection data and the second inspection data, respectively, of the examined section of the track during a single pass of the rail vehicle system over the examined section of the track. In one aspect, the rail vehicle system may be a train, and the leading rail vehicle and the trailing rail vehicle may be first and second locomotives of the train.

In another embodiment, a sensing system includes a route examining unit that is configured to be disposed onboard a vehicle system that travels along a route. The route examining unit also is configured to receive first inspection data from a leading sensor configured to be coupled to a leading vehicle of the vehicle system as the vehicle system travels over the route. The first inspection data is indicative of a condition of the route in an examined section of the route. The route examining unit is further configured to identify damage in the examined section of the route based on the first inspection data and to direct a trailing sensor to acquire second inspection data in the examined section of the route responsive to identifying the damage. The trailing sensor is configured to be coupled to a trailing vehicle of the vehicle system that is indirectly or directly mechanically coupled to the leading vehicle.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

Reference is now made briefly to the accompanying drawings, in which:

FIG. **1** is a schematic diagram of a vehicle system traveling along a route in accordance with one embodiment of the inventive subject matter;

FIG. **2** illustrates one example of the vehicle system shown in FIG. **1** approaching a damaged portion of the route shown in FIG. **1**;

FIG. **3** illustrates one example of a leading sensor shown in FIG. **1** of a sensing system shown in FIG. **2** passing over the damaged portion of the route as shown in FIG. **2**;

FIG. **4** illustrates a trailing sensor of the sensing system shown in FIG. **2** subsequently passing over the damaged portion of the route as shown in FIG. **2**;

FIG. **5** is a schematic diagram of one embodiment of the sensing system shown in FIG. **2**;

FIG. **6** is a schematic diagram of one embodiment of the vehicle shown in FIG. **1**;

FIG. **7** is a flowchart of one embodiment of a method for obtaining inspection data of a potentially damaged route;

FIG. **8** illustrates one example of an inspection signature of the route shown in FIG. **1**;

FIG. **9** is a schematic illustration of one version of a sensor that can be used to measure the electrical characteristics of the route shown in FIG. **1** for creation of inspection signatures;

FIG. **10** is a schematic illustration of another version of a sensor that can be used to measure distance characteristics of the route shown in FIG. **1** for creation of inspection signatures;

FIG. **11** is a schematic illustration of another version of a sensor that can be used to measure distance characteristics of the route shown in FIG. **1** for creation of inspection signatures;

FIG. **12** illustrates another example of an inspection signature of the route shown in FIG. **1**;

FIG. **13** illustrates another example of an inspection signature of the route shown in FIG. **1**;

FIG. **14** illustrates a first inspection signature obtained by the leading sensor shown in FIG. **1** according to one example of comparing inspection signatures to identify a damaged section of the route shown in FIG. **1**;

FIG. **15** illustrates a second inspection signature obtained by the trailing sensor shown in FIG. **1** according to one example of comparing inspection signatures to identify a damaged section of the route shown in FIG. **1**;

FIG. **16** illustrates one example of a scaled portion of the first inspection signature shown in FIG. **14**;

FIG. **17** illustrates a net inspection signature according to one example of the inventive subject matter described herein; and

FIG. **18** illustrates a method for inspecting a route for damage according to one example of the inventive subject matter.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION

FIG. **1** is a schematic diagram of a vehicle system **100** traveling along a route **102** in accordance with one embodiment of the inventive subject matter. The vehicle system **100** includes several powered vehicles **104** (e.g., powered vehicles **104**A-E) and several non-powered vehicles **106** (e.g., non-powered vehicles **106**A-B) mechanically interconnected with each other such that the vehicles **104**, **106** travel together as a unit. The vehicles **104**, **106** may be

connected with each other by coupler devices **110**. The terms “powered” and “non-powered” indicate the capability of the different vehicles **104**, **106** to self-propel. For example, the powered vehicles **104** represent vehicles that are capable of self-propulsion (e.g., that include motors that generate tractive effort). The non-powered vehicles **106** represent vehicles that are incapable of self-propulsion (e.g., do not include motors that generate tractive effort), but may otherwise receive or use electric current for one or more purposes other than propulsion. In the illustrated embodiment, the powered vehicles **104** are locomotives and the non-powered vehicles **106** are non-locomotive rail cars linked together in a train. (Examples of non-powered rail vehicles include box cars, tanker cars, flatbed cars, and other cargo cars, and certain types of passenger cars.) Alternatively, the vehicle system **100**, powered vehicles **104**, and/or non-powered vehicles **106** may represent another type of rail vehicle, another type of off-highway vehicle, automobiles, and the like. The route **102** may represent a track, road, and the like.

In one embodiment, the vehicle system **100** operates in a distributed power (DP) arrangement, where at least one powered unit **104** is designated as a lead unit that controls or dictates operational settings (e.g., brake settings and/or throttle settings) of other powered units (e.g., trailing powered units **104**) in the vehicle system **100**. The powered units **104** may communicate with each other to coordinate the operational settings according to the commands of the leading powered unit **104** through one or more communication links, such as a wireless radio communication link, an electronically controlled pneumatic (ECP) brake line, multiple unit (MU) cable, and the like.

The vehicle system **100** includes plural sensors **108** (e.g., sensors **108**A, **108**B) that monitor the route **102** for damage as the vehicle system **100** moves along the route **102**. While only two sensors **108** are shown in the illustrated embodiment, the vehicle system **100** may include additional sensors **108**. Additionally, while the sensors **108** are shown coupled with the powered vehicles **104**, one or more of the sensors **108** may be coupled with a non-powered vehicle **106**. The sensors **108** can examine the route **102** for damage such as broken sections of a rail, pitted sections of a road or rail, cracks on an exterior surface or interior of a rail or road, and the like. The sensors **108** may be the same or different types of sensors that examine the route **102**. By “types,” it is meant that the sensors **108** may use different technologies or techniques to examine the route **102**, such as ultrasound, electric current, magnetic fields, optics, acoustics, distance measurement, force displacement, and the like, representing some different technologies or techniques.

For example, with respect to ultrasound, one or more of the sensors **108** may include an ultrasound transducer that emits ultrasound pulses into the route **102** and monitors echoes of the pulses to identify potential damage to the route **102**. With respect to electric current, one or more of the sensors **108** may include probes that measure the transmission of electric current through the route **102**, such as by using a section of the route **102** to close a circuit, to identify damage to the route **102**. An opening of the circuit can be indicative of a broken portion of the route **102**, such as a broken rail. With respect to magnetic fields, one or more the sensors **108** may measure eddy currents in the route **102** when the route **102** is exposed to a magnetic field. With respect to optics, the sensors **108** may acquire video and/or static images of the route **102** to identify damage to the route **102**. Alternatively or additionally, the sensors **108** may use optics, such as laser light, to measure a profile, positions, or displacement of the route **102** (e.g., displacement of rails of a track). With respect to acoustics, the sensors **108** may monitor sounds, such as sounds created when the vehicle system **100** travels over the route **102**, to identify damage to the route **102**. With respect to distance measurement, the sensors **108** may include probes that engage the route **102** to measure distances to or between portions of the route **102** to identify damage. With respect to force displacement, the sensors **108** may include probes that engage and attempt to push sections of the route **102** to identify damage and/or strength of the route **102**.

The sensors **108** that are in the vehicle system **100** may be the same or different types of sensors **108**. Additionally or alternatively, one or more of the sensors **108** may represent a sensor array that includes two or more of the same or different types of sensors **108**. The sensors **108** acquire data (e.g., ultrasound data, electric circuit data, eddy current data, magnetic data, optic data, displacement data, force data, acoustic data, and the like) that represents a condition of the route **102**. This data is referred to as inspection data.

One of the sensors **108**A is positioned ahead of another one of the sensors **108**B along a direction of travel of the vehicle system **100**. The sensor **108**A that is positioned ahead of the sensor **108**B is referred to as a leading sensor while the sensor **108**B that is positioned behind or downstream from the leading sensor **108**A along the direction of travel of the vehicle system **100** is referred to as a trailing sensor **108**B. The vehicle **104**, **106** to which the leading sensor **108**A is coupled can be referred to as the leading vehicle (e.g., the leading powered vehicle **104**A) and the vehicle **104**, **106** to which the trailing sensor **108**B is coupled is referred to as the trailing vehicle (e.g., the trailing powered vehicle **104**D).

As the vehicle system **100** moves along the route **102**, the sensors **108** acquire inspection data of the route **102** to monitor the condition of the route **102**. The sensors **108** obtain inspection data that is examined (e.g., by a route examination unit) to identify potential sections of interest in the route **102** that may include damage to the route **102**, such as breaks in a rail, cracks in the route **102**, pitting in the route **102**, and the like.

FIGS. **2** through **4** illustrate one example of operation of a sensing system **200** of the vehicle system **100**. The sensing system **200** includes the sensors **108** of the vehicle system **100**. Only the leading and trailing vehicles **104**A, **104**B of the vehicle system **100** are shown in FIG. **1**, but, as described above, one or more powered and/or non-powered vehicles **104**, **106** may be disposed between and interconnected with the leading and trailing vehicles **104**A, **104**B. FIG. **2** shows the vehicle system **100** approaching a damaged portion **204** of the route **102**, FIG. **3** shows the leading sensor **108**A of the sensing system **200** passing over the damaged portion **204** of the route **102**, and FIG. **4** shows the trailing sensor **108**B of the sensing system **200** subsequently passing over the damaged portion **204** of the route **102**. The damaged portions **204** of the route **102**, such as sections of the route **102** that include cracks, breaks, pitting, and the like.

In operation, the vehicle system **100** moves along the route **102** in a direction of travel **202**. The leading sensor **108**A may acquire inspection data of the route **102** as the vehicle system **100** moves along the route **102**. The leading sensor **108**A can acquire the inspection data on a periodic or continual basis, when automatically prompted by a control unit (described below) of the vehicle system **100**, and/or when manually prompted by an operator of the vehicle system **100** using an input device (described below).

When the leading sensor **108**A passes over the damaged portion **204** of the route **102** (as shown in FIG. **3**), the leading sensor **108**A may acquire inspection data representative of the damage to the route **102** in the damaged portion **204**. This inspection data can be examined by the route examining unit (described below) of the vehicle system **100** to identify potential damage to the route **102**. The sensing system **200** can designate the section of the route **102** that includes the identified potential damage as a section of interest **300** in the route **102**. The section of interest **300** may be identified as including portions of the route **102** in addition to the location where the potential damage is identified. For example, the sensing system **200** can designate the section of interest **300** as including an additional margin (e.g., section) of the route **102** ahead of and/or behind (e.g., along the direction of travel **202**) the location where the potential damage is identified. Designating the section of interest **300** as including more of the route **102** than just the exact location of where the potential damage is identified can increase the probability that the trailing sensor **108**B can acquire inspection data of the entire damage to the route **102** in or near the damaged portion **204**.

Alternatively, the section of interest **300** may represent an examined section of the route **102**, or a section of the route **102** that is being examined for damage relative to other sections of the route **102**. For example, the leading sensor **108**A may be activated to acquire inspection data only for designated or selected (e.g., autonomously or manually selected) portions of the route **102**. The section of interest **300** may represent at least one of the designated or selected portions that are associated with potential damage to the route **102**, as determined from the inspection data acquired by the leading sensor **108**A.

In response to identifying the section of interest **300**, the sensing system **200** may direct the trailing sensor **108**B to acquire additional inspection data of the route **102** in the section of interest **300**. In one embodiment, the trailing sensor **108**B is inactive (e.g., such as by being deactivated, turned OFF, or otherwise not obtaining inspection data of the route **102**) until activated by the sensing system **200** in response to the section of interest **300** being identified from inspection data acquired by the leading sensor **108**A. The sensing system **200** can determine when the trailing sensor **108**B will pass over the section of interest **300** (as shown in FIG. **4**) based on one or more characteristics of the vehicle system **100**.

For example, the sensing system **200** can determine when the trailing sensor **108**B will pass over the section of interest **300** based on the velocity of the vehicle system **100** along the direction of travel **202** and a separation distance **400** between the leading and trailing sensors **108**A, **108**B along the vehicle system **100**. In an embodiment where the vehicle system **100** includes several vehicles **104**, **106** following a curved route **102** and/or undulating route **102** (e.g., that passes over one or more hills, mounds, dips, and the like), the separation distance **400** can be measured along the length of the vehicle system **100** as the vehicle system **100** curves and/or undulates along the route **102**. The sensing system **200** can determine when the trailing sensor **108**B will pass over the section of interest **300** based on the separation distance **400** and the velocity of the vehicle system **100** and then direct the trailing sensor **108**B to acquire the additional inspection data of the section of interest **300** when (or just prior to) the trailing sensor **108**B passing over the section of interest **300**.

Alternatively, the trailing sensor **108**B may be actively acquiring additional inspection data of the route **102** when the sensing system **200** identifies the section of interest **300** based on the inspection data from the leading sensor **108**A. The sensing system **200** may then flag or otherwise designate the inspection data acquired by the trailing sensor **108**B when the trailing sensor **108**B passes over the section of interest **300** as being inspection data of interest (e.g., data obtained from the section of interest **300**).

In response to identifying the section of interest **300**, the sensing system **200** may direct the trailing sensor **108**B to acquire the additional inspection data at a greater (e.g., finer) resolution or resolution level relative to the inspection data acquired by the leading sensor **108**A. For example, the trailing sensor **108**B may be directed to acquire more measurements of the route **102** per unit time than the leading sensor **108**A. As another example, the trailing sensor **108**B may optically acquire data (e.g., via a camera) of the section of interest **300** with a much smaller lateral resolution than the optically acquired data obtained by the leading sensor **108**A. The lateral resolution can refer to the distances between two distinguishable points in the image or video data that is acquired. For example, the smallest distance between two or more distinguishable points in the image acquired by the leading sensor **108**A may be larger than the smallest distance between two or more distinguishable points in the image acquired by the trailing sensor **108**B. The trailing sensor **108**B may have a smaller limiting resolution measured using the USAF 1951 resolution test target than the leading sensor **108**A. In one aspect, the difference in resolutions between the leading and trailing sensors **108**A, **108**B does not refer to how close the sensors **108**A, **108**B are to an object being imaged. That is, if the trailing and leading sensors **108**A, **108**B were the same or similar type of cameras, the fact that the trailing sensor **108**B is disposed closer to the route **102** than the leading sensor **108**A may not necessarily mean that the trailing sensor **108**B acquires images or video of the route **102** at a greater resolution than the trailing sensor **108**B.

Alternatively or additionally, the trailing sensor **108**B may be directed to acquire measurements having greater detail (e.g., data) of the potential damage to the route **102** than the leading sensor **108**A. Alternatively or additionally, the trailing sensor **108**B may be directed to acquire a different type of inspection data of the route **102** than the leading sensor **108**A. Alternatively or additionally, the trailing sensor **108**B may be directed to acquire more measurements (e.g., more inspection data) of the potential damage to the route **102** than the leading sensor **108**A.

The sensing system **200** may be in communication with a propulsion system (described below) of the vehicle system **100** to coordinate movement of the vehicle system **100** with the locations of the leading sensor **108**A and/or trailing sensor **108**B in response to identification of the section of interest **300** in the route **102**. For example, when the section of interest **300** is identified based on the inspection data from the leading sensor **108**A, the sensing system **200** may communicate with a controller (described below) of the vehicle system **100** that autonomously controls the propulsion system of the vehicle system **100** so that the velocity of the vehicle system **100** slows down when the trailing sensor **108**B passes over the section of interest **300**. Alternatively or additionally, the controller may generate commands that are output to an operator of the vehicle system **100** to direct the operator to manually control propulsion system of the vehicle system **100** so that the velocity of the vehicle system **100** slows down when the trailing sensor **108**B passes over the section of interest **300**. The vehicle system **100** can slow down just prior to the trailing sensor **108**B passing over the section of interest **300**, as soon as the section of interest **300** is identified, and/or when the trailing sensor **108**B reaches the section of interest **300**. The vehicle system **100** may slow down so that the trailing sensor **108**B can acquire the additional inspection data at a higher resolution than the inspection data from the leading sensor **108**A. For example, if both the leading and trailing sensors **108**A, **108**B acquire inspection data at the same or approximately the same rate, then slowing down the vehicle system **100** when the trailing sensor **108**B acquires the inspection data can allow for more inspection data (e.g., data at a higher resolution) from the trailing sensor **108**B than the inspection data from the leading sensor **108**A. Even if the leading and trailing sensors **108**A, **108**B acquire inspection data at different rates, slowing down the vehicle system **100** can allow for the trailing sensor **108**B to acquire the inspection data at a greater resolution.

As another example, when the section of interest **300** is identified based on the inspection data from the leading sensor **108**A, the sensing system **200** may communicate with the propulsion system of the vehicle system **100** in order to change a slack in one or more coupler devices **110** between the connected vehicles **104**, **106**. For example, the propulsion system may change movement of the vehicle system **100** so that forces exerted on one or more of the coupler devices **110** are modified. The slack may be modified by reducing the slack (e.g., increasing the tensile forces on the coupler device **110**) between the trailing vehicle **104**B and one or more of the vehicles **104**, **106** coupled with the trailing vehicle **104**B. Reducing the slack can allow for reduced movement of the trailing vehicle **104**B and the trailing sensor **108**B relative to the other vehicles **104**, **106** in the vehicle system **100**. Such reduced movement also can reduce noise in the inspection data and/or erroneous inspection data acquired by the trailing sensor **108**B.

The operation of the vehicle system **100** described above allows for the sensing system **200** to acquire inspection data of one or more sections of interest **300** in the route **102** by two or more sensors **108**A, **108**B at two or more different locations in the vehicle system **100** during a single pass of the vehicle system **100** over the section of interest **300**. The multiple inspections may be performed to acquire different types of inspection data, different amounts of inspection data, inspection data at different resolutions, and the like, during a single pass of the vehicle system **100** over the section of interest **300**.

FIG. **5** is a schematic diagram of one embodiment of the sensing system **200**. The sensing system **200** may be distributed among multiple vehicles **104**, **106** (shown in FIG. **1**) of the vehicle system **100** (shown in FIG. **1**). For example, a route examining unit **500** of the sensing system **200** may be disposed on the same or different vehicle **104**, **106** as the leading sensor **108**A and/or the trailing sensor **108**B. As used herein, the terms "unit" or "module" (such as the route examining unit **500**, communication unit, and the like) include a hardware and/or software system that operates to perform one or more functions. For example, a unit or module may include one or more computer processors, controllers, and/or other logic-based devices that perform operations based on instructions stored on a tangible and non-transitory computer readable storage medium, such as a computer memory. Alternatively, a unit or module may include a hard-wired device that performs operations based on hard-wired logic of a processor, controller, or other device. In one or more embodiments, a unit or module includes or is associated with a tangible and non-transitory (e.g., not an electric signal) computer readable medium, such as a computer memory. The units or modules shown in the attached figures may represent the hardware that operates based on software or hardwired instructions, the computer readable medium used to store and/or provide the instructions, the software that directs hardware to perform the operations, or a combination thereof.

The route examining unit **500** is communicatively coupled (e.g., by one or more wired and/or wireless communication links **502**) with the leading sensor **108**A and the trailing sensor **108**B. The communication links **502** can represent wireless radio communications between powered units **104** in a DP arrangement or configuration, as described above, communications over an ECP line, and the like. The route examining unit **500** is communicatively coupled with the sensors **108**A, **108**B to receive inspection data from the sensors **108**A, **108**B and to direct operations of the sensors **108**A, **108**B. For example, in response to receiving and examining the inspection data from the leading sensor **108**A, the route examining unit **500** may direct the trailing sensor **108**B to acquire additional inspection data, as described above. In one embodiment, the inspection data obtained by one or more of the sensors **108**A, **108**B may be stored in a tangible and non-transitory computer readable storage medium, such as a computer memory **502** (e.g., memories **502**A, **502**B). The memories **502**A, **502**B may be localized memories that are disposed at or near (e.g., on the same vehicle **104**, **106**) as the sensors **108**A, **108**B that store the inspection data on the respective memory **502**A, **502**B.

The route examining unit **500** includes several modules that perform one or more functions of the route examining unit **500** described herein. The modules may include or represent hardware circuits or circuitry that include and/or are coupled with one or more processors, controllers, or other electronic logic-based devices. The modules include a monitoring module **504** that monitors operations of the sensors **108**A, **108**B. The monitoring module **504** may track which sensors **108**A, **108**B are acquiring inspection data (e.g., which sensors **108** are active at one or more points in time) and/or monitor the health or condition of the sensors **108** (e.g., whether any sensors **108** are malfunctioning, such as by providing inspection data having noise above a designated threshold or a signal-to-noise ratio below a designated threshold). The monitoring module **504** may monitor operations of the vehicle system **100**, such as the velocity of the vehicle system **100** and/or forces exerted on one or more coupler devices **110** (shown in FIG. **1**) in the vehicle system **100**.

An identification module **506** examines the inspection data provided by the sensors **108**. The identification module **506** may receive the inspection data from the leading sensor **108**A and determine if the inspection data is indicative or representative of potential damage to the route **102**. For example, with respect to ultrasound data that is acquired as the inspection data, the identification module **506** may examine the ultrasound echoes off the route **102** to determine if the echoes represent potential damage to the route **102**. Additionally or alternatively, the identification module **506** may form images from the ultrasound echoes and communicate the images to an output device (described below) so that an operator of the vehicle system **100** can manually examine the images. The operator may then manually identify the potential damage and/or confirm identification of the potential damage by the identification module **506**.

The identification module **506** may examine changes in electric current transmitted through the route **102**, such as by identifying openings or breaks in a circuit that is otherwise closed by the route **102**. The openings or breaks can represent a broken or damaged portion of the route **102**. The identification module **506** can examine the eddy currents in the route **102** when the route **102** is exposed to a magnetic field in order to determine magnetoresistive responses of the route **102** (e.g., a rail). Based on these responses, the identification module **506** can identify potential cracks, breaks, and the like, in the route **102**.

The identification module **506** can examine videos or images of the route **102** to identify damage to the route **102**. Alternatively or additionally, the identification module **506** may examine a profile, positions, or displacement of the route **102** to identify potential damage. The identification module **506** may form images from the videos, images, profiles, positions, or displacement and communicate the images to an output device (described below) so that an operator of the vehicle system **100** can manually examine the images. The operator may then manually identify the potential damage and/or confirm identification of the potential damage by the identification module **506**.

The identification module **506** can examine the sounds (e.g., frequency, duration, and the like) measured by the sensors **108** to identify potential damage to the route **102**. The identification module **506** can examine distances to or between portions of the route **102** and compare these distances to known or designated distances to identify potential damage to the route **102**. The identification module **506** may examine force measurements from probes of the sensors **108** that engage and attempt to push sections of the route **102** to identify potential damage and/or mechanical strength of the route **102** (which can be indicative of potential damage to the route **102**).

The identification module **506** identifies the location of the potential damage, such as by identifying where the section of interest **300** (shown in FIG. **3**) is located along the route **102**. The identification module **506** may communicate with a location determination system (described below) of the vehicle system **100** to determine where the section of interest **300** is located. For example, upon identifying the potential damage, the identification module **506** can obtain the current location of the vehicle system **100** (or a previous location of the vehicle system **100** that corresponds to when the inspection data indicative of the potential damage was acquired) and designate the location as the location of the section of interest **300**.

The route examining unit **500** includes a control module **508** that controls operations of the sensing system **200**. The control module **508** can transmit signals to the sensors **108** to direct the sensors **108** to activate and/or begin collecting inspection data of the route **102**. The control module **508** may instruct the sensors **108** as to how much inspection data is to be obtained, the resolution of the inspection data to be obtained, when to begin collecting the inspection data, how long to collect the inspection data, and the like. The control module **508** can communicate with the identification module **506** to determine when potential damage to the route **102** is identified.

In one embodiment, the control module **508** automatically directs the sensors **108** to acquire inspection data. For example, responsive to the leading sensor **108**A acquiring inspection data that is indicative of potential damage to the route **102**, the control module **508** may autonomously (e.g., without operator intervention or action) direct the trailing sensor **108**B to begin acquiring the additional inspection data, as described herein.

The control module **508** may select the resolution level at which the trailing sensor **108**B is to acquire the additional inspection data from among several available resolution levels (e.g., resolution levels that the trailing sensor **108**B is capable of acquiring). For example, the trailing sensor **108**B may be associated with several different resolution levels that acquire the inspection data at different resolutions. When the control module **508** determines that the inspection data acquired by the leading sensor **108**A indicates potential damage to the route **102**, the control module **508** can select at least one of the resolution levels of the trailing sensor **108**B and direct the trailing sensor **108**B to acquire the additional inspection level at the selected resolution level.

In one embodiment, the control module **508** can autonomously select the resolution level (e.g., without operator input or intervention). For example, the control module **508** can select the resolution level for the trailing sensor **108**B based on a current speed of the vehicle system **100**, a category of the potential damage to the route **102**, and/or a degree of the potential damage to the route **102**. Different resolution levels can be associated with different speeds, categories of damage, and/or degrees of damage. For example, faster speeds may be associated with greater resolution levels while slower speeds are associated with lower resolution levels. As another example, a category of damage that includes damage to the interior of the route **102** (e.g., inside a rail) may be associated with greater resolution levels than a category of damage that includes damage to the exterior of the route **102**. In another example, greater degrees of damage (e.g., more damage, such as a larger volume of damage, larger pits, larger cracks, larger voids, and the like) may be associated with a different resolution level than lesser degrees of damage. Once the speed, category of damage, and/or degree of damage is determined by the control module **508** (e.g., such as from a speed sensor described below and/or the identification module **506** that identifies the category and/or degree of damage), the control module **508** determines the associated resolution level, such as from information stored in an internal or external memory. The control module **508** may then automatically direct the trailing sensor **108**B to acquire the additional inspection data at the selected resolution level.

Alternatively, upon identification of potential damage to the route **102** from the inspection data acquired by the leading sensor **108**A, the control module **508** may direct an output device (e.g., the device **608** described below) to present the operator of the vehicle system **100** with one or more choices of resolution levels. The resolution levels that are presented to the operator may be associated with the speed of the vehicle system **100**, category of damage, and/or degree of damage, as described above. The operator may then use an input device (e.g., the input device **606** described below) to select the resolution level that is to be used by the trailing sensor **108**B to acquire the additional inspection data of the route **102**.

The control module **508** can communicate with a control unit (described below) of the vehicle system **100** to control or modify movement of the vehicle system **100** in response to identification of potential damage to the route **102**. For example, in response to the identification module **506** determining that the inspection data from the leading sensor **108**A is indicative of potential damage to the route **102**, the control module **508** can instruct the control unit to slow down movement of the vehicle system **100** prior to the trailing sensor **108**B passing over the section of interest **300** and/or to alter movement of the vehicle system **100** in order to change the slack in the vehicle system **100**, as described above.

FIG. **6** is a schematic diagram of one embodiment of the powered vehicle **104**. The vehicle **104** may represent the leading vehicle **104**A, the trailing vehicle **104**B, or another vehicle **104** shown in FIG. **1**. The vehicle **104** includes a controller **600** that controls operations of the vehicle **104**. The controller **600** may be embodied in hardware and/or software systems that operate to control operations of the vehicle **104** and/or vehicle system **100**. The controller **600** may include one or more computer processors, controllers, and/or other logic-based devices that perform operations based on instructions stored on a tangible and non-transitory computer readable storage medium, such as a computer memory **602**. Alternatively or additionally, the controller **600** may include a hard-wired device that performs operations based on hard-wired logic of a processor, controller, or other device.

The controller **600** is communicatively coupled (e.g., with one or more wired and/or wireless communication links **604**) with various components used in operation of the vehicle **104** and/or vehicle system **100**. The controller **600** is communicatively coupled with an input device **606** (e.g., levers, switches, touch screen, keypad, and the like) to receive manual input from an operator of the vehicle **104** or vehicle system **100** and an output device **608** (e.g., display device, speakers, lights, haptic device, and the like) to present information to the operator of the vehicle **104** or vehicle system **100**. The input device **606** may be used by the operator to manually control when one or more of the sensors **108** of the sensing system **200** (shown in FIG. **2**) collect inspection data of the route **102**, the resolution of the inspection data that is collected, the amount of inspection data that is collected, the type of inspection data that is acquired, and the like. The input device **606** may be used by the operator to manually confirm identification of potential damage to the route **102** based on the inspection data. The output device **608** can present information concerning the potential damage to the route **102** to the operator, such as the location of the section of interest **300**, information representative of the inspection data (e.g., video, images, numbers, values, and the like, of the inspection data).

A location determination system **610** is communicatively coupled with the controller **600**. The location determination system **610** obtains data representative of actual locations of the vehicle system **100** and/or the vehicle **104**. The location determination system **610** may wirelessly receive signals using transceiver and associated circuitry (shown as an antenna **612** in FIG. **6**), such as signals transmitted by Global Positioning System satellites, signals transmitted by cellular networks, and the like. The location determination system **610** may use these signals to determine the location of the vehicle system **100** and/or vehicle **104**, and/or convey the signals to the controller **600** for determining the location of the vehicle system **100** and/or vehicle **104**. In another embodiment, the location determination system **610** may receive speed data indicative of the velocity of the vehicle system **100** from a speed sensor **614** of the vehicle **104** (or another vehicle **104**, **106** in the vehicle system **100**). The location determination system **610** may determine the velocity of the vehicle system **100** based on the speed data and can use an amount of time elapsed since passing or leaving a designated location in order to determine the current location of the vehicle system **100** or vehicle **104**. As described above, the route examining unit **500** (shown in FIG. **5**) of the sensing system **200** may communicate with the location determination system **610** to obtain the location of the vehicle **104** when the sensor **108** identifies potential damage to the route **102** in one embodiment.

The controller **600** is communicatively coupled with a propulsion system that includes one or more traction motors (shown as "Traction Motor **616**") in FIG. **6**) for providing tractive effort to propel the vehicle **104**. Although not shown in FIG. **6**, the propulsion system may be powered from an on-board power source (e.g., engine and alternator, battery, and the like) and/or an off-board power source (e.g., electrified rail, catenary, and the like). The controller **600** can communicate control signals to the propulsion system to control the speed, acceleration, and the like, of the vehicle **104**. The control signals may be based off of manual input received from the input device **606** and/or may be autonomously generated.

For example, when the route examining unit **500** identifies potential damage to the route **102**, the route examining unit **500** may direct the controller **600** to change movement of the vehicle system **100**. The route examining unit **500** may direct the controller **600** to slow down movement of the vehicle system **100** in response to identification of the potential damage to the route **102** by the leading sensor **108**A. The controller **600** may then autonomously control the propulsion system of the vehicle **104** to slow down movement of the vehicle **104**. With respect to other vehicles **104**, **106** in the vehicle system **100**, the controller **600** may transmit control signals to other vehicles **104** that direct the vehicles **104** also to autonomously slow down movement. A communication unit **618** (e.g., transceiver circuitry and hardware, such as a wireless antenna **620**) may be communicatively coupled with the controller **600** to communicate these control signals to the other vehicles **104** in the vehicle system **100** so that the other vehicles **104** slow down movement of the vehicle system **100**. Additionally or alternatively, the communication unit **618** may communicate with the other vehicles **104**, **106** via one or more wired connections extending through the vehicle system **100**. In another embodiment, the controller **600** may generate and communicate command signals to the output device **608** that cause the output device **608** to present information to the operator of the vehicle system **100** to manually control the vehicle system **100** to slow down the vehicle system **100**.

A force sensor **622** is connected with the coupler device **110** for measuring force data of the coupler device **110**. The force data may represent or be indicative of the amount of slack between the illustrated vehicle **104** and another vehicle **104** or **106** coupled with the illustrated vehicle **104** by the coupler device **110**. For example, the force data may represent tensile or compressive forces exerted by the coupler device **110**. Additionally or alternatively, the force data can include distance measurements to the other vehicle **104**, **106** that is coupled with the illustrated vehicle **104**, which may represent or be indicative of the slack in the coupler device **110**. Additional force sensors **602** may be disposed onboard other vehicles **104**, **106** in the vehicle system **100** to measure the force data of the coupler devices **110** joining the other vehicles **104**, **106**. The force data may be communicated to the illustrated vehicle **104** via the communication unit **618**.

The force data can be communicated to the route examining unit **500** to be monitored, as described above. If the route examining unit **500** determines that the slack between vehicles **104**, **106** is to be changed (e.g., increased or reduced) in response to identification of potential damage to the route **102** by the leading sensor **108**A, then the route examining unit **500** can direct the controller **600** to change movement of the vehicle system **100** to effectuate the change in slack. The controller **600** can transmit signals to the propulsion system of the illustrated vehicle **104** and to other vehicles **104**, **106** in the vehicle system **100** to autonomously apply braking and/or tractive effort to alter the slack between the vehicles **104**, **106** as requested by the route examining unit **500**. Alternatively, the controller **600** may generate and communicate command signals to the output device **608** that cause the output device **608** to present information to the operator of the vehicle system **100** to manually control the vehicle system **100** to change the slack in the vehicle system **100**, such as by stretching out the coupler devices **110** to reduce slack in the vehicle system **100**.

In one embodiment, the route examining unit **500** may communicate with an off-board location, such as a dispatch center, a repair or maintenance facility, and the like, when potential damage to the route **102** is identified. For example, in response to the route examining unit **500** identifying potential damage to the route **102** based on the inspection data obtained by the leading sensor **108**A and/or the damage being confirmed by examination of the additional inspection data obtained by the trailing sensor **108**B, the route examining unit **500** may transmit a signal to the off-board location to request repair to the damaged portion **204** of the route **102**. This signal may communicate the location of the section of interest **300**, the location of the actually damaged portion **204**, the time at which the damage was identified, and/or an identification of the type or category of damage (e.g., external cracks, internal cracks, external pitting, internal voids, displacement of tracks, and the like) to the off-board location via the communication unit **618**. The type or category of damage can represent a classification of the damage. For example, one category of damage may be external damage to the route **102** (e.g., damage that is on an exterior surface and/or extends to the exterior surface), while another category includes interior damage (e.g., damage that is inside the route **102** and not on the exterior surface). As another example, other categories of damage may be defined by the evidence of the damage, such as categories of cracks, pits, voids, and the like. Alternatively, other categories may be used. The off-board location can then send a repair crew to fix and/or replace the damaged portion **204** of the route **102**.

In another embodiment, the route examining unit **500** may communicate with another vehicle or vehicle system (that is not coupled with the vehicle system **100**) to warn the other vehicle or vehicle system of the damaged portion **204** of the route **102**. For example, in response to the route examining unit **500** identifying potential damage to the route **102** based on the inspection data obtained by the leading sensor **108**A and/or the damage being confirmed by examination of the additional inspection data obtained by the trailing sensor **108**B, the route examining unit **500** may transmit a signal to one or more other vehicles or vehicle systems traveling on the route **102** to warn the other vehicles or vehicle systems of the damaged portion **204** of the route **102**. The signal may be transmitted to designated vehicles or vehicle systems (e.g., addressed to specific vehicles or vehicle systems as opposed to broadcast to any or several vehicles or vehicle systems within range) using the communication unit **618**. Alternatively, the signal may be broadcast for reception by any vehicles or vehicle systems within range of communication, as opposed to being addressed and sent to specific vehicles or vehicle systems. This signal may communicate the location of the section of interest **300**, the location of the actually damaged portion **204**, the time at which the damage was identified, and/or an identification of the type of damage (e.g., external cracks, internal cracks, external pitting, internal voids, displacement of tracks, and the like) to the off-board location via the communication unit **618**. The vehicles or vehicle systems that receive the signal may then adjust travel accordingly. For example, the vehicles or vehicle systems may change course to avoid traveling over the damaged portion **204**, may slow down when traveling over the damaged portion **204**, and the like.

FIG. **7** is a flowchart of one embodiment of a method **700** for obtaining inspection data of a potentially damaged route. The method **700** may be used in conjunction with one or more embodiments of the sensing system **200** (shown in FIG. **2**). For example, the method **700** may be used to acquire inspection data of the route **102** (shown in FIG. **1**) from plural sensors **108** (shown in FIG. **1**) or arrays of sensors **108** in the vehicle system **100** during a single pass of the vehicle system **100** over the route **102**.

At **702**, the vehicle system **100** travels along the route **102** while acquiring inspection data of the route **102** using the leading sensor **108**A of the vehicle system **100**. As described above, the leading sensor **108**A may acquire the inspection data periodically, continuously, and/or when manually or autonomously prompted to collect the data.

At **704**, a determination is made as to whether the inspection data obtained by the leading sensor **108**A is indicative of potential damage to the route **102**. As described above, the route examining unit **500** (shown in FIG. **5**) can determine if the inspection data from the leading sensor **108**A represents damage to the route **102**. If the inspection data does not indicate potential damage to the route **102**, then additional inspection data may not need to be acquired by the trailing sensor **108**B. As a result, flow of the method **700** may return to **702**, where additional inspection data of the route **102** is obtained. If the inspection data does indicate potential damage to the route **102**, however, then additional inspection data may be acquired by the trailing sensor **108**B. As a result, flow of the method **700** may continue to **706**.

At **706**, the section of interest **300** (shown in FIG. **3**) of the route **102** is identified. As described above, the section of interest **300** is identified to include the portion of the route **102** that includes the potential damage. The section of interest **300** may be identified by determining the location of the leading sensor **108**A when the inspection data that is indicative of the potential damage was acquired.

At **708**, the time at which the trailing sensor **108**B is to acquire additional inspection data of the section of interest **300** in the route **102** is determined. This time may be determined based on the separation distance **400** (shown in FIG. **4**) and the velocity of the vehicle system **100**. Additionally or alternatively, this time may be determined based on the separation distance **400** and a designated upcoming change in the velocity of the vehicle system **100**, such as when the controller **202** (shown in FIG. **2**) directs the vehicle system **100** to slow down for the trailing sensor **108**B, as described above.

At **710**, a determination is made as to whether measurement conditions of the vehicle system **100** are to be changed for the trailing sensor **108**B. For example, a decision may be made as to whether the vehicle system **100** should slow down to increase the resolution and/or amount of the additional inspection data acquired by the trailing sensor **108**B. This decision may additionally or alternatively include a determination of whether to reduce slack in the coupler devices **110** of the vehicle system **100** to stretch the vehicle system **100** and reduce false readings by the trailing sensor **108**B. For example, reducing slack and stretching the vehicle system **100** may eliminate false readings that may occur with the trailing sensor **108**B when the trailing vehicle **104**B suddenly jerks or accelerates relative to the other vehicles **104**, **106**.

If the measurement conditions of the vehicle system **100** are to be changed, then the movement of the vehicle system **100** may need to be modified. As a result, flow of the method **700** may proceed to **712**. Otherwise, flow of the method **700** may continue to **714**.

At **712**, movement of the vehicle system **100** is modified, such as by slowing down speed of the vehicle system **100** and/or changing slack of the vehicle system **100**. As described above, reducing the velocity of the vehicle system **100** may allow more time for the trailing sensor **108**B to acquire the additional inspection data. Reducing the slack of the vehicle system **100** (e.g., between the trailing vehicle **104**B and/or one or more other vehicles **104**, **106**) may reduce false readings made by the trailing sensor **108**B. For example, reducing the slack can stretch the vehicle system **100** so that the trailing vehicle **104**B and the trailing sensor **108**B are not suddenly moved relative to the route **102**.

At **714**, the trailing sensor **108**B is directed to acquire additional inspection data in the section of interest **300** of the route **102**. The trailing sensor **108**B may be directed to acquire the data at a time when the trailing sensor **108**B passes over the section of interest **300**. In one embodiment, the trailing sensor **108**B may only be activated to acquire the additional inspection data when the section of interest **300** is identified based on the inspection data acquired by the leading sensor **108**A.

The inspection data acquired by the leading sensor **108**A and/or the trailing sensor **108**B may be used to identify and/or characterize damage to the route **102**. Acquiring different types of inspection data, acquiring different amounts of inspection data, acquiring the inspection data at different resolutions, and the like, during a single pass of the vehicle system **100** over the potentially damaged portion of the route **102** can be more efficient than using multiple, different, and/or separate systems or vehicle systems to examine the route **102**.

In one example of operation of the sensing system **200**, the sensors **108**A and/or **108**B acquire characteristics of the route that are represented by inspection signatures as the vehicle system **100** travels along the route **102**. The inspection signatures can be formed by the route examining unit and can represent the data obtained by the sensors **108** that are indicative of whether or not the route **102** is damaged. For example, the inspection signatures can represent electrical characteristics of a conductive rail of the route **102** that are measured at different times and/or distances when an electric current is injected into the rail and/or when the rail is exposed to a controlled magnetic field. These electrical characteristics can be measured at a first location along the rail (that moves along the rail with the vehicle system **100**) and can include the voltage, amps, frequency, resistance, impedance, or other measurement of the current that is injected into the rail at a different, second location along the rail (which also moves along the rail with the vehicle system **100**) and that is at least partially conducted by the rail. Optionally, the rail can be exposed to a magnetic field and the electrical characteristics that are measured and used to form the inspection signatures can be the magnitude (e.g., amps and/or volts) of eddy currents induced in the rail by the magnetic field. As another example, the inspection signatures can represent ultrasound echoes (e.g., the magnitude and/or frequencies of the echoes) that are measured by an ultrasound probe responsive to ultrasound waves are transmitted into the route.

In another example of the inspection signatures, the inspection signatures can represent distances that are measured to one or more surfaces of the route **102**. For example, a laser light can emit light toward the route **102** or a mechanical probe can engage the route **102** and the reflected light or displacement of the mechanical probe can be used to measure the distance between the source of the light or a fixed point of the mechanical probe and the route **102**. The inspection signatures can represent these measured distances with respect to distance along the route **102** and/or time. As another example, the inspection signatures can represent acoustics (e.g., sounds) measured by one or more acoustic pick up devices (e.g., microphones) over time. The vehicle system **100** can generate sounds when wheels of the vehicle system **100** travel over the route **102** and/or damage to the route **102**. These sounds can be represented with respect to time or distance along the route **102** in the inspection signatures.

FIG. **8** illustrates one example of an inspection signature **800** of the route **102** (shown in FIG. **1**). The inspection signature **800** is shown alongside a horizontal axis **802** representative of time or distance (e.g., distance along the route **102**) and a vertical axis **804** representative of magnitude of the characteristic of the route **102** being measured by the sensor **108**A or **108**B (shown in FIG. **1**). In one aspect, the inspection signature **800** can represent one or more electrical characteristics of an electric current that is at least partially conducted by the route **102** (e.g., by a rail of the route **102**), such as voltage or amplitude of the current.

FIG. **9** is a schematic illustration of one version of a sensor **900** that can be used to measure the electrical characteristics of the route **102** for creation of inspection signatures, such as the inspection signature **800** shown in FIG. **8**. The sensor **900** can represent the leading sensor **108**A (shown in FIG. **1**), the trailing sensor **108**B (shown in FIG. **1**), or each of the leading sensor **108**A and the trailing sensor **108**B. The sensor **900** includes two electrical probes **906**, **908** that contact or are disposed very close to the route **102** at different locations along the route **102**. For example, the probes **906**, **908** may be spaced apart from each other along the length of the route **102**. The probes **906**, **908** are connected with the vehicle system **100** (shown in FIG. **1**) so that the probes **906**, **908** move along the route **102** during movement of the vehicle system **100** along the route **102**.

One probe **908** can be referred to as an injecting probe that applies an electric current to the route **102**. For example, the probe **908** can be coupled with a power source **904** that supplies electric current (e.g., direct current and/or alternating current) to the probe **908** for applying the current to the route **102**, such as a rail of the route **102**. The power source **904** may include or represent a battery, fuel cell, alternator, generator, or other source of electric current disposed onboard the vehicle system **100**. Optionally, the power source **904** can represent an off-board source of the electric current (e.g., an overhead catenary, electrified rail of the route **102**, or the like). Optionally, the probe **908** may be referred to as an inducing probe that generates a magnetic field within and/or around the route **102**, such as in and/or around a rail of the route **102**. This magnetic field can induce an electric current in the route **102**. For example, eddy currents may be created in the rail of the route **102** by the magnetic field.

The other probe **906** can be referred to as a measuring probe that measures one or more electrical characteristics of the route **102**. For example, the probe **906** can be coupled with a meter **902** that measures the voltage, amps, frequency, or other characteristic of the electric current that is injected into the route **102** by the probe **908**. Optionally, the probe **906** and meter **902** can measure the voltage, amps, frequency, or other characteristic of the eddy currents that are induced in the route **102** by the probe **908**. In another aspect, the probe **906** can measure the resistance, impedance, or other characteristic of the route **102** using the current that is injected into or induced in the route **102** by the probe **908**. With respect to the inspection signature **800** shown in FIG. **8**, the signature **800** can represent electrical characteristics of the route **102** as measured by the sensor **900** shown in FIG. **9**, such as the voltage or amps of the current that is injected into the route **102** or that is induced in the route **102**.

FIG. **10** is a schematic illustration of another version of a sensor **1000** that can be used to measure distance characteristics of the route **102** for creation of inspection signatures, such as the inspection signature **800** shown in FIG. **8**. The sensor **1000** can represent the leading sensor **108**A (shown in FIG. **1**), the trailing sensor **108**B (shown in FIG. **1**), or each of the leading sensor **108**A and the trailing sensor **108**B. The sensor **1000** includes a light emission device **1002**, such as a laser or other light source, and an optical receiver **1004**, such as an optical sensor that detects receipt of the laser or other light.

The light emission device **1002** generates light **1006** toward the route **102**. This light **1006** is at least partially reflected off the route **102** as reflected light **1008**. The receiver **1004** can sense this reflected light **1008** and determine a distance between the sensor **1000** and the route **102**. For example, based on the time of flight of the light **1006** toward the route **102** and the reflected light **1008** back to the receiver **1004**, the sensor **1000** can determine how far the sensor **1000** is from the route **102**. When the surface of the route **102** off of which the light **1006** is reflected changes, such as due to damage or displacement of the route **102**, then this distance can change. With respect to the inspection signature **800** shown in FIG. **8**, the signature **800** can represent distances between the sensor **1000** and the route **102** as measured by the sensor **1000** shown in FIG. **10**. Alternatively, one or more of the devices **1002**, **1004** can represent ultrasound transducers that emit ultrasound waves (e.g., as **1006** in FIG. **10**) toward and/or into the route **102** and that sense ultrasound echoes of the waves (e.g., as **1008** in FIG. **10**) that are reflected off of the route **102**.

FIG. **11** is a schematic illustration of another version of a sensor **1100** that can be used to measure distance characteristics of the route **102** for creation of inspection signatures, such as the inspection signature **800** shown in FIG. **8**. The sensor **1100** can represent the leading sensor **108**A (shown in FIG. **1**), the trailing sensor **108**B (shown in FIG. **1**), or each of the leading sensor **108**A and the trailing sensor **108**B. The sensor **1100** includes a mechanical probe **1102** that engages the route **102** and a displacement sensor **1104**. An engagement end **1106** of the probe **1102** engages the route **102** and may move up and down as the vehicle system **100** (shown in FIG. **1**) moves along the route **100** when the surface of the route **102** on which the end **1106** is moving moves up or down. The probe **1102** is able to move up and down within the sensor **1104** as the distance between the route **102** and the sensor **1104** changes (due to displacements of the route **102**). The sensor **1104** can monitor how far the probe **1102** moves relative to the sensor **1104** in order to measure changes in the distance between the route **102** and the sensor **1104**. With respect to the inspection signature **800** shown in FIG. **8**, the signature **800** can represent distances or changes in the distances between the sensor **1104** and the route **102**.

Returning to the description of the inspection signature **800** shown in FIG. **8**, the inspection signature **800** can be generated by the monitoring module **504** (shown in FIG. **5**). In one aspect, the monitoring module **504** generates an output signal representative of the inspection signature **800**. The output signal can be sent to an output device, such as a display device, for presentation of the inspection signature **800** to an operator of the vehicle system **100**.

The inspection signature **800** can represent one or more of the characteristics described above with respect to time or distance as the vehicle system **100** (shown in FIG. **1**) moves along the route **102** (shown in FIG. **1**). For example, with respect to the sensor **900** shown in FIG. **9**, the inspection signature **800** can represent voltages, amps, or other measurements of electric currents conducted by the route **102**, or another characteristic. With respect to the sensors **1000**, **1100** shown in FIGS. **10** and **11**, the inspection signature **800** can represent distances or changes in distances between the sensors **1000**, **1100** and the route **102**. Optionally, the inspection signature **800** can represent magnitudes of ultrasound echoes measured by an ultrasound transducer.

As shown in FIG. **8**, the inspection signature **800** exhibits a decrease in the measured characteristics over a time period or distance segment **806** of the route **102**. Prior to and/or following this time period or distance segment **806**, the characteristics may remain constant or substantially constant (e.g., with some noise from the sensor **108**). During this time period or distance segment **806**, the characteristics may sharply decrease and/or be eliminated (e.g., decrease to zero or otherwise decrease by an amount that is larger than noise in the measurements). This decrease may be identified by the identification module **506** (shown in FIG. **5**) as being indicative of a damaged section of the route **102**. For example, the identification module **506** may determine that when the characteristics measured by the sensor **108**A and/or **108**B decreases by at least a designated, non-zero amount, the inspection signature **800** indicates potential damage to the route **102** in a location that corresponds to where the sensor was located when the characteristics of the time period or distance segment **806** were measured.

FIG. **12** illustrates another example of an inspection signature **1200** of the route **102** (shown in FIG. **1**). The inspection signature **1200** is shown alongside the horizontal axis **802** and the vertical axis **804** described above. The inspection signature **1200** can be generated by the monitoring module **504** (shown in FIG. **5**). In one aspect, the monitoring module **504** generates an output signal representative of the inspection signature. The output signal can be sent to an output device, such as a display device, for presentation of the inspection signature to an operator of the vehicle system **100** (shown in FIG. **1**).

The inspection signature **1200** can represent one or more of the characteristics described above with respect to time or distance as the vehicle system **100** moves along the route **102**. For example, with respect to the sensor **900** shown in FIG. **9**, the inspection signature **1200** can represent impedances, resistances, or other measurements of the route **102**, or another characteristic. With respect to the sensors **1000**, **1100** shown in FIGS. **10** and **11**, the inspection signature **1200** can represent distances or changes in distances between the sensors **1000**, **1100** and the route **102**. Optionally, the inspection signature **1200** can represent magnitudes of ultrasound echoes measured by an ultrasound transducer.

The inspection signature **1200** includes an increase in the measured characteristics over the time period or distance segment **1206** of the route **102**. Prior to and/or following this time period or distance segment **806**, the characteristics may remain constant or substantially constant (e.g., with some noise from the sensor **108**). During the time period or distance segment **1206**, the characteristics may sharply increase (e.g., increase by at least a threshold, non-zero amount or otherwise increase by an amount that is larger than noise in the measurements). This increase may be identified by the identification module **506** (shown in FIG. **5**) as being indicative of a damaged section of the route **102**. For example, the identification module **506** may determine that when the characteristics measured by the sensor **108**A and/or **108**B increases by at least a designated, non-zero amount, the inspection signature **1200** indicates potential damage to the route **102** in a location that corresponds to where the sensor was located when the characteristics of the time period or distance segment **1206** were measured.

FIG. **13** illustrates another example of an inspection signature **1300** of the route **102** (shown in FIG. **1**). In contrast to the time domain or distance domain inspection signatures **800**, **1200** shown in FIGS. **8** and **12**, the inspection signature **1300** may be a frequency spectrum of measured characteristics of the route **102**. The signature **1300** is shown alongside a horizontal axis **1302** representative of frequencies and a vertical axis **1304** representative of magnitudes of the measured characteristics at the various frequencies.

The monitoring module **504** (shown in FIG. **5**) can create the inspection signature **1300** from the characteristics of the route **102** as measured by one or more of the sensors described herein. For example, the inspection signature **1300** can represent sounds detected by a microphone of the sensor **108**A and/or **108**B. The identification module **506** (shown in FIG. **5**) can identify a damaged section of the route **102** based on the inspection signature **1300** and/or changes in the inspection signature **1300**. For example, the identification module **506** may examine the inspection signature **1300** to determine if the inspection signature **1300** includes a peak **1306** at one or more frequencies of interest **1308**, **1310**, **1312** or within designated ranges of the frequencies of interest **1308**, **1310**, **1312**. Additionally or alternatively, the identification module **506** can examine the inspection signature **1300** and/or one or more other inspection signatures **1300** to determine if the magnitude of the peak **1306** at one or more frequencies of interest **1308**, **1310**, **1312** changes. The presence or absence of peaks **1306** at one or more of the frequencies of interest **1308**, **1310**, **1312**, and/or changes in the magnitudes of the peaks **1306** may indicate that the route **102** has a damaged section in locations associated with the peaks **1306**.

In one example operation of the sensing system **200** (shown in FIG. **2**), if the identification module **506** (shown in FIG. **5**) is able to identify a section of the route **102** as being damaged from the inspection signature obtained by the leading sensor **108**A, then the sensing system **200** can take one or more remedial actions, such as slowing or stopping movement of the vehicle system **100**, communicating a warning to one or more other vehicle systems, communicating a signal to an off-board location to request further inspection and/or maintenance of the route **102**, automatically controlling slack in the vehicle system **100**, or the like. If the inspection signature obtained by the leading sensor **108**A does not indicate damage to the route **102**, the identification module **506** may still identify the section of the route **102** as being damaged from the inspection signature obtained by one or more of the trailing sensors **108**B. The sensing system **200** can then take one or more of the remedial actions described above, even though the inspection signature from the leading sensor **108**A did not clearly indicate damage to the route **102**.

The identification module **506** can examine the inspection signatures obtained by different sensors **108** to determine if the vehicle system **100** has a defect that potentially damaged the route **102**. The identification module **506** can examine the inspection signatures obtained by the leading and trailing sensors **108**A, **108**B. If the inspection signature from the leading sensor **108**A does not indicate damage or potential damage to the route **102**, but the inspection signature from the trailing sensor **108**B does indicate damage or potential damage to the route **102**, then the identification module **506** can determine that the vehicle system **100** may have a defect that damaged the route **102** during travel of the vehicle system **100** over the route **102**, such as a flat wheel or broken wheel. The sensing system **200** may then communicate a signal to an off-board location to request inspection or maintenance of the vehicle system **100** at an upcoming location.

If, however, the identification module **506** is unable to clearly identify the damaged section of the route **102** from the inspection signatures obtained by the sensors **108**A, **108**B, but does identify some changes in one or more of the inspection signatures that are indicative of damage to the route **102**, then the identification module **506** may compare one or more inspection signatures obtained by the leading sensor **108**A with one or more inspection signatures obtained by one or more of the trailing sensors **108**B in order to confirm or refute the potential identification of a damaged section of the route **102**.

For example, with respect to the inspection signature **800** (shown in FIG. **8**), the identification module **506** may determine that the section of the route **102** that corresponds to the measured characteristics associated with the decrease in the signature **800** is damaged when the measured characteristics in the signature **800** decrease by at least a designated, non-zero threshold amount. If the characteristics decrease, but not by an amount that is at least as large as this threshold amount, then the identification module **506** may determine that the section of the route **102** is potentially damaged. With respect to the inspection signature **1200** (shown in FIG. **12**), the identification module **506** may determine that the section of the route **102** that corresponds to the measured characteristics associated with the increase in the signature **1200** is damaged when the measured characteristics in the signature **1200** increase by at least a designated, non-zero threshold amount. If the characteristics increase, but not by an amount that is at least as large as this threshold amount, then the identification module **506** may determine that the section of the route **102** is potentially damaged. With respect to the inspection signature **1300** (shown in FIG. **13**), the identification module **506** may determine that the section of the route **102** is damaged when the measured characteristics for that section are represented by a peak **1306** and/or a change in a peak **1306** that is at least as large as a designated, non-zero threshold amount. If the peak **1306** is present, but is not as large as this threshold or the change in the peak **1306** is not as large as this threshold, then the identification module **506** may determine that the section of the route **102** is potentially damaged.

In the event that the inspection signatures from one or more of the sensors **108** indicates potential damage but do not definitively indicate damage (e.g., the increase or decrease in the measured characteristics does not exceed a first designated, non-zero threshold), then the identification module **506** can compare the inspection signatures to confirm or refute the identification of potential damage. In one aspect, the identification module **506** may normalize the inspection signatures obtained by different sensors **108**A, **108**B, divide the inspection signatures obtained by the different sensors **108**A, **108**B into smaller portions, temporally or spatially correlate the smaller portions of the inspection signatures obtained by the different sensors **108**A, **108**B with each other, and compare these normalized and/or correlated portions obtained by the different sensors **108**A, **108**B with each other. Based on this comparison, the identification module **506** may determine that the route **102** includes a damaged section (e.g., confirm the potential identification of the damaged section of the route **102** from one or more of the inspection signatures) or determine that the route **102** does not include the damaged section (e.g., refute the potential identification of the damaged section of the route **102**).

FIG. **14** illustrates a first inspection signature **1400** obtained by the leading sensor **108**A (shown in FIG. **1**) according to one example of comparing inspection signatures to identify a damaged section of the route **102** (shown in FIG. **1**). The first inspection signature **1400** is shown alongside a horizontal axis **1402** representative of time or distance along the route **102** and a vertical axis **1404** representative of magnitudes of the characteristics being measured to generate the first inspection signature **1400**.

As shown in FIG. **14**, during a first time or distance window **1406** of the inspection signature **1400**, the measured characteristics include one or more decreases. But, due to noise or other causes, the inspection module **506** (shown in FIG. **5**) may be unable to positively identify the decreases as being indicative of a damaged section of the route **102**. For example, the decreases in the measured characteristics may not exceed a designated, non-zero threshold.

FIG. **15** illustrates a second inspection signature **1500** obtained by the trailing sensor **108**B (shown in FIG. **1**) according to one example of comparing inspection signatures to identify a damaged section of the route **102** (shown in FIG. **1**). The second inspection signature **1500** is shown alongside a horizontal axis **1502** representative of time or distance along the route **102** and a vertical axis **1504** representative of magnitudes of the characteristics being measured to generate the second inspection signature **1500**.

As shown in FIG. **15**, during a second time or distance window **1506** of the inspection signature **1500**, the measured characteristics include one or more decreases. But, due to noise or other causes, the inspection module **506** (shown in FIG. **5**) may be unable to positively identify the decreases as being indicative of a damaged section of the route **102**. For example, the decreases in the measured characteristics may not exceed a designated, non-zero threshold.

With continued reference to both the first and second inspection signatures **1400**, **1500** shown in FIGS. **14** and **15**, the inspection module **506** may normalize the inspection signatures **1400**, **1500** in order to compare the signatures **1400**, **1500**. The inspection signatures **1400**, **1500** may be normalized by the route inspection unit by modifying (e.g., expanding or contracting) the time- and/or distance-scale of one or more of the inspection signatures **1400**, **1500** so that the measured characteristics in the inspection signatures **1400**, **1500** are measured for the same or substantially same section of the route **102**. For example, the horizontal axes **1402**, **1502** for the respective inspection signatures **1400**, **1500** may represent different periods of time or different distances along the route **102**. The inspection signatures **1400**, **1500** may represent the characteristics measured over the same segment of the route **102**, but one of the signatures **1400** or **1500** may extend over a longer or shorter time and/or distance along the route **102** than the other signature **1500** or **1400**.

For example, the vehicle system **100** (shown in FIG. **1**) may be traveling at a faster speed when the leading sensor **108**A measured the characteristics for the first inspection signature **1400** than when the trailing sensor **108**B measured the characteristics for the second inspection signature **1500** (or vice-versa). As a result, the second inspection signature **1500** may extend over a longer time period or distance along the route **102** than the first inspection signature **1400**. This difference in speed also may cause the time period or distance **1406** in the first inspection signature **1400** to be shorter in duration or distance along the route **102** than the time period **1506** in the second inspection signature **1500**. Optionally, the trailing sensor **108**B may measure the characteristics of the route **102** at a greater resolution than the leading sensor **108**A (or vice-versa). The difference in resolutions can cause one of the signatures (e.g., the second inspection signature **1500**) to acquire more measurements of the characteristics and, as a result, extend over a longer portion of the horizontal axis **1502** than the horizontal axis **1402** of the first inspection signature **1400**.

In order to compare the inspection signatures **1400**, **1500**, the inspection module **506** may scale one or more of the inspection signatures **1400**, **1500** to match the scale of the other inspection signatures **1400**, **1500**. For example, the inspection module **506** may horizontally expand or stretch the portion of the inspection signature **1400** in the window **1406** so that this portion of the inspection signature **1400** extends over the same length of the horizontal axis **1402** that the window **1506** of the inspection signature **1500** extends over the horizontal axis **1502**. Conversely, the inspection module **506** may compact the portion of the inspection signature **1500** in the window **1506** so that this portion of the inspection signature **1500** extends over the same length of the horizontal axis **1502** that the window **1406** of the inspection signature **1400** extends over the horizontal axis **1402**. The inspection signatures **1400**, **1500** may be scaled by a comparison of the time periods or distances over which the inspection signatures **1400**, **1500** extend. As one example, if the window **1406** of the inspection signature **1400** extends over a time period of two seconds and the window **1506** of the inspection signature extends over a time period of five seconds, then the inspection module **506** may stretch (e.g., lengthen) the window **1406** of the inspection signature **1400** so that the window **1406** extends over the time period of five seconds. Conversely, the inspection module **506** may compact the window **1506** of the inspection signature **1500** so that this window **1506** extends of the time period of two seconds.

FIG. **16** illustrates one example of a scaled portion **1600** of the first inspection signature **1400** shown in FIG. **14**. The scaled portion **1600** of the first inspection signature **1400** represents the portion **1406** of the first inspection signature **1400** shown in FIG. **14**. The scaled portion **1600** is shown alongside the horizontal axis **1502** described above in connection with the second inspection signature **1500** and the vertical axis **1404** described above in connection with the first inspection signature **1400**. The scaled portion **1600** has been horizontally extended, or stretched, so that the scaled portion **1600** of the first inspection signature **1400** extends over the same segment of the horizontal axis **1502** as the portion **1506** of the second inspection window **1500**. Optionally, the portion **1506** of the second inspection signature **1500** may be horizontally compacted, or shrunk, so that the portion **1506** horizontally extends over the same segment of the horizontal axis **1402** as the portion **1406** of the first inspection signature **1400**.

In one aspect, the inspection module **506** may slice up the inspection signatures **1400**, **1500** into smaller segments and then compare the portions of the inspection signature **1400** with the segments of the inspection signatures **1500**. These segments of the inspection signatures **1400**, **1500** may be referred to as slices of the inspection signatures **1400**, **1500**. In one embodiment, the inspection module **506** scales and then divides one or more of the inspection signatures **1400**, **1500** into the slices. Optionally, the inspection module **506** may divide up the inspection signatures **1400**, **1500** into the slices without scaling the inspection signatures **1400**, **1500**.

For example, in FIG. **16**, the inspection module **506** can divide at least the scaled portion **1600** of the first inspection signature **1400** into separate, non-overlapping slices **1602** (e.g., slices **1602***a-j*). Alternatively, the inspection module **506** can divide the non-scaled portion **1406** (shown in FIG. **14**) of the first inspection signature **1400** into the slices **1602**. Although ten slices **1602** are shown in FIG. **16**, optionally, the inspection module **506** may divide at least the portion **1600** or **1406** into a different number of slices **1602**. While the slices **1602** do not overlap each other in FIG. **16**, alternatively, one or more of the slices **1602** may overlap one or more other slices **1602**.

The slices **1602** may horizontally extend along the horizontal axis (the axis **1502** for the slices **1602** of the scaled portion **1600** or the axis **1402** for the slices **1602** of the portion **1406**) for equal distances or time periods. For example, the slices **1602** may have the same width dimensions. Alternatively, one or more of the slices **1602** may have a different width dimension along the horizontal axis than one or more other slices **1602**.

The inspection module **506** also may divide at least the portion **1508** the second inspection signature **1500** into separate, non-overlapping slices **1508** (e.g., slices **1508***a-j*), as shown in FIG. **15**. Although ten slices **1508** are shown, optionally, the inspection module **506** may divide at least the portion **1508** into a different number of slices **1508**. While the slices **1508** do not overlap each other in FIG. **15**, alternatively, one or more of the slices **1508** may overlap one or more other slices **1508**. The slices **1508** may horizontally extend along the horizontal axis **1502** for equal distances or time periods. For example, the slices **1508** may have the same width dimensions. Alternatively, one or more of the slices **1508** may have a different width dimension along the horizontal axis than one or more other slices **1508**.

The inspection module **506** can correlate the slices **1602**, **1508** based on which portions of the route **102** that the slices **1602**, **1508** correspond with. For example, different slices **1602** represent the measured characteristics for different segments of the route **102** and different slices **1508** represent the measured characteristics for different segments of the route **102**. The inspection module **506** can group the slices **1602**, **1508** that represent the measured characteristics over the same segment of the route **102** in the different inspection signatures **1400**, **1500** into sets. Each set of the slices **1602**, **1508** can include the measured characteristics in the inspection signatures **1400**, **1500** for the same segment of the route **102**, and different sets of the slices **1602**, **1508** may include the measured characteristics in the inspection signatures **1400**, **1500** for different segments of the route **102**. There may be more than two slices **1602**, **1508** in a set, such as when there are three or more inspection signatures for the same segments of the route **102**.

For example, the first slices **1602***a*, **1508***a* of the different inspection signatures **1400**, **1500** may occur over the same time period or length of route **102**, the second slices **1602***b*, **1508***b* of the different inspection signatures **1400**, **1500** may occur over the same subsequent time period or length of route **102**, the third slices **1602***c*, **1508***c* of the different inspection signatures **1400**, **1500** may occur over the same subsequent time period or length of route **102**, and so on. The inspection module **506** can compare the slices **1602**, **1508** in the same set with each other to confirm or refute the identification of a damaged section of the route **102** (shown in FIG. **1**). The inspection module **506** can compare the first slices **1602***a*, **1508***a* with each other, the second slices **1602***b*, **1508***b* with each other, and so on.

In one example of comparing corresponding slices **1602**, **1508** with each other, the inspection module **506** may determine if both or all of the slices **1602**, **1508** in a set represent measured characteristics of the route **102** that indicates damage to the route **102**. The inspection module **506** may determine that both or all of the slices **1602**, **1508** in a set represent damage to the route **102** when the measured characteristics of the first and second inspection signatures **1400**, **1500** in those compared slices **1602**, **1508** are less than a designated threshold. For example, if the inspection signatures **1400**, **1500** represent current or voltage conducted through a rail of the route **102**, the inspection module **506** can determine that the slices **1602**, **1508** listed below fall below designated thresholds **1604**, **1510** of the inspection signatures **1400**, **1500**.

Slice in inspection signature 1400	Below threshold 1604?	Slice in inspection signature 1500	Below threshold 1510?
1602a	No	1508a	No
1602b	Yes	1508b	Yes
1602c	Yes	1508c	Yes
1602d	No	1508d	Yes
1602e	Yes	1508e	Yes
1602f	Yes	1508f	No
1602g	Yes	1508g	Yes
1602h	Yes	1508h	Yes
1602i	No	1508i	Yes
1602j	No	1508j	No

The thresholds **1604**, **1510** can represent lower limits on the measured characteristics such that, when the measured characteristics drop below the thresholds **1604**, **1510**, the characteristics indicate potential damage to the route **102**. Optionally, the thresholds **1604**, **1510** can represent upper limits on the measured characteristics such that, when the measured characteristics rise above the thresholds **1604**, **1510**, the characteristics indicate potential damage to the route **102**.

In comparing the same slices **1602**, **1508**, the inspection module **506** can determine if the corresponding slices **1602**, **1508** in the sets both or all fall below the thresholds **1604**, **1510**. If both slices **1602**, **1508** in a set fall below the threshold **1604**, **1510** (or rise above an upper threshold), then the inspection module **506** can identify or confirm that the segment of the route **102** (in which the measured characteristics of the slices **1602**, **1508** were measured) is damaged. On the other hand, if less than all (or less than a designated number) of the slices **1602**, **1508** in a set falls below the threshold **1604**, **1510** (or rise above an upper threshold), then the inspection module **506** can determine that the segment of the route **102** (in which the measured characteristics of the slices **1602**, **1508** were measured) is not damaged (or can refute the potential identification of damage to the route **102**. In the example shown above in the tables, the (b), (c), (e), (g), and (h) sets of slices **1602**, **1508** exceed the thresholds. Therefore, the inspection module **506** can determine that five of the ten sets of slices **1602**, **1508** indicate damage to the route **102**. The inspection module **506** can assign a score to these sets, such as a score of five. The inspection module **506** can compare this score to a score threshold, such as a score of four, five, or another number. If the score of the sets meets or exceeds the score threshold, then the inspection module **506** can determine or confirm that the route **102** is damaged. Otherwise, the inspection module **506** may determine that the route **102** is not damaged or refute a previous identification of possible damage to the route **102**.

As described above, the sensing system **200** (shown in FIG. **2**) may take one or more remedial actions if a section of the route **102** is identified by the identification module **506** as being damaged. In one aspect, the selection of which remedial actions to implement may be based on the score of the sets of slices **1602**, **1508** being examined. Different scores can result in different remedial actions being taken. In one aspect, larger scores may result in more severe remedial actions, while smaller scores can result in lesser remedial actions. For example, if the score of the sets of slices **1602**, **1508** meets or exceeds a first, relatively large score threshold, then the sensing system **200** may communicate (e.g., broadcast or transmit) a warning to one or more off-board locations (e.g., a dispatch facility, other vehicles or vehicle systems, etc.) to instruct the other locations to no longer use the segment of the route **102** that is identified as being damaged. In one embodiment, the sensing system **200** may additionally communicate a request to one or more off-board locations for repair of the damaged segment of the route **102**. If the score of the sets of slices **1602**, **1508** does not meet or exceed the first score threshold, but does meet or exceed a smaller, second score threshold, then the sensing system **200** can automatically control slack in the vehicle system **100** until the vehicle system **100** completes travel over the damaged segment of the route **102**. If the score of the sets of slices **1602**, **1508** does not meet or exceed the second score threshold, but does meet or exceed a smaller, third score threshold, then the sensing system **200** can automatically slow movement of the vehicle system **100**. If the score of the sets of slices **1602**, **1508** does not meet or exceed the second score threshold, but does meet or exceed a smaller, fourth score threshold, then the sensing system **200** can automatically stop movement. Optionally, one or more other remedial actions can be taken based on the score determined by the inspection module **506**.

In another aspect, the inspection module **506** can combine the inspection signatures **1400**, **1500** with each other to generate a net signature of the route **102** and can determine if the route **102** is damaged based on this net signature. FIG. **17** illustrates a net inspection signature **1700** according to one example of the inventive subject matter described herein. The net inspection signature **1700** represents a combination of the measured characteristics in the inspection signatures **1400**, **1500** shown in FIGS. **14** and **15**, and is shown alongside the horizontal axis **1402** described above and a vertical axis **1702** representative of magnitudes of the combined measured characteristics of the inspection signatures **1400**, **1500**.

In one example, the net inspection signature **1700** can be created by adding the measured characteristics of the inspection signature **1400** with the measured characteristics of the inspection signature **1500**. Optionally, the net inspection signature **1700** can be created by calculating differences between the measured characteristics of the inspection signature **1400** and the measured characteristics of the inspection signature **1500**. In another example, the net inspection signature **1700** may represent the largest or smallest of the measured characteristics in the inspection signatures **1400**, **1500** at respective locations along the horizontal axis **1402**. Optionally, the net inspection signature **1700** can represent averages, medians, or other calculations of the measured characteristics in the inspection signatures **1400**, **1500**.

The inspection module **506** (shown in FIG. **5**) can generate the net inspection signature **1700** and examine the net inspection signature **1700** to determine if the route **102** is damaged. In one aspect, the inspection module **506** can compare the net inspection signature **1700** to one or more designated thresholds, similar to as described above, to determine if the net inspection signature **1700** indicates damage to the route **102**. Depending on whether the net inspection signature **1700** meets or exceeds or falls below (as appropriate) upper or lower thresholds, the inspection module **506** may take one or more remedial actions, also as described above.

The examination of multiple inspection signatures obtained by different sensors **108** of the vehicle system **100** in order to identify damage to the route **102** can reduce the amount of false positive detections of damage to the route **102**. For example, the inspection signature generated from the measured characteristics obtained by the leading sensor **108**A may indicate damage to the route **102** when there is no damage. This is referred to as a false positive detection of damage to the route **102**. If the sensing system **200** only relied on the use of a single inspection signature to take a remedial action (e.g., slowing or stopping the vehicle system **100**), then the vehicle system **100** could frequently slow down or stop when no damage to the route **102** actually exists. Instead, using two or more inspection signatures from different sensors **108** can reduce the number of times that damage to the route **102** is identified when no such damage exists.

FIG. **18** illustrates a method **1800** for inspecting a route for damage according to one example of the inventive subject matter. The method **1800** may be used by the sensing system **200** (shown in FIG. **2**) to examine the route **102** (shown in FIG. **1**) and determine if the route **102** and/or the vehicle system **100** (shown in FIG. **1**) on which the sensing system **200** is disposed is damaged.

At **1802**, the vehicle system with the sensing system travels along the route. At **1804**, a leading sensor of the sensing system measures characteristics of the route during this travel along the route. As described above, the leading sensor can measure electrical characteristics (e.g., voltage, current, impedance, resistance, or the like) of the route, can obtain ultrasound echoes from the route, can measure physical characteristics (e.g., distances, displacements, or the like) of the route, or other characteristics.

At **1806**, a determination is made as to whether the characteristics measured by the leading sensor clearly indicate damage to the route. In one example, the characteristics can be compared to a first upper or lower threshold, or a first range of acceptable values, in order to determine if the characteristics meet or exceed the first upper threshold, fall below the first lower threshold, or otherwise fall outside of the first range of acceptable values. If the measured characteristics do meet or exceed the first upper threshold, fall below the first lower threshold, or otherwise fall outside of the first range, then the measured characteristics obtained by the leading sensor may clearly indicate damage to the route. As a result, flow of the method **1800** can proceed to **1808**.

At **1808**, one or more remedial actions can be taken in response to identifying the damage in the route. These actions can include, but are not limited to, changing tractive effort and/or braking effort provided by one or more propulsion-generating vehicles in the vehicle system (e.g., locomotives) to control slack in the vehicle system (e.g., to maintain slack between coupled vehicles between designated upper and lower limits), slowing movement of the vehicle system, stopping movement of the vehicle system, directing one or more additional sensors to measure characteristics of the route, communicating messages to off-board locations to request inspection and/or maintenance of the route and/or vehicle system, changing which route the vehicle system is traveling along, and the like. If the remedial action does not involve stopping movement of the vehicle system, then flow of the method **1800** can return to **1802**, where the vehicle system continues to travel along the route.

On the other hand, if the characteristics measured by the leading sensor do not clearly indicate damage to the route (e.g., at **1806**), then flow of the method **1800** can continue to **1810**. At **1810**, the characteristics measured by the leading sensor are examined to determine if the characteristics indicate potential damage to the route. The examination of these characteristics at **1806** and **1810** may occur at the same time or at different times. The characteristics can indicate potential damage, but not clear damage, to the route, when the characteristics meet or exceed a second upper threshold that is smaller than the first upper threshold described above, fall below a second lower threshold that is larger than the first lower threshold described above, or extend outside of a second range that is smaller than the first range described above. For example, the measured characteristics may be sufficiently large or small to indicate potential or probable damage, but may not be large or small enough to clearly indicate damage to the route. In such a situation, flow of the method **1800** can proceed to **1812** in order to confirm or refute the identification of potential damage to the route.

If, however, the characteristics measured by the leading sensor do not indicate potential damage to the route, then flow of the method **1800** may proceed to **1820** (described below).

At **1812**, a trailing or other sensor of the sensing system measures characteristics of the route during travel along the route. As described above, the trailing sensor can measure electrical characteristics (e.g., voltage, current, impedance, resistance, or the like) of the route, can obtain ultrasound echoes from the route, can measure physical characteristics (e.g., distances, displacements, or the like) of the route, or other characteristics.

At **1814**, a determination is made as to whether the characteristics measured by the trailing or other sensor indicate damage to the route. In one example, the characteristics can be compared to the same or different thresholds or ranges as the measured characteristics obtained by the leading sensor. If the measured characteristics of the trailing sensor meet or exceed one or more upper thresholds, fall below one or more lower thresholds, or otherwise fall outside of one or more ranges, then the measured characteristics obtained by the trailing sensor may indicate damage to the route. As a result, the identification of potential damage to the route that is based on the characteristics measured by the leading sensor is confirmed, and flow of the method **1800** can proceed to **1816**.

At **1816**, one or more remedial actions can be taken in response to identifying the damage in the route. As described above, these actions can include, but are not limited to, changing tractive effort and/or braking effort provided by one or more propulsion-generating vehicles in the vehicle system (e.g., locomotives) to control slack in the vehicle system (e.g., to maintain slack between coupled vehicles between designated upper and lower limits), slowing movement of the vehicle system, stopping movement of the vehicle system, directing one or more additional sensors to measure characteristics of the route, communicating messages to off-board locations to request inspection and/or maintenance of the route and/or vehicle system, changing which route the vehicle system is traveling along, and the like. If the remedial action does not involve stopping movement of the vehicle system, then flow of the method **1800** can return to **1802**, where the vehicle system continues to travel along the route.

On the other hand, if the characteristics of the route that are measured by the trailing or other sensor do not indicate damage to the route, then the identification of potential damage to the route that is based on the characteristics measured by the leading or other sensor cannot yet be confirmed. The characteristics measured by the leading (or other) sensor can be compared to the characteristics measured by the trailing (or other) sensor in order to confirm or refute this identification of potential damage to the route. As a result, at **1814**, if the characteristics measured by the trailing or other sensor do not confirm the identification of damage to the route, then flow of the method **1800** may proceed to **1818**.

At **1818**, the characteristics measured by two or more of the sensors (e.g., the leading, trailing, and/or other sensors) are compared to each other to determine if the compared characteristics indicate damage to the route. As described above, the characteristics of one or more sensors may need to be normalized to account for differences in the speed of the vehicle system between the time period when one sensor measured the characteristics and the time period when another sensor measured the characteristics. The characteristics can be compared by dividing inspection signatures of the measured characteristics into slices, and comparing the slices to each other and/or to thresholds to determine scores of the inspection signatures (as described above). If the scores meet or exceed one or more thresholds, then the characteristics measured by the two or more sensors indicate or confirm damage to the route. As a result, flow of the method **1800** can proceed to **1816**. Otherwise, the potential damage to the route is not confirmed, and flow of the method **1800** can return to **1802** until a trip of the vehicle system is completed or another ending point in time.

As described above, at **1810**, if the characteristics measured by the leading sensor do not indicate potential damage to the route, then flow of the method **1800** may proceed to **1820** (described below). At **1820**, a trailing or other sensor of the sensing system measures characteristics of the route during travel along the route. As described above, the trailing sensor can measure electrical characteristics (e.g., voltage, current, impedance, resistance, or the like) of the route, can obtain ultrasound echoes from the route, can measure physical characteristics (e.g., distances, displacements, or the like) of the route, or other characteristics.

At **1822**, a determination is made as to whether the characteristics measured by the trailing or other sensor indicate damage to the route. In one example, the characteristics can be compared to the same or different thresholds or ranges as the measured characteristics obtained by the leading sensor. If the measured characteristics of the trailing sensor meet or exceed one or more upper thresholds, fall below one or more lower thresholds, or otherwise fall outside of one or more ranges, then the measured characteristics obtained by the trailing sensor may indicate damage to the route. As a result, potential damage to the route may be identified, even though the characteristics measured by the leading sensor do not indicate damage to the route. As a result, flow of the method **1800** can proceed to **1824**.

On the other hand, if the characteristics measured by the trailing sensor do not indicate damage to the route, flow of the method **1800** can return to **1802** until a trip of the vehicle system is completed or another ending point in time.

At **1824**, a warning signal is generated to indicate that the vehicle system may have damaged the route. For example, because no damage was identified by the characteristics measured by the leading sensor, but damage was identified by the characteristics measured by the trailing sensor, the damage to the route may have occurred after the leading sensor passed over the now damaged section of the route, but before the trailing sensor reached this location. The warning signal may cause a warning to be displayed onboard to the operator so that the operator can take one or more remedial actions described herein, or can cause the vehicle system to automatically take one or more remedial actions described herein.

In one aspect of the inventive subject matter described herein, a vehicle system (such as a rail vehicle consist) can have onboard track inspection equipment (e.g., a leading sensor) on a lead or other locomotive in the vehicle system. When this equipment crosses over a section of track and the equipment detects an issue (e.g., damage to the track), or needs a better check (e.g., identifies potential damage to the track), a message may be communicated from the equipment on the lead locomotive to track inspection equipment onboard one or more other locomotives (e.g., one or more trailing sensors). The message may be communicated using Distributed Power or Ethernet over multiple unit (MU) cable technology. Distributed Power is a technology that, among other things, allows locomotives in a consist or train to coordinate their tractive and/or braking efforts. Ethernet over MU cable technology allows for the communication of network data (e.g., packetized data) or other data through the MU cable extending through the vehicle consist. This message can trigger the track inspection equipment onboard one or more other locomotives to look more closely at this section of track (e.g., examine the area of track where the leading equipment identified potential damage). The trailing equipment can accomplish this by recording details about the track with greater precision than the sensors of the trailing equipment are normally configured for. For example, the sensors may have a default or standard resolution (e.g., quantifiable amount of data acquired per unit time, per unit area, or per unit length of track). These sensors may not be able to measure characteristics of the track at higher resolutions (e.g., larger amounts of data acquired per unit time, per unit area, or per unit length of track) due to limits on the memory available to the sensors. But, the resolution of these sensors may be increased subsequent or responsive to leading equipment (e.g., sensor) identifying potential damage to the track.

In one example of the inventive subject matter described herein, a sensing system includes a leading sensor, a trailing sensor, and a route examining unit. The leading sensor is configured to be coupled to a leading rail vehicle of a rail vehicle system that travels along a track. The leading sensor also is configured to acquire first inspection data indicative of a condition of the track in an examined section of the track as the rail vehicle system travels over the track. The trailing sensor is configured to be coupled to a trailing rail vehicle of the rail vehicle system and to acquire additional, second inspection data indicative of the condition of the track subsequent to the leading rail vehicle passing over the examined section of the track and the leading sensor acquiring the first inspection data. The route examining unit is configured to be disposed onboard the rail vehicle system. The route examining unit also is configured to direct the trailing sensor to acquire the second inspection data in the examined section of the track when the first inspection data indicates damage to the track such that both the leading sensor and the trailing sensor acquire the first inspection data and the second inspection data, respectively, of the examined section of the track during a single pass of the rail vehicle system over the examined section of the track. The leading sensor can be configured to acquire the first inspection data at a first resolution level and the trailing sensor can be configured to acquire the second inspection data at a second resolution level that is greater than the first resolution level such that the second inspection data includes a greater amount of data than the first inspection data at least one of per unit time, per unit distance, or per unit area.

In one aspect, at least one of the route examining unit or the trailing sensor is configured to select the second resolution level, from among a plurality of available sensor resolution levels, based on at least one of a current speed of the vehicle system, a category of the damage, or a degree of the damage.

In one aspect, the leading rail vehicle and the trailing rail vehicle are locomotives mechanically interconnected with each other by one or more railcars in the vehicle system.

In one aspect, the first inspection data acquired by the leading sensor and the second inspection data acquired by the trailing sensor are different types of inspection data, with at least one of the types of inspection data being non-optical inspection data.

In one aspect, the trailing sensor is configured to acquire the second inspection data responsive to the route examining unit determining that the first inspection data indicates the damage to the track.

In one aspect, the route examining unit is configured to direct a controller of the vehicle system to at least one of autonomously control the rail vehicle system or direct an operator of the rail vehicle system to decrease slack in one or more coupler devices that couple the trailing rail vehicle with one or more other vehicles in the vehicle system when the first inspection data indicates the damage to the track and prior to the trailing sensor traveling over the damage to the track.

In another example of the inventive subject matter described herein, a sensing system includes a leading sensor, a trailing sensor, and a route examining unit. The leading sensor is configured to be coupled to a leading rail vehicle of a rail vehicle system that travels along a track. The leading sensor also is configured to automatically acquire first inspection data indicative of a condition of the track in an examined section of the track as the rail vehicle system travels over the track. The first inspection data can be acquired at a first resolution level. The trailing sensor is configured to be coupled to a trailing rail vehicle of the rail vehicle system and to automatically acquire additional, second inspection data indicative of the condition of the track subsequent to the leading rail vehicle passing over the examined section of the track and the leading sensor acquiring the first inspection data. The second inspection data can be acquired at a second resolution level that is greater than the first resolution level such that the second inspection data includes a greater amount of data than the first inspection data at least one of per unit time, per unit distance, or per unit area. The leading rail vehicle and the trailing rail vehicle can be directly or indirectly mechanically connected in the rail vehicle system. The route examining unit is configured to be disposed onboard the rail vehicle system. The route examining unit also can be configured to automatically direct the trailing sensor to acquire the second inspection data in the examined section of the track when the first inspection data indicates damage to the track such that both the leading sensor and the trailing sensor acquire the first inspection data and the second inspection data, respectively, of the examined section of the track during a single pass of the rail vehicle system over the examined section of the track.

In one aspect, the leading rail vehicle and the trailing rail vehicle are locomotives mechanically interconnected with each other by one or more railcars in the vehicle system.

In one aspect, the first inspection data acquired by the leading sensor and the second inspection data acquired by the trailing sensor are different types of inspection data, with at least one of the types of inspection data being non-optical inspection data.

In one aspect, the trailing sensor is configured to acquire the second inspection data responsive to the route examining unit determining that the first inspection data indicates the damage to the track.

In one aspect, the route examining unit is configured to direct a controller of the vehicle system to at least one of autonomously control the rail vehicle system or direct an operator of the rail vehicle system to decrease slack in one or more coupler devices that couple the trailing rail vehicle with one or more other vehicles in the vehicle system when the first inspection data indicates the damage to the track and prior to the trailing sensor traveling over the damage to the track.

In another example of the inventive subject matter described herein, a sensing system includes a leading sensor, a trailing sensor, and a route examining unit. The leading sensor is configured to be disposed onboard a first vehicle of a vehicle system that travels along a route. The leading sensor also is configured to measure first characteristics of the route as the vehicle system travels along the route. The trailing sensor is configured to be disposed onboard a second vehicle of the vehicle system that is directly or indirectly mechanically coupled with the first vehicle. The trailing sensor also is configured to measure second characteristics of the route as the vehicle system. The route examining unit is configured to be disposed onboard a vehicle system that travels along a route. The route examining unit is configured to receive the first characteristics of the route and the second characteristics of the route and to compare the first characteristics with the second characteristics, the route examining unit also configured to identify a segment of the route as being damaged based on a comparison of the first characteristics with the second characteristics.

In one aspect, the route examining unit is configured to compare a first inspection signature representative of the first characteristics of the route at one or more of different times or locations along the route with a second inspection signature that is representative of the second characteristics of the route at the one or more of different times or locations along the route to identify the segment of the route as being damaged.

In one aspect, the route examining unit is configured to normalize at least one of the first inspection signature or the second inspection signature with respect to at least one of time or distance by modifying at least one of a time scale or a distance scale of the at least one of the first characteristics or the second characteristics prior to comparing the first inspection signature with the second inspection signature.

In one aspect, the route examining unit is configured to normalize the at least one of the first inspection signature or the second inspection signature by expanding or contracting the at least one of a time scale or distance scale of at least a portion of the at least one of the first inspection signature or the second inspection signature.

In one aspect, the route examining unit is configured to separate the first inspection signature into plural first slices and to separate the second inspection signature into plural second slices, and to compare the first slices with the second slices in order to identify the segment of the route as being damaged.

In one aspect, the first slices of the first inspection signature extend over at least one of same time periods or same distances along the route as the second slices of the second inspection signature.

In one aspect, the route examining unit is configured to compare the first slices with the second slices based on which segment along the route that each of the first slices includes the first characteristics measured in the segment and that each of the second slices includes the second characteristics measured in the segment.

In one aspect, the route examining unit is configured to calculate a score representative of how many of the first slices includes the first characteristics that indicate damage to the route in the same segment as the second slices that include the second characteristics that also indicate the damage to the route in the same segment.

In one aspect, the route examining unit is configured to select a remedial action to implement responsive to identifying the damage in the route based on the score that is calculated.

In another embodiment, a sensing system is provided that includes a leading sensor, a trailing sensor, and a route examining unit. The leading sensor is configured to be coupled to a vehicle system that travels along a route. The leading sensor also is configured to acquire first inspection data indicative of a condition of the route as the vehicle system travels over the route. The condition may represent the health (e.g., damaged or not damaged, a degree of damage, and the like) of the route. The trailing sensor is configured to be coupled to the vehicle system and to acquire additional, second inspection data that is indicative of the condition to the route subsequent to the leading sensor acquiring the first inspection data. The route examining unit is configured to be disposed onboard the vehicle system and to identify a section of interest in the route based on the first inspection data acquired by the leading sensor. The route examining unit also is configured to direct the trailing sensor to acquire the second inspection data within the section of interest in the route when the first inspection data indicates damage to the route in the section of interest.

In one aspect, the leading sensor is configured to be coupled with and acquire the first inspection data from a leading vehicle in the vehicle system and the trailing sensor is configured to be coupled with and acquire the second inspection data from a trailing vehicle in the vehicle system. The leading vehicle and the trailing vehicle are mechanically directly or indirectly interconnected with each other in the vehicle system such that, in at least one direction of travel of the vehicle system, the leading vehicle travels over the section of interest in the route before the trailing vehicle.

In one aspect, the leading sensor and the trailing sensor may be coupled to the same vehicle in the vehicle system.

In one aspect, the leading sensor is configured to acquire the first inspection data and the trailing sensor is configured to acquire the second inspection data during a single pass of the vehicle system over the section of interest in the route.

In one aspect, the first inspection data acquired by the leading sensor and the additional inspection data acquired by the trailing sensor are different types of inspection data.

In one aspect, the leading sensor is configured to acquire the first inspection data at a lower resolution level and the trailing sensor is configured to acquire the second inspection data at a greater resolution level. The resolution levels may represent how much inspection data is acquired per unit time, an amount of inspection data that is acquired during a pass of the respective sensor over the section of interest in the route, and the like.

In one aspect, the leading sensor is configured to be coupled to a leading locomotive and the trailing sensor is configured to be coupled to a trailing locomotive of the vehicle system.

In one aspect, the trailing sensor is configured to acquire the second inspection data responsive to the route examining unit determining that the first inspection data indicates the damage to the route.

In one aspect, the trailing sensor is configured to acquire the second inspection data only when the route examining unit determines that the first inspection data indicates the damage to the route.

In one aspect, the route examining unit is configured to determine when to direct the trailing sensor to begin acquiring the second inspection data based on a velocity of the vehicle system and a separation distance between the leading sensor and the trailing sensor.

In one aspect, the route examining unit is configured to communicate with a location determination system of the vehicle system to determine a location of the section of interest in the route and to direct the trailing sensor to being acquiring the second inspection data based on a velocity of the vehicle system and the location of the section of interest.

In one aspect, the route examining unit is configured to direct a controller of the vehicle system to at least one of autonomously control the vehicle system or direct an operator of the vehicle system to slow the vehicle system down upon determination that the first inspection data indicates damage to the route. The controller may be an onboard processing device that controls operations of the vehicle system or at least one of the vehicles.

In one aspect, the route examining unit is configured to direct a controller of the vehicle system to at least one of autonomously control the vehicle system or direct the operator such that the vehicle system travels faster over the section of interest when the leading sensor passes over the section of interest than when the trailing sensor passes over the section of interest. The controller may be an onboard processing device that controls operations of the vehicle system or at least one of the vehicles.

In one aspect, the route examining unit is configured to direct a controller of the vehicle system to at least one of autonomously control the vehicle system or direct an operator of the vehicle system to reduce slack in one or more coupler devices of the vehicle system between the trailing vehicle and one or more other vehicles in the vehicle system when the first inspection data indicates the damage to the route. The controller may be an onboard processing device that controls operations of the vehicle system or at least one of the vehicles.

In one aspect, the route examining unit is configured to transmit a notification signal to an off-board location responsive to identification of damage to the route based on one or more of the first inspection data and/or the second inspection data, the notification signal notifying the off-board location of at least one of a location of the damage to the route and/or a type of damage to the route.

In one aspect, the route examining unit is configured to transmit a warning signal to one or more other vehicles or vehicle systems responsive to identification of damage to the route based on one or more of the first inspection data and/or the second inspection data, the warning signal notifying the one or more other vehicles or vehicle systems of at least one of a location of the damage to the route and/or a type of damage to the route.

In another embodiment, a method (e.g., for acquiring inspection data of a route) includes acquiring first inspection data indicative of a condition of a route from a leading sensor coupled to a leading vehicle in a vehicle system as the vehicle system travels over the route, determining that the first inspection data indicates damage to the route in a section of interest in the route, and directing a trailing sensor coupled to a trailing vehicle of the vehicle system to acquire additional, second inspection data of the route when the first inspection data indicates the damage to the route. The leading vehicle and the trailing vehicle are mechanically directly or indirectly interconnected with each other in the vehicle system such that the leading vehicle passes over the section of interest of the route before the trailing vehicle.

In one aspect, acquiring the first inspection data and directing the trailing sensor to acquire the second inspection data occurs such that both the first inspection data and the second inspection data are acquired during a single pass of the vehicle system over the section of interest in the route.

In one aspect, the first inspection data acquired by the leading sensor and the second inspection data acquired by the trailing sensor are different types of inspection data.

In one aspect, acquiring the first inspection data is acquired at a first resolution level and the second inspection data is acquired at a second resolution level that is greater than the first resolution level. The resolution levels may represent how much inspection data is acquired per unit time, an amount of inspection data that is acquired during a pass of the respective sensor over the section of interest in the route, and the like.

In one aspect, directing the trailing sensor to acquire the second inspection data includes directing the trailing sensor when to acquire the second inspection data based on a velocity of the vehicle system and a separation distance between the leading sensor and the trailing sensor.

In one aspect, the method also includes slowing movement of the vehicle system responsive to determining that the first inspection data indicates the damage to the route.

In one aspect, the method also includes reducing slack in one or more coupler devices between the trailing vehicle and one or more other vehicles in the vehicle system responsive to determining that the first inspection data indicates the damage to the route.

In another embodiment, a sensing system includes a leading sensor, a trailing sensor, and a route examining unit. The leading sensor is configured to be coupled to a leading rail vehicle of a rail vehicle system that travels along a track. The leading sensor also is configured to acquire first inspection data indicative of a condition of the track in an examined section of the track as the rail vehicle system travels over the track. The trailing sensor is configured to be coupled to a trailing rail vehicle of the rail vehicle system and to acquire additional, second inspection data indicative of the condition to the track subsequent to the leading rail vehicle passing over the examined section of the track and the leading sensor acquiring the first inspection data. The route examining unit is configured to be disposed onboard the rail vehicle system. The route examining unit also is configured to direct the trailing sensor to acquire the second inspection data in the examined section of the track when the first inspection data indicates damage to the track such that both the leading sensor and the trailing sensor acquire the first inspection data and the second inspection data, respectively, of the examined section of the track during a single pass of the rail vehicle system over the examined section of the track.

In one aspect, the leading rail vehicle and the trailing rail vehicle are locomotives mechanically interconnected with each other by one or more railcars in the vehicle system.

In one aspect, the first inspection data acquired by the leading sensor and the second inspection data acquired by the trailing sensor are different types of inspection data.

In one aspect, the leading sensor is configured to acquire the first inspection data at a first resolution level and the trailing sensor is configured to acquire the second inspection data at a second resolution level that is greater than the first resolution level.

In one aspect, at least one of the route examining unit or the trailing sensor is configured to select the second resolution level, from among a plurality of available sensor resolution levels, based on at least one of a current speed of the vehicle system, a category of the damage, or a degree of the damage.

In one aspect, the trailing sensor is configured to acquire the second inspection data responsive to the route examining unit determining that the first inspection data indicates the damage to the track.

In one aspect, the route examining unit is configured to direct a controller of the vehicle system to at least one of autonomously control the rail vehicle system or direct an operator of the rail vehicle system to slow movement of the rail vehicle system down upon determination that the first inspection data indicates damage to the track. The controller may be an onboard processing device that controls operations of the vehicle system or at least one of the vehicles.

In one aspect, the route examining unit is configured to direct a controller of the vehicle system to at least one of autonomously control the rail vehicle system or direct an operator of the rail vehicle system to decrease slack in one or more coupler devices that couple the trailing rail vehicle with one or more other vehicles in the vehicle system when the first inspection data indicates the damage to the track. The controller may be an onboard processing device that controls operations of the vehicle system or at least one of the vehicles.

In one aspect, a sensing system comprises a leading sensor configured to be coupled to a leading rail vehicle of a rail vehicle system that travels along a track. The leading sensor is also configured to automatically acquire first inspection data indicative of a condition of the track in an examined section of the track as the rail vehicle system travels over the track. The first inspection data is acquired at a first resolution level. The sensing system further comprises a trailing sensor configured to be coupled to a trailing rail vehicle of the rail vehicle system and to automatically acquire additional, second inspection data indicative of the condition of the track subsequent to the leading rail vehicle passing over the examined section of the track and the leading sensor acquiring the first inspection data. The second inspection data is acquired at a second resolution level that is greater than the first resolution level. The leading rail vehicle and the trailing rail vehicle are directly or indirectly mechanically connected in the rail vehicle system. The sensing system further includes a route examining unit configured to be disposed onboard the rail vehicle system. The route examining unit is also configured to automatically direct the trailing sensor to acquire the second inspection data in the examined section of the track when the first inspection data indicates damage to the track, such that both the leading sensor and the trailing sensor acquire the first inspection data and the second inspection data, respectively, of the examined section of the track during a single pass of the rail vehicle system over the examined section of the track. In one aspect, the rail vehicle system may be a train, and the leading rail vehicle and the trailing rail vehicle may be first and second locomotives of the train.

In another embodiment, a sensing system includes a route examining unit that is configured to be disposed onboard a vehicle system that travels along a route. The route examining unit also is configured to receive first inspection data from a leading sensor configured to be coupled to a leading vehicle of the vehicle system as the vehicle system travels over the route. The first inspection data is indicative of a condition of the route in an examined section of the route. The route examining unit is further configured to identify damage in the examined section of the route based on the first inspection data and to direct a trailing sensor to acquire second inspection data in the examined section of the route responsive to identifying the damage. The trailing sensor is configured to be coupled to a trailing vehicle of the vehicle system that is indirectly or directly mechanically coupled to the leading vehicle.

It is to be understood that the above description is intended to be illustrative, and not restrictive. For example, the above-described embodiments (and/or aspects thereof) may be used in combination with each other. In addition, many modifications may be made to adapt a particular situation or material to the teachings of the inventive subject matter without departing from its scope. While the dimensions and types of materials described herein are intended to define the parameters of the inventive subject matter, they are by no means limiting and are exemplary embodiments. Many other embodiments will be apparent to one of ordinary skill in the art upon reviewing the above description. The scope of the inventive subject matter should, therefore, be determined with reference to the appended claims, along with the full scope of equivalents to which such claims are entitled. In the appended claims, the terms "including" and "in which" are used as the plain-English equivalents of the respective terms "comprising" and "wherein." Moreover, in the following claims, the terms "first," "second," and "third," etc. are used merely as labels, and are not intended to impose numerical requirements on their objects. Further, the limitations of the following claims are not written in means-plus-function format and are not intended to be interpreted based on 35 U.S.C. §112, sixth paragraph, unless and until such claim limitations expressly use the phrase "means for" followed by a statement of function void of further structure.

This written description uses examples to disclose several embodiments of the inventive subject matter and also to enable one of ordinary skill in the art to practice the embodiments of inventive subject matter, including making and using any devices or systems and performing any incorporated methods. The patentable scope of the inventive subject matter is defined by the claims, and may include other examples that occur to one of ordinary skill in the art. Such other examples are intended to be within the scope of the claims if they have structural elements that do not differ from the literal language of the claims, or if they include equivalent structural elements with insubstantial differences from the literal languages of the claims.

The foregoing description of certain embodiments of the present inventive subject matter will be better understood when read in conjunction with the appended drawings. To the extent that the figures illustrate diagrams of the functional blocks of various embodiments, the functional blocks are not necessarily indicative of the division between hardware circuitry. Thus, for example, one or more of the functional blocks (for example, processors or memories) may be implemented in a single piece of hardware (for example, a general purpose signal processor, microcontroller, random access memory, hard disk, and the like). Similarly, the programs may be stand-alone programs, may be incorporated as subroutines in an operating system, may be functions in an installed software package, and the like. The various embodiments are not limited to the arrangements and instrumentality shown in the drawings.

As used herein, an element or step recited in the singular and proceeded with the word "a" or "an" should be understood as not excluding plural of said elements or steps, unless such exclusion is explicitly stated. Furthermore, references to "one embodiment" of the present inventive subject matter are not intended to be interpreted as excluding the existence of additional embodiments that also incorporate the recited features. Moreover, unless explicitly stated to the contrary, embodiments "comprising," "including," or "having" an element or a plurality of elements having a particular property may include additional such elements not having that property.

What is claimed is:

1. A sensing system comprising:

a leading sensor configured to be coupled to a leading rail vehicle of a rail vehicle system that travels along a track, the leading sensor also configured to acquire first inspection data indicative of a condition of the track in an examined section of the track as the rail vehicle system travels over the track;

a trailing sensor configured to be coupled to a trailing rail vehicle of the rail vehicle system and to acquire additional, second inspection data indicative of the condition of the track subsequent to the leading rail vehicle passing over the examined section of the track and the leading sensor acquiring the first inspection data; and

a route examining unit configured to be disposed onboard the rail vehicle system, the route examining unit also configured to direct the trailing sensor to acquire the second inspection data in the examined section of the track when the first inspection data indicates damage to the track such that both the leading sensor and the trailing sensor acquire the first inspection data and the second inspection data, respectively, of the examined section of the track during a single pass of the rail vehicle system over the examined section of the track,

wherein the leading sensor is configured to acquire the first inspection data at a first resolution level and the trailing sensor is configured to acquire the second inspection data at a second resolution level that is greater than the first resolution level such that the second inspection data includes a greater amount of data than the first inspection data at least one of per unit time, per unit distance, or per unit area.

2. The sensing system of claim **1**, wherein at least one of the route examining unit or the trailing sensor is configured to select the second resolution level, from among a plurality of available sensor resolution levels, based on at least one of a current speed of the vehicle system, a category of the damage, or a degree of the damage.

3. The sensing system of claim **1**, wherein the leading rail vehicle and the trailing rail vehicle are locomotives mechanically interconnected with each other by one or more railcars in the vehicle system.

4. The sensing system of claim **1**, wherein the first inspection data acquired by the leading sensor and the second inspection data acquired by the trailing sensor are different types of inspection data, with at least one of the types of inspection data being non-optical inspection data.

5. The sensing system of claim **1**, wherein the trailing sensor is configured to acquire the second inspection data responsive to the route examining unit determining that the first inspection data indicates the damage to the track.

6. The sensing system of claim **1**, wherein the route examining unit is configured to direct a controller of the vehicle system to at least one of autonomously control the rail vehicle system or direct an operator of the rail vehicle system to decrease slack in one or more coupler devices that couple the trailing rail vehicle with one or more other vehicles in the vehicle system when the first inspection data indicates the damage to the track and prior to the trailing sensor traveling over the damage to the track.

7. The sensing system of claim **1**, wherein the route examining unit is configured to identify the damage to the route by comparing a first inspection signature representative of changes in magnitudes of the first inspection data with respect to one or more of time or distance along the route with a second inspection signature representative of changes in magnitudes of the second inspection data with respect to the one or more of time or distance along the route.

8. The sensing system of claim **7**, wherein the route examining unit is configured to compare the first inspection signature with the second inspection signature to identify the damage to the route by normalizing one or more of the first inspection signature or the second inspection signature by one or more of expanding or contracting one or more of a time scale or a distance scale of the one or more of the first inspection signature or the second inspection signature, dividing two or more of the first inspection signature, the second inspection signature, or the one or more of the first inspection signature or the second inspection signature that is normalized into smaller signature portions, temporally or spatially correlating the smaller signature portions obtained from the two or more of the first inspection signature, the second inspection signature, or the one or more of the first inspection signature or the second inspection signature that is normalized with each other, and comparing the smaller signature portions obtained from at least one of the first inspection signature, the second inspection signature, or the one or more of the first inspection signature or the second inspection signature that is normalized with the smaller signature portions obtained from at least another one of the first inspection signature, the second inspection signature, or the one or more of the first inspection signature or the second inspection signature that is normalized.

9. The sensing system of claim **7**, wherein the route examining unit is configured to combine the first inspection signature with the second inspection signature to form a net inspection signature of the route, wherein the route examining unit is configured to identify the damage to the route based on the net inspection signature.

10. The sensing system of claim **9**, wherein the route examining unit is configured to combine the first inspection signature with the second inspection signature such that the net inspection signature represents sums of the first characteristics in the first inspection signature and the second characteristics in the second inspection signature.

11. The sensing system of claim **9**, wherein the route examining unit is configured to combine the first inspection signature with the second inspection signature such that the net inspection signature represents differences between the first characteristics in the first inspection signature and the second characteristics in the second inspection signature.

12. The sensing system of claim **1**, wherein one or more of the leading sensor or the trailing sensor include an acoustic pick up device configured to measure acoustics of the route as one or more of the first characteristics of the first inspection signature or the second characteristics of the second inspection signature.

13. The sensing system of claim **12**, wherein the route examining unit is configured to determine one or more of the first inspection signature or the second inspection signature as a frequency spectrum of the acoustics of the route.

14. The sensing system of claim **1**, wherein one or more of the leading sensor or the trailing sensor include a receiver configured to receive light reflected off of the route and the route examining unit is configured to determine one or more of the first inspection signature or the second inspection signature based on the light that is received by the receiver.

15. A sensing system comprising:

a leading sensor configured to be coupled to a leading rail vehicle of a rail vehicle system that travels along a track, the leading sensor also configured to automatically acquire first inspection data indicative of a condition of the track in an examined section of the track as the rail vehicle system travels over the track, wherein the first inspection data is acquired at a first resolution level;

a trailing sensor configured to be coupled to a trailing rail vehicle of the rail vehicle system and to automatically acquire additional, second inspection data indicative of the condition of the track subsequent to the leading rail vehicle passing over the examined section of the track and the leading sensor acquiring the first inspection data, wherein the second inspection data is acquired at a second resolution level that is greater than the first resolution level such that the second inspection data includes a greater amount of data than the first inspection data at least one of per unit time, per unit distance, or per unit area, and wherein the leading rail vehicle and the trailing rail vehicle are directly or indirectly mechanically connected in the rail vehicle system; and

a route examining unit configured to be disposed onboard the rail vehicle system, the route examining unit also configured to automatically direct the trailing sensor to acquire the second inspection data in the examined section of the track when the first inspection data indicates damage to the track such that both the leading sensor and the trailing sensor acquire the first inspection data and the second inspection data, respectively, of the examined section of the track during a single pass of the rail vehicle system over the examined section of the track.

16. The sensing system of claim **15**, wherein the leading rail vehicle and the trailing rail vehicle are locomotives mechanically interconnected with each other by one or more railcars in the vehicle system.

17. The sensing system of claim **15**, wherein the first inspection data acquired by the leading sensor and the second inspection data acquired by the trailing sensor are different types of inspection data, with at least one of the types of inspection data being non-optical inspection data.

18. The sensing system of claim **15**, wherein the trailing sensor is configured to acquire the second inspection data responsive to the route examining unit determining that the first inspection data indicates the damage to the track.

19. The sensing system of claim **15**, wherein the route examining unit is configured to direct a controller of the vehicle system to at least one of autonomously control the rail vehicle system or direct an operator of the rail vehicle system to decrease slack in one or more coupler devices that couple the trailing rail vehicle with one or more other vehicles in the vehicle system when the first inspection data indicates the damage to the track and prior to the trailing sensor traveling over the damage to the track.

20. A sensing system comprising:

a leading sensor configured to be disposed onboard a first vehicle of a vehicle system that travels along a route, the leading sensor also configured to measure first characteristics of the route as the vehicle system travels along the route;

a trailing sensor configured to be disposed onboard a second vehicle of the vehicle system that is directly or indirectly, mechanically coupled with the first vehicle, the trailing sensor also configured to measure second characteristics of the route as the vehicle system moves along the route; and

a route examining unit configured to be disposed onboard the vehicle system, wherein the route examining unit is configured to receive the first characteristics of the route and the second characteristics of the route and to compare a first inspection signature with a second inspection signature, the first inspection signature representative of changes in magnitudes of the first characteristics at different first times, the second inspection signature representative of changes in magnitudes of the second characteristics at different second times, the route examining unit configured to combine the first inspection signature with the second inspection signature to form a net inspection signature of the route, wherein the route examining unit also is configured to identify a segment of the route as being damaged based on the net inspection signature of the route.

21. The sensing system of claim **20**, wherein the route examining unit is configured to combine the first inspection signature with the second inspection signature to form the net inspection signature of the route such that the net inspection signature represents sums of the first characteristics in the first inspection signature and the second characteristics in the second inspection signature.

22. The sensing system of claim **20**, wherein the route examining unit is configured to combine the first inspection signature with the second inspection signature to form the net inspection signature of the route such that the net inspection signature represents differences between the first characteristics in the first inspection signature and the second characteristics in the second inspection signature.

23. The sensing system of claim **20**, wherein one or more of the leading sensor or the trailing sensor include a receiver configured to receive light reflected off of the route and the route examining unit is configured to determine one or more of the first inspection signature or the second inspection signature based on the light that is received by the receiver.

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