

Devices could disable terror bombs

National security arm to test 'Render Safe' for local agency use

Keay Davidson, Chronicle Science Writer
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The nation's top nuclear weapons agency announced Tuesday that it's planning to field-test devices that could eventually be used by local agencies around the country to disable a terrorist "dirty bomb" or nuclear weapon in the absence of experts trained to defuse nuclear bombs.

The plan is an answer to concerns that, in the event of a terrorist plot on U.S. soil, the Nevada-based Nuclear Emergency Search Team wouldn't be able to get to the scene of an attack soon enough. The team, known as NEST, is the first line of defense against such attacks, which federal authorities say could radioactively contaminate a 30-block section of a city.

The U.S. National Nuclear Security Administration announced that "Render Safe," devices that have been years in the making, will soon be ready for field testing and eventually could be used by FBI agents, police or firefighters or other nonnuclear authorities.

The devices are covered in the agency's proposed budget for fiscal year 2008 announced Tuesday.

Citing security considerations, National Nuclear Security Administration officials refused to describe how the classified devices work. Agency acting chief Thomas D'Agostino said that it isn't clear who will receive the Render Safe devices.

"It's not like buying fire extinguishers and handing them out," D'Agostino said. "These are open questions. But the '08 budget is set up so that (if the project is funded), we can start addressing these questions."

California officials have quietly launched their own effort to ensure that state agencies are prepared to prevent a nuclear terrorist attack.

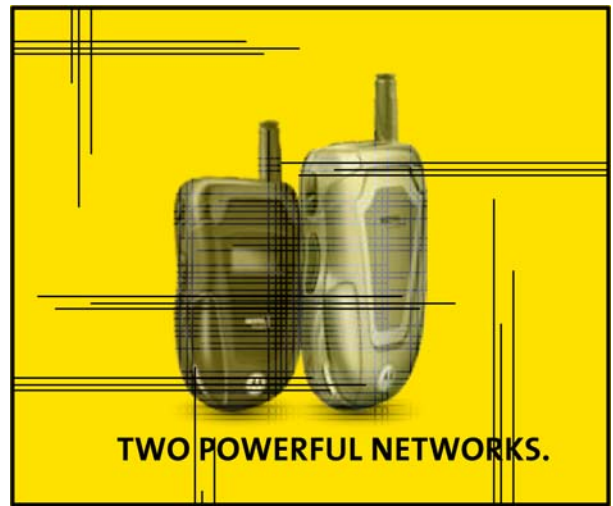
The state Office of Homeland Security held a preparedness meeting Jan. 24 in Sacramento with about 20 representatives from the state Department of Health Services, the California Highway Patrol, Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory and other agencies to discuss beefing-up the state's response to a nuclear weapon or dirty bomb attack, said Homeland Security spokeswoman Elaine Jennings.

"The state of California takes seriously the radiological nuclear threats and is working very closely with (the federal) Department of Homeland Security to establish a statewide plan," Jennings said.

Local agencies also are preparing.

Using federal funds, the San Francisco Fire Department has purchased 150 radiation-detecting devices, said Assistant Deputy Fire Chief Bob Navarro, who heads the homeland security division for the Fire Department.

In the federal government's hypothetical dirty-bomb scenario, an attack using the radioactive cesium-137 isotope could contaminate a 30-block range, killing 180 people and causing 270 injuries just from the direct effects of the



blast itself, as well as creating radioactive "hot spots" around the city, Navarro said.

"What are you going to do when 70,000 people are contaminated by a radiological explosion?" Navarro asked. "How do you deal with their contaminated clothing and skin? Those are the kinds of things they're (the federal government) asking us to prepare for. This is not a joke. We take this one seriously."

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