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Reporter encounters security measures at plants

USA TODAY investigative travel editor Gary Stoller visited two nuclear power plants in the Northeast recently to observe security measures. Here is his report.

Perimeter security appeared tight but no safeguards against an aircraft attack were evident at either plant I visited recently.

At the Massachusetts Rowe plant, which is being decommissioned after operating for more than two decades, concrete barricades had been erected in the parking lot to prevent against an attack by a truck or another vehicle filled with explosives. At least three state police cars were parked in the plant's parking lot, and at least two other state police cars were on watch outside the plant.

No signs prohibited entry into the parking lot, but after I drove out, state police officers pulled me over.

I identified myself as a reporter on assignment. They ordered me out of the car, told me to put my hands on my head and gave me a pat down. They also asked for permission to search my car.

I balked, saying I didn't know my constitutional rights or why they needed to search the car of someone who hadn't broken a law. An officer searched the car thoroughly anyway and looked in every pocket of two coats in the back seat.

In response to a question, I mentioned that I was also traveling to other New England nuclear plants, including one in Vermont.

The police telephoned my editor to verify my story and detained me for more than a half hour.

I drove on a county road in front of the operating Vermont Yankee nuclear plant in Vernon, Vt. Several security and police vehicles protected the front gate. Barriers were in the Connecticut River near the plant, protecting it from a boat attack.

I drove a short distance to the Vernon town hall and library to research any recent security incidents. As I walked out of the building, police officers who had been tipped off by the Massachusetts state police converged on me. They detained me and did an ID check.

Vernon police chief Randy Wheelock asked whether I knew anything about three people who had breached a perimeter fence at Massachusetts Rowe. I said I did not.

When I interviewed him later, Wheelock said the plant is very secure, but there was no protection against an attack from the air.

Told that security officers at nuclear facilities in France were being armed with rocket launchers to protect against such an attack, Wheelock said: "The last thing the people of Vernon want me to do is carry a rocket launcher."