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Flats is vulnerable, watchdog group says

Energy Dept. rejects report's claim of lax security

By [Mike Soraghan](#)
Denver Post Washington Bureau

Monday, December 17, 2001 - WASHINGTON - When a team of terrorists set out to steal plutonium from Rocky Flats, their secret weapon was a lacrosse stick.

Testing the mothballed nuclear bomb plant's security in 1997, the special government operations team was told it had to escape without cutting a hole in the plant's outer fence and would have to hoist the plutonium over it. They went to a Denver-area sporting goods store and bought lacrosse sticks.

The team sneaked into the plant disguised as construction workers, waited for a shift change and raided the vault where the "plutonium" was kept. Then, amid a laser-tag gun battle, one member of the team sprinted to the outer fence and lobbed four hockey-puck sized chunks of plutonium over the fence with the lacrosse stick.

"It was funny when you think about a bunch of guys running around with lacrosse sticks," said a member of the team who participated in the 1997 exercise. "But it's pretty scary when you can just throw it over the fence."

The ingenuity and determination of the terrorists who attacked the World Trade Center, the Pentagon and the mail system has raised new questions of how prepared the country's nuclear sites are for terrorist attacks. Those fears are heightened by reports of Osama bin Laden's intense interest in obtaining a nuclear weapon.

And a recent report by a government watchdog group claims that despite assurances from Rocky Flats managers that the plant is secure, it remains vulnerable to a nuclear attack.

"I simply wouldn't be confident that they could withstand an attack," said Peter Stockton, a former congressional investigator and assistant to former Energy Secretary Bill Richardson who authored the report. "The word around the department is Rocky Flats has been the most recalcitrant of all the sites in terms of upgrading security."

The lacrosse stick episode highlights one of the report's key allegations: that the Energy Department "dumbs down" its tests at nuclear plants so its security contractors can pass muster. The report says Energy officials put unrealistic restrictions on the mock terrorists, such as saying real terrorists wouldn't be able to cut a hole in the outer fence.

"Yet even with the scales tipped in their direction, protective forces still lose over 50 percent of the time," the report states.

Energy officials say the Washington-based watchdog group, the Project on Government Oversight, or POGO, is biased and flat wrong, and that Rocky Flats is secure. They say the group ignored evidence that made the incidents sound less sinister, and that the report is a compilation of already-discredited allegations by malcontents within the department.

"We are disappointed that a so-called independent government oversight organization would be so biased that it blatantly misrepresents and distorts facts about security," said Pat Etchart, spokesman for department management at Rocky Flats.

He emphasized that no plutonium or nuclear secrets have ever been stolen from the plant. He said the

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amount of plutonium has decreased substantially in recent years at the plant, and has been consolidated from seven buildings to one.

Despite the furious dismissal by Energy officials of POGO's findings, they've raised enough concerns that the House's National Security, Veterans Affairs and International Relations Subcommittee has begun a review of efforts to protect nuclear weapons facilities. Subcommittee chairman Chris Shays, R-Conn., intends to hold a hearing after the investigation is completed in February or March.

"We cannot allow security weaknesses to persist," Shays said.

Rocky Flats manufactured plutonium "triggers" for nuclear bombs until 1989. The Energy Department has contracted out the cleanup of the plant, and security is handled by a private subcontractor, Wackenhut; the department spends about \$40 million a year on security.

Security at Rocky Flats has been an issue for some time. In 1996, the department gave its contractors a "marginal" rating for security. In 1997, The Denver Post reported that a security officer there warned federal investigators that terrorists could steal plutonium to make a nuclear bomb.

But since 1996, Etchart said, security has been bolstered and has received top ratings every year. He said POGO's report is a compilation of old reports and whistleblower allegations, which were investigated and rejected.

However, the report does include allegations of new security lapses. Among them:

In July 1999, a team sent by then-Energy Secretary Richardson found that security forces were not posting additional guards when plutonium was moved out of its vault, as is required.

The security team found that a steel cable strong enough to stop a truck bomb had been attached to the wrong fence - the outside fence, which has no alarms. The problem was noted in 1996, but was not fixed until the team pointed it out in 1999. Etchart said that items such as the cable are only one of many controls at the plant.

In March 2000, another security team found that in mock attacks, security forces at the plant sprayed gunfire at testers and bystanders evacuating the buildings, violating rules on deadly force. Plant officials say the "victims" dressed as participants and disregarded the orders of security police officers.

In 1988, a Navy SEAL team was again able to enter the plant through the fence in a test, "steal" enough plutonium to make multiple nuclear weapons, and escape back through the fence.

But after that, Rocky Flats management changed the test so that the attack team couldn't go back through the fence, but had to climb a guard tower and rope the plutonium over the fence. The report states that a SEAL commander said he would no longer do tests at Rocky Flats because they're unrealistic.

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