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The Charlotte Observer

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Posted on Mon, May. 27, 2002

The Charlotte Observer

Nuclear caravan safety stressed

Associated Press

CHARLESTON - The Energy Department says shipments of weapons-grade plutonium from the Rocky Flats facility in Colorado to its Savannah River Site in South Carolina would be secure.

Among security measures would be a global tracking system, armed guards and trucks that could withstand attack.

"We train for every contingency and every precaution," said DOE spokesman Joe Davis, who refused to comment on whether the trucks would be camouflaged as ordinary cross-country rigs.

The agency said a global tracking system would lock onto the whereabouts of every vehicle in the caravan.

An undisclosed number of armed guards would carry machine guns and other weapons to defend the trucks, which are capable of surviving rocket attacks. At night, the convoy would be diverted to a military base or other safe government installation.

All bridges and roads would be secured ahead of time.

If anyone got inside one of the trailers without authorization, they could get sealed up and suffocated by a spray of sticky foam designed to gel and neutralize both the plutonium and everything around it.

Gov. Jim Hodges has sued to stop the shipments until the Energy Department and the state agree on how the plutonium will be processed once in South Carolina and when it will leave.

Hodges also questioned the department's safe-transport capabilities. Last week, he asked Energy Secretary Spencer Abraham to put any movement plans on hold.

"It underscores exactly why we have to be so careful here in South Carolina," Hodges' spokesman Morton Brilliant said Friday.

But DOE officials and U.S. Rep. Lindsey Graham say Hodges' concerns are overblown. Transporting the plutonium would run like a military operation "of the highest order," Graham said.

"Nobody is going to send this material out in the heartland of America and into South Carolina in a haphazard way."

If the shipments do begin next month, it would take as long as 13 months to move all the material to SRS, and Graham said security would be tight at every step.

NEWS COLUMNISTS

Updated Monday, August 12, 2002

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- » Don Hudson
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- » Dr. Traffic
- » Gerry Hostetler
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"Anybody that confronts this situation will get hurt," he said. "These people are serious."

In fact, the Energy Department argues moving the plutonium increases security by reducing the number of potential targets.



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