

Radioactive shipments are tightly protected

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If it sounds like a plot from a Tom Clancy thriller, it was.

In the 2002 film adaptation of *The Sum of All Fears*, terrorists detonated a nuclear bomb in Baltimore using weapons-grade plutonium manufactured at Savannah River Site.

Could it happen outside Hollywood?

Agencies such as the National Nuclear Security Administration devote a lot of effort -- and dollars -- to safeguard the production and transportation of radioactive materials pure enough to use in nuclear warheads. According to the agency, its specially designed and armored 18-wheelers have logged more than 100 million miles without any accidents resulting in loss of life or a radioactive release.

If that did happen, the agency's command center in Albuquerque, N.M., maintains a fleet of always-ready aircraft equipped to respond to any threat or emergency.

At Savannah River Site, where massive military reactors first went online in the 1950s, workers produced 36.1 metric tons of the material -- enough for more than 10,000 nuclear bombs.

Much of that material has been removed from aging warheads and is being returned to SRS for conversion to mixed-oxide fuel that will be used in commercial nuclear reactors to make electricity.

Typically, those materials arrive by trucks that are unlike any other.

According to the nuclear security agency's Web site, the rigs are unmarked and look like any other commercial hauling vehicle. Inside, however, are a host of electronic and security devices that "incorporate various deterrents" to prevent anyone from removing its cargo. The vehicles and their trailers are hardened against attack and made with fireproof materials "that would allow the trailer to be totally engulfed in a fire without damage to the cargo."

The trucks are driven by federal agents and accompanied by convoys of heavily armed commandos who travel in armored -- but unmarked -- escort vehicles.

One of the most public challenges to such transports occurred in South Carolina in 2002.

Then-Gov. Jim Hodges, as a protest against bringing more nuclear material to his state, ordered state police to blockade SRS to prevent shipments of plutonium from arriving. Mr. Hodges even threatened to lie in the road to block the trucks.

A federal judge quickly banned the governor -- and anyone else -- from impeding those shipments, saying such behavior is unconstitutional and contrary to national security interests.

The plutonium that has since been shipped to SRS from other U.S. Energy Department sites is in storage at K Complex, where it remains under heavy guard and will eventually be processed at the MOX plant.

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