

Farmer solves radioactive mystery

FINDS STOLEN DEVICES

Sask. authorities had worried about possible dirty bomb

BY JIM BRONSKILL

A Saskatchewan farmer stumbled across two suitcases of stolen radioactive material on the weekend, relieving fears the potentially deadly contents might fall into the wrong hands.

The orange cases containing highly radioactive moisture density probes had been missing since June, 1999, when the pick-up truck they were in was pilfered from the University of Saskatchewan.

The farmer turned the items over to Saskatoon RCMP on Sunday after finding them on a remote stretch of his property about 50 kilometres north of the city, said Debbie Frattinger, the university's radiation safety officer.

"We're just ecstatic," Ms. Frattinger said yesterday. "We're just smiling because it was a health concern, an environment concern, and we got them back. So that's just great, and now we will dispose of them properly."

The recovery comes shortly after university officials noticed another, far less dangerous radioactive device was accidentally sold as scrap, winding up in the Saskatoon dump.

The university has alerted the Canadian Nuclear Safety Commission about both incidents. Ms. Frattinger called the commission yesterday regarding the newly located cases.

"They were glad, very glad because you don't want that stuff lying around."

Concern has grown in federal circles about the possibility of an attack involving radiological materials in the wake of the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist assaults on the United States.

Officials are particularly worried about a so-called dirty bomb packed with such conventional explosives as dynamite to scatter radioactive material such as that in the density probes.

The initial blast from a dirty bomb can kill or maim bystanders, while the radioactive fallout may claim more victims. In addition, the resulting contamination would place the area off-limits to people for lengthy peri-

ods, causing panic and wreaking economic havoc.

"It would just contaminate everything," Ms. Frattinger said.

The orange cases had been locked inside a green wooden box in the Ford truck, which was stolen along with other items from a secured compound at the university.

A man belonging to an organized theft ring was convicted four years ago for his part in the break-in. But the whereabouts of the cases were a mystery until Sunday.

The farmer instantly noted the radiation warning symbols on the carrying cases and apparently told the Mounties he had discovered two batches of plutonium.

Still, he drove the materials into Saskatoon. "It was no big deal to him," Ms. Frattinger said.

The Mounties quickly contacted Ms. Frattinger because the force often relies on the university's expertise with radioactive substances. She promptly set them straight. "I said, 'I think I know what those are.'"

The probes, which are intact but have severe water damage, will be

'YOU DON'T WANT THAT STUFF LYING AROUND'

disposed of at a radioactive waste facility in Chalk River, Ont.

In the other incident, a radioactive device was accidentally discarded by university officials in 2002, in what the nuclear safety commission recently called a "major breakdown" in procedures.

An electron capture detector, used in chemical analysis, was noticed missing during a routine inspection. University officials determined the detector had been sold to a man who wanted to salvage any valuable metal. Finding none, he tossed the detector, including the sealed radioactive device, into the dump.

Rick McCabe of the safety commission said yesterday that officials took the incident seriously even though the device, considered a low-risk source of radiation, posed little or no health hazard.

"What if it had been a stronger source?" he said.

Steps have been taken to prevent a recurrence, including better education and more frequent inspections, Ms. Frattinger said.

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