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NNSA Removes High-Activity Radioactive Materials from Boston

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WASHINGTON, D.C. – The Department of Energy's (DOE) National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA) recently successfully recovered a disused, high-activity cesium-137 source from Massachusetts General Hospital in downtown Boston, Mass. and transported it for permanent disposition. Formerly used as a research irradiator for medical studies, the device contained cesium-137, which could be used in a dirty bomb. The removal was part of NNSA's global campaign to prevent terrorists from acquiring nuclear and radiological material.

"This operation is a key part of the NNSA's broad strategy to strengthen both U.S. and global security by keeping dangerous nuclear and radiological material safe and secure," said NNSA Deputy Administrator for Defense Nuclear Nonproliferation Anne Harrington. "Today's announcement is a good example of how NNSA utilizes its unique expertise and assets at the national laboratories to partner with local communities and other agencies to make our cities and those around the world safer and more secure."

Working in partnership with Massachusetts General and both state and local law enforcement and regulators, NNSA removed the irradiator in a series of two shipments and transported it to a secure location where it will be prepared for final disposition at a federal facility. Because sources like those recovered lack a commercially available disposition pathway, NNSA works with licensees, the Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) and state regulators to identify and safely dispose of these materials. This latest recovery was preceded by 18 other recoveries in the Boston area that securely recovered and disposed of more than 850 sources. To date, NNSA has recovered nearly 33,000 disused and unwanted radioactive sealed sources in the U.S., eliminating more than 1,000,000 curies of activity.

Every year, thousands of sources become disused and unwanted in the U.S. While secure storage is a temporary measure, the longer sources remain disused or unwanted, there is a greater chance that they will become unsecured or abandoned. Due to their high activity and portability, some radioactive sealed sources, such as those contained in irradiators, could be used in radiological dispersal devices (RDD), or so-called “dirty bombs.” An attack using an RDD could result in extensive economic loss, significant social disruption and potentially serious public health problems.

The operation was led by NNSA’s Global Threat Reduction Initiative (GTRI). GTRI collaborates with partner sites like Massachusetts General, the private sector, and state, local, and federal agencies, including the Department of Homeland Security, the Federal Bureau of Investigation and the NRC, to enhance existing domestic radiological security. In addition to partnering to remove this device, Massachusetts General is currently working with GTRI to install security enhancements for all Massachusetts General facilities with high-activity radiological materials.

GTRI was supported on this project by technical experts from Los Alamos National Laboratory and Idaho National Laboratory.

For a fact sheet on DOE/NNSA’s Global Threat Reduction Initiative, click here [1].

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Established by Congress in 2000, NNSA is a semi-autonomous agency within the U.S. Department of Energy responsible for enhancing national security through the military application of nuclear science. NNSA maintains and enhances the safety, security, reliability and performance of the U.S. nuclear weapons stockpile without nuclear testing; works to reduce global danger from weapons of mass destruction; provides the U.S. Navy with safe and effective nuclear propulsion; and responds to nuclear and radiological emergencies in the U.S. and abroad.

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