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Offsite source group gathers up the bad stuff

By ROGER SNODGRASS, Monitor Editor

The chances of U.S. radioactive sources falling into the hands of risky characters were reduced again last year with the help of a small team of scavengers at Los Alamos National Laboratory.

The lab's Off-Site Source Recovery Project, under supervision of the National Nuclear Security Administration, recently passed an important domestic milestone for getting dangerous materials out of the way.

The number of excess and unwanted sealed sources recovered in the United States since 1997 reached 20,000 last month.

"This major achievement in the removal of these radioactive sources ends any threat that they could be used in a dirty bomb," NNSA Administrator Thomas D'Agostino in an announcement.

According to the Nuclear Regulatory Commission, several million sealed sources are thought to exist around the world, at least 2 million in the U.S. alone.

They are used as batteries or radiation sources for a variety of military or industrial tools and processes, as well as medical and research applications. Some contain small amounts of highly radioactive materials like plutonium, cesium and americium that could be used in a dirty bomb, a potential terrorist weapon.

OSRP has a staff of about 15 full-time people who crisscross the country and the world securing sealed sources that contain a variety of radioactive material in closed metallic containers.

NNSA has been in charge of the program since 2004. A special exception was obtained to dispose of U.S.-originated sealed sources at the Waste Isolation Pilot Project in Carlsbad, N.M. Additional interim and special case storage takes place at the Nevada Test Site.

"We still have our domestic mission, a congressionally reportable metric for the number of sources we are recovering in the U.S.," said Project Leader Julia Whitworth in a recent interview. "We manage to meet that every year."

"We have been removing high activity field sources from VA hospitals and universities that are not equipped to dispose of these materials on their own for cost or difficulty reasons."

There are some emerging issues, however.

Whitworth said 34 states currently have no commercial disposal path for most types of field sources, but OSRP and NNSA is working on a solution.

Another problem is the loss of Type B containers, a class of shipping containers that were used for decades, but have been phased out by the International Atomic Energy Agency.

“A lot of devices for blood irradiation and cancer treatment require Type B containers,” Whitworth said. “The beneficial uses are so important that we can’t afford not to have a solution for these kinds of things at the end of their lives.”

OSRP’s international work has increased. This “off-off-site” recovery includes repatriation of major sources that originated in the U.S. Last year, there were projects in Brazil, Ecuador, Australia and Italy.

“Right now we’re in Peru and Australia again,” Whitworth said. “We have letters of request from France and Germany.”

OSRP staff spends about half of the time on the road, the other half doing the advance work required for handling, packing and transporting hazardous materials.

Whitworth said the volume might decrease some day.

“But the reality is most uses are continuing, so I think there will be work to do for some time to come,” she said.

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