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Plutonium is ready to roll

Rocky Flats could start to ship today under court ruling

By **Todd Hartman, News Staff Writer**
June 22, 2002

Drive carefully.

That 18-wheeler chugging along next to you this weekend might be carrying some hot stuff -- plutonium, to be precise.

Shipments of the highly radioactive material could be rolling from Rocky Flats near Boulder as soon as today, after a federal appeals court Thursday refused to stop the shipments to the Savannah River Site in South Carolina.

Times and routes are classified, but in recent legal proceedings, the Department of Energy said that shipments could begin today -- or not.

"As we told the court, the earliest we could begin is June 22," said Joe Davis, a DOE spokesman in Washington. Beyond that, "I can't tell you when we are shipping."

The Colorado State Patrol will be examining the trucks and checking drivers before any shipments leave, said Capt. Tom Wilcoxon.

"We are out there every day already doing point-of-origin inspections," Wilcoxon said.

He and others note that shipments of nuclear waste are not uncommon in the country, and that nuclear waste from Rocky Flats has been going to New Mexico since 1999, although that material isn't necessarily weapons-grade plutonium.

"A month ago they completed their 500th shipment without an incident," said Wilcoxon, adding that hazardous waste shipments of all kinds dot the highways every day.

Davis said the trucks hauling the plutonium "look like an average 18-wheeler," unlike the more distinctive trucks with a trio of squat cylindrical cases that haul materials from Rocky Flats to the underground Waste Isolation Pilot Plant near Carlsbad, N.M.

"These are safe, secure transports that employ a variety of protective measures," Davis said. Those include oversight by the DOE's Office of Transportation Safeguards and escorts by federal officers, he said.

Shipping the estimated six tons of plutonium to the energy department's Savannah River Site is a major step in closing Rocky Flats by the target date of Dec. 15, 2006.

The material -- pure plutonium and plutonium oxide produced during the manufacture of bomb parts -- will fill about 1,900 containers, about 700 of which are ready for shipment, officials say.

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Shipments to the Palmetto State are expected to take 12 to 18 months. The DOE wants to convert the Rocky Flats plutonium into a mixed-oxide fuel at Savannah River for use at nuclear reactors.

The legal battle over the shipments isn't over. The 4th Circuit Court of Appeals has agreed to hear arguments opposing the plan on environmental grounds in July. But the same court declined to bar the transports in the meantime.

South Carolina Gov. Jim Hodges has said he isn't opposed to allowing the plutonium in his state temporarily. But he said he fears the federal government won't move the material later -- despite assurances by Energy Secretary Spencer Abraham that it will.

For months, Hodges threatened to lay down in the road and use state troopers to block the shipments. But a federal judge this week ordered Hodges not to interfere.

The Associated Press contributed to this report.

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