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Posted on Sun, Jun. 23, 2002

# Weigh station may be first to know plutonium has entered state

**COLUMBIA, S.C.** - South Carolina officials likely won't get any warning from the federal government on when scheduled plutonium shipments will cross the state's borders, but may find out the material is in the state after it passes a weigh station, Public Safety Department spokesman Sid Gaulden said.

The Energy Department has said for security reasons it will not disclose when the shipments are leaving a Rocky Flats, Colo., facility or when the plutonium shipments arrive at the Savannah River Site in Aiken.

Federal agents will be traveling with the tractor-trailer rigs containing barrels loaded with smaller cans of radioactive plutonium and will be authorized to use deadly force to protect the shipments, court documents said.

But one way authorities might know the plutonium has crossed the border, besides the convoy, is when the tractor-trailers pass a weigh station along a major highway or interstate.

Gaulden said the plutonium trucks won't stop. Instead, the lead vehicle will pull into the weigh station and notify officers the plutonium truck will be passing through.

"By that time, it would already be in the state," Gaulden said.

Saturday was the first day the DOE said they could logistically and practically begin shipping the weapons-grade plutonium. But state officials said they were not aware of any shipments made Saturday.

The shipments have been delayed since last fall because of an ongoing dispute between Gov. Jim Hodges and the DOE. Hodges has sued the DOE and Energy Secretary Spencer Abraham because he fears a federal program to dispose of the plutonium will not be funded and the plutonium will be left at SRS.

But the DOE has said it will build facilities to convert the plutonium into fuel for commercial nuclear reactors. A judge threw out Hodges' lawsuit asking for more environmental studies and the governor's appeal will be heard July 10 by the U.S. Fourth Circuit Court in Virginia.

Hodges had also threatened to lie down in the road to block the shipments, but a federal judge has ruled Hodges' or state police roadblocks are illegal.

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