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Ports get mobile ra

The devices will be used to check

By Dan Weikel
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In the effort to protect the nation's busiest harbor from terrorist attack, federal officials announced Thursday the addition of 18 mobile radiation detectors in the ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach.

The devices, which will check cargo containers on ships, trucks and trains, are part of a group of 24 portable scanners that will be delivered by January.

U.S. Customs and Border Protection officials say the monitors will supplement 85 stationary radiation detectors that have been used at 14 port terminals since June 2005. The devices scan shipping containers for nuclear materials as trucks leave the harbor.

In addition, customs officers use small hand-held detectors on the docks and wharves to check cargo as it is unloaded from ships.

"The technology we have deployed enhances our critical mission of preventing terrorists or others from attempting to smuggle weapons of mass destruction through U.S. borders," said Customs and Border Protection Commissioner W. Ralph Basham.

By early next year, agency officials say the additional scanners will allow customs to scan 100% of containers that leave the ports by truck and train. The devices also can be moved outside the harbor to help other law enforcement agencies.

Radiation detectors, however, have not been without their critics. According to the federal Government Accountability Office, the devices have difficulty reading the low levels of radioactivity emitted by nuclear weapons; and they cannot detect radioactive materials if they are well shielded.

Critics say the ports' stationary radiation detectors should be used to screen containers when they arrive at port terminals, not when they leave. Shipping industry representatives say that checking containers upon arrival would severely disrupt unloading operations.

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