

# Homeland Security: South Dakota-style

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Editor's note: This is the first of two packages of stories on South Dakota's approach to Homeland Security.

Three men who appear to be foreign buy 38 pounds of fertilizer at a Black Hills store. Concerned that it is destined for a bomb-making operation, employees notify law enforcement. The Rapid City office of the FBI investigates.

A man with an accent calls a local company that takes tourists on helicopter rides over Mount Rushmore and Crazy Horse. He is looking to rent one but wants to fly it himself instead of hiring a pilot. The FBI gets that call, too.

Both of these reports, from July of this year, turned out to be benign. In the first case, the men were here legally, were working on a sheep ranch and had been told to buy the fertilizer. The helicopter inquiry came from a British filmmaking firm that was doing a documentary and didn't want to pay for a pilot.

Officials say these incidents show that everyday people have heightened awareness since Sept. 11, 2001. And because of measures taken since 9/11, local jurisdictions are more prepared for natural calamities such as Hurricane Katrina, officials say.

For instance, equipment obtained with federal Homeland Security funds and training of first responders "not only increase the capability to combat terrorism, but helps add to the response for natural disasters," Park Owens, Pennington County Emergency Management coordinator, said. "It will work just as well in a flash flood as in a terrorist attack."

Rural jurisdictions are better prepared "to handle anything that comes, whether it is natural or man-made or any type of emergency," Frank Maynard, Fall River County emergency manager.

And although South Dakota doesn't have the characteristics of a likely terrorist target such as a large, concentrated population, there are sites and infrastructure under close watch.

"Law enforcement people in the state have concerns about the Oahe Dam, Mount Rushmore, the electrical power structure and places where large numbers of tourists or people congregate, like the Mitchell Corn Palace, that type of thing," Bill Grode, special agent in the Rapid City FBI office, said. "It's true, we don't have a lot of things out here that you

would be concerned about, but we do know that foreign powers are interested in Ellsworth Air Force Base because they want to know how many bombers are there. There is concern about Mount Rushmore being a target. That's a possibility."

Grode said that the focus of terrorist activity, led by Osama bin Laden, is the U.S. economy, the military and "our fun things."

"When they took out the World Trade Center and part of the Pentagon, that was the military and that was capitalism. The other thing is the fun things, and that's why people are concerned about icons where people congregate, like Mount Rushmore, the Statue of Liberty, the Mall of America or a football game. Those are things to think about," Grode said.

Grode said his biggest concern is the Canadian border.

"They don't check people flying in or out," he said. "You could be an al-Qaida guy, fly into Toronto, rent a car and drive over to North Dakota. You find a gravel road in a cornfield and drive south, leave the car, walk and you're here."

John Berheim, South Dakota's Homeland Security director, said people who cross U.S. borders from Canada or Mexico - or come in by boat - could bring in deadly weapons that may go undetected.

"We have folks sneaking in there from other countries," Berheim said. "We can't catch full-grown people, and shoulder-fired missiles are smaller than that. It could take down a plane easily. It's not an impossibility."

A major characteristic of a rural state such as South Dakota is its role in agriculture and the food supply, which officials say could be the target of terrorists who cross U.S. borders.

Berheim said introduction of diseases into the agriculture industry is a concern.

"Whether it is cattle production, or things associated with cattle, like big dairy farms and turkey farms where we raise these animals or birds and sell them for food, we need to look at all these things," he said. "Terrorists might decide at some point to introduce some sort of disease."

He said this sort of terrorist act might seem subtle "because it wouldn't give them the big splash they are looking for. But it would have a big impact on South Dakota's economy."

South Dakota before and after 9/11

Home-grown terrorism landed on Grode's agenda more than a decade ago with the Oklahoma City bombing.

"The job I had was to contact all of the militia leaders and all the anti-government people in North and South Dakota and try to convince them to work with us and stop the next bombing, because why should we be killing our own people?" Grode said.

Timothy McVeigh, convicted of the bombing, had links to South Dakota.

"We call Highway 212 the Timothy McVeigh memorial highway because he would drive it all the time between the militia compounds in eastern Montana to Tigerton Dells, Wis., which is the Posse Comitatus homeland," Grode said, referring to the white supremacist group. "He was always going back and forth, and that's why he had a phony ID from Redfield, S.D."

Grode said McVeigh merely drove through the town, picked out an address and got a driver's license.

After McVeigh was executed in June of 2001 "we were kind of back to normal" - until Sept. 11.

"Once that happened, the priorities of the FBI everywhere became, catch the terrorists and stop the next attack," Grode said.

Kevin Thom, director of the South Dakota Division of Criminal Investigation, said the agency is more engaged in intelligence gathering and analysis than it was before 9/11.

And one of the most dramatic changes has been the relationship between DCI and the private sector, Thom said.

"We interact more with utilities, medical facilities, financial institutions and agriculture industry because of their vulnerabilities," he said. "We've raised our level of awareness of each other."

In the forensics area, DCI analysts whose usual duties include investigation of Internet child pornography and other computer-related crimes are available for analysis on terrorism-related activity as well, Thom said.

Regional training exercises involving law enforcement, first responders and public-health officials based on emergencies and disasters have been going on for years. But since 9/11, some are focused on Homeland Security-type threats.

One exercise earlier this year involved the shooting down of a civilian airliner with a shoulder-mounted missile. Two years ago at Mount Rushmore there was a "dirty-bomb" exercise scenario - the first collaboration of its kind between the National Park Service and local jurisdictions.

What everyday people can do

Grode and Berheim say that the last thing they want is for people to be fearful. That's not warranted, they say.

"You hate to have citizens get scared," Grode said.

But people are paying attention. And this is one of those times when a state like South Dakota with a small population has an advantage because strangers and suspicious activities stand out.

"You see a guy in a red van with New Jersey plates and he is parked at the power station outside your town taking pictures - that's odd. You call 911, and we need to get the closest law-enforcement person out there," Grode said. "Out here, observing this is much more likely to happen rather than in downtown Detroit or Las Vegas where nobody knows anyone."

Sometimes, though, there's a lag in reporting unusual activity.

Grode tells the story of two men driving a truck who stopped at a gas station in central South Dakota and asked odd questions about the Corn Palace in Mitchell.

"They wanted to know if there is like a big garage door that they could drive in because they are going to be too tired to walk and they just wanted to drive in and see it," Grode recalled. "That's kind of goofy, and red flags should be going up."

The station clerk didn't report it until three days later and didn't have details other than that they were driving a white truck.

"There was nothing we could do except let people over there know to use some caution and there might be something coming their way," Grode said.

He said in situations like this, people should try to get a license number or a name if a check or credit card is used "so we can track it down quickly."

Berheim said that the key for public involvement is to be the "eyes and ears for law enforcement."

"We live in a different environment when it comes to terrorism, but we can't let this intimidate us or drastically change the way we live our lives," Berheim said. "But all of us can be more alert for suspicious activity."

Berheim said he encourages local officials to plan ahead for events where large numbers of people gather.

"They need to be thinking about that way in advance so they can secure the proper equipment through Homeland Security grants," Berheim said. "They also need to be able to support security with people. I can't fund people, but I can fund the equipment," he said.

The post-9/11 world is putting a strain on law-enforcement personnel budgets, Grode noted.

"Osama bin Laden sits over there and sees on CNN that when places like the Golden Gate Bridge closes, they call out the National Guard, they surround it, the police go 12 hours on, 12 hours off with no days off. He knows that it burns up resources," Grode said.

And it can also lead to the boy-who-cried-wolf scenario.

"We already have a lot of chiefs of police - and I don't blame them - who say, I am not doing that anymore. I don't have the funding to pay the double time and have to take people from the bicycle program or the school program or whatever warm and fuzzy things they have drop to follow up on these alerts that the federal government puts out," Grode said. "So we know Osama pulls those strings and watches us. The question is, you have to guess which is the one that's going to be the real one."

South Dakota Office of Homeland Security at a glance:

- Established in 2003 as part of the Department of Public Safety
- Coordinates information-sharing network among all levels of government
- Allocates federal Homeland Security grants to local jurisdictions; \$13 million in 2005
- Director: John Berheim, a 22-year veteran of the South Dakota Highway Patrol, former director of the Office of Emergency Management during the late 1990s, former chief of Security Police with the Air National Guard in Sioux Falls.
- Web site: <http://www.state.sd.us/homeland/>

Monday: South Dakota's agriculture industry and medical community are prepared to deal with both natural and intentional incidents.

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