

Presentation on Explosive Storage Facilities by Chief Heather Fong, San Francisco Police Department, to the Subcommittee on National Security, Monday, August 2, 2004

Good Morning. I would like to begin by thanking the Subcommittee on National Security for the invitation to speak on this critical matter. I greatly appreciate the opportunity to speak with you on a subject of such importance and concern to this subcommittee and to the public at large.

As you have learned, the San Francisco Police Department has, since at least the early-1970's, shared explosive storage magazines with the San Mateo County Sheriff and the Federal Bureau of Investigation. As a result of a burglary over the Fourth of July holiday weekend, a large quantity of explosives and other materials were stolen. Officers from the San Francisco Police Department uncovered this crime on July 6th and immediately made notifications to our law enforcement colleagues. These steps ensured timely notice was made to the public. Thanks to the hard work of agents from the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (BATFE), suspects were rapidly apprehended and the stolen items located.

This incident has given rise to a much-needed examination of how we in the San Francisco Police Department store explosive materials. I have reviewed the department's practices in this area and would like to briefly go over them to provide context for this discussion. The SFPD maintained two of the magazine bunkers at the Crystal Springs Skyline Quarry facility. The SFPD has been at the site for some 30-plus years. One of the magazines was used to store high explosives, along with breaching and demolition charges. The other bunker was used to store flares, tear gas, etc., but no high explosives. At the time that the burglary was discovered, the watershed site was only being used as a storage magazine.

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It was no longer used as a site for disposal, demolition or training. In other words, it was not being used as an explosives range. Since the burglary, the SFPD is no longer storing high explosives at the site, and in fact has removed all explosive materials from the bunkers for safe storage elsewhere. The site is a former quarry, which had generally been secluded from public access. The magazines themselves are in a remote area, behind two locked gates. The bunkers are standard explosive magazines and meet the industry standards for explosive magazines. Unfortunately, what makes this such an attractive site due to its isolation from populated areas or structures also makes it susceptible to theft. Aside from the FBI, no other entity outside the San Francisco Police Department stored any explosive materials in our magazines.

As far as the training of our officers, our EOD team has undergone the same rigorous training as bomb officers do across the country. They attend the FBI-sponsored Explosive Ordnance Disposal training at the Redstone Arsenal in Huntsville, Alabama. Our EOD officers belong to the International Association of Bomb Technicians and Investigators (IABTI), a professional organization that sets international standards, holds regular conferences, and offers cutting edge training to its members. As for the security of the explosive magazines, we in part depended on resident watershed rangers that have been deputized by San Mateo County. The SFPD relied on them to notify law enforcement if they saw anything unusual during their regular patrols of the area. There was also a verbal understanding that any suspicious activities observed by other Water Department employees would be immediately relayed to law enforcement, including the SFPD and San Mateo County EOD Units.

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Beyond question, the San Francisco Police Department needs a secure, modern facility to store munitions and this incident gives great urgency to that need. A new site should have an alarmed fence, as well as motion sensors that would activate a video camera system. In contrast to what was available when the current facility was built, there is much better technology now available. We need to relocate to a site in a more protected area with new bunkers, equipped with reliable security safeguards.

We further need to have a site that has electricity and can serve as a real training range. With electricity, there would be greater usage and consequently, an enhanced law enforcement presence. Motion-sensitive video cameras could be placed on the perimeter and record trespassers once activated. A permanent structure, with lighting, video surveillance and completely meeting the BATFE standards has to be constructed to meet an inarguably compelling and immediate need for safe and secure explosive storage.

Above and beyond the construction of a new facility for storage, a strong internal protocol detailing the safety and security guidelines for the bunkers must be developed and rigorously enforced. The verbal agreements of the past must be replaced with frequent, documented site visits and regularly scheduled inventories. The officer-in-charge of the EOD Unit will be responsible for ensuring adherence to these guidelines, for personal site inspections, and for coordinating an annual inspection by BATFE.

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Additionally, every officer assigned to the Unit must be fully familiar with all pertinent regulations governing the operation and maintenance of an explosive magazine facility.

There is no question that the lessons learned from this incident have brought the issue of secure explosive materials storage to the forefront of our concerns. We in the San Francisco Police Department understand that a new location is mandatory and we look to whatever assistance we can obtain from our local, state and federal partners to assist us in this endeavor. We must identify a solution to this pressing issue and look forward to working with you and others to arrive at that solution.

As I am sure you are well aware, there are no properties in San Francisco County that would qualify as a site given the large radius needed to store explosive materials. Furthermore, state regulations bar the transport of explosives over bridges, thus precluding, at a minimum, siting a facility in Marin County.

We sincerely hope that as a result of this hearing steps can and will be taken to once and for all identify a site where the storage of explosives can be done safely and securely, and with minimum impact on the surroundings. We look to you for your assistance in this matter of high public concern. The San Francisco Police Department is committed to working with this subcommittee in the development of thorough and stringent national standards in this area.

Thank you again for calling for this hearing and for your attention. I will do my best to answer any questions you may have.