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U.S. Customs and Border Protection Radiation Portal Monitor Identifies Smuggling Attempt at Santa Teresa Port of Entry

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SANTA TERESA, NEW MEXICO-U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) officers performing anti-terrorism operations at the Santa Teresa port of entry made an unusual discovery Thursday. Recently installed technology helped CBP officers discover 49 baggies of soil being smuggled from Mexico to the U.S.

The seizure was made at approximately 10:15 a.m. when a 1994 Chevrolet van arrived at the port from Mexico. When the van passed through recently installed Radiation Portal Monitors (RPM's), it triggered a gamma alert. CBP officers began inspecting the vehicle and discovered 49-sandwich size baggies of soil hidden in the rear door panels of the van. CBP officers then used a Radiation Isotope Identifier Device to further examine the soil and determined that the source of the gamma ray alert was Radium-226.

CBP officers interviewed the driver of the van and determined that he was a consultant who had been hired to test soil samples from Mexico. The individual was planning to deliver the samples to a lab in California for analysis. CBP has detained the soil for examination. CBP will attempt to determine if the soil contains any detrimental pests including the "golden nematode" which is a serious pest of root crops known to occur in Mexico. A concern is that such a pest could contaminate growing areas in California. In an unusual twist, the driver did have USDA authorization to legally import the soil through proper channels but elected to smuggle the product in an attempt to avoid fees associated with using a bonded legal carrier. The investigation is continuing and penalties may be assessed at the conclusion of the investigation.

"This case illustrates how a diligent CBP Agriculture Specialist working with the latest technology can protect the United States on many levels," said Luis Garcia, U.S. Customs and Border Protection Director of Field Operations in El Paso. "This is the second time in less than a week that an alert Agriculture Specialist in the El Paso field office area has identified a shipment that posed a risk."

CBP employs a wide array of Non-Intrusive Inspection (NII) technology to serve as a force multiplier and to complement the work of CBP officers, canine enforcement officers and Border Patrol agents in guarding America from terrorism. These technologies serve a vital function in day-to-day inspection and movement of tens of thousand of passengers, pedestrians, vehicles, trucks, cargo containers and baggage, at our borders and ports of entry. The Radiation Portal Monitor is a detection device that provides CBP with a passive, non-intrusive means to screen trucks, cargo containers, rail cars, passenger

vehicles, and other conveyances for radiation emanating from nuclear devices, dirty bombs, special nuclear materials, natural sources, and isotopes commonly used in medicine and industry. There are more than 473 installed nationwide with plans for continued expansion.

In addition to the Santa Teresa incident, area CBP officers were kept busy in a number of other enforcement categories as well. Area CBP officers encountered 29 drug smuggling attempts during the previous seven days resulting in the confiscation of 1,818 pounds of marijuana, a personal use amount of cocaine, and 1.4 pounds of heroin. The heroin seizure occurred at the Paso Del Norte crossing in El Paso on May 2. CBP officers discovered the drugs hidden in the shoes of 32-year-old Cesar Reyes Lara of El Paso as he attempted to enter the U.S. as a pedestrian. ICE special agents arrested Reyes Lara on federal smuggling charges.

A total of 87 immigration related violations were uncovered at area ports this week. CBP officers identified 15 imposters (people using a legitimate document not assigned to the person), 38 intended immigrant cases (people with legitimate entry documents intending to live/work illegally in the U.S.), 12 false claims for U.S. citizenship and 22 cases of people attempting to enter the U.S. with counterfeit or fraudulent entry documents.

Area CBP officers also identified 22 fugitives while performing anti-terror operations this week. A total of 691 wanted people have been apprehended by area CBP officers since October 1, 2004, the beginning of the fiscal year. CBP officers also identified one currency smuggling case (\$15,000), two export violations, the illegal importation of 131 pieces of gold jewelry, and two cases of people attempting to enter prohibited medications during the past week.

Anti-terrorism remains the primary mission of CBP. The intensive inspection process associated with the anti-terror mission continues to yield impressive enforcement numbers in all categories.

U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) is the unified border agency within the Department of Homeland Security charged with the management, control, and protection of our Nation's borders at and between the official ports of entry. CBP is charged with keeping terrorists and terrorist weapons out of the country while enforcing hundreds of U.S. laws.