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Terminal warns ports will 'grind to a halt': Proposal to install radioactivity detectors draws flak

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VANCOUVER - A plan by the federal government to install radioactivity detectors at major ports has sparked fears among port operators that the new security will cause the ports to "grind to a halt."

The Canadian Border Services Agency (CBSA), created in the wake of 9/11, recently told container terminal operators it wants to place radioactivity detection equipment on their docks.

The detectors, similar to ones being introduced at U.S. ports, are designed as a deterrent to terrorists.

But Morley Strachan, vice-president of business development and strategic planning at TSI Terminal Systems Inc. at the Port of Vancouver, says the equipment would create confusion and take up valuable space at his company's already congested terminal.

Mr. Strachan said Ottawa wants the system -- which looks like a doorway that containers would have to pass through -- set up close to where ships are docked, so containers can be checked as they're unloaded. But Vancouver's port, the biggest in Canada, is already struggling with bottlenecks and delays caused by record freight volumes.

"Operationally, it would be disastrous," he said in an interview. "The terminal would grind to a halt. We understand the desire of the government to check for radiation, we just question whether the location has been thoroughly thought out."

One of the biggest players at Vancouver's port, TSI operates Deltaport and Vanterm, which together handle about 80% of all container traffic passing through Vancouver. Like nearly all terminal operators, especially on the West Coast, TSI is feeling the impact of China's booming economy. Mr. Strachan estimated it will take Deltaport -- one of the biggest container terminals in Canada -- at least seven weeks to deal with its current container backlog.

Officials at several other terminal operators who declined to be named said they are also worried about Ottawa's plan. Chris Kealey, a spokesman for CBSA, said Ottawa is looking to buy about 32 detectors at about \$200,000 each to place in ports in Vancouver, Montreal, Halifax and Saint John, N.B.

Mr. Kealey said the CBSA is aware of the concerns. "We are negotiating with them. We need their co-operation and we're obviously working closely with them."

Terminal operators say their main complaint is with the government's plan to set up the detectors close to where ships are being unloaded. They argue it would take up valuable space and cause major disruption in the event a container had to be opened and inspected.

Mr. Strachan says a better alternative would be to put the new systems at the port exit gates, so if a container has to be opened there is space available and port operations won't be interrupted.

Part of the problem is there are plenty of materials that give off radiation that are not dangerous, including kitty litter, ceramic toilet bowls and even bananas.

At a meeting with CBSA officials in Montreal earlier this month, the terminal operators failed to persuade Ottawa to change its plan.

Governments fear terrorists might try to smuggle in the makings of a dirty bomb -- a conventional explosive attached to a piece of radioactive material.

"They could use spent fuel from a reactor, even medical waste," said Douglas Ross, a political science professor at Simon Fraser University. "If you pack enough dynamite the cloud of radioactivity would cost billions to clean up."

Because the Canadian economy is heavily dependent on trade with the United States, Ottawa wants to be seen as tough on security.

The United States started installing radioactivity detectors at its ports in March. But unlike Canada, the Americans are placing the systems at the port exit gates and terminal operators are happy with that.