

U.S. Seeks to Boost Security, Soothe Public

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Confronted by a mounting anthrax scare in Washington and New York, the federal government yesterday took steps to stop the spread of bioterrorism, increase homeland security and reassure a rattled public.

The Bush administration asked Congress for \$1.5 billion to stockpile emergency medicine, including 300 million doses of smallpox vaccine, enough to inoculate every American against a potential terrorist weapon considered even more lethal than anthrax. The money would also expand the capacity of health laboratories to deal with anthrax and pay for hiring hundreds of food inspectors to guard against tainted meat and poultry.

The Federal Aviation Administration announced that it will require criminal background checks on all workers with access to secure areas of airports, including pilots and flight attendants. It will also require that all checked luggage be screened. Both steps have been proposed in Congress, but FAA Administrator Jane Garvey said the agency would not wait for congressional approval.

Ensuring the safety of the water and food supply was the focus of a series of actions. The Environmental Protection Agency issued advisories to chemical, pesticide and water companies, urging them to take greater security precautions, from locking doors to reviewing emergency response plans to rechecking the backgrounds of employees and contractors.

The Energy Department said it has developed an underground electronic "sniffer" that can detect toxic chemicals in municipal water supplies without taking them to a lab. And food industry executives said they will tighten safeguards against tampering with their products on grocery shelves.

The fear that the country may be under assault by bioterrorists was heightened when congressional leaders ordered the closing of the Capitol and adjoining House and Senate office buildings through the weekend to allow for a widespread environmental testing for anthrax.

Seeking to allay fears about the federal response, Health and Human Services Secretary Tommy G. Thompson told a Senate hearing, "The administration is committed to responding to bioterrorism quickly, in a coordinated and effective manner."

Meanwhile, a number of states instituted their own security measures this week. In Kentucky, uniformed guards took up positions at all entrances to the state capitol in Frankfort after a suspicious package was received. In Missouri, Gov. Bob Holden (D) ordered additional training for all state employees who handle mail. And in Oregon, Gov. John Kitzhaber (D) ordered increased staffing at emergency response centers around the state.

But with doctors' offices, hospitals and government agencies being flooded with calls about suspicious-looking envelopes or white powder, most governors and mayors focused on calming their constituents.

California Gov. Gray Davis toured the American River Water Treatment Plant and swallowed a glass of Sacramento River tap water to assure residents that it was safe. After dozens of reports of suspicious packages, Maine Gov. Angus King (I) said, "We need to be vigilant, but we don't want to panic. If we do, we're giving in to fear, and that is really the essence of what these folks are trying to accomplish."