

Peace activists tail N-weapons convoys

By Terry FitzPatrick

Special to The News

AMARILLO — Anti-nuclear peace activists this week are following truck shipments of nuclear weapons as they leave the Pantex Assembly Plant near Amarillo headed to U.S. military bases.

All of the United States' nuclear weapons, including warheads, are assembled at the Pantex Plant and are shipped, without public announcement, to U.S. military bases.

The "truck watchers" plan to document the route used by Energy Department special convoys and publish the information.

"The public has a right to know what is going on on its highways," said Les Breeding, an Amarillo peace organizer.

"People want to know when nuclear weapons go by their cars. They want to know when the highway that you live next to is a highway that carries the bomb," Breeding said.

Several teams of truck watchers are posted at the gates to the Pantex Plant. They use binoculars and citizens band radios. Their cars are packed with sleeping bags and extra food, ready to leave at a moment's notice to follow a truck that might travel thousands of miles.

This is the fourth time that peace protesters have attempted to trail the truck shipments.

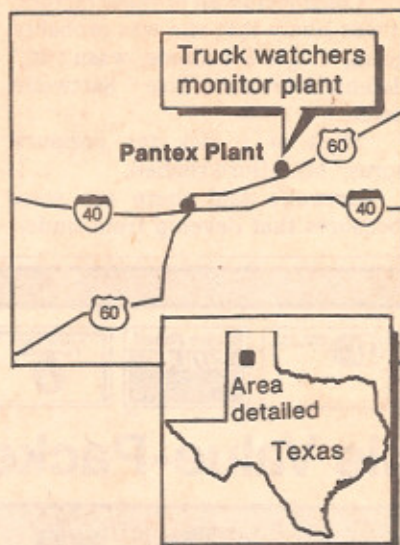
Earlier efforts were only moderately successful because of decoy trucks used by the Energy Department and the protesters' limited resources. This time, more volunteers and resources are being committed to the truck watch. The increased attention has some officials concerned.

"The routes are classified information," said Ann Bachicha, a spokeswoman at the Energy Department's Albuquerque office, which supervises the the convoys.

Bachicha said the truck watch has not interrupted the flow of weapons from Pantex. "It's business as usual," she said.

Charlie Poole, manager of the Pantex Plant, says he is concerned that the truck watchers could be playing into the hands of terrorists.

"If someone is attempting to cause a problem, the more they



The Dallas Morning News

know the easier it would be," Poole said.

The shipments are escorted by armed guards and the truck drivers are civilian employees of the Energy Department who have military training. Numerous radio antennae are mounted on each truck.

The truck watchers say they do not intend to interfere with the weapons convoys, and follow the semi-trailer trucks and armed escorts at a distance. Bachicha said no incidents have been reported.

However, the goal of the truck watch is to stir up public opposition to the shipments.

For years, peace activists have been monitoring nuclear arms shipped by rail and have documented routes, culminating in mass demonstrations. Protesters have tried to block trains outside military bases and a lone protester outside the Pantex Plant tore up a section of track in July.

"We would like the same thing to happen with those trucks," Breeding said.

The Energy Department says there is no need for public concern over the safety of the shipments.

There have been "about" six accidents in 37 million miles of truck transport, Bachicha said. Twice a truck has rolled over, but there has been no serious injury and no damage to the weapons, she said.

Bachicha said her department maintains close contact with state police.