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Energy Department May Set Plans For New Nuclear-Material Security

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WASHINGTON—Department of Energy security planners will spend the next few months weighing heightened security requirements to deter terrorists and planning the formation of an “elite” federal security force that may replace a network of private-security firms now guarding nuclear-weapons materials.

In a speech to the agency’s top security officers Friday, Secretary Spencer Abraham said “everything is on the table.” He outlined a security force with a “mission focus” and intensive training and tactical skills comparable to the Army’s Delta Force or the Navy’s Seals. He also said DOE is considering “federalizing” some current security units, which means they would receive comparable pay and benefits across the U.S.

Mr. Abraham called for a change in DOE’s “management culture,” a bureaucracy that has sometimes hidden the failures and ignored low benefits earned by private-guard forces, men and women who are currently the nation’s last line of defense against terrorists at facilities that store plutonium and highly enriched uranium. Guarding the metals, which are used in nuclear warheads, requires guards to shoot to kill and to risk their lives against armed attackers.

“People should never have to worry about the perils of doing their jobs honestly, safely and correctly,” Mr. Abraham said. Guards and others who see shortcomings, he said, should no longer worry “about facing retribution” for reporting their concerns to management.

Mr. Abraham also promised technological improvements to upgrade security at national weapons laboratories. They included “diskless computers” to prevent theft of weapon-design secrets and a “keyless security environment,” where doors and gates can’t be opened by using stolen keys or pass cards.

The DOE head noted that his agency’s security failures have often been exposed by so-called whistle-blowers, employees who have gone to outside groups, often at the risk of losing their jobs. In his speech he singled out one group, the Washington-based Project on Government Oversight, which has lobbied for increased protection at nuclear sites since 2001.

Danielle Brian, executive director of the group, praised the announcement, but said she will wait to see whether improvements happen. DOE and its private contractors, she said, “have a long history of stonewalling security reforms.”

Sen. Pete Domenici, chairman of the Senate Energy Committee, said he looked forward to helping DOE improve its security, but added that he was concerned that “security costs are outpacing any growth in the DOE budget.”

Part of DOE’s plan, outlined by Mr. Abraham, would be to consolidate what it calls “special nuclear materials” to reduce the number of sites that require specially trained guards. The agency will also study the feasibility of “blending down,” or reducing the bomb-capabilities of over 100 tons of highly enriched uranium that are currently stored at a facility called Y-12 at Oak Ridge, Tenn.