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Alaska to Revise Emergency Response Plan to Include Preparation for EMP Attack

Anchorage, AK – May 29, 2007 – Alaska will include electromagnetic pulse (EMP) attack in the range of risks, threats and hazards confronting the state. The next revision of its emergency response plan will outline how to prepare for and recover from an EMP attack that could simultaneously shut down all of Alaska’s electric power and telecommunications grids, Alaska Homeland Security Director John Madden said last week.

Madden, co-chair of the Alaska State Emergency Response Commission, stated that planning for the threat of EMP will include integration, implementation and survivability measures, and that he plans to present the issue before the Department of Homeland Security later this summer in order to raise EMP preparedness as a national issue, not just an Alaska issue.

Alaska’s State Emergency Response Commission heard a briefing on the threat posed by EMP attack during its May 24th session held in Anchorage. The presentation, given by the Institute of the North Senior Fellow Mead Treadwell, who directs the Institute’s Defense and Security Program, urged the Commissioners to follow through on a contingency plan by highlighting our current vulnerabilities and infrastructure gaps.

An electromagnetic pulse, caused by detonating a nuclear warhead between 25 and 250 miles above the Earth’s atmosphere, creates a radiating pulse capable of disrupting and damaging electric power grids and electronic devices over a geographic region that extends approximately 1000 miles in every direction from the blasts’ epicenter, depending upon the height of the burst.

Such a disabling of the power grid could shut down telecommunications networks, transportation systems, emergency services, energy pipelines and food and water distribution. Furthermore, a space-based nuclear blast could also disable satellites that are the primary communication in much of Alaska. Other satellites help the U.S. to identify the source of and respond to such an attack.

“What makes contingency planning on this issue so critical is that in the case of an EMP attack, Alaska could be losing all these capacities at once, without being able to call upon outside assistance,” said Treadwell.

Treadwell also urged the Commission to consider the cost-benefit implications for EMP emergency planning since even a one-time attack would be financially devastating. “Indeed, such a calculation could factor into national decisions regarding expanding a missile defense program,” he added.

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Treadwell quoted author Thomas Schelling to emphasize that, though unprecedented, there is, "...a tendency in our planning to confuse the unfamiliar with the improbable. The contingency we have not considered looks strange; what looks strange is therefore improbable; what seems improbable need not be considered seriously."

A report by the 2004 Commission to Assess the Threat to the United States from Electromagnetic Pulse Attack noted that, "...one or a few high-altitude nuclear detonations can produce EMP effects that can potentially disrupt or damage electronic and electrical systems over much of the United States, virtually simultaneously, at a time determined by an adversary." The executive summary of the EMP Commission report is viewable online at www.missilethreat.com/empreport.

Treadwell also discussed proposals for a space-based missile defense, which he said could provide the best defense against the kind of nuclear blast resulting in electromagnetic pulse. The nation's primary ground-based interceptor system is housed at Fort Greely, Alaska.

The briefing follows the release of a nationwide survey of Adjutants General on issues such as missile defense and EMP attack that was conducted jointly by the Anchorage-based Institute of the North and the Claremont Institute of Claremont, California. Survey results revealed that our nation's National Guard leaders are unprepared to respond to an EMP attack and would like further information on the subject.

Both the Institute of the North and the Claremont Institute, publisher of the website www.missilethreat.com, have been working closely together for more than 10 years on policy issues related to the strategic defense of the United States. One goal of the collaboration is to help state and local officials and citizens understand policy options at all levels related to ballistic missile defense.

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