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WAR ON TERROR

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Water Utilities Need \$1.6 Billion For Improving Security Systems

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WASHINGTON -- Utilities that provide 80% of the nation's drinking water estimate they will need \$1.6 billion to pay for security upgrades designed to prevent terrorist attacks.

Waterworks companies this week began submitting secret reports on their security vulnerabilities to the Environmental Protection Agency, as required by federal law. "Our threat is no longer trying to keep high-school students from marking up the local water tower," said Andrew Hudson, a spokesman for the American Water Works Association, which represents 4,500 U.S. utilities.

Since the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, he said, the security effort has shifted to "cope with somebody who is intentionally targeting a water supply," either by disrupting the flow or contaminating pipes and reservoirs with poison. That will require more guards, better fences and lighting, and more frequent and sophisticated water testing, some of which, he said, already has been put into practice.

"The next challenge is obviously going to be to find the funding for these additional infrastructure costs," Mr. Hudson said. Officials from major waterworks where upgrades have begun say they expect the federal government to pay some of the costs, and that customers will see higher water bills to make up the remainder.

Tracy Mehan, the EPA's assistant secretary for water programs, said it will be up to Congress to decide how much federal assistance local waterworks will get. Most of the cost, he believes, will be paid by local water users. Under the EPA program, utilities have six months to implement "emergency-response plans" that correct the weaknesses they have found.

"The basic thing we've done is to increase our presence at various facilities," said Thomas C. Hokinson, assistant general manager for the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power, the nation's largest utility. Its security force, which must monitor a network of 7,100 miles of pipe connecting reservoirs, wells, treatment facilities and aqueducts, has increased by 30%.

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Rick Hahn, a former Federal Bureau of Investigation antiterrorist expert who now runs a security company that has helped Los Angeles and 16 other waterworks, said that before Sept. 11 many waterworks had "just enough security to keep a trespasser from walking through a gate." For years, he said, utilities assumed

their huge reservoirs were self-protecting against attempts to contaminate them.

"There is an old saying in the industry: Dilution is the solution to pollution," he said. That may no longer be true against terrorists armed with more-powerful poisons. The industry's new standard, adapted from security policies used to protect nuclear-power plants, must delay intruders long enough for security forces to apprehend them. "That's a tough standard," he explained.

So far, he said, the FBI hasn't had reports of a terrorist attack on a water plant. However, it has obtained evidence captured from al Qaeda cells in Manila, Rome and Washington state, he said, that shows alleged terrorists were studying documents describing the vulnerabilities of water systems.

According to the EPA's timetable, midsize and smaller U.S. utilities must submit their vulnerability reports over the next year. The Public Health, Security and Bioterrorism Act, which became law in June, requires utilities that serve more than 3,300 customers to submit the reports and then develop improved security plans to cover their deficiencies.

James A. Warfield, executive officer for the Fairfax County Water Authority, a Virginia utility that supplies about a third of the drinking water for the Washington, D.C., metropolitan area, noted that security costs will vary widely because city water systems all are designed differently. Because the Fairfax authority provides water to some critical federal facilities, he said, it will require a more robust emergency plan, "which we're now in the process of doing."

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