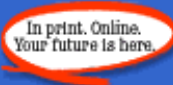


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WAR WITH IRAQ

# Airport Shows Off "Human Carwash"

By Jennifer Oldham, Times Staff Writer

Worries about anthrax were confined to cattle ranches in the Midwest when Michael DiGirolamo first suggested that the city purchase a decontamination unit for Los Angeles International Airport.

Five years later, LAX is one of three airports in the country, including Ontario and Dallas/Fort Worth international airports, that have such units available to help clean people after a chemical or biological attack, an aviation fuel spill or a natural disaster.

DiGirolamo requested the decontamination systems, which cost \$243,000 each, in 1998 after a 1995 nerve gas attack on rush-hour commuters in a Tokyo subway.

"I went to the Los Angeles Fire Department and asked them if we could decontaminate an entire airplane," said DiGirolamo, deputy executive director of airport operations and public safety for the city

agency that operates LAX. "And they said we could, but it would take forever."

Only recently has the city decided to publicize the units to reassure travelers that the airport -- cited as the state's No. 1 terrorist target in a recent government report -- is ready to handle the fallout from a biological or chemical attack.

Mayor James K. Hahn got a firsthand look at how the units operate Tuesday at a crowded demonstration outside the airport's Imperial Terminal.

"After spending time touring the LAX decontamination units, I remain convinced that LAX is one of the world's safest airports," Hahn said. "As a result of the current global climate and the high state of alert, I'm requesting [the city agency that operates the airport] purchase two additional units as a precautionary measure."

The request is the latest in a series of efforts by city and federal officials to increase security at the world's fifth-busiest airport. Hahn has announced numerous measures, including more cameras and tighter perimeter security, since the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks and last year's deadly July 4 shooting at the Tom Bradley International Terminal.

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At Tuesday's demonstration, firefighters showed off the decontamination units' ability to clean chemicals from victims in a matter of minutes. The system features a firetruck with enclosed showers that can be attached to a large, heavy plastic tent that covers additional nozzles. The showers spray users with warm water, to which bleach or soap can be added. Each unit can clean 250 people per hour.

After 20 firefighters spent an hour assembling the tent unit and tapped into a nearby hydrant, Chief of Airfield Operations Raymond Jack gamely volunteered to strip down to his black and red swimsuit and walk through what some dubbed the human carwash. Jack's clothes were placed in a trash bag, and he was given a plastic wristband with an identification tag.

A firefighter wearing a hooded plastic suit, rubber boots and gloves and an oxygen tank greeted Jack at the tent's entrance and hosed him down with a retractable nozzle. Jack proceeded along the right side of the red, green and white tent set aside for men. The left side was designated for women and those who could not walk on their own.

Next, Jack stepped into a hazy red light in the middle of the tent, where two similarly attired firefighters hosed him down again and used a broom to scrub his skin. Contaminated water ran under the showers where Jack stood and was siphoned out of the tent into a 600-gallon bladder. When Jack emerged from the tent he was given a baby blue paper suit and yellow booties.

"I didn't know if I should bring shampoo and my rubber ducky," Jack said after he changed back into his track suit. "It's no different than being in a big locker room shower."

The firefighters who operate the units work with the city's three hazardous-materials teams, relying on a variety of sensors and monitors to detect minute concentrations of nuclear, biological or chemical contaminants.

The units can also be used outside the airport, and were sent to Sunday's Academy Awards ceremony and to the 2000 Democratic National Convention in Los Angeles.

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