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BAY AREA
Explosives theft ignites debate
Congress members seek federal
checks on police storage

- [Patrick Hoge, Chronicle Staff Writer](#)

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Members of a congressional subcommittee on national security called Monday for greater federal control over police storage of explosives after a Hayward man allegedly stole 200 pounds of explosives from a remote San Mateo County site used by three law enforcement agencies.

"We are dealing with a national wake-up call," said Rep. Tom Lantos, D- San Mateo, citing the potential for explosives to fall into the hands of terrorists. "This could be a blessing in disguise." Lantos was joined at a special hearing in San Mateo by Rep. Chris Shays, R-Conn., and Rep. Anna Eshoo, D-Atherton.

Monday's hearing was held in the wake of last month's theft of explosives -- including 30 to 35 pounds of C4 plastic explosive -- from sheds near Crystal Springs Reservoir. The site was used by the San Mateo county sheriff, the San Francisco Police Department and the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

Federal prosecutors have charged four men in the case, including Michael Alexander Allan, a 46-year-old Hayward cabinetmaker with an extensive criminal record. All the stolen explosives have been recovered.

The three members of Congress said they found little security at the San Mateo site, which they visited. Only one of the four storage sheds had an alarm, which had been broken for years since it was installed following a 1988 burglary at the site.

"I thought that the facility was short of pathetic," said Shays.

"I can't help but think that when I'm in a grocery store they have more security protecting the frozen-food section," Eshoo said.

Sheriff Don Horsley, who said he had never visited the site before the burglary, agreed and urged a national effort to secure such storage facilities.

"We certainly were negligent," Horsley said. "We mistakenly believed that it was a secret location."

In the future, Horsley said, the county will store explosives in a site that is fenced, alarmed and monitored by cameras. Horsley was joined by San Francisco Police Chief Heather Fong, who also promised to pursue such security measures.

Despite the criticisms, Walfred Nelson, deputy assistant director of the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives, said the San Mateo bunkers apparently would have complied with federal regulations, which do not require alarms.

The guidelines specify the size and construction of containers, their placement away from homes and roads, and the locks used to secure them.

Nelson said his agency had instituted a policy in 2002 to investigate all thefts of explosive materials from storage sites. There are more than 12,000 commercial licensees.

Last year, there were 79 reported thefts of explosives -- including six from storage sites run by public agencies, Nelson said. Police agencies are supposed to abide by federal guidelines, Nelson said, but his agency has no authority to inspect them.

Lantos said he did not understand why the ATF does not license police storage sites the same way it does for the private sector.

The committee members said they were shocked to learn that Nelson could not say how many public or private storage sites existed nationwide or where they were. The committee heard testimony that there were about 450 bomb squads around the country, and all of them typically have explosive materials they need to do their jobs.

The ATF has begun compiling a database of the private storage sites and is about one-third finished, Nelson said.

Assistant Chief Scott MacGregor of the California Highway Patrol testified Monday that there was no statewide list of where law enforcement agencies store explosives, but he said the agency had recommended that a list be compiled as a result of the Crystal Springs theft. The CHP has 13 storage sites, he said.

Lantos castigated the ATF for not being more in securing explosive storage sites following the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks on the World Trade Center in New York City.

"This is a pre-9/11 standard, which simply doesn't hold up in a post-9/11 world," Lantos said.

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Page B - 5

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