

Measure calls for picture security

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TRENTON -- Right now, any person can photograph or videotape a "high-risk" facility in the state and police are limited in how they can react.

Take for example the Valero refinery in Paulsboro, in neighboring Gloucester County, where officials there allege suspicious activity is reported at least six times each year.

"Some of it is pretty scary with some of the things that have happened," said Robert Lee, regional security manager for Valero. "Surveillance is one of the ways these terrorist units conduct their planning. These things have to be investigated."

The state Senate Law and Public Safety Committee is expected to discuss a bill today which would make it a crime -- punishable by up to 18 months in jail -- to photograph, videotape or otherwise record for an extended period of time a power generation, waste treatment, public sewage, water treatment, public water, nuclear or flammable liquid storage facility, as well as any airport in the state.

At the very least, it will allow law enforcement officials across the state to detain the individual or confiscate any recorded materials to further their investigation, according to state Sen. Fred Madden, D-4 of Turnersville, who is the bill's sponsor.

Opponents of the bill said it "makes no sense" and is "awful."

"If you have someone who lives in Gloucester County who looks at a plant and notices there are toxic fumes emanating from the plant, it's in the public's interest for that individual to get out a video camera and document it and give that to the (Department of Environmental Protection)," said Rick Engler, director of New Jersey Work Environment Council. "This bill will stop individuals from protecting the environment and will do nothing to thwart terrorism."

Engler's non-profit group is made up of 70 labor, environmental and community organizations, which look to create safe jobs and a healthy environment.

"We think (the proposed legislation) does violate the constitution," Engler said.

Another key point of interest in the region would be Salem and Hope Creek Nuclear Generating Stations at Artificial Island in Lower Alloways Creek.

"To me, this just makes sense to limit unauthorized surveillance like this," said PSEG Nuclear spokesman Skip Sindoni.

However, watchdog group Unplug Salem, criticized the idea saying it will keep them from completing their mission.

"It may be a good-faith attempt to protect vital institutions, but if we become a dictatorship, then terrorists win," said Unplug Salem coordinator Norm Cohen.

His group needs access to ensure the nuclear facility is running properly and is safe to those living nearby.

A watchdog group can "look at things in a different view and make suggestions," Cohen offered.

The proposed bill "goes too far," Cohen added.

State Sen. Stephen Sweeney, D-3, of West Deptford, and a co-sponsor of the bill defended the legislation on Wednesday.

"We're not trying to violate anybody's rights," Sweeney said. "We're just looking to protect the public."

Without identifying them, Sweeney said there were four locations in South Jersey which rank among the top 100 potential terrorist targets identified by the federal government.

At the same time, Sweeney said it was "healthy" for advocacy groups to be out there monitoring the activities of such facilities because they can bring attention to "problems."

"We're not going to punish anyone like that," Sweeney said.

Both Sweeney and Madden admitted the bill is still being developed and a final hearing will not take place any time soon.

Besides facing 18 months behind bars, those caught committing these potentially illegal activities would face up to \$10,000 in fines if convicted, according to the proposed legislation.

"Quite frankly, this bill is long overdue," Madden said. "The intent is to identify those individuals during the planning stages and apprehend them before the attack takes place."

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