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After explosion, new worries about LNG trucks

Tanker trucks carrying liquefied energy gases have worried terror experts since the 1970s. Now, with shipments of liquefied natural gas (LNG) set to soar in coming years alongside already robust shipments of liquefied petroleum gas, some security experts are again sounding the alarm. Their prime evidence: a truck accident in Spain.

Industry officials have long argued that LNG trucks are almost immune to explosion. But in 2002, an LNG truck in Spain flipped over, burned, then exploded into a 500-foot fireball that killed the driver and burned two others.

"The severity of this kind of explosion is something people haven't usually considered applicable to LNG trucks," says Jerry Havens, former director of the Chemical Hazards Research Center at the University of Arkansas. "But what happened in Spain changes that picture. It shows you've got the potential for a massive explosion."

Despite the Spain incident, industry spokesmen say LNG is not explosive.

"We don't view LNG tractor trailers as a high target for any intentional attacks whatsoever," says Bill Cooper, of the Center for Liquefied Natural Gas, a coalition of energy providers. "It would not explode, just burn back to its ignition source. Therefore you have to wonder if that's really a target-rich environment."

When an LNG tanker truck flipped in Massachusetts in May and another LNG tanker burned in Nevada last summer, neither produced an explosion, he notes.

But if terrorists are involved, then the equation changes, Dr. Havens and other experts argue. A hijacked LNG tanker truck could be rigged to explode fairly easily, Richard Wilson, a Harvard physicist, warned in a 2003 speech.

One thing is clear: More LNG trucks will hit the road in coming years if the federal government approves new LNG terminals at US ports.

The Christian Science Monitor.