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activist's Remark Starts FBI Probe

Saturday August 26, 2006 7:01 PM

By JIM SUHR

Associated Press Writer

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ST. LOUIS (AP) - Jim Bensman thought his suggestion during a public hearing was harmless enough: Instead of building a channel so migratory fish could go around a dam on the Mississippi River, just get rid of the dam.

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Instead, the environmental activist found himself in hot water, drawing FBI scrutiny to see whether he had any terrorist intentions.

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The case ``shows just how easy it is to be labeled a suspected terrorist," he says.

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It all started on July 25 in Alton, Ill., when the Army Corps of Engineers invited public discussion about options for improving fish movement at the nearby Melvin Price Locks and Dam, considered a major impediment to roughly three dozen species that migrate upstream.

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During the 90-minute hearing that included on the agenda whether to build a fish channel, Bensman says, he reiterated

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he's no fan of dams, contending they're environmentally destructive and amount to billions of dollars in corporate welfare for boating interests.

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He urged that the dam be torn out. He said he never mentioned blowing the dam up, though the corps' presentation of possible options included a picture of a dam being dynamited.

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The next day, however, a local newspaper reported that Bensman ``said he would like to see the dam blown up and resents paying taxes to fix dam problems when it is barge companies that profit from the dam."

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Workers at the corps' St. Louis office ``took a dim view (of the article) and questioned if it was a potential threat," and a security manager forwarded the clipping to the FBI, said corps spokesman Alan Dooley.

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Within days, the FBI had Bensman on the phone, asking whether he was any threat.

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``To think I'm a terrorist is utterly ridiculous," Bensman, 46, said from his home in Alton, just north of St. Louis. ``How could any reasonable person think a terrorist is going to come to a public meeting held by the Army Corps, let them know who they are and announce their terror plot? It just doesn't make sense to me."

From the Associated Press

Dooley isn't offering apologies, casting the agency's deferral to the FBI as a judgment call.

``I don't want to dispute anything with Jim at this point," Dooley said. ``We're not going to debate whether this is oversensitivity or undersensitivity."



Dooley noted that when it comes to determining security threats ``there's probably a lower threshold after 9/11."

Marshall Stone, a supervisory special agent with the FBI office in Springfield, Ill., acknowledged that the corps had asked his agency to review Bensman's remarks. He wouldn't discuss the status of the inquiry, to avoid casting ``a negative cloud" on Bensman if the review uncovers nothing.

Bensman is affiliated with the Sierra Club and the forest-protection group Heartwood, and his environmental activism is

well-known around much of the Midwest. He has railed against logging and gone to bat for bats, woodpeckers and, lately, migratory fish in the Mississippi.

``They all know me, and I'm a thorn in their side," Bensman says of the Corps of Engineers. ``I'm one of their biggest critics, and I'm sure I drive a lot of them crazy. But the First Amendment gives me a right to publicly speak out."

That's not the issue, Dooley said: ``The issue was the (newspaper) report and not a matter of judgment about how well you do or don't know Mr. Bensman."

Bensman said his reaction when an FBI agent quizzed him about the newspaper article was that the case was ``absurd."

``I told him, `How could you possibly think this is a terroristic threat? Don't you have something more to worry about?'" Bensman said. ``He said: 'We have to investigate everything.'"

On the Net:

Corps of Engineers, St. Louis: <http://www.mvs.usace.army.mil>

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