UConn hosts homeland security conference

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STORRS — As technology moves ever faster, developing systems and policies to protect the public moves slowly.

“These are the challenges we must consider,” Robert Popp said Thursday during the first day of the International Conference on Advanced Technologies for Homeland Security at the University of Connecticut.

“Policy reflects the 1970s, technology does not; in making decisions [politicians] don’t have a deep understanding of technology.”

The two-day event, sponsored and organized by the School of Engineering, attracted 450 people and 54 invited speakers, including experts in homeland security and high-tech industries.

Bruce Schneier, founder and chief technology officer at Counterpane Internet Security, pointed to the airlines as an example of new technologies not addressed by any policy.

He spoke of the fairly recent practice allowing airline passengers to print out a boarding pass at home from the Internet. The printed pass gets a passenger through an airport’s security screening system. However, Schneier said, “there is nothing to stop another person from printing out the pass and obtaining access to the plane.”

“The agenda of people using the system is more important than the system itself,” he said. “What happens when systems fail is more important than how they succeed.”

In the past, said Amy Donahue, senior adviser to the administrator for homeland security and a UConn faculty member, the first line of defense was the armed forces during a public emergency.

“Now the first line of defense is on the backs of our first responders — police, firefighters, public works employees and emergency medical technicians and many of these are volunteers,” she said. “It’s just coming to our policymakers that there is no coherent framework for retooling our response plan, no variant for the incident command system.”

She asked, for example, if there’s a chemical spill how can the first people on the scene tell if it’s a deliberate attack or an accident. She suggested regionalizing emergency services as a possible answer to the dilemma.

The public wants immediate action, but departments work with pitifully small budgets, said Robert Tuohy, senior director for strategic planning at Hicks & Associates, a Virginia-based firm that works to steer federal research funding to police and emergency fire and medical personnel. He also said neither emergency responders nor customs agents guarding our borders have a lot of expertise in protection.

Border patrol guards, who formerly tried to stem the flow of drugs and illegal aliens, must now concentrate on terrorists slipping across the border.

“Emergency responders are not federal employees and buy equipment though commercial vendors with their own money or through federal grants,” he said. “There is no [research and development] program for homeland security like the Department of Defense has.”

He suggested that public/private partnerships could work toward developing needed tools for local emergency personnel.

Technology far outpaces policy, explained Neil Pollard, senior director of emerging threats and capabilities at Hicks & Associates. Pollard, an attorney who is an expert in counterterrorism, said basic research is the beginning, later comes the issue of how to apply it.