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US wants trucks mounted with frikkin' laser beams

By [Lewis Page](#)

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US arms and aerospace manufacturer Boeing announced on Friday that it had landed a contract to develop truck-mounted laser cannons for the US Army.

As part of the Army's High Energy Laser Technology Demonstrator (HEL TD) project, Boeing will produce a "rugged beam control system", which will be mounted on a monstrous 20 tonne Heavy Expanded Mobility Tactical Truck.

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The HEL TD is intended to shoot down incoming enemy artillery shells, rockets, or mortar bombs. Laser systems which can actually blast stuff, as opposed to merely lighting targets up for other weapons to hit, are big and bulky items - hence the big carrying vehicle (though the HEL TD is a mere peashooter compared to Boeing's other famous blaster-cannon programme, the jumbo-jet mounted [Airborne Laser](#) (http://www.theregister.co.uk/2007/06/20/raygun_jumbo_wants_pork/)).

The idea is that HEL TD raygun lorries could, in future, zap enemy bombardments out of the sky before they hit. This is a comparatively rare case of a wild-eyed technical gizmo which might actually be some use in current counter-insurgency wars. A significant proportion of Western casualties in this kind of fighting are caused by mortar or rocket attacks on otherwise-secure bases in Iraq, Afghanistan, or (in the past) Northern Ireland. The danger isn't just to personnel: during 2005, two RAF Harrier jets were knocked out on the ground when their Kandahar airbase was rocketed.

The US forces have [already deployed](#) (<http://www.defensetech.org/archives/001623.html>) rapidfire radar-controlled guns to defend some compounds against such incoming attacks, but a laser - if it could explode its targets reliably - would have some obvious advantages.

To begin with, a beam travelling at light speed has an easier time hitting a falling shell than another shell does - even a very fast one. Then, the shells used in land-based defensive gun systems are set to self-destruct before falling to earth: but such mechanisms aren't perfect and loosing thousands of rounds off across the perimeter involves some risk to the surrounding population.

To begin with, however, HEL TD is getting only a tentative implementation. Boeing's initial phase beam-controller development contract is for just \$7m, though there are options allowing funding to go to \$50m.

This sort of money is chickenfeed to Boeing, but it has high hopes for the future.

"We consider this programme an important win for Boeing because it supports a cornerstone of the Army's high-energy laser programme," said Pat Shanahan, Boeing veeep in charge of Missile Defense Systems. "We believe this is the next step for developing a weapon system that can change the face of the battlefield."

The Boeing release is [here](http://www.boeing.com/news/releases/2007/q3/070723a_nr.html) (http://www.boeing.com/news/releases/2007/q3/070723a_nr.html).

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