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NEWSPAPER ARTICLE "NAVY SEES TEST ORDER FOR DIOXIN AS A PLUS" NCBC
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Navy sees test order for dioxin as a plus

Officials hope move spurs Air Force role

By GEOFF PENDER

THE SUN HERALD

■ GULFPORT — Navy and state officials looked on the bright side of a state mandate for more dioxin testing around the Naval Construction Battalion Center, saying the order was not a surprise and that it will help them get money for the cleanup.

Not punishment

A Mississippi Department of Environmental Quality official told an advisory board of residents who live around the site that the order was a response to pressure from legislators and an effort to help the Navy get more money. He said the mandate was not punishment, and that DEQ and the Navy cleanup team have a good relationship.

"Everything with (Department of Defense) is a funding issue," said DEQ environmental administrator Phillip Weathersby. "We understand that."

Other DEQ statements have sounded more critical of the cleanup effort.

"We've got to know that there's not a problem out there," Jerry Banks, chief of the DEQ's hazardous waste division, told reporters Wednesday. "We can't take the chance of letting this lie and hoping that there is not a problem."

Dangerous substance

Dioxin is the term for a group of chemicals, some of which have been shown to cause cancer, birth defects and other disorders in laboratory animals.

The Naval center was used during the Vietnam War to store Agent Orange, which contains dioxin, for the Air Force. Potentially hazardous levels of dioxin have been found in soil at the border of the base.

Art Conrad, with the Naval Facilities Engineering Command, which helps the Navy with environmental matters, said the order should help the Navy find money to continue cleanup. He said he hopes the order, which also instructs the Air Force to help, will mean the Air Force will become more involved in the cleanup.

Help with funding

"We right now are not budgeted to do anything else in 1996," Conrad said. "This should help."

"It's as if it were going to take something like this to get funding and get the Air Force more involved," said Navy Comdr. John Zink, co-chair of the advisory committee.

Weathersby would not say where legislative pressure on the DEQ came from.

The DEQ order was discussed Thursday night as part of the regular meeting of the Restoration Advisory Board, which is made up of residents near the site and Navy officials.

Testing ordered

The state order will require extensive testing on and off the site, and will put deadlines on the work.

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Dioxin

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The Navy first will have to file a testing plan that includes safeguards against more contamination leaving the base.

Dioxin levels 30 times higher than considered safe in soil have been found at the base's northwestern border, but levels a half-mile north were

within the safe limits.

Meeting scheduled

The Rev. Lee Adams, a Rich Avenue resident and member of the resident board, invited Navy officials, board members and residents to attend an environmental education meeting at the Biloxi Broadwater Beach Resort on March 30 at 9 a.m. The seminar will be presented by Xavier University in New Orleans.

■ The Associated Press contributed to this report.

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