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NEWSPAPER ARTICLE "DIOXIN CONFIRMED AT SEABEE BASE IN 1970'S, BUT LITTLE  
DONE" NCBC GULFPORT MS  
3/17/1996  
THE CLARION-LEDGER

# The Clarion-Ledger

Mississippi edition ■ Jackson, Mississippi

Sunday ■ March 17, 1996

## Dioxin confirmed at Seabee base in 1970s, but little done

■ Civilian neighbors have urged the military to solve the problem, which may have spread

By Bruce Reid  
Clarion-Ledger Staff Writer

GULFPORT — The Rev. Lee Adams and many of his neighbors grew up with the local Navy base firmly entwined in the fabric of the community.

Some residents work there, school

### TODAY'S EXTRA

children go there on field trips and base personnel serve as mentors to neighborhood youngsters, many of whom are poor and black.

Now, as the Naval Construction Battalion Center wrestles with the notion that decades-old chemical contamination may have spread off the base and into surround-

ing communities, Adams and his neighbors say they are facing the threat honestly and openly with the military.

"They make no bones about it," said Adams, a member of a resident board that advises the base on environmental issues. "There is pollution and we are working together to fix it."

Recent tests showed worrisome levels of dioxin, a byproduct of the military defoliant Agent Orange, in canals and drainage ditches flowing from the base.

The Seabee base, which houses naval construction personnel, had stored supplies of the defoliant for the Air Force, which used it during the Vietnam War.

While Navy officials and community leaders have forged a partnership over the past 18 months since the formation of the resident board, the military had evidence dioxin was spreading into surrounding neighborhoods 18 years ago, according to documents on file at the state Department

See DIOXIN, 8A

# Dioxin

From 1A

of Environmental Quality.

Although health risks are still unclear, the documents show the military has done little to investigate them since the initial findings.

Tests conducted in the late 1970s confirmed that dioxin was present in the canals and ditches at levels many times higher than those now thought to pose health risks.

In the older tests, a limited number of fish and other aquatic life were collected off the base. They were found to have dioxin levels as high as those that prompted Mississippi to issue advisories about eating dioxin-contaminated fish from several rivers elsewhere in the state.

Jerry Banks, chief of the DEQ's hazardous waste division, said further tests would show whether similar advisories are needed around the Gulfport base.

The DEQ ordered more tests on Feb. 14, but that was merely the latest action in a protracted legal battle over the extent of cleanup needed, who pays for it and the precise risks posed by dioxin — a class of chemicals at the center of an intense scientific debate.

Banks said the state ordered the Navy and the Air Force to conduct more tests in hope of breaking a logjam over federal funding. The order calls for extensive sampling of soil, water, sediment and fish around the 1,100-acre installation.

But continuing legal disputes may delay further study or limit its scope.

In a written petition last week, the Air Force asked the state for a hearing on the order. Lt. Col. Robert Wallett, a top environmental official at the Pentagon, said the Air Force would not commit to funding more study until its complaints about the order, which it calls vague, broad and premature, are addressed at a hearing.

Also last week, the Navy formally responded to the state order and said it might request a hearing later. The Navy's petition also called the state's

## WHAT IS DIOXIN?

Dioxin is the short name for a family of chemicals formed as unwanted byproducts during the making of certain pesticides, in paper manufacturing, during waste incineration, in forest fires and at wood-treatment plants. It was contained in the now-banned Agent Orange, a defoliant that was used in the Vietnam War and stored at the Naval Construction Battalion Center in Gulfport until 1977. Scientists agree that some probably cause cancer, birth defects and liver damage. New research suggests dioxins are among many manmade chemicals that can disrupt hormone systems, causing reproductive disorders.

order too broad and raised numerous legal questions about it.

Despite the petition, Navy officials said they are proceeding as quickly as possible with limited funding.

"We're going to get to the end of it," said Lt. Carol Womack, director of the base's environment, fire and safety department.

Banks said the state will begin conducting limited soil sampling around the base this week, to obtain independent information.

In about a month, the Navy hopes to start a study of the potential dioxin exposure in soil and fish.

"We're going to do our best and try to get the Air Force to come along," said Gordon Crane, a civilian who serves as the base's environmental program manager.

On March 30, the Deep South Center for Environmental Justice at Xavier University in New Orleans plans to hold a public workshop on the ongoing dioxin studies at the base. The center is helping inform the minority communities around the base.

The latest events in Gulfport come as the dioxin debate is heating up again across the country.

A book out last week warns that dioxin and a host of other manmade chemicals are "hormone disruptors," low levels of which can harm developing fetuses, reduce sperm counts and cause other reproductive disorders.

"When you are dealing with dioxin, caution is always in order," said Dr. John Peterson Myers, a coauthor of the book, *Our Stolen Future*. Vice President Al Gore compares the

book to Rachel Carson's 1962 environmental classic *Silent Spring*, which warned of the dangers of now-banned pesticides such as DDT.

The new book asserts that government controls on chemicals should not be based solely on cancer risks, when significant health effects can be expected at lower levels of exposure.

Myers, a zoologist and director of the W. Alton Jones Foundation in Charlottesville, Va., was the keynote speaker Friday at the Third Citizens' Conference on Dioxin in Baton Rouge. The conference, which concludes today, was organized by environmental activists, researchers and Vietnam veterans from around the country.

In response to the new book, the environmental group Greenpeace called for a phaseout of commonly used polyvinyl chloride plastics, which it said contribute to dioxin formation.

Also last week, the Institute of Medicine, an arm of the congressionally chartered National Academy of Sciences, released a study suggesting an increased risk of spina bifida, a serious birth defect, in children born to Vietnam veterans exposed to Agent Orange. Earlier studies by the institute found possible or clear links between wartime Agent Orange exposure and nerve disorders, chemical acne and various cancers.

This emerging information on dioxin's potential risks strengthens the need to resolve lingering questions around the Gulfport Navy base, said Banks, DEQ's hazardous waste chief.