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Contamination found in 4 wells near Navy base

By Tom Holden
Staff writer

NORFOLK — Tests on 55 wells in the Glenwood Park neighborhood show that four are contaminated with minute amounts of industrial solvents, and Navy officials on Tuesday told residents that further testing is needed to identify the source.

The levels of solvents were so small that residents, many of whom fear that Navy pollution has caused cancer in the neighborhood, were told that they could use the well water without risk. But many of the roughly 60 who attended the civic league meeting were skeptical.

Cherryl Barnett, director of the Navy's environmental programs division, said, "The chemicals we found are the kind that evaporate easily, so if you want to use the wells to water your grass, wash your car or water your garden then you can with no threat to your health."

Since last spring, some residents have beseeched politicians and local health authorities to explain cancer deaths in the neighborhood. Many residents suspect the cause is a series of landfills that surround the neighborhood, which borders the Norfolk Naval Base. At least one, the Camp Allen landfill, is known to contain toxic and cancer-causing chemicals.

While the Navy concedes that the landfill contains toxic chemicals, little is known about how fast underground water is moving and at what rate it is carrying buried toxins. To that end, the Navy will drill a 60-foot well to find out how far the toxins have moved from the Camp Allen site.

The wells sampled in the most recent survey were drilled to between 10 and 36 feet, Barnett said. None of the wells is used for drinking water. All residents of the neighborhood are hooked into the city's supply.

In addition, Barnett said results of another test at a landfill on the northern border of the community found no radioactivity in the ground. In June, a resident had asked the Navy to look into unconfirmed reports that radioactive waste had been buried in a landfill between Interstate 564 and Fleet Park.

Two studies conducted in the past year by C. Diane Woolard, the state's senior epidemiologist, show that cancer rates are no higher than would be expected for any aging population. Most of the cancers found are the kind that typically affect older Americans, she has said.