

Navy ponders base cleanup

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WARMINSTER - Water flowing below what was the industrial hub of the old Naval Air Warfare Center turns toxic before it travels off Navy property.

The chemical trichloroethylene, a commonly used degreaser that's known to cause cancer, pollutes the water up to 64 times beyond what is considered safe for drinking, according to a Navy report.

The Navy isn't sure how this chemical reaches water that's 100 to 150 feet below ground.

High chemical concentrations show up in subsurface water adjacent to a building cluster that once housed an airplane factory and flight research facility. Trichloroethylene and other solvents may have seeped into the soil and water from a factory floor or storage area, according to the Navy. Chemical levels taper as you move west of the building cluster.

The Navy doesn't know how far or how wide the contamination from this region spreads, said Tom Ames of the Navy, who's directing base cleanup.

"We know we have to do some type of action as an interim step."

Possible cleanup projects will be discussed at a June 16 public hearing at 7 p.m. at the Warminster Municipal Building, Henry and Gibson avenues.

The Navy recommends diverting water from wells in the contaminated area - dubbed "Area D" - to a treatment plant that is presently cleaning water from another part of the base.

The proposal costs between \$2.1 million and \$2.5 million, including \$675,000 to \$810,000 in start-up costs. The project's annual maintenance would cost between \$82,000 and \$100,000 annually.

Cleanup could take more than a year to implement, according to a Navy report.

Environmental improvement projects dot the former military research complex located in Warminster, Ivyland and Northampton. The 824-acre base closed last fall. There is \$30 million being used to rid the land of environmental health risks before the land is reused for business, housing and recreation.

The Navy has named four contaminated areas (A through D) - sections that have petroleum-soaked soils, trash pits, waste treatment sludge pits and chemical-laced ground water.

"Area A" is on the northern end, west of Jacksonville Road; "B" is on the eastern side, adjacent to Shenandoah Woods Navy housing; and "C" starts at an auxiliary runway's edge, parallel to Kirk Road. Area D includes the main research buildings west of Jacksonville Road and the aircraft hangar east of Jacksonville Road.

Trash pits in areas B and C have been excavated. Area A holds the most ground water contamination and is awaiting cleanup. Chemicals in A, C and D have moved off base and have affected household wells. A number of residents have been connected to public water.

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