

EPA wants to test the old Bone Yard

By Jeff Long
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LACKEY

Some of the places at the Yorktown Naval Weapons Station's Cheatham Annex sound kind of sinister

The "Bone Yard," for example. Or the "Ammonia Settling Pits" and the "TNT Catch Box Ruins."

At a public meeting on Wednesday, officials from the Environmental Protection Agency explained why Cheatham Annex should be put on the National Priorities List — making it the military equivalent of a Superfund site.

The Bone Yard is an old construction-debris site, with scrap metal and containers of waste oil, asphalt and gasoline. No one really knows where the name came from, except that old stuff got dumped there. Some cleanup has already started — all above-ground containers were removed from the Bone Yard in 1997.

The Ammonia Settling Pits and TNT Catch Box Ruins are leftovers from days of the Penniman Shell-Loading Plant, which operated dur-

ing World War I.

But the sites with the most sinister names aren't necessarily the ones that cause the most concern, the Environmental Protection Agency officials said.

After all, the area has a long history that dates back to long before people worried too much about what got dumped where.

Initial testing has shown that metals such as chromium, lead, manganese and zinc have been released into Penniman Lake, according to Kevin Wood, the National Priorities List coordinator for the EPA's Region III. Retired and active military personnel use the lake for recreational fishing.

That doesn't necessarily mean that fish caught in the lake are dangerous to eat, Wood said.

"Metals are all over the place," Wood said. "If you take a sample in your back yard, you'll have metals."

But putting the annex on the National Priorities List would trigger studies that could determine more precisely if they are safe.

"Testing could determine what levels are in the fish tissue,"

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explained Wood. "And if that does pose risk, what should be done about it."

The commander of the Naval Weapons Station, Capt. James Cosper II, asked whether there should be any immediate concern about the safety of people who use parts of Cheatham Annex for recreation.

"Should I be marking areas off, so people can't get to them?" he asked.

Bob Schirmer, from the Atlantic Division of the Naval Facilities Engineering Command, said the lakes at the annex should be tested. But he added that there's no immediate threat to the safety of visitors.

"Their exposure is going to be very minimal, if anything," he said.

Until April 4, the EPA is taking comments from the public on whether to add Cheatham Annex to the National Priorities List.

For more information, contact the agency's Community Involvement Coordinator, William Hudson, at (215) 814-5532.

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