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NEWSPAPER ARTICLE "EXPERIMENT IN REPROCESSING HERBICIDE DEEMED
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Experiment in reprocessing herbicide deemed 'failure'

By TIMOTHY KRIEHN

An experiment to reprocess Herbicide Orange at the Seabee Center in Gulfport was labeled a "failure" Thursday by an Air Force official who said a plan to burn the outlawed defoliant at sea may be proposed for a second time to the Environmental Protection Agency.

Air Force project officer Karl Merrill said experimental efforts by a private firm, Agent Chemical Inc. of Houston, Tex., were suspended when laboratory analysis showed a filtering system was virtually unable to remove a contaminant from the herbicide.

Preliminary testing also showed that an incinerator to burn the contaminant during latter stages of the reprocessing system malfunctioned.

Merrill said he will confer next week with Air Force officials in Washington to discuss the project's failure and consider possible recommendations to the EPA on the chemical's future. He said that barring further pilot projects, he favored the Air Force's earlier proposal to burn the herbicide at sea.

Agent chemical's filtering and incinerating systems were the crucial steps in the firm's proposal to reprocess Herbicide Orange into a safe defoliant for

commercial use.

The herbicide, once used in the Vietnam War to defoliate jungles, was banned in 1970 by the Department of Agriculture and later the Department of Defense amid reports the contaminant known as dioxin produced during its manufacture was linked to birth defects.

Since the ban, 800,000 gallons of the herbicide have been stored in 55-gallon drums at the Seabee Center and 1.5 million gallons have been secured on Johnston Island in the Pacific.

Agent Chemical's pilot program came after the EPA suggested to the Air Force at a hearing early last year that the military find an acceptable use for the valuable herbicide. The Air Force had proposed burning the entire Herbicide Orange supply aboard the Dutch-owned incinerator ship, Vulcanus, in the Pacific.

As the only firm to actively pursue a reprocessing method, Agent Chemical was in the position that if its system worked, it would probably be the only company permitted to purchase the military's Orange supply and then process it for resale.

But in two efforts to reprocess the chemical, the firm was dealt one set-

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Herbicide experiment said failure

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back after another, climaxing with Thursday's announcement that the project was being suspended.

Merrill said three drums of the herbicide were processed through the firm's filtering system but only a small amount of the dioxin was isolated. Laboratory tests conducted by Wright State University in Ohio showed that "the amount of (filtered) dioxin was far below what we expected," he said.

The project officer said he had received authorization from the EPA to fly three cartridges containing what dioxin was isolated — about .08 grams — to Kelly Air Force Base in Texas for storage in a military warehouse.

Expressing surprise at the failure of the filtering system, Merrill said, "I fully expected it to work." He noted that dioxin had been successfully removed from Herbicide Orange in laboratory tests.

Agent Chemical's first incinerator malfunctioned last November during the company's initial preliminary testing. A second incinerator met with technical problems while the company conducted more preliminary tests in late January but they were thought to be solved when modifications in the fur-

nace's bonding material were made.

Merrill said Thursday, however, that the incinerator failed to burn a cartridge properly containing no dioxin during a test this week, producing particles of polypropylene which were discovered outside a post-burn cleaning system.

If the cartridge had contained dioxin, the inadequate incineration "would have contaminated the whole pad," said Merrill who called the burning system "absolutely unacceptable."

Merrill said he was disappointed over the project's failure. "This material is useful and needed. It would have been better to clean it up for use instead of destroying it."

Agent Chemical representatives were also described as being disappointed with the results of the project. The firm had spent more than \$300,000 in equipment alone while its employees had spent nearly 10 months researching and working on the pilot facility.

Merrill estimated that it cost the government \$100,000 to oversee Agent Chemical's work.

The Air Force's Herbicide Orange stock was purchased at a cost of \$17 million. With the dioxin removed, the same herbicide would be worth between \$30 million and \$80 million today because of a world-wide shortage of herbicides.