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NEWSPAPER ARTICLE "PUBLIC TOLD DIOXIN BURN IS NO THREAT" NCBC GULFPORT
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Public told dioxin burn is no threat

By **GEORGE LAMMONS**

STAFF WRITER

■ The cleanup of dioxin-contaminated soil at the U.S. Naval Construction Battalion Center in Gulfport poses little threat to Gulf Coast residents and promises to be successful, according to the U.S. Air Force.

But the small group that heard the Air Force's presentation at Monday night's public hearing remained skeptical.

The Air Force Engineering and Services Center, based at Tyndall Air Force Base in Florida, is responsible for cleaning the dioxin out of the soil at a 12-acre site at the Seabee Center. The highly toxic dioxin is removed by baking the contaminated soil in a portable incinerator.

But before the wholesale dioxin removal takes place, the incinerator has to bake test batches of soil because the process is still experimental. The soil, the fumes and the water from the incinerator are then tested by an independent laboratory with the results monitored by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and the state Bureau of Pollution Control before approval is given to clean all of the soil.

The soil was contaminated by leaks of Agent Orange during and after the Vietnam War, when 17,000 barrels of the herbicide were stored at the Seabee Center. Dioxin is a by-product of Agent Orange.

Maj. Terry Stoddart, Air Force spokesman for the project, said Monday night that initial test samples were made in December without any problems. Additional tests will be made next month.

But the citizens at the meeting, who seemed to be outnumbered by representatives of the Air Force, the Navy, the Environmental Protection Agency and the Bureau of Pollution Control, wanted assurances that the dioxin did not escape the contaminated site. And they wanted promises from the Bureau of Pollution Control that the state will monitor strictly the equipment tests and the burning of the dioxin-laden soil.

However, Stoddart admitted that questions remain about how much leaked and where it went if it went off the site.

If something goes wrong during the testing, Stoddart

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said, only milligrams of the dioxin will escape because no more than 130 milligrams will be in the incinerator at any one time, and "by the time it reaches the boundary [of the site] it will probably be disbursed."

If a problem occurred, first Navy officials, then civilian civil defense officials would be notified before local residents are warned.

But he said that based on the Air Force's environmental impact study of the area, the only life that could have a problem is a form of wild parsley, which is not growing the the 12-acre site.

"We don't believe that would cause any public health effects at all" to humans, he said.

Stoddart said inspection of the surrounding area didn't reveal any contamination off the 12-acre site.

Robert Brownlee, who was responsible for the Agent Orange while it was stored at the Seabee Center, said the herbicide didn't cause a single problem the entire time it was stored at the Seabee Center.

"I just can't understand why they're spending \$5 million to do what they're doing," he said.

It is only in recent years that scientists have realized



TIM ISBELL/SUN HERALD PHOTOGRAPHER

State Sen. Bob Usey of Gulfport poses a question.

dioxin is toxic.

Stoddart said that the Air Force is using the experimental, portable incinerator because the 9,000 to 11,000 tons of contaminated soil can be cleaned for about \$500 a ton with the portable incinerator. If it is excavated and sent to a permanent incinerator, the cost goes to \$3,000 to \$3,800 a ton.

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