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NEWSPAPER ARTICLE "TOXIC CHEMICAL MAY EXIST NEAR SEABEE BASE" NCBC
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may exist near Seabee base

Risk of illness minimal, environment expert says

By GREG LACOUR
THE SUN HERALD

■ GULFPOR — Soil in and around the Naval Construction Battalion Center may contain toxic chemical compounds left over from the days when Agent Orange, a toxic herbicide used in war, was stored there.

State environmental officials learned this Monday, when the Seabee base confirmed the results of soil tests at the base. The tests revealed soil that may contain a concentration of dioxins higher than federal

SEABEE BASE

The Air Force stored Agent Orange at these spots until 1977. Contaminated soil from the site was incinerated in 1987 and 1988.



THE SUN HERALD

hazardous

state standards recommend.

Dioxin is an umbrella name for a group of chemical compounds produced during manufacturing. About one-fifth are highly toxic.

State officials aren't sure if the soil near the Seabee base is dangerous because they don't know if the dioxins found during sampling are toxic, or if toxic dioxins exist in concentrations strong enough to be a hazard. The test results are based on what toxicity levels would be if all dioxins in the soil turned out to be the most toxic dioxin, TCDD.

Even if that happens, people would have to come into close contact with the soil every day to significantly increase their risk of the cancer or physical disorders toxic dioxins can cause, said Jerry Banks, acting chief of the hazardous waste division of the state Department of Environmental Quality's Office of Pollution Control.

Said Banks: "I would think there's minimal risk to anyone."

More tests planned

The base took the samples as part of a basewide testing program in December, said Gordon Crane, environmental program manager for the Seabees.

Banks said the area was last tested in 1986, and the Environmental Protection Agency has since stiffened federal standards for dioxin levels. Crane said the Seabees did not test for dioxins after the standards changed because they thought the Air Force's incineration of contaminated soil had brought the soil at the base to acceptable levels.

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THE PERILS OF DIOXIN

- ▶ **Dioxin** is a catchall term for a class of 75 organic compounds produced as byproducts during the manufacturing of chemicals. Thirteen of those compounds are considered highly toxic and can, in high enough concentrations, cause cancer, skin lesions, central nervous system and liver damage and disorders in the immune and reproductive systems.
- ▶ **Scientists don't know** exactly how damaging the toxic dioxins are to people. But the federal Environmental Protection Agency draws the line of safety for dioxins in soil, where they usually are found, at 4.7 parts dioxin per trillion parts soil. That means people sufficiently exposed to dioxins in that concentration for 70 years have at least a one-in-a-million chance of contracting cancer from the exposure.
- ▶ **Agent Orange**, used as a defoliant during the Vietnam War and banned in 1971, contains the most toxic dioxin, 2,3,7,8-TCDD, which also is the most toxic known synthetic substance. Paper and pulp mills also produce large amounts of dioxin when they use chlorine to bleach paper, although the paper industry has cut down on the dioxins it produces.

Dioxin

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"There was no reason to suspect (dioxins) would have been there," Crane said. "When the Air Force burned the stuff, they put it in the incinerator and said, 'Done deal.'"

DEQ and the Seabee base plan to run more tests within the next few weeks and, if necessary, take the contaminated soil to a toxic waste landfill, Banks said.

Banks said he suspects that the contaminated soil contains the residue of Agent Orange, which was stored in barrels at the Seabee base from the 1960s until 1977, when it was incinerated at sea. But some of the barrels leaked during handling. The contaminated soil was burned in 1987 and 1988.

Base officials may have missed some spots or failed to clean out drainage ditches after the contaminated soil was burned, Banks said.

"There's a very good possibility that we had some contaminated sediment transported (by rainwater) to those ditches," he said. "Right now, we don't have any explanation for it."

All nine test sites were just inside

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risk to anyone.*

**Jerry Banks,
State Department
of Environmental
Quality**

base property. Four had high d levels. The highest level was drainage ditch at the base's north border. The dioxin level at one was more than 30 times the accepted level — although two other saw on either side of that spot were below it.

"I'll be honest with you, we know what that means," Banks

The EPA's accepted dioxin for the most toxic dioxin is 4.7 dioxin per trillion parts soil. The from the drainage ditch at the northern border contained 150 d per trillion. A sample from a can the west side contained 74 parts trillion, and two samples taken the front gate contained 7.8 and parts per trillion.