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NEWSPAPER ARTICLE "SEABEE CENTER RESTARTS CLEANUP OF AGENT ORANGE"
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Seabee Center restarts cleanup of Agent Orange

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GULFPORT - Work to clean up the poisonous remains of Agent Orange has begun again around Gulfport's Naval Construction Battalion Center after operations were shut down for several months because of Hurricane Katrina.

Gordon Crane, the center's environmental manager, said the project had been shut down for four months and that Katrina's surge did make contact with contaminated areas north of 28th Street, the northern border of the center.

"Out in the swampy area, we did have some piles of excavated soil. There was some water there," he said. "Something could have moved."

He said that both the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and the Navy took samples to see if pollution had spread as a result of Katrina. They expect results back within the next two weeks.

The water infiltrated "into areas that had the highest level of contamination," but that movement of the dangerous soil should have been contained by sediment traps placed around the piles.

Crane said the contaminated area north of the base would be cleaned up by the end of February or March. No housing or playgrounds will be allowed to be built on it.

The Mississippi Department of Environmental Quality's Jerry Banks, who heads the state's part in depolluting the center, said 80 percent of the effort was completed before Katrina came ashore.

"We probably would have already been done with the cleanup by now if it weren't for the hurricane," he said.

Between 1968 and 1976, 850,000 gallons of Agent Orange, the military code name for one of a group of powerful herbicides, was stored in more than 15,000 drums at the Seabee Center.

One of the chemical byproducts in Agent Orange, 2,3,7,8-tetrachlorodibenzo-para-dioxin, has been linked to several diseases and cancer by federal health agencies and the military.

When it leaked out of the drums, Crane said, it soaked into the soil and washed out of the base into 15 acres north of 28th Street. That area is part of the Turkey Creek watershed.

The first two phases of the cleanup occurred in the 1970s and 1980s, Banks said. Navy personnel and the EPA cleaned up and contained the contaminants on the base, but missed the contaminated area to the north that totalled around 15 acres.

The final phase requires that all of the tainted soil be moved back onto the base, mixed into concrete and poured into a containment area.

So far, the soil and concrete mixture is 4.5 feet thick and covers roughly 13 acres.

When all of the soil has been set in the concrete, a 12-inch-thick layer of concrete is poured on top of it as a cap.

Banks said that area would then be used to store heavy equipment.

"That's pretty thick concrete," he said. "We don't want water or anything getting to it after we seal it."

He said he was not concerned that the storm had dispersed dioxin farther off the base, but that the EPA had taken samples to be sure.

"There was some erosion of soil from the hurricane surge, but we do not expect to see anything from the tests," he said.

Marie Hansen, who lives near the site north of the base, said that flood surge maps showed Katrina's flood made it to the contaminated mounds. She said she believes that current levels and movement of the substance were not the real problems.

"Our concern lays with past exposure," she said. "The levels today are a lot lower than they were in the past. So many people in the neighborhood have cancer now, and they are only in their 30s and 40s."