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Navy dumps endanger waters

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Navy investigations of hazardous waste contamination at Pensacola's Naval Air Station and Whiting Field near Milton have identified dozens of sites where the military dumped toxic wastes onto the ground and into Pensacola Bay.

A recent Navy study indicates that over a period of 35 years, Navy wastes were dumped carelessly, though not illegally, into pits, ponds and open dumps. Those wastes contained pesticides, toxic industrial solvents, battery acids, jet fuel, radioactive radium, and metal-plating wastes that include cyanide and mercury.

So far, the Navy has found no evidence that

contaminants have spread far enough to pollute drinking water wells on or off the Naval Air Station.

But a preliminary study conducted by Navy engineers in 1982 and 1983 warned that poisonous chemicals seeping into underground water formations could flow into coastal marshes and estuaries. The shellfishing areas of Pensacola Bay and Bayou Grande also could be affected, the report said.

Some damage probably already has occurred.

A report by the Navy's consultant said that between 1939 and 1973, liquid wastes from the Naval Air Rework Facility were dumped in Pensacola Bay via storm sewers.

The wastes included paints, thinners, solvents, and metal plating chemicals including chromium, cadmium,

lead and cyanide. Since 1973, NARF has disposed those wastes into a waste water treatment pond. That site too is now a suspected source of groundwater contamination.

The Navy's study is part of a nationwide effort by the Defense Department to assess the consequences of past negligence in the disposal of toxic materials.

"I think the whole cleanup is painfully slow," said John Ruddell, chief of the Bureau of Operations for the Florida Department of Environmental Regulation.

Ruddell adds, however, that the military's cleanup program is probably no slower than the Superfund program initiated by the Environmental Protection Agency to clean up non-military waste sites.

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The Navy began to identify its hazardous waste sites in Pensacola in 1982. The studies have been complicated by the fact that no records exist concerning some past waste disposal activities.

The initial Navy study identified 29 potentially-contaminated sites. After military engineers ruled out problems at some sites, the Navy hired a consultant, Ceraghy & Miller Inc., to evaluate the extent of contamination at 18 sites.

That confirmation phase of the project is continuing. Phase 3 of the study will be to clean up or control the contamination sites.

The Phase 2 report identified groundwater and soil contamination at a variety of locations at NAS. But the consultant also concluded that no site poses an immediate threat to human health or the environment.

The study's conclusions and recommendations have been challenged, however, by State environmental officials who reviewed the study in recent weeks.

Those officials asked the Navy for additional sampling to justify the consultant's recommendation that no further studies be conducted at

nine sites.

Memos written by two specialists with the Florida Department of Environmental Regulation characterize the Navy's effort to define its waste problem as inadequate. One DER official said the Navy's sampling methods used at NAS appear to "only scratch the surface."

The objections of the state officials are consistent with a pattern found nationally by a team of reporters from the Sacramento Bee in California. One month ago, after a

lengthy study of waste disposal at many military installations, the newspaper reported:

"As in the Air Force and the much of the early work in the Navy program was incomplete or haphazard and must be done again, this time more thoroughly."

Ed Pike, environmental engineer at NAS, defended the consultant's work as adequate. He said more detailed studies planned for some sites should begin early next year.

Studies similar to the one at NAS are ongoing at Eglin Air Force Base, while the survey is just beginning at the Navy's Whiting Field.

An Air Force consultant looked at

four landfills at Eglin's main base, a landfill and a munitions training range at Hurlburt Field, and one landfill on Santa Rosa Island. According to a report filed with the DER this week, the Air Force consultant found some contamination and has called for additional study at four landfills.

At Whiting, the Navy is scheduled to assess possible contamination at 11 sites, said George Hoffman, enforcement chief for the DER in Pensacola.

The sites include abandoned landfills and areas where fuel was spilled years ago.

Hoffman said the state cited Whiting Field this summer after an inspection found a battery shop was discharging liquid wastes into the ground.

Hoffman said the Navy has stopped the hazardous discharge and hired a contractor to assess the contamination.

Officials in the Naval Facilities Engineering Command in Charleston, S.C., could not be reached Friday for an estimate of how much money has been spent on the studies at Pensacola NAS and Whiting Field.

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