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Military protected, poisoned Florida

Some toxic dumps may never be found — or cleaned up

By John J. Glisch

OF THE SENTINEL STAFF

When Paula and Ken House sank a well for their new home near the quiet country town of Bushnell in Sumter County, they thought they would strike a vein of cool Florida water.

What they got was poison.

Benzene, a byproduct of gasoline known to cause cancer and chromosome damage, contaminated the Houses' well at levels 1,100 times above federal safety limits for drinking water.

The pollution came from an abandoned military base next door, where soil and ground water had been saturated with aviation fuel.

"I just wanted to sit down and cry," said Paula House, an elementary school teacher. "Who would have thought that in the middle of this farming com-

munity there would be something so dangerous?"

In fact, the Pentagon has dumped enormous amounts of toxic waste into the lakes, rivers, swamps and woods of Florida, from the lush bayous of Pensacola to the tropical mecca of Key West.

The dumping, which began in World War II and officially ended in the early 1980s, was so bad that federal and state experts are doubtful that all the pollution — especially in the ground water — can be cleaned up.

"It's an enormous problem," said Eric Nuzie, who oversees Florida's military bases for the state Department of Environmental Regulation. "The more you get into it, the more complex it gets."

The military did not keep records of where or what it dumped. No one knows for sure how much oil, jet fuel, chemicals, pesticides and heavy metals have

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Poisoning Florida

THE MILITARY DUMPS

This report continues a periodic series in which The Orlando Sentinel examines ground and water contamination in Florida. Today, in the 1st of 3 parts, the military's dumping and spilling has left a legacy of poison.



GEORGE SKENE/SENTINEL

Paula and Ken House, with son, shown near testing well.

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Poisoning Florida: The military dun

Military probably poisoned its own along with public

POISON from A-1

aked into the ground water on and off Florida bases.

That means the big question — how many people might have been poisoned by tainted water during almost half a century — cannot be answered.

"We'll never know what happened," Nuzie said. "A lot of this stuff might have leached into the water and be gone by now. There's no way to track that."

Beyond that, some of the dumps continue to leak and threaten drinking water supplies.

The Pentagon says it is trying to correct its wrongs. So far it has identified 529 suspected toxic sites in the state, most of them on bases. It has set a goal of having 100 sites cleaned up by the year 2000 — a goal no one realistically expects to be met.

Thomas Baca, the Pentagon's deputy assistant secretary of defense for the environment, said the military has begun to attack the problem with an armada of troops, machines and technology.

This year, Baca said, the military will spend \$1.18 billion on cleanups all over the state. He said everyone from the Joint Chiefs of Staff to base commanders have been ordered to make the cleanup a priority.

"It's a philosophy that permeates every service," he said. "We try to coordinate the effort and we hold monthly meetings" with senior Army, Navy and Air Force leaders to discuss how the cleanup is going.

But Baca's optimism is based on a program that for more than a decade has essentially been stalled. Only about half a dozen sites have been cleaned in Florida, and most bases still don't have a schedule for cleaning the other dumps.

Last year, the Pentagon inspector general's office found that inefficiencies and red tape in the military's cleanup plan — which involves 17,500 dumps across the nation — threaten to sink the project.

The report said the Army, Air Force and Navy have not coordinated the plan or given it direction. There is a lack of money, communication and ability to decide what to do next.

The report also warned that the program's technical complexity and heavy reliance on outside contractors make it ripe for fraud, waste and mismanagement.

Drilling a well to take samples of polluted ground water can cost \$200,000. A single soil sample test runs \$500 to \$5,000, depending on how many contaminants are suspected. Those costs, combined with lengthy procedures set out by state and federal laws, mean that a typical toxic waste site takes eight to 10 years to clean.

As a result, military and civilian experts say it could take 20 years and \$500 million to complete military cleanups in Florida alone. That would make it one of the largest environmental salvage jobs in state history. The Pentagon says the national cleanup will cost at least \$24.5 billion. That's more than it cost to land men on the moon in NASA's Apollo program.

A study of Defense Department and state records, along with documents obtained by The Orlando Sentinel through the federal Freedom of Information Act, show how the military has polluted Florida's land and water.

Contaminated sites

With 529 suspected sites, Florida ranks ninth among states with the most military dumps. Florida has more than any state in the Southeast except Alabama.

Four bases — Pensacola Naval Air Station, Jacksonville Naval Air Station, Cecil Field Naval Air Station near Jacksonville and Homestead Air Force Base outside Miami — are on the federal Superfund cleanup list, a designation meaning that after inspections and tests, the sites have national priority for cleanup.

Another Superfund site is the Hipps Road neighborhood in Jacksonville, where hundreds of residents say they were poisoned by a nearby Navy dump that contaminated their well water.

More Florida bases could be added to the Superfund list next year, when a base-by-base review is completed. But it doesn't end there.

The Pentagon also is checking 389 abandoned military sites statewide for toxic waste. Among them is

the World War II Army airfield next to the Houses' home and the South Patrick Shores neighborhood near Patrick & Force Base in Brevard County. Federal and state experts began studying South Patrick Shores last year after residents reported a high rate of Hodgkin's disease, a rare form of cancer.

Although Florida Department of Environmental Regulation officials believe the houses were built on an old dump, tests recently showed no pollutants in the soil or water under the neighborhood.

In all, 57 of the state's old military sites are in Brevard, Lake, Orange, Osceola, Seminole and Volusia counties. Of the 48 inspected to date, 43 were found to be clean and do not require further study. Five are known to have hazardous or toxic materials.

They include the former McCoy Air Force Base in Orlando, Leesburg Army Airfield and the Sanford Naval Air Station. All were used to train pilots during World War II. The Leesburg and Sanford bases were closed in the late 1940s. McCoy was shut in 1975. All are now busy hubs for civilian aircraft.

The ground water under a fire-training area at McCoy — part of which is now Orlando International Airport — is saturated with cancer-causing heavy metals and vinyl chloride. The area is in a remote, seldom-visited field.

At Sanford, 11 empty concrete tanks that could each hold 50,000 gallons of fuel were found buried. At Leesburg, four empty concrete tanks that could each hold 25,000 gallons of fuel were found underground.

The Army Corps of Engineers, which is checking the sites, does not know if the tanks are cracked or how much fuel may have leaked into ground water, officials say.

Amounts of waste

Based on Pentagon studies and estimates, total military dumping in Florida would amount to tens of millions of gallons of toxic waste.

If all the waste were put on a giant ship and spilled off the Florida coast, it would cover the state's 1,197 miles of beaches with a poisonous sludge several inches or more thick.

The waste has come in many forms. The Navy and Air Force have spilled untold millions of gallons of jet fuel. At just one site — MacDill Air Force Base in Tampa — 3.7 million gallons of ground water is tainted with fuel.

At Key West Naval Air Station, a site once used to mix the cancer-causing pesticide DDT is believed

to be leaking into coastal waters that are teeming with fish and that are home to some of North America's endangered coral reefs.

A square-mile section of Eglin Air Force Base in the Panhandle might be declared a "dead zone" because it was sprayed with the defoliant Agent Orange during the Vietnam War. Experts don't know how to clean it up.

At a Navy research center in nearby Panama City, 4 tons of lead paint were shoveled into an oozing pit. Other pollutants, including mercury and solvents, likely seeped into St. Andrew's Bay and the Gulf of Mexico.

All told, everything from radioactive wastes to napalm bombs were routinely placed in back-lot dumps across the state where an unknown amount leaked into the ground water.

Water contamination

The military may have poisoned its own men, women and children — as well as the public — through its dumping.

In 1986, for example, officials at Whiting Field Naval Air Station near Pensacola found that two wells that supplied drinking water on base were contaminated with levels of benzene 33 times above safety limits.

About 3,900 base personnel drank tap water from the wells. Navy officials say there is "no way" to know how many people were exposed to the bad water over the years or what health problems might have resulted.

There also is no way to know whether leaking pesticide pits and fuel spills at Homestead Air Force Base near Miami ever contaminated the Biscayne Aquifer, which runs under the installation. The aquifer is a source of drinking water for more than 16,000 people living within three miles of the base.

A great deal of toxic waste also was dumped into major bodies of fresh water and salt water around Florida because many bases are next to rivers, the Gulf of Mexico and the Atlantic Ocean.

As a result, people who fished or swam in the waters near the installations might have been exposed to the poisons.

In Pensacola, the Navy spent decades dumping radium — a low-level radioactive material used to illuminate instruments in aircraft cockpits — into sewers and ditches that flowed into Pensacola Bay and Bayou Grande, both popular fishing grounds. Millions of gallons of heavy metals were dumped the same way.





The Navy also dumped lead, mercury and oil into the St. Johns River. A 1985 study by Jacksonville University showed that 60 percent of the spotted sea trout and flounder caught near Jacksonville Naval Air Station had large open sores caused by the waste.

A 1981 study in 1982 showed that fish caught near the base had levels of "petroleum, heavy metals and just about everything else you could image" in them, said David Boehnke, the JU professor who did the survey.

The Navy even dumped cyanide and acids from a photo lab into Lake Baldwin at Orlando Naval Training Center from the 1950s to 1978. The lake was used for fishing, boating and swimming by the military and the public during that time, though the Navy tested the lake in 1989 and found no sign of contamination.

How could the military have been allowed to run roughshod over Florida's environment?

Easy. The policy was anything goes.

During the years of wholesale dumping, no laws covered the disposal of hazardous waste. The material was simply carted off in trucks and front-end loaders, thrown away and forgotten.

"They did it under accepted practices of the time," said Art Linton, an official with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency in Atlanta who tracks the military's cleanup in Florida. "Everybody did it."

The dumping also is a legacy of World War II, when nearly 200 military installations were built in Florida to train soldiers, sailors and airmen to fight Nazi Germany and Japan. The bases, many built in the boondocks, brought jobs and industry to Florida and helped transform the peninsula into a boom state in the postwar years.

The dumps were a hidden and dangerous byproduct, however, especially when thirsty cities and subdivisions began creeping closer.

"We were not looking at the environmental consequences of our actions," said Lt. Col. Don Bradford, chief of cleanup operations at Homestead Air Force Base. "We'd talk to industry and they'd say, 'Just put it in a 55-gallon drum and put it in a landfill.'"

Finding the dumps has been immensely difficult. Because no records were kept, officials have had to rely on the memory of civilian workers to point out toxic sites.

That remains the case today as the search for dumps goes on.

"It was very much like a detective job. It was very tedious," said Arturo McDonald, environmental chief at the Navy's Coastal Systems Center in Panama City. "Most of it was talking to old-timers, many of them retired.

"Some were afraid to talk. They didn't want to implicate themselves," he said.

Paula and Ken House wish somebody had talked to them about the hidden leaks of aviation fuel beneath their 5 acres of pine and oak.

After months of investigation, the Pentagon admitted its responsibility and drilled the couple a new, deeper well with a special filter to cleanse their tap water.

But the contamination remains underground. There are no plans to pump it out. That angers Paula House, a native Floridian who fears her state is being poisoned to death.

"The military has a responsibility to clean up the land and the water," she said. "They're accountable. We're all accountable."

