

Report: West Basin cleanup not needed

Environmentalists demand action at Long Beach Harbor

By Dori Meinert
COPLEY NEWS SERVICE

WASHINGTON — The environmental cleanup of the Long Beach Naval Station and Shipyard complex — which is scheduled to close next year — was expected to be faster and cheaper than at many other surplus military bases.

But environmentalists now are strongly opposed to a proposal that would allow the Navy to avoid any cleanup of the West Basin of Long Beach Harbor, the facility's most polluted site.

A protracted fight could delay a planned port expansion project and the Alameda Corridor project that would link the ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach with national rail and highway systems.

The West Basin is "probably the most polluted site in the Pacific," said Don May, an environmentalist who sits on the local Environmental Restoration Advisory Board that meets monthly to review Navy proposals for cleaning up contaminants at the Long Beach site.

Until recently, the board's meetings have been fairly harmonious.

Need for cleanup denied

But the atmosphere heated up after the Navy's contractor, Bechtel National Inc., a subsidiary of Bechtel Corp., told the board that data showed no need for cleanup of the contaminated sediment at the bottom of the harbor, May said.

There is no controversy over what contaminants are in the harbor.

From the early 1940s to the mid-1970s, drainage from the Navy's various industrial areas and cleaning and process tanks were discharged to the West Basin, where they settled into the bottom mud, according to Navy documents given to the advisory board. The contaminants include chemicals, sol-

vents, PCBs, acids, oil and grease.

"If it's no worse than other areas of the harbor, which are also contaminated, does the Navy have a responsibility to clean it up? The answer is yes," said May, who is president of California Earth Corps, which is primarily known for marsh restoration.

May said the Navy instead should be asking: "What's the right way to clean it up?"

Braden Phillips, who focuses on Navy reuse issues for the city of Long Beach, downplayed the controversy.

"From my personal perspective, I'm not skeptical about the (Bechtel) results . . . What was found is that it's not as contaminated as they (the environmentalists) had thought," Phillips said.

He said the Bechtel study concluded the contaminated sediment wasn't hazardous to human health.

The Bechtel report said chemicals in California halibut and white croaker from the West Basin "may occur at concentrations that could adversely affect individuals who con-

CLEANUP/A4

Budget cuts will delay turning over of bases

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WASHINGTON — The federal government's budget problems undoubtedly will slow the process of cleaning up former military bases and turning them over to local governments for private development.

Although Congress gave priority this fiscal year to funding environmental cleanup programs at military bases scheduled for closure, it cut \$200 million from the Clinton administration's request for

cleanup programs at bases that are to remain open.

Those cuts affect states' ability to monitor and enforce environmental regulations at both closing and active military bases, said David Wang, a base closure specialist for the California Environmental Protection Agency, which monitors and enforces environmental regulations at bases in California.

With 140 bases in the state, including 39 scheduled to be closed or realigned, "we are

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sume these fish." But the report said cancer and non-cancer risks associated with consumption of fish from the West Basin "do not appear to be appreciably different" from the risks associated with eating fish from the other tested locations.

Advisory board members will submit their formal comments on the Navy contractor's recommendation at their April 16 meeting. The state Department of Toxic Substances Control is to comment by May 1, a spokesman said.

'A whitewash'

David Sundstrom, who represents residents of Long Beach's West End community on the advisory board, called the Bechtel report "a whitewash" and criticized the Navy's approach as "dishonest, almost arrogant."

But Robert Kanter, manager of environmental planning for the Port of Long Beach, said he was "impressed" by the science used by Bechtel. If regulatory agencies require cleanup of the harbor, Kanter said, the port would try to do "anything reasonable" to keep to its schedule for improvements. Under federal law, the property can't be transferred to local authorities until the contaminants are cleaned up.

Nationwide, the cleanup of pollutants left behind by the military could cost taxpayers \$50 billion when it's done. That includes 81 facilities where the estimated cleanup bill will be more than \$100 million each. California has more military facilities — and more contaminated sites — than any other state.

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In Long Beach and elsewhere, the potentially harmful wastes were dumped on land and at sea long before laws and regulations were in place to guard public health and safety.

While many of the contaminants are known to cause cancer and birth defects, the Long Beach facility isn't near any residential sites or wildlife corridors. The advisory board meetings so far have attracted little attention.

At the Long Beach naval complex, 13 sites have been identified as potentially contaminated. Environmental studies are ongoing, and until they're finished it's difficult to estimate how long or how costly the cleanup will be.

Although officials once predicted the cleanup would take decades, now they say most of the naval station property will be available for reuse by the end of this year through a lease agreement while the Navy's cleanup continues.

The federal base closing commission voted in 1991 to close the

naval station, but it wasn't formally shut down until 1994. At that time, some operations were transferred over to support the shipyard. The shipyard was added to the base closing list in 1995, and is expected to cease operations in September 1997.

Several options available

The harbor's West Basin, which covers about 700 acres under water, is a "thorny problem," May said. But he said the pollutants are somewhat contained, leaving several cleanup options available.

The contaminated bottom mud could be dredged and used as fill. It could be sent to a landfill. Or it could be treated with "engineered bugs," bacteria that could digest the toxins, May said.

The Navy has speeded up the study of the harbor site in an attempt to make it available more quickly for reuse, said Kim Kessler of the Navy's base closure office in San Diego.

The naval station property is primarily to be used for port expansion. Several private shipyards have expressed interest in using the naval shipyard. A community-drafted reuse plan for the shipyard property is expected to be made public in May.

Lenny Siegel, who served on the advisory board at the former Moffett Field Naval Air Station and now trains other community officials in the cleanup process, has cautioned against being too eager to put former military facilities to reuse.

very concerned" about staffing, Wang said.

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For their oversight work, states are paid a percentage of the amount allocated to the military for cleanup. This year, however, Congress capped the states' portion at \$10 million, about half the \$21 million requested by President Clinton. California alone received \$10 million annually in recent years, Wang said.

The cap applies only to bases staying open. But such a drastic cut could require the layoff of up to half of the 100 state workers now overseeing the military's environmental restoration efforts, slowing cleanup efforts at all bases, Wang said.

Projects may have to wait

Such work may be delayed this year at McClellan Air Force Base, one of the military's most expensive cleanup projects, and other facilities added late to the 1995 closing list because Congress refused to allow the Pentagon to dip into an account for active bases.

The Long Beach Naval Shipyard, which was on the 1995 list from the beginning of the process, won't be affected, a Navy spokesman said.

Ongoing congressional budget fights suggest stiff competition for future funding for cleaning up contaminated military sites.

And as more thorough studies are completed at specific sites, to-

tal cost estimates for cleanup are spiraling upward.

The Department of Defense estimated it would cost almost \$4 billion to clean up contaminants at 123 bases selected for closure in the 1988, 1991 and 1993 rounds of base closings.

But a General Accounting Office study last year said the cost had been greatly underestimated. Just 84 closing bases in April 1994 estimated the cost at \$5.4 billion, the GAO said.

The total estimated cleanup cost for the Long Beach Naval Station and Shipyard is \$226 million, compared with \$857 million for McClellan Air Force Base in Sacramento, which is expected to be the third most expensive cleanup project in the country.

Generally supportive

Congress, which is eager to turn former military bases into job-producing enterprises, generally has been supportive of funding for cleaning up the military facilities.

"But because of the budget cuts, there is the perception that the government isn't going to clean up its mess," said Lenny Siegel, who researches military pollution and cleanup issues for the San Francisco Urban Institute, affiliated with San Francisco State University.

"The perception is that there isn't enough money, maybe we shouldn't pursue as much cleanup. That's one of the biggest dangers of the budget cuts."