

Site pollution not a major problem at training center

But Navy still has lot to do before turning property over to city

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Staff Writer

By its very nature as a citadel for military instruction, the nearly 75-year-old Naval Training Center does not score high in the area of environmental pollution, base officials say.

Unlike military installations where jet fuel, nuclear material or other toxic substances are routinely used, the training center's share of hazardous-waste problems are minimal, officials supervising its toxic cleanup say.

But that does not mean the Point Loma facility is pollution-free.

As the city of San Diego prepares to take control of about 400 acres of the training center next year, 13 major hazardous sites and 92 smaller areas of environmental concern have been identified.

Most of the major sites involve leaking underground tanks — ranging from 100 to 2,000 gallons of capacity — that contained gasoline or other petroleum-based products. Some of those sites are in the process of being cleaned up.

Under federal law, the Navy must clean up pollution if it is responsible for the problem, said Philip Dyck, the base realignment and closure environmental coordinator at the training center.

A cleanup team of the Navy and the state and federal environmental protection agencies is scheduling waste removal and other remedies.

It has two goals: to protect the environment by eliminating contamination and to turn over training center property to the city in a timely manner.

Before embarking on a cleanup project, the Navy performs extensive tests to assess the nature and size of the pollution problem. Sometimes action is taken, as when leaking tanks are excavated and contaminated soil is treated or

removed.

But in some cases, the Navy chooses to cap the pollution, covering it with a layer of soil and monitoring for signs of trouble.

That approach may be followed to address pollution in the training center's landfill, which site officials say is the most complex on the base.

The site, also known as the old Marine Corps Recruit Disposal Area, was active from the 1940s to 1971. The Navy estimates that between 1.3 to 2 million cubic feet of waste, including organic solvents and metals, were disposed there.

Located between Lindbergh Field and the training center's boat channel, it was the final resting place for a wide array of products.

Navy studies say gasoline, paints, thinners, thousands of gallons of hazardous wastes and electrical transformers were dumped into three trenches in a 32-acre area.

Last year, the Navy installed 24 monitoring wells in and around the site. So far, there has been no evidence of a plume of pollution, nor proof that the discarded wastes are migrating toward the boat channel, said Content Arnold, an environmental engineer for the Navy.

She said an analysis will be made of the cost of covering the landfill with a soil cap. After the analysis, a report will be released for public review before base Capt. Stephen Drake makes a final decision about how the polluted site should be addressed.

Laura Hunter, director of the Clean Bay campaign for the Environmental Health Coalition, believes a soil cap is not the answer. She said the site is so close to the boat channel that it is a clear threat to water quality.

"The landfill should be excavated and removed," Hunter said. "You can't pretend it doesn't exist."

Z Kripke, a retired physician, is a member of the training center's Restoration Advisory Board. The

See Cleanup on Page B-2

Cleanup

Capping landfill may be a contentious point

Continued from B-1

board makes recommendations to the cleanup team and disseminates information about environmental cleanup to the community.

Kripke prefers to call the landfill a "chemical hazardous waste dump" and is concerned because borings have not been made to determine its content or the extent of ground-water contamination.

"We've put men on the moon," said Kripke. "Why can't we find out what's in those trenches?"

Dyck said test results from the landfill have not warranted borings. Low-level emissions of methane gas have been detected, he said, but

they are far below harmful levels. Monitoring wells at the boat channel have shown no signs of contamination, he added.

Evidence of underground gasoline or petroleum-based contamination has been found at six locations, including the Navy Exchange Gas Station at Nimitz Boulevard and Rosecrans Street. Those sites are either being studied or cleaned up.

Testing is being conducted on other base sites. Pesticides were allegedly dumped at a spot next to the golf course maintenance building. Dry-cleaning solvents leaked from tanks beneath the former base dry-cleaning facility. The site of an incinerator, used to burn classified documents from the 1940s to the 1960s, is being investigated.

Another complex pollution site is the boat channel. Extensive testing has been conducted on three portions of the waterway, which ranges from 10 to 30 feet in depth.

Samples have been taken from the fine, silty sediment in the channel to determine contamination levels. Test results should be available in early summer.

"We'll compare sediment in the boat channel to the rest of the sediment in San Diego Bay," said Thomas L. Macciarella Jr., a Navy environmental engineer.

Under Department of Defense policy, government property being transferred to civilian use must meet environmental standards set by the federal and state environmental protection agencies.

The boat channel is influenced by pollutants from San Diego Bay and storm water runoff from Point Loma, Lindbergh Field and nearby industrial businesses, Macciarella said.

He said that means that pollution, if found, may not have come

from the training center. Extensive testing might be required to determine the pollution source.

While not considered official pollution sites, many of the nearly 300 buildings on the property contain asbestos.

The City Council is expected to send a land-use plan this summer to the secretary of defense outlining how it plans to use training center property. The city and the Navy will then prepare a joint environmental report based on features of the reuse plan.

When the environmental report is completed, the public will be given 30 days to review it.

If the secretary of the Navy approves the city's reuse plan for the training center, the land may be transferred to the city. City officials believe they may have possession of the property by late next year.