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Navy Study Reveals Toxic Waste Deposits At NOS

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Possibly hazardous deposits of mercury and silver have been found in two areas that access Mattawoman Creek in Indian Head, according to information released last week by the Naval Ordnance Station.

At a press conference held last Wednesday, experts employed by the U.S. Navy assured visitors that no toxic level of either chemical had made it into the creek. Also, they

contended no danger existed for drinking water in any nearby wells.

Among those attending the meeting were Indian Head Mayor Warren Bowie, Town Manager David Spinney, Del. Samuel A. "Buddy" Linton, county sanitation chief Susan Webber and Reese Meisinger from Rep. Roy Dyson's office.

For 90 minutes, the audience listened to presentations from Larry Sparks, an environmental engineer with the Navy, and Henry Harris, a

private hydrogeologist.

The two explained that the chemical deposits were discovered as part of a nationwide campaign that investigated all naval installations for possible toxic content. Mandated by federal "superfund" legislation, the program consisted of two studies monitored by the Environmental Protection Agency.

The initial assessment study researched records and interviewed Navy old-timers to find potentially dangerous dumping grounds. That

study revealed 500 suspect areas across the country.

The next step, or confirmation study, sought to verify toxic content at these suspect areas. That study, released in late November, confirmed three sites at NOS in Indian Head.

The sites identified were located on or near the base landfill, the nitroglycerine plant and the x-ray building.

Landscaping waste, including paint and varnish residue, was

found at the landfill. They posed no immediate threat to animal or human life, the study said, but continued monitoring was recommended.

At a site near the x-ray building, the two-year study confirmed the presence of several hundred pounds of silver. Though confined mostly to drainage ditches, the silver could actually be seen in the water after heavy rains, according to Harris.

The hydrogeologist explained that
See NOS, Page A-12

NOS

Continued from Page A-1

the current level of silver on the site technically does pose a threat to aquatic life. However, Harris noted, that measurement did not drain solid silver deposits, which do not affect the toxicity level. If the samples had been strained, he said, the toxicity probably would have been low enough to be acceptable.

For that reason, the confirmation study did not see a need to remove the silver sediment. Instead, it only recommended the x-ray site be monitored regularly for five years.

The mercury content caused more concern, however. Released over a 23-year period, the chemical sediment has reached a level that exceeds toxicity for aquatic life and for human drinking water. Nearly four gallons, or 488 pounds, of mercury are spread across a one-square-mile area, the study found, so there may even be some problem with inhaling the chemical.

For those reasons, the study recommended that access to the nitroglycerine plant be restricted and warning signs posted. Also, the study said the mercury content should be removed from the area. Monitoring will then continue for five years after the disposal.

Sparks said removal of the mercury would probably be complete by 1986.

Until then, however, Sparks and Harris stressed that there is no real cause for alarm. The NOS has its own water-monitoring facilities, they said, and it would be the first to

know of any contamination threat. Also, the Navy has discontinued operations that generated the mercury and silver build-up in the first place.

For added insurance, a containment system was installed at NOS three years ago to control and monitor drainage into the Mattawoman Creek.

Sparks even pointed out that the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is still conducting its own examination of the Mattawoman. So far, he said, that study has found no threat to either aquatic or human life.