



Photo by Bob Keaveney

Jennifer McGraw, public affairs officer at the Naval Surface Warfare Center at Indian Head, stands in a ravine where mercury was reportedly released into the ground.

## Navy base seeks volunteers to clean up old chemical spill sites

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It may have all started with something as simple as the solution used to affix silver onto X-ray film. Or with acetone, the same chemical used in nail polish remover.

Those things may seem fairly harmless to most people, but the Naval Surface Warfare Center at Indian Head is taking no chances. Those chemicals and a few others

were reported to have been disposed of improperly by Navy officials in the 1950s and prior, before the health and environmental effects of those chemicals had been assessed.

And now the Navy is looking for individuals with an interest in Indian Head to help it clean up what it considers to be very minor threats to the environment at three active sites.

It has been working for several months with a technical review board, whose members include individuals from the Charles County Health Department,

Maryland Department of the Environment and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, which would like to expand to include ordinary citizens of the Indian Head area and others with a stake in the community. The new, expanded version of the board would be called the Restoration Advisor Board, or RAB.

NSWC Public Affairs Office Jennifer Dean McGraw said the chemical spills, which it discovered primarily through interviews with people who worked at the sta

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tion, are not considered a danger to health, because they are in extremely low levels and the spills are not near residential areas.

Still, the chemicals could pose a minor threat to the environment, particularly if left untreated.

And so, in what is largely a public relations effort, NSWC is hoping to locate individuals willing to serve on the RAB, whose members will serve as a conduit of information between the station and the community. The RAB will not make decisions about how the spills should be cleaned up - those decisions will be made by NSWC. However, it will provide comments and community concerns to NSWC officials:

Other RAB responsibilities will

include:

- recommending priorities among spill sites and identifying the applicable standard for cleanup.
- reviewing budget information.
- reviewing documents and providing timely comments.

Environmental Division Director Susan Adams, who will co-chair the RAB along with one individual from the community, said the RAB will hold many of its meetings in public, so members should be able to feel comfortable appearing in front of an audience.

"We're asking people to volunteer their time and sit in front of an audience," she said. "If we hold our meetings and talk amongst ourselves and then just close the meeting, then we're not

doing our jobs."

Much of the necessity of this grows out of the Navy's problems with other communities on related matters, and its desire to stress the low level of concern necessary. All the spills occurred during routine station operations, McGraw said.

Those operations include such things as making rocket motors and ejection seats, or "escape systems," as well as producing a myriad of other military items.

The three spills are a matter of simple human error, combined with a lack of understanding that the chemicals being used can endanger the environment if disposed of improperly. For example, one site is an area near a telephone pole on the base where acetone, a chemical that evaporates quickly, was dumped on the

ground. The technician expected it to evaporate, but some of it seeped into the soil, where it remains today, according to Shawn Jorgenson, a chemical engineer and a program manager.

It is not a serious threat, but "not the way God intended this soil to be," McGraw said.

Another site is behind a building where X-rays are taken. In photography, silver is used to develop film, and the solution used to affix the silver to the film was allowed to run off behind the building, Jorgenson said. If not cleaned up, the solution could eventually make it to wetlands that are behind the site.

"If this stream (located at the site) didn't run into wetlands, we probably wouldn't do anything ... at the current levels, it is not a problem ... But if it continued to

go down there, it would build up, so we're going to stop it from going down there," Adams said.

The third site is behind a laboratory where mercury was sometimes allowed to drain through a system in the floor of the lab, but the mercury found is not at a level higher than normal, McGraw said.

Adams said individuals interested in joining the RAB should send an application, available through the public affairs office, by Aug. 28. RAB members should be residents, business people or some other individuals with a stake in the community. They should also have some science background, though it is not necessary to be a scientist. Adams said a willingness to learn is more important.

NSWC hopes to make its final selections public by Oct. 1.