

Errors found in soil, water tests at base

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GEORGE AIR FORCE BASE — Fixing mistakes recently found in a two-year-old environmental study won't delay the start of cleanup at George Air Force Base but undoubtedly will cost the military some money, officials said Wednesday.

How much money no one at GAFB yet knows for sure, because the cost of rectifying the errors will be dealt with at the Air Force Headquarters level in Washington D.C.

"The government will bear that cost," said Col. Dick Cole, assistant deputy commander for resources, at an impromptu press conference called at the base.

And a state water official also present Wednesday said that analyses of hundreds of samples, performed weeks or months later than they should have been, haven't changed the fact that the environmental situation at George is serious.

With regard to the one category of tests, the volatile organic analysis, the contracted company has revealed that procedure set forth by the federal Environmental Protection Agency was not adhered to on 446 of 777 samples.

Protocol specifies that tests are to be run within 14 days, but on more than half the samples they were run in 24 to 104 days, said Sandra Cuttino, the base's chief of environmental affairs. Toxics the tests should reveal escape over time, she said.

The base leadership said it learned the first week of April that Science Applications International Corporation of San Diego, which drew soil and water samples in 1986 and wrote a report about them in 1987, mishandled half of them. The company has already been paid its

• See TESTS, A5

Tests

Continued from A1

\$2,030,000 it was due on the contract, Cole said.

SAIC's senior vice president, Chuck Nichols, said this morning that his company already paid approximately \$75,000 in restitution to the government last summer. The errors were found during an internal audit in May 1988 of the chemistry laboratory and were reported immediately to the company's contract monitor located at Brooks Air Force Base in San Antonio, he said.

"The work backed up in the lab, and the scheduling got off-whack," he said. "It's never happened before and we hope it doesn't happen again." SAIC has changed many managers and technicians and has shored up its quality-review procedures since the incident, he said.

SAIC installed 40 ground-water-monitoring wells to draw and analyze samples for numerous dangerous substances, including heavy metals, petroleum residue and pesticides, said base spokesman 1st Lt. Kevin Baggett. Other work the company performed, aside from the now-questionable analyses of the samples, is still considered "very usable," he said late Wednesday.

The company admitted its errors as part of the Department of

Defense's Voluntary Disclosure Program, which is neither an amnesty program nor an immunity program, according to a statement distributed by Cole.

Actually, the mistakes haven't thrown off the reckoning of the magnitude of the pollution, said Ken Carter, senior engineer with the local "Lahontan" region of the California State Regional Water Quality Control Board.

Pollutants start to dissipate after 14 days, and that's why the EPA has that time limit on samples, said Carter, who's based in the Victorville office. But the levels of the toxic material trichloroethylene found were so high even in the incorrect samples that the federal government has a lot of work ahead of it no matter what, he said. Even in the mishandled samples, TCEs measured several hundred parts per billion, whereas 5 per billion is the upper limit.

TCEs were components of degreasers not used at GAFB in 20 years but previously regularly employed to clean planes and then buried in now-deteriorated drums at the base. In sufficient quantities, it is considered carcinogenic, or cancer-causing.

The so-called "underground TCE plume" is worrisome because it's migrating toward the Mojave River Basin, a chief source of water for

most of the high desert. Eliminating the plume entirely may well take years, he said at the press conference, which followed a meeting between himself, GAFB officials and representatives of county's environmental health services department.

The good news, said Cole Cuttino, is that no delays are anticipated for this fall's planned cleanup effort. The Air Force still will be awarding two remediation contracts later this year, one on the lengthy project getting rid of the TCEs, and another about a year in length, to tear out industrial storm drains that catch other industrial wastes.

"We'll be able to stay right on target," Cole said, because another private company, J.M. Montgor Consulting Engineers, has, as part of its contract, been doing an analysis of some of the same samples since 1987.

What will now have to be done, though, is yet more sampling of the TCE plume to verify its current location and size, plus resampling the area by the storm drains so they meet the deadline to have the contracts go out to bid as scheduled this coming fall.

Where the recently reported errors may have most seriously misled the base cleanup process at the three sites where SAIC reported there were no contaminants. They were in the vicinity of an abandoned fuel pit, a perimeter road near a flight line and an area used to store old fuel tanks, Cuttino said.

File: 29A
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27 APR 89

271

FINAL PAGE

ADMINISTRATIVE RECORD

FINAL PAGE



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