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George AFB cleanup effort mishandled; costs may rise

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GEORGE AIR FORCE BASE — An environmental consulting firm mishandled part of a \$2 million study of base toxic wastes, but the error will not slow cleanup efforts, base officials said Wednesday.

The mishandling may increase the cost of the cleanup, however, and may reveal new areas that need cleaning up, said Col. Dick Cole, assistant deputy commander for resources at George.

Science Applications International Corp., a San Diego-based consulting firm, mishandled 446 of 777 samples of groundwater contamination during a two-year study completed in 1987, Cole said.

The firm was hired to study the extent of groundwater contamination at George caused by solvents, paints and fuels that were legally dumped on the ground for more than 30 years.

An underground plume of trichloroethylene (TCE), a degreaser used to clean aircraft parts, is slowly moving toward the Mojave River, the High Desert's water source.

The firm waited too long to analyze samples of contaminants including TCE, Cole said.

Environmental Protection Agency standards require such samples be analyzed within 14 days after they are collected. The firm waited up to 70 days after the required period to analyze

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some samples, said Sandra Cuttino, chief of environmental planning and compliance at George.

Contaminant samples can change chemically and become less toxic with time, she said.

Science Applications discovered the mishandling during an internal audit and revealed the problem to a contract auditing office at Brooks Air Force Base near San Antonio, Texas, on May 17, 1988, said Chuck Nichols, the company's senior vice president.

George officials didn't learn of the problem until early this month, they said. They had no explanation for the delay.

Several Science Applications employees left or were fired as a result of the audit, a new team of laboratory managers was hired and new practices were instituted to prevent another such incident, Nichols said.

Science Applications also paid about \$75,000 in restitution to the Air Force in January, Nichols said. The amount represents the cost of redoing samples and analyses mishandled by the firm, he said.

Science Applications performs technical services relating to national security and environmental health for the Department of Defense, Department of Energy, EPA and NASA, Nichols said. The firm employs about 10,000 people nationwide and reported sales of \$865 million during its last fiscal year, he said.

The firm's \$2.03 million contract included drilling 40 wells to monitor groundwater contamination and other toxic analysis work, George officials said.

Analysis of contaminated groundwater is an im-

portant first step in designing a cleanup program.

Mishandling of samples by Science Applications shouldn't affect the cleanup, however, because another firm analyzed secondary samples in most of the same areas, Cuttino said.

Results of those tests, performed by J.M. Montgomery Consulting Engineers, were roughly comparable with those done by Science Applications, base officials said.

Cleanup of contaminated groundwater at George is scheduled to begin this fall and is expected to take 15 to 30 years, Cuttino said. Cleanup of toxic sludges from an abandoned storm drain along the base's flight line will begin this fall and will take one year, she said.

Base officials are concerned that three areas declared clean by Science Applications may in fact be contaminated by toxic wastes.

The Air Force will conduct more soil sampling for fuel contamination at an abandoned fuels leach field, near a road bordering the flight line and at a fuel tank storage area, Cuttino said. Science Application's errors also will force the Air Force to sample more soil at the storm drain site, she said.

Water quality officials are satisfied the Air Force is not allowing the mishandling to slow the cleanup.

"The Air Force is doing a good job in picking up the pieces. . . . They've got all the bases covered," said Ken Carter, senior engineer for the Lahontan Region of the California Regional Water Quality Control Board.

Air Force officials don't know how much the error will cost, but vow to stick to their cleanup schedule.

"I will say that the costs certainly won't stop us," Cole said.

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