



US Army Corps  
of Engineers  
Baltimore District

# The Corps' pondent

a newsletter by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers for the residents of Spring Valley

Special Issue, July 2001

## Corps responds to July 9 *Washington Post* article

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Many of you undoubtedly saw the article "Evidence of D.C. Toxins Unheeded" that appeared in the July 9 issue of the *Washington Post*. After carefully reviewing the article, we believe it would be beneficial to clarify several issues raised in the article.

The article states that federal analysts warned the Army in 1986 of potential burial sites, yet the Army did not do any field investigations. Here are the facts.

### Army's historical search

In 1986, American University had concerns over the possibility of buried ordnance remaining from the Army's World War I research, testing and training in the area, and asked for Army assistance in reviewing historical records to determine the likelihood and potential locations of significant residual hazards.

The U.S. Army Toxic and Hazardous Materials Agency, or USATHAMA, was tasked with conducting a search of existing accessible records in April 1986.

In addition to reviewing records, USATHAMA was supported by the Environmental Protection Agency's Environmental Photographic Interpretation Center which conducted an analysis of aerial imagery dating back to 1918. Based on this analysis and the technology and information

available at the time, Army officials concluded that the evidence showed there was very little likelihood of a large-scale disposal of ordnance at or near American University.

### Possible locations

The report did highlight sites that would be possible locations if burial had occurred, but at that time, no evidence could be found to estimate the possibility or location of isolated smaller scale burial locations.

Given these findings and the fact that no residual hazardous items had been reported to officials despite the extensive farming and residential development of the area after the closure of the American University Experiment Station in 1920, the Army and others did not pursue additional research or study of the area.

### Emergency response

On Jan. 5, 1993, a contractor digging a utility trench discovered buried ordnance. The Army immediately initiated an emergency response. This response was completed on Feb. 2, 1993, and resulted in the removal of 141 items (43 suspect chemical items).

Shortly after the munitions were discovered, the Army issued a news release on Jan. 8, 1993, explaining the work and course of action for the future. Following is the second paragraph of the news

release, which mentioned the 1986 work of the Army:

*This land had been used during World War I by the Research Division of the Chemical Warfare Service (1917-19) as a site for the development of chemical warfare materiel. Due to planned American University construction activity in 1986, the Army conducted a records search of the entire American University Chemical Warfare Research Center site to determine the extent of any hazard. This search found no evidence of the burial of munitions, but concluded that there remained the possibility that some materiel could remain buried and sub-surface ordnance could exist.*

### Corps takes over

On Feb. 3, 1993, control of this site was transferred to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Baltimore District, to conduct a remedial investigation of the entire site.

During this investigation, the Corps evaluated the potential for remaining ordnance or chemical warfare material in the Spring Valley neighborhood.

The Corps also assessed the possible existence of ordnance or chemical warfare material-related contamination in pits and trenches as a result of military activities during World War I.

In conducting this investiga-

tion, the Corps used two primary techniques —geophysical surveys to identify possible locations for the burial of ordnance materiel and environmental sampling to identify possible chemical contamination.

The geophysical surveys were done at all locations called points of interest and considered to be potential ordnance burial locations, plus a selection of approximately 10 percent of all properties outside of the points of interest. This would serve as a check on the historical information that had been gathered.

### **Discoveries**

Of the 492 properties surveyed, over 1,900 suspicious items were identified.

These items were reviewed by Army ordnance experts who recommended that 840 of these items be further investigated. No burial pits were identified.

One spent Livens smoke round was identified. Two other rounds were found on the surface and appeared to be left by unknown individuals. (Such finds are traditionally termed “amnesty finds.”) An additional Stokes mortar round was discovered during the digging of a basement. This round was unfilled, unfired and unarmed. Approximately 20 other pieces of ordnance scrap items were also found.

### **Sampling**

Environmental sampling was conducted at 13 points of interest. A total of 260 soil samples were collected, split with EPA, and analyzed by both the Corps and EPA. The samples were taken as close as possible to the 1918 surface level.

No chemical agents, chemical warfare agent-unique breakdown products, explosives or explosive breakdown products were found

in any of the soil samples collected.

The Army conducted a risk assessment for certain metals that exceeded the EPA’s risk based screening criteria, or established background concentrations. This assessment found no elevated health risk requiring remedial action. The findings of the geophysical survey and environmental sampling are documented in a Remedial Investigation Report.

After public review of this report, the Army issued a Record of Decision in June 1995 that concluded no further action was needed.

During this investigation, the Corps publicly stated many times that if any new information about the Spring Valley site was made available, it would be reviewed and investigated as deemed necessary.

In 1996, in a letter to the Corps, the D.C. Health Department raised a number of concerns with the 1993-95 investigation.

### **Corps returns**

During 1997, the Corps evaluated these concerns. In January 1998, we published a Remedial Investigation Evaluation Report, in which we stated that we had made an error in the location of one point of interest, Point of Interest 24, which is located adjacent to the American University campus. It had been mislocated by approximately 150 feet.

We verified that all the other points of interest were properly located, but we felt we needed to investigate the new location of Point of Interest 24.

During our investigation of this area, two large burial pits were found. Over 600 items were removed, including 288 ordnance items. Fourteen of them were determined to contain chemical

warfare agent, predominantly mustard agent.

### **Elevated levels of arsenic**

We also discovered elevated levels of arsenic in the soil inside the pits as well as near the surface at specific areas near the pits. This soil was removed and replaced with new soil. From this testing, other properties were sampled to determine the extent of any arsenic contamination.

As a result, the area next to the American University’s child development center was found to contain elevated levels of arsenic. This soil will also be removed in the weeks ahead.

### **Expanded sampling**

Based on these results and requests from residents to broaden the arsenic sampling to other areas of the Spring Valley neighborhood, the Corps and our partners developed a comprehensive soil sampling plan that involves sampling for arsenic at 1,200 residential properties and approximately 400 non-residential lots within the Spring Valley site. This effort is ongoing.

The article quotes a former District of Columbia employee as saying that from 1986 to the present the Army caused people to be exposed to unacceptable levels of contamination that the Army could have identified and corrected 15 years ago.

### **Safety, primary concern**

We can assure residents and the general public that at no time has the Corps knowingly exposed the public to any health risk related to past military activities.

During our past and current investigations of the area, we have taken and continue to take every possible precaution to protect the health and safety of

residents and workers. This has been, and always will be, our highest priority as we continue to work to resolve the issues related to this site.

### **Advisory panel**

The article states that the Mayor's Scientific Advisory Panel is not comfortable with a preliminary health analysis of cancer rates in Spring Valley.

The D.C. Health Department is the government agency responsible for the investigation of all health-related issues at Spring Valley.

The Army and the Corps

remain supportive of the efforts of the Health Department and the Mayor's Spring Valley Scientific Advisory Panel.

The *Post* stated that the Corps of Engineers and EPA officials felt that the 1986 and 1993-95 evidence did not warrant taking more steps than they did.

Others involved claimed that federal agencies shied away from more aggressive steps because of concerns about expense and property values.

The Corps and EPA have always put the health and safety of the Spring Valley community above all else.

For example, we coordinate with residents to leave their homes during some investigations.

In certain situations, we have installed metal structures to shield the community from any dangers associated with the investigation of buried military ordnance.

And now we are currently involved in sampling every property in Spring Valley.

As we undertake this effort, we will continue to take the necessary steps to protect residents from any known risk related to past military activities at this site.

## ***Restoration Advisory Board***

The third meeting of the Spring Valley Restoration Advisory Board was July 10 at St. David's Episcopal Church.

The RAB addressed the recent *Washington Post* articles and the proposed congressional hearings. The chronology surrounding the development and release of the 1986 USATHAMA report was discussed, and a copy of this document was provided to each RAB member.

RAB members agreed to prepare a letter to the Department of the Army and other appropriate agencies requesting project information and technical data concerning the Spring Valley area.

During the second half of the meeting, several draft documents under development by the Corps and the community RAB members were discussed. These documents include a revised Right-of-Entry form to expand and clarify the rights of property

owners, and the notification letter that will be sent to each property owner as sampling data results become available.

Once the new Right-of-Entry form is completed, it will be sent to each owner. It will **not** require a signature or additional effort; these expanded rights will apply automatically for those who have signed a previous version.

Other draft documents reviewed included a draft charter that will guide the operation of the RAB and an informative summary of the arsenic criteria and the risk decision process being used in the area-wide arsenic effort.

The agenda and draft documents were provided to audience members so they could follow along in the discussions.

RAB members also received a brief update of ongoing and planned field activities for Operable Unit 5. The RAB was informed that additional composite and grid sampling

had recently been completed in the vicinity of Sedgwick Trench.

This was a follow-up to elevated arsenic findings reported previously. The recent excavation of bottles containing lewisite and mustard and the planned prove-out of potential technologies to investigate possible buried anomalies in Spring Valley were also addressed.

Several community members and three members of the Mayor's Spring Valley Scientific Advisory Panel attended the meeting as observers. RAB members and meeting attendees discussed agenda topics and specific resident concerns during the regular meeting break.

The next RAB meeting will be **Tuesday, Aug. 14, from 7 to 9:30 p.m. at St. David's Episcopal Church, 5150 Macomb Street, N.W., Washington, D.C.** The public is welcome to attend.



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## Sampling Schedule

It is a difficult task to develop a detailed sampling schedule as there are changes to the schedule on a daily basis.

Schedule changes may result from special requests received due to real estate transactions, residents choosing not to have the sampling performed, or residents asking for the sampling to be rescheduled due to vacations or other schedule conflicts.

In addition, we cannot sample on a scheduled property if a signed right of entry has not been returned to us.

We have developed a general schedule for sampling the neighborhood that assumes we have all rights of entry.

This should give residents a general idea of how we will proceed, but residents should keep in mind that this schedule

will be subject to daily changes. We are still exploring ways to make available a more detailed schedule that can be kept up-to-date with daily changes.

Our sampling plan will follow this general schedule:

**May 30 to Aug. 14** — Central Testing Area (CTA);

**Aug. 15 to Sept. 27** — Residential properties outside the CTA and south of Massachusetts Avenue, generally working from north to south;

**Sept. 28 to Oct. 29** — Residential properties north of Massachusetts Avenue;

**Oct. 30 to Nov. 1** — American University campus areas not yet sampled;

**Nov. 2 to Nov. 12** — Federal property near Dalecarlia reservoir.

(Reprinted from June/July 2001 issue)

## Meeting Notice

The next community meeting is scheduled for **Tuesday, Aug. 7, at 7 p.m., at the Metropolitan Memorial United Methodist Church**, 3401 Nebraska Avenue.

Dr. Steven Lamm, M.D., D.T.P.H., will be one of the speakers. Lamm is from Consultants in Epidemiology and Occupational Health, Inc.

He is an environmental and occupational epidemiologist with expertise in arsenic exposure and risk assessment. He will address questions on the potential effects of arsenic.

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