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Public Affairs Office

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Dear Editor:

I am writing to correct several inaccuracies and misconceptions that appeared in your December issue about Spring Valley. I am concerned that your article gives the false impression that the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers is a reluctant partner in the ongoing effort to address environmental issues related to past military activities at this site. I want to assure your readers that the Corps has been, and always will be, committed to protecting the health and safety of the community and the environment as it relates to this site.

Arsenic levels in Spring Valley – Contrary to the impression left by the article and by other media, elevated levels of arsenic are not widespread throughout Spring Valley. Tests have shown isolated spots where elevated levels exist in the soil, and research has indicated other points that should be investigated. That is what we are currently doing. The bottom line is that everyone involved has the same goal. All of us – the residents of Spring Valley, the D.C. Health Department, the Environmental Protection Agency and the Corps of Engineers – want to find and clean up any remaining WWI chemical material that could potentially cause harm.

Ordnance and contamination – The article also gives the incorrect impression that there are large amounts of ordnance and contamination remaining undiscovered throughout Spring Valley. In fact, historical research and our own investigation provide a fairly clear idea of the relatively few areas where contamination and ordnance items could be found.

From 1993-1995, we undertook an extensive, two-year investigation that involved the collection and analysis of over 260 environmental samples taken from 11 locations where testing of chemical warfare materiel would most likely have occurred. In this testing, we found no chemical warfare materiel, agent breakdown products or explosive materiel. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency also took split samples from these same locations and concluded in their October 1999 EPA draft risk assessment report that persons in the Spring Valley neighborhood are not exposed to an elevated human health risk, with the possible exception of the area around the burial pits on Glenbrook Road.

In addition to this sampling, over 500 properties, or nearly half of the neighborhood, were surveyed using metal detecting equipment. No additional pits or trenches were found, and a total of 840 anomalies were identified, primarily in one area of the site known historically as the static test fire area. Ordnance specialists carefully investigated these anomalies and found two intact munitions, 10 empty 75mm shell casings, some ordnance fragments, several pieces of construction debris and miscellaneous items. None of the items contained chemical warfare agent.

Testing of the entire neighborhood – No one from the D.C. Health Department or EPA has currently indicated a need for testing of the entire neighborhood. They have expressed a desire to re-examine areas that had been identified as points of interest, and the Corps of Engineers has been active in that process. Much of the effort has been based on analysis by EPA's Environmental Photographic Interpretation Center (EPIC). Completed analyses by EPIC's Terry Slonecker, and those that he is currently conducting, are being used to determine the areas that call for sampling and investigation. Those areas – about five in all – do not pose an immediate threat to health and safety. However, they show reason for further examination. Throughout the process of identifying courses of action, we are working closely with D.C. Health and EPA representatives. We've also kept the residents involved through frequent meetings, a regular newsletter, a telephone information line and an Internet web page.

Arsenic sources – The article leaves the false impression that arsenic is a mustard agent breakdown product. In fact, mustard agent is a sulfur-based compound and is not a source of arsenic. Lewisite is a potential source, and arsenic itself was experimented with at the American University Experiment Station (AUES) in a number of ways. Our ongoing project is focused on identification and removal of arsenic contamination associated with AUES activities. It is important to understand that arsenic has been used as a pesticide and herbicide during much of the 20th century. Arsenic also occurs naturally in some quantity in nearly all soil. EPA took 30 samples in the vicinity of Spring Valley to give us an idea of the background levels of arsenic in the soil of the area. That information has helped us identify areas of concern.

Small disposal area located on American University – The article implies that the Corps of Engineers has been reluctant to address a small disposal area that Richard Albright discovered on the campus of American University. This is inaccurate. We have moved expeditiously to address the question. The need to develop detailed plans for the required excavation and to coordinate with the many involved parties has caused delays, but through every step, we have briefed and sought input from both D.C. Health and EPA.

The article also incorrectly gives the impression that lewisite was found in the small disposal area. To protect workers during our initial excavation of this area, we followed our standard safety procedure of air monitoring using a screening device known as MINICAMS. This device is used to detect possible chemical hazards. Although results are fast, they are not 100 percent accurate because they cannot completely distinguish between certain chemical warfare agents and other types of chemicals. It therefore can give false positive results. When the workers digging in the small disposal area found the ceramic pieces mentioned in the article, the MINICAMS indicated the possible presence of lewisite, and our workers responded accordingly. Since the MINICAMS is only a screening tool, the ceramic pieces were containerized, and air samples were collected to conduct more definitive analysis to determine what chemicals were present. The results indicated trace amounts of three industrial chemicals, but no lewisite. We have no evidence of lewisite being present in the small disposal area.

Arsenic at the bottom of Dalecarlia Reservoir – It is highly unlikely that arsenic has pooled at the bottom of Dalecarlia Reservoir as alleged in the article. The Corps' Washington Aqueduct, which operates the Dalecarlia Reservoir, conducted sampling of sediment dredged from the bottom of the reservoir in the mid-1990s and found no elevated levels of arsenic. We also have not seen a way by

which arsenic could be deposited in the reservoir. Sampling conducted by EPA shows no elevated levels of arsenic in either the water or the sediment of East Creek downstream from the Glenbrook Road property. In addition, all the surface water in the area of Dalecarlia Reservoir is routed around the reservoir and does not actually enter it. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the Washington Aqueduct has never detected arsenic in their monthly testing of finished water.

Lewisite toxicity – A statement about lewisite that a “single drop on the skin could be fatal” is incorrect. Lewisite is a toxic substance, but primarily as an incapacitating agent. It causes blistering similar to mustard agent, but the effects are immediate rather than delayed as they are with mustard agent.

Health studies – The D.C. Health Department is the lead agency for epidemiological studies. Mr. Jim Sweeney from that organization has indicated to us that a comprehensive health study may be in order when current sampling results and investigations are complete.

Relationship among D.C. Health, EPA and the Corps of Engineers – We routinely coordinate with both the D.C. Health Department and EPA Region III, our partners on this project. Richard Albright, who was quoted in the story, has praised our efforts, as we have lauded his. We may initially disagree concerning the interpretation of data and results that we collect. That is often the case in any scientific pursuit. However, we have been able to come to agreement on how to proceed to ensure that all issues are adequately addressed.

History of arsenic discovery and actions taken – As a part of the investigation of the two burial pits at a Glenbrook Road property, the D.C. Health Department asked for environmental sampling around the pit to include four adjacent properties. EPA and the Corps of Engineers each conducted sampling in the area around the pits. The results indicated elevated levels in the area sampled.

We immediately notified DC Health Department, EPA Region III and the community of these results. We did this by presenting the results in our project newsletter and at a public availability session. Mr. Albright from DC Health and Mr. Harbold from EPA Region III attended the availability session. This type of meeting format provided the community with the opportunity to exchange ideas and get specific answers to their concerns. The community indicated that they appreciated our open and honest approach. We have since used this meeting format on several other occasions and have found it to be equally effective in communicating project activities to the community, our partners and the media.

Lawsuits – The article gives the impression that several lawsuits have been filed against the Army concerning Spring Valley. We are aware of only one lawsuit that you describe in your article, which was settled in 1998.

Sincerely,

Charles J. Fiala, Jr.
COL, Corps of Engineers
District Engineer