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Is Lackland AFB aglow?

By Lisa Sorg

The Air Force must deal with remnants of the Atomic Age

The Atomic Energy Commission's leftovers are now Lackland Air Force Base's problem.

Air Force officials unveiled details about low-level radiological sites during a July 28 meeting of the Lackland Air Force Base Community Council on Restoration.

Lackland's Training Annex, which lies west of the main base, was built in 1954 and previously owned by the Atomic Energy Commission. In 1966, the AEC left the annex - and abandoned radioactive material, much of it generated from weapons.

In 2000, Lackland officials began investigating the radiological sites by interviewing former AEC employees. "There aren't a lot of records from that time," said Ed Roberson, Lackland's environmental flight chief. "The AEC said it was cleaned up, but it didn't have any documents saying that it was."

A predecessor to the Department of Energy, the AEC existed from 1947 to 1975. It maintained programs for nuclear weapons research, development, production, and testing; production of plutonium and weapons grade uranium; milling and refining of uranium ore; biomedical research into the effects of radiation and nuclear weapons; promotion of a civilian nuclear power industry; and conduct of international Atoms-for-Peace activities.

In May, the Air Force began investigating seven sites, and determined that three underground storage tanks pose no hazard because they were never used for radioactive spills or accidents. The Pentagon must approve the decision; it is expected these three sites will be closed by September 2005.

Using soil samples and water monitoring, the Air Force will investigate and then clean up any contamination at two landfills, a sandy area used for water filtration, and an abandoned bunker. Roberson estimated these four sites will close by September 2006.

Since the radiological sites were used to test or produce weapons, neither the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality nor Environmental Protection Agency oversees these cleanups; the Air Force Safety Center at Kirtland AFB in Albuquerque, New Mexico has jurisdiction.

It appears the PCB contamination near Lackland and the former Kelly Air Force bases will remain unexamined, at least temporarily.

In "Just the Facts," a Lackland AFB newsletter about its environmental restoration program, it noted that the San Antonio River Authority was working on a proposed \$236,000 study of PCB contamination in the San Antonio River Basin.

In August 2002 ``Carp with a side of arochlor," September 11-17, 2003; "Air Force dismisses fuss over fish," September 18-23, 2003`, high levels of PCBs were detected in fish from a portion of Lower Leon Creek. However, it wasn't until a year later that the Texas Department of Health issued a ban on eating fish from a section of the creek from Highway 90 south to S.W. Military Drive, a segment that runs through the former Kelly Air Force Base and its golf course.

PCBs have been banned in the U.S. since 1977. They are considered a potential carcinogen and can damage the neurological, reproductive, and immune systems.

However, due to a lack of federal funding, the PCB project will be scaled down. SARA spokeswoman Suzanne Scott said the River Authority didn't receive a grant from the TCEQ, which funnels federal money to local agencies.

Federal funds would have comprised 60 percent of the study's funding; local agencies would have been required to provide 40 percent.

Bill Carter, who is with the TCEQ's watershed management division said SARA's proposal didn't score high enough to receive funding. The grant for which SARA applied is geared toward projects that will clean up contamination or those involving "high priority" bodies of water.

Under the proposed PCB study, SARA would have worked with six area agencies, including the Metropolitan Health Department, to collect and test fish and sediment from the Basin, including Leon Creek. Since Leon Creek is a 45-mile urban stream that collects runoff, it would be difficult to pinpoint the source, but the study would have been a starting point. PCBs have been detected at Kelly Air Force Base.

Scott said the SARA board is still interested in studying PCBs in the region, perhaps under a phased approach. "We were upset to hear the state denied the funds, but we're still investigating what we can do."