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Cardin calls for quicker, broader cleanup at Fort Detrick

Maryland senator asks EPA to get involved in cleaning up contaminants at base

August 16, 2010 | By Don Markus, The Baltimore Sun

Sen. Benjamin L. Cardin is calling for a rapid investigation and expanded cleanup at Fort Detrick in Frederick amid fresh questions over the testing and storage of the notorious herbicide blend Agent Orange there decades ago.

Cardin wants the Army and the Environmental Protection Agency to reach an agreement by December that would allow more federal money and expertise to come to the base, where dangerous chemicals were maintained for years and pollutants seeped into water.

The Army needs to "recommit itself to being transparent with the communities surrounding Fort Detrick and to expand its plan for public participation and information," Cardin, a Democrat, said in a letter to officials Monday. "As a fundamental matter of fairness, the public has the right to know."

Federal authorities, including the EPA, have recently completed a Superfund cleanup of a portion of the installation known as Area B, where known carcinogens such as trichloroethylene (TCE) and perchloroethylene (PCE) were placed in a landfill in the 1960s and 1970s.

But neighbors and former employees of the base are raising new questions about exposure to Agent Orange, the defoliant used extensively during the Vietnam War.

A West Virginia man who served at Fort Detrick from 1962 to 1964 is receiving compensation from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs for exposure to Agent Orange, which military officials said was spray-tested there, according to the Frederick News-Post.

Many residents who live near the base believe that a high number of cancers among family and friends can be attributed to drinking contaminated water from local wells.

Cardin is pushing for the signing of a Federal Facilities Agreement between the Army and the EPA to create what he called a "legally enforceable process" for cleaning up hazardous waste.

Cardin spokeswoman Sue Walitsky said discussions creating such an agreement have been "in the process" for nearly a year.

Meeting the Dec. 1 target for an agreement might be difficult, according to a spokesman for the base.

"Resolution in FFA completion can take years, though, depending on the complexity of the legal, boundary, ownership and engineering issues," Chuck Gordon, a public affairs officer at the base, said in a statement.

Gordon added that "Fort Detrick will continue to work in partnership with the EPA, MDE and local officials to ensure that all environmental concerns are addressed in as timely a manner as possible"

The Area B landfill is about a quarter-mile from the main gate of the base.

"Area B has been a concern for some time," Walitsky said. "The suspected use of Agent Orange has been in Area B."

Agent Orange was used during and after the Vietnam War, where it was sprayed to destroy vegetation and foliage in hopes of exposing enemy troops.

In the aftermath of the war, former U.S. soldiers who were exposed to Agent Orange were diagnosed with cancer as well as other diseases and disorders that were believed to have been caused by the soldiers' contact with the defoliant. Agent Orange was tested at Fort Detrick from the mid-1940s until the early 1960s.

Gordon said that the Frederick County Health Department is conducting its own investigation into Area B. The health department held a meeting last week to discuss the prevalence of cancers around the base.

Source: http://articles.baltimoresun.com/2010-08-16/news/bs-md-cardin-agent-orange-20100816_1_fort-detrick-cardin-federal-facilities-agreement