

Detrick tries to allay clean-up fears

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Officials working on Fort Detrick's "Area B" clean-up project Thursday night tried to allay surrounding residents' fears about possible contamination when the project begins.

Nearly 50 residents of the area turned out at Waverley Elementary School seeking answers to their questions about the Army's project and just how contaminated local ground water has become.

U.S. Army officials began testing site "B-11" within Area B in 1992 and detected levels of tetrachloroethene (PCE) and trichloroethene (TCE) in soil and groundwater within the military installation.

Many homes with well water in the area have had their wells tested for contamination by the Army, which then provided bottled water or hook-up to the city's water system. Those in the vicinity who have not had a test can request one by contacting Fort Detrick.

A proposed clean-up plan, which will probably be put up for bids in September, involves building a temporary containment structure over the three main points of contamination.

The containers that held the PCE and TCE will be removed and hauled away. The soil under and around the pits will then be frozen by chilled brine in steel piping to form a solid barrier to contain wastes and stabilize the soil to reduce the risk of cave-in.

Wastes removed will be transported off site to licensed and certified disposal facilities. The closest available sites are in New Jersey, Ohio, Kentucky and Tennessee. A decision hasn't been made on which site will be used.

Lt. Col. Jeff Springer, chief of safety and environmental programs at Fort Detrick, fielded most of the residents' questions.

"What health problems could occur as a result of drinking this contaminated water?" one woman wondered.

PCE is widely used for dry cleaning fabrics and metal de-greasing operations, and may be carcinogenic. PCE can be concentrated in the breast milk of nursing mothers who have been exposed to it, but its effects on infants in unknown.

TCE is a nonflammable colorless liquid used mainly as a solvent to remove grease from metal parts. The chemical, when it breaks down in humans, can be toxic.

"We do not have any clear evidence that TCE alone can cause leukemia or any other type of cancer in humans," states the final document of the Area B-11 Chemical Waste Disposal Pits Proposed Plan, given to each resident Thursday.

The report also states that it is not known if the chemical affects human reproduction.

Col. Springer said repeatedly that the clean-up is the Army's "first step" to eliminating or vastly lowering the levels of chemicals within the surrounding soils and groundwater.

Primary contamination has flowed to the south and east of the pit sites, in the direction of Montevue Lane. The end of the plume of contamination has moved about two miles since 1970 to the edge of Area B. Officials said Thursday its course might have been stabilized but they aren't taking any chances.

"We're dealing with the sins of the past," Col. Springer said.

Chemicals have leaked from containers and drums deposited in the pits from 1950 to 1970.

Funding for the project, estimated to cost more than \$20 million through the next three years, has already been appropriated by Congress and the Department of Defense.

After the excavation and removal of the contaminated surface soil, the Army will conduct tests to see if deeper contamination can be neutralized by chemical treatment.

The public comment period for evaluating the proposed plan closes June 14. Further comments for the record can be sent to Fort Detrick, to the attention of MCHD-SFE/Douglas Warnock.

One resident reminded others that all administrative records pertaining to the Area B pits, testing results and clean-up plans are available at the Frederick County Public Library on Spectrum Drive.