Fort Detrick proposes ways to remove waste

by Patience Wait
Staff Writer

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Fort Detrick officials want to clean up toxic waste sites on the Frederick base by freezing the soil before incinerating it.

The soil freezing method is the preferred of three options proposed in a plan released earlier this month.

The disposal pits are in a section of Fort Detrick known as Area B, near the intersection of Shookstown Road and Kemp Lane.

The pits were used for various types of waste chemicals such as cancer-causing trichloroethylene from Fort Detrick, the U.S. Bureau of Standards and Walter Reed Army Medical Center from 1955 to 1970, according to reports released by Fort Detrick over the years.

These pits were reported to be 15 feet deep, 12 feet wide and 20 feet long.

The groundwater under Area B is contaminated with a number of chemicals, and the disposal pits are considered the likely source.

In October 1997, a spring that runs through the base and serves several neighboring homes' private wells was found to be contaminated with trichloroethylene (TCE) and tetrachloroethylene (PCE) at levels far exceeding federal limits of five parts per billion (ppb). The tests found TCE levels at 5,000 ppb, and PCE at 20,000 ppb.

In November 1997, a test of a monitoring well in Area B found PCE levels between 60,000 and 120,000 ppb.

Eileen Mitchell, public information officer for the base, said officials evaluated three alternatives for removing the waste from the disposal pits, settling on a $4.9 million containment system using soil freezing.

In this method, Mitchell said, directional drilling would install pipes under and around the pits. Once installed, super-chilled salt water would be forced through the pipes, creating a four-foot-thick layer of frozen soil, akin to permafrost, impermeable to the contaminants and keeping them from spreading. The contaminated soil could then be removed.

"We selected this alternative because of the element of safety," Mitchell said. "We evaluated all three of the plans, and this one we feel reduces the risks to humans or the environment."

The soil-freezing technique was in the mid-range for cost, as well. The cheapest alternative would run $4.7 million, while the most expensive was estimated at $5.7 million.

Whichever method ultimately is selected, the waste taken from the site will be incinerated off-site, though Mitchell said the location has not yet been identified.

The proposed removal plan and related technical documents can be reviewed at the Fort Detrick Library, 1520 Freedman Drive, Fort Detrick, and at the C. Burr Artz Library's temporary location at 5340 Spectrum Drive, Suite A, in Frederick.

There are a limited number of free copies of the plan available at each library. A copy may be requested from the Fort Detrick Public Affairs Office at 301/619-2018.

Comments may be submitted in writing to the U.S. Army Garrison, Environmental Management Division, Attn: MCHD-SFE/Douglas Warnock, 1500 Porter St., Frederick, MD 21702-5000, or may be faxed to 301/619-2555.

The plan is available for public comment and will be the subject of a public meeting at 6 p.m. Thursday, June 1, at Waverley Elementary School on 201 Waverley Drive in Frederick.