

Interview with Dr. Michael Gros, a victim of water contamination at US Marine base

Joanne Laurier
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For more than 30 years, residents of Camp Lejeune, a US Marine Corps base in North Carolina, were exposed to contaminated water. From 1957 to 1987, Marines/Naval personnel, family members and civilians drank and used water containing toxic levels of industrial solvents, although the military knew in late 1980 or early 1981 that at least one of the base's water treatment plants was polluted.

The contaminants, TCE (trichloroethylene) and PCE (tetrachloroethelene, also called perchloroethylene), are both labeled probable carcinogens by the Environmental Protection Agency. In 1985, when 10 water wells were eventually shut down, TCE levels recorded in one well were nearly 4,000 times the level considered safe.

On June 12, victims of Camp Lejeune's water contamination appeared in Washington, D.C., before a hearing convened by the House Energy and Commerce Committee to give testimony about the cancers and myriad illnesses they believe were contracted from exposure to the toxins. Retired Master Gunnery Sergeant Jerry Ensminger, former Navy physician Dr. Michael Gros and former Marine air traffic controller Jeff Byron spoke movingly about the horrific impact of the poisoning on themselves and their families. Ensminger lost his nine-year-old daughter Janey to leukemia, while Byron's two daughters are afflicted with serious health problems that include a spinal disorder and a rare condition called plastic anemia.

Dr. Gros, battling an unusual form of non-Hodgkin's lymphoma that he attributes to his years as an obstetrician and gynecologist at the Marine base, spoke from his home in Texas with Joanne Laurier, whose article "US military officials knew about contaminated water at Marine base" was posted June 15. The following are his comments.

My involvement with Camp Lejeune goes back to the time between July 1980 and July 1983, although it's possible that the water contamination stems from the 1950s. My whole family had three years of continuous contamination.

When TCE was dumped into the ground, it had the ability to seep into the water wells, one of which was adjacent to the dump. This well, Well 651, was shown to have TCE levels of 18,900 parts per billion, when water is unsafe at more than 5 parts per billion. You do the math! The well's water was mixed in with other less-contaminated sources and therefore was somewhat diluted. But despite this, tap samples were showing at 1,400 parts per billion. Well 651 was drilled in 1972 and was only taken offline in 1985.

Jerry Ensminger [a retired gunnery sergeant at Camp Lejeune] has compiled a lot of material under the Freedom of Information Act that is posted on the web site *The Few, the Proud, the Forgotten* [a parody of "The Few, the Proud...the Marines"].

From 1980 to 1983, the military knew the water was poisoned. The testing showing this was ignored. It's a particularly nasty thing because there is no way for the end user to know—there is neither taste nor smell—and it takes some 10 to 15 years for related illnesses to emerge. My own cancer—non-Hodgkin's lymphoma—had a very slow onset with characteristics that were not typical.

I was diagnosed in 1997, and in 1999 the ATSDR [US Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry] called me asking about my son Tom, who was born at Camp Lejeune. I told them that outside of a few minor problems he was fine. When I informed them about my cancer, there was dead silence. They claimed to be limiting investigations to children born at the base because they had decided that "adults were not

likely to be affected.”

That’s why I went before Congress, because for 30 years they had not studied adults. I think it’s a conspiracy. The military does not want to pay reparations. The cost would probably be in the billions!

The military is using the Ferris Doctrine [a US Supreme Court decision that prevents military personnel from suing the government for injuries received while on active duty] against us. Through it, they claim that the government has sovereign immunity and can’t be sued. They keep extending it to cover every occasion. When I filed a claim, they ran me out of the courtroom. I then went to the Fifth Circuit, and they dumped me out. All of us affected had to file tort claims with the government to preserve our rights in the event of a settlement. But if at all, I believe this is years and years in the future.

At the congressional hearing last week, the woman who was in charge of the federal tort claims system flat out said there would be no awards until the science is in place, yet they won’t do the science. The ATSDR is denying that adults are affected. Meanwhile, people who have been damaged by the contamination may be dropping like flies—dying in large numbers. I would guess that there are far more than 1 million people who have been exposed. They need to look back and study the death certificates as well as re-contact those still alive.

I personally have some \$4.5 million in medical bills. The VA [US Department of Veterans Affairs] refused to pay for my bone marrow transplant, but have paid some of my pharmacy bills.

The government seems to have a strategy, and that strategy is not to do anything. Let people die away until there is no one left. I’m hoping that the hearing will alert people who could have been exposed. It is outlandish. The government knows how to find you when they want to.

In the infant study, they found a 100 percent increase in leukemia, and 50 percent of the kids in the study who were sick are no longer alive.

Without doubt, the military is one of the biggest polluters. Every year, the Department of Defense [DoD] asks to be exempted from EPA standards. You could tell at the hearing that the government is concerned about Jerry [Ensminger] because he has so much information related to that.

I would not assume that Camp Lejeune, still a large active base, has been cleaned up. They say it would take \$1 billion to really do the job. Nonetheless, they are still pumping water there because the military says the water is good. I would say to the people living there, “Be real careful.” I know, for example, that some of the suburbs of San Antonio [Texas] are being contaminated from the military base nearby.

They also need to reopen the criminal investigation and take a look at documents like the letter that the general sent out in 1985 telling the families that there were just “minute” amounts of organic chemicals when they were pumping 1,400 ppb [parts per billion] TCE into the housing. That was just criminal. There may also be a criminal destruction of documents going on. They want to hide the fact that they would shut down contaminated wells, and then quietly turn them on at night when they needed the water.

Tyler Amon from the EPA, who was an investigator during the 2005 EPA criminal investigation of Camp Lejeune, spoke at the hearing against the wishes of the Bush administration. He said at the time that he had wanted to file charges, but was overridden. The investigation was killed. It needs to be turned on again.

We need to know who was responsible. Who went against the DoD 1972 directive on clean water? It’s a big corporate mumbo-jumbo: they tell us there are no laws governing water!

On the one hand, the government says, “Support our troops!” and then they do this to their families. It is similar to how they used Pat Tillman after he was killed by “friendly fire” in Afghanistan. They lied about how he was killed, called him a war hero and used him as a recruiting tool.



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