

US military officials knew about contaminated water at Marine base

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As many as 1 million people were exposed to contaminated water at Camp Lejeune, a US Marine Corps base in North Carolina, according to the US Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry in a document revealed at a hearing convened by the House Energy and Commerce Committee in Washington June 12. The figure is far higher than previous estimates.

Thousands of families from 1957 to 1987 drank water contaminated with toxins as much as 40 times above current safety standards. The military knew as soon as late 1980 or early 1981 that one of the base's water treatment plants was polluted.

The contaminants, industrial solvents known as TCE (trichloroethylene) and PCE (tetrachloroethelene, also called perchloroethylene), are classified by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) as probable carcinogens. Defense Department officials recently revealed that between 1975 and 1985 alone, nearly 200,000 Marines were stationed at Camp Lejeune.

"We wouldn't be investigating this disgraceful situation if [the Department of Defense] had put half as much effort into cleaning up the water as it has into stonewalling those who drank it," said Democratic Representative John Dingell of Michigan, the Energy and Commerce Committee's chairman. The subcommittee that held Tuesday's oversight hearing took testimony from families about cancers and other serious illnesses they attribute to ingesting the tainted water at the training and deployment base. At least 850 former residents of the installation have filed administrative claims, totaling nearly \$4 billion.

EPA investigator Tyler Amon testified at the hearing despite objections from the Bush administration. He said that the agency's 2005 criminal investigation at Camp Lejeune had considered accusing civilian Navy employees of obstruction of justice. The Navy (the Marine Corps functions as a part of the Department of the Navy) had balked at funding health impact studies, despite the existence of a statutory requirement. Further, the Navy failed for years to close down the contaminated drinking water system, although it knew about the problem.

The hearing also presented evidence that the Marine Corps delayed initiating health studies for fear of bad publicity, repeatedly failing to produce the necessary documents for the investigations.

Other witnesses who appeared before the subcommittee panel included retired Master Gunnery Sergeant Jerry Ensminger, Dr. Michael Gros and former Marine air traffic controller Jeff Byron, who all served at Camp Lejeune but did not learn of the

contamination until 1997, 1999 and 2000, respectively.

Ensminger, a Marine for 24 years, lost his daughter Janey, 9, to leukemia after she endured painful treatments. He said: "I held her and she screamed in my ear, 'Daddy, don't let them hurt me.'"

Gros told lawmakers that he has accumulated medical bills of more than \$4.5 million and now faces possible bankruptcy. He contracted a rare form of non-Hodgkin's lymphoma due to his work at the base in the 1980s as an obstetrician and gynecologist. "My wife and I now have new full-time careers just staying alive and figuring out how to pay for it all," stated the physician.

Ensminger and retired Maj. Tom Townsend have compiled a 20-foot-high stack of documents primarily obtained under the Freedom of Information Act. Townsend is convinced that the birth defects and fatal heart formation suffered by his infant son, Christopher, as well as the death of his wife of 52 years last year from liver cirrhosis were due to the contamination.

"My question is how many more of these scenarios played out in private hospital rooms or in private rooms of people's homes?" Ensminger asked.

Byron, the former air traffic controller, accused the military of hindering progress on health studies. His two daughters have an array of problems, including a spinal disorder and a rare condition called aplastic anemia. Cindy Cribb said three of her four children were stricken in their 20s with non-Hodgkin's lymphoma and testicular cancer, kidney cancer and unexplained internal pain and kidney problems.

Affected families were outraged that water wells continued to operate for years after tests in 1980-1981 showed that water at one of the camp's treatment plant was "highly contaminated." The contaminants were identified in 1982, but the water systems continued to service the housing, schools, other facilities and swimming pools at the base.

In July 1984, the base began testing individual wells, and by February 1985, shut down 10 showing high levels of solvents. According to the Associated Press (AP), in at least one case, a well showed TCE levels of 18,900 parts per billion, whereas the US government eventually specified "water is unsafe with TCE levels higher than 5 parts per billion at the tap"—i.e., the water had 3,780 times the safe level of TCE.

In the course of 1985, shut wells known to be seriously contaminated were still occasionally used to ease temporary water shortages and other problems.

In April 1985, Maj. Gen. L.H. Buehl told the families that the

affected wells had been shut down as a precaution for “minute” amounts of organic chemicals, failing to mention that contamination levels exceeded maximum recommended exposure limits several times over.

In 1989, Camp Lejeune was added to the Superfund list of the nation’s highly contaminated hazardous waste sites. (The Superfund program, launched in 1980 in the wake of Love Canal, N.Y., was initially funded by a tax on polluters, but now draws its revenues from taxpayer dollars and money that the EPA manages to recover from polluters for work the agency has done at their sites.)

A federal study in 1998 confirmed the link between the solvent-contaminated water and low birth-weight babies born at the base. It underestimated, however, the number of mothers who might have been exposed, assuming that they were provided with untainted water for the four years before a new treatment plant was constructed. In 2003, an investigation was launched into the connection between birth defects and an elevated incidence of leukemia and the base’s contaminated water.

TCE is used for degreasing metals, while PCE is a dry-cleaning agent. Both are common contaminants at military bases and private industrial sites. The 1998 movie *A Civil Action* centered on a lawsuit involving TCE and PCE based on a real case against corporate polluters in Massachusetts.

An environmental health professor at Boston University, Dr. Richard Clapp, an advisor to a panel organized by federal health investigators, told the press that the “Camp Lejeune exposures were quite high, probably some of the highest drinking water exposures ever seen in this country.”

Another health professional, Dr. Andrew Campbell, who directs the Houston, Texas, Medical Center for Immune and Toxic Disorders, said that he had treated many former Camp Lejeune residents who shared common disorders, such as immune, neurological and reproductive problems, and children with rare behavioral and processing problems.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention lists the reported health problems in children exposed in utero to TCE- or PCE-contaminated water: leukemia, smallness for their gestational age, low birth weight, fetal death, major heart defects, neural tube defects, oral cleft defects (including cleft lips), nasal passages blocked with bone or tissue, and eye defects.

More than 150 military installations polluted by TCE and PCE are currently being cleaned up by the EPA. The agency claims that while drinking water at these locations was unaffected, at some sites underground contamination migrated to surrounding neighborhoods.

“From Cape Cod to the Hawaiian Islands, the Defense Department has been forced to provide bottled water, treat ground water and well water and switch residents to municipal water systems. But those incidents have rarely led to litigation or claims like those at Camp Lejeune,” according to AP.

The wire service listed two examples: At the former McClellan Air Force Base in northern California, TCE and PCE were found in 1979 to be migrating from the base to neighborhood wells that served more than 23,000 people. On Cape Cod, the Massachusetts Military Reservation for many years contaminated the central

water source for thousands of local residents with hazardous solvents, rocket fuel and other toxins.

The Center for Public Integrity recently analyzed a confidential EPA document and discovered that about 100 companies, along with the federal government, are connected to more than 40 percent of America’s most dangerously contaminated toxic waste sites. The Center used EPA’s databases to find ties between these companies and the government and about 700 of the Superfund’s 1,623 sites.

Remarkably, nearly one out of three Americans lives within 10 miles of one of these 700 toxic sites, according to U.S. Census data of the 2000 population analyzed by the Center.

At least 114 of the sites could pose immediate health hazards for neighboring communities, according to the EPA, which determined that the risk of human exposure to dangerous contaminants at those sites is not under control or that contaminated groundwater could be migrating off-site.

Meanwhile, victims like Camp Lejeune’s Dr. Gros are plagued by terrible health problems. Gros is housebound due to a compromised immune system, forced to survive on a massive drug regimen. His bid to sue the US government for his condition was recently rejected by a federal appeals court.

“They drag it out and by the time you get them all done, everybody would be dead anyway,” said Gros. “That’s the whole purpose of their delaying tactics and it’s succeeding.”

The indifference of the military and the government to the fate of its troops and their families helps expose the hypocrisy of the American political and media establishment. While it loudly demands that the population “support the troops,” in reality, it sees the servicemen and women as expendable, nothing more than cannon fodder to be used in the pursuit of its geopolitical aims.



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