

Air Force base jet fuel spill threatens Albuquerque water supply

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What a New Mexico Bernalillo County Water Utility Board member has termed a “traveling tsunami” consists of approximately 24 million gallons of jet fuel spilled from Kirtland Air Force Base in Albuquerque, New Mexico. The fuel has been traveling underground towards local neighborhoods, posing a threat to their water wells.

The estimated size of the spill is approximately twice that of the 1989 Exxon Valdez oil tanker spill, which dumped hundreds of thousands of barrels of crude oil into Prince William Sound, Alaska.

According to official sources, the Kirtland spill was first discovered in 1999 and sourced to an old aircraft fuel storage center that dates back to the 1950s. Air Force officials say the fuel was leaking from an underground pipe for at least 40 years dating back to the 1970s. Tests on components of the plume, extracted from a series of test wells, show that it contains benzene and other harmful toxins.

The toxic plume has been migrating outward from its source on the Air Force base, and it remains uncertain if or when it will contaminate the local water wells.

Albuquerque, a southwest desert city of more than half a million people, is already under pressure to maintain local sources of fresh water, and the municipal wells are a key component of the water infrastructure. The declining water situation has been exacerbated by drought conditions that affect virtually all of the US Southwest and which climatologists predict will persist.

Over the last few years, about 130 explorer wells have been dug in and around the local community in an attempt to more fully characterize the extent and amount of the spill. During this process of discovery, estimates of the size and severity of the spill have continued to grow. It has been confirmed to have

spread into at least one nearby neighborhood.

A report prepared for the group *Citizen Action* in 2013 noted that the Air Force was aware that the fuel facility had been leaking for decades as early as 1992 and that replacement and repair of known defective valves and piping was not done. The report disputes Kirtland’s claim that it did not know the aquifer was contaminated until 2007. It calls attention to other already existing contaminations of groundwater at various Albuquerque locations arising from diverse sources.

The report goes on to note:

“Albuquerque’s municipal wells, Kirtland’s supply wells and the Veterans Administration Hospital supply well are all at risk from the spreading plume of contamination of ethylene dibromide (EDB), a potent carcinogen. Military personnel, sick veterans and residents receive water from these wells.

“Kirtland failed to conduct an early and complete investigation into the leaking at the bulk fuels facility, missing an opportunity to remediate and halt the spread of a massive plume of aviation gas and jet fuel contamination that is now estimated at 24,000,000 gallons, the largest toxic spill into a public water supply in U.S. history.

“The Air Force only sees a duty to keep the level of contamination in the drinking water below the maximum limits imposed by the EPA. Because EDB is classified as a probable human carcinogen, as a matter of public policy, EPA sets the recommended level at zero. The allowable limit in New Mexico is 50 parts per trillion (ppt) but only 10 ppt in California and Massachusetts. Why should residents feel secure if the water only contains 49 ppt of EDB at the tap?”

Last June the Albuquerque Bernalillo County Water Utility Authority issued a resolution demanding that

Kirtland Air Force Base “immediately develop and implement an appropriate remediation plan that prevents further migration of the dissolved phase of EDB plume and continue to monitor the location of the plume and install additional monitoring wells to track the movement if it continues towards the Water Utility’s water supply wells.”

Subsequently, the New Mexico Environment Department issued a “notice of violation” in January 2015 to Kirtland Air Force Base after it missed a December 31, 2014 deadline to design and implement an interim plan to begin cleaning up contamination from the fuel spill. The NMED had already extended previous deadlines to the Air Force on remediation plan submissions.

The first well designed to extract groundwater contaminated by EDB is scheduled to start pumping by the end of June 2015 in locations where three nearby monitor wells have shown EDB levels above drinking water standards. A recent probe well was drilled in the area and hit clean water—indicating the bottom of the plume—at about 558 feet below ground.

Three other extraction wells are set to be drilled by the end of 2015 through 2016. The intention of the wells is draw the fuel plume back toward the Air Force base and away from the drinking water wells. As a remediation strategy, the efficacy of this approach is controversial in and of itself.

The clean-up is being engineered by The Shaw Group, presently part of a multinational conglomerate called “Chicago Bridge & Iron Company,” known commonly as CB&I, and who claims on its website to be “the most complete energy infrastructure focused company in the world and a major provider of government services.”

A report issued by “Project Censored” back in 2010 reveals that the US military as a whole is responsible for the most egregious and widespread pollution on earth, including “uninhibited use of fossil fuels, massive creation of greenhouse gases, and extensive release of radioactive and chemical contaminants into the air, water, and soil” and produces more hazardous wastes than the five largest US chemical companies combined.

One might ask just how and why it was that 24 million gallons of jet fuel went missing without ever being noticed and corrected by anyone at Kirtland Air

Force Base. Were the most basic accounting procedures to keep track of public spending at the base completely absent? And if so, how many other examples are waiting to be discovered? The revelation that so much wasted fuel is threatening to poison water supplies adds a new dimension to reports that the Pentagon cannot account for trillions of dollars in expenditures.

Military bases and laboratories consist of some of the most polluted places on earth. In particular, millions of acres of land and water in the American Southwest have been contaminated with radiation through nuclear weapons testing, as well as uranium mines which harm indigenous communities in particular, including Navajo reservations.

The state of New Mexico hosts three Air Force bases, a missile-testing range in White Sands, and an army proving ground and maneuver range.

Other war-related federal installations include Los Alamos National Laboratory and Sandia National Laboratories, the latter of which conducts electronic and industrial research on Kirtland Air Force Base. New Mexico is but one of several southwestern states having a surfeit of secret military installations whose activities are off-limits and invisible to the public.

Local groups have pressured the federal government over decades for federal funding to clean up radioactive waste at Los Alamos National Laboratory and Sandia National Laboratory.

The toxic byproducts of US militarism poison and destroy ecosystems both at home and abroad and threaten the health and survival of millions.



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