

# Engineers find hazard chemicals at old Air Force Base

BY TRICIA CORTEZ  
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The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers has discovered levels of arsenic, chromium, cadmium, lead and petroleum compounds exceeding state environmental limits in soil and groundwater samples taken from the former Laredo Air Force Base.

Corps representatives from Fort Worth and Tulsa, Oklahoma, held a public meeting Thursday night at Newman Elementary to distribute results from tests conducted nearly five years ago.

Boundaries of the sample testing area include Hibiscus, Hillside, Cypress, Cactus, McPherson, Los Ebanos, Daugherty and other streets, as well as further south to areas that fall between Arkansas, Saunders and South Stowe. Currently, the areas are now covered with homes, warehouses, an elementary school and Mercy Health Center.

Corps officials and CH2M Hill hired consultants for the project, were evasive with specifics on how serious is the situation, who is responsible for the clean-up and whether or not there was a potential for those living on or near the contaminated sites to become ill.

"We don't get into medical testing. If it gets to that point, then we would get together with your local health department," Carol Wies, environmental protection specialist with the corps, said.

Federal legislation passed in 1986 requires that the corps perform environmental investigations and clean-ups at properties formerly controlled or used by the Department of Defense.

The program involves nearly 9,000 sites across the country and is known as the Formerly Used Defense Sites Program, or FUDS.

The corps is required to evaluate hazardous, toxic and radiological waste; building demolition and debris removal and explosive debris and then evaluate potentially responsible party investigations.

Wies and Corps Project Manager Brian J. Condit did not know if the city, which bought most of the 2,085 acres of land after the base closed, was required to disclose the results of the corps' investigation to potential home- and land buyers.

"You'll have to check your state laws on real estate," Wies said.

Residents of the area were supposed to receive a post card informing them about the Thursday meeting, according to one CH2M Hill

representative.

However, six of the 20 or so residents who attended, said they did not receive a post card. Instead, they said they learned about the public meeting from a notice that the corps ran in the newspaper.

In all, the corps is investigating six sites within the former air force base, which closed in 1974. These include the shotgun range, industrial waste treatment plant, fuel farm, fire training area, sanitary landfill and construction landfill.

So far, four of these six sites have been determined to contain harmful and/or toxic substances.

Of the 14 samples collected at the shotgun range, lead was found in the groundwater at levels higher than what is permissible by the Texas Natural Resources and Conservation Commission, or TNRCC.

Wies said the groundwater test results "are not a concern for residents because Laredo's groundwater is not used as a drinking source." Further investigation of the site is planned.

Seven borings done at the former industrial waste treatment plant indicate that petroleum compounds were also found at levels exceeding TNRCC standards.

However, the corps determined that this is not a result of the air force base's use of the industrial waste treatment plant. Further investigation to determine the extent and source of contamination is also slated for the near future.

As for the fuel farm, 18 huge underground storage tanks were removed in 1993 and six in 1997. High levels of petroleum products were also found at levels exceeding TNRCC limits.

The corps and city are negotiating a cost-sharing agreement for future monitoring and studies," reads a May 2002 Corps fact sheet.

In the fire training facility site, the corps tested 30 locations and detected arsenic, cadmium and chromium in levels exceeding TNRCC limits.

Water samples also found petroleum compounds exceeding TNRCC limits. The May fact sheet indicates that the corps and city are negotiating a cost-sharing agreement for future monitoring and studies.

As for the sanitary and construction landfills, the corps determined that no contamination existed levels which would endanger human life and will thus perform no other additional tests at those two areas.

Corps officials directed interested people to review various thick binders for specific information on test results at

the different sites. The binders are available at the Laredo Public Library. Interested people can be added to the former Laredo Air Force Base project mailing list by calling 817-886-1313 or by sending an e-mail to [FUDSmailinglist@swf02.usac.e.army.mil](mailto:FUDSmailinglist@swf02.usac.e.army.mil).

"The public is encouraged to ask questions and make comments throughout the process; this input will become part of the public record," reads the May fact sheet.

For more information on the sanitary landfill, shotgun range and industrial waste treatment plant, contact David Scottio at 817-886-1390. For more information on the fire training area, fuel farm and construction landfill, call Lisa Lawson at 918-669-7551.

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## Historical marker unveiling Tuesday

Alumni and the public are invited to the unveiling of the St. Augustine School's historical marker on Tuesday at 7 p.m.

The ceremony will begin in the San Agustin Cathedral with a procession headed by Bishop James A. Tamayo and honor guests Sister Antonette Billeaud, the superior general of the Sisters of Divine Providence; Sister Alma Rose Booty, current principal; and Sisters Casilda Hyzak and Miriam F. Melloin, former faculty.

Josephine Alexander Gonzalez, member of the first graduating class of 1933 and Juanita Aguilar (class of 1937) will represent the alumni.

The elementary school principal, Sylvia Holguin and the high school vice principal, Lupita Jimenez, will represent the faculty.

The senior class will be represented by Alleen Monelou and Jose Montemayor, and the elementary school by Patrick Palacios.