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Neighbors worry over depot drain-off

By Tom Charlier
The Commercial Appeal

During all the years she spent raising eight kids on a secluded dead-end road in South Memphis, Cora Lee Johnson never gave much thought to the drainage ditch next to the plot where she grew vegetables.

As Johnson now knows, however, the ditch drains part of a disposal area at the old Defense Depot Memphis. For decades, depot personnel were burying a variety of wastes, including solvents, acids and chemical-warfare materials, in a field upstream.

"Later on, much later on, we found out about the contamination," says Johnson, 77, who has lived in the home on Rozelle since 1947. Had she and her late husband known about the disposals, "we wouldn't have raised (children) in this environment."

The many ditches winding out of the sprawling depot are getting new attention as federal health officials try to determine whether neighbors such as Johnson have reason to worry about contamination problems at the depot.

In a newly released study, the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR)

found there currently is "no apparent public health hazard." But it cites the Rozelle neighborhood as a possible exception because of the ditches, and it doesn't rule out past environmental threats to depot neighbors.

Now, five years after the initial health assessment on the depot was released, ATSDR wants to conduct further off-site testing. Most of the sampling would be done in soils where overflows from ditches could have deposited toxins over the years.

"I don't think there's anything there, but the prudent thing to do is go and check,"

said John Crellin, senior environmental epidemiologist for ATSDR in Atlanta.

The depot, a 640-acre installation on Airways, has been the focus of growing concerns among neighbors and community activists since before it closed in 1997.

Many of the environmental issues at the base center on Dunn Field, which juts north from the rectangular main base. It was there that many wastes were buried during the 1940s, '50s and '60s — disposals been blamed for groundwater contamination.

As part of the long-term effort to clean up the depot for

future uses, federal officials have been planning to excavate chemical warfare-related material. That includes remains of World War II German mustard gas bombs.

In response to community concerns, ATSDR agreed to re-evaluate its initial 1995 health assessment of the depot, which found no hazard to the public. The agency also reviewed cancer data and helped set up a Greater Memphis Environmental Justice Work Group.

The term environmental justice refers to claims that minorities and low-income communities are exposed to disproportionate risks from toxic

waste and pollution. The population near the depot is overwhelmingly African-American.

In the latest health assessment, which employed updated sampling data, ATSDR officials could not confirm any direct risks to the public emanating from the depot. From the time in which sufficient information was available (1989) until the present, there is no apparent hazard for people living near the depot.

"Currently, no known exposures exist of off-site contaminants that could result in health effects," the study says.

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By Nikki Boertman

Residents wonder if living near the depot is a health risk. Alvera Crockett lost her husband, who never smoked, to lung cancer. Neighbor Willie Wilson, whose son died of leukemia, said, "There have been lots of cancers around the perimeter of this depot."

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One area that might be exposed to dangers is the Rozelle neighborhood just west of Dunn Field.

The report says soil sampling is needed there to determine the presence of any contaminants that might have been deposited in the past by overflowing ditches.

"Obviously, contaminants from the site have gone through the area — there's no disputing that. It's just a matter of what the levels are," said epidemiologist Crellin. Other drainages where residents could have been exposed to contaminants are on the west and southeast sides of the depot. Between 500 and 3,000 residents "could potentially have contact with water" there, the report says.

Currently, the water in ditches flowing off the depot is not polluted enough to affect public health, the study says. But there is insufficient information on contaminant levels before 1989.

ATSDR did find that some depot workers could have faced an increased cancer risk if they had daily exposure to

taunted soils in some parts of the facility.

An examination of cancer data by state and ATSDR officials found no excessive rates among residents living near the facility.

But the cancer review was limited because the only records available were for 1990-96 and they covered broad census tracts instead of areas adjacent to the depot.

"The rates may have been higher in the past, but we don't have the data to look at that," Crellin said. "Currently, the rates are not excessive."

Many depot neighbors, including Johnson, say they don't know if the depot has caused any health problems in their homes.

But all along the perimeter of the facility, stories of cancer deaths among longtime depot neighbors are not difficult to come by.

For instance, Alvera Crockett, 74, who lives just east of Dunn Field, said her husband died of lung cancer nearly 20 years ago despite never having been a smoker. Not many houses away, Willie Wilson, 68, lost a teenage son to leukemia in the 1970s.

"There have been lots of cancers around the perimeter of this depot," Wilson said.

But cancer isn't the only ailment cited by residents as pos-

sibly resulting from depot contaminants.

On Rozelle, James Massey, 46, suspects his kidney failure, resulting in a transplant, is linked to pollution. He said two men who previously lived next door also had kidney trouble.

"If it's contaminated over there (on the depot), I can't see how it couldn't be over here, close as we are," Massey said.

Doris Bradshaw, president of the Defense Depot-Memphis, Tennessee, Concerned Citizens Committee, said it's important that officials "find out why there's so much illness in this community."

The citizens group has sought the additional off-site analyses. But they've arranged for scientists from historically black Howard University to also participate in the testing as a "check-and-balance to make sure nothing is concealed or hidden from the community."

Bradshaw said a primary goal of her group is the establishment of a health center in the community to monitor any medical problems.

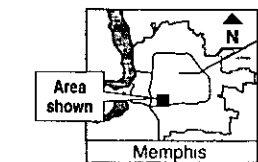
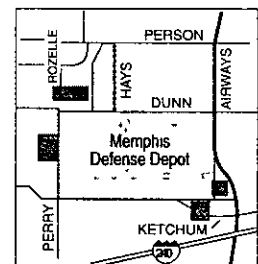
"We do believe the depot has contributed to some of this," she added.

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Depot concerns

In a newly released study, federal health officials found no apparent threats to the public from contamination at the old Defense Depot Memphis. But they want to do some additional testing in neighborhoods where drainage ditches might have carried chemicals off site in past decades.

Shaded blocks indicate general areas of proposed off-site testing.



Staff map

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