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Memphis takes on military depot

Residents believe years of living near toxins at the secretive site are the cause of their health problems.

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By Genevieve Howe
REUTERS

MEMPHIS, Tenn. — Residents of a mostly black, low-income community in Memphis believe there is an insidious health risk in their midst: a square-mile military depot containing the dangerous detritus of war.

Anecdotal evidence suggesting that South Memphis residents living near what was once the military's largest supply storehouse suffer abnormally high rates of illness has led to a concerted effort to peel back the secrecy surrounding the polluted site.

"For 50 years we had minimal dialogue with the community. This was an error," said Denise Cooper of the Memphis Defense Distribution Depot environmental protection and safety office.

Such admissions bring little solace to residents who attribute high rates of cancer, heart and respiratory disease and birth defects to chemicals that they say have seeped from the depot.

Alma Black, 74, has lived a block from the depot for 40 years. Her son Elroy developed testicular cancer at 17, and her nephew Byron Hawes came down with skin cancer at 32. Both men survived, but Black said she knew many in the area who did not.

"The husband of my sister who lives across the street — he died of cancer," she said. "In the next block, three or four people have died of cancer."

Black said she suspects that children playing on the grassy slopes and drainage ditches bordering the depot were exposed to carcinogens and that the water and air are also contaminated.

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cals," said Lois Gibbs, executive director of the Center for Health, Environment and Justice.

But in Memphis and in other communities across the United States, the people the military considered powerless are now forcing the government to take responsibility for what they've done," she said. "The military would never have buried leaking mustard bombs in Beverly Hills."

The Defense Department spends $2 billion annually on environmental restoration efforts that involve 30,000 sites on 2,300 properties. Of the 1,206 sites on the EPA's Superfund list, 153 are government-owned, most of them military.

Bradshaw's wife, Doris, who heads the Tennessee Environmental Justice Network, worried that the pending health reassessment would amount to "a public relations campaign to keep us pacified. But we will do our own PR campaign."

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Cause for action

What finally propelled the depot's neighbors into action was a 1995 assessment from the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry that called it "no apparent public health hazard." Angry residents discovered that the site was on the Environmental Protection Agency's list of Superfund sites needing cleanup and believed that their concerns were dismissed because they were thought to be powerless.

Since then, community pressure has led to a decision to reevaluate the 1995 assessment, and disease rates are being tabulated to determine whether residents are abnormally unhealthy.

Residents successfully lobbied the Tennessee legislature for a law requiring hazardous-waste sites to be marked with warning signs and are getting help securing a government-funded health clinic. If depot chemicals are linked to health problems, the community wants to be moved and compensated.

Memphis could become a proving ground for environmental activists who argue that poor communities have borne the brunt of commercial and military pollution.

"For 55 years the depot operated in an atmosphere of secrecy, control and ignorance of the black community," local activist Kenneth Bradshaw said. "Now they are trying to do things right."

Officials say depot activities from 1942 until it closed in 1997 consisted of storing clothing, medical supplies, electronic equipment, petroleum products, industrial chemicals and construction materials and shipping them to all branches of the military as well as to customers in other nations.

Hazardous ingredients occasionally leaked or spilled, and there is concern about contamination of the aquifer that provides drinking water for the Memphis area's 800,000 people.

Though tests have yet to show that wells are contaminated, state environmental official Jordan English said: "My guess is that there is a strong possibility" of risk to drinking water.

Array of toxins

The depot consists of long warehouses, some built by German prisoners of war, on an otherwise barren, fenced-in expanse mainly devoid of people or vehicles. Studies have identified an array of chemicals there: arsenic, cadmium, trichloroethylene, chromium, pesticides, dioxin, chlordane, lead, mercury, PCBs and even remnants of World War II German mustard-gas bombs.

Cooper said the captured mustard bombs were buried at the site because of a fluke. They were on a train en route to a dump in 1946 when they began leaking, so the train stopped at the depot and its contents were dumped into pits.

Despite suspicions that nuclear weapons are also on the site, Cooper said the only sources of radiation might be from old "compass dials, watch dials and lantern mantels."

Memphis is hardly the only community living with hazardous substances that belong to the military, experts say.

"The Defense Department strategically dumped on communities they thought were too poor, too focused on the day-to-day struggle of getting by, to ever object to the health effects of leaking chemi-

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