

Save The Water: The Invisible Mil-Corp-Water Crisis

By Pat Birnie

More than 50 percent of U.S. tax dollars are devoured by the military budget, money that could be much better spent improving our domestic water supplies. The United States is responsible for 50 percent of the world's military expenditure. Less than 2 percent of that total each year would provide clean water and good sewage disposal for everyone in the world.

The U.S. military produces more hazardous waste than the five largest international chemical corporations combined. Its mil-corp toxic waste is a serious threat to our country's rivers and ground water supply, even to the entire world's water. In addition to toxic contamination, the military also diverts funds that could be used to heal our own and the world's water woes.

Direct pollution of our domestic water supplies by the military is rampant, many in locations where WILPF members are active.

NUCLEAR WEAPONS PRODUCTION

In 2004 the Alliance for Nuclear Accountability (ANA) published a comprehensive report of radioactive and toxic contamination at 13 major nuclear weapons production sites in the United States. With hundreds of factories and hundreds of square miles in ten states, these sites seriously affect water supplies to millions of U.S. citizens.

Among the rivers affected are the Columbia River in Oregon and Washington, the Savannah River on the South Carolina-Georgia border, and Tennessee's Clinch River. Also affected are underground aquifers used for drinking water or irrigation. These include the Ogallala Aquifer beneath Texas, Idaho's Snake River Aquifer, and the Great Miami Aquifer in Ohio. A toxic soup of contamination has traveled from Department of Energy (DOE) sites to groundwater via many routes, including unlined landfills, burial pits, injection wells, pipeline breaks, and open dumping. Now DOE is trying to remove records that document contamination from public Internet sites and reading rooms. The ANA report tells of the major failure of the DOE to eliminate contamination of major water supplies, saying the DOE has cut corners and provided inadequate funds for cleanup and even threatened to withhold cleanup funds unless the states permit waste abandonment.

Western WILPF branches have been involved in exposing such dangerous pollution for years. Examples are Portland Branch and Hanford, and Palo Alto

Branch's exposure of Lockheed's release of toxic poison into the water. There is much more work for our branches to do. We urge WILPF members to participate in efforts to expose and end this pollution and initiate remediation.

Now the government plans to build new nuclear weapons production facilities! These new projects would inevitably generate more radioactive and toxic pollution and pull funds from the inadequate remediation process now underway. It has taken citizen activists near all of these existing contaminated sites to blow the whistle on threats to public health and to motivate the DOE to do remediation.

Conservative, independent estimates put the cost of DOE cleanup at more than \$200 billion. Where is this money coming from when we siphon off so much for fighting wars, providing tax cuts for the wealthy, and now building new facilities to produce nuclear weapons? Cleanup of the legacy of U.S. nuclear weapons production is the biggest environmental project in the nation's history. There appears to be little official resolve to actually get the job done.

DEPLETED URANIUM (DU) AND OUR WATER

The first Gulf War was the first large scale "test" of the new depleted uranium weapon. DU is a waste product from preparation of fuel rods for nuclear reactors and has qualities the military loves: It is heavier than lead so can penetrate targets. It is pyrophoric, so it bursts into flame as it enters its target and is more destructive than ordinary ordnance.

Although its half-life of 4.5 billion years should have been a warning not to use it, military officials are adamant to continue using this wonder weapon. Its health effects appear to be serious, not only to civilian victims, but to our own military personnel. The Veterans Administration admits that more than 250,000 veterans from the first Gulf war have severe health problems, but the VA still will not acknowledge much of the harm is due to DU, as many independent scientists believe.



More studies need to be made to determine the specific effects of DU when consumed in water or inhaled; however, circumstantial evidence is mounting. Much of the harm from DU is caused by inhaling the particles, most of which are not soluble in water. Certain forms of DU are water soluble, according to Dr. Rosalie Bertell, and adversely affect kidneys of victims, causing chemically toxic reactions.

Water-soluble DU can also adversely affect farm animals and produce, as some claim has happened in southern Iraq. For example, date palms concentrate DU in their fruits, making it a risk to eat dates and slashing the value of this important cash crop. In another case, an Iraqi veterinary surgeon claims that a 100 percent fish kill at a fish farm thirty miles south of Baghdad was caused by DU.

Authoritative research is in process to back up these claims. With production facilities at Alliant Tech in Minnesota; the former Starmet production site in Concord, Massachusetts; the Aberdeen Proving Grounds in Maryland; the Vieques firing range off the coast of Puerto Rico; as well as Iraq and Kosovo battlegrounds, there are many opportunities for scientists to do definitive studies.

Meanwhile, WILPF recommends the Precautionary Principle, where DU is withdrawn as a weapon until the full tests can be conducted and evaluated.

PERCHLORATE AND OUR WATER

The military also spreads its chemical contamination at hundreds of bases, and much contamination is present at corporation sites that build missiles or other weapons for military contracts. Lockheed Martin, Raytheon, Boeing, Bechtel, and Alliant Tech Systems are just a few of the corporations with a history of toxic spills or parties to EPA Superfund Sites. The toxic stewards include dozens of unpronounceable names of compounds that have specialized uses for the military and can cause contamination by careless use and disposal.

One chemical that causes major health problems is perchlorate, a toxic and explosive component of rocket and missile fuel. It has long-lasting health implications for millions of consumers of Colorado River water, either as drinking water or for irrigating lettuce and other vegetable crops. Vegetation concentrates the poisons, making the edible crops hundreds of times more toxic. Perchlorate impairs the thyroid's ability to take up iodide and produce hormones critical to proper brain development in fetuses and infants.

Lockheed Martin's operations in California, along with other military polluters, have contaminated 300 drinking water sources and farm wells in California and an unknown number of sources in at least fifteen other



To find out more about WILPF's Save the Water campaign, go to www.wilpf.org/campaigns/water. There you will find resources and ways to get involved.

states. The contaminated Colorado River is the primary source of irrigation water for farms in California, Nevada, and Arizona that grow the majority of lettuce sold in the United States during winter months. The federal government does not have protective regulations for the amount of perchlorate that is "safe" for the most vulnerable of our population, such as babies or older people. In July 2006 the state of Massachusetts established a 2-parts-per-billion (ppb) limit, the first in the nation. The Environmental Working Group estimates that 44 million women are at risk of thyroid deficiency from this rocket fuel chemical, and it recommends a limit of .1 ppb as a safe level. The Colorado River carries 9 ppb at some locations.

TRICHLOROETHYLENE (TCE) POLLUTES WATER

TCE is another toxic chemical that is widespread, having been a widely used de-greaser in military, aeronautical, or industrial applications. The health effects of TCE ingestion (or even showering in the TCE water) include liver and lung damage, impaired fetal development, and impaired heart function. Many of the people near the TCE Superfund site in Tucson, Arizona, still bear the scars of health damage and family disruption due to the Hughes Missile factory (now Raytheon). TCE contamination is widespread at military bases and weapons factories all across the United States.

So what happens when the Pentagon is responsible for more than 1,400 pieces of property at which the groundwater is contaminated with TCE? The military has lobbied for and achieved ever-more exemptions from regulations requiring environmental cleanup. We, the people, must demand accountability, must demand cleanup NOW, and demand a halt to further contamination!

Across the United States at contaminated military sites where remediation efforts have taken place, citizen interveners have been the lifeblood of making things happen. WILPF's role in that effort has been monumental! Are you active in promoting remediation in YOUR area?

Pat Birnie serves on the WILPF national DISARM! committee leadership team, facilitates the Tucson Branch, and is a member of Tucson Raging Grannies.