

PCBs halt housing project

Fort Wainwright probes cause of contamination

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Construction of a \$55 million housing development on Fort Wainwright Army Post was halted Tuesday after the site was found to be contaminated.

Army officials cleared the 54-acre Taku Garden housing project of construction workers after soil testing revealed the presence of the cancer-causing chemical compound, PCB.

Bob Hall, spokesman for the US Army's Alaska garrison, said the level of PCB contamination in the area varied, but that some soil samples showed "extremely high" levels—as high as 115,000 parts per million.

Army officials said estimates were preliminary and that work is ongoing to determine the extent of the contamination. Approximately 250 cubic yards of soil was originally excavated, most of which appears to be contaminated.

The contamination was discovered when contractors breaking ground to do foundation work on the military housing project in late June reported a chemical odor in the soil.

Initial soil samples tested positive for solvents, but were not screened for PCBs. Additional testing revealed the presence of the chlorine-based chemical compound.

Army officials originally thought the contamination was limited to a small area of the 54-acre site, but further testing revealed the presence of PCBs over a wider area, prompting the August shutdown.

Army officials alerted the Alaska Department of Environmental Conservation and the Environmental Protection Agency to help determine the full extent of the contamination.

Hall said the Army collected soil samples before construction started but that those samples did not reveal the presence of PCBs.

"The contaminants were found a couple of feet below the surface and, unfortunately, those samples weren't taken from deep enough in that area," he said.

The Army is studying aerial photos from the 1950s to try to determine the origin of the contamination. The photos show communications buildings in the area. Transformers used at those facilities could be the source of the PCBs, which were used in transformers and capacitors for insulating purposes until they were banned in 1979, Hall said.

The buildings were demolished in the late 1960s and no further industrial activity was done at the site, Hall said.

The Army is building 128 badly needed family housing units on the site. The development was scheduled to be completed next September and Army officials are hopeful the project won't be delayed for long.

"We have a significant short-fall in housing," said Linda Douglass, spokeswoman for Fort Wainwright Army Post. "We expect to resolve the situation at Taku Gardens and resume construction as soon as we can safely do so."

How long the clean-up will take and how much it will add to the cost of the project is not yet known.

"That's going to depend a lot on the extent of the contamination and they're still doing testing," Douglass said.

A team of Army medical personnel are conducting groundwater and air samples to assess the health risk and make sure the contaminants haven't spread.

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