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US

## Army's \$100 Million Housing from Hell: Alaska's Taku Gardens

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Washington, DC, June 12, 2008 -- For more than three years, the U.S. Army has hemorrhaged money into an Alaskan housing complex that will likely never be occupied, according to agency documents released today by Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility (PEER). After a damning internal investigation, the Army ordered a new review which excused any misconduct as a failure to communicate, conceding only that "this was not an organization optimally aligned for success."

Under intense pressure to provide housing at booming Fort Wainwright, in 2005 base officials authorized building 128 units on a 54-acre site, called Taku Gardens but with only cursory environmental assessment. Unfortunately, that site was an old weapons and equipment dump, profoundly contaminated with munitions (some holding chemical agent), dioxin, PCBs, tons of drums and equipment (including an entire locomotive and a forklift). By the time construction was halted, 79 units had been built but will likely have to be torn down.

An internal Army review completed on April 21, 2006 was scathing in faulting, among other lapses -

- \* Skewed decision-making in failing to halt construction when problems were first discovered: "Who is in charge? Lines of responsibility, accountability and authority are muddled";
- \* Failure to secure the contaminated construction site from nearby playgrounds and housing: "Construction sites and equipment are child magnets"; Extensive guidance exists regarding this but none of it was adhered to" and
- \* Spreading contamination "via vehicles, wind and probably foottraffic [sic]" by not properly covering or monitoring profoundly dangerous soils.

"Taku Gardens is such a monumental screw-up the Army cannot countenance culpability because the reins of responsibility run very high up the chain-of-command," stated PEER Executive Director Jeff Ruch, who obtained the internal reports under the Freedom of Information Act. "This command found it far easier to commission a new review than dealing with the indictments of the original investigation."

Completed on July 3, 2007, this new review pledged to dispel the "witch hunt atmosphere" existing at the base. In contrast to the original investigation, this review found that "Any potential violations of Federal or State law or regulations by Government personnel would be minor and attributable to difference of interpretation" - a sentence repeated verbatim a numbing 15 times in the 21-page report.

This new review did admit an extreme emphasis on rapid completion of construction to expand the Army, especially base housing: "In one case [application processing] for a 'Grow the Force Project' was recently done at Fort Wainwright in 40 minutes with generic sites due to pressure from Washington level HQ."

In April 2008, the Army said it would begin yet another round of hazardous waste investigation and clean-up at Taku Gardens, where last year more than 1,800 tons of PCB-tainted soils were removed. The Army hopes to be done with this next phase by the end of 2010.

"The Army still has no idea what else it will uncover at this housing-from-hell sinkhole," added Ruch, pointing to the growing realization that radioactive material may also be buried among the many, many tons of debris layered throughout the site. "Before it is done, the Army will spend well more than \$1 million for each planned unit, meaning that it would have been far cheaper to buy each family a mansion than trying to house them in Taku Gardens."

PEER is asking the Department of Defense Inspector General to step into the case in order to review both the underlying environmental breakdowns as well as the subsequent failure of command accountability.

Read the PEER Inspector General complaint:

[http://www.peer.org/docs/dod/08\\_12\\_6\\_dod\\_oig\\_taku\\_complaint.pdf](http://www.peer.org/docs/dod/08_12_6_dod_oig_taku_complaint.pdf)

See the original Army internal investigation of Taku Gardens:

[http://www.peer.org/docs/dod/08\\_12\\_6\\_original\\_taku\\_investigation.pdf](http://www.peer.org/docs/dod/08_12_6_original_taku_investigation.pdf)

Compare the second review ordered by the Army:

[http://www.peer.org/docs/dod/08\\_12\\_6\\_second\\_taku\\_review.pdf](http://www.peer.org/docs/dod/08_12_6_second_taku_review.pdf)

View Alaska DEC background information on Taku Gardens:

<http://www.dec.state.ak.us/spar/csp/sites/ftwainwright.htm>