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# Housing horrors



Eric Engman photos/News Miner

A pile of soil with lead traces sits contained and ready for transport and disposal as contamination cleanup continues at the Taku Gardens housing complex Thursday on Fort Wainwright. Construction on the 110-unit housing complex, which started in 2005, was halted when contaminants and munitions were unearthed at the site.

## Army housing site primed for investigation

Contamination, buried old munitions halted original construction

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A Washington D.C.-based watchdog group is asking the Department of Defense Inspector General to investigate why the Army built housing over an area of Fort Wainwright contaminated with a toxic chemical and filled with old munitions.

Construction was halted in the summer of 2005 at Taku Gardens, a planned 128-unit housing area on Fort Wainwright, when construction crews discovered two inert bombs dating from near World War II. Only 79 housing units on the 54-acre site have been



"I've lost track of the thousands of samples taken from the area," Fort Wainwright public works environmental specialist Joseph Malen said while pointing out an excavation site Thursday where soil samples were taken as contamination cleanup continues at the Taku Gardens housing complex on base.

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completed to date.

Since then, six more pieces of inert munitions have been discovered as well as an area roughly 100 feet by 10 feet contaminated with PCBs, an organic compound once used as a coolant that can cause rashes and poison humans. PCBs may also be harmful to the cognitive development of humans.

"This is a huge screw up, and the Army's only explanation is that it was the result of miscommunication," said Jeff Ruch, the executive director of Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility, the group calling for the Department of Defense investigation.

PEER claims a membership of more than 1,000 civilian federal employees dedicated to upholding environmental laws. Two civilian employees originally came forward to PEER with their concerns that there was not a proper environmental assessment of Taku Gardens, Ruch said.

Bob Hall, the public affairs officer for U.S. Army Garrison Alaska, said such accusations are baseless. Contractors were required to take lone core sample to test for contaminants for every acre of the construction site, and they hoped to miss the relatively small area containing PCBs, he said.

"The PEER report is pretty full of inaccuracies," Hall said.

PEER also claims that chemical agents were found at the site and that radioactive materials may also

be found there. The Army clarified that one M-47 canister contained an unknown liquid which had to be treated as a chemical agent until it was found to be water.

"I have no idea what they're referring to with radioactive material," Hall said.

Ruch said the possibility of radioactive materials under Taku Gardens was mentioned by one of the two civilians who came forward to PEER. What is clear, however, is that there is still work to be done to clean up the construction site. U.S. Army Garrison Alaska is currently working with state and federal organizations to complete an environmental investigation.

It's likely that some housing built over the land contaminated by PCBs will have to be torn down. PEER estimates the total project will cost \$100 million, while Hall said the Army will have spent about \$68 million before a single family can move into Taku Gardens. PEER has yet to receive a response to their complaint sent to the Department of Defense last week. Ruch said the group might take their concerns to Congress eventually.

"Beyond Taku Gardens, there's the larger concern of the lack of environmental compliance in the armed services," he said. "It's typically not regarded as central to the mission. They feel it's insistent, and right now this could happen again tomorrow."

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