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Officials defend cleanup of toxic plume from old El Toro base

Despite repeated assurances that TCE plume doesn't pose a risk to residents, some skeptics have taken to e-mail and the internet to question the cleanup.

By SEAN EMERY
THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

IRVINE – Years of work and millions of dollars have gone into the cleanup of a toxic plume released from the old El Toro airbase, with local leaders continually assuring residents that the contamination is too far down and too low a concentration to pose a health risk.

But despite assurances from the city, water district and Navy, a vocal group of skeptics has taken to the Internet and e-mail to argue that the solvent-laced water poses a real risk to nearby, as well as future, residents.

While officials say concerns about the cleanup is nothing new, the increased drive by the skeptics, including some former Marines and El Toro airport proponents, to question the project and accuse project leaders of covering up the truth has forced city and water district leaders to publicly respond.

"There is this notion afoot that the contamination at the old base is so bad that no one can build anything out there," said Councilman Larry Agran, who also serves as Great Park chairman. "The real story is that the identification and cleanup has gone forward with almost no surprise at all."

The Cleanup

The plume is a result of more than 30 years of aircraft maintenance using a solvent known as Trichloroethylene, or TCE, which was later learned to be a carcinogen. The TCE was often poured onto the ground, and, over the years, carried into the earth by rainwater.

The plume now extends about 3 miles northwest of the base, under nearby Woodbridge neighborhoods. Officials estimate that the plume ranges in depth from about 150 feet under the base to 300 to 1,000 feet under Woodbridge.

The Navy and the Irvine Ranch Water District have created a system to extract the contaminated water and treat it at a nearby Desalter plant, where the TCE is filtered out and disposed. Once stripped of the TCE, the water is used for irrigation. The Navy is footing the bill for the project, which is expected to cost more than \$30 million and last decades.

But critics say they were startled to learn recently that trace amounts of TCE were found in one of 18 drinking water wells near Santa Ana. Water District officials say the well was immediately turned off before the water reached the drinking water system. They also deny the TCE in the well came from El Toro, claiming it was most likely from a polluter near Santa Ana.

"It has never been detected in a person's home, and we turned it off right away," said Irvine Ranch Water District Assistant General Manager Paul Cook, who noted that specific testing in Woodbridge the past two years has found no TCE in the drinking water.

An ongoing debate

El Toro was designated a superfund site in 1990, five years after the TCE contamination was first discovered. As debate raged during the 90's about what to do with the former base, both pro and anti-airport forces argued that the contamination made the site unusable as either an airport or a park.

The voters' backing of the Great Park killed off the airport plan, but, for some, the environmental questions remained. Bill Turner, a vocal airport proponent who runs the eltoronow.com web page, has often accused officials of downplaying the contamination issues. Turner is particularly concerned about the possible impacts of TCE vapors in neighborhoods above the plume.

"It could come up through the cracks in the foundation, and then it wouldn't have anywhere to escape," Turner said. "What would make me happy is if they would take 100 houses and test to make sure there isn't TCE."

Tony Megliola, base closure manager for the Navy in a written response to the Register said Navy, state and federal regulatory agencies agree that testing for TCE vapor isn't necessary. He said an evaluation of the contamination indicated that it doesn't pose an "unacceptable risk" to human health.

Others concerned about the cleanup have personal ties to El Toro.

Former Marine Robert O'Dowd, who was stationed at El Toro for two years during the 1960's, started [a website](#) critical of the cleanup after learning it had been turned into a Superfund site. O'Dowd said his main focus is on reaching out to other Marines who may have been exposed to TCE.

"I started the blog to get the word out," O'Dowd said. "I don't want to see anybody exposed to it."

O'Dowd has also worked with another former El Toro Marine, Tim King, a reporter for Oregon-based Salem-News.com who has published more than a dozen articles sharply questioning the cleanup.

Many of the cleanup critics seized on an incendiary, although apparently fake, article attributed to the "Financial Times News" alleging a TCE cover up at the base that circulated this summer online, and, according to some reports, in residents' mailboxes. The article was largely comprised of anonymous quotes, and neither the author nor the publication it was credited to could be found.

"My thought was 'who would benefit from, or who has an interest in, the possibility of there being some problem?'" Agran said. "I think of the old-guard, the pro-airport forces. But there is always a potential litigant of some sort."

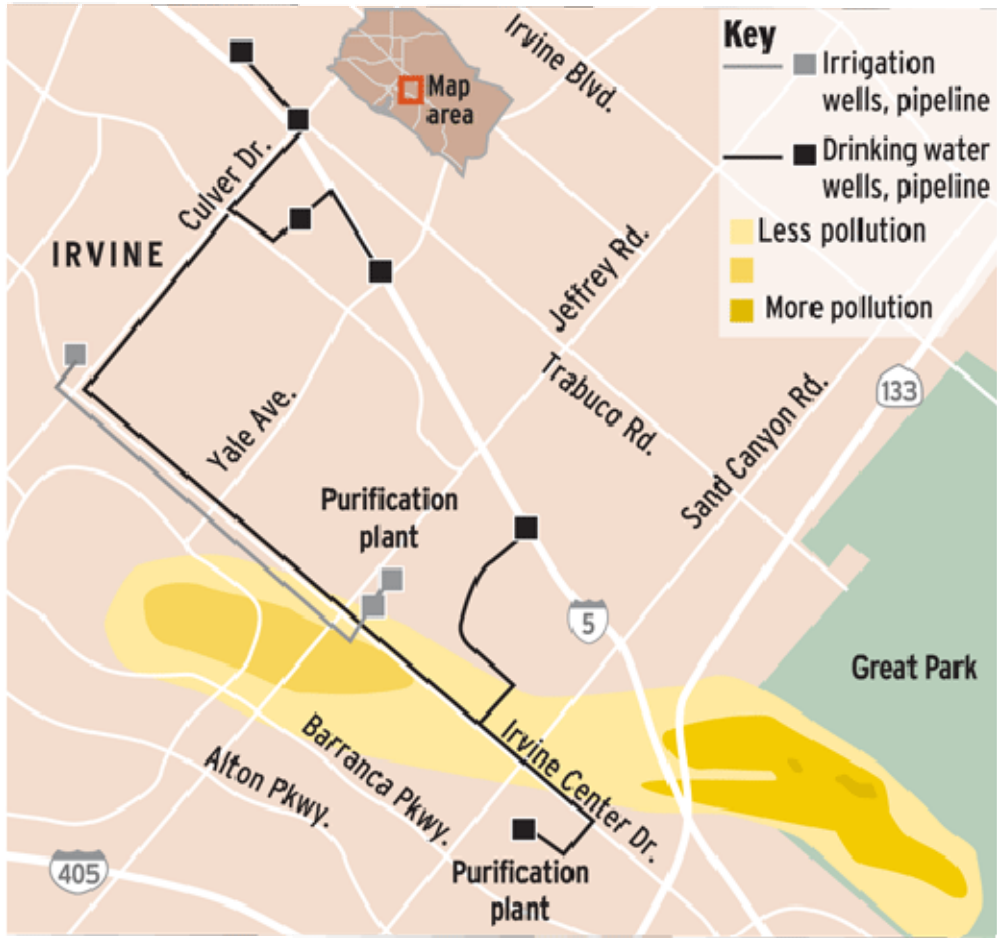
Despite the online debate, city and water district officials say they have heard few concerns from residents about the plume. City officials have also worked to alleviate concerns by placing an update on the cleanup prominently on the city website, <http://www.cityofirvine.org>, as well as hosting several public updates at Great Park and council meetings.

"When this is all done it will be seen as the gold standard for environmental cleanup and restoration," Agran said.

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A view of the old El Toro airbase, which closed in 1999. The Navy is in charge of cleaning up the base, as the city and Lennar Corp. prepare to turn it into the Great Park and surrounding private developments.



Source: Irvine Ranch Water District

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