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Former Military Site in Alaska Contaminated with Toxic Chemicals

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Aug. 30--FAIRBANKS, Alaska--Just west of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge and squarely situated in the middle of nowhere, a remote military site has become a favorite summer camp of big game hunters and sportsman. But while visitors enjoy pristine views of the Arctic tundra, they may not realize the site is heavily contaminated with polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs), a cancer-causing chemical agent.

An assessment conducted by the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry indicates the site was declared an "intermediate public health hazard" this summer. That classification puts it among the most polluted sites in the country.

The Umiat Air Force site was created as a base of operations for oil exploration by the Navy in 1944. The Air Force took over ownership in 1953, and after 1960 it was closed and transferred to the Bureau of Land Management. Part of the site is owned by the Alaska Department of Transportation, which leases it to a back-country hunting outfitter, Taiga Ventures.

Over the years, visitors have adorned the ramshackle buildings with moose antlers and a sign that facetiously reads "Umiat Hilton." Last year Taiga Ventures rebuilt the "Hilton" and now has a brand-new lodge on the property. Beyond the small cluster of buildings that once comprised an Air Force and Navy hub is an endless expanse of flat wetlands where moose, caribou, and other wildlife roam.

Visitors tend to stay away from the contaminated wells and landfills that dot the property, according to Taiga Ventures. But the Army and the Alaska Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) still haven't documented the full extent and exact location of the contamination at Umiat.

In 1991 the DEC discovered high levels of PCB contamination at several of the wells where the Navy had drilled for petroleum. An airstrip, gravel pad, and landfill were also highly polluted with solvents, PCBs, DDT, diesel fuel, and heavy metals.

Over the past decade, the Corps has removed 1,000 drums containing petroleum products and solvents and 300 gallons of PCBs. The Umiat site was identified as one of the top cleanup priorities for the Army Corps of Engineers, which supervises the remediation of more than 100 contaminated sites in Alaska.

In 1998 concern about Umiat's impact on the Arctic ecosystem escalated when the Corps found elevated PCB levels in fish from the adjacent Colville River. Sediment from a slough near the Umiat airfield also contained significant amounts of PCBs.

A human health and ecological risk assessment conducted by the Army Corps and the Department of Environmental Conservation found that the contaminated main gravel pad area at the site posed a human health risk that exceeded regulatory standards for PCBs and dioxins. Fish from the seasonal slough also exceeded those standards.

One well contains exceedingly high PCB contamination -- on the order of 240 parts per million (ppm). The Environmental Protection Agency recommends removal and disposal of soil containing PCBs above 50 ppm.

"We are concerned about those levels and have included a removal action for those PCBs in our 2003 work plan," said Curtis King, Umiat project manager for the Army Corps of Engineers.

The agency responsible for the cleanup of the toxic site doesn't know why it's so highly contaminated. "Maybe somebody used PCB oil in the drilling process as an additive," said Tamar Stephens, DEC project leader for Umiat. "What the rationale was for using this stuff back in the 1940s and '50s is somewhat bewildering sometimes."

In two wells that border the nearby Colville River, petroleum contamination is so high that Stephens suspects deliberate dumping may have occurred. "I have heard that sometimes rather than back-hauling fuel tanks, sometimes excess fuel would just be drained into a pad," she said.

Those oil wells are of urgent concern to the Native Inupiaq village of Nuiqsut, which is downstream from the site. The Colville River has seasonally eroded the bank near the wells, bringing the water dangerously close to the toxics that lie within.

"Our biggest health concern is the contamination to the fish in the river. This last winter a lot of the fisherman didn't want to take home any burbot to eat for fear of eating a lot of the PCBs and DDT that was discovered up here," said James Taalak, cultural guardian for the village of Nuiqsut.

"The pad between the wells and the edge of the river is petroleum contaminated, and the river has reached the pad itself," said Stephens. "Fortunately, we're going to be excavating and stockpiling that soil this winter."

Hunting visitors to the Umiat site have been dropping off in recent years. One Taiga Ventures employee attributes that trend to the dwindling number of moose found in the area, not the mounting evidence that Umiat is awash in contaminants. Cleanup efforts at the site will continue next year.

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