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US can't vouch for cancer assurances to Marines

By RITA BEAMISH – Apr 28, 2009

 Associated Press

In an about-face, the government Tuesday disavowed a 12-year-old federal report that found little or no cancer risk for adults who lived on a Marine base where drinking water was contaminated for three decades.

Up to 1 million people could have been exposed to toxins that seeped from a neighboring dry cleaner and industrial activity at Camp Lejeune, N.C., federal officials say. Now, a report that minimized the cancer threat for adults has been discredited.

"We can no longer stand behind the accuracy of the information in that document," William Cibulas, director of health assessment for the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry, said at a meeting in Atlanta. "We know too much now."

Sick veterans, who became known as "poisoned patriots," and their advocates never believed the report's conclusions. Their families have filed claims for \$33.8 billion in damages. A study continues on whether fetuses might have been harmed.

The agency, charged with protecting public health around toxic sites, said it was rescinding the 1997 assessment on health effects of water that residents of the base drank and bathed in, because of omissions and scientific inaccuracy. That study found the water contamination began in the 1950s and continued until wells were shut down in 1987.

The agency offered no new health conclusions but will pull the flawed document from the Internet while incorporating new science to rewrite what Cibulas called "troublesome" sections.

Jerry Ensminger, a retired Marine who has spent years digging through military and health documents at Camp Lejeune and believes his daughter Janey's leukemia death at age 9 was due to the water, welcomed the government's reversal on the report.

"We are in Day 99 of change, and by God we're starting to see it," he said, meaning the change promised by President Barack Obama. The report in question dates to Bill Clinton's administration.

Officials said that some sections of the document were still valid, including those dealing with past concerns about lead in water and contamination of fish, and analysis of pesticide hazards in soil. People now will have to contact the health agency in Atlanta via e-mail or phone to obtain that information now removed from the Web site, a spokeswoman said.

Among its problems, the document omitted mention of the cancer-causing chemical benzene, which military sampling found in a base well in 1984. Researchers should have mentioned its high levels and tried to verify whether it reached the drinking water, said Cibulas. He said Ensminger recently brought the omission of benzene to his attention.

Additionally, the contaminating solvents that officials focused on have been characterized by new science as even more likely to cause cancer, he noted.

Cibulas also cited findings, reported in a 2007 Associated Press investigation of the water contamination, that the study underestimated the extent of the contamination on the base due to inadequate information from the Marines.

His unusual announcement came at a meeting of the health agency, part of the Health and Human Services Department, and its community advisory panel that works on follow-up to Camp Lejeune's past water problems.

Members of the panel have long criticized the health document's failings. Lawmakers who heard the Marines' stories last year dubbed them "poisoned patriots."

A table in the document stated unequivocally that adults faced no increased cancer risk from the water. Elsewhere, the report said cancer was not likely but more study was needed.

Cibulas voiced concern that the report was misinterpreted by Veterans Affairs and others as saying: "No way, no how, would any person who drank contaminated water at Camp Lejeune be expected to suffer any adverse health effects, be they cancerous or non-cancerous."

"The science is just not that good for us to make that determination," he said.

The 1997 assessment said children's cancer risk was unknown, but it cited studies showing potential cancer dangers from solvent-tainted water for fetuses. That led to an ongoing study by the agency into whether babies whose mothers drank the water were born with elevated leukemia or birth defects.

The agency estimated as many as 1 million people at the Atlantic-seaboard base could have been exposed to the toxins; the Marines have estimated 500,000.

Levels of one solvent, known as TCE, were the highest ever measured in a U.S. public water supply, according to an agency scientist.

"We keep coming up with more and more stuff," said Allen Menard, a former Marine on the

community panel who suffers a rare non-Hodgkin's lymphoma that his doctors linked to chemical exposure.

"They knew about the benzene," he said. "Why didn't they tell us?"

The reversal comes at a sensitive time for the toxic substances agency, following a blistering report last month by congressional investigators who accused it of obscuring or overlooking potential health hazards at toxic sites. The agency's director, Howard Frumkin, promised Congress he was working to improve on any shortcomings.

Military families "have suffered needlessly because of the agency's flawed work," Rep. Brad Miller, D-N.C., said Tuesday.

Health officials wrote to Veterans Affairs last month warning that a VA report had read too much into the Camp Lejeune health assessment and it should not be used as the basis to deny disability benefits.

According to the Navy's legal office, which handles claims, 1,500 people have filed claims for \$33.8 billion in damages. The military is waiting for conclusions from the current study of fetal effects before deciding the claims.

On the Net:

- Federal information on the base and its water: <http://www.atsdr.cdc.gov/SITES/LEJEUNE>

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Camp Lejeune Water Study

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