

# THE WARD THREE DEMOCRATIC COMMITTEE

## NEWS RELEASE

### **International And Local Experts Assess Impact Of Failure To Fully Remediate World War I-Era Military Pollution In Ward 3 Community**

A panel of international and local experts warned that local residents and the DC government needed to push the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) to ensure that its 16-year clean up of World War I chemical munitions at American University (AU) and in the surrounding neighborhood is thorough before the USACE concludes its work next year, as scheduled. Panelists expressed particular concern about the threat to the city's drinking water supply due to high levels of perchlorate in groundwater at AU, Sibley Hospital, and on land adjacent to the Delacarla Reservoir, which is thought to be linked to the burial of still undiscovered chemical munitions in the area.

The panel which took place last week at a meeting of the Ward Three Democratic Committee examined challenges confronting the clean up of chemical military pollution in Spring Valley and at more than 200 other sites across the country. Chemical weapons were found in Spring Valley in 1993 during construction of a new residential development. The weapons were buried by the Army nearly 90 years ago as part of its use of AU as a World War I chemical weapons research and experimental station. At the time, AU was the world's second largest site for chemical weapons research and development.

A theme of the panel was the need for more transparency to ensure USACE is accountable for its work. Several panelists noted that the Army and AU knew that chemical weapons had been buried in the community in the early 1900's but had failed either to disclose the information or to work to remediate the site until the 1993 discoveries.

Dr. Jeffrey Kraskin, a 50-year Spring Valley resident and a member of Mayor Anthony Williams' Health Policy Council of the Spring Valley Scientific Advisory Panel, and the moderator of the recent panel discussion, noted that munitions had been found before 1993 during construction on the AU campus, but that AU did not inform the public of the scope of the military's use of the campus and the toxic nature of the weapons that had been buried.

"We thought at the time that the discovery of chemical weapons in 1993 was the first modern day find of munitions in our community," he said. "In reality, over the past 90 years, remnants of this amazing laboratory were known by our government and in the AU archives."

4601 TILDEN STREET N.W.  
PHONE: (202) 364-7130

WASHINGTON, D.C. 20016  
FAX: (202) 363-4452  
E-MAIL: TMFSMITH@STARPOWER.NET

Ginny Durrin, an Academy Award nominated filmmaker, who is working on a feature documentary of the Spring Valley clean up, called “Bombs In Our Backyard,” said the DC Department of the Environment (DDOE) needed to play a more aggressive role in the clean up and stressed the need for a health study of the effects of long term exposure to the toxic munitions. “I would like to see the DDOE step up and have a stronger profile,” she said. “The health issues need to be dealt with. There is no budget for a health study as recommended by a Johns Hopkins report two years ago. Additionally, indoor air testing should be done. That is where residents have the greatest exposure – inside their own homes. Why hasn’t this been done?”

The issue that triggered the most reaction by the nearly 100 residents in attendance at the meeting was the potential threat to the area’s water supply stemming from perchlorate associated possibly with still-buried chemical weapons. Eric Olson, a former Deputy Staff Director for the U.S. Senate Committee on Environment and Public Works, and an expert in public health and toxic substances, warned of high levels of perchlorate in the groundwater at AU, near Sibley Hospital, and adjacent to the Dalecarlia Reservoir. If this groundwater penetrates the reservoir, he warned, the perchlorate could pose a serious community health risk. He said evidence has demonstrated that perchlorate can interfere with the thyroid and affects development of fetuses and young children. He noted that the levels of perchlorate in this area were higher than safety standards set by several other states.

An attempt by the EPA to set a national safety standard for perchlorate was derailed by the U.S. military during the Bush administration. New EPA Administrator Lisa Jackson has committed to establishing a safety standard for perchlorate during her Senate confirmation hearings.

Olson noted that perchlorate already has been found in the reservoir and in the drinking water but at levels much lower than found in the groundwater near AU, Sibley, and adjacent to the reservoir.

“My concern is not the levels now, but where is the chemical coming from,” Olson said. “Contamination appears to be moving slowly through the ground and eventually could be moving to the reservoir. We need comprehensive monitoring of the groundwater, comprehensive clean up, and full disclosure. We also need aggressive monitoring of our tap water to be sure it is safe.”

Marina Vornorova of Global Green USA, which has been working to facilitate the destruction of chemical weapons in the U.S. and Russia, also warned that residents should work to ensure the safety of the community when newly-discovered chemical weapons are destroyed in the community near Sibley Hospital, as now scheduled, later in May. She noted that toxic chemicals will be shipped into the community to destroy these weapons. “These chemical are very dangerous,” Vornorova said. “It is important the community know all the details of the planned destruction and the potential dangers.”

Harold Bailey, a Superfund attorney, who has represented U.S. municipalities, corporations, and foreign governments dealing with the dangers of chemical, biological, and conventional weapons testing and disposal, outlined a series of mistakes by AU, USACE, and the DC government that have delayed remediation of the site. He called on AU to release records in the archives that would show the locations where munitions were tested and buried. He also said that USACE should be more thorough in its investigation of all areas where there is credible evidence of munitions burial instead of planning to leave the site before the remediation is complete. He also urged the DDOE to conduct more aggressive oversight and to conduct independent testing of groundwater, soil, and indoor air to assure residents the clean up is complete and the community is safe.

“This site was the Manhattan Project of World War I,” Bailey said. “What other states dealing with military pollution have learned is that they have to aggressively push the Army to be thorough and to commit the resources to do so. We need to learn from mistakes, not just play a blame game.”

Nan Wells, an ANC Commissioner representing part of the Spring Valley community, expressed concern that USACE has not demonstrated to the community that its work is completed. She noted that the USACE says that much of the information about the current clean up cannot be shared with the public because of national security reasons. “We have not been able to get a complete list of munitions and chemical weapons that have been uncovered and that are now stored behind Sibley Hospital,” she said. “The information is restricted because of national security. So, you can store these things behind a hospital, near an assistive living facility, and near a residential community, but you can’t tell the community what is stored there because it is so dangerous. Sometimes, the logic is challenging.

“USACE has walked away from our community prematurely before,” she added. “So, if you ask me what the Spring Valley community needs, it needs transparency. We need the information to be public. We need to be able to report to the residents what is going on. As former President Ronald Reagan said, ‘Trust, but verify.’ That was a good motto then and it’s a good motto now for our community.”

Vornorova concluded by saying that residents of Spring Valley are a model for many other communities across the world that are dealing with similar contamination from military pollution. “We see the Spring Valley community as the leader in promoting a proactive approach to clean up and remediation,” she said. “Only when the area is fully remediated can we be assured of our safety. We encourage you to keep pressing the case in Spring Valley.”

Also participating in the panel discussion was Jim Sweeny, the chief of DDOE’s Land Remediation and Development Branch.

Ward 3 Councilmember Mary Cheh, the chair of the DC Council Committee on Government Operations and the Environment, has announced that a public roundtable on the Spring Valley clean up will take place on May 11.