

Agency for Toxic Substances
and Disease Registry
Atlanta GA 30333

Ms. Elsie L. Munsell
Deputy Assistant Secretary
Installations and Environment
Department of the Navy
1000 Navy Pentagon (Rm. 13721)
Washington, D.C. 20350-1000

AUG 23 1999
8/23/99-02769

Dear Ms. Munsell

The purpose of this letter is to notify you of the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry's (ATSDR) health concerns related to the Island of Vieques, Puerto Rico.

ATSDR, a public health agency of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, received a petition in May, 1999 from a resident of the Island of Vieques. The resident requested that the agency investigate health concerns of island residents as authorized under the Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation, and Liability Act (CERCLA, as amended). The petition asked ATSDR to determine if airborne dust and particulate matter from the detonation of bombs at the U.S. Navy's bombing range on the Island of Vieques would pose a health threat. Further, we were requested to evaluate if hazardous materials resulting from the detonation of munitions at the range are contaminating ground and surface water (runoff) on the island and if that might affect drinking water supplies. An additional concern which has been expressed is the physical danger from unexploded munitions at the range site. As part of our petition process, ATSDR conducted a site scoping visit to the Island of Vieques and the Island of Puerto Rico the week of August 9-13, 1999, to begin the data collection process of our investigation.

Based on our efforts to date, ATSDR's immediate concern is the imminent health threat presented to persons (estimated numbers of 20-200 persons, including families with children) visiting or residing in the Live Impact Area on the Island of Vieques. Unexploded and unstable military ordnance is present in areas where people are camping. Such ordnance has the potential to detonate without warning due to atmospheric conditions or mishandling. We believe the potential for injury or death due to the unstable ordnance will increase. Furthermore, we have learned that the individuals visiting or living in the target area are building a church and a school in the impact area. This will increase the potential for contact with unstable ordnance. In addition, there is the potential for individuals to move, even off site, live ordnance. Our concern for the children and others living on the Live Impact Area was echoed by the petitioner, the Commonwealth, and federal agencies we visited.

ATSDR fully recognizes the political and culturally sensitive issues that have led to persons occupying this hazardous area. We have no direct intervention authority nor do we seek to be arbitrators of these issues. However, as a public health agency we must state our highest level of concern for individuals, including children, who come in contact with unexploded ordnance in the Live Impact Area. It is imperative that the public health of these individuals protected.

ATSDR urges that this issue receive the highest order of attention by the responsible parties and that all avenues of resolution are pursued to eliminate this imminent health threat to persons visiting or residing on the Live Impact Area.

We are continuing to address other environmental issues identified during our site visit. In addition to meeting with several Navy staff, Agency officials met with the petitioner, Vieques residents, Commonwealth officials (Puerto Rico Department of Health and the Puerto Rico Environmental Quality Board), the U.S. Geological Survey, and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to gain a better understanding of the health concerns related to the site, and to begin collecting the data that will be necessary to assess those concerns and respond to the petition. ATSDR is seeking environmental sampling information of air, soil, and water that characterizes the presence of contaminants that might be present in the impact area and might be transported in an exposure pathway to residents of the island. The determination of exposure of people to contaminants is essential to begin to assess any plausible relationship between environmental contamination and the health of the island residents (reportedly elevated cancer rates).

The Commonwealth and federal agencies are at different stages of their data gathering; some is available while other data is being gathered. ATSDR will work with the appropriate Commonwealth and federal agencies to develop a plan to address "data gaps" that might exist to not only provide evaluation of the petitioner's concerns but to assist the various agencies to ensure protection of public health on the island.

We have provided this information in separate letters to Mr. Frank Rush, Chairman, Special Panel on Military Operations on Vieques; Dr. Carmen Feliciano de Melecio, Secretary of Health, Puerto Rico Department of Health; Mr. Hector Russe-Martinez, Chairman, Puerto Rico Environmental Quality Board; Mr. Larry Reed, Deputy Director, Office of Emergency and Remedial Response, Environmental Protection Agency (EPA); and Ms. Jeanne M. Fox, Regional Administrator, Region II, EPA.

ATSDR will continue to work with the U.S. Navy to help address the public health concerns of the people of the Island of Vieques, Puerto Rico. Thank you for the excellent support provided by staff in the Naval Environmental Health Center, the Atlantic Division, Navy Facilities Engineering Command, the Naval Station Roosevelt Roads, and the Atlantic Fleet Weapons Training Facility.

Please do not hesitate to call me at 404-639-0730 if you have any questions.

Sincerely yours,



Mark M. Bashor, Ph.D.

Associate Administrator for Federal Programs

Director, Office of Federal Programs

cc: RADM J. Kevin Moran