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## Fields hide decades of trash

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FREEHOLD BUREAU

EARLE -- Like a captain showing off his ship, environmental engineer Gregory J. Goepfert proudly guides visitors through grassy fields that stretch between the thick woods of the weapons station's Colts Neck section.

The Navy spent \$5 million here in the past year, but besides some candy-cane-shaped pipes that dot the meadow, it's hard to see where the money went.

That's as it should be, Goepfert said. The important part is what can't be seen: evidence that two fields totaling nine acres once were industrial and household dumps that helped Earle earn a place on the Superfund list of hazardous waste sites.

From 1940 until 1978, the base dumped 16,800 tons of waste -- everything from oil drums and metal scraps to old newspapers and broken bicycles -- on its grounds, not unlike many municipalities.

"At that time, that was an acceptable practice," Goepfert said.

In February, Navy contractors began building a cap over the debris to ensure that pollutants in the dump stay there.

More than 156,000 tons of topsoil, gravel and sand were brought to the base in 6,500 truckloads. Most important was a black, waterproof tarp the thickness of a fingernail, which was laid 3 feet beneath the surface. The project was completed in July.

Studies in the mid-1990s found low levels of metals and solvents in shallow ground water at the edges of the dump, but no pollution in deeper aquifers. According to Goepfert, local drinking water was never affected, because the contaminants generally clung to soil.

Goepfert said wells at the perimeter will be monitored closely now, and the

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pollutant levels should drop significantly in the future because the tarp will prevent water from flushing toxins from the landfill.

"I hope so, or all this work and money will have gone to waste," Goepfert said.

Next year's budget includes \$5 million in environmental remedies throughout the base, including maintenance of the two capped fills and investigation of a mine battery dump discovered by a hunter earlier this year.

Prior to the 1980s, few records of waste disposal were kept at Earle or elsewhere.

In the early 1980s, a private consulting firm hired to find contamination sites had to interview longtime employees to find out the type and location of disposal sites.

"The EPA didn't require record-keeping, and no one did it," said Goepfert, who said he believes most sites have been located.

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