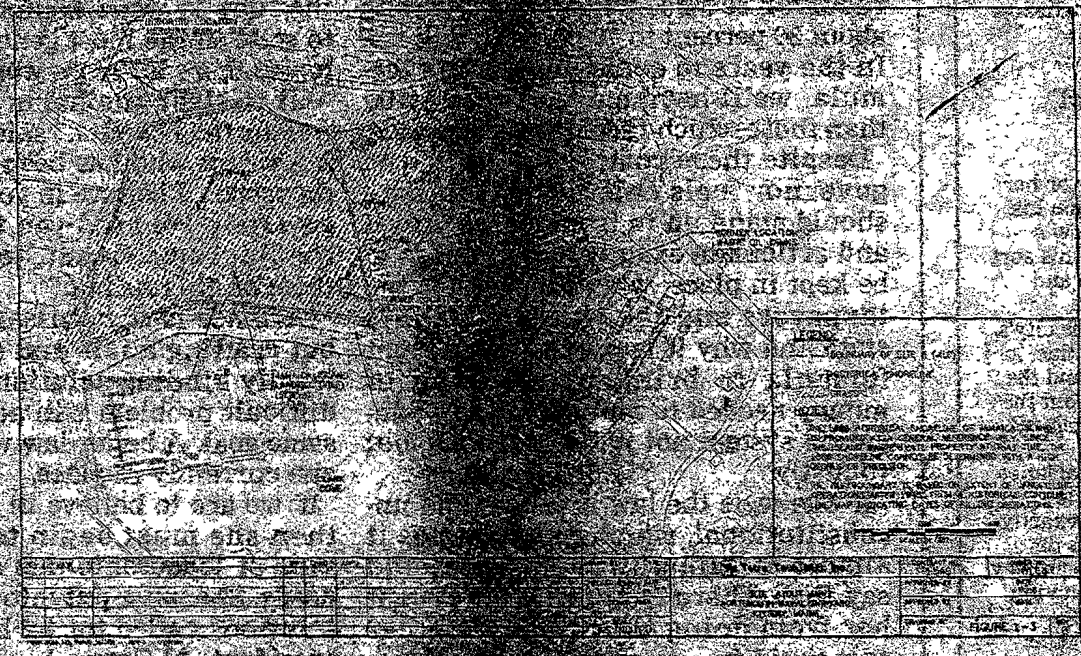
N00102.AR.002124
NSY PORTSMOUTH
5090.3a

NEWSPAPER ARTICLE "SHIPYARD MESS NOW GETTING ATTENTION" NSY PORTSMOUTH ME
1/9/2000
PORTSMOUTH HERALD

Shipyard mess now getting attention



By STEVE HABERMAN
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

PORTSMOUTH NAVAL SHIPYARD — After nearly six years of being on the federal Superfund list, solutions to the contamination seeping from one of the approximately 18 toxic waste sites located on the Portsmouth Naval Shipyard are finally being considered.

The Navy is preparing six possible cleanup alternatives for the area of the shipyard categorized as Operating Unit (OU) 3. That location includes the 25-acre Jamaica Island Landfill, the locations of two vaults containing mercury that were buried in the vicinity of the landfill (one was located in 1994 and removed intact except for the concrete blocks on which it rested that were removed in 1997. The other vault has yet to be found), and another adjacent site where two waste oil tanks had been situated. The former Child Development Center will also be investigated as an area that has been potentially impacted by chemicals blown from the landfill.

OU3 is located at the eastern end of Seavey Island. In truth, however, it is not part of the original island, but a former tidal mud flat into which the Navy deposited virtually every kind of contaminant known to man from 1945 to 1978. Included were incinerator ash, plating sludges, asbestos insulation, waste oil, solvents, sandblasting grit, [illegible] and, perhaps, several [illegible] chemicals the Navy [illegible] Protection Agency [illegible] of Maine officials are [illegible] aware of.

Because [illegible] flats are unlined [illegible] 400,000 gallons [illegible] washes in and [illegible] each day during [illegible] flushing out many [illegible] toxins indicated above, according to Navy federal and state [illegible] experts.

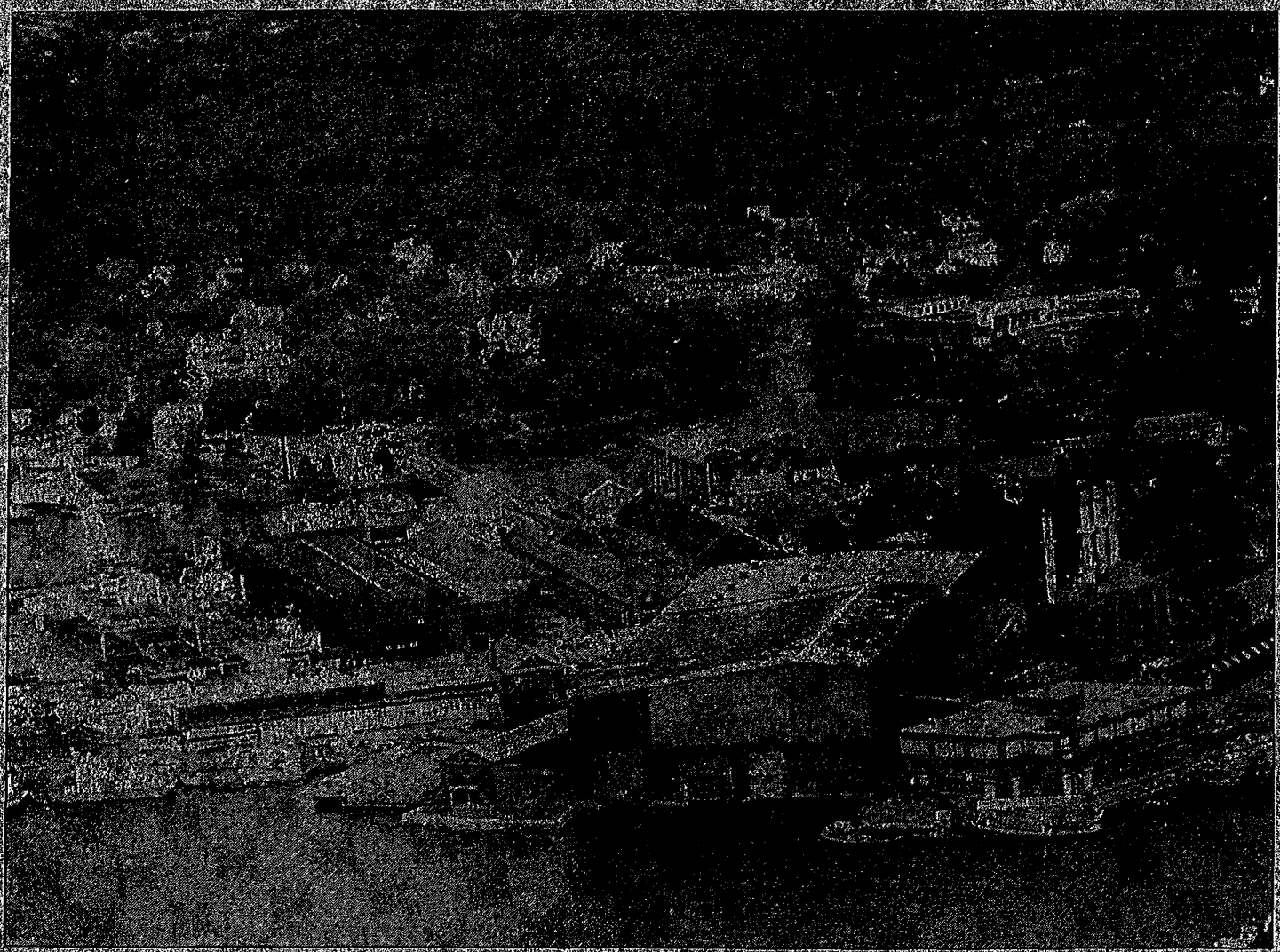
OU3 is [illegible] being used for [illegible] equipment stora[illegible] recreational activities. There is a running track bordering the landfill.

The Navy's stated opinion is that the risks to the environment from this location — and to the humans who inhabit the area — are negligible.

Officials have indicated there are no risks to people on the shipyard posed by the Jamaica Island Landfill and there are "low" ecological risks to offshore environments, particularly areas around the island. However,

See Shipyard, Page F4

OPINION



HERALD FILE PHOTO

After nearly six years on the federal Superfund list, solutions to contamination seeping from one of the estimated 18 toxic waste sites at the Portsmouth Naval Shipyard are finally being considered.

Superfund site still waiting

Shipyard, from Page F1

those officials have had some difficulty in explaining specifically what constitutes a low risk, but have admitted that children and boaters should stay away from the seeps (areas where contaminants are seeping out of the landfill and shipyard) that are located beneath the water line.

In terms of risks this particular portion of the shipyard poses to people, the EPA indicates those risks are "acceptable" to individuals working on at the shipyard, and found no "unacceptable risk" from exposure to river surface water or sediment off the base. However, the Maine Department of Environmental Protection (MEDEP) has determined there are "some exceedences of MEDEP (human health risk) guidance risk levels" for individuals on the island, and has agreed there is a potential risk to humans from ingestion of seafood taken from the lower Piscataqua River.

The Navy is currently reviewing a study of what it considers to be potentially feasible alternatives to cleaning up this portion of the shipyard. It is called Likely enough, the Feasibility Study for OU3, and six options are being considered. The Feasibility Study for ES is the fourth of eight steps that have to be completed before a Superfund site is cleaned up.

In actuality, however, the Navy is considering only four options for cleaning up OU3. One of the original six calls for no action at all, and every regulator involved in the process, as well as the Navy, has ruled that option out as inappropriate and not in keeping with federal regulations.

The other option that has been almost fully ruled out is on the opposite end of the cleanup scale — total site cleanup. That would involve the removal of all wastes at the OU3 site for proper disposal off site and placing controls on the groundwater at the site so it cannot be used for any purpose. Aside from the more than $1 billion the Navy estimates that remedy will cost, there are also concerns that moving that much material could result in large increases in the amounts of toxic substances released into the environment.

So, in essence, there are currently four real options on the Navy's table for cleaning up the Jamaica Island Landfill area. They range in cost from a little more than $1 million to in excess of $15 million, and involve varying levels of waste removal, landfill capping, barrier building to prevent additional contaminants from migrating into the Piscataqua, and groundwater extraction and treatment.

The next step is for the Navy to pick one of these remedies and present it to both federal and state regulators, and the public at an open hearing. Responses from regulators and the public will determine if the plan fulfills all federal cleanup requirements and what, if any, changes must be made. The public input part of the process is expected to begin sometime this summer and, if everything goes well, cleanup will actually begin late next year.

The Shipyard Restoration Advisory Board, a group of local citizens, community officials and Navy personnel that receives periodic updates, and the opportunity to supply input on the proposed cleanup process, continues to meet to review the plans for this one Superfund location, as well as the status of 16 other sites on the shipyard that have raised regulatory concerns.

To help in this process, the Seacoast Anti-Pollution League obtained a $50,000 EPA Technical Assistance Grant back in 1996, and another in 1998 to pay the salary of a consultant to review the reams of data being distributed by the Navy, state of Maine and EPA. The goal is to keep citizens of the region aware of what is going on in the cleanup effort and to offer advice on whether what is proposed to be done will do what it is supposed to do. SAPL is now working to renew that grant because the nature of the Portsmouth Naval Shipyard site is so complex and the data that must be reviewed so extensive that most of the last grant has already been spent.

And there is still so much to do.

A two-year river monitoring study is under way to determine what chemicals and in what quantities are being leeched into the Piscataqua by the shipyard and/or other locations upstream. The perimeters of an old incinerator site from which poisonous dioxin spewed has yet to be determined, and several new sites being investigated for toxic contamination.

Judging from the fact that it has taken almost six years for the Navy to come up with potential solutions to just one of the many points of contamination at the Portsmouth Naval Shipyard, it appears the potential dangers the site poses to the Seacoast environment will be around well into the next century and perhaps, beyond.

Steve Haberman, the field director for the Seacoast Anti-Pollution League, is a contributing columnist and writer for Seacoast Newspapers. Opinions expressed in this article are not necessarily those of either organization.