

Navy sites may join Superfund cleanup list

THE LOCAL IMPACT

If the designation for St. Juliens Creek Annex is approved, the Navy would have to meet EPA schedules for cleaning up contaminants at the site. Also, the Navy probably would get additional money to do the work.

BY SCOTT HARPER
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CHESAPEAKE — St. Juliens Creek Annex, an aging Navy outpost and former munitions depot on the Elizabeth River, has been proposed as a toxic Superfund cleanup site, the Environmental Protection Agency announced Friday.

The EPA also is recommending that Cheatham Annex, a branch of Yorktown Naval Weapons Station near Williamsburg, be listed as a Superfund project because of ecological threats from old buried wastes and other suspected contaminants.

The two Navy installations are the latest candidates for the infamous list of severely polluted properties. The EPA published its recommended additions, including a salvage yard in West Virginia, Friday in the Federal Register.

If approved after a 60-day public comment period, St. Juliens and Cheatham would become the seventh and eighth active and former military facilities in Hampton Roads in the Superfund program.

The Norfolk Naval Shipyard in Portsmouth, located just north of St. Juliens Annex, made the roster last year, joining the Norfolk Naval Base, Little Creek Naval Amphibious Base and the former Nansemond Ordnance Depot in Suffolk, among others.

In all of these military cases, regulators say, environmental problems can be traced to poor waste disposal and handling techniques decades ago, before there were environmental rules and regulations.

That is especially true at St. Juliens, which opened in 1849, and saw its heyday for loading and processing ammunition during World Wars I and II and the Korean War.

A common method for getting

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rid of chemical wastes back then was "basically, to dig a hole and bury them," said John Ballinger, a Department of Defense environmental outreach coordinator for St. Juliens Annex.

Ballinger said there are 21 suspected problem areas within the 490-acre annex. They include old landfills, dumps, salvage yards and burning grounds.

Since none of the spots lie directly on the shore of the Southern Branch of the Elizabeth River, environmental risks are lessened. Still, there are small ditches and other pathways for wastes to leach into the river and nearby St. Juliens Creek, where recreational fishing occurs.

Unwanted chemicals, solvents, petroleum byproducts known as PAHs, heavy metals, hydrocarbons and ordnance remnants are thought to exist in disposal sites, according to EPA assessments. They pose ecological risks to local soils, river sediments and neighboring surface waters, said Robert Thomson, an EPA hazardous waste expert who has studied the site extensively.

Thomson said military records indicate that chemical weaponry test kits were stored at St. Juliens during World War I and that residues might still be in the ground.

EPA and Navy officials agree so far that the property poses no danger to human health. The Navy has installed "site access controls" at many of the suspect areas, Ballinger said.

While the EPA has yet to estimate cleanup costs, Ballinger said the Navy believes it will need between \$15 million and \$20 million to purge contaminants to meet federal standards.

If a Superfund designation is approved, the Navy would be forced to meet EPA cleanup schedules and work demands. But it also would likely receive more money — a factor that led the Navy on Friday to react with mixed emotions to the Superfund nomination.

"I'm not going to say it's good news," said Ballinger, "but I'm not really surprised either. We pretty much expected this . . . and I wouldn't anticipate any resistance" to the proposed listing.

The Navy has been studying environmental problems at the annex since 1981, and so far has cleaned up four landfills, he said.

To the EPA, this pace was too slow, Thomson said.

"We finally made a determination to come in, screen the site, clean it up and get out," he said.

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