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Agent Orange storage site studied

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The U.S. Air Force will begin a mapping program within the next six weeks to determine the location of "hotspots" of dioxin contamination at a Seabee Center site in Gulfport where the herbicide Agent Orange was stored during the 1970s.

Air Force officials said Wednesday that soil samples taken on the base have revealed dioxin — a highly toxic contaminant of Agent Orange — in concentrations of as high as 200 to 300 parts per billion at some locations.

However, officials with the Air Force and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency said extensive testing indicates that the dioxin contamination appears to be contained on the Seabee Center.

The soil samples were conducted within the 12-acre area of the compound where 843,000 gallons of the herbicide were stored between 1970 and 1977. The herbicide was incinerated at sea in the Western Pacific following its removal from Gulfport.

The Air Force, which has monitored the Navy base since the removal of the Agent Orange, has hired an Idaho Falls,

Idaho, firm, EG&G Idaho Inc., to conduct a comprehensive mapping program to locate the areas of highest dioxin contamination, said officials at the Engineering and Services Laboratory at Tyndall Air Force Base in Panama City, Fla.

"The mapping activity will let us know where it is and will investigate whether or not it has been contained," said Maj. Tom Walker, chief of the environmental engineering branch of the laboratory.

"We don't feel that it has been moving," Walker added.

Air Force officials estimated the

Gulfport work, which is slated to begin in early December, will cost between \$500,000 and \$700,000. The government already has spent in excess of \$100,000 monitoring the site, they said.

"What we're working on is the ultimate cleanup of that site," Walker said.

Walter Mathis, an officer with EPA's Superfund program, said the agency is planning to work with the Air Force in testing proposed methods of decontaminating dioxin-laden soil. The

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All Saints' Day preparations

Rosalie Galle gets

Orange

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tests would be conducted at the Gulfport base and at other government locations contaminated with Agent Orange, he said.

Walker said the "hotspots" resulted from leaks in some of the 17,000 55-gallon drums on the site. Minor spills that took place during the transfer of the herbicide to railroad tank cars prior to the incineration also could be responsible, he said.

"This is not from one major spill. It's more

likely from a number of small spills," Walker said.

The entire Agent Orange inventory at the base was redrummed in 1972 after drums began to leak, and the site was "checked for leaks continuously thereafter," according to a 1979 Air Force report.

Capt. Kerry Stoddard, an environmental research scientist with the lab, said the areas of heaviest contamination are small and isolated.

"We may have some hotspots where there's two to three hundred parts per billion, and six inches away there might not be anything," he said.

The recent soil samples also have indicated dioxin in concentrations of 2 parts per billion at the point where a drainage ditch leaves the former storage area, the officials said.

However, from that point on, the ditch is lined with sediment basins and fabric filters installed in 1979 to keep any dioxin-laden soil from escaping. The former storage area also is surrounded

by a cable fence to keep unauthorized personnel out.

The 1979 Air Force report also stated that "trace levels" — only about 20 to 32 parts per trillion — had been found in soil and fish in the drainage ditch about two miles downstream from the storage site. The U.S. Food and Drug Administration has advised against consumption of fish with dioxin concentrations of 50 parts per trillion or more.

The drainage ditch flows into Turkey Creek, which empties into the Harrison County Industrial Seaway. The seaway lies upstream from Bernard Bayou and the Back Bay of Biloxi.

However, Stoddard and Walker stressed that throughout the Air Force sampling program, no dioxin has ever been found in soil or fish in Turkey Creek.

Dioxin, one of the most toxic man-made substances known, has been linked to skin ailments,

liver disorders, a rare form of cancer and other problems. The Atlanta-based Centers for Disease Control considers a concentration of 1 part per billion of dioxin in residential areas sufficient to warrant concern.

Agent Orange was used as a defoliant during the Vietnam War until the Defense Department suspended its use in 1970. U.S. servicemen exposed to the herbicide have blamed it for several ailments and have said it is linked to miscarriages and birth defects suffered by their wives and children.

In another dioxin study, EPA and the Mississippi Bureau of Pollution Control will sample soil and fish at more than a dozen sites in the state — including the Back Bay — beginning in November. However, state and federal officials said that work is part of a nationwide survey of more than 1,000 sites, and is unrelated to the past storage of Agent Orange at the Seabee Center.