

Blast Off: BGAD Talks Open Detonation of Conventional Weapons

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On Friday morning and afternoon, the open detonation crew at the Blue Grass Army Depot was busy blasting several thousand pounds of obsolete, conventional weapons such as bullets and artillery rounds.

Although the operations practiced for open detonation have been executed for decades, Mark Henry, BGAD public information officer, said the munitions being destroyed are larger, prompting a bigger bang.

"Some munitions like these cratering charges result in a much louder and earth shaking impact than other munitions," Henry said.

That's led to many complaints from area residents, and Henry said he can't always give out advanced notice as to when detonations are happening. The open detonation crew can only dispose of the old non-chemical munitions including bullets, mortars, artillery rounds and other munitions when weather conditions are ideal.

According to Dustin House, explosives operator supervisor for the open detonation operation, weather factors that play a part include wind direction, temperature, humidity, cloud coverage, and rain or thunderstorms.

"In other installations out west, they have pretty consistent weather with 90 degrees and dry," House said. "But here in Kentucky, the weather can change by the hour, by the day, so it is really hard to give the community an advanced notice."

If weather conditions are suitable, the detonation will take place somewhere at the depot, where 30, 10-foot holes are dug and no more than 100 pounds of munitions are placed into each individual pit, covered in dirt, and later electrically initiated causing 30 explosions per event.

Typically, three sessions are done throughout the day, but recently the detonations have been reduced to two times a day.

Citizens reactions

Naturally, with weapons being blown up on the installation, loud explosions can be heard and felt by those in Madison County, and even surrounding counties, prompting citizens to call the depot for answers.

"What we have learned over the years, the impact of open det sometimes takes funny paths that no one understands," Henry said. "A lot of calls we do get from people, they certainly understand what is going on and feel the vibrations, and they are used to it and know it is part of the mission, and we have to do as directed by the Army, and most people are very understanding of that."

Henry said his personal take on the matter is that people were surprised by the event — something he and depot officials understand.

“It is a big explosion and their house is rocking, so they can be a little startled,” he said. “A lot of the calls, people just want to be talked down. They have been startled, and even though they are aware of what we do, they want to be assured.”

With the chemical demilitarization having started last year and also taking place elsewhere on the installation, he said this adds an extra element of uncertainty to nearby citizens.

“Our community has heard much more and has more awareness of chemical weapons at the depot, and not the 95% of weapons that are made and stored here including bullets and bombs,” he told The Register.

Henry said while he understands the discontent of some homeowners and their unhappiness, those at the depot have a mission to complete, having to report to the Joint Munitions Command of what and how much they are destroying.

Why it's destroyed

Put simply, Henry said munitions destroyed by open detonation are done so because they can no longer be used or have outlasted their shelf life.

“We produce lots of munitions,” he said. “Along the line, (the munitions) have a shelf life and we store things that were produced 40 years ago; they are now not considered a safe munition or the energetic mutation may have depleted.

“There have been munitions made for every type of weapon system fielding and certain weapon systems become retired and are not used any more. When we have old weapons that are no longer used and taken out of service, that leaves munitions that are not good for the weapons.”

Each year, about 400,000 and 500,000 tons of ammunition are made to have a readily available stockpile.

“That is a lot of ammo around,” Henry admitted. “And we demilitarize it because it is just unsafe to let it sit around where people can get to it, damage it or hurt themselves, and it is our effort to get rid of it.”

The demilitarization stockpile averages around 50,000 to 60,000 tons of munitions each year that are scheduled to be destroyed.

The future of open detonation

With many citizens understanding the need for the destruction, many are still requesting changes be made to make those in the area more aware of when, and what, is happening at the depot.

Henry said the officials are hearing their concerns, and changes are being made to help them feel more at ease. That's why the depot decreased its blasting sessions from three a day to two a day, leading to less impact on nearby homes and residents.

Additionally, more top soil is being added to cover the pits where the munitions are being destroyed, which has been costly for the depot as 4,000 tons of dirt costs about \$90,000. Henry and House both reported the full shipment of the soil is close to being completed, but that about 1,000 more tons of soil are yet to arrive.

Lastly, the officials at the Army Depot are hoping to put out a weekly schedule on social media to help make people more aware. However, as House mentioned and Henry agreed, with weather always changing and a primary factor, it is hard to determine a set-in-stone schedule.

“If we put out a weekly release, we will have to make note that it is subject to change, or could not even happen depending on the weather,” he said.

But according to Henry, the environmental, and financially friendly practice of open detonation is being phased out, with the hopes of closed-disposal technology being phased in.

This technological alternative provides the ability to demilitarize by melting, washing, steaming and chemically converting energetic materials to re-sellable commercial products.

Furnaces, decontamination chambers, chemical conversion processes and other methods use heating, cooling, melting and washing to decontaminate and recover ammunition items and parts.

Henry said this is extremely more costly than that of open detonation, which he believes is the best way for BGAD to be good stewards of the taxpayers' dollars.

"There are a lot of factors, but the Army is working on more than open det," he said. "We just have to be patient and hang in there until new systems come along."

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