

Pentagon relies on antiquated, dangerous methods for hazardous waste disposal

Gulf Coast Environmental Defense is a grassroots environmental organization that has advocated for the health of the Florida Panhandle community for more than 30 years.

It's a shocking case of arrested development. In a nation that prides itself on high technology, our federal government is burning and detonating hazardous waste in the open air, using stone age disposal methods long ago outlawed for private companies.

How did this happen? In the 1980s, when our federal hazardous waste rules were written, a special exemption was created for waste military explosives. This loophole has a catch: it was only for waste explosives "which cannot be safely disposed of through other modes of treatment."

After decades of technological progress, safer alternative technology is available and has been endorsed by the Department of Defense Explosives Safety Board and the National Academy of Sciences.

Why isn't the Department of Defense using it?

The Pentagon, known for its technologically sophisticated weaponry and communication systems, is relying on the most antiquated methods for ridding itself of waste munitions: open burning and open detonation (OB/OD). This isn't only backward; it's dangerous.

Currently, at more than 60 sites across the United States, millions of pounds of unneeded explosives such as bombs, artillery shells, propellants, tactical missiles, rockets, pyrotechnics, igniters, cartridges, rounds, incendiaries such as napalm, land mines, flares and smoke canisters are burned and exploded in the open air.

OB/OD spews heavy metals, including extremely fine particles of easily breathable lead, depleted uranium and other heavy metals; energetic compounds and perchlorate; dioxins and other organic compounds, often spreading far beyond the point of release, washing into creeks, rivers and bays and leaching into groundwater, exposing service members and nearby communities. These contaminants can cause cancer, birth defects, cardiac and immune system deterioration, and severe brain damage.

Eglin Air Force Base in Okaloosa County, Florida, is the OB/OD disposal site for waste explosives and munitions generated at Hurlburt Field, Tyndall Air Force Base, Pensacola Naval Air Station, and Navy Support Activity Panama City, as well as Eglin itself. A Florida Department of Environmental Protection (FDEP) permit allows nearly 9 million pounds of these wastes to go up in smoke and come down in air and water pollution.

Although open burning (OB) at Eglin has been authorized for decades, a new FDEP draft permit omits OB. This appears to be a significant improvement, but it continues open detonation (OD) unabated.

Three important information gaps suggest that Eglin's OB/OD may have even greater negative effects on nearby military and civilian communities.

First, it is assumed that Eglin groundwater can be sacrificed to munitions disposal. Already there is enormous pressure on Florida's potable water supplies from rapid development and saltwater intrusion; it is likely that Eglin groundwater and surface water will eventually be needed for drinking water use. Protecting it should be a priority.

Over the years, FDEP records show rapidly increasing levels of poisoned groundwater at Eglin. Levels above the state's excess cancer risk have been recorded since 2006 and continue to rise, doubling between in concentration between 2017 and 2018 at one location. But even this data may understate the danger, since FDEP acknowledges that Eglin's groundwater monitoring has been inadequate to measure the actual threat to onsite workers and residents.

Second, there is no monitoring of Eglin's air emissions. Since OB/OD contamination travels through air, as well as soil, to reach groundwater in these high concentrations, the air pathway must be measured in real time.

Third, both poisoned irrigation water and air deposition may also be exposing local populations through contaminants in garden produce and seafood.

While sites in other states are prohibited from OB/OD of certain wastes such as depleted uranium, dioxins, PCBs, napalm, pesticides, red phosphorus, nerve agents, nuclear devices, riot control gear, asbestos, chemical warfare materiel, and biological agents, there are no such prohibitions at Eglin. And transport of hazardous waste from the other four facilities shares the roads civilian and commercial interests use daily to travel throughout Northwest Florida, risking accidental release that could affect thousands of people along and near by the Interstate 10 /Highway 98 corridor between Pensacola and Panama City.

GCED has worked with the Pensacola Bay Area and the Okaloosa and Walton chapters of the League of Women Voters and joined in urging that FDEP require Eglin to begin phasing out OB/OD immediately. Northwest Florida families, military and civilian, should not be subjected to the unnecessary risk of cancer, birth defects, cardiac and immune system deterioration, and severe brain damage so that Eglin can continue its antiquated ways. It's time to move into the 21st century.

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