

U.S. seeks free pass on rocket fuel pollution

by Rena Steinzor

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April brought news of a major health threat caused by pollution from the dumping of rocket fuel, a government gag rule on scientists studying the problem, and a campaign by those responsible to escape having to clean up their own toxic mess. It may sound like the sort of muddle one would associate with the government of China — think SARS — or the former Soviet regime — think Chernobyl. But in this case, it's the Pentagon, with the help of the White House, working overtime to avoid having to clean up after dangerous chemical spills on its bases right here in the United States.

The pollutant in question is perchlorate, a component of rocket fuel and certain munitions. Weapons testing at various military bases around the country has left high levels of the chemical in some drinking water supplies, and a recent study found it in one-quarter of lettuce samples collected in the San Francisco Bay Area. Until now, the threat from perchlorate pollution was thought to be largely confined to drinking water, but the new research demonstrates that the food supply is vulnerable as well.

Perchlorate is a health threat because it interferes with the body's uptake of iodine, disrupting thyroid function. Adults' bodies normally store extra iodine in their systems, countering these effects. But for pregnant women and their babies, as well as people with thyroid problems, perchlorate can cause irreversible damage.

The lettuce survey follows the discovery of perchlorate contamination of water supplies in as many as 20 states. Water near Rocket Center has been affected because of perchlorate problems at the Allegany Ballistics facility, as has water near the Aberdeen Proving Ground outside Baltimore. Other leaks are causing problems in parts of California, Massachusetts, Missouri, Nevada, New Mexico, New York and Texas. The most dangerous levels of perchlorate pollution in the nation were at defense contractor Kerr McGee sites in Henderson, Nev., where pollution has exposed some 10 million people to perchlorate through the contamination of Nevada's Lake Mead and the water supplies it feeds.

In 2002, EPA issued a study recommending that perchlorate never be permitted to reach more than one part per billion in drinking water. The study was years in the making and was reviewed for scientific soundness by a raft of independent experts. But the Pentagon found its implications unacceptable, no doubt because cleaning up to the level recommended by EPA would cost some \$3 billion nationwide. The Joint Chiefs maintain that perchlorate is safe at levels of 70 to 200 parts per billion.

Revealing the same determination and thoroughness that wins wars abroad, the Pentagon and two of its contractors, Lockheed-Martin and the aforementioned Kerr McGee, browbeat EPA into indefinitely suppressing the study, persuaded the National Academy of Scientists to re-do the EPA research, and had legislation introduced in Congress to block the military's liability for perchlorate cleanup. Then at the end of April, by way of icing this particularly noxious cake, the Bush administration issued a gag rule for EPA scientists and regulators, barring them from even commenting on the lettuce studies.

Proving that no scientific study is invulnerable to confusion and obfuscation, Pentagon scientists have kicked up so much self-serving dust that we may need to wait for two years to learn the results of the National Academy of Sciences study, exposing countless mothers and children to rocket fuel in the meantime.

While the perchlorate problem is troubling enough, legislation now pending on Capitol Hill does not end with the elimination of that liability. The Pentagon is making the extraordinary argument that compliance with environmental laws would compromise the military's readiness to fight the war on terrorism. Therefore, they say, military branches must receive exemptions from laws governing hazardous waste disposal and cleanup, protecting endangered species, and protecting public water supplies from all harmful chemicals—not just perchlorate. Or, in other words, to fight the war abroad, we must sacrifice environmental quality and public health at home.

In more open, less ruthless times, we could at least count on the EPA administrator and other officials to speak out against such proposals, fulfilling their mission to put America's public health first. Sadly, we have reached the momentous turning point where such independence is stifled by the White House, all in service of an effort to spare the Pentagon the trouble of taking responsibility for the pollution it causes.

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