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The Pentagon is Poisoning Your Drinking Water

By Joshua Frank
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The nation's biggest polluter isn't a corporation. It's the Pentagon.

The Department of Defense, under a 1980 EPA exemption, is still allowed to burn weapons waste, detonate toxic explosives, and in certain cases even radioactive waste. Every year the

DoD churns out more than 750,000 tons of hazardous waste — more than the top three chemical companies combined.

The military is largely exempt from compliance with most federal and state environmental laws, and the EPA continues to work hard to keep it that way, especially in the case of perchlorate as the agency debates exactly how much of the noxious stuff is safe to consume.

For the past five decades the federal government, defense contractors and the chemical industry have joined forces to block public health protections against perchlorate, a component of rocket fuel that has been shown to effect children's growth and mental progress by disrupting the function of the thyroid gland which regulates brain development.

Perchlorate has been leaking from literally hundreds of defense plants and military installations across the country. The EPA has reported that perchlorate is present in drinking and groundwater supplies in 35 states. Center for Disease Control and independent studies have also overwhelmingly shown that perchlorate is existent in our food supplies, cow's milk, and human breast milk. As a result virtually every American has some level of perchlorate in their body. The higher the level the more dangerous it becomes, raising the risk of thyroid and other cancers.

Currently only two states, California and Massachusetts, have set a maximum allowable contaminant level for perchlorate in drinking water. In California perchlorate has been found, not only in groundwater supplies, but in dairy cows. The EPA, despite acknowledging the problem, won't follow these states' lead even though the Obama administration promised to regulate the toxin in 2015. It hasn't happened yet and likely won't any time soon with Trump at the helm.

In the Colorado River, which provides water for over 20 million people, perchlorate levels are high. The chemical is most prevalent in the Southwest and California as a result of the large number of military operations and defense contractors in the region.

In 2001 the EPA estimated that the total liability for the cleanup of toxic military sites would exceed \$350 billion, or five times the Superfund Act liability of private industry. But the federal government has been complacent and allowed perchlorate to run rampant throughout our water supplies. This negligence and lack of regulatory oversight has left the Pentagon, NASA and defense contractors free to set their own levels, trimming the high, but necessary costs of restoring groundwater quality.

While the situation has become dire in recent years, it was the Clinton administration that didn't do nearly enough to begin cleaning up these sites and certainly did not keep a close eye on how the Pentagon spent the money it received. During the 1990s the Defense Department spent only \$3.5 billion a year cleaning up toxic military sites — much of that on studies, not actual remediation. In 1998, the Defense Science Review Board, a federal advisory committee set up to provide independent advice to the secretary of defense, looked at the problem and concluded that the Pentagon had no clear environmental cleanup policy, goals or program, which led lawyer Jonathan Turley, who holds the Shapiro Chair for Public Interest Law at George Washington University, to call the Pentagon the nation's "premier environmental villain."

“If they can spend \$1 million on a cruise missile, it seems kind of ridiculous they won’t spend \$200,000 to see if our food is contaminated with rocket fuel,” says Renee Sharp, a scientist with Environmental Working Group. But if the Clinton program was chintzy, Bush’s plan was downright penurious.

While Bush boosted overall Pentagon spending by billions, the administration simultaneously slashed its environmental remediation program. Obama failed to reverse Bush’s trend and did not regulate perchlorate even though his administration knew it was polluting our nation’s water supplies. The trend is unlikely to end. Trump is now slashing EPA funding by billions of dollars while promising to gut many environmental regulations. This means cleaning up our military sites will essentially come to a standstill and perchlorate will continue to poison drinking water across the country.

US military sites, which total more than 50 million acres, are among the most insidious and dangerous Pentagon legacies. They are strewn with toxic bomb fragments, unexploded munitions, buried hazardous waste, fuel dumps, open pits filled with debris, burn piles and yes, rocket fuel. An internal EPA memo from 1998 warned of the looming problem: “As measured by acres, and probably as measured by number of sites, ranges and buried munitions represent the largest cleanup program in the United States.”

When a site gets too polluted, the Pentagon has chosen simply to close it down and turn it over to another federal agency. Over the past three decades, the Pentagon has transferred more than 16 million acres, often with little or no remediation. The former bombing areas have been turned into wildlife refuges, city and state parks, golf courses, landfills, airports and shopping malls.

Serious contamination of streams, soil and groundwater is a problem at nearly every military training ground. The sites are often saturated with heavy metals and other pollutants as well as unexploded weapons. The Government Accountability Office’s list of the kinds of unexploded munitions left behind on many training sites reads like a catalogue for a Middle East arms bonanza: “hand grenades, rockets, guided missiles, projectiles, mortars, rifle grenades, and bombs.”

But the government has gone to great extents to cover up its deadly legacy. In 2002 the Pentagon, defense contractors and perchlorate makers persuaded the editors of a prestigious journal to rewrite an article on the chemical’s health effects without the lead author’s knowledge or consent. Then in 2005 the White House loaded a National Academy of Science panel, which was set up to assess the health risks of perchlorate, with paid consultants of the rocket fuel industry, which, not surprisingly, recommended that exposure levels be set many times higher than the lower doses recommended by numerous independent research studies.

“Perchlorate provides a textbook example of a corrupted health protection system, where polluters, the Pentagon, the White House and the EPA have conspired to block health protections in order to pad budgets, curry political favor, and protect corporate profits,” Richard Wiles, Executive Director of the Environmental Working Group, told the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee on May 7 during a hearing held by committee Chair Barbara Boxer (D-CA) who would like to see national safety standards for perchlorate in drinking water.

“All the pieces needed to support strong health protections are in place,” said Wiles. “This is a nightmare of epic proportions for the Department of Defense and its contractors, and rather than address it head-on, they have spent 50 years and millions of dollars trying to avoid it.”