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Uranium tests due on Big Isle

Army hires contractor to monitor levels after years of denying its use

Associated Press

HILO, Hawai'i — The Army plans to measure airborne uranium levels at three monitoring stations on the Big Island over the next 12 months.

It has hired a contractor to do the testing for \$150,000.

The move comes after the Army in 2007 said it confirmed the presence of depleted uranium at Pohakuloa Training Area on the Big Island. The Army, after years of denials it used depleted uranium in the Islands, also said soldiers training in Hawai'i fired 714 spotting rounds containing depleted uranium in the 1960s.

Depleted uranium is a byproduct of radioactive enriched uranium and has been used by the U.S. military in bullets and other weapons designed to pierce armor.

The Army and the state say the depleted uranium doesn't threaten public health.

But some researchers suspect exposure to depleted uranium may have caused chronic fatigue and other symptoms in veterans of the first Gulf War, but there is no conclusive evidence it has.

Col. Howard Killian, the deputy director of the Pacific Region for the U.S. Army Installation Management Command, told the Public Works Committee of the Hawai'i County Council about the tests Tuesday.

Big Island residents have expressed concerns over the depleted uranium, prompting the county council last year to pass a resolution calling on the military to halt live firing exercises until it is known whether depleted uranium is present at the site.

The Army, however, has not stopped exercises.

Peace activists Jim Albertini of Kurtistown said the council should urge the state to cancel the Army's lease for Pohakuloa because the military failed to honor the council resolution.

Sierra Club member Cory Hardin said she doesn't understand how the Army can conclude there is no radiation danger when the studies are not completed.

Howard Sugai, chief public affairs officer for the Army's Pacific region, said the Army is confident there is no health risk "because of what we know about depleted uranium."

South Kona Councilwoman Brenda Ford and Puna Councilwoman Emily Naeole expressed concerns that the Army hasn't invited Maui resident Dr. Lorrin Pang, a former Army doctor and World Health Organization consultant, to serve on a community advisory council formed to study the situation.

Pang is perhaps the most noted of the scientists to express concerns about depleted uranium at Pohakuloa, and some residents and county officials would feel more comfortable if he were to serve on the Army's advisory council.

Army officials said Tuesday that Pang was excluded from the advisory council because he is not a Big Island resident, but that his inclusion will be considered.