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Army Corps to take on TCE cleanup

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CHEYENNE -- The Army Corps of Engineers will apparently “do the right thing” when it comes to taking responsibility for treating one source of Cheyenne’s drinking water for trichloroethylene, or TCE, which is a result of Cold War-era nuclear missile maintenance east of Cheyenne.

Paul Johnston, public affairs officer for the Omaha district of the Army Corps of Engineers, said the Corps is charged by the Department of Defense to administer the FUDS (formerly used defense sites) program.

That means taking care of a range of sites, “from missile sites to old training grounds to WWI and WWII bombing ranges and old munitions storage; the whole gamut,” Johnston said.

But right now, the city is paying the \$20,000 a year it takes to remove the TCE from the water before it arrives at residents’ taps.

It also paid \$600,000 for the aeration basin that removes the chemical when it was first found in 1998, Jane Francis, geological supervisor at the Wyoming Department of Environmental Quality, said.

“Our first priority is safe drinking water,” Bud Spillman, manager of the water treatment division of the Cheyenne Board of Public Utilities, said in a news release. “We can remove the TCE at the treatment plant and do not allow any water contaminated with TCE to be piped to town.”

But before the water from the newly-acquired Belvoir Ranch can be sent to Cheyenne, the aeration basin at the treatment plant will need to be increased, according to a BOPU news release.

“The cost to increase capacity at the aeration basin is a cost that Cheyenne’s residents shouldn’t have to pay,” Spillman said in the release.

As a result of a project in September 2007, Spillman said the city was able to provide the Army

Corps with a dollar amount for another treatment facility.

“It was a milestone to say, ‘OK, we now know what it costs,’” he said.

The Army Corps has been studying the contamination in Cheyenne for the last seven years, Francis said.

They’re making slow progress in trying to find out how long the contamination plume is, she added. It is the position of the department that there is one large plume of TCE that is a result of the chemical being used at the Atlas No. 4 missile site.

Johnston said there are two areas of contamination. One is obviously because of the work at the missile site.

The Army Corps is taking full responsibility for that site, he said, and taking steps to clean it up.

But there is a 2- to 3-mile stretch where there is no contamination, and the TCE picks up again about 10 miles from the missile site. The source of the contamination at that site isn’t clear to the Army Corps, Johnston said.

Working with the Environmental Protection Agency and BOPU, “all of us cannot find a firm link between the two contaminated areas,” he said.

That’s as of yet, anyway. In June, Johnston said the Army Corps plans to have more people out in the field doing studies to determine the source of contamination for the second plume.

If it is found that the water is also contaminated because of the missile maintenance, the Army Corps will take full responsibility and clean it up, he said.

At a recent Senate Environment and Public Works Committee hearing, U.S. Sen. John Barrasso, R-Wyo., put some added pressure on the Army Corps to step up their investigation of the Atlas 4 missile site.

The senator had been pressuring the Army Corps for some time, Barrasso spokesman Greg Keeley said.

In a news release, Barrasso stated, “Let me be clear -- Cheyenne’s water is safe. But state and city officials should not bear the entire burden of cleaning up this mess.”

Keeley explained that “Cheyenne’s water is safe because the city of Cheyenne is covering the cost of treatment. The senator has asked the Army Corps of Engineers to assist the city with technical and financial assistance.”

Francis predicts that the water will have to be treated for the next 100 to 300 years, and hopes that the Army Corps will pick up the tab for that long-term treatment.

“Senator Barrasso is pleased that Corps Commander Lt. General Van Antwerp agreed at a Senate hearing this week that the problem needs to be fixed and has promised the Corps will ‘do the right thing’ to see it fixed,” Keeley said.