

CHEMICAL WEAPONS DISPOSAL PROGRAM

WHAT IS THE PUBLIC HEALTH ISSUE?

The Department of Defense (DOD) is in the process of destroying the entire U.S. stockpile of aging and obsolete chemical weapons. The original stockpile contained 63 million pounds of chemical weapons disseminated at eight sites in the continental United States and at Johnston Atoll in the Pacific. Additional non-stockpile materials, such as buried chemical warfare materiel, are located at more than 200 sites in the United States and U.S. territories. The entire stockpile must be destroyed to comply with the Chemical Weapons Convention Treaty. The health of workers and the public near the storage and disposal sites must be protected during this process.

WHAT HAS CDC ACCOMPLISHED?

Congress has charged CDC with public health oversight of DOD's chemical weapons disposal program. To ensure protection of the public's health, CDC reviews all disposal plans. As of March 2003, more than 15.8 million pounds of chemical agents and weapons have been safely destroyed. CDC will continue to protect the public's health while managing the safe disposal of the remaining 47 million pounds of chemical agents and weapons.

Buried or abandoned chemical weapons have been removed from several sites, including Rocky Mountain Arsenal, Spring Valley (a Washington, D.C. suburb), Memphis Army Depot (TN), a residential site in Guam, England Air Force Base (LA), Raritan Depot (NJ), and Fort Meade (MD). With CDC guidance and technical assistance, the Army has implemented a rigorous chemical agent quality assurance monitoring program to ensure that appropriate corrective actions are taken if the release of a lethal chemical agent is detected. Additionally, CDC has developed baseline community guidelines for medical readiness in case of such a release.

WHAT ARE THE NEXT STEPS?

CDC has proposed revised recommendations for exposure limits to the chemical agents during disposal. Using the most up-to-date toxicity information, the revised limits will ensure that workers and persons living in nearby communities are protected from potential adverse health effects.

CDC is also helping the Army evaluate new monitoring techniques, destruction technologies (such as chemical neutralization at two sites), and system safeguards for existing disposal facilities and for those under construction. CDC provides advice regarding medical readiness at each site before disposal operations begin.