

Company to pay \$1.3 million for falsifying tests on wastes

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A U.S. federal contractor pleaded guilty to falsifying test results vital to the cleanup of toxic waste dumps and agreed to pay more than \$1.3 million US in civil and criminal penalties, prosecutors said Monday.

The guilty plea of Science Applications International Corp. ends a three-year investigation that began after the company admitted its laboratory submitted false results for tests performed for the Environmental Protection Agency.

The EPA used the tests on soil and water samples to decide which hazardous waste sites were most dangerous and should be cleaned up first under the multibillion-dollar Superfund program.

The tests also were used to determine what toxic chemicals were present at each site and help determine who might have put them there.

"This company handled analysis of soil and water samples from all over the country," said Brooks Griffin, EPA divisional inspector general. The EPA has said several hundred tests were involved.

The false reports caused cleanup delays and retesting of sites, Griffin said. He said he had no way to evaluate health effects from the problems.

The company, based in La Jolla, agreed to pay \$805,000 in civil claims and \$500,000 in criminal fines, on top of \$75,871 already paid to the U.S. air force for retesting.

The company, which posted revenues of \$1.16 billion last year, continues to do government research, mostly in defence.

The investigation began when the company reported to the Defence Department in 1988 that testing at some of its military waste sites might have been falsified.

The company admitted that soil and water analyses were performed after the EPA's 10-day time limit, then back-dated to make it appear the work was done on time.

The delayed testing, in 1987 and 1988, could have let some chemicals in the samples dissipate, rendering the results invalid, the EPA said.

After the disclosure, government investigators found evidence of other shortcuts used by the company that could have altered results, Griffin said. Officials at Science Applications International said they reported all wrongdoing they were aware of and shouldn't face criminal penalties after voluntarily turning themselves in.

But U.S. Attorney William Braniff said the corporation didn't co-operate fully with the investigation.

Company spokesman Chuck Nichols denied that the company withheld information. Six former company employees have pleaded guilty to making false statements or aiding and abetting false statements as a result of the investigation. The company fired the employees and in February sold the 15-employee laboratory that performed the tests.

