

VICTOR VALLEY

DAILY PRESS

Low-level radioactive discovered at George

By WILLIAM COUEY
Daily Press Staff Writer



Staff Photo / WILLIAM COUEY

Sign at George AFB dump site reads: 'CAUTION — radioactive waste burial site. Digging in this area is prohibited without approval of the base civil engineer and director of base medical services.'

VICTORVILLE — The existence of a low-level radioactive waste dump near Victorville and the Mojave River was revealed Friday after a telephone tip from an off-road vehicle enthusiast.

The dump was apparently unknown to local and county officials, but might be on a state water board list.

The approximately one-acre unfenced site is located within the extreme southern boundary of George Air Force Base, a few hundred yards from the Victorville city limits and about one and one-half miles from the Mojave River.

A small flood ravine runs along an edge of the site and eventually reaches the Mojave River near Turner and Shay roads, the general area of George Air Force Base wells and a planned well site for Adelanto.

Signs at the site warn of possible danger from radioactive waste, but they are broken and lying on the ground. The general area is routinely used by motorcyclists, said the informant who called the Daily Press after discovering the site.

A George Air Force Base official confirmed Friday the dump is an old military repository for low-level radioactive waste.

"It's ours," said public information officer Capt. Michael Olson. "It's a former disposal site for

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dump AFB

low-level radioactive material."

The Air Force, he said, "doesn't know what's in it. It could (contain) anything from watch dials to cathode ray tubes out of X-ray machines."

The George site, Olson said, was used as a waste repository until about 1970. Though he didn't know how long it has been there, it has been tested for surface radioactivity and none has been found, he said.

A *Daily Press* test for radioactivity appeared to confirm that. In a walkover, only normal background radiation registered on a Geiger counter.

Olson said the site is not suspected of containing any high-level radioactive material, a point echoed by a water quality official and an Adelanto water consultant.

Low-level radioactive waste is material such as paper, used protective clothing, discarded equipment and tools, glassware and construction materials — solid waste that has been contaminated by radioactivity during routine use.

Robert Dodds, engineer for the local office of the state Water Quality Control Board, said if it's the site he thinks it is, the state is aware of it.

"I recall hearing that there was a site (at George) where watch and instrument dials were placed," Dodds said Saturday.

He said the site he knows of is listed on a nationwide federal pro-

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gram to clean up military bases.

"If it's that one, then we know about it," he said. "It contains very low levels of radioactivity."

Dodds said the agency has been prodding the federal government to get on with cleaning up the site. Lack of funds from Washington may be a cause of the delay, he said.

His agency has reviewed reports on the federal project and is keeping up to date on it, Dodds said.

"We know what's not in it," he said, adding that he could provide no other information until Tuesday.

Richard Titera, an engineer adviser on water matters to the city of Adelanto, said he too knows of the site and isn't particularly concerned about it.

It has been there for years, he said, adding that it may contain lead batteries and World War II radio tubes. Tests conducted on water from nearby wells reveal no contaminants, he said, but he added that tests for radioactivity have not been done.

A San Bernardino County hazardous waste specialist said Friday he had no knowledge of the site.

"We work with the state on a list of known abandoned sites, but that's not on it," said Peter Brierty of the Department of Environmental Health Services.

After talking to George officials Friday and being advised of a planned cleanup, Brierty said, "We'll be reviewing the progress that is made and the results obtained from test wells, and we'll be involved in the clean-up operation as it progresses.

"Chemical analysis and other tests on bore holes and test wells won't be confined to a single parameter (such as radioactivity)," Brierty said.

Olson said the site has been listed by the Department of Defense and is currently in the second phase of a four-phase "Installation Restoration Program" used on all military bases.

Phase one consists of a "general records review" and phase two involves "monitoring." Phase two has been in effect since "around 1983," but Olson said he didn't know what the monitoring involves.

In phase three, a clean-up proposal is prepared if needed. Phase 4 involves letting a contract and the actual cleanup, Olson said. He said information on the program — but not the site — had coincidentally been prepared for release to the press next week.

The IRP program began in 1976 and the George AFB site study was started "shortly after that," Olson said. He said he didn't know exactly when.

Olson didn't know exactly how George and other military bases now dispose of their low-level wastes.

The site is littered with a few concrete blocks and piles of earth and contains sink holes where the soil has settled. There is no fence, but a rusted cable used as a gate lies in the dirt and several broken signs bearing the symbol for radioactivity lay on the surface.

They read "CAUTION — radioactive waste burial site. Digging in this area is prohibited without approval of the base civil engineer and director of base medical services."

The site is bordered immediately to the north by an area identified by signs as a "munitions residue burial site."

Between the two, a small ravine runs downhill toward the Mojave River in the distance, cutting into along the edge of the nuclear site. It apparently connects to a large drainage channel that crosses under Air Base Road and enters the Mojave River.

Titera said he didn't feel deep ground water could be contaminated by the site. "It's not part of the watershed."

Notified of the finding Saturday, First District Supervisor John Joyner said he was surprised and concerned.

"I'm highly concerned about it. I will investigate as soon as we get

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back from the holiday. As soon as I'm able to communicate to our county people, I will have some further comments."

Victorville City Councilwoman Peggy Sartor, who has long kept abreast of environmental matters, said she knew of the IR program in general but was surprised to hear of the site.

"I'm concerned, especially because it's right in our own back yard," she said.

There are currently no legal low-level radioactive waste dumps in California. All non-military waste is transported to either Richland, Washington, or Beatty, Nevada, as

part of a compact between neighboring states.

California must choose a site of its own by Jan. 1, 1986.

California's low-level waste normally comes from medical research, hospitals, educational institutions and industry.

Health effects of the waste are not measurable by current technology, according to a 1982 guidebook, but it is estimated that if 1 million people were subjected to an acute dose of low-level radiation, 100 additional cancer deaths would be added to the nearly 200,000 cancer deaths expected from other causes.

The site was reported to the *Daily*

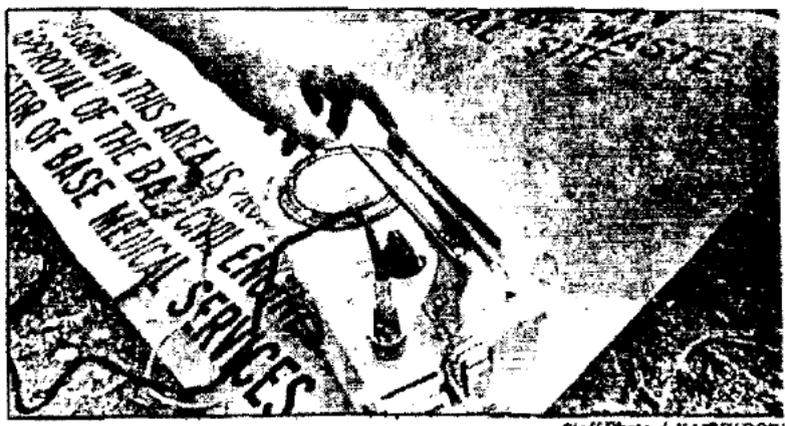
Press Friday by an man who had driven his four-wheel drive vehicle through the area. He asked that his name not be revealed.

He said he discovered the site by turning over a warning sign lying on the ground.

"It scared the — out of me. Did you ever see a four-wheel drive go into passing gear and leave? That's what we did."

Olson said the site is posted, but the warning signs have been vandalized and the southern boundary of the base is a few hundred yards away and not clearly marked.

Oson said the area is scheduled to be fenced next year.



Staff Photo / KATHY ROBI

Daily Press staffers got no reading using a Geiger counter at si

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