

U.S. Military Leaves Toxic Trail Overseas

TOXIC WASTE: A Federal Failure. Second in a series.

NEXT: As many military bases in the United States prepare to close, a dispute simmers over how to pay for the pollution they will leave behind.

June 18, 1990 | JOHN M. BRODER | TIMES STAFF WRITER

ROHL, West Germany — The United States' far-flung network of overseas military bases, operating in secret and far outside the reach of American environmental regulation, has left a quagmire of chemical contamination all around the globe that will cost billions of dollars to correct and will damage American foreign policy interests for years to come.

And, while the problem of toxic waste dumps created at home by industrial polluters has received high-level government attention, the very existence of a huge problem overseas is almost unknown outside the Pentagon.

For years, the brook that runs through this small village just beyond the runways of Bitburg Air Base has been a dumping ground for unwanted jet fuel, chemical solvents and firefighting chemicals.

Other U.S. military installations have polluted the drinking water of the Pacific island of Guam, poured tons of toxic chemicals into Subic Bay in the Philippines, leaked carcinogens into the water source of a German spa, spewed tons of sulfurous coal smoke into the skies of Central Europe and pumped millions of gallons of raw sewage into the oceans.

Even as they defended the freedom and security interests of the United States and its allies, America's armed forces have bequeathed to their hosts another legacy as well, one of enduring environmental damage.

"The Department of Defense is not blameless," conceded David J. Berteau, the senior civilian Pentagon official in charge of environmental programs. "There (are) places where we have not lived up to our responsibilities. We've done some dumb things in the disposal of hazardous materials."

Today, with the Pentagon preparing to close scores of costly foreign bases because of a deepening budget crunch and easing world tensions, the bill for decades of careless and arrogant environmental behavior is coming due.

And the tab will be paid not only in billions of dollars in cleanup costs but also in strained relations with many of America's most valued allies.

Indeed, Army and Air Force officials in West Germany have warned that U.S. military officers or civilian employees face "the specter of criminal charges, especially concerning ground-water pollution." Such charges have already been brought in West Germany and Italy, where prosecutors have charged civilian employees of the U.S. military with illegal disposal of hazardous chemicals.

As the world's most extensive industrial enterprise, the military generates huge quantities of hazardous wastes--used oils and solvents, paint sludges, plating residues, heavy metals, asbestos, cyanide, PCBs, battery acid, pesticides, herbicides and virtually every other toxic substance known to man. American military power plants in Europe also have caused significant air pollution and acid rain by burning high-sulfur content coal imported from the United States, a result of congressional action in the 1970s to help the faltering American soft-coal industry.

Lethal Waste Piles Up

The Pentagon also creates such special classes of lethal byproducts as high-level radioactive wastes from atomic weapons plants, high explosive powder, outdated chemical weapons, rocket fuels and ordnance practice ranges full of unexploded bullets, bombs and artillery shells.

In addition, the 2 million men and women in uniform and 1 million civilian Pentagon employees stationed in the U.S. and around the globe daily produce tons of ordinary garbage, medical wastes, photographic chemicals and as much sewage as a large city.

By the Pentagon's own admission, much of this waste has been treated cavalierly both in the United States and abroad. A seven-year survey of 1,579 domestic bases found 14,401 sites of known and suspected contamination, including 87 that qualify for inclusion on the Superfund list of the most polluted places in America. Cleaning up the messes at U.S. bases will cost at least \$20 billion, and perhaps as much as \$200 billion, according to Defense Department estimates.

The Pentagon has not even begun to assess the scope of the problem at foreign facilities, fearing the staggering cost of cleanup and the wrath of allies.

While there is no systematic effort under way to determine how badly polluted America's overseas bases are, the Army--without even looking formally--has identified 300 contaminated sites in West Germany alone. Of the total, 30 are on bases slated for closure and 25 are currently deemed serious enough to require expensive long-term remedies.

Polluted Sites Known

The Air Force has acknowledged that it has polluted soil, streams or ground water at every one of its airfields in Europe.

The Navy says it does not know the extent of contamination at its many overseas bases because it has neither money nor a legal requirement to study the problem. The Navy's senior environmental officer conceded that the service is aware of a number of polluted sites worldwide but refused to identify them because, he said, it would create "problems with host nations."