

House to probe chemical dumping

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John M.R. Bull Daily Press, Newport News, Va.

Nov. 13--Federal lawmakers are demanding the Army reveal everything it knows about where it dumped chemical weapons into the world's oceans, as well as provide proof the munitions won't leak and cause an environmental catastrophe.

Hearings in the House Armed Services Committee are likely if the Army's response is inadequate, said U.S. Rep. Rob Andrews, D-N.J. and a committee member.

"We're not going to let this go," Andrews said. "I'm not going to be satisfied with the Army saying, in effect, 'We know the facts, and we don't think there is a problem -- trust us.' "

Andrews has been pushing for more information from the Army since the Daily Press published an investigation into the Army's decades-long ocean dumping off at least 11 states, including New Jersey.

The newspaper found that the Army dumped at least 64 million pounds of chemical weapons, mostly mustard and nerve gas, from World War II until 1970 -- and more than that off 16 other countries. The weapons likely are still active and slowly corroding in the salt water.

The newspaper's investigation was circulated globally and brought demands for action from across the country and astonishment worldwide. Recent developments include:

New Zealand issued a formal query through diplomatic channels, asking the United States to provide all information that it had on chemical-weapon dump sites the United States might have created off that country.

Greenpeace said it was considering a diving expedition to one of the 26 identified Army chemical-weapon dump sites off the United States to see whether the long-submerged weapons were leaking.

A worldwide environmental group called for an international law to require the United States and other countries to inspect, monitor and clean up their chemical-weapon ocean dumps.

New Jersey's Andrews wants to know where exactly the dumps are, why they haven't been monitored and why the Army told no one in Congress or at the state level of the potential dangers lurking

offshore. He wants proof that the weapons aren't leaking and won't leak, he said.

Other lawmakers are also demanding answers.

"The decision to dump these weapons was made in a different era, at a time when the consequences were not understood the way they are today," said U.S. Rep. Neil Abercrombie, D-Hawaii.

"Still, the Department of Defense and the U.S. government bear a responsibility for remedying the problem," he said. "... I will make it a priority to enact legislation to deal with the problem and communicate the urgency of this issue to the Pentagon."

Sen. John Warner, R-Va., issued a formal letter of inquiry to the Army and has scheduled an informal briefing with military officials for Monday afternoon. Warner is chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee.

Under fire, the Army has decided to conduct a full search of all surviving ocean-dumping records to identify any other chemical-weapon dump sites. It's also preparing a formal response to questions from Congress. And it's expected to designate which military agency will oversee the record search, as well as any other response deemed necessary.

"The U.S. Army is actively engaged with members of Congress regarding the disposal of munitions at deep-sea locations," Army spokesman John P. Boyce Jr. said. "As always, the U.S. Army will work closely with Congress and other government agencies on these ordnance-disposal issues to ensure the safety of others and the protection of our environment."

It's long been known that the Army dumped chemical weapons into the ocean. But only now has it come to light just how much was involved, what kind of weapons were thrown into the ocean and the rough nautical coordinates of some locations.

The Army says it doesn't know the locations of almost half the dump zones that it created off the United States after World War II. Records are vague or missing or were destroyed.

More chemical-weapon dump sites likely exist because the Army hasn't reviewed dumping records from the World War I era, when throwing chemical weapons into the ocean was common.

Some evidence suggests the weapons might have leaked -- or will leak in the future -- as the ordnance corroded from exposure to salt water. Steel containers and shell casings corrode at different rates, depending on the depth and temperature of the water.