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Pentagon takes first steps toward tackling pollution

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GLOBE STAFF

WASHINGTON - Many participants called it an historic first, a meeting unthinkable even a few years ago. At a national conference held last week outside Washington, the Department of Defense, which acknowledges itself to be the nation's worst polluter, sat down to talk with some of its most vocal environmental critics.

This Defense Department-sponsored effort to establish a dialogue for improving the Pentagon's environmental performance proved, however, an uncertain first step. The encounter between the two camps was marked by mutual suspicion, a noticeable clash of cultures and claims that some activists, who had come from as far away as Alaska and Hawaii, were being shut out of the discussion.

How much the event was an exercise in Pentagon public relations - as opposed to a sincere effort to tackle the military's environmental problems - seemed to depend on who was viewing it.

Some read commitment in the fact that, despite the gulf crisis, Secretary of Defense Richard Cheney showed up and gave his speech as scheduled. And several environmentalists commented that the speech set a positive tone for discussion.

"Defense and the environment is not an either-or proposition," Cheney said. "To choose between them is impossible in this real world of serious defense threats and genuine environmental concerns. The real choice is whether we are going to build a new environmental ethic into the daily business of defense."

Cheney said that the department faces a major cleanup job because of environmentally unsound practices in the past. "This year alone we are spending over \$600 million on cleanup efforts in the Department of Defense," he said. "And our best current estimates say that restoration programs are likely to amount to \$14 billion before we are through."

But environmentalists cite warnings by the federal Inspector General that the costs may be five times higher. The Pentagon estimates it has at least 14,400 toxic waste sites at more than 1,500 military facilities across the country. Ninety-seven of these facilities have already been placed on the federal Superfund list.

Procurement guidelines

Environmentalists say, however, that hazardous waste is only one aspect of the military's pollution problem. The bases are small cities afflicted by a range of mundane pollution problems such as leaking solid waste landfills and malfunctioning

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sewage treatment plants.

And because the Defense Department is the largest single institution in the country, its procurement policies often dictate the manufacturing methods of its suppliers. Environmentalists note, for example, that department specifications still require that computer parts be cleaned with ozone-depleting CFCs even though many companies have already switched to less damaging substitutes.

Environmentalists also read the heavy attendance by generals, admi-

als and other senior officials as a hopeful sign.

But many expressed frustration that the department seemed eager to tout its efforts to protect wildlife on military bases, but unwilling to grapple with the human health problems stemming from pollution on military facilities.

In an interview, the deputy assistant secretary of defense for the environment, Thomas Baca, acknowledged that he was emphasizing the department's role in protecting wildlife and other natural resources. "A lot of natural resources would not exist today if not for the military. Whole areas have been protected. I want to sell that side of our mission. It's been a major contribution," he said.

Human health concerns

"What concerns most people here is the threat to their families and their homes," said Bob Schaeffer, spokesman for the Military Toxics Network, a coalition of national environmental organizations and grassroots groups fighting pollution from military facilities. "I haven't heard concerns at that human level addressed, concern for human life."

To the dismay of many, Baca also declined to alter the program to make room for a panel representing citizens from communities affected

by pollution from military facilities.

Explaining that the program had been put together a month earlier, he said that last minute changes would be "disruptive."

Denied a spot on the formal agenda, Ted Smith, a member of the Toxics Network from California's Silicon Valley, jumped up from the audience and hurriedly presented a seven-point "Citizen's Agenda for Environmental Responsibility" as Cheney stood poised to disappear out the door.

This agenda urged, among other things, speedy cleanup of toxic waste sites, public access to information about pollution on military sites and abandoning the military's claim of exemption from state and federal environmental oversight.

Asked about the recommendations, Baca said he generally found them to be valid. He said that the department is already working in areas suggested by the Citizen's Agenda, such as pollution prevention.

Environmentalists also questioned what the speech by the vice chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral David Jeremiah, signaled about the Pentagon's attitude. Jeremiah, for his part, was equally skeptical about the other side.

While acknowledging that there are some sincere environmentalists, he said that "in many cases," the en-

vironment "is used as a screen to mask hidden political agendas," which he characterized as "anti-military."

Adrienne Anderson, of the National Toxic Campaign in Denver, said the people she works with share Jeremiah's concern for a strong national defense, but she said some have suffered illness and birth defects because defense facilities have polluted their drinking water supplies.

"They feel they should not have to sacrifice their family health and property values" for national defense, she said. "We should not have to fight chemical warfare at home."