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Report calls Moffett 'point of blight'

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MOUNTAIN VIEW

Closing Moffett Field Naval Air Station may actually speed cleanup of toxic wastes at the base, according to environmental activists.

Moffett Field is on the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's Superfund list of the nation's most serious toxic waste sites. Tuesday, representatives of the National Toxic Campaign Fund released a report criticizing the slow pace of the cleanup at military bases, which the report called "15,000 points of blight."

Companies such as Fairchild Semiconductor Inc. in Mountain View have repeatedly accused the Navy of foot-dragging in

its cleanup at Moffett Field. Fairchild is one of more than a dozen companies that are being held responsible, along with the Navy and the National Aeronautics and Space Administration, for creating a large toxic plume known as the Middlefield-Ellis-Whisman waste site.

Complicating the issue is that Moffett may be on a list of bases targeted for closure that is being developed by a presidential committee. Local governments and businesses are worried about the economic effects of closure, partly because the land could not be reused until the toxics are cleaned up.

But Lenny Siegel, director of the Pacific Studies Center in Mountain View and one of the authors of the report released

Tuesday, said the government would be more likely to take care of the mess quickly if the base closed.

"We would anticipate, given the political climate, that closure would accelerate the cleanup," Siegel said.

During the 1991 budget negotiations in November, a bill was passed that set aside \$100 million for cleaning up bases already scheduled for closure, Siegel said. If this appropriation sets a precedent, cleanup efforts at Moffett Field could benefit from the closure funds in the future.

Moffett Field is only one of 11 military Superfund sites in Northern California. There are nearly 100 bases on the list nationwide, making the military by far the nation's largest polluter.

But despite the extent of the problem, which the Department of Defense has estimated would cost from \$100 billion to \$200 billion to clean up, the federal government is exempt from many of the requirements that corporate polluters must obey. And only 0.4 percent of the military budget is devoted to cleanups, the report revealed.

The report identified 14,401 likely waste sites at 1,579 military bases. Cleanup has been completed at only 287 sites.

The contamination endangers military personnel as well as civilian populations living near the bases. Chemicals that cause cancer and birth defects have

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leaked into groundwater supplies. Ted Smith, head of the Silicon Valley Toxics Coalition, said with the end of the Persian Gulf War the government should devote more military resources to ending the environmental hazards at home. War veterans should not have their lives endangered in the United States after surviving Iraqi bullets, Smith said.

"It would be a real tragedy to have people come back (from the war) to unsafe areas, and that's exactly what's happening all over the country," Smith said.

The report made seven recommendations to solve the toxics problems, including:

- Devoting more of the military budget to cleanup.
- Ending the military's exemption from supervision by states and the EP. Unlike private polluters, federal installations do not have to report the amounts of toxic chemicals released into the environment under the Community Right to Know Act.
- Changing military specifications and procurement policies, which encourage the use of ozone-destroying chemicals and other toxic substances.

Despite Moffett Field's status as a Superfund site, studies have revealed that the contamination poses no immediate threat to human health. The toxics have not reached any of the city of Mountain View's drinking water wells.

However, Smith said the pollution has almost certainly seeped into the San Francisco Bay, posing a serious threat to wildlife and an indirect threat to fisherman and hunters who eat animals taken from the Bay.

And because increased pumping of the city wells would cause the pollutants to migrate toward them, an important water resource in the drought is eliminated, Siegel said.