

Comment

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Navy dawdles as toxics migrate

THE TIMES TRIBUNE editorial staff had a simple question: *Why are toxic cleanup regulations for the military different than the rules for private industry?*

The question came to mind because the Navy at Moffett Field will not begin a comprehensive cleanup of toxic spills until 1995, while corporations nearby that have contributed to the same contamination have made much greater progress toward an eventual cleanup.

In response to our question, Moffett Field spokesman John Shackleton said the Navy is following orders from the Department of Defense in Washington. Environmental Protection Agency spokesman Terry Wil-

Moffett's massive toxic plume is slowly but surely drifting toward San Francisco Bay.

son in San Francisco responded with a lengthy digression about how each toxic site presents complex technical problems that have to be evaluated on an individual basis.

The explanation of Steve Anschutz, Moffett Field's toxic cleanup expert, was similarly unrelated to the question.

While bureaucrats ramble, a massive toxic plume is slowly but surely drifting from underneath the Moffett runways to San Francisco Bay. The Navy has known about the problem since 1981. Though there is no immediate health risk, EPA officials are concerned about the possibility of contamination to the Bay.

As menacing as migrating toxics can be, the dangerous underground soup doesn't have the intelligence to distinguish between private and military land. If there's no environmental rationale for giving the military more leeway than the private sector, why does the EPA treat the two entities so differently?

Of course, the official sources we asked know full well that the EPA has lacked the authority and the political direction to get tough with the military. Until recently, the military brass has taken the view that its defense mission is so important that it should not be held to the same environmental standards imposed on civilian entities. Although that attitude is changing, the military still spends too little on toxic cleanup, despite being the nation's No. 1 polluter.

The environmental group, National Toxic Campaign Fund, released a report this week criticizing the foot-dragging of military bases. The report identified 14,401 likely waste sites at 1,579 military bases. Cleanup has been completed at only 287 sites.

In some ways Moffett has been more responsive than the rest of the Navy in addressing its toxic problem. But Moffett is on the EPA's Superfund list as one of the nation's most serious hazardous waste sites. Along with its continued hesitance to cooperate with the private cleanup efforts, the Navy has argued that as a federal agency it does not have to obey state regulators.

Rather than argue its legal authority to set its own timetable, the Navy should make toxic cleanup a high priority.