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Mustard bomb site cleanup sickened workers

By Tom Charlier
The Commercial Appeal

Officials overseeing the removal of buried chemical warfare bombs at the old Defense Depot Memphis said Friday the public should have been notified of an incident last month in which three project workers were taken to a hospital.

The workers had been digging up soil surrounding buried bomb casings that had contained German-made World War II-era mustard gas when they complained of headaches, nausea and sinus irritation on Sept. 15.

The symptoms struck while the workers were inside a tightly sealed vapor-containment structure enclosing one of the excavation sites on the 640-acre base in South Memphis.



Three cleanup workers at the old Defense Depot Memphis were taken to The Med last month after complaining of headaches, nausea and sinus irritation. The workers were digging up soil around bomb casings that had held German-made, World War II-era mustard gas.

The employees work for UXB International, a Virginia-based contractor hired by the Corps of Engineers.

They were taken to the Regional Medical Center at Memphis, where the examinations and followup visits showed no evidence of exposure to chemical-weapons materials, authorities say. The workers had been wearing protective masks with

vapor filters.

Air monitoring and soil testing at the excavation site revealed no sign of chemical warfare agents. But further investigations turned up low levels of thioxane and dithiane, which are created by the breakdown of sulfur mustard.

Although the incident apparently did not significantly harm the workers or endanger

the public, it should have been relayed to the public and the agency in charge of the excavation, officials said Friday.

It went unreported nearly a month because the Defense Logistics Agency was not notified of the incident by its contractor, the corps. The agency didn't learn of it until a member of an

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advisory board monitoring cleanup work heard about it and made inquiries, said Shawn Phillips, an environmental coordinator for the agency.

"It's an embarrassing situation," Phillips said. "We're going to lose credibility because of this. It's going to take a long time to get it back."

After confirming the hospital visits with the corps, the logistics agency sent letters this week informing members of the depot's Restoration Advisory Board, which serves as a liaison to the public.

As a result of the incident, officials met with corps representatives and instructed them to "report any incident," said Jackie Noble, spokesman for the logistics agency's Defense Distribution Center in New Cumberland, Pa.

Noble said corps officers at the scene apparently thought the incident was too routine and inconsequential to report. They won't have that discretion in the future.

"We're not going to wait until they (the corps) decide it's an incident," Noble said.

Corps officials declined comment Friday, referring questions to Phillips.

Carter Gray, the Health Department's pollution-control manager and the advisory board member who first heard about the incident, said it's unfortunate it wasn't revealed sooner. The lessons from the episode are mixed, he said.

"It showed the system works" in protecting employees and the public, Gray said. "But it also showed that there still are communications problems between the various agencies and the public."

Although the hospital exams indicated no exposure to chemical agents, the discovery of low-

level concentrations of mustard byproducts raises questions, Gray said.

"That something was detected after a safety incident, I think, should have been reported to the community," he said.

The depot has long been a subject of concern among neighbors and activists. The facility, which operated from 1942 until 1997, contains a disposal field where a variety of chemical wastes were buried during the 1940s, '50s and '60s.

The chemical-warfare materiel now being excavated includes the remnants of 29 German bombs that contained mustard, a blistering agent that can damage the skin, eyes and lungs.

The mustard bombs arrived at the depot in 1946. They were being shipped by train to Pine Bluff Arsenal in Arkansas when they began leaking and were unloaded at the Memphis depot.

The bomb casings were punctured, and the mustard was drained into pits that contained bleach compounds to neutralize the chemical. The casings were buried, also.

During that operation 54 years ago, nearly two dozen rail and depot workers were hospitalized for burns and other injuries.

As long as they stayed buried, the mustard bombs and other chemical-warfare materiel at the depot posed little danger to the public, according to experts. But officials decided to remove it to allay public fears and help ensure the depot property eventually can be transferred to future owners for further use.

The \$2.7 million excavation project began last spring and is expected to last until May 2001. At least 22 empty bomb casings have been uncovered so far.

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