

Villages, Greenpeace forge ties to clean up old toxic waste sites

by Jeff Richardson
Tundra Times staff

Throughout Alaska's vast and supposedly pristine landscape are an unknown number of ticking time bombs.

The legacy of years of military and industrial activities in remote areas, many dating from World War II and Cold War installations, these sites are a constant concern to many communities. Many sites are long-neglected, some actually long-forgotten.

Especially troubling is that while the list of sites containing a wide variety of chemicals grows with new government and re-

search revelations, the level of government funding to address the problem is dwindling.

On the federal level, there is talk of virtually dismantling the Dept. of Energy, which has major responsibility for certain kinds of contaminated sites, with a projected loss of cleanup funds.

In Alaska, the budget of the Dept. of Environmental Conservation declined significantly during the Hickel Administration.

According to a brochure published by DEC, there are at least 1,100 contaminated sites across Alaska, not including leaking underground storage tanks. About

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250 of these are considered high priority for cleanup. However, some analysts fear there may be many more that have not yet been disclosed.

In Pt. Hope, fears linger that radioactive contamination remains in the local food chain, despite federal cleanup of a controversial nuclear test site dating from Cold War experiments of the Atomic Energy Commission. This is only one prominent example of what are actually widespread worries.

Diminishing funds notwithstanding, state officials acknowledge that village residents have reason to be concerned.

"Many of the issues which rose with the discovery of waste leftover from Project Chariot (in Pt. Hope) still remain. The state will keep its commitment to residents of Alaska's Arctic to identify – and reduce – sources of contamination in the air, the water, and the food

chain that can have a harmful effect," said Mead Treadwell, former deputy commissioner of DEC. "We have to maintain our vigilance. We start by examining our own house, and making sure that any sources of Arctic contamination in Alaska are being dealt with."

The contents of contaminated sites vary, but many contain some of the most toxic substances known to humans, posing grave risk to drinking water supplies and fish and wildlife resources. Sites contaminated by petroleum products are the most common. Light petroleum products such as gasoline and aviation fuel are the most toxic, as they contain high levels of cancer-causing benzene.

Other chemicals found at Alaskan sites include solvents, heavy metals and pesticides, many of

which have also been linked to cancer.

Through July of last year, DEC reported that 178 sites had been cleaned up or otherwise addressed, but there's a long way to go.

Two Native villages who got tired of waiting for government resources to deal with contamination problems in their area asked the environmental organization Greenpeace for help.

"They had tried for years to get attention for those sights," said Pam Miller, a biologist with the Greenpeace Alaska Campaign, noting that one village was concerned about an abandoned military installation, the other about an old mine. "They were at their wit's end. They had tried everything they could think of."

Greenpeace responded by helping the communities secure

experts to test the sites, hoping the hard data would eventually spur a government response.

"We went in and found extraordinarily high levels of mercury at the mine site on the Wood River near Aleknagik. There was actually mercury pooling on the surface," said Miller.

This fruitful alliance prompted Greenpeace to develop a statewide program of toxic site technical assistance for communities.

"We want to work with communities that request our assistance," Miller said. "We want to offer legal, scientific and advocacy assistance to villages that need it and there are a lot. We feel the environmental community has not been responsive regarding toxic sites in Alaska. We'd like to fill that gap."

Greenpeace has hired a com-

munity coordinator, Jean Gamache, both to spread the word about the program, as well as to collect information from village residents who may have unique knowledge about known toxic sites, or know of sites not currently entered in government databases.

According to Gamache, feedback from villages so far has been positive.

"I've been able to do some traveling. People are interested in having access to the information and using it to get some cleanup done," she said. "People are interested in training on sampling techniques and designing sampling programs and safety issues."

Readers interested in learning more about the Greenpeace Community Toxics Program can call Gamache at (907) 277-8234.