Airfield cleanup plans get few comments

By Jonathan Partridge, Staff Writer

Patterson Irrigator Patterson Irrigator , Tuesday, Feb. 14, 2012

Plans to turn Crows Landing's former naval airfield into a rail hub for the Port of Oakland have elicited an outcry among some West Siders, but talk last week about the U.S. Navy's environmental cleanup plans there hardly garnered a peep.

About 20 people gathered at the Best Western Plus Villa del Lago conference center Thursday, Feb. 9 to learn about proposed ideas for removing toxins from the groundwater. Those include an eight-year, $5.56 million strategy, preferred by the Navy, to pump water out of the ground, treat it and return it to the aquifer.

The only people to speak at the meeting were a few local residents who wanted clarification about the Navy's proposals and a Crows Landing resident who opposed a proposal to turn the airbase into a rail hub.

The Navy, along with the state Department of Toxic Substances Control and the Central Valley Regional Water Quality Control Board, is working to remove several groundwater contaminants that pose potential health hazards on an 81-acre parcel of the airfield, so that it can be transferred to the county. The parcel, which stands north of Ike Crow Road and just west of Bell Road, includes a few buildings, an air traffic control tower and a training area used by the Stanislaus County Sheriff's Department.

Toxins found in the groundwater include benzene, 1,2-dichloroethane, carbon tetrachloride, gasoline-range petroleum hydrocarbons and diesel-range petroleum hydrocarbons. All of the chemicals are known or suspected carcinogens and also pose other health hazards.

The contaminated area is one of seven parcels, totaling 176 acres, that have undergone environmental cleanup and remain to be transferred to Stanislaus County, and it is the only parcel that remains contaminated.

NASA, which took ownership of the airfield in 1994 as part of the U.S. Department of Defense's Base Closure and Realignment Process, transferred 1,352 acres of the nearly 1,528-acre facility to Stanislaus County in 2004.

Best-case scenarios have groundwater treatment starting by June 2013, according to Tony Guiang, the Navy's project manager for environmental cleanup of the Crows Landing airbase, noting that only would be possible if funding becomes available when needed. But first, the Navy must complete a formal Record of Decision on the process that details which cleanup strategy will be used.

In addition to the $5.56 million groundwater extraction proposal, Navy officials are considering the following options to contend with the toxins:

- Do nothing to remove the contaminants.
- Spend $3.3 million over 24 years to monitor groundwater plumes while allowing natural processes to clean up water at the site.
- Inject a substrate into the groundwater to increase the rate of natural processes that break down contaminants. This $8.9 million plan would take 20 years and would require building hundreds of injection-point wells on the site.

The groundwater extraction plan appears to be the best choice, because it would not only clean up groundwater on the site but also prevent contaminants from traveling away from the airbase and would require the least time, Guiang said.

Murray Wunderly, an environmental consultant working on behalf of the Navy, said this would entail extracting water via 14 new wells and putting water back into the aquifer with 17 injection wells.

Keith Boggs, a deputy executive officer for Stanislaus County, noted from the audience that the wells are small and would not be an unsightly addition to the airfield.

"I think the public's perception is that they're like oil rigs," Boggs said. "They're extremely minute."

Boggs told Navy representatives that county officials thought the Navy had been consistent with its environmental works and that its preferred strategy was the best way to handle groundwater cleanup.

Meanwhile, Mike Anderson, commander of American Legion Post 168 in Patterson, wondered whether concrete pads at the base had been cleaned up and he wanted a further explanation of the chemicals that were in the groundwater. Both Boggs and Guiang noted that soil cleanup at the airfield was already complete and that only groundwater cleanup needed to be take place.

Longtime Crows Landing resident Lorenne Alves commented on the county's proposed future plans for the airfield — a topic that appeared to draw several of the attendees, though it was not the topic of the meeting.

"I don't want to waste money on a train," Alves said. "I wouldn't want to put more contamination back into the ground."

Developer Gerry Kamilos, who plans to develop the 1,528 former airbase and surrounding land into a 2,930-acre industrial park, has said in the past that electric trains proposed for project would be environmentally friendly. Several West Side residents have vocally criticized his plans, however, saying that trains would cut through surrounding cities and disrupt their way of life and that trucks that would use the "inland port" would contribute to local air pollution.

Regardless of whether the airfield eventually becomes a train hub, Navy officials stressed that they will have no part in how the airfield is developed, noting that the county will be responsible for those decisions.

Those who wish to comment on the Navy's proposed cleanup plan can do so by Feb. 21 by submitting them by email to James.b.sullivan2@navy.mil or by mail at James Sullivan, BRAC Environmental Coordinator, 1455 Frazee Road, Suite 900, San Diego, CA 92108.

Air pollution might harm brain, study says
Susanne Rust
California Watch, February 14, 2012

It's well established that dirty, sooty air is no good for your lungs and probably not great for your skin. But new research indicates it can damage your brain, too.

A study in the journal of the Archives of Internal Medicine shows that air pollution accelerates cognitive decline in women.

And with a new federal report showing Southern Californians are at the highest risk of death due to air pollution, this study adds to the growing body of grim evidence showing air pollution and healthy bodies don't mix.

"We keep learning about more adverse effects (from pollution) than we thought possible," said Jean Ospital, health effects officer with the South Coast Air Quality Management District, who was not involved with the current research.

"I'm not sure I find these results surprising," he said, "but I'm also not sure I would have expected them if you'd asked me 10 years ago."

The new research, conducted by a team of researchers from Chicago, Boston, Baltimore and Philadelphia, looked at the effect of coarse particulate matter in the air on the cognitive health of older women.

"We, as a society, are on the verge of dealing with an unprecedented number of people having dementia," said Jennifer Weuve, lead author of the study and a researcher at Chicago's Rush University Medical Center. "We know relatively little about how to prevent dementia, but we do know cognitive decline is related to dementia."

Weuve pointed to research showing a link between air pollution and cardiovascular disease.

“It turns out that cardiovascular disease may play a role in cognitive decline," said Weuve, who is a researcher at Rush’s Institute for Healthy Aging. "So if we understand how to prevent or delay these cognitive increments, maybe we can prevent or delay dementia.”

And not just at an individual level, she said.

“What’s interesting about air pollution," Weuve said, is that “other factors that may cause dementia are generally found at the more individual level – diet, weight, smoking. And we can help to try to prevent them at that level. But in this case, we’re looking at something that we can do to intervene at a broad scale, with society at large."

"It's a whole new way to think about prevention for dementia and cognitive decline," she said.

Weuve and her team turned to one of the largest epidemiological datasets and cohorts in medical research, the Nurses' Health Study, to begin looking for links between pollution and cognitive health.

The Nurses' Health Study, which researchers began in 1976, is a dataset based on information collected over time from 121,700 female registered nurses between the ages of 30 and 55 living in 11 different states.

Between 1995 and 2001, Weuve and her colleagues invited participants of the Nurses' Health Study to participate in a study of cognition. The team was able to get data from nearly 20,000 women.

To establish pollutant exposure, the team collected air pollution exposure data from the Environmental Protection Agency, which they correlated with the location of each woman's home and place of employment. Then they called each woman six times on the phone, over six years, and tested their cognitive abilities.

They found that higher levels of long-term exposure to air pollution particles was associated with significantly faster cognitive decline.

She said more research needs to be done. For instance, is the cognitive decline they observed due to cardiovascular issues, or are pollutants having a direct effect on the brain?

She said more research also will be needed to confirm her work.

"The bottom line," said Sam Atwood, a spokesman for the South Coast Air Quality Management District, "is that in Southern California, we have some of the highest levels of particulate matter in the country, and we are working as quickly as possible at reducing those levels."

Bakersfield Californian, Opinion, Tuesday, Feb. 14, 2012:

OUR VIEW: More evidence PM 2.5 is slowly killing us

Some question the need to restrict the use of residential fireplaces and limit diesel exhaust, in some cases questioning the potential for harm from the airborne particulate matter that those emission sources create.

Yet another study, however, underscores the importance of reducing PM 2.5, the fine particulate matter that hovers over the Central Valley most days. U.S. Environmental Protection Agency research published in the journal Risk Analysis last month examined 2005 air pollution exposure. Its projection: The U.S. could soon see between 130,000 and 360,000 premature deaths among adults due to PM 2.5 and ozone, as well as a sharp increase in acute bronchitis and ER visits. Other studies have reached similar conclusions.

The debate has long been a political one, but the science of the consequences of poor air quality should be undeniable. We must do all we can to limit the impact of bad air.