



## Marin News



# Hamilton site suspected of damaging waterway

By Con Garretson

An apparently unidentified landfill at Hamilton Field, suspected to contain a wide array of toxic chemicals and other hazardous materials, may be the cause of environmental problems at a nearby pond that leads into San Pablo Bay, according to a former military sites inspector.

Bel Marin Keys resident Robert Foley spells out what he observed at the former Novato military base more than a decade ago in a letter he sent to military and regulatory officials last Friday, a copy of which he provided to the Independent Journal.

Foley, who served 20 years in the Army, said the improper storage of chemicals and other materials at Hamilton, as well as their subsequent disposal near a known military landfill of current environmental concern, were documented in a report he filed as an Army civilian inspector 13 years ago.

Attempts by Foley and others to retrieve that document from military sources have so far been unsuccessful, but among the dumped items, according to Foley, were:

- \* Hundreds of gallons of lead-based paints, strippers, thinners, degreasers and cleaning solvents.
- \* Some decontamination chemicals used for warfare purposes, including highly-concentrated industrial bleach.
- \* Radiological survey instrumentation.
- \* Outdated medical supplies and radioactive hospital materials.

"We're dealing with a complete unknown," said Sue Lattanzio, a chemist and



Elena Belsky, a Marin investigator with San Francisco BayKeeper, suspects the problems at Pacheco Pond and the unidentified landfill at Hamilton Field are linked because of groundwater migration patterns in the area.

Photo: Frankie Frost

founding member of Friends of Novato Creek. "This could be only the tip of the iceberg. Who knows what has been happening out there for years at Hamilton and in the pond?"

"We've got the methane and the MTBE and other stuff we know about. It could have all combined into one big toxic soup."

In his letter, Foley wrote: "Many of these supply stocks contained chemicals that were incompatible with each other and could under certain conditions produce violent isothermic (explosive) reactions without an additional catalyst."

Several military and regulatory officials discussed the matter with Foley during a special Jan. 16 meeting at Hamilton called on the issue. No clean-up work or testing has been done since, he said.

Foley said he has become frustrated by the lack of results after going through official channels and wanted to publicize his suspicions in hopes of affecting some change.

"I want some action taken," said Foley, a member of the Bel Marin Keys Homeowners Association. "I think the Army has an obligation to do something."

"I'll tell you, I'm not a member of the Audubon club but I do care about the future of my children, my grandchildren and the water out here. I don't think (the Army) did all they could do to clean-up Hamilton. I think they were just in a hurry to get the hell out of town."

Concerns have been raised at Hamilton in recent months after revelations that methane has crept underground from Landfill 26 to underneath adjacent property pegged for residential development. The 15-acre military dump, which was not officially used past 1974 and was capped in 1995, also contains known and suspected carcinogens.

Additionally, a former Navy gas station nearby is leaking the fuel additive methyl tertiary butyl ether (MTBE), which has been found in Pacheco Creek.

That waterway passes by Landfill 26 and into the Pacheco Pond Wildlife Area, which environmental monitors say has intermittently seen fish kills, strong chemical odors and a white plume in recent months. Some Marin County Sheriff's divers became ill after going into the pond last November.

The suspected landfill is about 100 yards northeast of Landfill 26 near former military runways. The land is planned to be restored to tidal marshlands as habitat for fish, waterfowl and other wildlife as part of the largest wetland restoration project on the West Coast.

To date, analyzed water samples from Pacheco Pond have been inconclusive, but Foley and other environmental monitors have called for more frequent and thorough testing. The Marin County Flood Control District, which has oversight on the pond, plans to test the pond sediment this summer, according to Liz Lewis, a biologist with that agency.

"When they started having problems out at Pacheco Pond, people were looking at the methane," Foley said. "I thought that may be part of the problem but it's probably not the only cause."

Elena Belsky, Marin investigator with San Francisco BayKeeper, an environmental watchdog group, planned to distribute the letter to officials at a meeting last night of the Restoration Advisory Board (RAB), held at the Novato Charter School at Hamilton.

The unidentified landfill issue was not expected to come up for discussion during the meeting because of a busy agenda dealing with other environmental-related developments at Hamilton. Foley did not attend the meeting.

RAB member Jim McAlister is a project manager with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, which is responsible for cleanup activities at military sites. He said he recalls Foley saying the cited materials were in Landfill 26 during the January meeting.

When some of the materials were not found in Landfill 26, McAlister said he set aside further consideration of the matter, particularly after concern grew about emerging, documented environmental problems at Hamilton. He said he has not had an opportunity this week to investigate the letter's allegations.

Other RAB members contacted before the meeting said they either could not, by agency policy, or would not immediately comment on the letter that some of them had received earlier this week.

Ken Bell and Jim Davies, consultants on Hamilton issues for the city of Novato, initially speculated that the landfill Foley referred to was a previously identified and cleaned-up site known as Landfill 23. But after looking at a map marked by Foley and interpreted by Belsky, they acknowledged it was a different site.

Belsky, like Foley, suspects that the pond problems and the unidentified landfill are linked because of groundwater migration patterns in the area.

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