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Suit: JPL's Toxic Waste Caused Cancer

Three Residents Blame Their Diseases on Lab's Chemical Disposals

LOS ANGELES, Posted 6:42 a.m.
 September 23, 1997 -- Three residents who live near the Jet Propulsion Laboratory are suing the research facility, alleging the lab's past chemical disposal practices caused several cancer cases.



The suit was filed on behalf of three plaintiffs -- two former La Canada women suffering from Hodgkin's disease and the mother of a third woman who died in 1989.

The Pasadena lab, which is basking in the spotlight from its Pathfinder mission to Mars, denied the allegations Monday.

"I don't really understand why these folks are even pressing the suit," said Charles Buri, manager of JPL's environmental affairs office. "The medical literature doesn't even show a chemical link with Hodgkin's."

Clifford H. Pearson, an attorney for the plaintiffs, said 31 others who have been found to have cancer or whose family members have died of cancer have petitioned the court to join the suit, which was filed in January.

JPL discharged toxic materials into the ground, ground water, sewers and air, exposing the plaintiffs to the materials through the water supply and air from the 1940s to the 1960s, the lawsuit alleges.



"You had all these guys over there who are putting rockets into orbit, they know the property of every chemical in the world ... and they decide 'Let's dump it in the water table,'" said Tom Girardi, one of the plaintiffs' lawyers. "It's inexcusable."

All of the potential plaintiffs are La Canada or Altadena residents and 14 of them represent Hodgkin's cases. The case could

take years to settle or go to trial.

If damages are eventually awarded, it's not clear who would pay because the lab has been funded by several federal agencies over the years. The suit also could be moved from Superior Court to federal court.

In 1992, the 179-acre facility, which is staffed by the California Institute of Technology, was placed on the Environmental Protection Agency's Superfund list of contaminated areas needing cleanup. It was common practice before the 1970s for each lab building to dispose of sewage and chemical wastes in the cesspool pits, which seeped into the ground, JPL officials said.

The Army ran the lab where rockets were tested, nuclear weapons built and soldiers trained. Records that would be required today were, at best, an afterthought at the time.

"This is what was viewed as commonly acceptable then," Buriel said of JPL's early disposal techniques. "Now we know better."

Internal investigations have shown that the amounts of chemicals released in the old disposal practices were so minute that they would not harm the population, Buriel said.

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