

JPL heads for EPA cleanup

By Franklin O'Donnell

The Environmental Protection Agency has proposed placing JPL and 29 other sites on the federal "Superfund" list for cleanup, it was announced this month.

The action means that the EPA will oversee efforts targeted at studying and cleaning up soil and groundwater contamination at the Lab.

After a period of public comment, the EPA expects to place JPL on the Superfund roll — technically called the National Priority List — later this year. About 1,230 other sites are on the list.

"We have been expecting this announcement for some time," said Chuck Buriel, manager of JPL's Environmental Affairs Office. "It helps us identify specific regulatory requirements for efficient identification and cleanup of contamination."

Tests of groundwater near the Lab over the past decade have revealed several volatile organic chemicals above levels permitted under state and federal law.

The contamination is suspected to be a result of waste disposal practices that were common during the 1940s and 1950s when JPL was an Army laboratory.

The chemicals detected in groundwater near JPL's Oak Grove site include several common industrial solvents used at the Lab during its Army era: trichloroethylene (TCE), perchloroethylene (PCE) and carbon tetrachloride (CTC).

As was common and accepted practice during the 1940s and 1950s, JPL disposed of wastes through cesspools, which allowed liquids to seep into the surrounding soil. As other disposal methods became accessible to the Lab in the late 1950s, about the time the Lab came under NASA jurisdiction, JPL discontinued the use of cesspools.

Through the years, Lab policy and practices have continued to follow federal and state procedures for waste disposal as they became defined.

Because JPL is on federal property, it is not eligible for EPA funding under the so-called Superfund — the common name for the Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation and Liability Act of 1980. Instead, the Lab's cleanup efforts are expected to be paid by its federal sponsor, NASA.

Buriel noted that JPL is currently carrying out studies, including the installation of monitoring wells and drilling several soil borings to help engineers locate the sources of contaminants.

After these studies are completed, JPL will weigh various alternative solutions and propose a cleanup plan to the EPA as well as to the state and local agencies involved.

As part of the current work — known as a remedial investigation/feasibility study — JPL will consider alternative solutions and develop a cleanup plan to be proposed to the EPA, the Regional Water Quality Control Board and the California Environmental Protection Agency. The current study will continue through about 1993.

After a cleanup design has been drawn up, approved and documented in what is known as a record of decision, the remediation system design will be completed and cleanup will begin.

The type of cleanup is yet to be determined, and options may change as new technologies become available. □