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Hazard cleanup funds will be cut

By Jeannine Clegg
FROM OUR WASHINGTON BUREAU

Congress apparently won't be doing favors any time soon for communities such as Altadena and Pasadena that are adjacent to contaminated federal facilities.

Even as residents become more aware of pollution at present and former defense facilities near their property lines, federal lawmakers continue to cut funds for mopping up the hazardous sites.

Cleanup of the Jet Propulsion Laboratory, which straddles the Pasadena-La Canada Flintridge border, falls under the Defense Department because it is a former Army facility.

This fall, the House and Senate are expected to approve less money for 1996 hazardous waste cleanup than the Pentagon spent this year. That will mean more delays in cleaning up an estimated $30 billion problem at 1,769 contaminated military installations and more than 2,000 former defense sites, according to Pentagon officials.

For the third time in three years, the Pentagon is being given less cleanup money than it's requested. On top of that, Congress chopped $300 million from the $1.8 million 1995 cleanup budget in the middle of this fiscal year.

President Clinton's 1996 budget proposed spending $1.6 billion to clean up open military facilities, but the House is expected to approve $1.4 billion. The Senate's figure is likely to be closer to $1.5 billion.

The president also has asked for $457 million to clean up bases targeted under the base-closing process. The House has agreed to that amount, and the Senate is expected to add $105 million.

Actual funding will likely fall somewhere between the House and Senate levels after the two houses negotiate an agreement.

No one is willing to speculate which bases will be affected if Congress reduces the president's base cleanup request.

The 176-acre JPL site is on the federal Superfund list of most contaminated sites in the U.S.

JPL workers in the 1940s and '50s poured chemicals down sinks that drained into cesspools around the lab — a common practice at the time. The groundwater now is contaminated with organic and inorganic chemicals, including the solvents trichloroethane, trichloroethene and tetrachloroethene.

Studies are under way to determine what cleanup methods should be used for the on- and off-site contamination. Five groundwater monitoring wells have been installed in Altadena neighborhoods and in Oak Grove Park.

Through 1994, $500,000 had been spent on the JPL site, according to the Defense Environmental Restoration Program 1994 report to Congress.

The JPL investigation aims to determine the extent of pollution and the Defense Department's liability. Eventually, a legal decision outlining appropriate cleanup methods will be made and implemented.

On the federal level, an ongoing congressional study indicates that the Pentagon is nowhere near completing its cleanup work, and that many cleanup projects remain in the study phase, an investigator said.

More thorough contamination studies will result in more efficient cleanups, said Patricia Rivers, assistant deputy undersecretary of defense for environmental security.

But experts warn that the longer the Pentagon delays, the more cleanups will cost.

"If we delay cleanup and waste management, the long-term costs are going to increase because the hazards will become difficult to manage or contain," said Darryl Kimball of Physicians for Social Responsibility.

Rivers acknowledged that delays could allow pollution to spread.

— Staff writer Tania Soussan contributed to this story.