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25 years later, Andersen Air Force Base still cleaning up contamination, EPA says

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A U.S. Air Force B-1B Lancer, assigned to the 37th Expeditionary Bomb Squadron, deployed from Ellsworth Air Force Base, South Dakota, takes off from Andersen Air Force Base, Guam, for a training mission on Friday, Aug. 11, 2017. Courtesy of U.S. Air Force



(Photo: Rick Cruz/PDN)

Andersen Air Force Base still is in the process of cleaning up contamination on the land it operates, 25 years after it was put on the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's [National Priorities List](#).

The base has been on the critical list of [U.S. EPA's Superfund sites](#) since Oct. 14, 1992. These sites contain high levels of uncontrolled or abandoned hazardous waste.

The U.S. EPA's Region 9 office, which has jurisdiction over Guam, stated Andersen Air Force Base has a total of 80 Installation Restoration Program sites and 18 Munitions Response Program sites.

Of the 80 sites where previous installations were, five of them await cleanup. All 18 of the sites related to munitions - military weapons and equipment - are pending action for contamination investigation and cleanup.

The agency added that, of the 80 Installation Response Program sites, 11 of them are off-limits for further activities.

The installation and munitions programs are meant to prevent contamination from spreading from their original sites.

"EPA generally states that these sites are not ready for reuse and redevelopment and no further or limited construction or development activities can occur at these sites until cleanup is complete," according to the Region 9 office.

EPA's 4-year plan

U.S. EPA put out a draft of its [Fiscal Year 2018 to 2022 Strategic Plan](#) that includes proposed actions for Superfund sites.

The agency wants to accelerate contamination cleanup over the next four years, starting with the top 10 Superfund sites on the National Priority List. Those sites have not been determined. As of Sept. 6, there were 1,342 federal and nonfederal Superfund sites on the list.

"Cleanup actions can take from a few months for relatively straight-forward soil excavation or capping remedies to several decades for complex, large, area-wide groundwater, sediment, or mining remedies," the draft plan states.

The Air Force is responsible for the investigation and cleanup of the contamination on Guam's base. Contamination includes hazardous substances and compounds such as industrial cleaning liquids, jet fuel, pesticides and polychlorinated biphenyls, which can greatly increase the risk of cancer. This chemical currently is being investigated in and around Cocos Island.

The base contamination is believed to be caused primarily from industrial activities and previous toxic dump sites, EPA states.

The Region 9 office stated some of the sites that are being investigated and cleaned up are located on Northwest Field. This field is where a proposed live-fire training range complex is set to be built. The firing range complex is part of several projects to accommodate approximately 5,000 Marines and their families from Okinawa to Guam.

Water and wildlife

The air base covers approximately 20,000 acres of limestone karst in northern Guam and has been in use since the 1940s. Guam's primary source of drinking water, the Guam Northern Lens Aquifer, lies beneath the base.

According to EPA, there are no drinking water well productions near contamination sites. However, the agency [reported contamination beneath the aquifer](#) and just above the salt water zone. The Air Force and EPA decided against cleaning up this contamination because it could result in salt water being pumped up into the aquifer.

The base recently conducted a test in its water system for perfluorooctane sulfonate and perfluorooctanoic acid, two unregulated contaminants that received islandwide attention last year. Water samples indicated no signs of those chemicals, according to a Oct. 11 news release from the base.

In 2016, high levels of chemical perfluorooctanoic sulfonate were found in [some of Guam Waterworks Authority's water wells](#). The chemical is known to be used for making carpets and fighting fires. However, GWA officials told the public that the chemical was not harmful. The source of the chemical has not been officially confirmed.

The land the Air Force Base is on also is home to some of Guam's endangered species such as the Mariana fruit bat and Guam's only adult *Serianthes nelsonii* tree, or *håyun lågu*. This tree only has been spotted on Guam and Rota, but scientists are looking into data that may suggest Guam's tree is different from Rota's.

The base has been working with U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the University of Guam to revitalize the tree by outplanting its seedlings. In September, Air Force personnel and UOG's Guam Plant Extinction Prevention Program [outplanted 41 seedlings](#).

The base's public affairs office could not be reached for comment.

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