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EPA: Hunter Liggett still a top toxic site

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Fort Hunter Liggett, Calif., site of live-fire training for the Army, continues to rank among the top sites in California for the accumulation of toxic materials, the Environmental Protection Agency says.

The agency's latest Toxic Release Inventory shows the fort generates the 10th highest total in the state of "persistent bioaccumulative toxics" or PBTs.

But the extent to which they pose a threat to the surrounding environment is in dispute.

"PBT chemicals are of particular concern not only because they are toxic, but also because they remain in the environment for long periods of time, are not readily destroyed, and build up or accumulate in body tissue," the agency said.

Live-firing exercises in 2010 generated almost 24,000 pounds of lead from spent bullets at the 165,000-acre site. They also left 16,194 pounds of copper from ammunition casings.

A spokesman for the fort, however, said the lead and copper are not an environmental hazard to the area.

"Copper and lead are the primary constituent metals in small arms ammunition," said Susan Clizbe, public affairs officer.

"Nearly all small arms firing at Fort Hunter Liggett takes place on designated training ranges, and ammo used in training does not enter the food chain."

Currently, the spokeswoman said, there is no effort to clean up the spent ammunition.

Some environmentalists say the military's assurances need questioning.

It may take up to 40 years for the process to start, but eventually lead in ammunition "can leak into the soil and water," said Jeff Miller of the Center for Biological Diversity in San Francisco.

Miller said much has been learned from ammunition that litters civilian firing ranges. "Target, trap and skeet shooting can result in substantial accumulation of spent lead in localized areas," he said, adding lead from spent shot at shooting ranges can become absorbed by surrounding plant and animal life.

Estimates of the amount of lead shot and bullets deposited at about 9,000 outdoor shooting ranges nationwide, he said, range totals 72,600 to 80,000 metric tons annually.

Lead shot at trap, skeet and sporting clay ranges, he said, can reach up to 3.7 billion lead pellets per acre.

"This lead slowly leaches into soils and enters surface and ground water," Miller said, adding that concentrations at civilian ranges can reach 10,000 times background levels, or those levels constantly present in nature.

Those who live around Hunter Liggett, he said, have a right to know what kind of environmental testing and monitoring is done.

Another environmentalist, Lenny Siegel of the Pacific Studies Center in Mountain View, Calif., seconded that view.

“Hunter Liggett doesn’t get the attention it deserves,” Siegel said, adding that lead from shattered bullets is more likely to leak into the environment than other ammunition.

“You don’t know until you test.”

But Clizbe, the base spokesman, said the lead and copper from spent ammunition are “stable” and don’t require environmental testing or monitoring.

Live-fire training has taken place at Hunter Liggett since 1940 and intensified recently due to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. The high point for toxic releases over the past decade was 2008, when 60,279 pounds were produced, EPA records show.

Because Hunter Liggett remains an active base there is “no legal requirement to sample their ranges for lead,” said Grant Himebaugh of the Central Coast Regional Water Control Board, a state agency.

Himebaugh also provides support for the Army’s contention that the lead at Hunter Liggett poses little environmental threat.

After Pentagon closed the former Fort Ord, located outside Monterey, in the early 1990s, there were so many spent bullets layering the sand dunes there “you could barely see the sand,” Himebaugh said. With the corrosive marine environment acting on the lead, he said, the water control board expected to find evidence of contaminated ground water located just beneath the dunes — but didn’t.

“I was surprised, but it was a pleasant surprise,” said Himebaugh.

But even with no evidence of water contamination, he added, there was still an urgency to clean up the lead there because of the risk of people, especially children, inhaling lead particles or absorbing it through touch.

Rep. Sam Farr, D-Carmel, said he was not familiar with the latest EPA data on Hunter Liggett but added, “If there is environmental damage, we’ll get it fixed.”