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Families Evacuated Because Of Methane Threat

Methane To Be Siphoned By Month's End

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FORTE MEADE, Md. -- The Army has evacuated 12 families from a privately built cluster of townhouses on its base at Fort Meade, after discovering dangerously high levels of methane gas from a former landfill nearby.

The move was made during the holidays and authorities say the homes will remain empty until regulators can come up with a remedy.

"My commitment to fix this problem (and ensure) the safety of the residents of Fort Meade are paramount," post commander Col. Kenneth McCreedy told *The (Baltimore) Sun*.

The landfill was opened in the early 1940s, authorities believe, and was used largely for household trash.

When the Army and the developer, Picerne Military Housing, first tested the site in 2003, they identified the presence of combustible gases, pesticides, metals and polychlorinated biphenyls, or PCBs, but no methane.

More recent tests have found underground methane levels near the center of the site at about 600,000 parts per million, or four times the federal upper-level explosive limit. Officials grew concerned as explosive pockets of methane shifted west, closer to the homes. In December, tests showed levels behind a block of five townhouses at more than twice the upper-level explosive threshold set by the federal government.

Critics charge the homes were built before the site was thoroughly tested.

"They just went ahead and did what they wanted to do to get the housing in," Robert Stroud, a project manager with the Environmental Protection Agency, said of the motives of top military officials. "They figured they would deal with the regulators later."

"There is absolutely no justification for putting military families this close to this dump," said Zoe B. Draughon, co-chairwoman of the Restoration Advisory Board, a group of residents and regulators overseeing Fort Meade's Superfund cleanup. "There is none."

The Army has spent about \$1.5 million since 2003 for testing and remediation efforts, and regulators expect to complete a study this spring that will lay out the long-term remedies, including the removal of the dump. McCreedy's staff said the final remedy might be years off and could cost \$1.5 million more, barring additional complications.

Regulators said they would start siphoning out the methane by the end of the month in hopes of reducing the underground levels.

No methane has been detected inside the homes or at nearby Manor View Elementary School.

Pollution problems are not new at Fort Meade. In 1998, the EPA placed the base on its Superfund list, describing it as one of the country's worst pollution sites because of contamination from fuels, solvents and munitions.

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