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Military wants to renovate Dugway

Critics fear health risks from biological testing

By Stephen Speckman

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Citing a worldwide threat to the security of the United States from hostile nations, the Army wants to renovate Dugway Proving Ground's old Baker Laboratory to increase defense testing against biological agents.

The proposal and the Army's most recent environmental assessment, released last month, already are generating criticism from watchdog groups about what they say is Dugway officials' lack of openness about numerous health, safety and environmental issues related to use of the decommissioned lab, built in 1952 to develop biological weapons.

The Utah chapter of the Sierra Club and the Healthy Environment Alliance of Utah both sent comments in April in response to Dugway's draft environmental assessment of the project.

Citizens Education Project director Stephen Erickson also sent Dugway officials a letter last April, alleging that there has been a "general lack of specificity and details regarding what is certainly a major expansion of Dugway's capacity to conduct testing of agents of biological origin."

Erickson singled out in his letter Dugway's interest in using vaccine strains of anthrax during tests as one area of interest needing more disclosure.

In an interview Friday, Erickson said the state only has limited oversight at Dugway, making it difficult to monitor activities that impact the environment or health and safety of workers at the remote Rhode Island-size Army base.

"So, someone needs to pay attention to it," Erickson said about Dugway's plans for the Baker Lab. "I guess it has fallen on us. ... We will always argue for greater transparency."

The Army's response to his letter said that the most recent version of the Baker Lab environmental assessment presents a "concept plan, not a detailed final plan" and that currently the proposal is more rudimentary than a final plan.



Two members of a chemical biological incident response force participate in a mock drill at Dugway Proving Ground. The Army wants to renovate the Baker Laboratory to increase defense testing.

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The other two watchdog groups expressed multiple concerns about health, human safety and environmental issues, all of which the Army essentially said have been addressed or will be in a manner that meets or exceeds federal and state requirements as the project moves forward.

Dugway spokeswoman Paula Nicholson said the Army tries to strike a balance in meeting public disclosure requirements and releasing too much information.

"We have to protect our customers and the United States," Nicholson said in a telephone interview Friday.

Those customers are tenants at Dugway that help the Army fulfill the base's overall mission of testing chemical and biological defense systems.



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Over about 20 years Nicholson has raised her family while living on the base, although she no longer resides there.

"I wouldn't have lived there if I was concerned," she said about health, safety and environmental issues related to tests at Dugway.

The most recent draft of an environmental assessment for the renovation proposal states that the country's ability to defeat an attack against the United States using some sort of biological agent "requires improvement."

The assessment goes on to say that war fighters and first responders need equipment to detect such an attack, identify the biological agent being used, protect against contamination and decontaminate any place or person affected by the attack.

To work toward that goal, the Army wants to renovate the old 32,000-square-foot laboratory, which was replaced in the 1990s by a new lab. The renovation would take place in phases, with the funding of each new lab (as many as 25) within the building initially coming from customers.

The assessment states that there would be controls at the renovated Baker Laboratory "to prevent the release of biological materials to the atmosphere." Nicholson noted that Dugway is recognized for setting the standards for safety and security at similar testing facilities around the country.

Army officials say congressional funding for the entire project "will not likely be realized for several more years." Nicholson was unable Friday to provide a total cost for the renovation, which she said could take at least two years before even the first phase is complete.

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