

June 11, 2008

Office of Inspector General
Department of Defense
Defense Hotline
The Pentagon
Washington DC 20301-1900.

RE: Request for Investigation

DOD-OIG Defense Hotline:

On behalf of Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility (PEER), I am writing to request that your office initiate an investigation into violations of federal laws and regulations and a breakdown of accountability in the U.S. Army Installation Management Command-Pacific Region concerning a base housing construction project in Alaska.

For reasons outlined below, it would not be appropriate to task this investigation to the service or command inspector generals, as the failures of these institutions should be a part of any complete review.

This request for investigation focuses on a base housing project at Fort Wainwright, Alaska. In 2005, base officials authorized building 128 units on a 54 acre site called Taku Gardens, but with only cursory environmental assessment. Unfortunately, that site was an old weapons and equipment dump, profoundly contaminated with munitions (some holding chemical agent), dioxin, PCBs, tons of drums and equipment (including an entire locomotive and a forklift). By the time construction was halted, 79 units had been built but will likely have to be torn down.

An internal Army review completed on April 21, 2006 [ATTACHMENT 1] was scathing in faulting, among other lapses –

- Skewed decision-making in failing to halt construction when problems were first discovered: “Who is in charge? Lines of responsibility, accountability and authority are muddled...”;
- Failure to secure the contaminated construction site from nearby playgrounds and housing: “Construction sites and equipment are child magnets...Extensive guidance exists regarding this but none of it was adhered to...” and
- Spreading contamination “via vehicles, wind and probably foottraffic [sic]” by not properly covering or monitoring profoundly dangerous soils.

Rather than act upon this review, the base command found commissioned a new review.

Completed on July 3, 2007, this new review [ATTACHMENT 2] pledged to dispel the “witch hunt atmosphere” existing at the base. In contrast to the original investigation, this review found that “Any potential violations of Federal or State law or regulations by Government personnel would be minor and attributable to difference of interpretation” – a sentence repeated verbatim a numbing 15 times in the 21-page report.

This new review did admit an extreme emphasis on rapid completion of construction to expand the Army, especially base housing: “In one case [application processing] for a ‘Grow the Force Project’ was recently done at Fort Wainwright in 40 minutes with generic sites due to pressure from Washington level HQ.”

In April 2008, the Army said it would begin yet another round of hazardous waste investigation and clean-up at Taku Gardens, where last year more than 1,800 tons of PCB-tainted soils were removed. In press reports, the Army states that it hopes to be done with this next phase by the end of 2010.

At this point, the Army still has no idea what else it will uncover at the Taku Gardens site. At this rate, the Army will spend well more than \$1 million for each planned unit, meaning that it would have been far cheaper to buy each family a mansion than trying to house them in Taku Gardens.

PEER is requesting that the DOD Office of Inspector General undertake a two-fold investigation into both the underlying environmental breakdowns as well as the failure of command accountability –

- 1) Did the U.S. Army violate guidelines, regulations or laws in the Taku gardens project – and, if so, who was responsible?
- 2) Did the internal accountability mechanisms for the Army work or fail in this case – and, if they failed, who was responsible?

Given the tremendous expenditure of taxpayer funds and the disruption of base expansion schedule, PEER believes that an investigation by your office is in order. Moreover, given that the actions of the service chain-of-command are themselves at issue, it is important that any review be conducted by the Department of Defense Inspector General.

Should you desire additional information in relation to any of these specifications, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Sincerely,

Jeff Ruch
Executive Director