EPA settles case with U.S. Army and Washington Group International for release of nerve agent at Johnston Island

Release date: 5/26/2004

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SAN FRANCISCO -- As part of a settlement with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, the U.S. Army and its contractor, Washington Group International, Inc., will pay $51,699 for the August 2002 release of a nerve agent at the Johnston Atoll Chemical Agent Disposal System facility.

"This settlement resolves one of the few outstanding issues standing in the way of a complete closure of the JACADs facility," said Jeff Scott, director of Waste Programs for the EPA Pacific Southwest Region. "The Army can now focus on the final steps toward returning Johnston Atoll to a thriving wildlife habitat."

As a result of the improper loading of a tray, VX-containing sludge was not completely processed in the incinerator. This resulted in a potential release of an unknown quantity of untreated VX to the environment. There were no reports of anyone being exposed or harmed as a result of this incident.

The EPA found that the Army and its contractor failed to maintain and operate the facility to minimize the possibility of a release, and failed to implement the contingency plan during an imminent emergency situation.

The settlement resolves the EPA's complaint against the Army and the Washington Group, which neither admit nor deny the allegations.

Death from inhalation or exposure to VX on the skin can occur within minutes. A lethal dose can be as small as a droplet the size of Lincoln's head inside the Lincoln Memorial on the back of a penny.

The JACADS facility was designed to incinerate military weapons containing blister agents and the chemical nerve agents GB (sarin) and VX. Operating since 1990, the facility has finished destroying 4 million pounds of chemical agents and chemical weapons originally stored on Johnston Island. The Army has since decommissioned and demolished the JACADS facility, and is in the process of conducting final clean-up sampling.

Johnston Atoll supports a rich and varied ecosystem for thousands of nesting seabirds, corals and marine life. It consists of approximately 50 square miles of shallow coral reef surrounding four islands, the largest of these being Johnston Island.

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