

EPA Vindicated on Deadly Widespread Contaminant



Written by Mike Wagner

Thursday, 27 July 2006

The National Research Council has vindicated victims of one of the Defense Department's worst environmental problems. An expert panel of NRC scientists reported that trichloroethylene, the most common water contaminant in America, is more dangerous than earlier thought.

Today's report warned that the powerful solvent is a serious public health threat that needs stronger regulation from the Environmental Protection Agency.

"We need a new drinking water standard now, with no more delays," said Jerry Ensminger, a retired Marine drill instructor whose 9-year-old daughter Janey (pictured right) died of leukemia in 1985 after exposure to TCE in the water at Camp Lejeune.

As Ralph Vartabedian [reported in today's Los Angeles Times](#), the lengthy review by the NRC committee concluded that EPA was right in 2001 when it proposed tighter limits on TCE, which is both the No. 1 water contaminant in the nation and a widespread air pollutant.

"The committee found that the evidence on carcinogenic risk and other health hazards from exposure to trichloroethylene has strengthened since 2001," the panel said in its report, which can be read at <http://www.nationalacademies.org/morenews/20060727.html>.

"Hundreds of waste sites in the United States are contaminated with trichloroethylene, and it is well documented that individuals in many communities are exposed to the chemical, with associated health risks," it said. "Thus, the committee recommends that federal agencies finalize their risk assessment with currently available data so that risk management decisions can be made expeditiously."

TCE is used as a degreaser by both the military and industries such as computer manufacturers. It has been dumped for decades onto land and into water supplies across the country, and the highly volatile chemical also vaporizes steadily so that it can become an indoor air pollutant in buildings located near contaminated sites.

When the EPA said in 2001 that TCE can cause cancer and other health problems at levels as low as 1 part per billion in water (the current drinking water limit is 5 ppb), its conclusions were attacked by the Pentagon, the Department of Energy, NASA and a host of industries with sites contaminated by the chemical.

"In short, the classification of TCE as 'highly likely to produce cancer in humans' appears to be based on the ardor and hypotheses of the EPA authors, rather than on sound scientific evidence," the Department of Defense [wrote in a critique of EPA's draft risk assessment](#).

Now, it appears EPA may actually have understated the risks of TCE exposure. The biggest threat is kidney cancer, but TCE can also cause liver cancer, reproductive and developmental problems, neurological damage and immune system disorders, the NRC panel said. The committee did not study the chemical's link to leukemia, but said that was "an important area of future review."

The question now is whether the EPA will adopt the NRC recommendations and issue a final risk assessment for TCE, the first step toward tightening the drinking water limit for the chemical.

An EPA spokeswoman promised action. "Armed with the results from the National Academy of Sciences review, EPA will move forward to finalize the risk assessment, and continue its mission of protecting public health and the environment," said EPA press secretary Jennifer Wood. "EPA will address the drinking water standard once the risk assessment is complete."

"I am skeptical about what this administration will do with these recommendations," said retired Marine Ensminger.

He [told the NRC panel last year](#) that it made no sense that the DOD, with more than 1,400 sites tainted by TCE, was allowed by the White House to challenge EPA's risk assessment.

"Here we have the EPA that was created by the government to protect our environment and our citizens from pollution being second-guessed by the world's largest polluter, the U.S. Department of Defense!" he told the panel.

Ensminger knows all too well what TCE can do. His daughter Janey was born in 1976 at Camp Lejeune, where the drinking water was contaminated for decades by TCE spilled from equipment cleaning operations at the base. Six and a half years later Janey was diagnosed with leukemia. On September 24, 1985, the nine-year-old died with her father at her bedside.

"There is now evidence that strongly links children exposed to chlorinated hydrocarbons (like TCE) while in utero to developing cancers and other birth defects," Ensminger said.

"I must ask Mr. Bush and his administration why is it that we don't err on the side of life and the health of our children when it comes to



Janey Ensminger died from TCE exposure at age of 9.

setting certain standards for our environment? Repairing the damage that we have done to our environment is one of our biggest moral obligations; in fact, as I unfortunately found out first hand, it is one our future generations can't live without."

Another ex-Marine who was stationed at Camp Lejeune in the 1960s, Tom Townsend of Moscow, Idaho, lost both a son and more recently his wife to ailments he believes were caused by TCE exposure.

Townsend's baby boy Christopher died at Lejeune in 1967, three months after he was born with a serious heart defect. Townsend and his wife Anne and both of their other two children never had any serious health problems, so they were shocked by what happened, he said.

"She felt for more than 30 years that she was at fault," Townsend said of his wife. "She didn't talk about it – we moved on – but it didn't leave her thought patterns."

Then in 2000, the water contamination problems at Camp Lejeune were revealed in a federal health study, and the Townsends made a connection to their son's death. "In a sense it lifted a burden from her," Townsend said of his wife, "but she was bitter and angry about it."

Anne Townsend died in February at age 73 of a rare liver disease that her doctor attributed to TCE exposure. After her death, Townsend found a letter she wrote to *Newsweek* magazine in 2001, expressing her frustrations with the Marine Corps' handling of the problem. The letter was never published, and [Townsend provided a copy](#) to the Natural Resources News Service.

There are thousands of other victims at DOD sites across the nation, such as an entire neighborhood in San Antonio that sits above a shallow aquifer contaminated by TCE from the recently closed Kelly Air Force Base. Residents of the mostly Hispanic area are suing the DOD for damages, but their lawsuit has languished while the EPA's risk assessment for TCE has been under review, the [Los Angeles Times reported in a series of stories](#) published in March.

Others have been poisoned by TCE from private industry sites, including as many as 25,000 workers at Mattel's former View-Master plant in Beaverton, Ore. Amanda Evans, who is suing Mattel for the wrongful death of her father from liver cancer and who founded a support group called Victims of TCE Exposure, said today's report provides some solace.

"Largely it means it will validate a lot of our concerns," she said. "Instead of having to wait decades to know whether our health has been impacted, we have the evidence now."

The head of a national group that promotes public involvement in environmental cleanups said the NRC report gives EPA a clear mandate to act now.

"The findings are too late to help the people at Camp Lejeune, View-Master and elsewhere who were exposed in the past, but if the Bush Administration acts responsibly it could help protect people who are drinking and especially breathing TCE now," said Lenny Siegel, executive director of the Center for Public Environmental Oversight, based in Mountain View, Calif.

"There is no excuse for further delay," Siegel said. "EPA should immediately go back to its practice of using, in the field, the findings of its 2001 Health Risk Assessment, and it should promulgate new legal standards as soon as possible."

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