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Report: Contaminants need study

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People stationed at Camp Lejeune decades ago want to know if contaminated water made them and their children sick.

Between the mid-1960s and 1980s, the water there was contaminated by chemicals — trichloroethylene (TCE) and tetrachloroethylene (PCE) — in dry cleaning solvent. For years, scientists have tried to determine the health effects from TCE, and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency is working on an official risk assessment of the chemical.

A new report released Thursday from the National Academies' National Research Council recommends more research be conducted on the health effects of TCE but says there is enough information for the EPA to issue its final risk assessment now.

The TCE, which contaminated the Hadnot Point water system, likely either leaked from on-base underground storage tanks or collected due to spills or improper waste disposal methods. Affected wells were later capped and don't pose any current known threat to residents.

In 2001, EPA issued the draft risk assessment, which sparked debate about the existing information on TCE. A committee representing the research council was formed to review TCE's health risks but was not asked to conduct its own risk assessment.

"The committee found that the evidence on carcinogenic risk and other health hazards from exposure to trichloroethylene has strengthened since 2001," the report states. "The committee recommends that federal agencies finalize their risk assessment with currently available data so that risk management decisions can be made expeditiously."

Among the potential health effects of TCE exposure is kidney cancer, other kidney problems and liver cancer. Other studies show a possible link between TCE exposure and reproductive and developmental problems, impaired neurological function and autoimmune disease.

The committee found weaknesses in the analysis used by the EPA in its draft risk assessment. It recommends further analysis that contains clear criteria for including epidemiological studies and that the EPA work with the Air Force to simulate how the body metabolizes TCE.

The committee also recommended more studies be conducted to define the health effects of TCE and which people are the most susceptible.

Jerry Ensminger of Richlands is a retired Marine who lost his 9-year-old daughter, Janey, in 1985 to leukemia, which he believes was caused by the contaminated water. He said he is skeptical about what the Bush administration would do with the committee's findings.

"The United States needs a realistic protective standard for our drinking water," he said. "This administration (should) err on the side of life when it comes to setting certain environmental standards that would protect the lives and health of our children. This is a standard that our future generations literally cannot live without."

EPA officials say it could be a year or more before the final risk assessment is completed.

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