

THE FUTURE OF A BOMBING RANGE

by John Lindsay-Poland

When the U.S. military abandons a bombing range in a populated area, and the federal government turns it into a “wildlife refuge,” everyone involved becomes embroiled in one critical question: How exactly will the land now be used?

In Vieques, Puerto Rico, where the above scenario took place in 2003, the stakeholders include, above all, the community that seeks to protect residents from explosives, contamination, and exploitative development. They have their own set of plans regarding how to make use of the lands formerly controlled by the military. The Department of the Interior’s Fish & Wildlife Service (FWS) now has title to those lands, and must by law create a “Comprehensive Conservation Plan” for the 17,763-acre refuge.

The Navy will have to pay for the cleanup, which it carries out through contractors, and under the oversight of the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). A dozen EPA officials met with activists in October 2004 to receive hundreds of the more than 2,500 comments sent to the agency regarding the designation of Vieques and Culebra as a Superfund site on the National Priorities List. The vast majority of letters sent supported the Superfund designation.

Even with the placement of Vieques on the Superfund list in February 2005, the EPA does not exercise binding oversight of cleanup of munitions—only of nonexplosive contamination. “I don’t know of any instrument that I can use as a project manager to say no to a Navy plan for remediation of munitions,” an EPA official said in December. In other words, the EPA can comment and urge changes, but it doesn’t recognize its jurisdiction over cleanup of munitions on the firing range or elsewhere on Vieques.

The EPA says that goals for the cleanup will be determined by “reasonably anticipated future uses” of the lands to be cleaned up. One official indicated that to determine future uses, the agency initially will follow existing law, which prohibits public entrance to the former bombing area and restricts uses of other lands as a wildlife refuge of the Department of the Interior. But activists point out that existing restrictions on land use do not recognize the reality of public use of the lands,

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and that not even the Navy was able to prevent the public from using the lands and waters in the area.

The EPA and FWS aim to certify all the beaches so that the public will have access to them in the future. According to Vieques Refuge Manager Oscar Díaz, FWS will only allow use of beaches that have been certified as safe by the Navy.

The community considered land use both as part of a master plan and in meetings convened by Fish & Wildlife in November 2004. The master plan was developed with community input by Estudios Tecnicos, a Puerto Rican consulting firm, and was approved by the Puerto Rican government the following month. The plan calls for protection of coastal areas and historical and cultural sites, effectively preventing the development of mega-hotels, which the community has opposed.

The Master Plan does not provide any guidance for the use of lands currently controlled by the federal government, but it does require that any plan—such as the wildlife refuge “conservation plan”—conform to the master plan.

During the “scoping” process for the conservation plan promoted by FWS, 78 community residents offered comments on uses they would like for the refuge. Among the uses advocated were housing, a visitors’ center, camping, agriculture, a study center, and an international laboratory for environmental cleanup. But residents have no power to decide those uses. That decision, based on what is “compatible” with the wildlife refuge’s mission, will be made by the Fish & Wildlife regional director, Oscar Díaz said. Asked to stretch the guidelines for refuge compatibility, FWS officials said no, according to Vieques residents who were present.

NAVY WANTS TO LEAVE WASTE ON WETLANDS

Near a former open detonation site on the western end of Vieques, the Navy has documented a dumpsite in a *quebrada* or wetland. Now, reflected Díaz, the Navy claims that soil tests show there are no hazardous materials in the site, and wants to leave it there. But, as Diaz points out, dumping on wetlands is illegal under the Clean Water Act.

One controversial issue in the cleanup process is how to determine “background” levels of heavy metals and other substances in Vieques. These background levels are important because the Navy maintains that some contaminants naturally occur at high levels in Vieques, and that as a result the Navy is not responsible for cleaning up at those levels, even

if they are harmful to human health. Activists say that the island is not naturally toxic, and the Navy has set background levels too high, based on sampling in already contaminated areas.

Marine scientists from the University of Georgia who studied coral reefs near the Vieques bombing range found that every animal tested on a reef near unexploded bombs “contained at least one potentially toxic compound. The toxic chemicals found in these reef organisms do not occur in nature but come exclusively from explosive ordnance.”

The scientists also tested sediments and organisms near the wreck of the USS Killen, a ship that had been used as a target in atomic tests in the 1950s, and later shipped to Vieques as a target for bombing with conventional explosives. There had been fear that the Killen may still be radioactive, or that drums with unknown materials inside the wreck were toxic. Fortunately, the team found no radioactive waste at the Killen site. But they were emphatic that conventional munitions in Vieques waters were contaminating the area.

“We strongly recommend that unexploded ordnance on the Vieques coral reef be picked up and removed.” This action, the scientists wrote, “will have an immediate and beneficial effect on the coral reef ecosystem by removing sources of toxic chemicals from the environment.”

Another recent study shows uranium and lead contamination in sea grass beds that serve as feeding areas for conch, lobsters, and other edible sea creatures. The team led by microbiologist Arturo Massol found no uranium contamination in land-based organisms. They pointed out that while low concentrations of uranium can be found naturally in seawater, depleted uranium was also fired on the bombing range. They recommended further study to understand the origin of uranium in Vieques sea grasses, and urged Vieques residents to limit consumption of lobster and conch caught in the area studied, as a “first line of defense against the possible effects” of toxics found there.

SOURCES

James Barton and James W. Porter, *Radiological, Chemical, and Environmental Health Assessment of the Marine Resources on the Isla de Vieques Bombing Range, Bahía del Sur, Puerto Rico*, March 2004.

Master Plan for the Sustainable Development of Vieques and Culebra, available at www.estudios tecnicos.com.