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Nerve agent may be missing

Pentagon auditors note discrepancies at Utah depot and elsewhere

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Is the Army missing some nerve gas?

Pentagon auditors concede that is a remote possibility because of discrepancies in records between how much chemical weapons agent was initially stored and how much of it was later destroyed at Utah's Deseret Chemical Depot and other bases nationwide.

But officials believe all the nerve agent in question was destroyed, according to a partially censored U.S. Army Audit Agency report obtained through a Freedom of Information Act request. Auditors list in it several reasons that could have caused apparent-but-unreal variances in those records.

But auditors concluded, "The (Army Chemical Materials) Agency didn't have complete assurance that amounts recorded in the system were accurate, which increased its chances for heightened levels of program scrutiny by federal, state and international organizations that have a vested interest in the elimination of chemical weapons."

Such words can cause shivers among Utahns who remember such things as the death of thousands of sheep in Skull Valley in 1968 that were blamed on nerve gas tests that went awry at nearby Dugway Proving Ground, and Skull Valley residents who have blamed mysterious illnesses on exposure to tiny amounts of nerve agent from such tests.

Auditors reviewed Army Chemical Materials Agency (CMA) records of arms destruction at seven bases nationwide, including at the Deseret base near Tooele, "to determine whether the agency accounted for destroyed chemical agents." A international treaty requires destruction of all such arms by April 2012.

While the Aug. 26 report said a good job was done recording the amounts of most types of chemical munitions destroyed, auditors found discrepancies between how much nerve agent had been recorded as stored in one-ton containers, and how much was actually destroyed.

"They did not have effective procedures in place to ensure amounts destroyed were accurately recorded in the (electronic recording) system. Consequently, CMA didn't have complete assurance that amounts recorded in the system were accurate," the report said.

For example, it said a random sample of such records found "20 CODs (certificates of destruction) were overstated by 4,026 pounds." Also, another "nine CODs were understated by 1,093 pounds." A drop of some types of nerve agent can cause death.

Auditors wrote, "Key CMA personnel told us they were aware of discrepancies involving ton containers. They also told us they expected variances to occur because of inaccurate initial ton container weights and the hardened heel process" where some nerve agent hardens over time and no longer is in liquid form.

Exactly which bases had such variances was censored from the released version of the report. But some uncensored text shows that the Utah base was one with such problems.

Auditors said officials explained that when the one-ton containers were filled initially years ago, different methods of varying accuracy were used to weigh and record how much agent was in each

— and those sometimes inaccurate weights were used when America declared how much it had for treaty purposes.

For example, one site used a scale where "weight could vary by as much as 129 pounds if reweighed on a more accurate scale," the report said.

So, auditors wrote, "Due to these methodologies it was determined that weights, in some cases, were inaccurate because of the scales used during the time of production," so it is not surprising they did not match the amounts actually destroyed.

Also, auditors wrote that "some of the chemical agent hardened in the container and remained in this state even after the container was destroyed during the demilitarization process."

The report added, "At Tooele, the contractor used a waste tracking form to: document the differences; (and) show the approximate amount of agent remaining in the ton container after liquid agent had been destroyed." Metal parts with hardened agent were then destroyed in a furnace.

The report added, "However, although we found that the tracking forms were signed by the contractor's custodian, they weren't signed by a government representative and the differences were reconciled and updated" in the database tracking how much was stored and destroyed.

Auditors also said no reviews into discrepancies — even when some large ones of up to 20 percent for some containers were noticed — were conducted because rules and contracts only required them if records for all ton containers at one site were off by 5 percent after their destruction was completed.

Auditors called for a few changes, including recording the actual amount of agent destroyed in databases and reconciling discrepancies quickly.

In a written response, the Chemical Materials Agency agreed with the report's conclusions. It said it will determine how often reconciliation should be conducted as one-ton containers and contents are destroyed.

It said, however, it intends to continue listing possibly inaccurate amounts destroyed in its official database because adjusting the weights would require changes to international treaties. Instead of seeking that, it plans to add a report in the data system that "is capable of showing the variances from the declared weight."

The Office of the Deputy Assistant Secretary of the Army for Elimination of Chemical Weapons also agreed with the conclusions of the report, and accepted the corrective actions proposed by the Chemical Materials Agency.

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