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Exclusive: Radioactive objects turn up at S.F. site slated to become huge waterfront neighborhood — again

By Laura Waxmann
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Gift Article

Kamillah Ealom, Greenaction Bayview Hunters Point Community Organizer/ Program Coordinator, looks out over the Hunter's Point Naval Shipyard as she stands at Hillpoint Park in San Francisco.
Lea Suzuki/The Chronicle

For the second time in five years, a massive retesting effort has turned up radioactive objects at the former Hunters Point Naval Shipyard, in areas that were already swept of radioactive contamination and earmarked for redevelopment years ago.

This past August, a 1.5-inch deck marker was unearthed some 1,300 feet from the "nearest occupied building, in a secure location" on the former shipyard, a Navy spokesperson confirmed to the Chronicle. The deck marker was found intact, covered by some 2 inches of loose soil on a screening pad in an area now known as Parcel C. Radium-tainted paint was commonly used to make the deck markers — which were used extensively by the Navy decades ago to light passageways on ships— glow.

And, last month, a radioactive object was identified by a Navy contractor at Parcel B, another site at the former shipyard that is currently subject to the retesting. The object was detected via a scan of a trench unit in April, and has been bagged, labeled and placed in a secure trailer on the site.

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Navy officials addressed the Parcel B finding — which they described as a "pea-sized" piece of glass — for the first time publicly at a meeting of the Shipyard Community Advisory Council on Monday.

The discoveries follow the 2018 news that a radium deck marker about the size of a silver dollar was found near a collection of new condos.

The fresh finds are the latest issues at San Francisco's most ambitious redevelopment project in a century — an effort to transform a Superfund waste site spanning hundreds of acres into a bustling waterfront neighborhood of 12,000 homes. Yet, as the city prepares to build 82,000 state-mandated homes by 2031, the continued complications around the cleaning of the former shipyard could further delay the development of this area along the bay coastline.

On Thursday, the environmental advocacy group Greenaction for Health and Environmental Justice said it would submit a notice of intent to sue the Navy and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) in federal court over the $1.2 billion cleanup. The notice of intent to sue is part of a 60-day notice requirement for both parties to comply with the Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation and Liability Act (CERCLA), which governs the cleanup of Superfund sites; as well with regulations in the National Contingency Plan (NCP) and the Federal Facilities Agreement (FFA) that also relate to the cleanup of the shipyard.

During the Cold War, parts of the former shipyard were contaminated by fallout from irradiated ships that were brought to Hunters Point after atomic-bomb tests, and radiological research also was carried out there. The Navy, which operated at the shipyard from 1945 to 1974, and other agencies have spent decades trying to remove that contamination. In 2004, regulators declared the hilltop portion of the shipyard to be clean, and hundreds of people now live in recently developed housing there.

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Hunter's Point Naval Shipyard, a superfund site, has undergone sweeps for radioactive contamination.
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The U.S. EPA, the California Department of Toxic Substances Control, and the San Francisco Department of Public Health have said the hilltop area is safe for residents. While the cleanup of the site continues, much of the former shipyard remains classified as a federal Superfund site that must be scoured and cleaned before people can live there.

Navy officials confirmed to the Chronicle in October that "after the cleanup is complete, the property will be available for transfer to the city of San Francisco," and, in an updated timeline, stated the retesting at Parcel G, a 40-acre piece of land that was once home to a nuclear research laboratory, is expected to wrap up in 2024. Developer FivePoint has said the area's remaining nine parcels would be transferred to the city by 2026, though the Navy suggested it could take longer.

Meanwhile, shipyard cleanup contractor Tetra Tech EC is being sued for fraud by Bayview residents and the Department of Justice, and a lawsuit by the shipyard's newest homeowners on Parcel A was recently settled. The Justice Department, in a civil action, alleged the firm cut corners and falsified radiation tests, and the Navy decided that its data were suspect and areas of the shipyard must be retested. Tetra Tech EC has denied any wrongdoing.

Two main issues are at the heart of Greenaction's intended lawsuit: The first is the 2021 discovery of Strontium-90 exceeding the cleanup standard in samples taken from Parcel G, a part of the shipyard that is currently subject to the retesting effort. The radioactive isotope is linked to increased risks of bone cancer and leukemia.

The second violation alleged by Greenaction as a basis for its lawsuit is that the Navy has missed deadlines for its most recently required, five-year review of its remediation plan.

In 2018, the Navy agreed to retest one-third of the areas where remediation work was carried out by Tetra Tech EC. It hired the civil-engineering firm between 2002 and 2016 to clean the shipyard, which spans hundreds of acres and contains radioactive waste and other contaminants, in order to unlock its redevelopment.

In its notice of intent to sue, the group argues that the agreement came with the "proviso that if retesting found any contamination, that discovery would trigger 100% retesting of (Tetra Tech EC's) work." The group also believes that the Navy and EPA should adhere to more stringent testing standards and procedures.

Dunne, the Navy's spokesperson, told the Chronicle that the Navy is taking new samples and scans at "all areas evaluated by Tetra Tech EC." The retesting involves "all trench and soil units will be investigated using a combination of gamma scan surveys, soil boring samples, and full re-excavation of 33% of trench units."

"If contamination is present above the remedial goal in a parcel, the remaining 67% of the trenches in that parcel will be re-excavated instead of investigating using gamma scan surface surveys and soil borings," Dunne said. "Scientific testing is at the heart of the Navy's work to ensure there is no contamination left behind that would risk public health and environment."

These days, condo buildings and a manicured public park decorate a hilltop at the Bayview shipyard overlooking the San Francisco Bay. Standing on its edge during an afternoon in October, Kamillah Ealom recounted growing up nearby, before the hilltop, known as Parcel A, was cleared for redevelopment and before cleanup efforts began at the shipyard below.

"As kids, we used to jump the fence and play at the PG&E power plant, and we also played at the Hunters Point Naval Shipyard Superfund site, not knowing that we were playing in radioactive toxic waste," said Ealom, who is now a community organizer with Greenaction.

Kamillah Ealom, Greenaction Bayview Hunters Point Community Organizer/ Program Coordinator, sits at Hillpoint Park off Innes Street at The San Francisco Shipyard in San Francisco.
Lea Suzuki/The Chronicle

Her eyes scanned a swath of flat land beneath the hilltop that juts out into the sea — Parcel C. Decades ago, the acreage was used for ship repair and radiological research by the Navy — today, it's marked by aging structures and mounds of soil piled up on screening pads in a staging area that's secured by a chain link fence.

The piles and screening pads are a visible sign of the soil resampling effort sparked by the controversies over Tetra Tech EC's testing.

Moments later, a young man wearing a white T-shirt and a backpack could be seen hopping the fence and entering the restricted area with an unnerving ease. He walked about 20 feet in the direction of the dirt piles before a worker on the site intervened.

"He was headed right over there to the pile," said Ealom, in mild disbelief. "Seeing how accessible the shipyard still is — it's disappointing."

Sean-Ryan McCray, senior project manager working on the shipyard's remediation, explained during the community hearing held Monday that the nearly seven-month gap between when a routine surface scan of soil from a trench on Parcel B was conducted and the radioactive piece of glass was positively identified and recovered in November, was due to "a rather lengthy data review process by our contractor."

"It wasn't initially caught during our RS 700 scans. But our data evaluation process was able to find this needle in a haystack," the project manager said, adding that the Navy is "still waiting on some more detailed information on the object itself."

But, he said, "The discovery of this object doesn't pose a risk to the public here."

When contacted for comments on the deck marker found in August, Navy spokesperson Christopher Dunne echoed that sentiment, stating that the device did not pose a high-risk to the public — rather, the discovery validated the Navy's retesting process.

"The relative dose of radiation from the deck marker is low, at 1.9 millirem annually. Our thoroughness and use of technology is the reason we could find something this small in 20,000 cubic meters of excavated soil," Dunne said in an emailed statement.

Dr. Ahimsa Porter Sumchai uses a map with pins representing the different cancers that she says have been found in residents near the Hunter's Point Naval Shipyard.
Lea Suzuki/The Chronicle

"For context, if a person were to sit or lay down on top of the location for eight hours per day for one year, the annual exposure would be roughly equivalent to a single six-hour flight from New York to California," Dunne said. "The Navy quickly communicated what we found to city officials, regulatory agencies and the public."

In October, more than a month after the deck marker was discovered, John Chestnutt, of the EPA, said that the agency was still awaiting a full report on the object's excavation.

"We haven't even seen pictures of the thing yet. We haven't really seen what conditions it was in and we haven't seen what kind of readings it had. We asked them (the Navy) if they'd taken some soil samples around it; they said they had, we haven't seen results of any of that," said Chestnutt at the time. "If they did find contaminated soil around it, then that would beg the question whether they need to go back in the trench and dig some more."

Chestnutt added that finding the deck marker was "good," given the circumstances.

"We are retesting for a reason — if we had confidence in Tetra Tech's work, we wouldn't be doing this retesting to make sure that nothing was left behind," said Chestnutt, adding that the deck marker was found in "a highly controlled area" that "we were suspicious of."

As of this week, the EPA — which initially raised alarm over the levels of Strontium-90 found in 2021 on Parcel G — was awaiting full reports on both of the objects found this year on Parcels B and C.

Dr. Ahimsa Porter Sumchai, founder, medical director and principal investigator of the Hunters Point Community Biomonitoring Program, unpacks a map at the Hunters Point Biomonitoring Foundation office.
Lea Suzuki/The Chronicle

It was also still waiting for the results of a "verification study" that it urged the Navy to complete to validate its decision to switch from a method used to test for Strontium-90 that was long approved by the EPA to another method that was only approved this year. The first method showed high levels of Strontium-90 in a number of samples taken from Parcel G, while the new method produced levels that were below the remedial goal, or safe.

The Navy has said that the original laboratory method should be "removed from decision-making" because it lacked accuracy; Greenaction alleged that the Navy tried to invalidate its own data because it is unfavorable.

Navy officials said Monday that they expect to issue a final report regarding the discrepancies in the Strontium-90 results to regulatory agencies next summer.

Ealom, the community organizer with Greenaction, said that the Navy and EPA's messaging have served to downplay results of the retesting effort.

"We've known for decades that there is contamination there," said Ealom. "We've asked them to properly clean up and properly inspect their folks that they have coming out here and doing the testing. There shouldn't be anything left — as they have said that there wasn't."

Monday's community hearing turned tense after the Navy's team addressed efforts to mitigate an elevated methane gas reading at Parcel E-2 — a 47-acre site of which roughly half was used as a landfill when the shipyard was active — that was recorded in January. Remediation of that parcel, which is earmarked as future open space in the larger redevelopment project, is slated to wrap-up next year.

Oscar James, a lifelong Hunters Point resident whose father, who developed cancer, worked as a rigger at the shipyard more than half-a-century ago, asked whether Parcel E-2 will ever be fully cleaned.

James said that his father in the 1940s transported toxic waste to the landfill and to the Farallon Islands.

"So it's a concern for me," said James. "My family is still in this community. We're not going anywhere, and we want to make sure whatever happens at this shipyard, that it is 100% clean."

A Navy representative answered that the landfill is "contained."

"We have a multi-layer cap and everything on that," the representative said. "We can't really say at this time, what is actually inside of that."

Steve Castleman, Greenaction's attorney, characterized that answer as evasive.

"This gentleman, Oscar, just asked you whether parcel E-2 is going to be wholly clean and you know as well as everyone else in this room knows that the answer is 'No,' " he said. "That stuff will be there for 100 years – if the Navy does it right. If the Navy does it wrong, it will start spreading."

The problem with Parcel E-2 in particular, said Castleman, is that "global warming is going to cause the groundwater to rise and the bay level to rise."

"The Navy never considered that," he said.

For other shipyard stakeholders, a sense of urgency when it comes to properly mitigating the shipyard's toxic legacy is a matter of survival.

Color-coded maps of the shipyard decorate Dr. Ahimsa Porter Sumchai's clinic south of the Shipyard at Candlestick Point. Using pins and threads, the physician has carefully mapped out cancer clusters and chemicals of concern that she's identified by testing residents through her nonprofit Hunters Point Community Biomonitoring Program in recent years.

"These are some of the compounds that we have detected in screening them — uranium, cesium, thallium, rubidium, and this is strontium," said Sumchai, her finger tracing one of the maps. "We have a lady living here, she has a radio isotope of plutonium that you can't get anywhere else in the universe — plutonium 244 — it's got a half life of 80 million years. At the shipyard, ships exposed to plutonium bombs were docked, and of course, it was dumped into these landfills."

So far, Sumchai said, she's completed around 150 screenings and re-screenings at her clinic. She's been pushing for a moratorium on the redevelopment plans for the shipyard long before she began producing evidence of its toxicity.

"They just need to stop this and just figure out what we can do to protect the community," she said. "About three years ago, we were trying to convince people that we were being exposed — at this point, I just don't want to argue about that. It's just overwhelming, the evidence."

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By Laura Waxmann

Laura Waxmann covers the business community with a focus on commercial real estate, development, retail and the future of San Francisco's downtown. Prior to joining The Chronicle in 2023, she reported on San Francisco's changing real estate and economic landscape in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic for the San Francisco Business Times.

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