

Big Island Weekly

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Monitoring depleted uranium

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Wednesday, February 28, 2007 9:10 AM HST

While weapons made with depleted uranium can penetrate any substance known to man, the issues surrounding the use of this radioactive, heavy metal are having a much harder time sinking in.

Here in Hawai`i, Linda Faye Kroll is a retired nurse who has dedicated her life to educating the public about the dangers of military toxics. When Representative Josh Green introduced H.B. 1452 this legislative session, he created a forum for Kroll and others to voice their concerns.



Leimaile and Kamo'a Quitevis - Kristine Kubat

"Don't believe anything I tell you," Kroll cautions, "look into it for yourself." Advice that seems to be gaining momentum at the local and state levels as U.S. Senator Inouye once again pushes for an increase in the military presence here and citizens are raising concerns about the increase of pollution that, inevitably, comes with the deal. "Make no mistake, everything having to do with preparing and making war is toxic," says Kroll.

In fact, the U.S. Department of Defense is the single largest producer of pollution in the world.

H.B. 1452 originally called for testing soil outside the military's live-fire ranges in the state of Hawai`i to determine if DU is present. The bill passed out of the Energy and Environmental Protection Committee and was heard for the second time last Saturday, this time by the Finance Committee chaired by Marcus Oshiro. Here it was amended to

include air and water testing. The only opposition to the bill thus far has come from the Department of Health, which has taken the position that it can't afford the testing, estimated by DOH at \$5 million per year. Rep. Green believes the federal government should share the cost because "any DU we're being exposed to must have come from the military."

All decision makers at the hearing voted in favor of passage, there were 17 ayes. Now H.B. 1452 is headed for the senate.

Depleted uranium (DU) is the by-product of the process that yields nuclear fuel. For decades, the U.S. government has been quietly converting stockpiles of it into weapons. The use of DU munitions in our own country is prohibited, a fact which does not keep the Pentagon from deploying them abroad, primarily in Iraq. They have also been used extensively in Serbia and Bosnia.

The Pentagon claims that the low levels of radiation emitted from DU weaponry pose no health risks. Many scientists disagree with the way this conclusion is drawn. The military looks only at how the trillions of healthy cells that comprise the human body are affected by exposure to low dosages when handling the munitions. They ignore the fact that as DU munitions are exploded, they burst into flames and vaporize.

Dr. Helen Caldicott is the co-founder of Physicians for Social Responsibility, an organization of 23,000 doctors committed to educating their colleagues about the dangers of nuclear power, nuclear weapons and nuclear war. She also founded an international umbrella group called International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War, which won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1985. Caldicott herself was personally nominated for the Nobel Prize by Nobel Laureate, Linus Pauling.

According to Caldicott, up to 70% of the uranium released when DU munitions are exploded is converted into microscopic particles that can be inhaled or ingested immediately or when air, soil and water get contaminated. Once inside the human body, these particles kill or mutate the cells they come in contact with. Photographs of DU particles in living lung tissues show them as tiny sun-like, radiating objects. The half-life of this radioactive substance is 4.5 billion years.

Over 375 tons of DU was released into the Iraq environment during the first Gulf War. Since that time, scientists, doctors and soldiers have been trying to understand how a war that lasted 100 hours and left 148 killed in action could have resulted in 10,324 veterans dead and another 221,502 disabled.

DU is the prime suspect in any independent investigation of the situation. As research continues, the military is slowly shifting from its once adamant position that DU was not involved. Recent publications from the Armed Forces Radiobiology Research Institute (AFRRI) and the Army Environmental Policy Institute reflect the change.

The AFRRI published its findings that DU transforms cells into tumorigenic phenotypes, is mutagenic, induces genetic instability and induces oncogenes, suggesting carcinogenicity. AFRRI's conclusion: "Strong evidence exists to support detailed study of DU carcinogenicity." In 1995, the AEPI admitted that DU may cause liver, lung and kidney damage.

A recent Army report to Congress sheds light on DOD's predicament: If a link between the use of DU and the deaths and disabilities resulting from the Gulf War were established, the costs to the government would be astronomical. Here disabilities would also include the birth defects that are found in the returning soldiers' offspring.

The name of the organization Kroll founded to educate the public about the risks of DU is called "Ten Fingers, Ten Toes" -- a reference to the alarming incidence of birth defects found in areas where DU weapons have been used in Iraq and Kosovo. AFRRI also found DU produced chromosome damage and caused delayed reproductive death.

In 2002, the United Nations declared DU a weapon of mass destruction and its use a breach of international law. So far America has used over 2000 tons in the second Gulf War.

Until August of 2005, when DU munitions were found at Schofield Barracks, people in Hawai`i who had concerns about the use of the radioactive substance were looking at this bigger picture. With the local discovery, the issue

has hit home.

The EIS that was prepared for the Stryker Brigade stated that DU was never used in Hawai`i. Evidence to the contrary turned up after Kyle Kajihiro, of the American Friends Service Committee, made repeated FOIA requests and dredged through endless stacks of documents. He discovered a single paragraph revealing that DU was present in the ground at Schofield, forcing the Army to admit that they misrepresented the facts to the community, including Senator Daniel Inouye.

For a long time, the Navy has stored DU at Lualualei on O`ahu under its Naval Radioactive Materials permit. In 1994, two DU rounds were accidentally fired from Pearl Harbor; they landed above Aiea and have never been recovered.

Leimaile and Kamoia Quitevis are literally on the front lines of the DU issue. The couple was hired by Garcia and Associates to monitor construction related to the expansion of Schofield to accomodate the Stryker Brigade. Their job was to ensure that sacred Hawaiian sites were not disturbed. Along with others who assisted the Quitevises in their fieldwork, the couple has been exposed to DU. Kamoia has photographic evidence that ordinances known to contain DU were open-air detonated. He testified before the house committee hearing H.B. 1452 that he has seen thousands of shards from Davy Crocketts, as the ordinances are called, scattered about Schofield.

None of the cultural monitors were ever told about the dangers related to DU exposure. Whether or not the Army agrees that such dangers exist, their own guidelines require the use of protective gear for DU clean-up, including respirators. None of the personnel on base wore protective gear; none of the cultural monitors were informed about the presence of DU; none of them knew they should be taking precautions against exposure.

Just recently, Leimaile's sister who was assisting on site and pregnant at the time, gave birth to a child with a serious birth defect. The baby was born with it's intestines outside its body.

"We can't say for sure that the baby's defect came from DU," says Leimaile, "but there's a chance. We need to start monitoring."

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