

Army's Germ Disposal Plan Questioned

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LOS ANGELES, May 31 — Federal health officials have quietly scotched an Army plan to dump the residue of germ-warfare chemical into the Arkansas River, a tributary of the Mississippi.

But they are still uncertain about the possible consequences of an alternative Army plan to get rid of the compounds by scattering the residue somewhere on the grounds of the 25-square-mile Pine Bluff Arsenal, 40 miles southeast of Little Rock, Ark.

The secrecy-shrouded arsenal has been the Army's principal production center for chemical and bacteriological weapons, ranging from tear gas and defoliants to nerve gas and carriers for germs of such diseases as rabbit fever, encephalitis and botulism.

The projected disposal of about 100,000 gallons of germ-compound residues presumably is pursuant to President Nixon's declaration of last Nov. 25 renouncing germ warfare and stating that the United States would stop producing such compounds and would destroy its stockpile.

Memorandum Quoted

Some mystery has been generated, however, by a memorandum circulated among several agencies stating that the substances to be disposed of would be "sterilized biological warfare agents produced at the arsenal between July 1, 1970, and June 30, 1971."

Officials of the Federal Water Quality Administration and the United States Public Health Service presume that "produced" refers to the planned treatment of stockpile material rather than new production, since any new production

would appear to contravene the Presidential order.

The Army has declined to elucidate this point, and it has withheld virtually all other details of the disposal problem. The only chemical information the other Federal agencies have been given is that "the material containing the dead agents is viscous, similar to sorghum," which is construed to mean molasses-like.

The lack of information, officials acknowledged in a series of recent interviews in Washington and elsewhere, has made it virtually impossible to make an ironclad judgment on the safety of the Army's disposal plans.

But both Water Quality and Public Health officials were certain that whatever the residues were, it was inadvisable to take the chance of dumping them into the river.

In respect to the Army's alternative plan of confining the residues to the military reservation, the two agencies' jurisdiction is cloudy in the absence of positive evidence of a health hazard. Even if the material is buried, rain conceivably could carry chemical constituents through the soil outside the reservation.

Details of Plans

The Army plans to "sterilize" the germ warfare material, officers told the other agencies in recent conferences, in a 2,500-gallon vat at a rate of from 625 gallons to 5,000 a week. The reason for the variable rate, in a presumed stockpile-destroying operation, was not explained.

Early in April the Army told the other agencies its plan was to mix the batches of resulting "sterilized" material each day

with about 100,000 gallons of water, put the mixture in a six-acre lined "holding pond" for eight days, and then run it into nearby Arkansas River.

When the other agencies disapproved of this plan, the Army propounded the on-site disposal scheme. This calls for chlorinating the "sterilized" material, putting it through a standard sewage treatment process to break down oxidizing constituents, and running the effluent into an evaporation shed to produce a dry sludge. This presumably inert material would then be put in the ground, the Army said, as a soil conditioner.

The Water Quality Administration and the Public Health Service have tentatively approved of this, with some misgivings.

"Presumably any germs will be long gone from the stuff that comes out at the end," one official said. "But how can you be categorical about it when you don't know what they started with? It may be unavoidable under the circumstances, but it's another case of an organization being in effect the sole judge of its own actions. And on the basis of the original plan of just dumping the stuff in a river, somebody might wonder just how sharp this judgment is."

Some of the officials involved recalled an incident of wildlife poisoning in Utah attributed to a cupful of anthrax germs dumped on the desert 15 years before by Army researchers; and an instance where chemicals, put by the Rocky Mountain Arsenal at Denver into a holding pond, spontaneously reacted to form a herbicide that percolated into neighboring farmland.