



Written by [David Kelly](#) on November 10, 2022

New Health Study Ordered for Polluted Former Army Base

Last week the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) decided to conduct a new study to determine whether veterans who were stationed Fort Ord, the coastal California Army base that closed in 1994, were exposed to high levels of cancer-causing toxins.

The Associated Press (AP) reported that the CDC's decision comes following an earlier [investigation](#) that "found that drinking water at the base contained toxic chemicals and that hundreds of veterans who lived at the central California coast base in the 1980s and 1990s later have developed rare and terminal blood cancers."



AP Images
California's Fort Ord Army Base

Fort Ord was established in 1917 by the Army as a maneuver area and field artillery target range, with its primary mission to train infantry military personnel. In 1991, Fort Ord was selected for decommissioning, but the post did not formally close until 1994.

In 1990, four years before closing as an active military training base, the fort was added to the Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) Superfund program's National Priorities List (NPL) of the most polluted places in the nation. Included in that pollution were dozens of chemicals, some now known to cause cancer, found in Fort Ord's drinking water and soil.

The EPA [acknowledged](#) in 1990 that "the site contained leaking petroleum underground storage tanks, a 150-acre landfill used to dispose of residential waste and small amounts of commercial waste generated by the base, a former fire drill area, motor pool maintenance areas, small dumpsites, small arms target ranges, an 8,000-acre firing range and other limited areas that pose threats from unexploded ordnance."

The AP [reported](#) this week that last Friday Patrick Breysse, director of the CDC's Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR), sent a letter to Rep. Katie Porter (D-Calif.) noting that "there are sufficient data and scientific reasons for ATSDR to re-evaluate health risks related to historical drinking water exposures at Fort Ord." AP noted that Porter had asked for a new study in February, just days after the first investigative story.

AP reportedly interviewed nearly two dozen ill veterans, and identified many more. They also reviewed thousands of pages of documents and interviewed military, medical, and environmental scientists, and [shared](#) that the "review of public documents showed the Army knew that chemicals had been improperly dumped at Fort Ord for decades. Even after the contamination was documented, the Army played down the risks."

One of the fort's previous residents, Army veteran Julie Akey, [told](#) the AP that she was diagnosed in 2016, at the age of 46, with multiple myeloma, a rare blood cancer. Akey is "confident that science will prove our high rate of cancers and illnesses are not a coincidence." She started a Facebook group for



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Fort Ord veterans with cancer, which now has nearly 1,000 members.

The AP investigation [revealed](#) that “One of [the chemicals found at the base] was trichloroethylene, or TCE, which was known as a miracle degreaser and was widely used at Fort Ord. The Army [found](#) TCE in Fort Ord’s wells 43 separate times from 1985 to 1994, and 18 of those tests showed TCE exceeded legal safety limits.”

A 1996 [ATSDR public health study](#) “found that toxins in the soil and in the aquifers below Fort Ord were not likely to pose a past, present or future threat to those living there.” However, the study’s “conclusion was based on limited data supplied by the military and before medical science understood the relationship between some of the chemical exposures and cancer, particularly TCE.” In 2000, the Department of Health and Human Services (DHS) added TCE to its list of chemicals known to cause cancer.

“It’s unclear how long and at what concentrations TCE may have been in the water before 1985, when hundreds of thousands of people lived on the base. And TCE wasn’t the only problem. The EPA identified more than 40 ‘chemicals of concern’ in soil and groundwater,” said the AP [article](#).

Earlier this year the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) said that the “contamination was ‘within the allowable safe range’ in areas that provided drinking water.”

However, with a new study in the works, Akey and other veterans who lived at Fort Ord are hopeful a link between their cancers and their time at Fort Ord will be found, allowing them to get care and benefits. AP concluded:

Former Defense Secretary Leon Panetta grew up next to Fort Ord, went through basic training on the base and now runs a nonprofit institute there. He said a new health study is an important next step for veterans.

“They were willing to serve their country and put their lives on the line, and as a result of their willingness to serve, I think we really owe it to them.”



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