

**Opening Statement of Chairman Bart Stupak
Oversight & Investigations Subcommittee
"Poisoned Patriots: Contaminated Drinking Water at Camp Lejeune. "
June 12, 2007**

This is the first in a series of hearings this Committee will be holding to examine whether the Pentagon is adequately protecting the American people, including military personnel and their families, from risks associated with environmental contamination at its facilities. In this hearing, we will explore the tragic narrative of why tens of thousands of Marines and their families were exposed to highly contaminated drinking water at Marine Corps Base Camp Lejeune for nearly 30 years.

Three years ago, this Committee heard testimony from Jerry Ensminger, a 24-year Marine Corps veteran, who raised serious questions about why both the Department of the Navy and the Marine Corps waited **five** years before notifying Camp Lejeune residents that the drinking water was highly contaminated. Mr. Ensminger also raised questions about whether the Navy and Marine Corps were cooperating with the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry which has been engaged for the last 8 years in a study of the connection between exposure to the contaminated drinking water at Camp Lejeune and the increased incidence of cancer and birth defects among children at the base.

Over 20 years after the Marine Corps finally took the contaminated wells out of service, these and countless other questions remain unanswered or inadequately addressed. The purpose of the hearing today is to get some answers:

- When did the Marine Corps learn that the drinking water at Camp Lejeune, a military base with nearly 100,000 residents, was contaminated with dangerous chemicals?
- If the contamination was first discovered in 1980, why did the Marine Corps wait until 1985 before it closed the wells?
- Why were the "closed" wells not immediately capped and abandoned, but continued to be used to supply water at various points at least into 1987?
- When and how were the residents told about the contamination? Was the notification adequate?

- Did exposure to the drinking water cause cancer and birth defects in children conceived at the base? What about adults who drank the water?
- How has the Marine Corp responded to those affected? Has it taken care of its own? Has it remained true to the Marine Corps motto, *Semper Fidelis*, or “always faithful”?
- Why is the ATSDR study taking so long? Will the study be published as scheduled by December 2007? Has the military intentionally delayed the study?

Today we welcome back Mr. Ensminger, who knows first hand the horrible consequences of the military’s failure to detect and cleanup the toxic drinking water at Camp Lejeune. His daughter Jane was born in 1976 at Camp Lejeune. Six and a half years later she was diagnosed with leukemia. Jane died when she was 9 years old in 1985 - the same year that the poisoned wells were finally shut down. Mr. Ensminger is joined on the first panel by Michael Gros and Jeff Byron, who likewise know only too well the devastation caused by exposure to the poisoned drinking water at Camp Lejeune. Jeff Byron, a former Marine air traffic controller moved his family into base housing at Camp Lejeune in 1982, three months after his first daughter, Andrea, was born and two years before Rachel was born. Rachel is developmentally disabled, has spina bifida, and was born with a cleft palate. Andrea has a rare bone marrow syndrome known as aplastic anemia. Dr. Michael Gros, a Navy obstetrician at Lejeune, contracted T-cell lymphoma and can no longer practice medicine. Dr. Gros spent his entire time in the Marine Corps at Camp Lejeune and he and his family lived in base housing. We are deeply grateful to each of these witnesses for sharing their painful stories with this Committee.

We will also hear from officials at the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry about the study initiated in 1999 which examines whether individuals born between 1968 and 1985 to mothers who drank contaminated water while they were pregnant and living at Camp Lejeune are at increased risk of developing certain childhood cancers and/or birth defects. We’ll learn whether the Department of Navy and the Marine Corps have been forthcoming in their efforts to assist ATSDR in this critical study. We also hope to learn why the Department of the Navy was resistant to funding the ATSDR study despite a federal statute requiring that it do so. Why did DOD refuse to fund ATSDR’s activities at Camp Lejeune for three full years (1998-2000)? Did military obstruction and lack of funding delay completion of the study? More importantly, does ATSDR have accurate information on which to base its study? Why aren’t all Marines and their families who were exposed to this contaminated water included in the study?

The principle contaminant of the drinking water at Camp Lejeune was a volatile organic compound referred to as TCE (or Tetrachloroethylene). TCE is

the most widespread water contaminant in the nation, and almost every major military base has a Superfund site with TCE contamination.

TCE was also the main contaminant at the Woburn Superfund site, made famous by the best-selling book, *A Civil Action*. That book, and the movie based on it, illustrated very well the horrible toll that TCE can take on the human body. But here is an important frame of reference: As bad as the contamination was at Woburn, the concentrations of TCE at Camp Lejeune were as much as 10 to 15 times higher.

Six years ago, the EPA attempted to issue a risk assessment that found TCE to be at least twice as carcinogenic as originally thought (and possibly 40 times as carcinogenic). The Defense Department aggressively opposed the EPA's findings – labeling it “junk science” – and colluded with the White House to derail issuance of the tough new TCE standard. Instead, the issue was referred for study by the National Academy of Sciences – delaying for years any conclusion about whether millions of Americans, including residents of Lejeune, were contaminated by TCE. The EPA's standard was vindicated a year ago by the NAS.

Nevertheless, this obstruction of environmental prerogatives has been the modus operandi of the Defense Department for years now – since at least 2001, the Pentagon has sidetracked environmental regulations, opposed EPA efforts to set stricter pollution limits, stalled and under funded cleanups, and ignored federal and state environmental regulators. Moreover, every year, right up through 2006, the Defense Department has sought to exempt itself from the environmental laws.

Those days are over. Nearly one out of ten Americans live within 10 miles of a military site listed on the Superfund National Priority List for hazardous waste cleanup. The American people, military and civilian alike, deserve to work and live in communities where drinking the water and breathing the air do not threaten their lives.

