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Hawaii chemical weapons dump site to be surveyed

Advertiser Staff

The University of Hawai'i at Manoa has been awarded \$1.975 million to support the U.S. Department of Defense's efforts to assess the potential risk to human health and the environment of a chemical warfare material disposal site about 5 miles south of the entrance to Pearl Harbor in waters more than 1,000 feet deep.

A full array of state-of-the-art technologies owned and operated by UH Manoa's School of Ocean Earth Science and Technology will be employed to assess the location and condition of the disposal site. The program will map the seafloor with high-resolution sonar followed by direct observation of any chemical warfare material found using either remotely operated underwater vehicles or three-man research submarines deployed using UH research vessels.

Researchers will collect water, seafloor sediment and biological samples in the vicinity of the disposal sites and at control sites up-current and away from the munitions disposal site. Chemical analysis for munitions constituents, including military chemical agents, will be performed on sediment, water, and biological samples.

"The University of Hawai'i is a recognized leader in the field of underwater research and has successfully partnered with the Department of Defense on previous research efforts, including a survey in conjunction with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration of an underwater munitions disposal site off Oahu," said Tad Davis, deputy assistant secretary of the Army for Environment, Safety and Occupational Health.

"I am confident that UH Manoa's leadership of this groundbreaking joint pilot project will succeed in establishing the preliminary procedures for determining whether sea disposed military munitions pose a hazard to human health and safety or adversely impact on the local marine aquatic environment," Davis said.

At the Department of Defense's request, UH will also develop and prove out methodologies for surveying and sampling other historic munitions sea disposal sites. Between 1919 and 1970, the armed services disposed of military munitions and containers of bulk chemical agent in coastal waters off the United States, including the island of O'ahu.

Dr. Gary Ostrander, UH-Manoa vice chancellor for research and graduate education, praised the Department of Defense for its ongoing efforts to determine whether sea-disposed military munitions poses a threat to human health and the environment and for the selection of UH as a partner, stating that the School of Ocean Earth Science and Technology has both extensive expertise and resources in underwater exploration and marine biology needed to ensure the program's success.

The program was funded through the efforts of Hawai'i's congressional delegation.

"This is a very important first step in determining the risks posed by military munitions disposal sites to our coastal waters," said U.S. Sen. Daniel K. Inouye.

Congressman Neil Abercrombie added, "In taking the lead with this pilot effort we believe other states with similar sites will greatly benefit from the methodologies developed by the University of Hawai'i."

The Department of Defense contracted UH to perform the program. UH will partner with Environet Inc., a local environmental consulting firm, to complete the assessment. Additionally, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration will consult with the Department of Defense and UH on scientific matters, and the U.S. Army's Edgewood Chemical Biological Center will provide chemical safety and analytical support to this project.

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