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Critics assail Fed study on health risks of military chaff

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By Frank X. Mullen Jr.

RENO GAZETTE-JOURNAL

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Environmental and military watchdog groups Tuesday attacked a study from the Naval Research Laboratory that found no health risks in the continued use of military radar evasion chaff.

“The report highlights the Department of Defense’s lackadaisical attitude towards human health risks by giving a green light to continued use of chaff while noting that several health questions remain unanswered,” said Grace Potorti, director of the Rural Alliance for Military Accountability.

The alliance is a Reno-based military watchdog group.

“Until we have an independent, impartial study of the health effects of chaff, the military should be allowed no additional public land over which to drop chaff. The studies must either confirm or nullify risks to humans and the environment.”

Chaff is ejected from warplanes to decoy enemy missiles from aircraft. The chaff, made of fiberglass-covered aluminum thinner than a human hair, confuses enemy radar.

In Nevada, Fallon Naval Air Station and Nellis Air Force Base near Las Vegas have used chaff in training missions for decades. Military officials have said the material is essential for realistic training and presents no health risks to the public or animals.

The Air Force plans to expand the use of chaff during pilot training over public and private lands in eastern Nevada and western Utah. Under the Air Force plan, large bundles of the material would be released at lower altitudes and over public and private lands within the Utah Test and Training Range, which extends into Nevada.

The Air Force chaff plan says expanded use is needed to “ensure military readiness through realistic training.” Navy spokesmen have said the chaff training saves pilots’ lives as shown by the Gulf War and U.S. operations in the Balkans.

Chaff has been used since the 1950s, but its health risks have never conclusively been studied. A 1998 report from the General Accounting Office, done at the request of U.S. Sen. Harry Reid, D-Nev., found that the health effects of chaff on humans and animals is unknown.

The Navy report was in response to the GAO study. Navy researchers found that the “environmental, human and animal impacts of chaff are negligible, and far less than those from other man-made emissions.”

The Navy’s panel determined that chaff does not break down into small enough particles to be inhaled and that the amounts of the substance that animals ingest causes no ill effects.

Critics said the Navy’s study is biased and is just a repetition of the standard military position.

“The health risks and ecological damage associated with inhalation, ingestion and widespread dispersal of chaff has never been independently researched,” said Steve Erickson, spokesman for the Downwinders, a military watchdog group.

“We cannot allow rural residents of Utah and Nevada to become guinea pigs for the Department of Defense.”

The coalition this week asked Reid to back an independent study of chaff’s effects on the environment.

“Chaff is clearly litter, and littering on public lands is illegal,” Potorti said. “All a person has to do is see and feel a clump of chaff to know that this is not something a person or animal should inhale. Nor is it appropriate for use on our public lands.”

In the letter to Reid, the coalition noted unanswered questions regarding the potential effects of chaff, including:

- * What fraction of emitted chaff breaks up in atmospheric turbulence into particles that can be inhaled?
- * What are the shapes of chaff particles after they break up?
- * What is the distribution of chaff under different release and weather conditions?
- * How do chaff emissions and expected concentrations compare to emissions and concentrations from other particle emitters over the time and areas where chaff is released?
- * What quantities of inhalable chaff are found in communities near training facilities where chaff is released?

AGAINST CHAFF : The coalition of groups questioning the military’s use of chaff:

AuSable Manistee Action Council
Beacon Foundation