

# P I O N E E R

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32 PAGES

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## Still searching

### Officials continue to search for source of Nemo contamination

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Staff Writer

NEMO — Nemo residents gathered last night at the local firehall to hear representatives of the United States Forest Service (USFS) tell them more bad than good news about recently discovered toxic chemical contamination there.

Residents received word last week the toxic chemical Ethylene Dibromide is present in 7 of 10 private water wells tested in the area. This was believed to be the result of the USFS burying a mixture of the chemical with diesel fuel in approximately 1975 at the USFS Work Center in Nemo.

The good news that was there for residents came from Black Hills National Forest Supervisor John Twiss.

"I am very concerned about your health, that we take care of your needs," said Twiss to the resi-

dents who may have been drinking contaminated water for 20 or more years.

"This is a problem we apparently created, it is twenty-plus years old, but none the less we have to own up to the responsibility and make sure we mitigate what ever has been done," said Twiss.

He said the situation in Nemo was changing "almost hourly" and that along with his concern about the residents was his concern about cleaning up any environmental damage which may have occurred.

"I am available, I work in Custer and can be here fairly shortly," said Twiss. "If we are not delivering what we way we are delivering or you think we need to deliver more; let's hear about it, let me know."

Twiss has appointed Deputy Forest Supervisor Sylvia Arbelbide as the "Team Leader" in an effort to take care of local residents and clean up the spill.

Arbelbide told the group the USFS had learned about the spill in 1994 and had the Federal Bureau of Reclamation do a "Preliminary Assessment," to "assess the threat to human health and the environment."

This assessment returned a finding of "No Further Remedial Action Needed," she said, leading USFS personnel to believe the site needed to be cleaned up but there was no imminent threat to life or the environment.

**"I am very concerned about your health."**

**— John Twiss  
BH Forest Supervisor**

"They stated there was no visible evidence that waste material was posing a health threat to the nearby population or the environment," she said. "They did not see a groundwater contamination although they looked at it as the

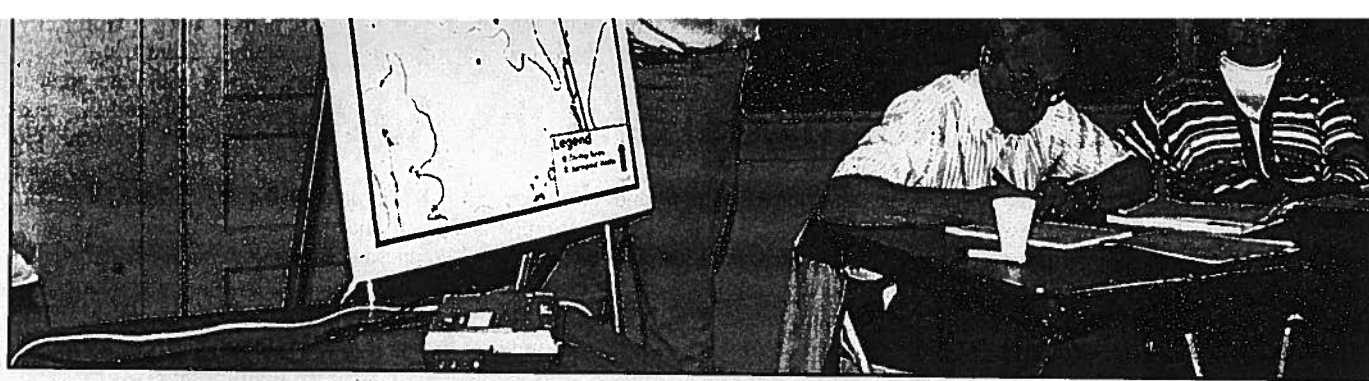
most likely pathway (for EDB to poison humans or the environment)."

"At that time we thought we were dealing with something pretty well contained and it would be just a clean-up operation," she said. "We didn't expect to find levels of EDB anywhere."

After contracting with EnviroScience International to do the clean-up, she said, wells were tested before work started to show that no contamination had resulted due to the disturbance of the clean-up activities.

"At this point in time we found that we already had some contamination in the water which is a surprise to use and a great deal of concern," said Arbelbide.

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Don Murray, of the Nemo District of the Black Hills National Forest points to a map showing the probable dump sites for the toxic chemical which has invaded several wells in the Nemo area that were also marked on the map. Also shown is EPA toxicologist Robert Benson, p.h.D., and Black Hills National Forest Deputy Supervisor Sylvia Arbelbide, who is also the team leader for the cleanup action. (Photo by Scott Randolph)

## Nemo contamination . . . . .

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Arbelbide said at first the USFS believed the cans may have been buried with lids on, but now they think the contents may have been exposed to the environment.

"We now know we are dealing with a situation that is worse than we originally thought it was," said Arbelbide. "We also assume it (EDB) has been in the water longer than we originally thought it was."

Meeting with representatives from the Federal Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) led the USFS team to realize, said Arbelbide, "... we were dealing with something more serious than we had hoped."

USFS officials began immediately providing bottled drinking water to those seven residents whose wells tested positive for EDB last week. She added that breathing the fumes or bathing in it or using it for cooking could be dangerous.

A contract has been reached with the nearby 4-T Guest Ranch and the Ox Yoke guest ranch to provide residents in need with everything from laundry facilities, bathing facilities, or even, if necessary, lodging, she said.

Robert Benson, a Ph.D. Toxicologist from the regional Denver office of the EPA said he was impressed after an afternoon of meetings that the USFS, "... are doing the right things to protect the health of the citizens."

He warned the residents that they were dealing with a "bad situation," and that EDB is a "very nasty chemical."

He said exposure to EDB in lab animals had shown internal gland injury to the liver, adrenal glands and kidneys and that prolonged exposure to EDB had proven to be a cancer causing agent for internal digestive organs, respiratory organs or skin coming in regular contact with the chemical.

In addition, he said, EDB has been suspected of causing problems with male reproductive organs.

He later added in an interview on EDB that it is considered a "mutagen" which causes

mutation including cancer and possible DNA damage to reproductive organs.

Because the EPA banned EDB in 1983, he said, little research has been done on the chemical since that time.

Richard Kelsey of EnviroSearch said the four initial sites thought to hold the toxic chemical had shown no evidence of the chemical and a fifth site searched was the same.

A sixth site to be excavated today is hoped barrels at that location may be identified as the source, or one of the sources of the Nemo pollution.

It was acknowledged in response to a question from County Commissioner Will Lantis, in the audience with fellow commissioners George Opitz, Ralph "Tubby" Carr and Jerry Apa, that the USFS does not know if other similar dump sites of poured or stored EDB/diesel solution or pure EDB exist at other locations in the county or over the national forest.

Twiss said investigation into other sites is starting and encouraged anyone with any knowledge of prior dumping or stockpiling of chemicals during or after the Rocky Mountain Pine Beetle treatment program of the late 1960's or mid-1970's to contact a USFS representative or his office.

Nemo Ranger District spokesperson Don Murray, also part of the USFS team working on the problem, said further testing has shown pollution contained on one side of Box Elder Creek with no well on the far side away from the Work Center showing any levels of EDB.

He said two more wells further out and away from the Work Center site had preliminary positive results in the high range and were being confirmed by further testing.

Arbelbide said consideration is being given to filtration of each well to remove, if possible, the EDB or drilling a common well in safe ground for a community water system as a long term fix for local residents.

Benson warned that agitation or heat

applied to water causes fumes from EDB to be released to the air where it can be breathed. He cautioned against washing clothes in the house with contaminated well water, cooking with the water, bathing with the water or washing dishes in the water, especially using an automatic dishwasher.

Kelsey said arrangements to trace the pollution "flume" to its source and the drilling of monitor wells to track contamination is being planned and will be undertaken in the next week to two weeks.

He said the EDB would stay in the ground water it has already reached, "for years and years."

Benson said EDB is broken down by sunlight and chemical constituents of air but that which is buried will remain toxic for a long time to come.

The USFS will maintain phone contact with residents with polluted wells on a daily basis and put together an every-other-day newsletter to all local residents.

Benson also said that there are no "normal physical exam tests" or any specialized medical tests to determine if damage from EDB has taken place in the human body. The only way to know if you have been hurt, he said, is the eventual development of cancer or other problems.

Opitz complimented the USFS on its handling of the situation to date but said the search for other possible sites of contamination must go forward.

"Our compassion and concern for the residents of Nemo is of paramount importance to us until the source of the contamination is found and clean potable water is restored to them," said Opitz. "However we also have a concern we identify any other waste dumps like these in the county if there are any and do it as quickly as possible."

"We appreciate the Forest Service 'up front' policy and their quick action to alleviate the problem in Nemo," added Opitz.