



**US Army Corps
Of Engineers**
Headquarters

News Release

Release No. PA-04-20

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For Release: August 18, 2004

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Army implements new Culebra decontamination plan

WASHINGTON, D.C. -- The Department of the Army announced today that it has launched an innovative underwater survey using multi-sensor technology to identify areas offshore of the Puerto Rican island of Culebra where military munitions may be located. The Army also announced that it has contracted to acquire high-resolution aerial photographs of the entire island and its surrounding cays to assist future cleanup efforts. Work on the surveys is expected to be completed within the next year.

The surveys are some of the initial steps taken by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to implement an ambitious "Plan of Action" for Culebra. Spanning from investigation to cleanup, the Plan incorporates measures that the Army has taken and plans to take to protect human health and the environment on Culebra from the dangers associated with military munitions. In addition to the surveys, the Plan calls for the Army to remove military munitions from a mortar range in Culebra's Cerro Balcon region, to investigate and clean up additional Puerto Rican areas of concern to the extent permitted by law, to conduct new research to identify additional locations where military munitions should be addressed by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, and to ensure public safety responsibilities through innovative protective measures, community involvement and education initiatives.

The Department of the Navy conducted training exercises in some Culebra areas from the early 1900s until the mid-1970s. Military munitions are still present in many of these areas as a result. The Commonwealth of Puerto Rico, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and private parties control these affected areas today. Congress has authorized the Department of Defense, acting through the Army, to conduct munitions and other environmental responses under the Formerly Used Defense Sites (FUDS) Program.

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers has already completed an initial report to identify areas for further investigations, and has conducted ground inspections of the Flamenco Peninsula, the Cerro Balcon Mortar Range, Isla Culebrita, and seven surrounding cays previously used for Navy target practice. When Puerto Rico decided to add Culebra to a Superfund National Priorities List (NPL) proposal for Vieques, the Army developed its Action Plan to consolidate and prioritize FUDS actions that would address military munitions in and around Culebra.

"We've shared a draft of the Plan of Action for Culebra with Puerto Rico and EPA, and requested their comments," said Ray Fatz, Deputy Assistant Secretary of the Army (Environment, Safety and Occupational Health). "Given their initial reaction, we're encouraged that we're on the right track. We're looking forward to finalizing this Plan so that we can move toward full implementation." In July, representatives of the Army, EPA, and Puerto Rico agreed that the Army

and Puerto Rico would pursue entering into a Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) incorporating the Action Plan.

“FUDS actions are taken in accordance with CERCLA (the Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation and Liability Act) with specific funds provided by Congress. FUDS aren’t eligible for funding from the Superfund program,” Fatz explained. “We believe the MOA option will directly address Puerto Rico’s military munitions concerns on Culebra and will do so in the most efficient and effective manner, with the Commonwealth as the lead regulator.”

Additional information can be obtained from the information repositories in San Juan (Puerto Rico) and Jacksonville (Florida). Points of contact for this information are Elsa Jimenez in San Juan at 787-729-6876, or Candice Walters in Washington, D.C. at 202-528-4285.

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