

Sweep for munitions on Culebra beaches planned

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The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers will investigate areas of Flamenco Beach in Culebra and Isla Culebrita this year to determine whether any old unexploded munitions remain after 70 years of military training on the tiny island and its surrounding keys, the Corps announced last week.

The search of 21.5 acres in Flamenco Beach and on the coast of Culebrita is expected to begin this winter, after turtle-nesting season, officials said in a statement. Any munitions found up to

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a depth of one meter will be removed, the Corps said.

"This provides a permanent long-term solution and a high level of public safety protection by removing both surface and subsurface munitions and explosives of concern," officials said in a statement.

Spokeswoman Elsa Jiménez

said the Corps is currently doing bomb clearance work in the Cerro Balcón area, but Culebra residents said the popular Flamenco Beach, as well as the offshore islet, were priorities.

Culebra was used by the Navy and Marines for exercises, including aerial



From left, Benjamin Pérez, Dan Balderston, Luis Avalo, Félix Rodríguez and Rubén Berrios talk strategy regarding protests to have the U.S. Navy cease live exercises in the island municipality of Culebra in this January 1971 file photograph.

bombing, artillery and amphibious assault train-

ing, from 1902 through 1975 when, as in Vieques, it was shut down in the wake of public protest and much of it was turned over to the Fish and Wildlife Service for management as a reserve.

When the training areas were closed they were swept for surface munitions, but it wasn't until 1995 that the Corps did an in-depth investigation of the popular and internationally renowned Flamenco Beach.

The Corps has also helped the Department of Natural and Environmental Resources set up boat moorings to ensure the sites were free of ordnance, but many of the areas managed by the FWS — including 20 islets — remain closed to the public because of the possibility of unexploded munitions.

Culebrita is open, like Cayo Luis Peña, but not heavily visited, Jiménez said.

After the Navy's departure from Vieques in 2003, the commonwealth asked the Environmental Protection Agency to list both islands

as a Superfund site, but under 1975 law the Corps has jurisdiction over the Culebra cleanup unlike in Vieques, where the Navy is responsible.

Under the Defense Environmental Restoration Program, the Corps has to compete for funding for hundreds of sites around the United States, including elsewhere in Puerto Rico.

The Corps and the local Environmental Quality Board came to an agreement whereby, in lieu of Superfund, the Corps would speed up the cleanup process in Culebra.

Jiménez said the cost of the sweep to be done this winter and in early 2007 depends on what, how much and where munitions are found.

The cleanup plan was developed in close coordination with the EQB, FWS and other federal and local agencies, the Corps said.

A 30-day public comment period began Wednesday and ends on Aug. 24.