Grassroots Letter on Defense Environmental Appointments

December 17, 2008

To the Obama Transition Team:

We are present and former residents of communities impacted by Department of Defense and military contractor Environmental and Sustainability activities; present and former Defense employees and members of the armed services; and representatives of organizations that work with such constituencies. The U.S. military has a significant impact upon our health, property, and communities. In fact, decisions made by Defense environmental officials have as much impact on our communities as decisions at U.S. EPA and other federal agencies.

We don’t expect Defense environmental officials always to agree with us, but during the administrations of George H.W. Bush and William J. Clinton, the military improved its relationships with our communities. During the last eight years, those relationships deteriorated with the appointment of leaders who believe short-term Department concerns take precedence over all other requirements. We recognize that some appointees and a large number of uniformed personnel and civilian employees are still trying to do the right thing, but it is essential to have Defense environmental appointees who appreciate the public interest as a whole and engender confidence among the public as well as state, local, and tribal governments.

When Vice-President Cheney was Defense Secretary, he stated that the Department should not just comply with environmental requirements, but it should be a leader. Today, this is even more important as the nation tackles the challenges of climate change, energy dependence, and grid vulnerability. With its vast landholdings, infrastructure, and land, sea, and air vehicle fleets, the Defense Department should be in the forefront in the drive for economic and environmental sustainability.

We urge, therefore, that the Defense Department create a high-level position within the Office of the Secretary of Defense—at the Undersecretary level—with responsibility for energy, environment, and other sustainability policies.

We further urge President Obama to appoint Defense environmental leaders who have demonstrated a clear commitment to protecting public health and the environment and building a sustainable future. Moreover, we ask that appointees meet the three following criteria:
1. They should recognize that the military is not above the law. The Defense Department is subject to environmental regulation by U.S. EPA, states, tribal, and local governments like any other entity.

2. The military should not interfere in the establishment of environmental standards. It should have the same access to the standard-setting process as the public, academia, and private polluters. Health standards should be based upon science, not the interests of those responsible for complying with them.

3. Existing public involvement strategies should be strengthened. Limits on the operations of Restoration Advisory Boards should be lifted, and similar bodies should be established to oversee installation and range sustainability activities. Furthermore, the Department should establish avenues, such as multi-stakeholder dialogues or conferences, to encourage public input at the national policy level.

We believe that elevating sustainability and making careful environmental appointments at the Defense Department will serve the men and women of the armed services, their families, host communities, national security, the natural environment, and the future of the planet.

Sincerely*,

Lenny Siegel, Executive Director, Center for Public Environmental Oversight, Former Moffett Naval Air Station Restoration Advisory Board (RAB), Mountain View, CA
Carol Ahlum, Ft. Detrick community, Frederick, MD
Eve Bach, Arc Ecology, San Francisco, CA
Sheila Baker, Vandenberg Watch, CA
Dvija Michael Bertish, Rosemere Neighborhood Association, Columbia Riverkeeper, Former Member Camp Bonneville RAB, WA
Paul Bloom, Twin Cities Army Ammunition Plant RAB, University of Minnesota, St. Paul, MN
Saul Bloom, Arc Ecology, San Francisco, CA
William Boeck, Research Professor, Niagara University, Chair, Radiation Committee Lake Ontario Ordnance Works, Lewiston, NY
Mark F. Bohne, Co-Chairman, Plum Brook Ordnance Works RAB, OH
Christine Borello, President, Concerned Citizens of Lake Twp./Uniontown IEL Superfund Site, Uniontown, OH
Doris Bradshaw, Defense Depot Memphis Tennessee Concerned Citizen Committee, Memphis, TN
Lesse Brady, Military Toxics Project, Memphis, TN
Tim Brick, Arroyo Seco Foundation, Pasadena, CA
Ann Buttenheim, Ft. Detrick community, Frederick, MD
John Campbell, Camp Lejeune community, Jacksonville, NC
Russell Clayshulte, Co-chair, Buckley Air Force Base CAG, Aurora, CO
Michael Pablo Connelly, Community Member, Vieques RAB, Vieques, PR
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Michael Diaz, Community Member, Vieques RAB, Vieques, PR
Cathy Duncan, Former Member, Fort Ord RAB, CA, San Luis Obispo, CA
Elizabeth Duthinh, Ft. Detrick community, Frederick, MD
J.M. Ensminger, MSgt. USMC, Ret., ATSDR Camp Lejeune Water Contamination Community Assistance Panel Member, Richlands, NC
Susan Falkoff, Watertown Councilor-at-Large, Watertown Citizens for Environmental Safety, Watertown, MA
Jorge Fernandez-Porto, Member, AFWTR, Vieques RAB, Member, Former Naval Station Roosevelt Roads RAB, PR
Mi’Chelle Fredrick, Former Alameda Naval Air Station community, Alameda, CA
Stacey Fritz, Coordinator, No Nukes North, Fairbanks, AK
Bruce K. Gagnon, Coordinator, Global Network Against Weapons & Nuclear Power in Space, Brunswick, ME
Joseph A. Gardella, Jr., Chemistry Professor, SUNY Buffalo (for ID purposes only), Chair, Lake Ontario Ordnance Works RAB, Buffalo, NY
Susan Gordon, Ft. Detrick community, Ijamsville, MD
Wally Gruber, Retired Math Professor, Lathrup Village, MI
Debra Hall, Founder, Hopewell Junction Citizens for Clean Water, Hopewell Junction, NY
Eugene J. Halus, Jr., Department of History and Politics, Immaculata University (for ID purposes only), Perkiomen Township, PA
Robert L. Hanson, Ft. Detrick community, Frederick, MD
Diane S. Henshel, Indiana University School of Public and Environmental Affairs, Henshel EnviroComm, Bloomington, IN
Richard Hill, President, Save the Valley, Inc., Madison, IN
Ed Hinde, Ft. Detrick community, Frederick, MD
Jane Horton, Mountain View, CA
Joanne Ivancic, Ft. Detrick community, Frederick, MD
Karyn Jones, GASP, Hermiston, OR
Karen Kingston, Former Co-chair Camp Bonneville Military Reservation RAB, Vancouver, WA
Rufus Kinney, Families Concerned About Nerve Gas Incineration, Anniston, AL
Barry J.C. Kissin, Ft. Detrick community, Frederick, MD
Joan Konrad, Member, Alameda Point Reuse Advisory Board, HOMES (Housing Opportunities Make Economic Sense), Alameda, CA
Elizabehd Landru, Ft. Detrick community, Frederick, MD
Dee Lewis, National Disease Clusters Alliance, Sacramento, CA
Kathleen Lipscomb, San Francisco, CA
Linda Lipscomb, Ft. Detrick community, Frederick, MD
Robert A. LoPinto, LtC, USA Ret., Co-Chair Ft. Totten, NYC RAB, New York, NY
Lirio Márquez, Community Member, Vieques RAB, Vieques, PR
David F. Martin, Victim, Marine Corps Base, Camp Lejeune (NC) Water Poisoning, The STAND
Matt McCarron, Community Co-Chair, Hamilton Air Force Base RAB, CA
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Edward McGlinn, Director Emeritus, Anglers of the Au Sable, Grayling, MI
Colleen McNamara, Community Member, Vieques RAB, Vieques, PR
Carol Meschkow, Concerned Citizens of the Plainview-Old Bethpage Community, Plainview, NY
Brian Moench, Utah Physicians for a Healthy Environment
Sara J. Morgan, Former Spokesperson for Citizens Against Incineration at Newport, Montezuma, IN
Bob Moss, Community Co-Chair, Moffett Field RAB, Palo Alto, CA
Dave Ness, Jr., Bayport, MN
Andrea Norouzi, Ft. Detrick community, Knoxville, MD
Deavan Ober lender, Radford Army Ammunition Plant community, Blacksburg, VA
Richard J. Ochs, Aberdeen Proving Ground Community, Baltimore, MD
Robert J. O'Dowd, Marine Corps Air Station El Toro (CA) Veterans
Laura Olah, Executive Director, Citizens for Safe Water Around Badger, Merrimac, WI
Bruce Oldfield, New York Vapor Intrusion Alliance, Hillcrest, NY
David Ozonoff, Professor, Boston University School of Public Health, Boston, MA
Mary Ann Parker, Parker Design, HUB Zone Enterprise, San Francisco, CA
Steven B. Pollack, Blue Eco Legal Council, Northbrook, IL
Grace Potorti, Rural Alliance for Military Accountability, Reno, NV
Lois Pryor, Renewed Hope Housing Advocates, Alameda, CA
Robert Rabin, Committee for Rescue and Development of Vieques, Vieques, PR
Thomas Rivell, Retired NASA and Defense Department Engineer, San Jose, CA
Kathryn Ruud, Ft. Detrick community, Frederick, MD
Lyle Salmela, Community Co-Chair, Twin Cities Army Ammunition Plant RAB, Arden Hills, PA
Vancil Sanderson, Guam veteran, Sun Valley, NV
Helen Lois Sause, HOMES (Housing Opportunities Make Economic Sense), Alameda, CA
Arthur G. Schwartz, Member, Moffett Field RAB, Sunnyvale, CA
Robert Silvas, Kelly Air Force Base community, San Antonio, TX
Alice Slater, Nuclear Age Peace Foundation, NY
Kent Slowinski, Former member of the Spring Valley RAB, Former Spring Valley resident, Washington, DC
William Smith, Member, Sierra Club, Alameda County, CA
Stephanie Smolen, Former San Gabriel Valley (Superfund Areas 1 & 2) resident,
Bob Spiegel, Edison Wetlands Association, Edison, NJ
Peter Strauss, President, P.M. Strauss & Associates, San Francisco, CA
Laura Thomas, Renewed Hope Housing Advocates, Alameda, CA
Paul F. Walker, Director, Security and Sustainability, Global Green USA, Washington, DC
Susan V. Walker, Former member Massachusetts Military Reservation Plume Cleanup Team, Lake Arrowhead, CA
Christina Walsh, Founder/Director-Cleanupperocketdyne.org, Co-founder Aerospace Cancer Museum of Education, Chatsworth, CA
Craig Williams, Director, Chemical Weapons Working Group, Berea, KY
Beth Willis, Frederick Citizens for Bio-lab Safety, Frederick, MD
John Willis, Ft. Detrick community, Frederick, MD
David Wilmot, South Weymouth (MA) RAB, AWARES (Abington, Rockland, and Weymouth Environmental Studies), MA
Howard Wilshire, Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility, CA
Loring Wirbel, Citizens for Peace in Space, Colorado Springs, CO
Andrew Zelenski, Camp Lejeune, NC Veteran, Bridgeport, OH

*Many affiliations, such as RAB participation, are for identification purposes only.