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### NEWS

#### W. Van researchers track Agent Orange in Vietnam

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A West Vancouver environmental consulting firm made international headlines this week when it released a study stating that the United States military is responsible for high levels of Agent Orange herbicide still found in several contaminated hotspots in Vietnam.

Researchers from Hatfield Consultants have been studying the levels of dangerous chemicals in Vietnam for 14 years.

Their most recent findings, released Monday, make direct connections between the U.S. military, Agent Orange, and a contaminated hotspot in Da Nang - Vietnam's third largest city.

"This is the first time we've actually had access to one of the former U.S. military installations where the Agent Orange was actually stored," said Hatfield president Thomas Boivin.

"One thing we have shown, without a doubt, is that the contamination that we are seeing on the Da Nang airbase and what's getting into the population - the original source of it was from Agent Orange and was, therefore, from U.S. military activities in the '60s and '70s."

Boivin said that the chemical signature on the contaminated soil samples they examined leaves no doubt about the origin of the toxins.

The U.S. military sprayed Agent Orange in Vietnam from 1961 to 1971 to kill vegetation and expose Viet Cong soldiers. It was later discovered that the herbicide contains a carcinogen called dioxin that has been linked to cancer, illness and birth defects.

Agent Orange was stored, sprayed, and spilled at Da Nang air force base during the Vietnam War. Boivin and several other researchers spent nearly a month acquiring and testing soil samples in Da Nang earlier this year. When samples were analyzed, the field researchers were a little shaken by the levels of contamination.

"To be very frank, we didn't expect the levels to be as high as

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they were so we were a bit surprised when we saw the results come back," he said.

Contamination levels in the hotspots were 300-400 times higher than accepted levels.

"If that was here in Vancouver or if that was anywhere in the United States or anywhere in Canada or the western world, these areas would be cordoned off, there would be huge studies to clean (them) up, and governments would intercede immediately to stop potential contamination to the general public. So there's no reason why it shouldn't be the same situation in Vietnam," Boivin said.

The team of researchers faced a number of challenges sifting through contaminated soil in a tropical climate.

"We had to take pretty careful protocols, actually, to ensure that we're not contaminating ourselves or cross-contaminating our samples," he said, adding that they threw away their clothes after each round of field research. "We had to use a lot of protective gear."

But for many of the people living near the base, the contaminants are a constant risk that has not been mitigated. Boivin and his team discovered that the dioxin works its way up the food chain and accumulates in people living near the contaminated site.

"There are several thousand (people) at least that are living directly around the main hotspot area, and we figure that there's probably 50-100 people that are potentially very highly exposed at present," he said.

Hatfield took tissue samples from local residents but they have not released the results of those tests.

"We obviously have to be a bit careful because we're talking about people's livelihoods," he said. "We try to be a bit careful not to talk too much about individual people's blood levels and things like that because the Vietnamese right now are just doing the consultations with the people of Da Nang themselves."

But there is positive news in this story, Boivin said.

Though Agent Orange was sprayed over vast areas during the war, according to Hatfield's study, the only highly contaminated areas left are three former American airbases.

The United States has not agreed to clean up the sites but Boivin said there is more co-operation now between the U.S. and Vietnam than there has been in the past. He said that this is an opportunity for the United States and Vietnam to demonstrate international co-operation.

"If you follow the kind of standard 'polluter pays' principle, then really the U.S. is obligated to help pay to clean up these sites," he said.

"The U.S. could actually show a lot of goodwill, I think, by assisting with the cleanup, and I'm hoping that they'll step up to

the plate and put some reasonable money behind it and do what's right."

News of Hatfield's findings have been reported in the Vietnamese news media and Boivin said he has been interviewed by national media outlets in Canada as well as the Associated Press and even Al Jazeera, an Arabic news network.

Boivin and his team will continue to work in Vietnam and will offer their assistance as the Vietnamese government attempts to get the contaminated areas secured and cleaned up, Boivin said.

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