

Hawaii families impacted by Navy's jet fuel leak worry about cancer, prepare legal action a year later

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Waikīkī Beach, Honolulu, United States. Credit: Unsplash/CC0 Public Domain

The battle to hold the U.S. military accountable for tainting public drinking water with jet fuel from the Red Hill bulk fuel storage facility continues almost a year after thousands of residents were sickened and displaced last year.

In November, a major jet fuel leak at the facility caused high amounts of

petroleum to enter Oahu's main water supply, and the military has been accused of trying to stay quiet about it.

After cleanup and flushing, the U.S. Navy and Hawaii Department of Health now insist the water is currently safe for drinking. But the Red Hill tanks have still not been defueled and months after the leak, officials have continued to document issues with petroleum traces in the water shafts and poor maintenance of the public water systems by the military.

Here's what you need to know about the ongoing issue at Red Hill.

EPA reports document issues with water system, military failures

Recent reports from the Environmental Protection Agency found that "both the U.S. Navy and U.S. Army have failed to adequately operate and maintain their public water system," according to the agency's website.

The reports come from the EPA's National Enforcement Investigations Center's week-long investigation of the Navy's Joint Base Pearl Harbor Hickam (JBPHH) and the U.S. Army's Aliamanu Military Reservation (AMR) in compliance with the Safe Drinking Water Act regulations. Inspectors observed "a visible sheen on the surface," a "fuel-like smell," and rusted or unlabeled pipes.

An EPA spokesperson told U.S. TODAY it's too early to say what the findings will lead to and that it is "part of an ongoing enforcement investigation of the JBPHH drinking water system."

About 93,000 people live on the water line that was affected. Some say

they are still experiencing [adverse health effects](#) as well as a toll on their [mental health](#), prompting many to take legal action.

What is happening at Red Hill?

Originally built in the 1940s to store fuel in case of an enemy attack, the facility at Red Hill includes 20 steel-lined tanks built 100 feet into the ground. These tanks are massive, carrying 12.5 million gallons of fuel for ships and jets, and some haven't been inspected in over 38 years.

This facility sits right above an aquifer that supplies 25% of Oahu's drinking water, according to the Honolulu Board of Water Supply. As an island—Hawaii's most populated—the loss of a major water supply source has the potential to reap dire consequences.

Jet fuel spilled in May 2021 when a valve-opening operation was "incorrectly executed" at the Red Hill facility and the fuel line "violently" ruptured. Then on Nov. 20, a valve for an overhead pipe cracked and, for hours, nearly 14,000 gallons of jet fuel poured out and drained into the groundwater.

Two days later, the Navy issued a notification to the public saying "there are no signs or indication of any releases to the environment and the drinking water remains safe."

Despite this, many people who lived in the area, a majority in military housing, reported health issues such as vomiting, burning eyes, and rashes after using the tap water for showering, cooking or drinking.

Exposure to or digestion of petroleum can cause pain or burning, diarrhea, nausea, vomiting, difficulty breathing, headaches, lightheadedness, blisters and more.

At the beginning of December, a water sample from Red Hill came back with "high levels" of petroleum—350 times above the safe drinking level—and the Navy was ordered to drain the tanks by the DOH. Hawaii Gov. David Ige issued an Emergency Order to cease Red Hill's operations and defuel its tanks. At first, the Navy appealed the order, arguing it was unlawful and would impact its ability to "support U.S. military forces throughout the Indo-Pacific Command." The Navy later dropped its appeal after criticism.

The military has been scrutinized for the way they handled the leaks and relayed information to the public. "This [water contamination](#) resulted from a series of cascading failures, and those failures were preventable," a Navy investigative report released in June said.

Have the tanks been defueled yet?

Not yet. On June 30, the Navy submitted the initial Red Hill Bulk Fuel Facility Defueling Plan to the DOH and EPA. It is "an overarching framework detailing the five-phase process by which the Department will ensure the safe and efficient defueling of the facility," a Navy spokesperson told U.S. TODAY in an email. The Navy said it plans to remove all fuel "no later than" the end of 2024.

A few weeks later, the DOH rejected the plan saying it "lacked substance, specific detail and dates."

The Navy spokesperson said the Navy has completed the first phase of the plan, which was an "independent third party assessment" and identified 43 repairs to be done. About eight have been completed and 30 are under construction. Currently, "the Navy is working with EPA and DOH to look at options to reduce the overall defueling timeline." Another update on the plan is slated to be provided to the DOH in September.

A Red Hill Closure Plan is due by the Navy on Nov. 1. That plan will take place after defueling and also include environmental remediation and restoration efforts, according to the Navy.

Is the Red Hill water safe to drink now?

Since March 2022, the water has been considered "safe" and meets "all federal drinking water standards," according to the EPA.

However, within the past month, data from the University of Hawaii found trace amounts of [jet fuel](#) in some of the affected neighborhoods.

Many people who live in the Red Hill area say they're still experiencing health symptoms from their tap water and don't trust the government or military.

What happened to the people who are affected?

The military flushed 9,715 homes to clear out the contaminated water and some families were relocated to hotels or short-term rentals. Hundreds are now preparing to take legal action over the months-long saga.

Texas attorney Kristina Baehr is helping over 250 families file claims and said she receives calls everyday. Under the Federal Tort Claims Act, individuals can seek compensation for "personal injury, death, or property loss or damage caused by the negligent or wrongful act or omission of an employee of the federal government," according to the EPA.

"Every single person who is on the waterline should be bringing in a claim," Baehr said. "Even if they don't currently have harm or illness,

this still affected their life." Baehr held two town halls in Honolulu last week inviting the public to share their stories.

"They're all watching what happened at Camp Lejeune," she said, referencing the Marine Corps Base that exposed people to contaminated tap water from 1953 to 1987 and resulted in serious health issues. "I have clients who are asking how long do they have."

During a town hall in Ewa Beach on Thursday, people said their eyes burned in the shower, they have foggy brains, or get rashes. They also said their military doctors have been unhelpful. A woman named Lacey Quintero whose family was affected by Red Hill shared how her daughter kept throwing up chicken soup made by tap water.

"I frequently just lay in bed scrolling, watching YouTube videos, presentations of pediatric symptoms of Leukemia, various cancers," she said. "At 1 or 2 a.m., I made a list of all the conditions people from Camp LeJeune water contamination developed and I spent quite a long time googling the first symptoms of those cancers so I can watch out for them for the rest of my life."

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