

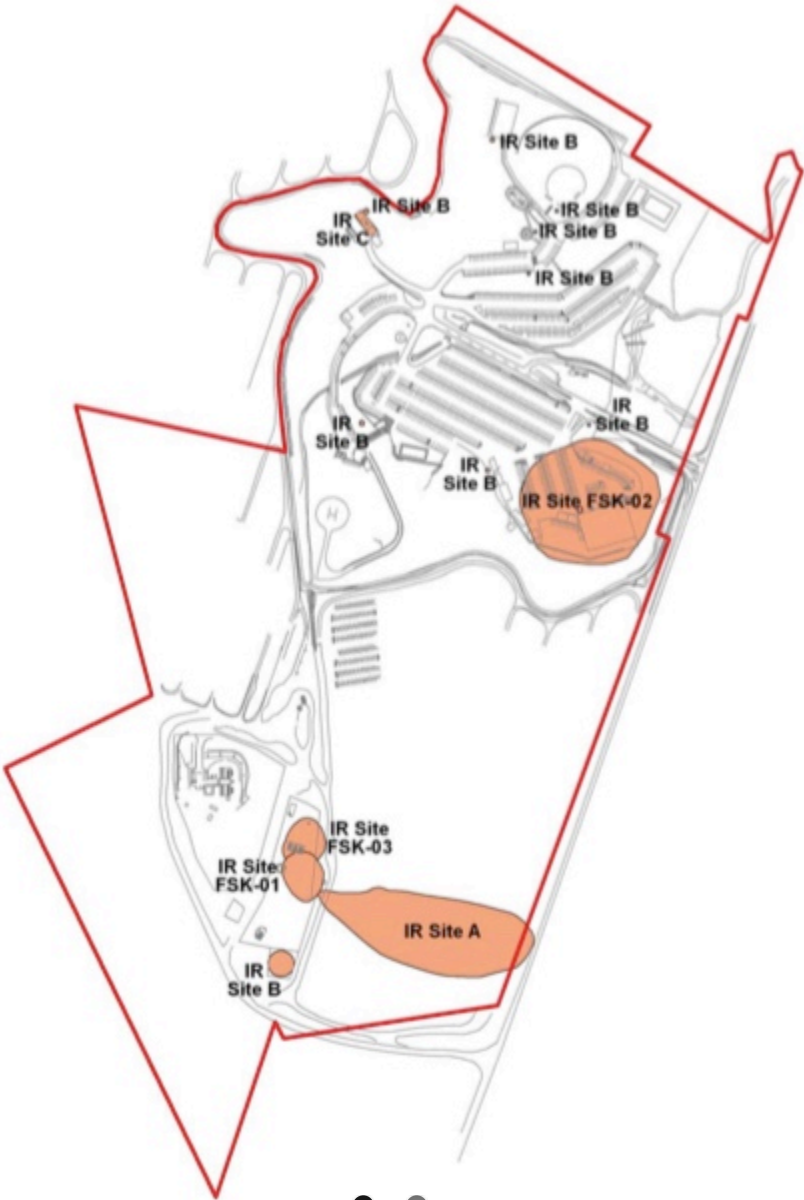
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Legislature Recognizes Connection Between Maladies and Kunia Tunnel

3

JUN 2021

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On April 19, the state Senate passed the final form of its Concurrent Resolution 47, urging the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs to recognize that health conditions afflicting chronically ill veterans once stationed at the Navy's underground field station at Kunia, O'ahu, are connected to their service there, "and to provide medical care and long-term services regardless of the veterans' ability to conclusively link their conditions to toxic exposure."

Senators Mike Gabbard, Clarence Nishihara, and Michelle Kidani introduced the measure this year. Last year, a similar resolution from Gabbard and Sens. Rosalyn Baker, Donovan Dela Cruz, Les Ihara, Gil Keith-Agaran, and Maile Shimabukuro never got a hearing.

In May 2019, Hawai'i News Now's Mahealani Richardson reported on the claims made by veterans Matthew Lamb, Tara Lemieux, and

about 100 others that the contaminants in and around the facility were the source of their health problems. Those ailments included illnesses ranging from cancer, to respiratory disorders, to cardiovascular and neurological issues, to seizures, muscle pain, spasms, and more. While some of those veterans have blamed their potential exposure to pesticide-contaminated water and/or soil, others have expressed their concerns about exposures to asbestos, mold, lead and other contaminants in the station, as well.



In 2016, Lamb began compiling testimonies from former field station workers who had either witnessed some type of environmental contamination and/or were suffering from a perplexing health issue following their time at Kunia.

Many commented on an asbestos removal project decades ago where remediation crews wore protective gear while the station personnel continued working around them without any special protections.

“I remember getting stuck on the detail watching the guys doing removal. They were all suited up and we were just standing there,” one of them wrote.

The Department of Veterans Affairs’ webpage on the station all but dismisses the claims that the suite of health conditions former personnel are experiencing — or have died from — are tied to the station.

“Veterans might be concerned about health effects from serving at KFS and being in the general area around the facility. The main threat at KFS was exposure to mold and high humidity. Any symptoms from this exposure should have cleared up soon after leaving the area. No other environmental or human health hazards have been found in the area,” it states.

As to claims of harmful exposures to pesticide-contaminated water or soil, the site concedes that “Del Monte used pesticides in the area, but not near KFS.”

It goes on to note that a pineapple fumigant was spilled in 1980, which resulted in the shutting down of a water well contaminated with trichloroethylene (TCE).

“The Army Public Health Center and the Center for Disease Control and Prevention investigated and concluded that the concentration of TCE and the duration of exposure were not likely to pose a significant health concern,” it states.

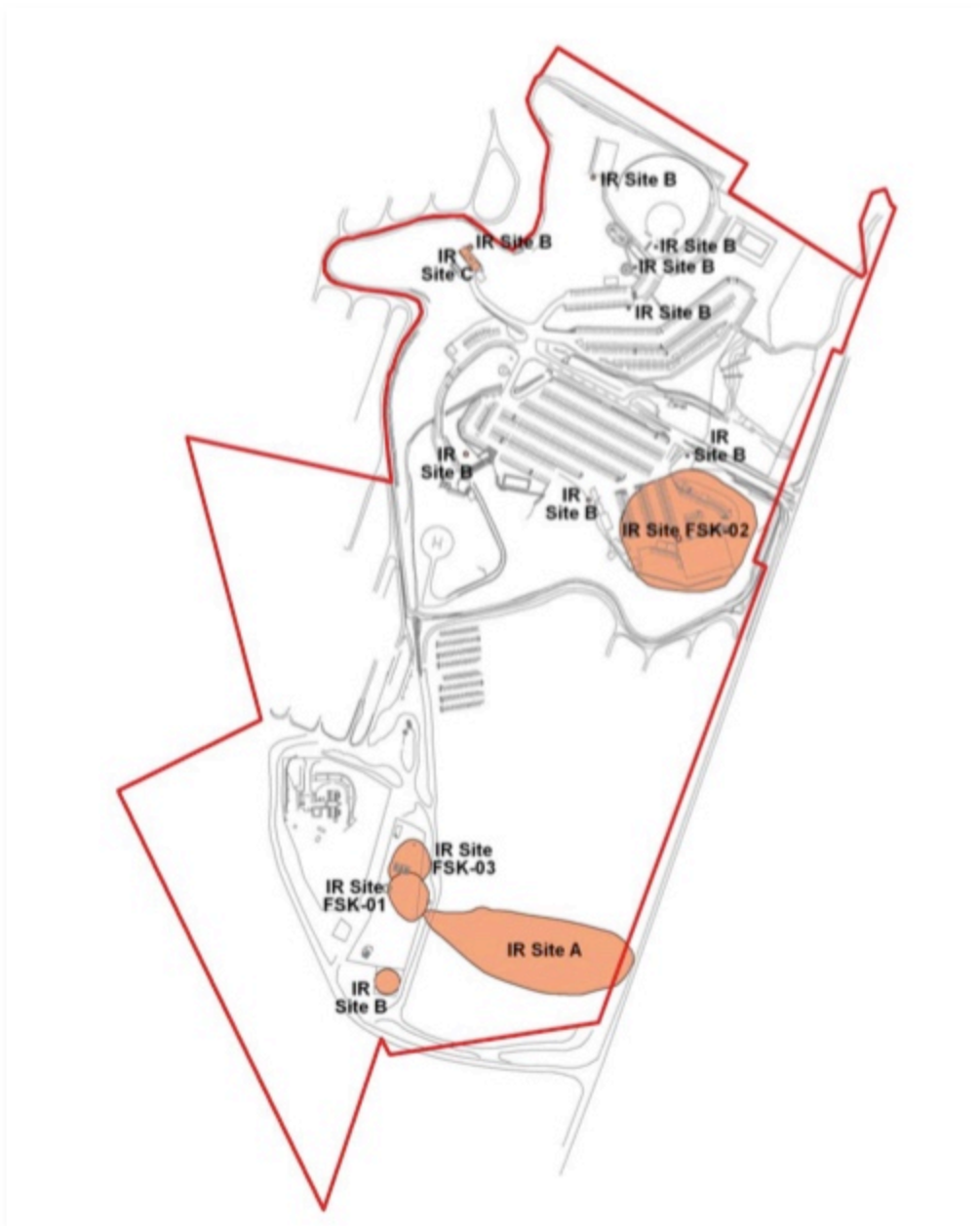
With regard to soil contamination, the site notes that in 1993, “waste oils, including polychlorinated biphenyls, and lead contamination were found in two spots in the soil, but testing showed no threat to human health or the environment.

“In June 1994, the Army found that a diesel underground storage tank posed an environmental problem. They removed the tank and the contaminated soil below it. The Army thermally treated the soil and placed a plastic liner over the excavation site to prevent any infiltrating water from reaching the groundwater below.”

Army Corps Report

That's it. The Veterans Affairs webpage lists no other possible contaminant sources in or around the field station.

But an April 2012 U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Environmental Condition of Property report does.



Installation restoration sites at the Kunia field station, also known as the Navy Information Operation Center (NIOC). Credit: U.S. Army Corps of Engineers

It notes that in 1997 asbestos containing material (ACM) was confirmed in Building 9 (floor tile and mastic, baseboard mastic, drywall, pipe insulation, duct mastic, transite panels, and ceiling tile mastic) and in the floor tiles of Building 31. Floor mastic in Building 25 was also assumed to contain asbestos.

“With the exception of some minor physical damage, the majority of the ACM was in good condition. Exposure to asbestos fibers is unlikely, as long as these materials remain in good condition and are not disturbed,” the report states.

It did indicate that the station’s nuclear, biological, or chemical threat (NBC) units, designed to protect personnel, were also found to contain asbestos. Those units consist of a particulate filter, gas filter, and a fan/motor assembly. The original particulate filters were made with pleated layers of heavy asbestos-bearing filter paper.

Although those filters were reportedly replaced with a different material in the early 1990s, the report states, “personnel noted a white, powdery substance on the inside frame of a gas filter, and conducted swipe sampling to check for asbestos

in 1999.” Testing of the system found that the swipe sample and a connection gasket contained chrysotile asbestos.

Samples collected from the air ducts had ACM.

“

The detected concentrations indicate that asbestos or ACM has been airborne at some point in the past.

U.S. ARMY CORPS OF ENGINEERS ENVIRONMENTAL

CONDITION PROPERTY REPORT FOR KUNIA FIELD

STATION, 2018

”

“The detected concentrations indicate that asbestos or ACM has been airborne at some point in the past; however the dust is found in areas unlikely to be disturbed and there is no immediate threat to human health. Abatement of residual asbestos dust was recommended for the NBC filter units and for HV AC supply ductwork. Cleaning of the entire building of dust was also recommended, as was further investigation of the ventilation area beneath floors. The

recommended actions have not been implemented,” the report stated.

In 1994, a preliminary investigation/site assessment of a microwave tower area at the station recommended that TPH-, lead-, and PCB-contaminated soil be removed. Removal occurred in 1997.

The report goes on to describe a diesel fuel spill at a site known as the Pineapple Field Fuel Box that occurred during 1970 and 1972 from Fuel Tank No. 8.

“An unknown volume of fuel saturated the adjacent pineapple field and spilled across Kunia Road. No record of additional investigation was found.

“[A]ll remedial action has not been taken to address this issue. ... [A]ction on this past release will be conducted by the Army. No further investigation or cleanup action has been programmed. Concurrence for no further action has not been received from [the Hawai‘i Department of Health.”

The report also notes that in 1991, 15 30-year-old transformers within the tunnel complex were removed.

“The transformers were active at the time of removal and some of the transformers were dry, but most of them contained PCBs. The location of the 15 transformers is unknown,” the report states.

The Army did not have any plans to investigate the areas around the former transformer areas, the report states. This, despite the fact that the Navy has found PCB contamination of soil and concrete at other naval facilities.

The Army Corps categorized the site as one “that may have had a release of hazardous substances, but have had no sampling or field screening and require such investigations to confirm that a release has or has not occurred.”

Silent Sentinels

In her testimony supporting SCR 47, Lemieux wrote, “We were the ‘Silent Sentinels of the Pacific’ – watching from our hidden perch, unaware of the dangers lurking in the soils overhead. Though the pesticides and other fumigants had been banned for sale in the United States, they were still widely in use by the Del Monte plantation. And, with each new rain their poisons lurched further still; through the porous dirt and cement walls; into the lead pipes which

supplied our only water source; through the ventilation intake set ironically in the center of the very same fields. At night, the roads were sprayed to control the clouds of fumigant dusts; as were the fields used for our military formations.”

“

Dust clouds would enter inside the facility too and out in front of the entrance when the fields were being cultivated or the pineapple field or parts were being burned around and above the Tunnel. Dust clouds would blow down on top of us sometimes while standing out in formation outside the entrance before and after shifts.

Lamb, who said he witnessed the asbestos cleanups from 1986 to 1988, testified, “[W]e were not provided any respirators or hazmat uniforms on the ops floor ... during these cleanups.”

He added that he saw lead paint being ground off the walls, as well as many days of “a foul stale smell inside, stuffy conditions, unregulated temperatures, smoke entering down into the facility, liquid running down some of the walls especially inside the stairwells. The liquid had a chemical type of smell. Dust clouds would enter inside the facility too and out in front of the entrance when the fields were being cultivated or the pineapple field or parts were being burned around and above the Tunnel. Dust clouds would blow down on top of us sometimes while standing out in formation outside the entrance before and after shifts. It would cause irritation in our eyes and throats plus coughing! We would have fire drills from time to time and go up the stairwells and be standing in those pineapple fields we could smell the chemical pesticides, herbicides, fumigants smell and would go back down inside as quick as we could!” he stated in his written testimony on the resolution.

He listed the many health problems he now suffers from, and noted that his wife, who also worked at the station from 1985 to 1990, later died of cancer.

The Senate committees that heard the resolution also noted that a 1992 EPA report found multiple contaminants in groundwater and soil at the Kunia Field Station, and a 2000 report by the Navy and National Security Agency “indicated the presence of arsenic and lead in the field station’s air intake system, as well as moderate to high levels of fungal contamination due to air ventilation problems and high moisture levels.”

— ***Teresa Dawson***

💜Teresa Dawson

4 Responses



Louisa Browning

November 17, 2021 | [Reply](#)

My husband and I both were at Kunia from 1982-85 & 1986-1990. We experienced many of the drills that required us to go up into the pineapple fields, smoke

issues throughout the tunnel, along with the liquidity substance down the walls. Maybe this is why we have/are experiencing the issues that we are.



Theresa Lopes Douglas

[November 22, 2021](#) | [Reply](#)

I was at Kunia from 1981-1983. I also experienced drills up into the pineapple fields. And I remember having alot of lighting problems because the florescent light holders would become wet and the liquid would actually drip down onto us, our workstations and the floor. Many a time, breathing was hampered by seen and unseen hazards. I had zero medical issues when I arrived there. Years later and have so many that can't be explained. Kunia was our generation's Agent Orange.



Jody (Callahan) Pruett

[November 22, 2021](#) | [Reply](#)

I was stationed there from 1987-1991and have experienced heart palpitations and was seen by doctor and was diagnosed with Graves' disease I underwent procedure to destroy my thyroid gland and am now on thyroid medication for the rest of my life this is not something that runs in my family history I

have had continual muscle aches and pains fir most of my life since I worked at field station Kunia



Denise Atkinson

[November 22, 2021](#) | [Reply](#)

My husband and I were both station there from 1983-1987. I have had cancer and a number of health issues. It could have been the contamination from the site.

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Contact Us

🏢 Environment Hawai'i

📍 421 Kaanini St.

Hilo HI 96720

☎ 808-933-2455

✉ mail@environment-hawaii.org

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