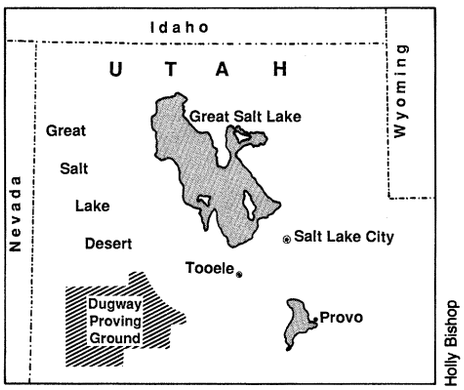
Biowarfare Lab Faces Mounting Opposition

The Army may be forced to reconsider its plans to build a maximum containment facility to test defenses against potential biological warfare agents



The facility would be in Dugway Proving Ground, 70 miles from Salt Lake City.

PLANS to construct a new facility in the Utah desert to test defenses against biological warfare agents have run into a buzz saw of local opposition. As a result, the Army is facing a tough fight to gain approval for the facility and is looking into alternatives.

The planned facility would be a maximum containment lab at the Army's Dugway Proving Ground, 70 miles southwest of Salt Lake City. One of only about a half-dozen facilities in the country with the highest biosafety level, known as BL4, it would be used to generate aerosols of highly infectious agents that could potentially be used as biological weapons. These will include the organisms that cause tularemia, anthrax, Q fever, and encephalitis, according to published documents.

The chief purpose of the facility would be to test the degree to which the agents would penetrate materials and filters that might be used for protection against an attack with biological weapons. It would also be used to develop sensitive monitors capable of detecting minute amounts of specific agents to provide warning that an attack is under way.

Plans for the facility first came to public attention in 1984, when the Army sought congressional approval to build the lab with funds that were originally appropriated for other activities. The proposal, which involved a transfer of $1.4 million, was buried in a stack of routine reprogramming requests and almost slipped through unnoticed. When it was brought to light by Senate aides, it sparked a furor that culminated in a lawsuit filed by Jeremy Rifkin, a leading critic of biotechnology, designed to block the facility. As a result, the Army was ordered by a federal court to produce a comprehensive analysis of any conceivable detrimental effects the lab may have on the environment and public health before going ahead with the facility.

A draft environmental report was published by the Army in February. Although it concluded that the proposed lab would pose virtually no danger to the surrounding community, the report has focused renewed attention on the project and appears to have provided a catalyst for local objections to the lab. Opposition groups have been formed in Utah, a petition expressing concern about the Army's plans attracted 54 signatures in 1 day from biologists and physicians at the University of Utah, and public hearings held last month in Salt Lake City drew large numbers of objectors. Rifkin has also announced that he intends to go back to court to block the project.

The disquiet has reached the state's top politicians. So far, the governor, Norm Bangerter (R); Senator Orrin Hatch, a conservative Republican; and Representative Wayne Owens (D), who represents Salt Lake City, have all announced their opposition to the facility. Hatch, in a statement released by his office on 25 March, called it "reckless endangerment" to build the lab in Utah. He suggested that it be constructed instead on Johnson Atoll, a remote island in the Pacific. Owens is arranging for hearings to be held jointly by three House subcommittees next month.

All this spells potential doom for the lab. The Army must obtain permits from the state before it can build the facility, and Congress must come up with the money.

As a result, the Army is looking into alternatives, including building the facility elsewhere or constructing a facility at Dugway capable of handling potentially less pathogenic organisms. Army spokesman Lieutenant Colonel John Chapla says these alternatives are being studied as part of the court-ordered environmental assessment process and the Army is currently still planning to produce a final version of its environmental report on the Dugway lab later this year.

As for the suggestion that the lab be built on Johnson Atoll, the draft environmental report gave the idea short shrift. "While this location offers exceptional control of access for ensuring security and safety, it presents unacceptable logistics difficulties, and its operation would be uneconomical," the report states.

The alternative of building a less sophisticated facility at Dugway could have the ironic result of permitting the Army to do virtually all the testing it currently has in mind, but in a less secure facility. None of the organisms that the Army has listed as candidates for the proposed facility actually requires a maximum containment lab. All could be handled in a less secure BL3-level facility.

The Army has said that it wants to build the lab with maximum containment features simply to have the option of being able to work with more hazardous pathogens if the need arises. For now, "BL4 organisms or techniques, including areas of research involving genetic engineering, will not be used in the new facility," the Army stated in its draft environmental report.

Some critics of the proposed facility have argued that there is no need to use pathogenic organisms at all for the purposes the Army has outlined. Protective materials and filters could be tested against harmless organisms, they suggest. "There's no reason why simulants cannot be used," says Naomi Franklin, a geneticist at the University of Utah who helped circulate the petition critical of the Army's plans. The Army contends that it must use potential biological warfare agents in order to develop detectors capable of sensing minute quantities of specific organisms.

Rifkin is already predicting victory in his fight against the lab. But he sees this as a skirmish in a larger campaign. In 1985, he also filed suit against the Army's entire biological warfare program, as a result of which the Army has agreed to produce a comprehensive assessment of the potential environmental and public health implications of all the biological weapons–related activities it supports.

According to Army spokesman Chapla, a draft of that assessment is scheduled to be published on 12 May. Like the draft environmental report on the Dugway lab, it is expected to focus renewed public attention on the biological warfare research program. ■ COLIN NORMAN