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Saturday, August 5, 2000

Kirtland Jet-Fuel Spill 'Significant'

By John J. Lumpkin
Journal Staff Writer

KIRTLAND AIR FORCE BASE — Military jet fuel has been spilling into the ground from faulty pipes, apparently for years, and investigators are trying to find out how much damage has been done.

"It's a significant spill," said Dennis McQuillan, a geologist with the New Mexico Environment Department. "We're not sure what the gallonage is."

Investigators are not certain how long fuel was spilling from the two underground pipes, but some of the fuel found in the soil is of a type that hasn't been used since 1991, said McQuillan.

Holes in the pipes were discovered in November during an integrity test. A physical inspection of the underground pipes

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confirmed they had holes.

One of the pipes carries jet fuel from a building to a pumping station, which then sends it to storage tanks. That pipe was shut down, and another was activated to replace it.

The other pipe hadn't been used for more than a decade.

The faulty pipes are on the west side of the base near the tarmac for the base's Air National Guard fighter wing.

The pipes had not undergone integrity tests for at least a decade, Kirtland spokesman Steve Milligan said. Air Force rules require the pipes be tested every five years, but he said the base received permission from its higher command to forgo testing for at least the last 10 years.

Milligan said he believed Kirtland received the waivers because the tests gave false results for Kirtland's kind of pipes. He said November's test was combined with other methods to determine whether the pipes had holes.

Some wells near the faulty pipes supply drinking water to Kirtland Air Force Base. None of those has shown any contaminants from fuel, McQuillan said.

However, a monitoring well used to test water quality, is closer to the pipes and has detected the poison benzene, a component of the older jet fuel, in the ground water, he said. It's not known whether the benzene is linked to the spill.

Investigators have bored down 200 feet and found soil soaked with fuel, said Mark Holmes, a project manager with Kirtland's environmental unit. They are continuing to dig.

Water is at 450 feet below the surface, and the Air Force is rushing to install several monitoring wells at the spill site to see if fuel has reached the ground water supply, Holmes said.

The fuel amounts to tens of thousands of parts per million in the soil, McQuillan said.

"If you take a soil sample from one of these bore holes, put it in a jar and add water to it, oil will flow to the surface," he said.

Air Force inventories of fuel passing through the pipe date back to 1996. They are off a net 157,000 gallons — meaning that much gas left the drop-off point but was never pumped into any jets.

Some 20 million gallons passed through the pipe annually, Holmes said, so a loss of tens of thousands of gallons a year is considered within normal error.

Miscounts could have been made in human measurements or by a faulty gauge on the storage tanks that has since been fixed, Holmes said. The volume of fuel also changes with the temperature — sometimes more fuel actually reaches the jets than was recorded pumped into the system.

Holmes estimated the Air Force would spend \$400,000 investigating the spill. He did not know how much the

has reached the ground water.

McQuillan said the Air Force is cooperating with state officials.

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