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Kirtland Seeks Missing Jet Fuel

Loss May Be Due To Error, Spill

BY JOHN J. LUMPKIN
Journal Staff Writer

KIRTLAND AIR FORCE BASE — Air Force environmental officials will soon be looking in the ground for up to 100,000 gallons of missing military jet fuel that might have spilled from a faulty pipe.

And it might not have spilled, said Mark Holmes, an Air Force project manager with Kirtland's environmental unit. The fuel could be "missing" because of accounting and inventory errors, he said.

But investigators, in accordance with water-quality laws, will begin digging next month to see if any fuel is seeping downward toward the aquifer, which is about 450 feet deep and supplies water wells that serve the base.

"It's a total unknown," Holmes said this week. "We're checking for the possibility of a release."

They are checking because two pipes were found to have holes during an integrity test last November. One of the pipes carries the jet fuel from a building where trucks drop it off to a pumping station; the other hasn't been used for more than a decade. The pumping station sends the fuel into large storage tanks on the base.

But the fuel traveling through the holed pipe is being pulled by

suction from the pumping station ahead of it, not being pushed by pressure from behind. That means that the juice isn't likely to seep from the holes — the suction pulling it toward the pumping station would prevent it from doing so, Holmes said.

After the holes were discovered, Kirtland officials also noticed a discrepancy in their inventory figures — some 97,600 gallons that were recorded at the truck drop-off point never actually reached any aircraft. The amount is less than one-half of 1 percent of the 20 million gallons that travel through the system each year, Holmes said — well within reasonable error on the inventory sheets.

Errors 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.

"I don't think personally we're going to find that much (that spilled)," Holmes said.

However, if it is discovered that most of the missing 97,600 gallons had gone into the soil, "that would be a big spill — one of the biggest" in the state, said Dennis McQuillan, a geologist with the state Environment Department, which Kirtland has informed of its investigation.

It would only threaten wells in the immediate area, McQuillan said. Kirtland would probably have to install filters on its water wells to keep the fuel out of the drinking water, he said.

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