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South Jersey landfill will not take contaminated soil from Willow Grove base

By Jenny Wagner

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A South Jersey landfill has changed its mind about accepting soil contaminated with toxic chemicals that was removed as part of cleanup operations at a former Pennsylvania military base.

A South Jersey landfill has changed its mind about accepting soil contaminated with toxic chemicals removed as part of cleanup operations at the former Naval Air Station Joint Reserve Base Willow Grove in Horsham.

In December, the Cumberland County Improvement Authority, which operates the landfill located in Deerfield Township, New Jersey, approved an agreement with Material Solution Services, an environmental consulting and soil management company based in Northampton, to accept up to 4,500 tons of the soil from the base.

However, the authority rescinded its approval Tuesday, according to president and CEO Gerard Velazquez III.

"The dirt is not going to be delivered to the landfill," Velazquez said, declining to elaborate on why. "We made a decision at the Improvement Authority that was in the best interest of the authority and the best interest of Cumberland County."

The chemicals, known as PFAS when referred to as a class, were an ingredient in firefighting foams used for decades in training exercises and emergencies at the former Willow Grove base and many other sites across the country. After the chemicals were found in surface and groundwater on and around the former Willow Grove base, the Navy announced plans to remove soil from three areas there, including a former fire training facility.

"There are no established cleanup standards for soil but ... these are areas that we consider to be sources, which could leach into groundwater," William Lin, environmental coordinator for the Navy, told this news organization last summer after a monthly meeting about the cleanup operations.

Some attendees at the meeting expressed concerns about where the soil would be taken, and at the time the Navy identified a couple of landfills in Berks County that were licensed to accept it.

As of another monthly meeting in December, the Navy had removed about 3,000 cubic yards of soil, and more was planned for January.

As of Tuesday, no soil had been delivered to the Cumberland landfill, and Velazquez said that to his knowledge it is still on the base.

Velazquez added that the authority is disappointed in "misinformation" being reported about the situation, again declining to elaborate.

In a statement about the situation on Tuesday, New Jersey Sierra Club officials said there were many health and environmental concerns about the soil being taken to the landfill, and the authority was doing the right thing.

"Every time we can stop toxic chemicals from being dumped in our state is a win. This material is highly contaminated and can get out into the environment and impact public health. This decision will also force the Department of Defense to properly remediate the material and send it to a more appropriate place. DEP should have never allowed these materials in the first place, this stuff is too contaminated. New Jersey has enough toxic chemicals to deal with," said Jeff Tittel, director of environmental group.

Tittel noted that the chemicals are unregulated, and he urged the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection to take action to prevent dumping in the future. He added that the chemicals also have been found in drinking and groundwater on and around Joint Base McGuire-Dix-Lakehurst in Burlington County, New Jersey.

"New Jersey has a serious problem with Joint Base, why would we want more toxic chemicals in our state?" Tittel said.

Officials from the Navy and Material Solution Services did not respond to questions from this news organization on Wednesday.