

Testimony of Mary Johnson  
To the House Subcommittee On National Security,  
Emergency Threat and International Relations,  
Committee on Government Reform

Hearing on Army Contract Management:  
Compliance with Outreach and Public Acceptance Agreements  
Sinclair Community College

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Introduction: Thank you for inviting me to testify today. I am Mary Johnson, a citizen of Jefferson Township and a member of Citizens for the Responsible Destruction of Chemical Weapons of the Miami Valley. I am a retired Registered Nurse and Certified Nurse Practitioner. I have been requested to speak on my experience with Public Acceptance.

*Public Acceptance*

For public acceptance to occur: residents must be informed. A way to inform residents is providing a forum where an audience is gathered, questions can be asked, honest answers or truth can be given.

Jefferson Township's introduction to the VX hydrolysate destruction plan was preceded by hearsay. An open house format meeting, occurring January 23, 2003, was later provided and there were small-individualized groupings. This outreach effort was not part of the company's approval process because the outreach meeting was scheduled after PermaFix had already received its contract from the Army. At the open house meeting, there was no collective group or audience sharing. Folders of information were distributed. The open house was scheduled during the day and ended at 6pm in the evening.

There did not seem to be a great effort to notify residents of the impending open house meeting. My friend, Willa Bronston, contacted me. At her behest I hurriedly dressed and we rushed to the Jefferson Township school administration building to see what was happening. I had no time to prepare or research before leaving my house. I knew nothing about VX or VX hydrolysate.

At the open house, we met representatives of the Army, Parsons, and PermaFix. I asked questions but knew so little, I am not sure my questions were on target enough to elicit answers of clarity. I remember the representatives placating and reassuring us that all is well, nothing harmful remained in VXH, and how this project was a great thing for us all.

Ms Bronston and I returned home and began our research. We discovered the National Research Council that published voluminous amount of information concerning VX and VXH. In a document on Supercritical Water Oxidation, in a paraphrase 'under certain conditions, VX byproducts can revert to the VX agent.' This information was startling. We proceeded to discover:

1. VX was so toxic and lethal that it takes only 6-10 mg to kill in a matter of 15 minutes – through the skin or inhalation, not just through ingestion.
2. There were four basic methods in efforts to destroy this chemical: incineration, supercritical water oxidation, neutralization, and biodegradation.
3. All four of the basic methods for destroying VX were experimental.
4. None of the four methods had long-term studies to demonstrate safety standards.
5. All methods had mishaps and problems in different cities such as Tooele, Utah, Corpus Christi, Texas, and Johnston Atoll in the Pacific Ocean.
6. VX is an organophosphate that can interrupt fetal development producing birth defects, cause nervous system illnesses such as memory loss, Alzheimer, hyperactivity and attention deficit, and breathing problems.

We decided to take this information to the Trustees of Jefferson Township. We were directed to speak to the County Commissioners, which we did. We notified our political representatives. We had numerous conversations with representatives of the Montgomery County Sanitation Department, Army, Parsons and PermaFix. As we continued our saga we joined forces with other groups of citizens who were drawn in alarm to this issue. Hugh McGuire invited us to his group meetings with Laura Rench, Michelle Cooper and later Jane Forrest Redfern. We named ourselves Citizens for the Responsible Destruction of Chemical Weapons of the Miami Valley.

Because the contract between the Army, Parsons and PermaFix called for community acceptance, our focus spotlighted gaining resolutions from neighboring communities, agencies and social groups in opposing the Plan. We attended numerous meetings, sometimes as many as four in one week. We staged rallies, wrote letters to the editors and letters to public officials, made thousands of phone calls all over the United States to experts and to our elected officials, sent numerous emails and faxes, we brought in knowledgeable speakers, we produced videos, we produced a program for Dayton Access Television Station, held environmental issue forums, we attained legal representation (with outstanding representation by Mr. Ellis Jacobs of Legal Aid Society of Dayton and Mark Chilson and Margaret Young of Young & Alexander Co., L.P.A.), filed lawsuits, and attended public functions in the community. We even toured PermaFix. We went everywhere to discuss this issue because it affected everyone in our midst.

The contract called for every jurisdiction to be notified along the route from Newport, Indiana to Jefferson Township. Every first responder or firefighter was to be oriented to VXH with a Material Safety Data Sheet and given tours of PermaFix. Only a few were oriented.

We citizens asked numerous questions concerning this issue including the criteria for company selection. We either got no straight answer or no answer at all. Donna Winchester, manager of the City of Dayton Water Department, sent ten major questions and a three-week deadline for a response and did not receive it until six to eight weeks later. On April 10, 2003, we had an accountability meeting (one in a series of meetings) with an attendance of greater than 200 individuals at Jefferson Township High School. There were no straight answers given that evening, either, only the same response such as “We’ll get back with you.” They never called nor sent the information requested.

On March 14, 2003, our attorney, Mr. Jacobs, filed a freedom of information act request with the Army, seeking information about the process used for choosing PermaFix, scientific information to process VXH, and information about VXH. To date, no information has been received as a result of that request.

We called agencies such as Ohio Environmental Protection Agency and Regional Air Pollution Control Agency. Both agencies' representatives explained that their agencies had no rules nor permits to prevent VXH from coming to our community. It is a stark reality that our environment is not being protected. One can tell that pollution of our air is present just by walking on Cherokee Street where PermaFix emits fumes and chemicals on a daily basis. PermaFix's neighbors are not allowed a quality of life because of the odors that make one's head reel with disorientation and dizziness, that provoke nausea and sometimes vomiting when exposed. These responses to the chemicals presently being emitted from PermaFix prevent neighbors from enjoying their own backyards. They can't even have a backyard picnic. Numerous nuisance violations had already been assessed against PermaFix.

Another small matter not addressed was that a road was widened for PermaFix's usage to avoid exposing children in the neighborhood to the large semi-trucks that crowd the lanes. The improved road has seldom been used – perhaps only when media was invited to tour the company. All other times the gate is closed because of need of repair. The question has been frequently asked, “If PermaFix can not performed these minor tasks, how can the Army trust PermaFix to perform a highly delicate operation with VXH?”

These issues were discussed with the representatives of Army, Parsons and PermaFix. They were asked to give a reason for sending VXH to a neighborhood of residents where children had been seen playing on PermaFix's lawn and towers. Mere feet separate residents from the property line of PermaFix. There is no buffer zone of 2.6 miles to the nearest population concentration as in Newport, Indiana. The response to the question concerning keeping VXH in Indiana was the following: “the expense too high, the standards were too stringent, and the oversight too great.”

The Miami Valley Community and this nation cannot afford to be casual about what to do with these weapons of mass destruction. These weapons were made to be so lethal that they could kill in minutes. That is the problem in trying to destroy these weapons because the bonds between the chemicals are so stable. It is difficult to break them by all the methods the Army has available. With every method there is a lethal problem. With supercritical water oxidation, the salts produced from the process destroyed the reactor. What did they do with the salts? In Corpus Christi, the salts were deep welled into the Gulf of Mexico and sealed. Incineration produces dioxins which is a known cancer-producing agent. During incineration of VX agent in Tooele, Utah, Salt Lake City, down wind, received high levels of dioxin that contaminated cows' milk. In Anniston, Alabama incineration does not take place during school hours but polluting emissions from chemical weapons incineration are adding to the existing polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs), a contamination problem from previous industries' output.

VX hydrolysate, produced by neutralization, is so caustic that a chance spill will destroy pavement, grass, and contaminate water, requiring evacuation. (Let's not even

think what VXH will do to flesh.) Biodegradation is a new science as far as its application to VXH. The National Research Council listed at least two real concerns with this method: 1) micro-organic predators and 2) pathogens. An additional concern for biodegradation is that there is not enough information available to say what other ills can evolve from this method. In other words, it is an immature science.

We raised the question of how anyone could know whether these experiments were successful, accurate or safe. The fact that these methods were experimental made it difficult for anyone to provide oversight. All laboratory tests provided mixed results with definite reservations at all attempts to destroy this agent. Scale up could have been disastrous because of the unpredictability of chemical reactions.

This information was shared with all jurisdictions and agencies that we encountered. We encouraged each group to do its own research. We shared with them research sources to assist them. We invited them to participate. In the end, 37 neighboring municipalities and agencies passed resolutions opposing this plan. Dr. Bruce Rittman, the expert selected by Montgomery County Commission confirmed our assessment that this project had too many unanswered questions and too many risks to be performed in a residential area. Another problem is the fact that Jefferson Township has a volunteer fire department – capable - but at a timely-response disadvantage because of the very nature of being voluntary. This fact promoted great discomfort as we investigated this plan.

In conclusion, we support the government's effort to destroy these weapons of mass destruction but not in anyone's residential area. Not where children, the most vulnerable population group to nerve agents, will be placed at risk and whose development can be so profoundly interrupted that they may not be able to grow into responsible citizens but may become invalids of the health care industry. Not where the infrastructure of the community is so anemic, it cannot address an immediate response to a horrific disaster.

We have assessed the VXH plan to be too risky and too dangerous a threat to our health and well-being and Dr. Rittman validated our concerns. Most important, 37 entities passed resolutions, exercising their responsibility to their constituents and citizens by rejecting this plan. We recommend that the local, state, federal governments and agencies collaborate with citizens, scientific experts, and the military to determine the safest path for us all to follow in destroying these weapons of mass destruction.