

PRESS RELEASE
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CEIBA- In early March 1999, officials at Naval Station Roosevelt Roads were notified that on February 19, 1999, U.S. Marine Corps Harrier jets, assigned to the amphibious assault ship USS Kearsarge, accidentally fired 263 25mm rounds of depleted uranium (DU) armor piercing ammunition into the north convoy target at the Navy's live impact range in Vieques.

After learning of the incident on March 5, Navy officials immediately notified the Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC), the agency that has oversight of licensed radioactive material, and immediately took the required steps to recover as much of the ammunition as possible from the impact area. Trained Navy health physicists surveyed the range using highly sensitive equipment able to detect low levels of radioactivity. The ammunition was confined to the range area and the clean-up crew recovered 57 of the 263 rounds. Navy environmental personnel notified local officials of the Puerto Rico Environmental Quality Board on March 11 of the unauthorized use of DU ammunition on the Vieques range.

This is the only documented case of depleted uranium being used on the live impact range. The use of depleted uranium on the Vieques range is strictly prohibited, and the cause of the incident is under investigation. The remoteness of the target area and its restricted access limits the likelihood of exposure to the public.

Depleted uranium is a heavy metal, that is a product of the process for converting (enriching) natural uranium, and in this form poses minimal risk to human health or the environment. While the military uses DU in ammunition for its armor-piercing capability, DU is also widely used in civilian industry, primarily for stabilizers in airplanes and boats.

Heavy metals (uranium, lead, tungsten, etc.) have chemical toxicity properties that, in high doses, can potentially cause health concerns. The DU expended on the Vieques Range was a very small quantity and poses no threat to public health, welfare, or the environment. The Navy is dedicated to preserving and protecting the environment of Vieques and is taking all measures to ensure DU toxic properties do not and will not affect the natural resources of the island. Navy officials have expressed regrets over this unfortunate, one-time event. During periodic cleanup and refurbishment of the range, the Navy will continue to monitor the area.

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The principal aquifers supplying water for the island are in the Valle de Esperanza and the Valle de Resolucion located on the western side of the island, minimizing any possible affects to the people, natural resources or animal species near the Vieques range. Recognizing the need for environmental responsibility, the Navy immediately dedicated personnel and money to recover the unauthorized ammunition.

The Navy will continue to monitor the range to ensure there are no traces of toxic properties because of this one time incident.

For additional information concerning Navy-related issues, please call Roberto Nelson at 865-4409/4022, 403-1778 or 401-9615.