



PRESS RELEASE

U.S. ARMY CHEMICAL MATERIALS AGENCY

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Media Update #3: M55 Rocket Fire Investigations

WHAT: Preliminary investigations on nine disassembled rocket motor assemblies sent from the Umatilla Chemical Depot, Ore. to Picatinny Arsenal, N.J., has confirmed the migration of nitroglycerin (NG) through the inhibitor layer on the exterior of the rocket motor grain to the annular space between the rocket motor and the steel tube housing. While yet to be confirmed as the root cause of the increased frequency of fires, NG is very sensitive and a potential cause of the fires when pinched between the steel case and rocket grain during shearing operations. Fires, if related to the presence of NG, appear to be random events. Other preliminary data indicated that the rockets are safe in storage, transport and handling in support of the demilitarization process. Further analysis is under way before a definitive conclusion can be stated.

Preliminary conclusions on the tests conducted to date show a migration of diluted NG in all nine cases. While this migration renders the inhibitor layer more sensitive, testing also found that the propellant grain and inhibitor layer are insensitive to friction and electrostatic discharge. Residual stabilizer is well within required levels.

A diversified team at Picatinny has conducted tests involving M28 propellant grain cutting, compositional analysis, sensitivity (friction, electrostatic) testing, inhibitor layer testing, and compatibility testing. Impact testing is not yet complete and testing still needs to be done on the M62 igniter. A final report from Picatinny on the Umatilla rocket tests is tentatively expected in the mid-August 2005 timeframe.

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This is an ongoing part of the U.S. Army Chemical Materials Agency rocket task force as it continues to perform an in-depth investigation into fires that occurred in April and May during the disposal of M55 rockets its Umatilla Chemical Agent Disposal Facility (UMCDF) in Oregon and Pine Bluff Chemical Agent Disposal Facility (PBCDF) in Arkansas. The fires occurred while processing drained GB-filled M55 rockets in an Explosive Containment Room designed specifically to contain such an event. There was never any danger to personnel or any release of agent to the environment.

WHEN: Rockets motor assemblies were shipped from Umatilla and arrived at Picatinny in mid-June. Testing has been ongoing since. A similar rocket disassembly operation is scheduled at Pine Bluff in the near future.

It is expected that these rockets motor assemblies will be shipped to Picatinny to undergo similar tests in the July-August timeframe. This testing will also support the demilitarization effort managed by the Department of Defense's Program Manager for Assembled Chemical Weapons Alternatives (PM ACWA) at the Blue Grass Army Depot, Kentucky. The potential for fires during processing exists with all M55 rockets, and while PM ACWA will dispose of the rockets at Blue Grass using a neutralization process, original disassembly plans employ and duplicate CMA's rocket shearing process.

WHO: Mr. Michael Parker, Director of the U.S. Army Chemical Materials Agency, appointed Mr. Gregory St. Pierre, Director of CMA's Risk Management, to lead the rocket task force. St. Pierre has 22 years of experience in chemical weapons risk mitigation and problem solving.

CMA COMMENT: Mr. St. Pierre said, "I cannot stress enough that these are preliminary results. The jury is still out as we prepare to look at and contrast these test results with the Pine Bluff samples. At this point, we are dealing in conjecture. More samples will provide more insight but a progress update to our interested stakeholders is certainly warranted."

ASSESSMENT COMPONENTS: The rocket task force includes a mix of experts from CMA, Washington Group International (WGI), U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Southwest Research Institute, Sandia National Laboratory, EG&G, and the U.S. Army Armament Engineering & Technology Center.

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U.S. ARMY CHEMICAL MATERIALS AGENCY ACCOMPLISHMENTS:

Two preliminary reports, one a review of the ECR structure design and one an assessment of whether or not the increased frequency of fires increases the risk to the public from M55 rocket disposal operations, are available on the web at www.cma.army.mil.

To date, preliminary assessments have indicated that the rockets remain stable in storage and through routine handling operations that bring them to the disposal process. At this point, all fires have been associated only with rockets involved in the actual shearing/disposal process.

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More information will be released as it becomes available.

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The U.S. Army Chemical Materials Agency is responsible for safely storing and eliminating the United States' aging chemical weapons and agent stockpiles and for the safe elimination of recovered chemical materiel.

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