

BNAS cleanup pegged at \$16 million

The estimate was left out of an earlier analysis of air base closing costs, and could grow higher.

By BART JANSEN

Washington D.C. Correspondent

WASHINGTON — The environmental cleanup of the Brunswick Naval Air Station will cost at least \$16 million, money that the Pentagon didn't include in its initial estimates of base closure costs, according to government auditors.

Congress is debating allocating less money for cleaning up military bases than President Bush has proposed. But Sen. Susan Collins, R-Maine, a member of the Armed Services Committee, said the extra cost shouldn't hurt Brunswick immediately, because the base is scheduled to close over a period of years and more funding could be arranged.

"This report does not surprise me at all," Collins said. "It calls into question whether other costs that the Pentagon estimated are similarly underestimated."

Officials from the Brunswick Local Redevelopment Authority say the auditors' report is not cause for immediate concern but could become worrisome if Congress fails to fund the base

cleanup adequately.

Carol Warren, chairwoman of the authority's environmental committee, said she would not be surprised if the environmental cleanup costs more than \$16 million.

She said it is hard to predict exact costs because the cleanup is ongoing, with more assessments still to be done - including an evaluation this year of a pesticide storage building.

"I am satisfied the Navy will move forward with the cleanup," Warren said, "but my concern is the timing. It might take longer than the public expects."

The Pentagon is closing 22 major bases and reducing 33 others to save a projected \$4.2 billion per year. But it needs an additional \$950 million for environmental cleanups at bases picked for closure in 2005, in addition to the estimated \$13.2 billion needed for bases closed in previous years, according to a Government Accountability Office report Tuesday.

The Pentagon originally estimated \$147 million in one-time costs to close BNAS.

Those costs are expected to grow as more intensive studies are done of the hazards involved. Unexploded ordnance and hazardous chemicals are the key hurdles to clearing bases for redevelopment.

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Brunswick was one of four bases studied in the report, which doesn't say how auditors arrived at \$16 million.

The GAO report argued that the estimates are low because the Pentagon included contamination before 1986 and munitions before 2002. "These additional costs could add millions to the overall cost estimate," the report said.

Additional costs eat into anticipated savings from closing bases. Collins noted that the same thing happened with the earlier closing of Loring Air Force Base in Limestone.

"This is why, when the Pentagon comes before us claiming huge savings from base closures and realignments, I'm always so skeptical," Collins said. "Inevitably, the savings turn out to be far less than estimated and the costs turn out to be far greater."

Congress is now debating a spending bill for the year that began on Oct. 1. The bill contains \$3.1 billion less than Bush requested for base closures.

But Collins said that shortfall might be a bigger problem for Jacksonville Naval Air Station in Florida, which needs new construction to accept the planes from Brunswick.

"It's difficult to assess how serious that is for Brunswick because this was to be a phased-out closure that would take place over many years," Collins said.

The Brunswick community is still exploring what to do with the property. The Local Redevelopment Authority reserved a 24-acre parcel for the Air National Guard. The Navy is expected to set aside 51 acres for the Army National Guard, 11 acres for the Coast Guard, with the base's air traffic control tower going to the Federal Aviation Administration.

Staff Writer Dennis Hoey contributed to this report.

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