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■ THE ARMY'S ANNISTON INCINERATOR Sat, Oct 5, 2002

# To critics, burning weapons a risk to people, environment

By Kathy Jefcoats  
The Times-Georgian

To burn or not to burn remains the question for opponents of the Army's incinerator in Anniston, Ala.

If you're in the Army now, the question is not burning, it is the answer. If you're not — and have an opinion at all — you probably think there is a better way to dispose of chemical weapons.

Count Wendy Crager and Genevieve Bannie in the last group. The two Carrollton residents are members of the local chapter of the Sierra Club. Crager's husband, Bryan Hager, is director of the Georgia Sierra Club.

Crager has recently formed the West Georgia Conservation Group of the Sierra Club. On Sept. 8, she and some 20 other West Georgia residents joined 200 other protesters against the Anniston plant.

The two women — representing the Sierra Club's philosophy — believe there is a safer, cleaner alternative to burning.

"The alternative is very technical but primarily, it is neutralization," said Crager. "The process uses a caustic solution and water and microbes."

Neutralization is similar to how raw sewage is handled. The microbes literally consume the materials until they are gone.

The \$900 million incinerator in Anniston is set to begin burning chemical weapons created during both world wars early next year — within months. The most recent date comes after delays, cost overruns and opposition.

Mike Abrams is public affairs officer for the Anniston Chemical Agent Disposal Facility. He came to Carrollton last week to address a group of public safety officials about the plant's plans. He stressed the lack of danger to Carroll County residents.

However, others argue that Carroll is downwind of Anniston. Emissions from the plant will likely blow eastward and for the next seven-eight years. Ensuring that those emissions are safe to breathe is paramount.

"It's a health issue for local residents," said Crager. "Our bodies are just bombarded with chemicals in the air, water and ground. We're spraying like crazy now for the West Nile virus. If given two choices, dirty air or clean air, which do I choose? A safe, non-polluting method."

The plant is built to burn chemicals but Crager said the machines can be retrofitted to accommodate neutralization.

"It can be done so that you don't lose money," she said.

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# Anniston incinerator:

## Critics call for safer method

Continued from page 1A

Abrams disagrees.

"Absolutely no," he said. "There is no mature neutralization technology presently available to handle the complex nature of the Anniston stockpile."

Even if there was, Abrams continued, a new technology permit request would take as long as 10 years to get through a possible approval process at the state level.

"A new technology would be vastly expensive," Abrams said. "There is not any money — hundreds of millions of dollars — available to do some experimentation at Anniston. We have already spent close to \$500 million to get to where we are. Bottom line: incineration works."

Crager argues that safety is priceless.

"We're talking about worker safety and human health," she said. "You can't put a price tag on that."

She also notes that other plants in the country were authorized to use the process.

"These non-incineration methods produce no smoke-stack emissions," said Crager.

Even if money weren't an issue, a world treaty mandates the chemical weapons be destroyed by 2007, so time is of the essence.

Another problem facing Georgia residents who object to the plant is the fact that it is in another state, under the leadership of a different government.

"We're not in the state," said Crager. "Georgia has no control over what Alabama does. The most we can do is educate our legislators and

ask them to influence the Alabama delegates."

Crager, 46, is a longtime activist. She grew up in Oklahoma with a respect for the land. But she was also taught to question authority.

"A lot of people trust the Army," she said. "I was taught to question authority. They are just human beings, they can make mistakes. I'm questioning the Army."

For Bannie, 37, the Anniston plant is her first foray into social conscious-

ness.

"This is similar to the Gulf War vets syndrome," said Bannie. "The government told people that low dose chemical exposure is safe. I want to speak for those exposed to chemical emissions and who will be exposed for the next 10 years."

Abrams argues that storing the weapons can become more dangerous than burning them as they age and become more unstable. Because of that danger, some rockets were treated

with stabilizers that caused the agent to gel into more of a solid than liquid substance.

"A big concern of ours is that the incinerator is not designed for the purpose of chopping up rockets with gelled insides," said Crager.

The plant is designed to drain the liquid agent and then cut up the pieces of the rocket. Abrams said disposing of rockets with gelled insides is not a hazard.

"Anyone who cares to educate themselves with facts should come to the conclu-

sion we can safely dispose of M55 rockets that have gelled GB nerve agent inside," he said. "We can do the job safely — as was done in Utah. Whether we handle rockets that drain, or that have gelled agent, the operations will be virtually transparent to the community."

The Sierra Club next meets Oct. 24 in the social sciences building at the State University of West Georgia. For information, call Crager at 770-537-3720.