

USACE Puts RCWM Excavation on Hold

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Spring Valley, Washington, D.C. the USACE has put a temporary hold on digging activities at the Spring Valley recovered chemical warfare materiel (RCWM) site. The reason for the temporary restriction on digging is due to concerns that the safety precautions and engineering controls currently in place may not be adequate enough. Engineering controls and safety plans are based in part upon the Munition with the Greatest Fragmentation Distance (MGFD), which is usually (not always) the munition with the largest quantity of explosives.

The current safety procedures and engineering controls in place were based upon a 75mm chemical round with a burster charge. However, an artillery round uncovered from the site about 3 weeks ago that is still under investigation is suspected of being a high explosive (HE) filled round. Because the amount of explosives and fragmentation distance is much higher in a HE round vs. a chemical round with a burster of the same caliber, the safety precautions and engineering controls for the site may need to be increased.

The temporary halt in digging is a smart safety precaution and should be lifted once the plans and engineering controls are updated should the MGFD assumption be changed. Considering that the suspected UXO in the area have been buried there since WWI, another few weeks or even months should not matter much, except of course to the property owners and contractors doing the work. However, safety overrides schedule and personal inconveniences every time, as it very well should.