

On My Mind
6/29/01

There's trouble brewing in Tanapag, but so far those responsible for it don't seem to be doing anything to try prevent it from coming to a head. The issue is the disposition of those piles of PCB-contaminated soil that have been cleared from the village. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (ACE) was supposed to study alternative means of disposal, share the results with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and the community, provide a period of public comments on the study results, and then await approval from the EPA before taking any action on disposal of the soil.

Instead, before the study results have even been released, the ACE has announced that it has selected a process called indirect thermal adsorption to remove the PCBs from the soil, and then something called Fenton's reaction to detoxify the remaining PCB-contaminated sludge, all of it to be done on Saipan.. Moreover, the ACE's contractor has already built a demonstration facility of that process in California, which it is testing this week. The intention is to move the facility to Saipan once the system is working properly.

ACE officials will be coming to Saipan in two weeks to present the ACE decision to the Tanapag community, and to explain next steps. Under the circumstances, there can be little doubt that sparks will fly and tempers flare at that meeting, given that people are bound to feel - and to express in no uncertain terms - that the ACE has not kept its word, that it has pre-empted their right to provide input into the decision-making process, that once again the "feds" have earned the distrust of the villagers.

Besides, some members of the Tanapag community have already come to the conclusion - and have so informed ACE officials in no uncertain terms - that they are adamantly opposed to having the stock-piled contaminated soil treated here in Saipan regardless of the method chosen, and that they want it taken off-island for treatment somewhere else.

The funny thing about all this is that the ACE apparently does not view its actions as improper or premature. Word (from sources other than ACE) is that the ACE decision is tentative, not final, that ACE is still open to input, and that if the indirect thermal adsorption facility built in California is not used in Tanapag, it can be used at other sites where ACE is involved in cleaning up PCBs.

It is possible that ACE is now sharing that information with the four members of the Tanapag community who have traveled to California, together with two members of the DEQ staff, to observe the demonstration of the facility. But ACE has not, so far, seen the need to share that with the rest of the community. It does not bode well.

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A study reported in the news recently revealed that children who found a gun would inevitably try to fire it. Surprise, surprise. Along the same lines, seems that if an agency is given

regulatory powers it will try to use them. At least that would explain the otherwise inexplicable reason behind the threatened “citizen’s” suit against the CNMI government in connection with the clearing of an area in Lower Base for construction of the long-awaited refuse transfer station.

The plan has been in the making for several years. There has even been a public hearing on the project. Up until now, there have been no protests. But now that the Harmful Substance Clean-up Emergency Regulations have been approved as permanent regulations, looks like Assistant Attorney General Murphy Peterson - responsible for drafting the regs to begin with - can’t wait to test their applicability. Given the fuzzy charges being bandied about, it’s not at all clear, however, just who would benefit, and how, if such a suit were actually pursued.

The claims that the designated land is flood-prone is irrelevant. It’s been flood-prone for decades, but that did not stop its being used for many years to house the Public School System administrative offices and a large automotive repair service facility. The claim that the soil may be contaminated is equally irrelevant. Not only has no evidence to support such a claim been provided, but even if it were true, there is no groundwater issue here, and such contamination would have no effect on the area’s use as a waste transfer station.

This is not the first time Peterson has threatened or promoted the suing of government agencies - first it was the ACE for allegedly not conducting proper clean-up efforts in Tanapag village (even before the Harmful Substance Clean-up regs were promulgated), then it was the Department of Defense for not following the newly-filed emergency regulations, and now it is the CNMI government for - it would appear - the rather far-fetched charge of taking steps that would prevent the suing of the federal government under those same Harmful Substance Clean-up regs.

So far, these have been but idle threats. No suit has yet actually been filed. Perhaps no suit will be filed in this instance either. In which case, it’s about time such inflamed rhetoric came to an end. The empty threats serve no useful purpose. They are demeaning, counterproductive, hurtful. The waste transfer station being built in Lower Base deserves support, not defamation. It is the first step - and a very good one - towards the shutting down of the Puerto Rico dump, and it should be allowed to proceed without further delay - Harmful Substance Clean-up regs notwithstanding.

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Are Guam’s snakes running out of food? That is one hypothesis offered by Mark Jaffe, author of “And No Birds Sing: a true ecological thriller set in a tropical paradise.” The book details the search, begun in 1979, to determine the cause of Guam’s declining bird population, and the difficulty faced by on-the-scene field scientists in persuading funding sources and fellow scientists that the culprit was indeed the brown tree snake. One reason for the skepticism, recounts the author, is that the brown tree snake does not fit known patterns of behavior for snakes of its type: the brown tree snake is able to support a standing position, is able to sling itself across hurdles, and is able to adjust its eating patterns to available prey, among other things.

The book also describes the difficulties in trying to raise in captivity the Guam rail and the Micronesian kingfisher, two of the eight species of birds that no longer exist on Guam, for eventual re-introduction when and if the brown tree snake danger declines.

Unfortunately, no workable solution for the control of the brown tree snake has yet been found. But scientists are finding that on Guam, while there is a large juvenile population of snakes, there is a disproportionately small proportion of full-sized adults. They theorize that there may no longer be enough prey to sustain the larger snakes, while there are still enough skinks and geckos to feed the younger snakes.

Given the fact that several brown tree snakes have already been sighted on Saipan over the last few years, the large amount of shipping coming to Saipan from Guam, and thus the very real fear that Saipan could face the same fate as Guam, the book has much of interest and pertinence to both government officials and local residents of the CNMI.

The book was published in 1997 by Barricade Books, Inc. The ISBN is 1-56980-109-6. I found a copy at the EPA conference on Guam. I do not know if it is available in local bookstores.

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Nancy Shaw Weil's "Island of Good-byes" said good-by to Nancy this week-end. She said her own good-by earlier this week, succumbing to a second bout with cancer after an eight-year remission.

She was many things to many people, as more than a dozen of her friends and colleagues testified at a well-attended celebratory memorial service. Her interests were eclectic, her determination boundless, her enthusiasm infectious, her talents broad, her spirit ever generous, always optimistic.

An aspect I particularly enjoyed was her love of words, her gift for felicitous phrases. She called her business "The Write Angle." She coined the phrase "The Island of Goodbyes." She would announce each newly-minted phrase proudly, joyfully.

Over the fourteen years of our friendship, we shared many a smile and a sigh over our respective "senior moments," over the shenanigans of local politicians, over the peccadillos of our occasionally errant children; we worked together on countless projects; we have said our share of good-byes to many others.

And while I know her spirit will always be with me, her passing leaves a hole in my life - as death always does.

