

Denver Post 9/30/02

State pressures feds to clean Camp Hale

Recovered munition again forces site's closing

By Steve Lipsher
Denver Post Mountain Bureau

The state health department is stepping up pressure on the federal government to recover unexploded World War II-era munitions at Camp Hale after recent discoveries forced the U.S. Forest Service to again close a portion of the former Army training site.

"We're concerned that there's a significant hazard that needs to be addressed now before someone gets hurt," said Jeff Swanson, project director for the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment.

Last Monday, a hunter found a live anti-tank rocket — the 16th piece of potentially deadly ordnance discovered at Camp Hale in the past two years — only days after munitions experts from Fort Carson destroyed a recovered rifle grenade and a "shape charge."

As a result, forest officials have again cordoned off 2,800 acres at the east end of the East Fork Valley between Leadville and Minturn, including popular campsites and land on either side of the heavily traveled Colorado Trail.

"These items can be extremely hazardous, even after being in the ground for 50 years," said Cal Wettsfein, district ranger for the U.S. Forest Service. "If a closure order is the only way we can keep people safe on Camp Hale, then that is what we have to do."

The Army Corps of Engineers has cleared some high-use areas and undertaken a review of the few existing military documents to determine where weapons testing occurred, but the pace has been painfully slow.

"Very little has been done," said Dave Van Norman of the Forest Service.

The main problem is that the federal program designed to clean up formerly used defense sites has been terribly underfunded in recent years, and officials have said that it could take 10 years or more to scour the entire 250,000-acre training area bordered by Leadville, Frisco, Breckenridge and Vail Pass.

State health officials expect to launch efforts this week to speed

up the process, Swanson said, with tactics ranging from written requests to possible legal action.

"I think the message needs to be very clear that there are live, dangerous items still out on Camp Hale," Swanson said.

The famed birthplace of the Army's 10th Mountain Division, located off U.S. 24 between Leadville and Minturn, was used for military training through the 1960s.

Although the area drawing concern is closed indefinitely, hikers are allowed on designated routes.

Officials, however, warn backcountry travelers to avoid even

secB BP3
There are live, dangerous items still out on Camp Hale.'

Jeff Swanson

Project director for the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment

picking up suspicious items — many look as innocuous as rusty tin cans — and alert authorities about the location of such objects.

"People need to realize that these are weapons of war. They are not souvenirs and need to be taken seriously," said Laura Bishard, spokeswoman for the state health department's hazardous-materials division.

sec BP3

images that show how much aspen grew in some of the large spruce stands that burned. He said it is believed that large aspen stands on much of Colorado's mountain landscape grew after the areas were cleared by fire.

Sue Cannon, a U.S. Geological Survey geologist in Golden, said she hopes to learn more about the behavior of landslides in her studies of the fire area.

"The behavior of these is so unpredictable, and the destructive power is tremendous," Cannon said.

Pauline Ellis, a U.S. Forest Service district ranger, said the Forest Service, the San Juan Public Lands Center and Fort Lewis College are working with the Mountain Studies Institute to coordinate research efforts.

The Silverton-based institute held its first conference over the weekend at Durango Mountain Resort.

Ellis said a federal funding request for long-term rehabilitation of the burned area will include an explanation of research opportunities created by the fire.

Other visitors include John Moody, a USGS hydrologist, and Jim Pringle, a meteorologist with the National Weather Service office in Grand Junction.

Pringle said the burned area is giving meteorologists "extremely valuable guidance on when to expect flash flooding with rainfall events of certain amounts" that can be used to help forecasters become more accurate and to help communities that fall victim to future fires.

"Long-term, from a hydrology standpoint, it's going to be interesting to really watch the decrease in the amount of flooding we're getting and debris flows we're getting," Crawford said. "Will these debris flows quit being significant in three years or in five years or will it take 10 years?"
