

Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20510

May 5, 2020

The Honorable Ryan McCarthy
Secretary of the Army
1400 Defense Pentagon
Washington, D.C. 20310-1400

Dear Secretary McCarthy:

We write to express our concern about the Army's apparent willingness to walk away from its obligation to remediate the Ammunition Disposal Area (ADA) at the now-closed Umatilla Chemical Depot in Umatilla, Oregon. We urge you in the strongest terms to continue and complete the critical remediation work now being done.

The Army opened a depot at Umatilla in the early 1940s and stored a variety of munitions and supplies there over the next half century, including chemical weapons. The Army formally closed the depot in 2012 with plans to transfer 7,500 acres to the Army National Guard for use by the Oregon National Guard. Those 7,500 acres include the ADA—roughly 1,730 acres that the Army used to dispose of “ordnance and other solid wastes by burning, detonation, dumping, or burial.”

The Army is required to clean up the ADA under the Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation and Liability Act (CERCLA) and as directed by agreements with the Environmental Protection Agency, National Guard Bureau, and Oregon Department of Environmental Quality. Even so, the Army now appears to be walking away from its obligation. Doing so would limit the Oregon National Guard's ability to use this land for training but more than that, it would limit the Guard's ability to put out wildfires on the land and endanger those who live in the area—particularly since munitions have now been found on neighboring private property. Although Department of Defense guidance gives priority to projects that pose a risk to the health and safety of communities, the Army tells us it will stop work at Umatilla because the ADA will require more remediation than the Army previously thought and because the Army has run out of money.

To the first point: remedial actions at Umatilla began in 1996 and even if the Army's most recent contract could not anticipate the full scope of the work, the answer isn't to pull the plug. There's a saying about what to do when a job gets tough and it doesn't end with “the tough call it quits.” To the second point, Congress provided the Army more than \$175 billion last year and appropriated more than \$700 billion in total military spending. We simply reject the idea that the Army cannot afford to properly clean up the potentially-deadly mess it made at Umatilla. We hope it is also clear to the Army that with a contractor on site now, it will cost much less to continue this work than it will to wind down and restart this process at some future date.

In sum, the Army's arguments for walking away from Umatilla simply do not wash. Accordingly, we urge you to quickly continue the important—and obligatory—remediation work. We stand ready to work with you, including through the appropriations process if necessary.

We thank you for your service and anticipate your prompt response.

Sincerely,



Ron Wyden
United States Senator



Jeffrey A. Merkley
United States Senator



Betty McCollum
Member of Congress



Greg Walden
Member of Congress



Dean Phillips
Member of Congress