



# Office of Inspector General U.S. Environmental Protection Agency **At a Glance**

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## ***EPA Region 9 Must Continue Oversight Throughout the Decontamination and Closure of the Red Hill Facility***

### **Why We Did This Evaluation**

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency Office of Inspector General conducted this evaluation to determine, by analyzing the sequence of events that led to drinking water contamination at the Red Hill site on Joint Base Pearl Harbor-Hickam, whether the EPA's oversight of relevant authorized state programs has effectively addressed the potential for contamination at the site. The facility, which the U.S. military uses, contains 20 underground tanks that can store up to 250 million gallons of fuel.

In November 2021, a petroleum release at the facility contaminated drinking water and sickened people. EPA Region 9 authorized the Hawaii Department of Health to implement various environmental programs, and the Department of Health used its authorities under those programs to respond to the incident. The EPA works with the Department of Health to ensure the programs perform consistent with federal laws and regulations.

#### **This evaluation supports EPA mission-related efforts:**

- *Ensuring clean and safe water.*
- *Cleaning up and revitalizing land.*

#### **This evaluation addresses a top EPA [management challenge](#):**

- *Enforcing environmental laws and regulations.*

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### **What We Found**

The EPA's regulatory oversight of authorized state programs for underground tanks or drinking water quality would not reasonably have identified the sequence of events that led to the drinking water contamination incident. According to the Navy, an improperly executed fuel transfer resulted in pipe joint ruptures and a subsequent fuel spill. Since the EPA does not regulate operations like this, its oversight of the underground tanks or drinking water quality would not reasonably have identified the events that led to the drinking water contamination. EPA Region 9 provided oversight of authorized Hawaii state programs prior to the incident. Additionally, Region 9 has worked with the Hawaii Department of Health, known as the Hawaii DOH, and the Navy to respond to the incident. However, the planned defueling—or fuel removal—process and decontamination efforts will require significant coordination between Region 9, the Hawaii DOH, and the Navy to minimize potential contamination and clearly communicate health and environmental risks to the public.

As part of Region 9's continued oversight, the region will need to address staffing, clearly communicate data, and maximize stakeholder involvement. First, Region 9 will need a sufficient number of staff to oversee the defueling process and address long-term remediation efforts. Second, Region 9 will need to collaborate with the Hawaii DOH and the Navy to clearly communicate risk and remediation information. Third, Region 9 will need to work with the Hawaii DOH and the Navy to maximize stakeholder involvement in Red Hill working groups to ensure that it hears all perspectives and instills public confidence in the defueling process, remediation efforts, and related outcomes.

After the defueling and closure processes are complete, consistent oversight of the remediation efforts will be necessary. Specifically, Region 9 will need to oversee the groundwater monitoring and contaminant migration information, as well as the communication of related information to the public.

**Decontamination and closure of the Red Hill facility requires transparency and accountability to protect the Oahu aquifer—the primary drinking water source on the island.**

### **Recommendations and Planned Agency Corrective Actions**

We recommend that the regional administrator for Region 9 develop a plan to define and provide appropriate levels of resources and oversight during defueling and closure, collaborate with the Hawaii DOH and the Navy to clearly communicate information to the public, and work with the Hawaii DOH and the Navy to develop a plan to increase stakeholder participation. Region 9 agreed with all three recommendations and provided ten corrective actions with completion dates. The region completed two of the actions. We consider all of the recommendations resolved with corrective actions pending.