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EPA Office of Inspector General issues findings regarding EPA oversight of drinking water contamination at Red Hill

WASHINGTON – The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency Office of Inspector General today issued a report with its findings regarding the November 2021 drinking water contamination incident at the Red Hill site at Joint Base Pearl Harbor-Hickam on the island of Oahu, Hawaii. The report, *EPA Region 9 Must Continue Oversight Throughout the Decontamination and Closure of the Red Hill Facility*, analyzes the sequence of events that led to drinking water contamination to determine whether the EPA’s oversight of relevant authorized state programs effectively addressed the potential for contamination at the Red Hill site.

The evaluation determined that the EPA provided adequate oversight of authorized Hawaii state programs prior to the Red Hill incident and that regulatory oversight of 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, the fuel spill was the result of pipe joint ruptures caused by an improperly executed fuel transfer—an operation that the EPA does not regulate and therefore would not have identified in its oversight of the underground tanks or drinking water quality.

Evaluators also found that the EPA has worked with the Hawaii Department of Health and the Navy to respond to the November 2021 incident. However, the pending defueling and decontamination efforts at Red Hill will require continued significant coordination to minimize potential contamination of the Oahu drinking water aquifer, ensure accountability, and provide clear and transparent communication to the public on health and environmental risks.

“EPA officials must take steps to ensure that they have adequate staffing to effectively oversee the defueling and permanent closure of the Red Hill facility,” said Inspector General Sean O’Donnell. “EPA officials must also clearly communicate data and maximize stakeholder involvement to ensure that the public understands and has confidence in environmental mitigation efforts.”

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