

**Opening Statement  
Senator Byron L. Dorgan  
Chairman, Democratic Policy Committee**

**“Are Burn Pits in Iraq and Afghanistan Making  
Our Soldiers Sick?”**

**Friday, November 6, 2009  
628 Dirksen Senate Office Building**

This is the twenty-first in a series of oversight hearings conducted by the Democratic Policy Committee to examine contracting fraud, waste, and abuse in Iraq and Afghanistan.

A number of the hearings that we have held have focused on the worst kind of contract abuse: that which unnecessarily puts our troops' lives in danger.

Today we are going to hear how, as early as 2002, U.S. military installations in Iraq and Afghanistan began relying on open-air burn pits, disposing of waste materials in a very dangerous manner.

We will hear how there were dire health warnings from Air Force officials about the dangers of burn pit smoke. We will hear how there were Department of Defense regulations in place that said that burn pits should only be used in short-term emergency situations – regulations that have now been codified. And we will hear how, despite all the warnings and all the regulations, the Army and the contractor in charge of this waste disposal, Kellogg, Brown, and Root, made frequent and unnecessary use of these burn pits and exposed thousands of U.S. troops to toxic smoke.

I would like to show two charts to give you an idea of the seriousness of this issue.

Here is a photograph showing the smoke plume from a typical burn pit being used by KBR in Iraq:



And here is a list of some of the toxins that, according to an Air Force briefing on the subject, could have been contained in burn pit smoke:



## What is in the Smoke

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- Carcinogens
- Respiratory Irritants
- Asphyxiants
- Cardiovascular Toxins
- Nervous System Toxins
- Eye Irritants
- Skin Irritants
- Liver Toxins
- Kidney Toxins
- Reproductive Hazards
- Blood Toxins



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Now, I think it is important to understand that these burn pits were being used at some very large, populated and well-established bases in Iraq, six years after we had invaded Iraq.

In fact, burn pits are still used at the Balad Airbase in Iraq, which is the largest U.S. base in that country. There are 20,000 troops based there, making it equivalent to a small city. The base has good paved roads, two large swimming pools with diving wells, two PX's that look like huge American-style supermarkets, five mess halls, and a full-service movie theater complete with a Dolby surround sound system.

Here is a picture, for instance, of one of the buildings at the base, which has a Subway sandwich shop.



My point is that this is not a makeshift base where one

would be surprised to find safe waste disposal with an incinerator. This is the kind of base were our troops would logically expect that there would be proper waste disposal.

So today we want to look at this practice of using burn pits, and examine whether it is endangering our troops' health. Witnesses will include former military officials and KBR employees with first-hand experience of this problem, as well as a medical expert on the health consequences of burn pit smoke.

Our first witness is Lt. Col. Darrin Curtis, a former Bioenvironmental Flight Commander for Joint Base Balad from Arkansas, who wrote a 2006 memo for the Pentagon warning of the acute health hazards associated with the continued use of burn pits by private contractors. Mr. Curtis has a Ph.D. in Environmental Engineering and has conducted health risk assessments for the Air Force for almost 20 years.

Rick Lamberth is a former KBR employee from Maryland who worked on logistics and helped KBR set up camps from Kuwait into Iraq. He is a long-time Army reservist who became LOGCAP officer, deployed to Iraq, and was exposed to burn pits.

Russell Keith served as a Medic for KBR at Balad Air Force Base from 2006 to 2007 and at Basra from 2008 to 2009 and currently resides in Alabama. Mr. Keith treated many patients in Iraq who had respiratory problems.

Finally, Anthony Szema is an Assistant Professor of Medicine and Surgery at Stony Brook University. Dr. Szema is also the Chief of the Allergy Section at the Veterans Affairs Medical Center in Northport, NY.