

Subject: Secrecy at Area 51 Leads to Abuses (fwd)  
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Workers blow whistle on Air Force's secret Nevada base

Vincent J. Schodolski Sun, May 28, 1995

RACHEL, Nev. - One warm July evening in 1988, Robert Frost pulled up in front of his home outside Las Vegas, climbed out of his car and started to scream. "His face was swollen and burning," Frost's widow Helen said. Although he threw water on his face, the burning and swelling persisted. Eventually, his skin started to split and bleed. Frost's condition continued to deteriorate, eventually spreading to his internal organs, and 16 months later he was dead of cirrhosis of the liver at the age of 57. Local doctors never figured out what caused Frost's illness, but a Rutgers University biochemist who examined tissue samples taken shortly before his death concluded that Frost had been exposed to toxic fumes. Had he lived longer, the scientist said, Frost would have contracted cancer. "He had been exposed to large amounts of dioxins and dibenzofurans," Helen Frost said. "But where? We had nothing like that around the house."

Frost's widow and six other workers who claim to have been poisoned by the fumes have filed lawsuits against the Department of Defense and the Environmental Protection Agency. They say the fumes appear to have come from burning toxic waste on a U.S. Air Force Base in the Nevada desert. The case is shaping up as a test of the extent to which the U.S. military can withhold information from the public on national security grounds. Finding out anything about the base, where the U-2 spy plane and the stealth bomber reportedly were tested, is difficult. It is so secret that the Air Force does not even admit that it exists. Although the base, just 30 miles from this rag-tag desert hamlet, can be seen from surrounding public lands, a nearly impenetrable cloak of secrecy surrounds it. It is so secure that local dirt roads are lined with sensors that detect cars. Get too close and guards wearing desert camouflage fatigues appear as if from nowhere in unmarked white four-wheel-drive vehicles.

The super-secrecy has led to a small cult of UFO fanatics here who are convinced the U.S. government has captured flying saucers and maybe even living extraterrestrials locked up on the base. Frost, a sheet metal worker, erected buildings and installed air conditioning ducts at the base for almost nine years as an employee of Reynolds Electric Engineering Co., a contractor to the Air Force. He and his fellow workers called the place "Area 51," or "Groom Lake," the name of the dry lake bed that lies beside the base. It was here, the plaintiffs contend, that they were routinely exposed to the fumes when hazardous waste was burned in huge open trenches. The Defense Department, arguing that disclosure of even the smallest scrap of information about the secret base would endanger many lives, has stonewalled since the suits were filed in August 1994. Using common-law provisions that provide the government the right of "military and state secret privilege," the Pentagon has refused to acknowledge that the base has a name and even refused to confirm that jet

fuel might be stored there, even though jets regularly fly in and out.

The government refuses all public comment on the ongoing legal battle. Jonathan Turley, a law professor at George Washington University and director of the nonprofit Environmental Crimes Project, is representing Helen Frost and the six other plaintiffs who are known only as John Does in the suit against the government. Their names remain under court seal, Turley said, because the former Air Force contract workers say the government threatened to imprison them if they went public with their complaints. Turley contends that the Air Force used the Groom Lake base not only to test exotic aircraft but also to dump toxic waste. He says he has evidence that government contractors brought truckloads of hazardous waste to Groom Lake for disposal so that it could be eliminated without having to comply with stringent environmental protection laws. "Corporate officials have gone to jail for violations that are far less egregious than those involved in this case," Turley said. "This case is about whether the federal government is subject to federal law in the same way as corporations and individuals are." According to the plaintiffs, trucks would bring 55-gallon drums containing various toxic and hazardous wastes to an area on the fringe of the base every other week and place them in deep trenches the size of football fields.

Once in place, the drums were covered with refuse, doused with jet fuel and then set alight with a flare gun. The smoke and fumes that billowed out of those open trenches had an acrid odor, the plaintiffs said, like the smell of burning plastic. Some of the effects were felt immediately. Workers complained of respiratory difficulties, burning sensations on their skin and impaired motor ability. But some of the effects took longer to appear. "There have been elevated levels of cancer," Turley said. Helen Frost said three of her husband's co-workers not involved in the lawsuits have died of cancer since he died.

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