

# Camp Hale ordnance cleanup may take years

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*Author/Byline: Steve Lipsher Denver Post Mountain Bureau*

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LEADVILLE - Cleanup of potentially deadly World War II-era ordnance being discovered around Camp Hale could take 10 years or more, and federal funding of the project is uncertain, authorities disclosed at public-information meetings last week.

"If I had to guess right now, I would say 10 years from now we're still addressing some of the lower-priority areas," said Jeff Swanson, project manager for the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment.

And because the cleanup money comes from the underfunded Formerly Used Defense Sites program of the Department of Defense, even immediate efforts aren't guaranteed beyond this year, Swanson told a gathering at the Delaware Hotel in Leadville.

"Every year, more and more sites are identified around the country, and there's not more money going into the program every year," he said.

Currently, the nationwide cleanup program entails some 2,657 sites, including 30 in Colorado, but few are believed to have as many pieces of unexploded ordnance as Camp Hale, the birthplace of the famed 10th Mountain Division.

More than 40 military training spots have been identified within a 250,000-acre area roughly bounded by Leadville, Vail Pass, Frisco and Breckenridge, and authorities fear increasing encounters with dangerous munitions.

"We have no information of anybody being killed or injured by unexploded ordnance" in the United States, said Jerry Hodgson of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. "But you can't depend on luck forever. ... This area is becoming more highly

populated, meaning more exposure and more potential for risk."

The problem at Camp Hale came to light only in 1999, when a hiker on Whitney Peak found a live World War II mortar round, followed by the discovery less than a year later of four live rifle grenades in the East Fork Valley and a 155mm shell near Homestake Reservoir.

Then in September 2000, hunters carried off an explosive anti-tank land-mine fuse before learning what it was, prompting the U.S. Forest Service to close off a 1,400-acre swath of land, including the popular East Fork campground and 3 miles of the Colorado Trail.

Mine-sweeping efforts enabled the reopening of the main travel corridors, but after the snow thaws this spring, the Forest Service is expected to increase the closure area by another 600 acres to cover a suspected artillery-training area.

"We're so early in the project, we don't know what areas have what hazards," Swanson said. "It's a huge area. Logistically, it takes a day or two just to go in and look at one site. ... In the next year, we should have the priority areas identified."

But officials are struggling with the lack of specific information about where bombs, grenades, bullets, mortars and other explosives were fired during training around Camp Hale.

For more than 20 years, the camp in a broad valley near Tennessee Pass was the site of poorly documented military maneuvers and artillery ranges, and in the early 1960s it even was used by the Central Intelligence Agency clandestinely for training Tibetan insurgents.

Showing a defused anti-tank mine detonator that looks like a rusty tin can, Hodgson noted: "This item would probably blow your foot off if you stepped on it."

"Many munitions don't look like munitions," he continued. "Looks can be deceiving ... even if it looks just like a rusty piece of metal."

A big fear, however, is the sheer number of unexploded shells