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Dartmouth Excavates Mass Lab-Animal Grave

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HANOVER — Far up Hanover Center Road in a hilltop pasture, secrets from Dartmouth College's past lie buried in an unmarked graveyard ... Or so the legend might go, if not for an effort by the school to excavate lab animals buried at Rennie Farm and restore environmental health to the 230-acre property by next spring.

"It's the right thing to do," said Michael Blayney, director of the school's Environmental Health and Safety office. "It's good stewardship and good environmental responsibility."

An unknown number of rats, mice, rabbits and possibly cats used in Dartmouth Medical School research from the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s were buried in heavy duty plastic bags at the pasture, according to Blayney. While he said it was too soon to say how many animals were interred at the site, Blayney confirmed 43 separate plots, each containing anywhere from several dozen to more than 100 bags of well-preserved carcasses.

Records indicated that the lab animals may have been injected with trace amounts of radioactive chemicals, and college officials were concerned that hazardous waste could be seeping from the site.

But soil and groundwater tests conducted bi-annually since 2007 have revealed no evidence of any radioactive or other hazardous materials in the vicinity of the eighth- to quarter- acre burial plot. The tracers that might have been used — carbon 14 or tritium — are either low-energy or have short half-lives and would have broken down by now anyway, Blayney said.

The remains of the animals inside the bags were not tested for hazardous materials because they are being dumped into refrigerated trucks and hauled to an out-of-state incinerator.

"The carcasses themselves are old and smelly and stinky," Blayney said. "We're not going to open those bags and expose either ourselves or the environment."

If the animals had been left in the ground, there would have been no serious environmental repercussions, Blayney said, but the plastic bags and their sealed contents would not have decomposed anytime soon.

Seven nearby property owners were sent a letter describing the excavation, and many others have stopped by the site to inquire about what's going on. A Dartmouth security guard posted there said he's not authorized to talk about the project, and directs interested passersby to a copy of the letter kept in a waterproof box. While some neighbors apparently knew about the property's history, oth-

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ers, like newcomer Jason Crist, were unaware that a mass grave of lab animals lies beneath the idyllic fields just beyond his backyard.

"That's creepy," said Crist, who moved into a house abutting the property with his two children in June. He said he was certainly aware of the work going on next door — a gravel road was constructed through the usually-quiet fields, and a generator now hums day and night to power the refrigerated trucks — but he'd assumed someone had bought the property and was building a house.

(Blayney said that Crist should have received a letter explaining the project, and that he'd try to figure out why he didn't.)

Several other neighbors expressed concern that Dartmouth was cleaning up the property in an attempt to sell or develop it, and feared that such activity might change the rural character of the area or prevent them from using the land for recreation, Blayney said. But he emphasized that Dartmouth recognizes the beauty of the site and is interested only in "seeing that land is protected and preserved."

"None of that is being contemplated," he said. "There is one specific purpose: ... to restore the land to its natural state."

But Dartmouth Real Estate Associate Director Tim McNamara acknowledged that selling "is always an option."

"Dartmouth at this point has no plans on developing the land, but we would be interested in some point in time in selling," McNamara said. He said the school is not currently pursuing any sales opportunities.

Burying garbage bags full of dead mice was once common practice, but it was effectively halted in the mid-1970s, when incineration became widely available. Other medical schools across the country have undertaken projects similar to that in Hanover in recent years, Blayney said, though he could not offer specific numbers of examples.

For nearby landowners concerned about the noise, Blayney assured that the most disruptive part of the project should be finished in the next three weeks, and then work will cease for the winter. In the spring, additional soil testing will be conducted, and restoration work will be done to reseed the area where the excavation occurred.

The cost of the project may run anywhere from $1 million to $2 million, depending on the volume of material found at the site. There is a lab in a trailer at the site for analysis of any chemical discoveries.

While it may be a nuisance to neighbors, the excavation work — which began with a treasure-hunt-like search of the property using a hand-drawn map — is a thrill for Blayney and his colleagues.

"This is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity," he said. "It's exciting to be able to do it."

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