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PACE, Eniwetok hearings over

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Two days of public hearings on the environmental impact statement for the U.S. Air Force's Pacific Cratering Experiments (PACE) at Eniwetok Atoll in the Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands concluded last night with a flurry of criticisms directed at the government project.

Representatives of the Micronesian Legal Services Association, the Friends of Micronesia and the University of Hawaii Anthropology department, plus several individuals, tore into the Air Force program during the two sessions at Ft. DeRussy's Maluhia Service Center.

PACE is a two-part program designed to find out what happens to installations, the ground and the atmosphere when giant TNT blasts to 100 tons in size are set off to simulate nuclear blasts.

THE AIR FORCE has chosen two islands in Eniwetok Atoll as the sites for these blasts because of nuclear bomb craters existing there from the early 1950s.

Although no final environmental impact statement will be issued for several weeks, the PACE project is under way.

The Eniwetok people, who were evacuated to Ujelang Island prior to the 1950s test period, have been promised they can return to their native atoll following conclusion of the PACE tests.

But critics almost universally claim that additional bombing would do further irreparable damage to the Eniwetokese homeland.

The most vocal critics of PACE at Wednesday night's hearing were Dr. Robert Kiste, visiting professor of anthropology at the University, and Ted Mitchell, a Saipan attorney and counsel to the people of Eniwetok.

KISTE HAS conducted field research four times in the past 10 years at Eniwetok and Bikini atolls. He blasted a section of the environmental impact statement which reads:

"At this time there are no permanent residents on Eniwetok Atoll. Thus, the proposed tests would have no direct impact on inhabitants."

Because the Eniwetokese have been promised their return to Eniwetok, Kiste said, there is a definite direct impact. He fears the impact may be similar to that experienced by returning Bikini islanders when they were permitted to return to their native atoll after the devastating Air Force tests.

"On Bikini, the tests had a disastrous effect on the spirit and morale of the inhabitants," Kiste said. "This had an adverse effect on the leadership, and Bikini was no longer a self-sufficient community, as it had been before the tests."

MITCHELL CITED the possible threat of radioactivity spread throughout the atoll as another possible impact on the Eniwetokese people.

"The concentration of the radioactive food web is a vital environmental question, and it has got to be answered," the attorney said.

Mitchell said radioactivity has been known to cause a form of poisoning in algae, which has proved fatal when consumed by fish and later eaten by humans. He said radioactivity can also increase starfish populations, thereby cutting into the islanders' marine food supply.

Mitchell also produced a transcript from public hearings among the Eniwetokese people on Ujelang Island March 26-28. Those hearings, conducted primarily in the Marshallese language, referred to the bombs as "big firecrackers" and were unnecessarily alarmist in indicating the urgency of the tests, according to Mitchell.

ISLANDERS TESTIFYING at those hearings stressed the point that their natural resources — their land, their flora and their fauna — are worth gold to them. The total destruction of two islands during the 1950s tests is still a vivid memory in their minds.

Smith Gideon, Eniwetok magistrate of Ujelang Island, was quoted as saying:

"I do not know if you have made an attempt to compare your sense of values, you who live in America or elsewhere, with ours. You live with gold and money, and we have to depend on land and whatever life we can find on land and in the water. Without these, we are nothing.

"We do not have to explain further that Eniwetok, with whatever land resources and whatever marine resources it has, is our homeland. And seeing that you understand this, we do not know why you continue to insist to do these things on Eniwetok, when for us there is really nothing else to look forward to."

Air Force officials said material collected at all hearings will be considered in issuance of a final environmental impact statement.