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The fleet of old, rotting warships in Suisun Bay – known as the “ghost fleet” or the “mothball fleet” – will be cleaned in dry-dock in San Francisco before being towed to Texas to be broken apart under federal plans announced Thursday.

Warships in Suisun Bay will be recycled

By MARCUS WOHLSEN
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BENICIA – A fleet of old, rotting warships shedding toxic paint into the water near San Francisco Bay will be cleaned up and recycled under a plan announced by federal officials Thursday.

The Suisun Bay Reserve Fleet – more than 70 mostly obsolete vessels in Suisun Bay – has been at the center of a nearly three-year deadlock between state water regulators and the federal government, which manages the ships.

Deputy Secretary of Transportation John Porcari said the government already has awarded contracts to dispose of two of the World War II-era cargo ships. And Porcari said the ships will be cleaned in dry-dock, not in the bay, alleviating state officials' concerns about additional water pollution.

“This is definitely big,” said Bruce Wolfe, executive officer of the San Francisco Bay Regional Water Quality Control Board. “This is the start.”

A congressional order set a 2006 deadline to scrap more than 50 ships in the fleet, but a regulatory quagmire has kept them in place.

A lack of disposal operations on the West Coast means the ships must be

towed to Texas to be broken apart. Under federal law, the ships must be cleaned of invasive species clinging to their hulls before they can enter the ocean.

California officials fought a Bush administration plan to clean the ships where they were anchored, arguing that the process would cause paint laden with heavy metals to flake off into the bay. They also filed suit against the federal government, claiming the paint flaking-off the ships as they sit idle put the fleet in violation of the federal Clean Water Act.

Putting the ships in dry dock in San Francisco eases worries about the cleanup causing further pollution, Wolfe said. But he said the state would continue to press its suit until a settlement or court order puts legal force behind the government's commitment to get rid of all ships awaiting disposal.

Environmentalists have long criticized the U.S. Maritime Administration for the delays in removing the ships. They said the government must act aggressively to get rid of the rest.

“MARAD has not yet committed to a concrete and enforceable timetable for cleaning and removing the remaining ships,” said Michael Wall, an attorney

with the Natural Resources Defense Council.

Of the 57 ships slated for the scrap heap, Porcari said the 25 most decrepit vessels would be disposed of first. The process would take several years because of limited space in dry-dock facilities, he said.

When steel prices were high, recyclers would pay for the rights to dispose of the ships in exchange for the steel they contain. In today's economy, the government is paying more than \$2 million to a Brownsville, Texas, company to dismantle them.

The dry-docking will cost the government another \$500,000 per ship.

“It is worth it in environmental terms to do it the right way,” Porcari said.

The country's three major reserve fleets, including one in Beaumont, Texas, and another near Newport News, Va., were once maintained to return to active duty in case of war or disaster. Over time, many ships fell into disrepair and became a financial and environmental burden.

In Suisun Bay, the aging hulks tied together in rows have become a landmark visible from a heavily traveled commuter bridge. They are known together as the “ghost fleet” or the “mothball fleet.”