

Toxic Exposures

VFW's Concerns:

Service members are exposed to toxins when they are in war zones. In Vietnam, veterans were exposed to Agent Orange, and those who served in the offshore waters of Vietnam during the war drank, bathed in, and cooked with water contaminated by Agent Orange. Expansion of presumptive exposure to Agent Orange for Blue Water Navy veterans has been held hostage by restrictions on the budget which have allowed one group of veterans to be treated in a lesser fashion compared to other veterans of the same war.

From 1967 to 1969 the United States government authorized the testing and use of toxic herbicides, including Agent Orange, to improve observation and fields of fire for American service members patrolling along the Korean demilitarized zone (DMZ) and deny hostile forces concealment provided by vegetation. Due to direct exposure to these toxic herbicides, Korean DMZ veterans now suffer from conditions directly linked to Agent Orange. In 2003, Congress authorized the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to establish presumptive disability compensation benefits for veterans who served along the Korean DMZ between September 1, 1967, and August 31, 1971, which incorporates the earliest use of toxic herbicides along the Korean DMZ, and accounts for the half-life of such toxins. However, VA unjustly elected to begin the presumptive date on April 1, 1968 — seven months after Congress suggested. In so doing, VA requires veterans who served along the Korean DMZ between September 1967 and April 1968 to prove individual exposure, which is almost impossible to do nearly 50 years after the incident.

VFW's Solutions:

- Congress must pass H.R. 299, or S. 422, the *Blue Water Navy Vietnam Veterans Act of 2017*, which would expand VA benefits and services to Blue Water Navy veterans.
- Congress must pass H.R. 3605, the *Fairness for Korean DMZ Veterans Act of 2017*, which would expand the period of time that veterans on the Korean DMZ are known to have been exposed to Agent Orange.

Additional VFW Priorities:

- Congress must pass H.R. 632, or S. 283, the *Mark Takai Atomic Veterans Healthcare Parity Act*, which would expand benefits to veterans who were exposed to radiation from atomic testing and cleanup.
- Congress must pass H.R. 4843, or S. 2105, to expand benefits to veterans who served on bases in Thailand during the Vietnam era who suffer from conditions associated with Agent Orange.
- Congress must pass legislation requiring better coordination between DOD and VA related to sharing information on burn pits and other exposures related to operations after September 11, 2001.
- VA must provide effective treatments and consistent benefits to Persian Gulf War veterans who suffer from an array of conditions and diseases, collectively known as Gulf War Illness. Congress must continue to properly fund independent research on the causes and effective treatments for Gulf War Illness.
- Congress and VA must continue to fund independent research on the impact of exposure to hazards, including open air burn pits and the antimalarial drug mefloquine, on the health of Iraq and Afghanistan veterans.
- Congress and VA must research the impact of exposure to soil, air, and drinking water contaminated by PCBs on the health of veterans who were stationed at Fort McClellan, Alabama.