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Scientists Say Pentagon Misleads on Dust Study

By Kelly Kennedy, USA TODAY

WASHINGTON — The Pentagon is falsely claiming its research shows that airborne dust in Iraq and Afghanistan poses no health risk to U.S. troops, say three scientists whose review of that research found it riddled with mistakes.



Marines deal with dust kicked up by a Black Hawk helicopter as they rush a colleague wounded from an improvised explosive device in Afghanistan's volatile Helmand province.

Military officials then falsely said the review of their research backed their conclusion that the dust in the two war zones is no different from that in California, scientists Philip Hopke, Mark Utell and Anthony Wexler say.

The scientists, who issued their report last year for the National Research Council (NRC) of the National Academy of Sciences, were part of a team that reviewed a 2008 study at the request of the Pentagon.

The earlier report, which was conducted for the military by the Nevada-based Desert Research Institute, made a series of incorrect conclusions and used faulty research methods, the 2010 study showed.

It is simply not true that research supports the Pentagon's claim that Middle Eastern dust is similar to that in the United States or that it poses no health risks, says Hopke, a Clarkson University scientist who conducted the National Research Council study. "It's a bit disappointing when they know that, realistically, the data does not support that conclusion," he says.

Both studies were conducted to better understand risks as the number of U.S. troops who served in Iraq and Afghanistan and developed mysterious and severe respiratory conditions skyrocketed after their service. Since the start of the wars in 2003 and 2001, neurological disorders per 10,000 active-duty servicemembers have risen by 251%, while respiratory issues jumped by 47%, according to a USA TODAY analysis of military morbidity records from 2001 to 2010.

In a series of interviews and written memos in recent months, Pentagon health officials have claimed that the 2008 study found nothing wrong with the dust from the Middle East. "It is not noticeably different from samples collected in the Sahara Desert and desert regions in the U.S. and China," Craig Postlewaite, head of the Pentagon Force Protection and Readiness Office, told USA TODAY for a May story.

That USA TODAY report, Postlewaite and other Pentagon officials later said, "attempts to form a 'cause and effect' relationship" but there is "no evidence on which to base such a relationship."

In a blog on the Defense Department's website, Navy Capt. Patrick Laraby cited the NRC study directly: "After an exhaustive review, the NRC was unable to identify any health risks and indicated that they would need more data to determine whether there were any risks," Laraby wrote.

Utell, a professor at the University of Rochester School of Medicine who headed the National Research Council study, said it's incorrect for the Pentagon to claim the council's research found "no adverse health effects."

Instead, he said, the 2010 study found there could be negative health effects from the dust and that the 2008 research was so flawed "that they wouldn't be able to determine that with their study."

Utell, Hopke and Wexler, of the University of California-Davis, say their study found that the military's research in the 2008 report was flawed from the beginning, and the council made no statement that the dust is safe or similar to that back home.

In fact, they said the Army's research was so "ill-founded" that it couldn't be used to determine anything other than that the fine particulate matter levels in the Middle East far exceeded recommended World Health Organization levels.

Postlewaite did not respond directly to questions about how he and others represented the two studies. Instead, he said the council praises the military's "ability to carry out such a large-scale exposure-monitoring study in the midst of a military operation."

Utell agreed that the military took on a big task that could lead to better surveillance, but he and Wexler said military medical command were told even before they began the 2008 study that it was faulty. "It is troubling that they did not take the scientists' recommendations to heart," Utell said.

Wexler said these kinds of studies have been performed before, so researchers should have known that the sampling equipment they used would be overwhelmed by sandstorms, that samples should not be kept in plastic containers in a hot environment because they could become contaminated, and that samples should be taken every third day - as has been the EPA standard since 1997 - rather than every sixth day. "It's not like it's rocket science," Wexler said.

He said the researchers used "inappropriate" methods to test for metals, and that when they did perform analyses correctly, they did not release the results. "It was just weird," Wexler said. "Were there people in the military trying to cover up and get away with something? Who knows. It could also be the best they could do with the resources they have."

Johann Engelbrecht, the Desert Research Institute scientist who led the 2008 study, called the council report "probably a fair judgment" and said he planned to use its recommendations for his upcoming report. That report is being paid for by a \$1.2 million earmark put in the defense budget by Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, a Nevada Democrat.

DRI, Engelbrecht said, is independent and was not pressured by the military.

http://www.usatoday.com/news/military/2011-07-06-dust-risk-troops-Pentagon_n.htm