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Clinton Expands Agent Orange Disability Benefits

By Rudi Williams

American Forces Press Service

WASHINGTON, May 31, 1996 – President Clinton has extended veterans benefits to Vietnam War veterans exposed to Agent Orange and other herbicides. He also asked Congress to legislate benefits to veterans' children afflicted with spina bifida.

"This is the first time the offspring of American soldiers will receive benefits for combat-related health problems," Clinton said. The president added prostate cancer and peripheral neuropathy, a neurological disorder, to the list of diseases the Department of

Veterans Affairs recognizes as related to exposure to Agent Orange and other herbicides. The others are cancer of the lungs, bronchi, larynx and trachea; chloracne; porphyria cutanea tarda; multiple myeloma; Hodgkin's disease; non-Hodgkin's lymphoma; and soft tissue sarcoma.

Clinton's decision stems from a recent National Academy of Sciences report linking Agent Orange to prostate cancer, acute and subacute peripheral neuropathy in war veterans and to spina bifida in children of exposed veterans.

About 2.6 million veterans served within the borders of South Vietnam and in adjacent waters, according to VA Secretary Jesse Brown. He estimated up to 3,000 children of Vietnam veterans may be afflicted with spina bifida.

"Vietnam veterans are not required to prove exposure to Agent Orange. VA presumes that all military personnel who served in Vietnam were exposed to Agent Orange," Brown emphasized. "The evidence, pro and con, is quite evenly balanced regarding these conditions, but the president and I firmly believe that VA needs to be on the side of veterans and their children."

"We are showing that America can listen and act," the president said. "We will bear responsibility for the harm we do, even when the harm is unintended. We will continue to honor those who served our country and gave so much. Nothing we can do will ever fully repay the Vietnam veterans for all they gave and all they lost, particularly those who have been damaged by Agent Orange."

In response to the National Academy of Sciences findings, VA is increasing funding for research to learn more about the possible relationship between herbicide exposure and development of birth defects and other health problems in veterans' offspring, Brown announced.

Vietnam veterans or their survivors who believe their health problems may be related to Agent Orange should contact the nearest Veterans Affairs medical center or regional office. The nationwide toll-free number is (800) 827-1000.