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Minister  
of Veterans Affairs



Ministre  
des Anciens Combattants

Ottawa, Canada K1A 0P4

June 19, 2009

Gary Goode  
P.O. Box 301  
Ferne, B.C.  
V0B 1M0

Dear Mr. Goode :

I regret that I was not available when you were recently in my riding. As you know, I was in Afghanistan at the time -- meeting many of our remarkable men and women who are serving our country in the same way that you and all of our other Veterans have always stood up for Canada.

While you were in St. Stephen, you gave staff in my local constituency office a copy of a letter you wanted shared with the Prime Minister and other members of our government. I want you to know that this was done and that the Prime Minister's Office has since asked me to take the lead in responding to the issues you raised.

Let me state from the outset that I am proud of how our government has delivered a fair and compassionate program of ex gratia payments – something that so many previous federal governments refused to do. As my immediate Liberal predecessor has admitted, her government did not act because the file was simply “too difficult.”

I do not pretend to think that our response is perfect. Too much time has passed since Agent Orange was tested at CFB Gagetown in the summers of 1966 and 1967. Too many medical records and other critical documents are no longer available. But I do believe, and rightfully so, that we got it as right as humanly possible.

We cannot change what happened 40 years ago. It was an entirely different era and, I am sure, if the government of the day had known what we know now, it probably would not have allowed the testing of Agent Orange to proceed. But we can't turn back the clock.

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Canada

We can only try to be just and fair in our own time -- and I sincerely believe our \$96.5 million program of ex gratia payments is truly just and fair.

It is important to remember that there is no definitive science linking Agent Orange exposure to any medical illnesses. In fact, the best the United States' Institute of Medicine can tell us – as the world leader on Agent Orange and other herbicides used in Vietnam– is that there is an “association” between some medical conditions and exposure to Agent Orange.

This is one of the reasons why Dr. Dennis Furlong, the respected former New Brunswick health minister who headed the government's fact-finding mission at CFB Gagetown, concluded there was no need for ex gratia payments. His research found that the base is safe and that the vast majority of people have not experienced long-term health effects. This is good news. It should be re-assuring to those who worked on the base or lived around it 40 years ago.

Our critics argue, however, that they will only be comforted by a full public inquiry into the spraying of Agent Orange at CFB Gagetown. I understand that; there was a time when I also thought this was the only way to “clear the air.” But I have since had the honour of being appointed the Minister of Veterans Affairs and I have been able to ensure that Dr. Furlong left no stone unturned with his work.

As a result, I am satisfied that a public inquiry would not achieve anything more than what Dr. Furlong did. For example, he had full access to any files and reports he needed from the Department of National Defence. Furthermore, I personally directed him to expand the scope of his work. Among other things, I asked him to have additional tests performed on riverbeds and streams and in other parts of the base where constituents believed barrels of Agent Orange had been buried.

My ministerial staff also conducted its own research to complement Dr. Furlong's work. We went through weather reports; we studied “drift theories”; and we tapped the experience of environmental experts. All these efforts helped to vastly improve the fact-finding mission we had inherited from the previous government. I'd like to share with you just one important example:

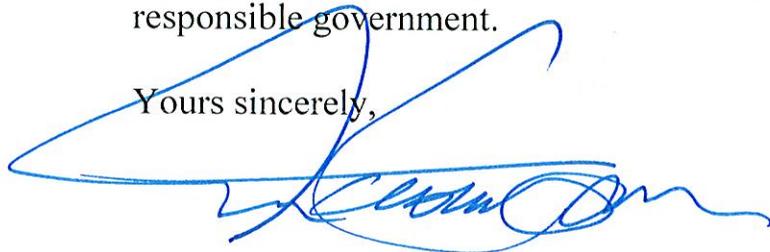
According to the best science available, dioxin can accumulate and remain in the fatty tissues of animals for decades. Unfortunately, animals such as deer and partridge do not live 40 years. But clams do. That's why I asked Dr. Furlong to study the local clam population. The results were negative. Again, this is good news.

Of course, I realize that you may not be aware of all of these developments. I also recognize that this is an emotional issue. We are talking about people's lives, about our health and the health of our loved ones. My wife still believes my own battle with non-Hodgkins lymphoma was caused by the countless spray programs I was exposed to while growing up on my family's farm in southern New Brunswick – whether it was the province spraying for Spruce Bud worm; NB Power trying to keep its hydro lines clear of trees; the railway companies trying to stay ahead of the brush and vegetation growing by their train tracks; or our own family using various agricultural products and insecticides.

More than 40 years later, we may never know for sure why some people developed certain medical conditions or diseases and others did not. But Canadians who genuinely believe they were affected by the Agent Orange tests have lost the opportunity to demonstrate how they were impacted.

That's why we have acted as we have. While there is no scientific evidence that the testing at the Base caused harm, we have done the right thing, with ex gratia payments that represent a fair, transparent and accountable solution from a responsible government.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Greg Thompson', is written over the 'Yours sincerely,' text.

The Honourable Greg Thompson, P.C., M.P.  
Minister of Veterans Affairs