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If Veterans don't help Veterans, who will?

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United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

December 14, 2018

The Honorable Mitch McConnell
Senate Majority Leader
317 Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Leader McConnell,

As we enter the final legislative days of the 115th Congress, we write to you with an urgent request to ensure Senate action on the Blue Water Navy Vietnam Veterans Act of 2017. This bipartisan legislation passed the House of Representatives earlier this summer by a unanimous vote of 382-to-0 and its Senate companion has 53 bipartisan cosponsors. The bill, HR 299, has the support of Chairman Isakson and Ranking Member Tester. The bill was hotlined two weeks ago and earlier this week, we were joined by the Chairman, Ranking Member in asking unanimous consent to pass the bill. Two Senators have objected to our bipartisan attempt to pass this bill based on misinformation about the magnitude and consequences of Agent Orange exposure. As such, we request your support in allocating floor time for a vote on H.R.299—to pass this bill and finally deliver the long-overdue care and benefits our Blue Water Navy Veterans deserve.

As you know, during the Vietnam War, the U.S. Army sprayed 20 million gallons of the herbicide Agent Orange to remove foliage. This chemical has had devastating health effects on those who served in and around Vietnam, and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention have linked Agent Orange exposure to illnesses such as non-Hodgkins Lymphoma, prostate and other cancers, Type II Diabetes, and Parkinson's Disease.

In 1991, Congress passed legislation requiring the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to provide presumptive health coverage to all illnesses linked to Agent Orange. However, in 2002 the VA made an arbitrary, bureaucratic decision that this presumptive coverage would only be extended to veterans who could provide orders for "boots on the ground" in Vietnam. This decision was contrary to the intent of Congress, and was not subject to any public comment or review. This bill would correct that wrong.

The Blue Water Navy Vietnam Veterans Act would clarify the existing law so that Blue Water Navy veterans, who served in the territorial seas of the Republic of Vietnam and were exposed to Agent Orange in their water supplies, would be granted VA coverage equitable to those who are already covered. The bill would make it easier for the VA to process Vietnam War veterans' claims for service-connected conditions, helping reduce the VA claims backlog and provide certainty to thousands of directly affected. This legislation is long overdue to correct this injustice, and we request your support in bringing H.R.299 to the Senate floor for a vote before the end of the 115th Congress.

Sincerely,

Kirsten Gillibrand
United States Senator

Steve Daines
United States Senator

cc: Senator Charles E. Schumer, Senate Minority Leader
Senator Johnny Isakson, Chairman, Senate Veterans Affairs Committee
Senator Jon Tester, Ranking Member, Senate Veterans Affairs Committee