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VA Renews Opposition to Agent Orange Benefits for Blue Water Navy Vets



A Vietnam veteran listens as Agent Orange expert and military historian Paul Sutton addresses the group during a town hall meeting held at the New Jersey State council, Vietnam Veterans of America, at VFW Post 809 in Little Ferry, N.J., on Sept. 27, 2015. (Jim Anness/Northjersey.com via AP)

18 Jan 2019 | Military.com | By Richard Sisk

The Department of Veterans Affairs shows no signs of backing off opposition to extending Agent Orange health care and benefits to "Blue Water Navy" Vietnam veterans, setting up another major battle this year with veterans groups and overwhelming majorities in the House and Senate.

The VA still lacks "sufficient evidence" to prove a presumptive link between service off the coast of Vietnam and the illnesses caused by the widespread use of the defoliant Agent Orange, Paul Lawrence, the VA's under secretary and head of the Veterans Benefits Administration, said Thursday. "In terms of presumptives, they come with a real requirement of sufficient evidence to indicate it's warranted," he said in a panel discussion on a VA Town Hall webcast.

Veterans who served on the ground or on the inland waterways of Vietnam are now eligible for Agent Orange health care and benefits. But existing studies do not show definitive causation between the illnesses suffered by the estimated 90,000 Blue Water Navy veterans and the use of Agent Orange, Lawrence said. "We understand the situation," he said. "We talked about having more studies in 2019 that would give us more insight into what the causation was and the definitive conclusions behind it."

He gave no indication of when the studies might be completed.

Blue Water veterans can file a claim, which will be evaluated on a case-by-case basis, Lawrence said, but they "must be supported by science."

He took a similar position on claims by veterans that they suffered illnesses from the toxic fumes of the burn pits used in Iraq and Afghanistan, saying those claims also must be supported by scientific evidence.

On Monday, the U.S. Supreme Court rejected an appeal by veterans for damages against companies that managed the open-air burn pits.

Last August, Lawrence and VA Secretary Robert Wilkie stunned Congress by announcing their opposition to a bill extending Agent Orange benefits to Blue Water sailors that had overwhelming bipartisan support in the House and Senate. The bill had passed 382-0 in the House and appeared headed to easy passage in the Senate with the support of Sen. Johnny Isakson, R-Georgia, chairman of the Senate Veterans Affairs Committee.

However, Lawrence, at a Senate Veterans Affairs Committee hearing, said, "It's difficult to hear from veterans who are ill," but "there is no conclusive science" from a report by the Institute of Medicine to show a service connection.

Major veterans service organizations (VSOs) disputed Lawrence on the evidence, but the bill failed in December when Sen. Mike Enzi, R-Wyoming, citing the costs, blocked a Senate vote.

The Congressional Budget Office had estimated that about 90,000 sailors could be covered by the bill, which would likely cost about \$1.1 billion over 10 years.

Last week, House Democrats reintroduced the "Blue Water Navy" bill, setting up another lengthy battle with the VA on extending Agent Orange benefits.

In a statement, Rep. Mark Takano, D-California, the new chairman of the House Veterans Affairs Committee, said, "We must get to work and finally secure the benefits our Blue Water Navy veterans earned over 40 years ago."

On Thursday, three VSOs -- the Paralyzed Veterans of America, Disabled American Veterans and the Veterans of Foreign Wars -- said that passage of the Blue Water Navy bill would be at the top of their legislative agenda for 2019.

"One of our key legislative concerns is ensuring that veterans who were exposed to dangerous toxic chemicals and other environment hazards during their service receive full compensation and other earned benefits," DAV National Commander Dennis Nixon said in a statement.

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<https://www.military.com/daily-news/2019/01/18/va-renews-opposition-agent-orange-benefits-blue-water-navy-vets.html>