‘Agent Orange Made Veterans Sick’

VFW Urges President to Take Care of Blue Water Navy Veterans

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WASHINGTON — The Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States is thanking the leadership of the House Veterans Affairs Committee for attempting to pass the *Blue Water Navy Vietnam Veterans Act*, and is now calling on President Trump to fix the 15-year inequity.

At issue is the *Agent Orange Act of 1991*, which regarded all Vietnam veterans as the same, regardless of where stationed. A regulation change in 2002 stripped coverage from nearly 100,000 so called “Blue Water Navy” veterans — all with valid service-connected disability claims.

“Excluding Blue Water Navy veterans is a long-standing wrong that essentially marginalizes the service and sacrifice of thousands of Vietnam veterans, ” said VFW National Commander Keith Harman, who served in Vietnam as an Army helicopter crew chief and door gunner. “Agent Orange has made Vietnam veterans sick. If any Vietnam veteran has one or more of the presumptive illnesses, our government has an inherent responsibility to take care of them.”

In today’s markup, Committee Chairman Phil Roe (R-Tenn.) and Ranking Member Tim Walz (D-Minn.) discussed how to offset the cost of passing H.R. 299, the *Blue Water Navy Vietnam Veterans Act*, which the Congressional Budget Office estimated would cost more than $1 billion over 10 years. A recommendation to round down annual cost-of-living increases to the next whole percentage point was rightfully dismissed because it would take from one veteran to give to another, which the VFW has strongly opposed in the past. This stopped movement on the bill, and is the reason why the VFW national commander is asking the president to intervene.

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"The Chairman and Ranking Member are both veterans and friends of the VFW," said Harman, "and we suspect because of the projected cost, H.R. 299 was not going to pass without some form of pay-go," he explained. "Budget caps, the sequester, and a whole lot of factors are standing in the way of this bill becoming law. I'm just glad everyone agrees that we absolutely cannot financially penalize one group of disabled veterans just to expand services to another group of disabled veterans," he said.

Bypassing Congress and urging the president to change the regulation is now the next step, since he has the authority to fix this issue with the stroke of a pen. Since the two previous administrations from both parties had failed to correct the inequity, the VFW national commander hopes President Trump's campaign promise to take care of America's veterans includes Blue Water Navy veterans, too. "Those serving in the nation's all-volunteer military force, who have been fighting a nonstop, multi-front war for 16 years, need to be reassured that their service today will not forgotten tomorrow," said Harman.

Read the VFW's letter to President Trump here.