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Point of Contact for Interviews: James Hartman MVA media consultant

james@jameshartman.net

504-458-4600

FATE OF AGENT ORANGE-AFFECTED NAVY VETERANS IN SENATE'S, ISAKSON'S HANDS

Six weeks after the House of Representatives unanimously passed the Blue Water Navy Vietnam Veterans Act, restoring benefits to sailors who served in the bays, harbors and territorial seas of South Vietnam, the fate of the bill is in the hands of the Senate Veterans Affairs Committee, chaired by Sen. Johnny Isakson (R-GA).

On June 25, the House passed the long-sought bill 382-0, restoring benefits that had been authorized by Congress in 1991 but later stripped by administrative decision in the Department of Veterans Affairs. As a result, thousands of Navy servicemen who served aboard ships during the Vietnam War lost coverage for conditions caused by exposure to Agent Orange.

Since that decision, the VA has denied claims to sailors on the basis that they never set foot on Vietnamese soil, although several significant studies have shown that runoff from Agent Orange-impacted areas flowed into the harbors where U.S. ships were stationed. It was subsequently ingested into shipboard distillation and purification systems, where it was actually enriched and made more potent. Countless U.S. Navy personnel were not only exposed to the toxin, but bathed in it, drank it, and ate food that was cooked in it.

Last week, a VA undersecretary testified that science did not support the claims of exposure, contradicting testimony Veterans Service Organizations, hydrologists and Navy experts. The bill has now been tabled in the committee, with limited days left for the Senate to act. If the bill is not passed before the next Congress takes office in January, supporters of the bill, including the Louisiana-based Military-Veterans Advocacy, will have to start from scratch.

"We initiated this bill, we drafted the initial language, and we have advocated – even begged – for Congressional action for years," said Cdr. John Wells (USN, Ret.), executive director of the organization. "I have made countless trips to Capitol Hill in support of this legislation. Former Secretary Shulkin gave it his support. The House finally passed it – with not a single 'no' vote – in June. Now, the bill is in danger because of testimony from an undersecretary who is either uninformed or ill-informed. I have reached out to current VA Secretary Robert Wilkie and asked for his renewed support of the Blue Water Navy Vietnam Veterans Act.

"While we have waited – and while we continue to wait – literally thousands of Navy veterans are suffering without needed care," Wells said. "I am confident there are enough votes in the Senate to pass the act decisively. We need only move it through the Senate Veterans Affairs Committee and to the Senate floor. I implore Sen. Isakson and other committee members to act swiftly on this legislation, giving so many veterans the long-overdue benefits they deserve."