

For Immediate Release
Monday, Sept. 10, 2018

VA SEC'Y WILKIE IS WRONG ON NAVY BENEFITS BILL

Veterans Affairs Secretary Robert Wilkie's new opposition to HR 299, the Blue Water Navy bill, is a misguided affront to U.S. Navy veterans who have suffered for years with the results of Agent Orange exposure, the head of a national veterans advocacy group said today.

In a Sept. 6 letter to Senate Veterans Affairs Committee Chairman Johnny Isakson, Wilkie expresses opposition to the bill, which passed the House of Representatives earlier in the summer with massive support and after years of effort on the part of Military Veterans Advocacy and its executive director, Cdr. John Wells (USN, Ret.).

"Secretary Wilkie's letter is replete with misinformation, including an assertion that no scientific evidence supports the conclusion that Navy personnel who served on ships in the harbors and estuarine waters of Vietnam were exposed to the deadly toxins in Agent Orange," Wells said. "On the contrary, multiple studies provide ample evidence that the defoliant chemicals that were sprayed on land ran off into these rivers and harbors and were pumped into the water filtration systems of U.S. Navy ships. Not only were sailors exposed to the toxin, but it was made even more harmful in the distillation process."

Congress long ago authorized VA medical benefits for Navy personnel who served aboard these ships, but the policy was changed by the VA years later to only award Agent Orange benefits to personnel who set foot on Vietnamese soil. Military Veterans Advocacy and other organizations have lobbied Congress for many years to pass the Blue Water Navy bill, restoring these benefits. Now that the bill has made it through the House, it is stuck in the Senate Committee.

"Despite having widespread support in the full Senate, this bill to restore rightful benefits to our veterans is being stalled by one senator - Chairman Isakson - and is being opposed by the person who should most be on our side - Secretary Wilkie," Wells said. "Our organization supported Sec. Wilkie's nomination and he told me directly that we could meet to discuss this legislation. Contrary to his word, he has declined to discuss the matter with us, and has now delivered official opposition. This is beyond disappointing; it's maddening.

"We will continue to fight this injustice and the VA misrepresentations in the Congress and the courts. We will not give up."

###

Media contact: James Hartman, 504.458.4600 or james@jameshartman.net

Military-Veterans Advocacy is a tax exempt non-profit corporation based in Slidell, Louisiana. For more information please go to www.militaryveteransadvocacy.org