

## Department of Veterans Affairs Opposes Enactment of H.R. 299, Blue Water Navy Vietnam Veterans Act of 2018

August 7 2018 – Senate Veterans Affairs Committee Hearing on H.R. 299, Blue Water Navy Vietnam Veterans held legislative hearing on August 1, 2018, on nine pending bills before the Committee. VVA testimony at the hearing focused on our support for H.R. 299, the Blue Water Navy Vietnam Veterans Act, which passed the House on June 25, 382-0.

The Department of Veterans Affairs during their testimony presented by the Undersecretary for Benefits, Paul R. Lawrence, opposed passage of the Blue Water Navy Vietnam Veteran Act because there's still no credible scientific evidence to support extending Agent Orange-related benefits to shipboard personnel who never went ashore in Vietnam or patrolled its rivers. Without such evidence, he said, it would be wrong, and would create a disastrous precedent, to award VA benefits. VA also is opposed to paying for the provisions of this bill by increasing the cost that some veterans must pay to access their home loan benefits. Veterans will either have to finance the VA funding fee with interest, or pay up front with cash. This means fewer veterans will buy homes or will buy homes using non-VA options, potentially opening them to predatory lenders. However, Rick Weidman, VVA Executive Director for Policy and Government Affairs stated before the Committee that Congress already presumes veterans who served anywhere in Vietnam were exposed to Agent Orange and doesn't try to calculate the level of exposure. "That benefit of the doubt should be applied to shipboard personnel too." "How much exposure makes no difference."

Senator Gillibrand, D-NY, cosponsor of the companion bill S.422, stated those who served on the ground and on the rivers of Vietnam are already able to claim Agent Orange benefits, and "it doesn't make any sense" to exclude the blue water sailors, said Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand, D-New York. "I think this is an injustice that we can and must rectify," as she testified before the committee supporting passage of H.R. 499.

Chairman Isakson has considered the Blue Water Navy Vietnam Veterans Act a top priority for the committee and last week's hearing was held to ensure that the committee is not overlooking needed improvement to the bill.

The Senate as well as the House are now in recess.

VVA will continue to advocate and request your grassroots support on behalf of our Blue Water Navy Veterans until justice prevails and the bill become law.

To view the hearing and witness testimonies go to <https://www.veterans.senate.gov/hearings/pending-legislation-08012018>, you must scroll down on the page to download witness testimonies.

VVA Government Relations Team