

Are Burn Pits the Agent Orange for the Nation's Youngest Veterans?

It took Vietnam War veterans nearly two decades to receive compensation from exposure to Agent Orange and now, veterans of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan who were exposed to burn pits face a similar battle

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Since 1990, the U.S. military has burned thousands of tons of waste at bases used in the Persian Gulf War, the Afghanistan War, the Iraq War and other overseas sites. Veterans who were possibly exposed to toxic fumes from these open-air pits want to know if they were adversely affected.

In response, VA created a Burn Pit Registry in 2014 for veterans who believe they are sick from exposure to burn pits. The registry is open to all Iraq and Afghanistan veterans, anyone who served in Djibouti after Sept. 11, 2001, those who served in *Operation Desert Shield* or *Operation Desert Storm* in 1990-91, and vets who logged duty in Southwest Asia after Aug. 2, 1990. VA says that so far, more than 141,000 veterans have signed up for the registry.

VA officials say they are continuing to study the health effects of burn pits, but that could take years. In the meantime, two young VFW members are pursuing a legislative solution. Rep. Tulsi Gabbard (D-Hawaii), who served with the Hawaii National Guard in Iraq and is a life member of VFW Post 2875 in Honolulu, and Rep. Brian Mast (R-Fla.), a double amputee wounded while serving in Afghanistan as an Army explosive ordnance disposal specialist and a member of VFW Post 9610 in Lake Park, Fla., introduced *H.R. 5671*, also known as the *Burn Pits Accountability Act*.

The VFW supports this legislation and in 2015 approved Res. 619 on toxic exposures that urges Congress "to invest adequate resources to study, diagnose, and treat conditions and illnesses associated with toxic exposures."

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The legislation would require the Department of Defense to conduct periodic health assessments for U.S. troops who were “based or stationed at a location where an open burn pit was used.” The bill also would automatically enroll those troops into VA’s Burn Pit Registry, unless they opt out.

LONG-TERM HEALTH EFFECTS?

The House Veterans' Affairs Committee's Subcommittee on Health held its first hearing on burn pits June 7. Ken Wiseman, former associate director of VFW's National Legislative Service in Washington, D.C., testified at the hearing and called on VA to do more to assess the health effects of burn pits. He also urged the Pentagon to assist in identifying the risks on the battlefield.

“Congress must require DoD to share all data related to burn pits,” Wiseman said during the hearing. “Veterans deserve to know what is making them sick.”

Wiseman, currently the commander of VFW's Department of Virginia, told Congress that VFW supports the creation of a congressionally directed medical research program (CDMRP) specifically for burn pits.

“The CDMRP has shown progress in identifying causes, effective treatments and biomarkers for Gulf War illness,” said Wiseman, a life member of VFW Post 1503 in Dale City, Va. “The VFW is confident a similar program for burn pits will help exposed veterans finally determine whether their exposure to burn pits while deployed is associated with their negative health outcomes.”

He also testified that VA needs to do more to identify and help women who have health problems that might be associated with toxic exposure.

“VA found some preliminary data showcasing that women who have deployed may have higher rates of pregnancy loss and infertility, but the researchers acknowledged that the study did not include enough participants to confidently deem that data as valid,” Wiseman said.

He added that VFW urges VA to improve its research on burn pits and how they relate to reproductive health issues.

“Women deserve to understand how their military service may or may not have long-term effects on their health,” Wiseman said.

Ralph Erickson, VA's chief consultant for post-deployment health services, testified at the hearing that VA “acknowledges the many sacrifices veterans make in service of our country, and remains committed to outreach and research on potential adverse health effects associated with exposure during deployment to open-air burn pits and airborne hazards.”

GET RECORDS AND GET DIAGNOSED

Ryan Gallucci, director of VFW's National Veterans Service, advises any veteran who suspects he or she is sick from exposure to burn pits or other toxic exposure to contact the VFW for assistance.

"Veterans should gather any medical records — both military and civilian — that document conditions they believe resulted from exposure to burn pits," Gallucci said.

"Those are usually respiratory or gastrointestinal conditions, cancer or related body systems, and so on. We also would ask if they have anything that could easily link these diagnoses to their time in the military."

Gallucci said that VA doesn't currently acknowledge any presumptive conditions related to burn pits, but added that benefit claims still can be granted on a direct basis if a service connection can be established. Some conditions for troops who served in Southwest Asia already are considered presumptive, such as functional gastrointestinal disorders, chronic fatigue syndrome or fibromyalgia.

"The VFW is helping to make sure that this generation isn't behind, but some of this is going to rest with VA and Congress to expand presumptive conditions," said Gallucci, who is in the registry as an Iraq War veteran.

"To date, we succeeded in creating the Burn Pit and Airborne Hazards Registry, and we encourage veterans to register to give VA the mechanism to track health care conditions and do the research necessary to identify trends."

Gallucci added that he and his staff are seeing these trends emerge in the civilian workforce. He cited a recent Department of Labor decision that allows private contractors who worked on open-air burn pits to seek health care for resultant health problems.

"The next step is making sure Congress moves quickly in approving any new presumptive conditions," Gallucci said.

In the meantime, he added, VFW wants to help service members get into the VA benefits system even before they separate from the military.

"If you're still on active duty and believe you have a health care condition related to burn pit exposure, get it checked out and get diagnosed," Gallucci advised. "At that point, we're filing for your benefits and documenting these conditions as soon as possible."

Carlos Fuentes, VFW's director of National Legislative Service, said he saw first-hand the effects of burn pits when he served with the Marine Corps Reserves in Afghanistan in 2009.

“When I went to the doctor and complained about chest pains, she told me ‘Well, you’re too young to have any type of chest complications,’” Fuentes said. “We can’t wait decades like our Vietnam vets waited when it comes to Agent Orange conditions. Congress and VA and DoD must improve research.”

This article is featured in the September 2018 issue of [VFW magazine](#), and was written by [Stephanie Gaskell](#), VFW public affairs specialist. Photo by Sgt. Anthony L. Ortiz/U.S. Marine Corps.