

Stripes: Wilkie opposes bill that would extend Agent Orange benefits to 'Blue Water' veterans

By NIKKI WENTLING | STARS AND STRIPES Published: September 11, 2018

WASHINGTON – New Department of Veterans Affairs Secretary Robert Wilkie has come out against extending benefits to veterans who served off the coast during the Vietnam War, citing high costs and insufficient evidence that they were exposed to Agent Orange.

Wilkie urged senators in a letter Friday to reject legislation that would make health care and disability compensation available to approximately 90,000 “Blue Water” Navy veterans – those sailors aboard aircraft carriers, destroyers and other ships who contend they were exposed to Agent Orange through the ships’ water systems. The dioxin-laden herbicide has been found to cause respiratory cancers, Parkinson’s disease and heart disease, as well as other conditions.

The bill passed the House unanimously in June and was sent to the Senate Veterans’ Affairs Committee.

The VA is conducting a study to compare the health of deployed Vietnam War veterans, including Blue Water Navy veterans, to others of similar age who weren’t deployed. Wilkie urged senators to wait until the study publishes in late 2019 before deciding on the legislation.

Wilkie’s stance deviates from that of former VA Secretary David Shulkin, who said last year that he was committed to extending benefits to Blue Water Navy veterans despite a lack of scientific evidence.

Wilkie also took issue with the method included in the bill to pay for the increased costs of the benefits. To make up the cost, the legislation raises fees for service members and veterans who use the VA’s home loan program.

The method wouldn’t generate enough savings, Wilkie argued. He said the VA estimates the legislation would end up costing the agency \$5.5 billion – much more than the nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office estimated it would. Wilkie argued the Congressional Budget Office underestimated by thousands the number of veterans and dependents who would become eligible for VA services.

Further, Wilkie wrote the VA would need 803 new employees in order to implement the bill.

The Senate VA committee discussed the legislation during a hearing Aug. 1. Committee members heard from Paul Lawrence, VA undersecretary of benefits, who voiced his opposition. He said the bill would set a bad precedent for approving benefits for illnesses without proof that they were caused by military service.

The committee hasn't scheduled a vote for the bill and has provided no updates on it since the August hearing.

Rep. Tim Walz of Minnesota, the ranking Democrat on the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs, said there were efforts underway to push the bill through Congress, even without the VA's support.

About 90 members of the Veterans of Foreign Wars traveled to Washington this week to ask Senate committee members to approve the legislation.

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