

House Launches Renewed Push for 'Blue Water Navy' Bill



In this Sept. 3, 2018, file photo an American flag flies on the U.S. Capitol in Washington. (AP Photo/J. Scott Applewhite)

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House lawmakers have reintroduced the "Blue Water Navy" bill to expand [Department of Veterans Affairs Agent Orange](#) health care and disability benefits to about 90,000 sailors who served off the coasts of Vietnam during the war.

A similar bill failed last Congress when Sen. Mike Enzi, R-Wyoming, [blocked a Senate vote](#) in December in the face of overwhelming bipartisan support for the legislation.

Rep. Mark Takano, D-California, the new chairman of the House Veterans Affairs Committee, said in a statement Tuesday after introducing his version of the bill, "We must get to work and finally secure the benefits our Blue Water Navy veterans earned over 40 years ago."

He said failure to pass the bill last year was a "disservice to the 90,000 [Navy](#) veterans who served in the coastal waters of Vietnam, and an insult to all veterans who served with the expectation that their country would care for them if they were wounded while serving."

On Jan. 3, the first day of the new Congress, Rep. Phil Roe, R-Tenn., the committee's ranking member, introduced a similar bill, saying the veterans deserve such benefits.

"I hope my colleagues in the House and Senate waste no time in passing this bill and sending it to President Trump so we can ensure that Blue Water Navy Vietnam veterans receive the benefits they deserve," he said.

The initial bill passed the House last year by a vote of 382-0 and appeared headed to easy passage in the Senate with the backing of Sen. Johnny Isakson, R-Georgia, chairman of the Senate Veterans Affairs Committee, but the legislation ran into opposition from the Department of Veterans Affairs.

At a Senate Veterans Affairs Committee hearing last August, Paul Lawrence, the undersecretary for benefits at the Veterans Benefits Administration, said, "The science is not there" to show that the fresh water systems of Navy ships were contaminated by dioxin from Agent Orange defoliants widely used in Vietnam.

"It's difficult to hear from veterans who are ill" as they file claims, Lawrence said, but "there is no conclusive science" from a report by the Institute of Medicine to show a service connection.

The VA also expressed concern over the potential cost of adding the Blue Water sailors who served on aircraft carriers, destroyers, cruisers and other Navy ships off Vietnam to the list of veterans eligible for Agent Orange health care and benefits.

The Congressional Budget Office had estimated that about 90,000 sailors could be covered by the bill, which would likely cost about \$1.1 billion over 10 years.

At the August hearing, Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand, D-New York, said 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.

The original bill failed in December when Enzi voiced an objection to it, suggesting that his colleagues wait for the outcome of a study on the issue. "On this bill, many of us have been made aware of the potential cost growth and the budgetary and operational pressures that would happen at the VA," if the bill were to pass," he said.

Rep. Annie Kuster, D-New Hampshire, co-sponsored the new Blue Water Navy Vietnam Veterans Act of 2019.

"This legislation would expand veterans benefits for 90,000 Navy veterans who served in the coastal waters of Vietnam and are impacted by toxic exposure as a result of their service," she said Tuesday.

-- *Richard Sisk can be reached at Richard.Sisk@Military.com.*