

Brown Calls on DOD, VA to Address Military Exposure Issues

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WASHINGTON, D.C. – Following two discussions held this week on water contamination issues at Camp Lejeune, U.S. Sen. Sherrod Brown (D-OH), member of the Senate Committee on Veterans Affairs, attended a hearing today entitled “VA/DOD Response to Certain Military Exposures.”

Brown yesterday met with Jeff Byron, who along more than 5,900 Ohio veterans and their families may have been exposed to contaminated water while serving at Camp Lejeune. Brown also spoke with Marine Commandant, General James T. Conway regarding exposure issues at Camp Lejeune. Brown’s remarks, as prepared for delivery, follow:

“Today’s hearing is about toxic exposure, elusive science, and earned compensation. It’s about our service members and their families, and how we resolve the difficult challenges exposure issues present. When there is doubt, we must take the side of the service member.

“Yesterday, I met with Jeff Byron, a former Marine who served at Camp Lejeune from 1982-1985, and his wife Mary of Hamilton, Ohio. We discussed his family and the impact living at Camp Lejeune has had on his life. Jeff is one of more than 5,900 Ohio veterans whose families are a part of the Marine Corps Registry for potential exposure at Camp Lejeune. He and Mary are here today.

“The Byrons have become well known advocates and lobbyists for helping families who also feel their lives have been affected by the water at Camp Lejeune. This isn’t a role they sought out, or one they would have chosen. They have become advocates for many families because of what happened and what is still happening to them today.

“The Byrons’ two daughters, Andrea and Rachel have a long history of medical troubles. Andrea and Rachel, and the Byrons’ twin boys, are now grown, but the troubles continue and they fear their grandchildren may also be facing many of the same problems their children faced.

“I can’t and don’t want to go into medical details because their story is well documented, but as a father of two daughters I completely understand their determination and admire their strength. Their family’s medical problems started when they were at Camp Lejeune and continue today. Connecting the dots between service and exposure is a complicated process. Helping these families should not be.

“In tough cases like this, we have to ask ourselves, what is the greater sin? Do we refuse benefits to a service member or veteran who may be suffering from service-connected exposure to cancerous toxins? Or do we provide benefits to a service member or veteran whose health care challenges may not be service connected? Do we save a few bucks or do we save a few lives? Scientific certainty shouldn’t trump human decency.

“There is another point here that cannot be overlooked: our military is working to connect the dots, but private contractors are not. From the exposures at Camp Lejeune to the burn pits in Iraq to the emissions at Atsugi Naval Air Station, we’ve found a military willing to work to find the answers. It hasn’t been the smoothest journey to where we are today, but the military is now working with VA to serve the best interests of our service members and veterans.

“Earlier this week I had a conversation with Marine Commandant, General James T. Conway regarding Camp Lejeune. He was frank, candid, and willing to answer the tough questions I had for him. I’m convinced that despite past hurdles, the Marines are committed to working with us to ensure the VA and DOD have the information they need to make any service related connections.

“This cooperation has not been the case with the sodium dichromate exposure at the Qarmat Ali water treatment plant. So, what is the difference? The water treatment plant was run by a private contractor, KBR.

“At a recent hearing, soldiers testified that they were never offered any kind of protective clothing, masks, or other protections by the company. They were never told about the presence of one of the most hazardous carcinogens. Hexavalent chromium is a genotoxic carcinogen and inhalation leads to lung cancer. Yet the company either dismissed these concerns, or worse, intentionally misled our military personnel. It’s a lousy way to turn a profit. So, while I am not happy at the speed of the progress at the Department of Defense and the VA, I am outraged at the behavior of KBR.

“We should all be outraged by the behavior of KBR and like-minded contractors who take the money from our military, but fail its members. That’s not the focal point of this hearing, but it’s an issue Congress must confront, and soon.

“As we consider how to ensure members of our military who have been harmed by environmental hazards receive the benefits they deserve, we should learn from the rocky road former nuclear workers have been forced to travel to prove they have been harmed by their jobs.

“The Department of Labor is charged with addressing work-connected health care issues affecting our former nuclear workers, many of whom are in my home state of Ohio. It has been an unjustifiably steep, red tape-ridden battle for these workers, and I welcome my colleagues’ assistance in efforts to improve that program.

“We mustn’t repeat the mistakes of that program as we address the concerns of service members. We must cut through the bureaucracy and focus on delivering help and hope to men and women who served our nation, and now are suffering.”

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