

## House subcommittee holds hearing on Project 112 bill

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WASHINGTON — On Thursday, a House subcommittee held a hearing on Congressman Mike Thompson's bill to help veterans who were unknowingly tested with chemical and biological weapons in the 1960s and 70s.

The House Subcommittee on Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs held a hearing on a Thompson-authored bill that would give these veterans health benefits and compensation for illnesses resulting from "Project 112" weapons tests.

Thompson hopes this hearing will ultimately push his bill toward consideration by the House, his office reported Thursday.

Project 112, which included ship-based Project SHAD, was conducted between 1963 and 1973 by the Department of Defense (DoD) and other federal agencies.

The DoD now admits that during these projects, unknowing military personnel were involved a number of chemical weapon tests such as VX nerve gas and Sarin nerve gas and were exposed to biological weapons such as E. Coli, Rabbit Fever and Q fever.

"First the government denied the tests existed," Thompson said in a written statement. "Then they said the tests happened but were harmless. Now they admit dangerous substances were used on our military personnel, yet they still refuse to give them care for their illnesses. We can't change the past, but we can begin to right this wrong by giving these men the proper health care and compensation they earned."

HR 5954, introduced by Thompson (D-St. Helena) and Congressman Denny Rehberg (R-MT) in May, provides veterans of Project 112 a "Presumption of Service Connection." This means the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) presumes the relationship between service and a health condition, making the veterans involved eligible for medical benefits and/or compensation for their conditions. For example, veterans exposed to Agent Orange during the Vietnam War are already given a "Presumption of Service Connection."

"I understand security classifications and the sensitivity of our operation," said Jack B. Alderson, a retired Lt. Commander from the U.S. Navy Reserves and resident of Thompson's district. "However, these were not volunteers but service personnel ordered to do a dangerous job and they did it, and did it well, now their nation needs to take care of them."

In 1964, Alderson was the officer in charge of five U.S. Army light tug boats that were used to test chemical and biological weapons, as Lake County News has reported. The tug boats acted as sampling stations and targets for disseminated weapon clouds.

After the DoD admitted to Thompson that the tests did exist and included harmful agents, they released more than 6,000 names of military personnel used in the tests.

However, the GAO reported in February that the DoD had halted their efforts to disclose additional names and many veterans remain unaware that they were even involved. The Thompson-Rehberg legislation would require the DoD to hand over all the names to the VA, which must then notify the veterans.

The subcommittee didn't indicate on Thursday when a vote might take place. However, Veterans Affairs Committee Chairman Bob Filner has indicated support for the measure.

The Thompson-Rehberg legislation has been endorsed by the Vietnam Veterans of America, Veterans of Foreign Wars, American Legion, Disabled American Veterans and Paralyzed Veterans of America.

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