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AOBWN Bill Approved by HVAC

The House Veterans Affairs Committee (HVAC) amended and unanimously approved the FRA-supported Blue Water Navy Vietnam Veterans Act (H.R.299). The bill now goes to the House floor for approval. The bill is similar to a bill that unanimously passed the House last year, but only to stall in the Senate Veterans Affairs Committee. The sponsor of the bill, HVAC Chairman, Rep. Mark Takano (Calif.) vowed to get House passage of the bill before Memorial Day.

The bill clarifies that service members serving off the coast of the Republic of Vietnam during the Vietnam conflict have a presumption for filing disability claims with the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) for ailments associated with exposure to the Agent Orange herbicide. The bill also extends the presumption of herbicide exposure to veterans who served on or near the Korean DMZ between Sept. 1, 1967 and Aug. 31, 1971. The legislation also provides health care, vocational training, rehabilitation and monetary allowance to a child who was born with spina bifida, if at least one of the child's parents served in Thailand between Jan. 9, 1962 and May 7, 1975 and the VA determines that at least one of the parents had been exposed to an herbicide agent during that period.

The two committee amendments adopted, waives fees on VA home loans for recipients of the Purple Heart decoration. Before passing the bill out of Committee, Rep. Takano said, "These veterans have waited far too long, and the Ranking Member (Rep. Phil Roe) and I are committed to working with our Senate colleagues to get this bill passed into law. As I said last week, If I have to stand in the Senate gallery every day until this bill is passed, I will."

The FRA welcomes this bi-partisan effort and believes Congress should recognize these veterans who were exposed to Agent Orange herbicide and authorize presumptive status for VA disability claims associated with this exposure. Members are strongly urged to use the [FRA Action Center](#) on the website to ask their legislators to support these bills (H.R.299 & S.1195).

FRA Meets with Speaker of the House

FRA Director of Legislative Programs John Davis and representatives from several other VSO/MSO associations met with Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi and other key legislators to

discuss issues of mutual concern. Key legislators in attendance include: HVAC Chairman Mark Takano (Calif.), HASC Personnel Subcommittee Chairwoman Jackie Speier (Calif.), and House Budget Committee Chairman John Yarmuth (Ky.). Other Reps. at the meeting include: Gil Cisneros (Calif), Mike Levin (Calif), Julia Brownley (Calif), Susie Lee (Nev.), Conor Lamb (Pa.), Hakeem Jefferies (N.Y.), Max Rose (N.Y.), Debbie Dingle (Mich.), Joe Cunningham (S.C.), and Elaine Luria (Va.).

Rep. Yarmuth started the hearing by warning the group about the need to lift sequestration spending caps. These spending caps would require an 11 percent cut in the Defense budget. He also expressed concern about the proposed drastic cuts to military medical staff. These planned cuts could impact access and quality of care for retirees, active duty members and their families. They could also impact combat casualty care capabilities.

The FRA and other groups thanked HVAC Chairman Mark Takano for approving the Agent Orange reform bill (see story above for more details), and recommended funding for additional claim adjudicators at the VA to handle the expected increase in disability claims by Blue Water Vietnam veterans. Other issues discussed included: concurrent receipt expansion, SBP/DIC offset repeal, adequate funding to implement the VA MISSION Act, worries about proposed drastic cuts to military medical staff and concerns about changes to the Defense Resale Program.

Members can weigh in on many of these issues by going to the [FRA Action Center](#) located online.

Nominee for Veterans' Employment Agency Moves Forward

The Senate Veterans Affairs Committee approved John Lowry III to be assistant secretary of the U.S. Department of Labor's Veterans' Employment and Training Service, (DOL-VETS). Lowry's nomination passed the Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs by a voice vote without dissent. The nomination has also been referred to and approved by the Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions. The Lowry nomination will now head to the full Senate for a vote on his confirmation.

Lowry is a U.S. Marine Corps veteran and a consultant with Egon Zehnder, a global executive search firm. He previously served as chief operating officer of Allied Recreation Group and was in the senior leadership group of Harley-Davidson. He served 15 years on active duty in the Marine Corps as an infantry officer and 10 years in the Marine Corps Reserve. His military awards include the Navy Commendation Medal with Combat Valor Device and the Combat Action Ribbon for his 1991 service in the first Gulf War. He holds degrees from Princeton, Stanford, Harvard, and the U.S. Army War College.

The assistant secretary of DOL-VETS is responsible for a range of programs aimed at helping veterans succeed in the civilian workforce. That includes programs such as the Homeless Veterans' Reintegration Program, which provides homeless veterans with resources and support to reenter the workforce.

This agency also works with other federal agencies to offer the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) that assists service members, who are leaving the military, make a smooth transition to all aspects of civilian life.

In addition, the assistant secretary administers and enforces the Uniformed Services Employment and Reemployment Rights Act, which protects service members from discrimination on the basis of their service and provides reemployment rights regarding their pre-service civilian jobs.

Lowry was nominated last year but was never confirmed by the Senate during the 115th Congress (2017-2018), and his nomination was resubmitted by the White House earlier this year.