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Simpson is right on agent orange

By Steve Milloy - 09/02/10 04:29 PM ET

White House fiscal commission member Sen. Alan Simpson is drawing fire from veterans groups for objecting to the Obama administration decision to expand Agent Orange benefits to Vietnam vets. Simpson is right and the vets wrong.

The Obama administration wants to expand medical benefits for Vietnam vets by \$42 billion over the next 10 years by permitting disability awards to vets who contract heart disease. The underlying assumption is that Agent Orange causes all heart disease in Vietnam vets.

The problem, though, is that assumption is not supported by any available facts and science.

As pointed out by Dr. Michael Gough, the chairman of the federal panel charged with investigating the potential health impacts of Agent Orange use, “[The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention] found that few, if any, ground troops in Vietnam had been exposed to Agent Orange. The Air Force's Operation Ranch Hand sprayed 90 percent of the Agent Orange used in Vietnam. There is no difference in the health of the Ranch Hands, the only veterans known to have been exposed, and that of other veterans who served in Southeast Asia at the same time and flew the same kinds of airplanes but were not exposed to Agent Orange.”

Sen. Simpson, of course, already knows this since Dr. Gough made the foregoing statement before the Senator in 1996 when he chaired the Senate Committee on Veterans Affairs.

More recently, Air Force researchers concluded in 2006 in the journal *Organohalogen Compounds* that “cardiovascular disease [among the Air Force personnel] does not appear to be associated with [Agent Orange] exposure.”

Accordingly, it is absurd to expect taxpayers to shell out so much money without giving them facts that justify the expense.

Americans, including Sen. Simpson, honor the service of veterans and are willing to go to extended lengths to help them — that’s why the vets get any compensation for Agent Orange at all. There really is no firm science indicating that any vet has ever suffered from Agent Orange exposure; yet we have historically given vets the benefit of the doubt because we honor their service.

But a cash-strapped government can no longer afford to be so generous without good reason.

Our commitment to veterans is sacred, but it is not a suicide pact to open the floodgates of the nation’s coffers indefinitely.

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