

Addressing the Impacts of Agent Orange

21 million gallons of defoliants and herbicides were sprayed by plane, helicopter and hand over southern Viet Nam for more than 10 years during the Vietnam War. Southern Laos was also heavily sprayed and parts of Cambodia. Two-thirds of the herbicides were contaminated with TCDD or dioxin. In addition, the U.S Military used dioxin contaminated herbicides along the DMZ in Korea and performed tests of these herbicides at numerous locations throughout the US, Puerto Rico, Thailand and New Brunswick, Canada. Communities such as Midland, MI, Nitro, WV, Newark Bay, and Gulfport, MS are still dealing with the ongoing impacts of the manufacture or storage of the toxic herbicides

Veterans and Agent Orange

US Veterans who served in Vietnam during the Vietnam war are presumed by the Veteran's Administration to have been exposed to the toxic herbicides making them eligible for Veterans Administration benefits if they have one of the diseases or conditions associated with service in Vietnam. This now includes the Blue Water Navy veterans if they served within 12 nautical miles of the coast of Vietnam or Cambodia.

Those who served along the Korean DMZ during the time of herbicide use are also eligible for benefits, as are some of those who served on the bases where testing of the herbicides took place. Veterans in Korea and Australia who served in Vietnam also received compensation from their own governments for diseases connected to their service in Vietnam.

US veterans' children are eligible for benefits if they suffer from Spinal Bifida. Children of female veterans are eligible for VA benefits if they suffer from one of seventeen birth defects associate with their mother's service in Vietnam including: Cleft Lip and cleft palate, club foot, congenital heart disease, hydrocephalus, and neural-tube defects.

Civilian contractors and Vietnamese-American former ARVN are not eligible for any of the VA compensation programs.

The Vietnam Veterans Association and other veterans' groups are calling for a comprehensive health study on the impacts of Agent Orange and the other toxic chemicals on veterans and their children, including supporting epidemiological studies in Vietnam.

Agent Orange's impacts in Vietnam and Laos

According to research by Jeanne Stellman et al of Columbia University a least 4.8 million Vietnamese civilians were living in the areas sprayed by airplane. This figure does not include the Vietnamese soldiers (on both sides of the war), Vietnamese civilians who traveled through the sprayed regions, or those that worked on the military bases which were frequently sprayed.

The Vietnam government estimates that there are 3 million people in Vietnam impacted by Agent Orange. The Vietnam Red Cross estimates that 150,000 Vietnamese children are disabled due to their parent's or grandparent's exposure to dioxin. Women living in sprayed regions have been shown to experience high rates of premature birth, spontaneous abortions, stillbirths, molar pregnancy, uterine cancer, and severe birth defects. Surveys conducted in 126 villages along the Ho Chi Minh Trail in Laos by War Legacies Projects have found an average of five people in each village with disabilities that may be related to Agent Orange exposure.

The Vietnamese government provides limited support (\$15-\$75/month) to Vietnamese who were exposed to Agent Orange and suffer birth defects or other health impacts. However, this assistance is inadequate and reaches less than half of those who are eligible.

The Office of the National Steering Committee on the Settlement of Post-war Unexploded Ordnance and Toxic Chemical Consequences (Office 710) is the focal point to address the health and environmental impacts of Agent Orange and the other toxic herbicides in Vietnam. The Vietnam Association of Victims of Agent Orange provides support service to those impacted by Agent Orange. VAVA's lawsuit in U.S. courts against the chemical companies was dismissed and appeals to the U.S. Supreme court denied.

Recent US Legislative Activities

The first funding to address the impacts of Agent Orange in Vietnam was an allocation in the 2007 Iraq spending bill to provide \$3 million to address remediation of dioxin hot-spots in Vietnam and to support public health programs in the surrounding communities. USAID was the implementing agency of the funding. Since then the US has allocated \$332.8 million for the dioxin remediation and health and disabilities programs in Vietnam. Two thirds of this funding supported the dioxin remediation projects at the former US bases in Da Nang and Bien Hoa where the herbicides were stored and loaded onto airplanes. The remainder has been allocated for health and disability programs in the areas that were heavily sprayed with dioxin contaminated herbicides.

The current appropriation's bill for FY2021 requests \$19 million in the foreign operations budget and \$15 million in the defense department budget for clean-up of the dioxin contamination in Bien Hoa. It also requests \$14.5 million for programs for those with severe physical and/or cognitive disabilities in the areas sprayed with Agent Orange or contaminated with dioxin.

In 2019 Barbara Lee sponsored H.R. 326 a bill to provide assistance for individuals affected by exposure to Agent Orange. The Bill stalled in Congress.

US Government activities regarding Agent Orange in Vietnam

Since normalization of relations between the US and Viet Nam the issue of Agent Orange has become one of the last stumbling blocks in addressing the legacies of the war. However, much progress has been made in the past 20 years leading to a much stronger bilateral relationship between Vietnam and the U.S.

- 2000** - Meeting between US and Vietnamese scientist held in Singapore to explore the possibility of launching a joint research program to study the human and environmental health effects of Agent Orange and other herbicides used during the Vietnam War.
- 2002** - US-Vietnam conference on Human Health and Environmental Effects of Agent Orange/Dioxins held in Hanoi. An MOU on Scientific cooperation was signed.
- 2002-2005** - US National Institute of Environmental and Health Science (NIEHS) sends several delegations to Vietnam and hosted Vietnamese scientists in the US to negotiate a joint research project on the possible relationship between Agent Orange and birth defects. The research project was canceled by NIEHS when both sides were unable to reach agreement on the research protocols.
- 2003** - The first US-Viet Nam workshop on remediation of dioxin was held. A second workshop on remediation techniques was held in Hanoi in August 2005 co-sponsored by the US Department of Defense and the Vietnam Ministry of Defense.
- 2005** - The US EPA, the Vietnam Ministry of Defense and the Vietnam Academy of Science and Technology (VAST) began a project to measure dioxin in soil at the Da Nang airbase, the US also donated a gas chromatograph / mass spectrometer (GC/MS) valued at \$500,000 to VAST and provided training to use the equipment.
- 2006** - The Joint Advisory Committee on Agent Orange made up of US and Vietnamese government officials and experts held its first meeting to explore areas of scientific cooperation, technical assistance and environmental remediation of dioxin hotspots. Additional meetings were held each year until 2013.
- November 2006** - President Bush and Vietnam's President Triet declared in their Joint Statement that "further joint efforts to address the environmental contamination near former dioxin storage sites would make a valuable contribution to the continued development of their bilateral relations."
- 2008** - USAID awards grants to three US Non-governmental organizations from the first installment of the congressional allocation for programs to address the public health needs of those living around the Da Nang Dioxin hotspot.
- 2009** - The project to clean-up of the dioxin hotspot in Da Nang begins. It is completed in 2018.
- 2012** - The second round of funding totaling \$9 million is granted to DAI and VNAH for a three-year project to assist people with disabilities in Da Nang and areas "where there was a high disability burden" and "in regions where dioxin hotspots are located."
- 2015** - The third round of disability funding of \$27 million is granted to eight foreign and Vietnamese organizations for programs to support people with disabilities in the seven most heavily sprayed provinces.
- 2018** - The U.S. Navy sailors visit the Da Nang Association of Victims of Agent Orange rehabilitation center.
- 2019** - The U.S begins the clean-up of the Bien Hoa Airbase and signs an agreement with the Vietnamese government to provide \$65 million between 2020 and 2024 for programs supporting people with severe disabilities in the eight provinces heavily sprayed by Agent Orange.

Current Needs in Vietnam and Laos

- Health – Rehabilitation** - Day-care and respite centers for the disabled, home-based rehabilitation programs and support for parents/care-takers; funds for surgeries; wheelchairs; programs to train physical, occupational, and speech therapists; early detection and early intervention programs for children with birth defects; comprehensive survey of disabled in Vietnam and Laos and their needs; the development of a birth defects registry; and early detection and treatment of cancers associated with exposure to dioxin.
- Environmental Remediation** - The Bien Hoa airbase clean-up needs to be completed and additional research done on at least a dozen additional potential 'hotspots' of lesser severity; and reforestation and environmental remediation in the defoliated areas. Exploration of potential dioxin hotspots in Laos needs to be conducted.
- Socio-economic** - Support for the poor families with disabled children or family members suffering from cancer and other illnesses who are living under the poverty line (earning less than \$50/month); income generation programs, inclusive education programs for the disabled, training of special education teachers and vocational training programs to enable the disabled to find employment.

Non-governmental activities in Viet Nam

- Ford Foundation** - Between 2000 and 2011 the foundation provided over \$78 million in grants for research to identify dioxin hotspots, funded a containment project at the Da Nang airbase, and provided grants to the NGOs to assist those believed to be disabled by Agent Orange as well as to address the environmental impacts of Agent Orange. Ford also funded the US - Viet Nam Dialogue Group on Agent Orange - Dioxin coordinated by the Aspen Institute.
- US Fund for UNICEF** - In 2008, Ford provided UNICEF with a \$1 million matching fund challenge grant to launch a new program for children with disabilities in Viet Nam which UNICEF matched by \$1.3 million.
- US NGOs** - The War Legacies Project, the Vietnam Veterans of America Foundation, the East Meets West Foundation, The Da Nang-Quang Nam Fund, Catholic Relief Services, CHEER Viet Nam, Children of Viet Nam, the Viet Nam Assistance to the Handicap and others have been providing rehabilitation, education, income generation and other services to the disabled in Vietnam.
- Vietnamese Organizations:** The Viet Nam Red Cross; Viet Nam Association for Victims of Agent Orange; and Office of Genetic Counseling and Disabled Children - Hue School of Medicine; the Friendship Village; Peace Villages; Project Renew; VietHealth; Center for Creative Initiative in Health and Population; Institute of Population, Health and Development; Action to the Community Development Center; Disability Resources and Capacity Development; and others have provided medical care, rehabilitation, education and vocational training services to the disabled.