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BULLETIN

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THE NEWSLETTER OF VETERANS UNITED FOR TRUTH, INC.

"VETERANS STANDING UP FOR EACH OTHER"

9 DECEMBER 2007

PLEASE SPREAD THE WORD TO THOSE WHO MIGHT BE AFFECTED

MARINES MUST TELL OF TAINTED WATER

Gareth McGrath - December 11, 2007

Bill with order on Lejeune case expected to pass

More than 25 years after the Marines first discovered dry-cleaning fluids and industrial solvents coursing through Camp Lejeune's drinking water, the military will now share the information directly with the estimated 1 million men and women who unknowingly were exposed to the polluted tap water.

The 2008 Defense Authorization Bill, the primary funding legislation for the Pentagon, includes a provision requiring the military to actively seek out Marines and civilians who lived and worked on the sprawling Onslow County military installation from 1958 to 1987.

But the Marines said they already have been working hard to get the message out, using their Web site and an aggressive multi-year media outreach campaign.

And they also caution that poor record-keeping might make it impossible to reach everyone who lived on or worked at Lejeune during those three decades.

The bill, which has been agreed to by House and Senate leaders, still requires the approval of both houses of Congress and President Bush's signature.

But those steps are considered formalities.

For former Lejeune residents who believe the tainted water has led to a litany of medical problems for them and their families, the notification requirement represents a victory, albeit one that's taken years to come to fruition.

Jerry Ensminger, a former Marine master sergeant who believes his family was affected by the contaminated water, said the amendment should push the military to step up its efforts.

"It's making them more proactive where they haven't been in the past," he said.

But Ensminger said it was a shame that it has taken federal legislation to prompt the Marines to do something that they should have done voluntarily - and years ago.

"One of my famous phrases to suit this situation is that we had to get a law passed through Congress to force these people to live up to their motto," he said, referring to Semper Fidelis, Latin for "Always Faithful."

U.S. Sen. Elizabeth Dole, R-N.C., who has led the push to force the Marines to take a more active role in notifying the residents, also called the amendment's adoption an important first step.

"I am pleased that my amendment was included in the final version of the Defense Authorization Bill," she said in a statement from her office. "Notifying these Marines, their families and civilian employees is a necessary first step and is the right thing to do."

The provision requires the military to make "reasonable efforts" to identify and notify people who lived on and worked at Lejeune during the three decades when the poisoned wells serving the Tarawa Terrace and Hadnot Point water systems were in use.

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The Navy, which handles many logistical and administrative functions for the Marines, has one year from when the bill is signed by the president to fulfill the requirement.

Health survey

The amendment also requires the federal Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry to develop a health survey to distribute to all former Lejeune residents and workers identified as possibly being exposed to the tainted tap water. The information then would be used to further the study of health problems caused by exposure to tetrachloroethylenes and trichloroethylenes.

The ATSDR, an arm of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and the National Academy of Sciences are both looking into the water contamination to try to determine what, if any, health problems it caused.

Researchers have yet to draw a direct scientific connection between the contaminated water that Marines and their families drank, washed and played in and any specific health maladies suffered by former residents.

But the defense bill amendment also might have a major "out" for the Pentagon, which has repeatedly mentioned the potential logistical nightmare posed by trying to track down nearly 1 million people scattered across the country and potentially the globe.

The amendment includes language allowing the military to use the media to supplement its direct notification process.

"Media notification may reach those individuals not identifiable via remaining records," says the provision. "Once individuals respond to media notifications, the secretary will add them to the contact list to be included in future information updates."

Capt. Amy Malugani, spokeswoman with Marine Headquarters in Washington, said the Marines are relying on a variety of methods to reach out to former base residents.

They include news releases, coverage through the media's reporting on the congressional hearings and ongoing health studies, word-of-mouth among former base residents, and a link on the Camp Lejeune Web site.

"We want to reach as many people as everyone else," Malugani said. "We all have the same goal with this."

She also defended the use of the media, noting that it might be the only way to get the message out to some people who otherwise wouldn't be contacted.

In a Nov. 30 letter sent to people who already had contacted the Marines about the water contamination, Maj. Gen. E.G. Payne said the military is committed to cooperating with the ongoing health studies and reaching out to past Camp Lejeune residents and workers.

"However, because our records are not complete and do not go back to 1957, we need your help in locating other individuals who may have been exposed," said the assistant deputy commandant for installations and logistics.

Staff Writer Amanda Greene contributed to this story.

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