



VA to reconsider benefits for ill Gulf War vets

VA To Re-Examine Gulf War Vets □ Disability Claims

The American Legion welcomes VA decision

(AP - February 26, 2010) The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) will re-examine the disability claims of what could be thousands of Gulf War veterans suffering from ailments they blame on their war service, the first step toward potentially compensating them nearly twenty years after the war ended.

Secretary Eric Shinseki said the decision is part of a "fresh, bold look" VA is taking to help veterans who have what's commonly called "Gulf War illness". "I'm hoping they'll be enthused by the fact that this ... challenges all the assumptions that have been there for 20 years," Shinseki told The Associated Press in an exclusive interview. These veterans have long felt the government did little to help them. The VA says it also plans to improve training for medical staff who work with Gulf War vets, to make sure they do not simply tell vets that their symptoms are imaginary-as has happened to many over the years. The changes reflect a significant shift in how VA may ultimately care for some 700,000 veterans who served in the Gulf War. It also could change how the department handles war-related illness suffered by future veterans, as Shinseki said he wants standards put in place that don't leave veterans waiting decades for answers to what ails them. The decision comes four months after Secretary Shinseki opened the door for as many as 200,000 Vietnam veterans to receive service-related disability compensation for three illnesses stemming from exposure to the Agent Orange herbicide. About 175,000 to 210,000 Gulf War veterans have come down with a pattern of symptoms that include rashes, joint and muscle pain, sleep issues and gastrointestinal problems, according to a 2008 congressionally-mandated committee that based the estimate on earlier studies. But what exactly caused the symptoms has long been unanswered. Independent scientists have pointed to pesticide and pyridostigmine bromide pills, given to protect troops from nerve agents, as probable culprits. The 2008 report noted that since 1994, \$340 million has been spent on government research into the illness, but little has focused on treatments. Last week, Secretary Shinseki and Senator Jay Rockefeller (WV), a member of the Senate Veterans' Affairs committee, met privately in Charleston, West Virginia, with several Gulf War veterans. In an interview after the meeting, Rockefeller told the AP that Shinseki's background as a former Army chief of staff made the changes possible. He said either the military has been reluctant over the years to release paperwork related to the war or kept poor records about exposures in the war zone, which made it harder for the veterans to prove they needed help. "The paperwork isn't very accurate, but the pain is very real," Rockefeller said. Secretary Shinseki has publicly wondered why today there are still so many unanswered questions about Gulf War illness, as stricken veterans' conditions have only worsened with age. Last fall, he appointed a task force led by his chief of staff, John Gingrich, a retired Army colonel who commanded a field artillery battalion in the 1991 war, to review benefits and care for Gulf War veterans. The changes stem from the task force's work. Gingrich said in an interview that he feels a personal stake because some of his own men who were healthy during the war are dealing with these health problems. Gingrich said the VA isn't giving a new benefit to Gulf War veterans, just making sure the claims they submitted were done correctly. "We're talking about a culture change, that we don't have a single clinician or benefits person saying 'you really don't have Gulf War illness, this is only imaginary' or 'you're really not sick,'" Gingrich said. A law enacted in 1994 allows the VA to pay compensation to Gulf War veterans with certain chronic disabilities from illnesses the VA could not diagnosis. More than 3,400 Gulf War have qualified for benefits under this category, according to the VA. The VA says it plans to review how regulations were written to ensure the veterans received the compensation they were entitled to under the law. The VA would then give veterans the opportunity to have a rejected claim reconsidered. The VA doesn't have an estimate of the number of veterans who may be affected, but it could be in the thousands. Of those who deployed in the Gulf War, 300,000 submitted claims, according to the VA. About 14 percent were rejected, while the rest received compensation for at least one condition.