**OPENING STATEMENT**

* Thank you, Mr. Chairman.
* Before we get to business, I’d like to take a moment to acknowledge a couple of important guests, Bobby Daniels - a Blue Water Navy Vietnam Veteran from Missouri and Claudia Holt, the Widow of Deceased Blue Water Navy Veteran Frank Holt.
* They traveled a long way to be here today, and I want to thank them for their service, and the sacrifices they’ve made for our nation.
* I’d also like to say a few things about the guy to my left who recently announced he’d be returning home to Georgia at the end of the year.
* Serving with Johnny Isakson on this Committee has been the honor of a lifetime for me. His example of civility, bipartisanship and decency is one we should all hope to emulate.
* Johnny is everything you could ask for in a colleague or in a friend. And he has been the best damn advocate this country's veterans could ask for.
* We have accomplished a lot for our Nation’s veterans during his time as Chairman – from the MISSION Act and the Forever GI Bill to Appeals Modernization and yes, the Blue Water Navy Veterans Act.
* And that’s why we’re here today – not just to talk about a process but to talk about fulfilling this nation’s promises to our veterans.
* When folks sign up for our military, promises are made. And the cost of fulfilling those promises is a cost of war.
* In terms of Agent Orange exposure, we’re talking about an aging Vietnam veterans’ population. A population that often returned home to protests from angry and divided communities - not parades or other appreciation from a grateful nation.
* A population that has suffered far too long from health conditions caused by service to a government that far too frequently refused to acknowledge the true extent of their sacrifice.
* Enough is enough. And it’s past time to end the wait for these veterans and their families.
* For three medical conditions - Hypothyroidism, Bladder Cancer, and Parkinson-like symptoms or Parkinsonism, the National Academies suggests an association with Agent Orange.
* And in the case of a fourth condition – Hypertension – a review of studies has shown that there is a positive association between it and Agent Orange.
* Yet in all four of these cases, Vietnam Veterans continue to wait for the VA bureaucracy to unravel itself from red tape and issue a decision on whether to extend presumptive exposure.
* There is absolutely nothing stopping the Secretary from making a decision on those four conditions today.
* Meanwhile, for those Vietnam veterans who served off shore, their wait also continues.
* Despite the court ordering the Department to finally acknowledge Blue Water Navy Veterans exposure to Agent Orange and other herbicides, VA continues to slow-walk processing claims for these veterans.
* VA must do right by these Blue Water Navy Veterans – lift the stay - begin processing their claims today – and end the wait.
* We are now at a point where our newest generation of veterans is losing faith in its government because of a VA bureaucracy that has not prioritized or appropriately addressed the health outcomes of veterans exposed to harmful toxins while in service.
* For Gulf War veterans – their health has worsened in comparison to their non-deployed counterparts and VA must work harder to figure out why.
* While I understand that the National Academies is undertaking a comprehensive review of the health effects of airborne hazards from burn pits, veterans are understandably frustrated with the pace of progress in examining their exposures.
* Moving forward, we must develop a better process for recognizing health outcomes caused by toxic and environmental exposures.
* Veterans and their families can’t wait decades for determinations that their military exposures caused their illnesses.
* We need a simpler, quicker process.
* At his confirmation hearing, Secretary Wilkie said that a veteran should not have to employ a team of lawyers to get the benefits or care to which they are entitled.
* I know that he sincerely believes that, and I agree with him.
* But in my opinion, VA could make this process much less adversarial if it stopped employing armies of lawyers to find ways to deny care or benefits to veterans, and started hiring additional doctors and claims processors to provide more timely care and benefits to veterans.
* But VA isn’t the only government agency that bears fault here.
* DOD must to a better job of mitigating the damage done by environmental hazards by working to prevent them in the first place.
* It needs to more accurately record the exposure our troops come in to contact with, and make sure our troops’ medical records document those exposures.
* I have worked closely with Senators Blackburn and Blumenthal on the OATH Act, which would require such documentation. It would help veterans establish that contact with a toxic occurred so they could more easily file claims for exposure, just as it helps VA with diagnosis and treatment.
* Groups like the Joint Executive Council exist to improve coordination between DOD and VA and ultimately improve outcomes for service members and veterans.
* Why is common-sense legislation like the OATH Act even necessary when the highest levels of DOD and VA are supposedly looking into these issues routinely?
* To that end, I’d like to see the JEC take a harder look at how DOD and VA can work collaboratively to ensure that VA has the information it needs to substantiate claims so that veterans don’t need to hire the team of lawyers referenced by the Secretary.
* Making a decision on the science shouldn’t take more than 3 years. Following a court decision shouldn’t take 9 months.
* And not learning from decades of mistakes and allowing our newest generation of veterans to experience the same hold-ups as Vietnam Veterans is a failure in and of itself.
* Mr. Chairman, thank you for calling today’s hearing.