

Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Douglas A. Collins
Secretary of Veterans Affairs
Department of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20420

The Honorable Pete B. Hegseth
Secretary of Defense
Department of Defense
1000 Defense Pentagon
Washington, DC 20301

February 11, 2026

Dear Secretary Collins and Secretary Hegseth,

Veterans who served in the Panama Canal Zone (PCZ) were exposed to toxic chemicals such as Agent Orange and aerosolized Dichlorodiphenyltrichloroethane (DDT). Many of these veterans have developed cancers and serious diseases associated with these exposures. As you know, *the Sergeant First Class Heath Robinson Honoring our Promise to Address Comprehensive Toxics (PACT) Act of 2022* established a new statutory framework under 38 U.S.C. §1171–1176 to create additional presumptions of service connection based on a veteran's exposure to toxic chemicals while serving in the military. Because of a strong fact pattern, we urge the Department of Veterans Affairs to recognize these veterans' sacrifices by establishing a presumption of service connection for those who served in the PCZ between January 1, 1958, and December 31, 1999.

Historical documentation reveals that the Department of Defense (DoD) transferred herbicides and other toxic chemicals to U.S. bases in the PCZ to clear vegetation and insects. Veteran testimony and archival records confirm their presence. At least 400 PCZ veterans have been diagnosed with cancer, cardiovascular disease, or other serious conditions correlating with toxic exposure, yet many continue to be denied appropriate disability benefits and recognition.

Congress has repeatedly acted to expand presumptions where evidence demonstrates exposure risk, such as through the *Blue Water Navy Vietnam Veterans Act* (P.L. 116-23), which extended the presumption of service connected disability for certain diseases associated with herbicide exposure to veterans who served off the shores of Vietnam and veterans who served in or near the Korean Demilitarized Zone. Most notably, Congress created a process within the PACT ACT that authorized the Department of Veterans Affairs to independently expand service-connected disability presumptions to veterans.

Regarding the Panama Canal Zone, Congress has recognized the need for further action. In the Joint Explanatory Statement (JES) for the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2025 (H.R. 5009), Congress directed the Secretary of Defense to brief the Congress' armed service committees on the use and presence of herbicide agents in the Panama Canal Zone during

the 1958–1999 period. This congressional directive seeks to officially establish the presence of herbicides in the PCZ. Though the directive is important, we believe enough evidence exists to establish a presumption of service connection for veterans who served in the PCZ.

While the authority provided under the PACT Act fully empowers the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to ensure veterans exposed to toxic chemicals receive the treatment and recognition they deserve, the Department of Defense is also tasked with updating and maintaining the *List of Locations Where Tactical Herbicides Were Tested, Used, and Stored*. With the understanding that information sharing between the VA and DoD is essential, we also strongly urge your departments to work together to ensure the list of locations accurately reflects the presence of tactical herbicides in the PCZ.

Thank you for your attention to this important matter. We strongly urge you to use the processes within the PACT Act to provide PCZ Veterans with the compensation they earned and need. We look forward to working together to ensure all our veterans receive the compensation they deserve.

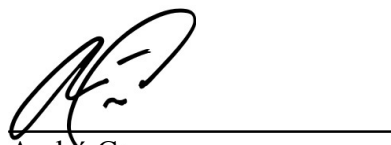
Sincerely,



Joaquin Castro
Member of Congress



Maria Elvira Salazar
Member of Congress



Andre Carson
Member of Congress



Dina Titus
Member of Congress



Greg Casar
Member of Congress



Kat Cammack
Member of Congress



Eleanor Holmes Norton
Member of Congress



Danny K. Davis
Member of Congress



Morgan McGarvey
Member of Congress



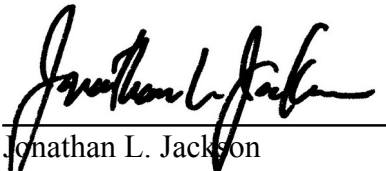
James C. Moylan
Member of Congress



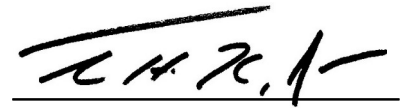
Brian K. Fitzpatrick
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Thomas H. Kean, Jr.
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