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Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

May 30, 2012

The Honorable Leon E. Panetta
Secretary of Defense
1000 Defense Pentagon
Washington, DC 20301-1000

Dear Secretary Panetta,

I would like to take this opportunity to express my concerns regarding the recent release of a memo regarding burn pit exposure in Afghanistan. This memo seems to show that our troops in Afghanistan may be exposed to an ongoing serious health risk from burn pits.

As you may know, last fall I introduced legislation to create a burn pit registry within the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). Since that time I have been told repeatedly by the VA and the Department of Defense (DOD) that there is no conclusive link between burn pit exposures and negative health consequences. As recently as April of this year, my staff was briefed by a group of individuals from the VA and DOD who reiterated their belief that there is no conclusive link between burn pits and negative health consequences.

Recently Danger Room, a blog from Wired magazine, published an Army memo dated April 15, 2011 which concluded that servicemembers who served at Bagram Air Field (BAF) in Afghanistan from 2002 to 2010 are at "an increased risk of long term adverse health conditions as a result of the poor air quality" at BAF. The memo went on to conclude that the primary contributor to the poor air quality "was a burn pit which services the trash generated on BAF." The Army concluded that there was a specific link between burn pit exposures and increased health risks at BAF, where over 40,000 individuals regularly worked, while the DOD maintained publicly that no link between burn pits and health consequences could be proven.

The release of this memo leads to a number of questions. I would appreciate your help in ensuring a timely response:

1. Is the burn pit at Bagram Air Field still active? If so, what is being done to mitigate the exposures to servicemembers and government civilians who are present?
2. A 2004 DOD memo concluded that the conditions at Bagram "should not cause any long-term health effects." What has changed? Or was the 2004 memo incorrect?
3. While the memo discusses long-term health effects, what have been the acute health effects at Bagram? Has there been an increased level of acute respiratory health problems at Bagram or elsewhere in Afghanistan?
4. Has similar testing been done at other bases in Afghanistan? If so, can you provide me with those results?

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5. Has any independent analysis been done of the air pollution levels in Afghanistan or other bases with air pollution like Camp Lemonier?
6. The 2011 Bagram memo is a short summary of significant data. Please provide me with the data supporting this memo.

As a nation we have a duty to ensure that our servicemembers have the equipment they need to fight and win as safely as possible. Our country rushed MRAPs into Iraq and MATVs into Afghanistan to protect our troops from IEDs. I am concerned that while we have responded to these acute threats quickly, we have failed to respond to long-term health threats like burn pits with the same level of effort. I am aware of the joint action plan for airborne hazards developed by the DOD and VA. I think this effort is important and encourage you to accelerate this initiative. Additionally, I would like to draw your attention to Section 315 of the House-passed National Defense Authorization Act for FY2013, which I authored. This provision requires the DOD to develop a plan for tracking the environmental exposures faced by individual servicemembers. I believe an exposure tracking system would help the DOD identify potential environmental risks more quickly and help prevent long term health consequences.

Mr. Secretary, I believe that we need to address the problem of burn pits much more aggressively. I look forward to your prompt response.

Sincerely,



W. Todd Akin
Member of Congress