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May 24, 2021

The Honorable Mark Takano, Chairman  
Committee on Veterans' Affairs  
B234 Longworth House Office Building  
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Mike Bost, Ranking Member  
Committee on Veterans' Affairs  
B234 Longworth House Office Building  
Washington, D.C. 20515

Thank you, Chairman Takano, Ranking Member Bost, and members of the Committee for this opportunity to testify today. I come before you to highlight an issue that effects constituents in all of our districts.

Too many veterans are suffering from cancers, lung diseases and other illnesses connected to their exposure to burn pits at military bases during the Iraq and Afghanistan wars. Only after pressure from veterans and many of us in Congress has the Defense Department finally begun to close the remaining burn pits in operation and disclose the information needed to determine how to best care for these veterans going forward.

In 2020, we called on DoD to end the use of burn pits and provide the VA with a list of burn pit locations, and in 2021 we required VA health screenings to include questions about burn pit exposure.

But it's too little too late for many veterans suffering from health issues. In my home state of Vermont, Sergeant Major Michael Cram and Brigadier General Michael Heston died from diseases linked to burn pits that they were exposed to during their service in the Middle East. The tireless advocacy of their widows, Pat Cram and June Heston, has put a spotlight on this issue in Vermont. I know they will continue to raise awareness and fight to get recognition for diseases associated with exposure to burn pits. In turn, we need to do better for our veterans.

First, we must end the use of burn pits once and for all. No one serving in our military should be exposed to toxic fumes on military installations. The Reducing Exposure to Burn Pits Act, which will be reintroduced this session, would require DOD to include an estimate for waste disposal alternatives to burn pits in their budget request.

Second, we must improve and expand the burn pit registry. The Burn Pit Registry Expansion Act, which will be reintroduced soon, would expand eligibility for the registry to servicemembers who served in Syria and Egypt.

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The registry is essential because it provides first-hand accounts that help researchers understand the potential effects of exposure to burn pits and ultimately help improve the care of our veterans. An estimated 3 million veterans and active-duty service members are eligible to join the registry, but just over 244,000 have joined as of today. It is essential that all veterans know the importance of signing up for the registry and that it is accessible and easy to use.

Finally, we must improve care for veterans exposed to burn pits. Congress has a responsibility to these veterans to expedite the review process to establish a presumption of service connection.

To do so, we must aggressively and consistently invest in research on the health effects of burn pits. Introduced last session, H.R. 7597 would have required a report of all the studies DOD is conducting or funding on the health effects of burn pits. It is also essential that medical workers at the DOD and VA receive training on the potential health effects of burn pits. The DOD Burn Pits Health Provider Training Act would require such training. Our veterans can't afford to wait.

Thank you again, Chairman Takano and Ranking Member Bost, for the opportunity to speak today, and I urge you to keep these provisions in mind as you work to protect and support our nation's veterans.