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## **Agent Orange Commission Among State's (New Jersey) Most Effective**

By Darryl R. Isherwood | July 15th, 2010 - 2:35pm

Among a host of defunct committees that would be wiped clean from the state's books in a bill passed in the assembly is New Jersey's Agent Orange Commission, arguably one of the most effective in the state's history.

The commission, formed by Gov. Brendan Byrne in 1980, was tasked to explore the link between Agent Orange, a defoliating herbicide containing Dioxin used extensively by the U.S. military in Vietnam, and health problems among veterans.

The commission took its work seriously, setting up a research project through Rutgers University to study the issue. The study, called the "Pointman Project," was pioneering. "We were first agency of our type to actually conduct original research into dioxin exposure," said William W. Lewis, who helped conduct the research and later became chairman of the committee. "Some of our research was published in the Journal of the American Medical Association."

What the committee's research found was men and women who had served in "the bush" had higher levels of dioxin in their systems than the control group.

The committee's study was small, Lewis said, and because of funding restrictions, never grew larger, but its effects were far reaching.

The research conducted by the group was used in part to help pass the Agent Orange Act of 1991, which gave the Department of Veterans Affairs the ability to declare certain conditions "presumptive" to exposure to Agent Orange and allowed exposed veterans to receive treatment and compensation for their illnesses.

U.S. Rep. Chris Smith, who has taken an interest in veterans throughout his career and once chaired the House Veterans Committee, was a co-sponsor of the act.

Since then thousands of veterans have received compensation from the federal government for more than a dozen illnesses related to agent orange exposure. Several new diseases have been added in recent years, expanding the number of veterans who are eligible.

In 1996, the commission's funding was cut off by then Gov. Christie Todd Whitman, a move that Lewis said was entirely about politics. "Our budget was only about \$125,000," he said. "I think the commission was too independent for some people."

The commission has remained on the state's books since, with no members, no budget and no function. Today, a senate panel approved the bill to clean it and dozens of other boards for posting to the full body.

[http://www.politickernj.com/back room/agent-orange-commission-among-states-most-effective](http://www.politickernj.com/back_room/agent-orange-commission-among-states-most-effective)