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Congressman introduces Guam-inspired Agent Orange bill

[Jerick Sablan and Kyla P Mora](#), Pacific Daily News Published 6:41 p.m. ET Feb. 2, 2017
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(Photo: U.S. Congress)

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A Florida congressman introduced a bill that would allow Vietnam War veterans who served in Guam and other areas easier access to federal benefits for Agent Orange exposure.

Rep. Dennis Ross, R-Florida, introduced the [Fighting for Orange-Stricken Territories in Eastern Regions \(FOSTER\) Act](#), which would provide presumptive Agent Orange exposure status to Vietnam War-era veterans who served in specific areas, including Guam, the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands and American Samoa, and show symptoms of medical conditions currently associated with such exposure so they can receive U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs benefits.

The bill is named after a veteran, Leroy Foster, who served on Guam and who said he routinely sprayed Agent Orange here.

“Nearly every day, I speak to or hear about Vietnam veterans who say they were exposed to Agent Orange, but are unable to receive VA benefits for their diseases associated with this toxic herbicide because the Department of Defense does not acknowledge Agent Orange was used in the areas they

claim to have been exposed. These brave men and women cannot be denied help any longer, which is why I introduced the FOSTER Act to help them qualify for VA benefits," Ross said in a release.

The DOD denies Agent Orange was ever used outside of Vietnam and Thailand during the Vietnam War, despite the influx of veterans coming forth with claims of exposure outside of these areas, including Guam, Ross said.

If veterans' diseases or exposure locations fall outside of the current VA list, the veterans must show an actual connection between the disease and herbicide exposure during military service. There is no presumption in such cases, and many claims are denied.

The legislation would grant presumptive Agent Orange exposure status to U.S. service members who served in specific areas outside of Vietnam and Thailand during the Vietnam War and suffer from any of the diseases the U.S. government has linked to Agent Orange, Ross said.

The congressman has also asked the defense department for information on what specific chemicals were used during the Vietnam War.

The legislation was named after Master Sgt. Foster, of Lakeland, Florida, who said he sprayed Agent Orange in Guam while serving at Andersen Air Force Base during the Vietnam War. He said he has more than 30 diseases and multiple cancers due to his exposure to Agent Orange in Guam, but doesn't qualify for VA benefits under current law.

"I was shocked when I heard that they named it after me," Foster said Friday, in a phone interview. "I felt very honored for them to do that, but it's not about me," Foster said. "It's about all the people who were affected who are living there on Guam, and all the veterans and their families. Every day I hear more and more stories coming out and it's very very sad. I'm hoping help comes quickly to the people of Guam."

With this new bill and growing media attention, Foster said, he has "got hope back."

"My soul feels finally at peace that the truth is out and our government is accepting responsibility about what happened. All of the prayers have helped. Please ask the people of Guam to keep praying," Foster said. "This is not my doing, this is God's doing. I know it's all the prayers that have been said and are being said. It's moving the hearts of the people in leadership."

Foster hopes that veterans and Guam families who were affected by Agent Orange will see financial and medical benefits as a result of the FOSTER Act.

"I will not let the DOD drag its feet on this or allow a 'deny until they die' attitude toward our courageous veterans. If there is a cover up, we are going to get to the bottom of it. I refuse to forget those who put our lives before their own, like Master Sgt. Leroy Foster of Lakeland who served in Guam during the Vietnam War," Ross said.

"It is downright heartbreaking and shocking to hear these veterans list off their myriad of ailments and life-threatening conditions, knowing our government isn't providing them any relief even after they selflessly put their lives on the line to serve and defend our nation. We must quickly provide them the help and services they deserve," Ross added.