

Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20515

September 14, 2023

The Honorable Jack Reed
Chair
U.S. Senate Committee on Armed Services
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Roger Wicker
Ranking Member
U.S. Senate Committee on Armed Services
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Mike Rogers
Chair
U.S. House Committee on Armed Services
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Adam Smith
Ranking Member
U.S. House Committee on Armed Services
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Chairs Reed and Rogers, and Ranking Members Wicker and Smith:

As you work to finalize the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2024 (FY24 NDAA), we write in strong support of Sec. 5341 of S. 2226, the Senate-passed version of the bill. This bipartisan provision, also known as the Reducing Exposure to Burn Pits Act (S. 2083/H.R. 4264),¹ would help protect servicemembers from exposure to toxic substances and should be included in the final version of this year's NDAA.

As you know, until the mid-2010s, burn pits were commonly used by the Department of Defense in some overseas locations to dispose of waste on military bases. The Department has since estimated that nearly 3.5 million soldiers may have been exposed to toxic agents in smoke from these burn pits at levels sufficient to cause severe health issues.² For example, servicemembers exposed to burn pits have suffered from heart disease, asthma, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, lung cancer, and increased risk of death.³ In recognition of the harmful impact of burn pits on soldiers, Congress passed the Sergeant First Class Health Robinson Honoring Our Promise to Address Comprehensive Toxics (PACT) Act of 2022 (Public Law No: 117-168) last Congress to grant Department of Veterans Affairs healthcare eligibility and benefits to millions of veterans suffering from toxic exposure, representing the most substantial expansion of benefits and services for toxic-exposed veterans in decades.

Sec. 5341 of S. 2226 builds upon the PACT Act's progress by directing the Department of Defense to explore alternatives to burn pits for waste disposal, helping to prevent veterans' exposure to toxic substances in advance. Specifically, the provision requires the Department of Defense to submit a report to Congress on incinerators and waste-to-energy disposal alternatives to burn pits no later than 60 days after the enactment of the NDAA. The provision is supported by the Veterans of Foreign Wars, the Disabled American Veterans Auxiliary, the Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America, the Wounded Warriors Project, the Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors, and the Non-Commissioned Officers Association.

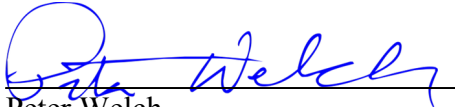
¹ S. 2083 was introduced on June 21, 2023, is led by Senator Welch (D-VT), and is co-led by Senators Tillis (R-NC) and Murkowski (R-AK). H. 4264 was introduced on June 21, 2023, is led by Representative Ruiz (D-CA-25), is co-led by Representative Bilirakis (R-FL-12) and is cosponsored by Representative Nunn (R-IA-3).

² The Guardian, *Toxic burn pits put the health of US veterans at risk. Can a new law help?* (March 13, 2022) (online at www.theguardian.com/us-news/2022/mar/13/soldiers-toxic-burn-pits-new-law-us).


³ American Cancer Society, *Military Burn Pits and Cancer Risk* (August 25, 2022) (online at www.cancer.org/cancer/risk-prevention/chemicals/burn-pits.html#:~:text=Toxic%20exposures%20linked%20with%20burn%20pits,-Environmental%20sampling%20of&text=There%20is%20extensive%20evidence%20in,overall%20increased%20risk%20of%20death).


To take the next step in addressing the risks toxic exposure poses for our veterans, we respectfully urge you to include Sec. 5341 of S. 2226 in the final version of the FY24 NDAA. Thank you again for your consideration of this request.


Sincerely,


Peter Welch
United States Senator


Raul Ruiz, M.D.
Member of Congress


Lisa Murkowski
United States Senator


Thom Tillis
United States Senator


Gus M. Bilirakis
Member of Congress