

## ISSUE BRIEF: TOXIC EXPOSURES AT FORT MCCLELLAN

### The Situation

- Fort McClellan, located in Anniston, Alabama, became an Army installation in 1917. After World War II, it was home to the Army's Chemical Corps and Chemical Weapons School until the base closed in 1999. In 1953, Fort McClellan conducted "Operation Top Hat," which used military personnel to test exposure and decontamination methods that included sulfur mustard and nerve agents. In 1962, Fort McClellan added the Biological Radiological Agency.
- From 1929 to 1971, a Monsanto chemical plant operated south of Fort McClellan in Anniston. Airborne polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) from the plant entered into the environment, and the surrounding community was exposed. In 2003, Monsanto Chemical settled a class action lawsuit with more than 200,000 residents of Anniston for more than \$700 million.
- Although the base closed in 1999, the 2005 National Academy of Medicine report, *Contaminants in the Subsurface: Source Zone Assessment and Remediation*, recognized that both the groundwater and soil were contaminated. There were 67 different disposal sites on Fort McClellan containing volatile organic compounds (VOCs), trichloroethylene (TCEs), PCBs, semi-volatile organic compound (SVOCs), pesticides, explosives, heavy metals (Pb), unexploded ordinance (UXO), radioactive sources and non-stockpile chemical materials.
- The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Veterans Health Administration (VHA) has recognized the toxic chemicals used at Fort McClellan, noting that potential exposures could have included, but are not limited to, the following:
  - Radioactive compounds (cesium-137 and cobalt-60) used in decontamination training activities in isolated locations on base.
  - Chemical warfare agents (mustard gas and nerve agents) used in decontamination testing activities in isolated locations on base.
  - Airborne PCBs from the Monsanto plant in Anniston.
- The Sergeant First Class Heath Robinson Honoring our Promise to Address Comprehensive Toxics (PACT) Act, signed into law in August 2022 (P.L.117-168), requires the VA to conduct an epidemiological study on the health trends of veterans who served at Fort McClellan at any time during the period beginning January 1, 1935, and ending May 20, 1999.

### The Challenge

- Although the 2005 National Academy of Medicine report identifies hazardous toxins in the soil and water and VA acknowledges specific toxic exposures at Fort McClellan, VA does not concede these toxic exposures for those who served there. This requires veterans seeking VA disability claims for illnesses or diseases related to those exposures to prove their individual toxic exposures at Fort McClellan.

- This large-scale and long-term epidemiological study will potentially generate evidence on the positive association between Fort McClellan exposures and health conditions. However, it will be years before the study is completed, which means veterans suffering from negative health impacts will be waiting years for possible presumptive diseases to be recognized by VA.

### **The Solution**

- In accordance with DAV Resolution No. 235, we urge Congress to establish a concession of exposure for all veterans who served at Fort McClellan. This should include all of the toxins listed in the 2005 National Academy of Medicine report and those VA has acknowledged. This will remove the burden of veterans having to prove their exposures at Fort McClellan and ease their ability to establish direct service connection in lieu of waiting years for potential presumptive diseases.
- The PACT Act requires the creation of the Toxic Exposures Research Work Group to research and study toxic exposures and associated negative health impacts. We urge the Secretary of Veterans' Affairs and the work group to include Fort McClellan as one of the research activities to expedite actions in establishing presumptive diseases.