

THE CANADIAN PRESS



Veterans Affairs Minister Greg Thompson (left) and Defence Minister Peter MacKay, right, announce the details of a compensation package for people harmed by Agent Orange. (CP PHOTO)

Critics say Ottawa's Agent Orange package too little for too few

Sep 12, 2007

FREDERICTON (CP) — The federal government says its compensation package for Agent Orange victims is fair and compassionate, but critics say it is too little for too few.

Defence Minister Peter MacKay and Veterans Affairs Minister Greg Thompson announced a \$96 million compensation plan Wednesday for people who say their health was harmed by Agent Orange spray programs at Canadian Forces Base Gagetown.

The long-awaited announcement applies only to veterans and civilians who worked on or lived within five kilometres of the base in 1966 and 1967, the two years during which the U.S. military tested Agent Orange and several other combat defoliants at Gagetown.

As well, people should only apply for the one-time, \$20,000 compensation payment if they have any of 12 medical conditions associated with exposure to Agent Orange, including respiratory cancers, prostate cancer and Type 2 diabetes.

"For too long we have lived with doing nothing and today that ends," Thompson said at a news conference in Fredericton.

MacKay said the program should bring closure to an issue that has lingered for decades with veterans, their families and people who live in the shadow of the sprawling New Brunswick training base.

"We may never fully know what happened when Agent Orange was tested at Base Gagetown," MacKay said.

"But our government has always stood firm in the belief that we had to do what was right for Canadians. This is fair and compassionate and it is done for all the right reasons."

There were mixed feelings among the veterans attending the announcement.

Several said they were pleased to see that something was done and some money will be paid.

Others were bitterly disappointed.

"It's too little and the way they have put it, I'm wondering how many people will qualify," said Earl Graves, who served with the infantry at Gagetown.

"I'm extremely disappointed."

The federal government anticipates about 4,500 people will qualify for the package.

Many individuals and groups were hoping for a much broader compensation program that encompassed all herbicide spraying at the base - including annual defoliation programs carried out by the Canadian military to cut down on brush growth.

But Thompson said those spray programs involved registered and approved herbicides. He said Agent Orange was the only unregistered product ever applied on the base.

"The only unlicensed, unregistered product used at Base Gagetown was Agent Orange," Thompson said. "That is the reason behind zeroing in on those years."

Other defoliants used at the base, especially in the 1950s, 60s, and 70s, used similar formulations to Agent Orange and were also contaminated with dioxin - a poison linked to cancer in humans.

However, they were approved by the Canadian government and were widely used across the country in forestry operations and by utility companies.

Wayne Cardinal, a veteran who was at the base in the 1960s, said the federal government should have lumped all the dioxin-contaminated sprays together and compensated people accordingly.

"Dioxin is dioxin whether it's registered or not," Cardinal said. "What's the difference? These chemicals will kill you. I wish they had been a little more compassionate and looked at many other health symptoms that people have."

More than 1,000 people have joined a class-action lawsuit over herbicide spraying at the base. The suit is making its way through the courts.

Opposition politicians criticized the Conservative plan.

"They promised a compensation program that was full and fair, but what they have delivered is bait and switch," said Albina Guarnieri, the Liberal party's veterans affairs critic.

"This is nothing more than a defoliated compensation plan."

Guarnieri said the Conservatives stalled on compensation while they looked for reasons to shrink the number of people eligible.

She said she cannot think of any other government that would take almost two years to deliver a \$96 million program.

The government also imposed a strict timetable on the compensation, centring on Feb. 6, 2006 - the day on which the federal Conservatives formed the government.

The payments only apply to people who are either still living or who died on or after the 2006 date.

"It's too limited," said Cardinal. "I think I have lost close to 700 buddies before 2006."

Several reports on the Agent Orange controversy at CFB Gagetown minimized the health impact of all spray programs at the base, suggesting only those who were directly involved in the applications might have reason to be concerned.

MackKay said that should be comforting news.

"CFB Gagetown suffers no lasting harm," he said.

"It is a safe place to work, to train and to live and the vast majority of people who lived or work on or around the base have not experienced long-term health effects. "