

An Unmistakeable Message. Depleted Uranium kills our troops

The Montana DU Project

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The words are bright and unmistakeable, sitting high above Montana Avenue on the latest flashy billboard.

“Depleted uranium kills our troops,” the message says, depicting an Abrams tank firing its cannon, along with a warning for “ionizing radiation.”

The billboard doesn’t mention the Helena Peace Seekers, a local anti-war group that has called the current conflict “immoral and unjust.”

It does, however, list the group’s new subsidiary, the Montana Depleted Uranium Project, which hopes to use the billboard to raise public awareness on the use of DU, which it says threatens the health of both U.S. troops and Iraqi civilians.

“We have DU munitions being used by the military that are endangering our own troops,” said Chip Clawson, a Vietnam-era veteran who’s funding the billboard. “These radioactive weapons are certain to devastate the future health of many troops and many civilians in the countries where we’ve used them.”

The group’s members also want veterans returning from the war to get screened for the presence of uranium.

House Bill 288 sought to provide members of the Montana National Guard with a DU health screening upon returning home. The bill was tabled due to funding questions.

Clawson said the group has no current evidence that DU has adversely affected the health of any particular Montana soldier home from Iraq or Afghanistan. However, he said, he believes that will change in time.

“I have had some possibilities, but we’ve been unable to produce them,” Clawson said. “We have an incredibly high rate of veterans from the first Gulf War on disability. We believe DU is part of the problem.”

The Department of Veterans Affairs said DU possesses about 60 percent of the radioactivity of natural uranium. It poses a hazard if internalized, be it through shrapnel or inhalation.

Testing DU for military use began in the 1960s. The material was first used in combat by the U.S. in the first Gulf War.

Joe Foster, administrator of the Montana Veterans Affairs Division, said that in the four years the current war has been going on, no veteran health-care provider has filed a claim naming DU as the cause of illness.

"I sent out a memo a month ago, asking them if they've processed any claim based upon depleted uranium," Foster said. "There were none. It doesn't mean it hasn't happened to any of our soldiers. It's just that we haven't seen it here in Montana."

Even so, Foster said the VA will place information on its Website about DU, particularly the three levels of exposure, which range from being hit by a DU round to being in the general area of a DU incident.

While veterans presented with level-one or level-two exposure to DU have that exposure documented in their medical records, those who experience a level-three exposure do not.

"I think what this group wants is to have anyone and everyone in theater tested for DU automatically," Foster said. "That just can't happen unless they want to pay for it themselves."

The link on Clawson's billboard sends viewers to the Gulf War Veterans Association.

According to the group's own mission, its single goal is to obtain treatment for veterans who "experience symptoms collectively known as the 'Gulf War Illness.'"

The group claims that the number of Gulf War veterans suffering from the mysterious illness "has spread to epidemic proportions." The group also claims that the government has turned its back on the nation's defenders.

Yet studies question whether the Gulf War Illness is even a real medical condition.

A November 1996 article in the New England Journal of Medicine found no difference in hospitalization rates or self-reported symptoms between Persian Gulf vets and non-Persian Gulf vets.

"U.S. troops and Iraqi civilians have been exposed to ionizing radiation as a result of the use of DU munitions in Iraq," Clawson said. "But many of our troops haven't been told about this, nor have they been trained to minimize the long-term health risks."

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