

Chairman Dingell at the Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations hearing entitled "Poisoned Patriots: Contaminated Drinking Water at Camp Lejeune"

Statement of Congressman John D. Dingell, Chairman
Committee on Energy and Commerce

SUBCOMMITTEE ON
OVERSIGHT AND INVESTIGATIONS HEARING ENTITLED
"POISONED PATRIOTS: CONTAMINATED DRINKING WATER AT CAMP LEJEUNE"
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Mr. Chairman, thank you for holding this most important hearing. The sorry treatment of the wounded at Walter Reed Hospital was a national scandal, and so is the treatment of the Marine casualties of Camp Lejeune's poisoned water.

Although the drinking water contamination happened decades ago, the victims of that contamination continue to suffer both physically and emotionally.

They suffer the ill effects of exposure to the toxic water; they suffer watching their children become sick and die; they suffer waiting for decades for scientific studies; and they suffer from the apparent penny-pinching and indifference of their formerly revered commands, the U.S. Marine Corps and Department of Navy.

It is hard to believe that, to this day, former Marines and their families have not been notified that the water they drank at Camp Lejeune was carcinogenic—a fact that our Government has known for decades.

Indeed, the witnesses on our first panel—Retired Master Gunnery Sergeant Jerry Ensminger, Dr. Michael Gros, and Mr. Jeff Byron—each served at Camp Lejeune and, along with their families, consumed poisoned drinking water for years. Yet they did not learn of the contamination until 1997, 1999, and 2000, respectively. Each has a story of tragedy and courage to share with us, and I deeply appreciate their appearance before us today.

I also welcome representatives from the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry who will help answer some of the tough questions about what may be one of the largest contaminated water cases in our country's history.

Almost 20 years ago, I sponsored legislation that provided EPA's Criminal Investigations Division (CID) with law enforcement powers so they could more effectively carry out their duties. Unfortunately, in the course of conducting our inquiry, we have learned that CID may not have the resources or leadership to do its job. I am particularly concerned over reports that many CID agents are being used as drivers and personal bodyguards for the Administrator rather than investigating important environmental crimes, or have been assigned homeland security work that duplicates what the FBI is already doing.

These are but a few of the troubling things being reported to us, Mr. Chairman, and I hope you will consider looking further into the operations and management of this important program.

Finally, I welcome our distinguished Department of Navy and Marine Corps officials. I sincerely hope these officials can explain some of the very troubling evidence that this Committee has reviewed:

• Evidence that the Navy balked at funding health impact studies despite statutory requirements that Department of Defense fund such studies;

• Evidence that the Marine Corps delayed initiating these studies over concerns about bad publicity;

• Evidence that the Marine Corps repeatedly failed to produce documents necessary for the health impact studies; and

• Evidence that the Navy failed for years to close down a contaminated drinking water system despite knowledge of contamination.

The Marine Corps takes great pride in its maxim, "Marines take care of their own." But if this principle is to be anything but an empty slogan, the Corps needs to do more to notify all former Camp Lejeune residents about their possible exposure, and provide prompt and adequate medical coverage to them and their families.

Prepared by the Committee on Energy and Commerce
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