

Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20515

October 26, 2018

The Honorable James Mattis
Secretary of Defense
1000 Defense Pentagon
Washington, D.C. 20301

Dear Secretary Mattis,

We are writing out of deep concern about reports that members of the Vermont Army National Guard's Charlie Company, an air ambulance unit currently deployed in support of the Missouri National Guard's 35th Combat Aviation Brigade in "Operational Spartan Shield," may be exposed to hazardous airborne pollution from two active open burn pits.

As you know, the U.S. military and private contractors regularly disposed of all sorts of waste in open-air fire pits during the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. In response to significant evidence suggesting a strong correlation between exposure to burn pits and serious health conditions such as pulmonary diseases, various cancers and autoimmune diseases, Congress passed legislation in 2014 establishing an Airborne Hazards and Open Burn Pit Registry through the Department of Veterans Affairs. That registry, with relatively little outreach to the veterans community, has already enrolled more than 150,000 veterans.

Retired General David Petraeus stated in a recent letter to Congress that during his time as CENTCOM Commander, he raised concerns at the time "about the effects of burn pits and airborne toxins on our service members and civilians." We are deeply dismayed that, some ten years after General Petraeus first articulated these concerns and four years after Congress created the Burn Pit Registry, the military is reportedly still using open burn pits and unnecessarily exposing our servicemen and women – including Vermont National Guard soldiers – to the potentially toxic consequences.

We urge you to look into this matter immediately. If you find that the military, private contractors, or foreign governments are in fact still using open burn pits where U.S. troops are deployed, we request that you close the pits at once and implement an alternative method of disposing waste that does not jeopardize the health and well-being of our servicemembers.

We also respectfully request that you answer the following questions as soon as possible:

1. How many open burn pits are the military, private contractors, or foreign governments currently using in theaters where U.S. servicemembers are stationed or operating?
2. What policies or guidelines do the Department of Defense, Department of the Army, Department of the Air Force, and Department of the Navy have in place regarding use of burn pits?
3. What plans, if any, does the Department of Defense, Department of the Army, Department of the Air Force, and Department of the Navy have to cease the use of burn pits?

4. Has the Department of Defense developed a mechanism to track servicemembers who are exposed to burn pits for the purposes of quantifying the extent of exposure, conducting outreach, and monitoring health outcomes over time?

We appreciate the unique challenges of managing waste disposal in areas of active combat operations. However, the well-being of our servicemembers – both while deployed and for the rest of their lives – must always be the top priority when meeting those and other battlefield challenges.

Thank you for your attention to this urgent matter and we look forward to your prompt response.

Sincerely,



PATRICK LEAHY
United States Senator

BERNARD SANDERS
United States Senator

PETER WELCH
United States Representative