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Senate passes Camp Lejeune water-contamination bill

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WASHINGTON -- After an impasse with a South Carolina senator was broken, the Senate passed a historic bill Wednesday by unanimous consent that would help thousands of sick Marine veterans and their families who were exposed to contaminated water at Marine Corps Base Camp Lejeune, N.C.

Sens. Patty Murray, a Washington state Democrat who's the head of the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee, and Jim DeMint, a South Carolina Republican, brokered the deal on the Senate floor moments before she was expected to force his hand by publicly calling for a unanimous-consent vote on the measure.

Instead, she announced that they'd reached a "gentlemen's agreement" on modifications DeMint had been seeking in the bill.

"These families have waited for decades to get the assistance that they need and should not be forced to wait any longer," Murray said from the Senate floor.

DeMint said he was always supportive of the "underlying bill," but he'd put a procedural hold on it and charged that there weren't enough safeguards to prevent fraud by those whose illnesses weren't due to contaminated water.

"The modification would make sure the veterans who deserve these benefits get them and they're not taken advantage of by fraud from others who don't deserve it," he said from the floor.

Last month, the House of Representatives and Senate veterans committees agreed on a bill that would provide health care to sick military personnel and their family members provided they'd lived or worked at least 30 days on the base from 1957 to 1987. They also must have a condition listed within the bill that's associated with exposure to these chemicals.

The agreed-on changes add language from existing laws that provides exceptions if a doctor can prove that the person didn't contract the illness from the base's contaminated water. For example, if the person had the illness before being at Camp Lejeune.

The changes ended a standoff between DeMint and Sen. Richard Burr, R-N.C., who was the lead sponsor of the measure.

"This has been a long time coming, and unfortunately many who were exposed to contaminated water at Camp Lejeune over the years have died as a result and are not with us to receive the care this bill can provide," Burr said in a statement. "While I wish we could have accomplished this years ago, we now have the opportunity to do the right thing for the thousands of Navy and Marine veterans and their families who were harmed during their service to our country."

Congressional aides said the House might take up and pass the bill in the next couple of weeks. It could be on President Barack Obama's desk by the end of the summer.

The measure is expected to help as many as 750,000 veterans and their families who were exposed to drinking water that was poisoned with trichloroethylene, tetrachloroethylene, benzene and vinyl chloride.

"This is a huge first step," said Mike Partain of Tallahassee, Fla., who lived at Camp Lejeune as an infant. "We've been waiting for over 15 years for a resolution to this."

Five years ago, Partain, who's now 44, learned that he had breast cancer. Partain was born at Camp Lejeune, where his father was a Marine officer. Fewer than 2,000 men are diagnosed with breast cancer each year, but Partain said he'd since found 80 male breast cancer patients from across the country with connections to Camp Lejeune.