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WASHINGTON, D.C. — Congressman Jim McDermott (D-WA), a medical doctor, on May 17 introduced legislation with 21 original co-sponsors in the House of Representatives that calls for medical and scientific studies on the health and environmental impacts from the U.S. Military's use of depleted uranium (DU) munitions in combat zones, including Iraq. The McDermott bill also calls for cleanup and mitigation of sites in the U.S. contaminated by DU.

"The need is urgent and imperative for full, fair and impartial studies," McDermott said. "We may be endangering the health and lives of U.S. soldiers and Iraqi civilians. All we've gotten so far from the Pentagon are assurances. We need facts backed by science. We don't have that today."

Because of its density, the military uses DU as a protective shield around tanks, and in munitions like armor piercing bullets and tank shells. DU tends to spontaneously ignite upon impact, disintegrating into a micro-fine residue that hangs suspended in the air where it can be inhaled and falls to the ground to leach into the soil.

DU is a by-product of the uranium enrichment process; it is chemically toxic, and DU has low-level radioactivity. About 300 metric tons of DU munitions were fired during the first Gulf War, and about half that amount has been used to date in the Iraq War.

"I've been concerned about DU since veterans of the first Gulf War began to experience unexplained illnesses, commonly called 'Gulf War Syndrome' that remain mysterious," McDermott said.

McDermott added that there are reports from Iraqi doctors and others today of seemingly unexplained serious illnesses including higher rates of cancer and leukemia, and even birth defects.

"We pretended there was no problem with Agent Orange after Vietnam and later the Pentagon recanted, after untold suffering by veterans. I want to know scientifically if DU poses serious dangers to our soldiers and Iraqi civilians."

The Depleted Uranium Munitions Study Act of 2005 has 21 original co-sponsors, all Democrats, including: Reps. Charles Rangel, Pete Stark, Sherrod Brown, Peter DeFazio, Maurice Hinchey, Raul Grijalva, Jan Schakowsky, Robert Wexler, Sam Farr, Tammy Baldwin, Robert Andrews, Bob Filner, Jay Inslee, Jose Serrano, Lynn Woolsey, Earl Blumenauer, Bart Stupak, Mike Honda, Tom Udall, Barney Frank and Ed Markey.

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