

Promoting Hope and Dignity: An Overview

Agent Orange, a chemical used by the U.S. military during the war in Vietnam, continues to have harmful impacts in Vietnam today. The Red Cross estimates that three million Vietnamese have been affected by Agent Orange, including 150,000 children born with serious birth defects.

This is a humanitarian concern. We can promote hope and dignity and help prevent the problem from continuing to affect future generations by using best practices to clean up the remaining toxic “hot spots,” and by providing education, medical care and rehabilitation to those affected.

Millions of Americans and Vietnamese are still affected, directly and indirectly, by the wartime U.S. spraying of Agent Orange and other herbicides over South Vietnam.

- As U.S. Vietnam-era veterans know, some of the herbicides contained dioxin, a highly toxic and persistent organic pollutant linked to cancers, diabetes, birth defects and other disabilities.
- The U.S. and Vietnamese governments have both taken steps to care for veterans affected by dioxin exposure during the war. But much remains to be done for others whose needs have not been met.

Agent Orange/dioxin continues to contaminate the environment in Vietnam and freshly affect people’s health.

- Agent Orange was sprayed at up to 50 times the concentration the manufacturers recommended for killing plants. It defoliated millions of acres of forests and farmland. Much of that land remains degraded and unproductive to this day.
- The chemical dioxin, contained in Agent Orange, remains toxic for decades and is still found in very high concentrations in “hot spots” in Vietnam.
- At least two dozen “hot spots” of toxic dioxin residues exist where Agent Orange and other chemicals were stored and handled. As long as these “hot spots” are not cleaned up, dioxin can continue to make its way into the food chain and affect adults and children.

A cleanup plan is in the works. The U.S.-Vietnam Dialogue Group on Agent Orange/Dioxin, established in 2007 with help from the Ford Foundation, has recommended a ten-year remediation plan. It has three parts:

- Clean dioxin-contaminated soils and restore damaged ecosystems;
- Expand humanitarian services to people with disabilities and to their families;
- Educate key U.S. policy-makers and the public about this effort, in order to sustain momentum and support over the ten years.

This plan would address the legacy of Agent Orange/dioxin.

In 2010, Vietnam marks four important events: the 1,000th anniversary of the founding of Hanoi; the 35th anniversary of the end of the war with the United States; the 15th anniversary of renewed U.S.-Vietnam diplomatic relations; and Vietnam’s chairing of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

The United States should join the Vietnamese in funding this comprehensive and humanitarian effort to clean up toxic areas and address the legacy of Agent Orange/dioxin. This would be a fitting way for the United States to mark the important historic milestones of 2010.