

**Opening Statement
Senator Ron Wyden**

**“The Exposure at Qarmat Ali: Did the Army Fail to Protect
U.S. Soldiers Serving in Iraq?”**

**Monday, August 3, 2009
628 Dirksen Senate Office Building**

The threat of service members being exposed to harmful chemicals has been a problem for decades. Agent Orange in Vietnam and Gulf War syndrome are two examples. Our military should be prepared for these incidents and should be taking precautions to keep our servicemembers as safe as possible. I have tremendous personal concern with this issue because soldiers from the Oregon National Guard are among those affected in this Chromium case, and also because over 3,000 of my fellow Oregonians are currently back in Iraq serving our country. But I want to make clear that I believe this issue is larger than any one incident.

All of our troops need to be safeguarded from needless risk and they need to know their government is there for them if their service puts their health in jeopardy. Our troops face enough risk when they go into combat; they shouldn't also have to battle their government to stay protected from toxic chemicals on the front lines. The military needs to be proactive about any exposure troops may have had to toxic chemicals right away – and not wait for years to tell them about it.

I would like to make two points today on this issue.

First is that Soldiers need to be taken care of and recognized for the sacrifices that they selflessly make. I have read Senate testimony that explains the reason there was so much of the deadly chemical spread all over the area. It states: “The fact that (the chemical) was a poisonous material was one of the key reasons members of the Baath Party had opened the bags and spread their contents all over the plant as part of their sabotage efforts in the facility.” (DPC Hearing, July 20, 2008). According to Army award regulations, the Purple Heart can be given for injuries including “Injury caused by enemy released chemical agents.” Now I have to admit this issue is personal to me. One of my former workers had a brother whose name was Nick Thomas. He served honorably in the Oregon National Guard, deployed to Iraq, pulled guard duty at the contaminated Qarmat Ali facility, came home, and died of leukemia at age 21. It is obvious to me that the Purple Heart regulation should be interpreted to include this specific type of chemical agent and applied to these cases.

The second point is that Contractor and Department of Defense abuses must be reformed and that their leadership be held accountable for such negligence. There are probably more epidemiological studies demonstrating that Hexavalent Chromium causes cancer more viciously than any other carcinogen that has ever been studied. Yet KBR

denies the problem and DoD appears to be trying to cover up their mistakes. Any company working for the people of the United States should be required to keep safety foremost in their efforts and to report the possibility of contamination of hazardous materials, just as all companies, for example even your local gas stations are required to do inside US borders. We owe this to our troops.