

Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515-0918

May 24, 2021

John E. Whitley
Acting Secretary of the Army
101 Army Pentagon
Washington, D.C. 20310

Dear Acting Secretary Whitley,

I am writing to raise your attention to the fact that Army personnel are currently being poisoned in Florida and to ask that you intervene to protect the men and women serving our country as part of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

Lake Okeechobee in Florida is toxic and will likely become more so as summer heats up. Recently, satellite images from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration showed a toxic algae bloom that covered 500 square miles, and the Florida Department of Environment Protection determined that this bloom was greater than 100 times more toxic than the level the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) states is safe for human contact.

When people are exposed to toxic algal blooms testing above the EPA standard, the symptoms range from headaches, vomiting, and blisters around the mouth to severe liver or kidney damage, ALS, Alzheimer's, and even death. A recent University of Florida study found that these toxins become airborne and can poison people up to 10 miles away from the source.

Nonetheless, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers is asking soldiers to work day in and day out at facilities, including the Port Mayaca Lock and Dam in Martin County, Fla., at the center of this toxic bloom. As a result, these men and women are highly exposed to these toxins. I recently visited Port Mayaca with Major General William Graham, Deputy Commanding General for Civil and Emergency Operations, and, like him, I am deeply concerned for the health of the personnel stationed there. I would describe the situation at the lock and damn as unbearable inside and out, toxic, and more disgusting than multiple-days-old dead bodies in a closed space.

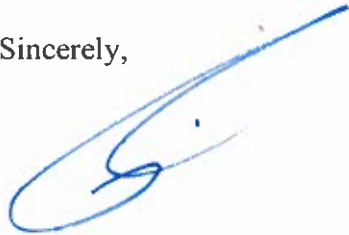
There's no other way to say it: these men and women are being poisoned while working for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. For that reason, I request the following:

- No U.S Army Corps of Engineers personnel should be placed at structures on or around Lake Okeechobee when cyanotoxins above the EPA limit are present.
- The U.S. Army should provide immediate medical evaluation for the men and women currently working at structures around Lake Okeechobee who have been exposed to the cyanotoxins above the EPA limit.
- The medical files of U.S. Army Corps of Engineers personnel working at structures around Lake Okeechobee should note their exposure to cyanotoxins and the levels of microcystin to which they were exposed. If these individuals develop liver failure, kidney failure, ALS, or Alzheimer's, it should be considered presumptively service connected.
- There should be daily testing of algae at the structures in order to assess if personnel are being exposed to toxins.

This an emergency for our soldiers stationed there and should be responded to immediately.

On a personal note, when I was serving in Afghanistan, men and women in the Army were routinely exposed to burn pits that we now know are likely to be the Agent Orange of our generation. I am asking the Army to step in before exposure to cyanotoxins within our own borders poses a similarly widespread threat to the men and women of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. I look forward to your response and working with you to address this urgent health threat.

Sincerely,



Brian Mast
Member of Congress

CC:

Jaime A. Pinkham
Acting Assistant Secretary of the Army For Civil Works
108 Army Pentagon
Washington, D.C. 20310