

United States Senate

May 19, 2025

The Honorable Peter B. Hegseth
Secretary of Defense
U.S. Department of Defense
1000 Defense Pentagon
Washington, D.C. 20301-1000

General John D. Caine
Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff
U.S. Department of Defense
9999 Joint Staff Pentagon
Washington, D.C. 20318-9999

The Honorable Troy E. Meink
Secretary of the Air Force
Department of the Air Force
1670 Air Force Pentagon
Washington, DC 20330-1670

General David W. Allvin
Air Force Chief of Staff
Department of the Air Force
1670 Air Force Pentagon
Washington, DC 20330-1670

Dear Secretary Hegseth, Secretary Meink, General Caine, and General Allvin:

I write to raise a serious and urgent concern regarding exposure to toxins and radiation among Department of Defense (DOD) personnel who served at data-masked or classified locations, including within the Nevada Test and Training Range (NTTR). These individuals—many of whom served under Special Access Programs (SAPs)—are being denied the care and benefits they deserve because their service records either omit key location details for classification reasons or because DOD has not formally acknowledged environmental hazards at those sites.

Several constituents have brought to my attention that they were exposed to radiation and toxic substances—including emissions from burn pits used to dispose of debris from developmental aircraft—while stationed at NTTR. However, because of the classified nature of their assignments, they cannot substantiate their presence or exposure. Even if they could, DOD does not recognize the NTTR as a location associated with toxic exposure, despite decades of nuclear testing conducted from 1951–1992, and documentation of environmental contamination.

Compounding this issue is the disparate treatment between DOD personnel and their civilian counterparts from the Department of Energy (DOE). DOE maintains a list of “covered facilities” where DOE employees are presumed to have been exposed to radiation and are eligible for compensation under the Energy Employees Occupational Illness Compensation Program (EEOICP). In Nevada alone, six such sites are listed—including the Tonopah Test Range, which is jointly operated by the Air Force and DOE. DOE personnel working there are presumed to have been exposed, while DOD personnel working in the same environment at the same time are afforded no such presumption.

It is unacceptable for one federal agency to acknowledge hazardous exposure while another, overseeing servicemembers in the same location, offers no presumption and no pathway to care. The 1975 Environmental Assessment from the Energy Research and Development Administration clearly stated that the area remained contaminated, acknowledged the risks, and justified its continued use to be in the national interest. That decision to prioritize national security came with an implicit responsibility to protect and care for those who served there.

I respectfully request that you provide a plan of action to address the following critical concerns:

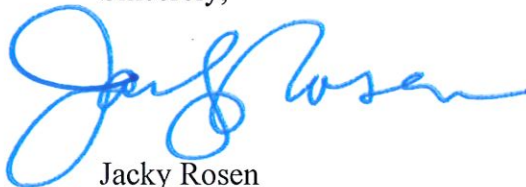
1. How does the DOD intend to enable veterans who served at classified or data-masked locations to verify their toxic or radiation exposure, given the security constraints surrounding their assignments? What secure, interagency mechanisms are being developed—or could be developed—to ensure these veterans are not left behind?
2. Does the Department plan to establish a presumption of toxic or radiation exposure for DOD personnel who served at DOE-covered facilities, such as the Tonopah Test Range, where DOE civilian employees are already presumed to have been exposed and are eligible for compensation under EEOICP? If not, please explain why this disparity exists and how the Department plans to resolve it.
3. What is the Department's current process for designating or re-evaluating environmental hazards at installations like the NTTR, which have known histories of radiation and toxic exposure? How is the Department coordinating with the Department of Veteran Affairs (VA) to ensure these hazards are properly recognized in claims adjudication?
4. Has the Department assessed whether medical records of veterans who served at classified or data-masked locations are themselves classified or otherwise inaccessible to the VA? If so, what steps is the Department taking to establish a secure mechanism that allows VA access to the necessary health records for care and benefits adjudication, while still safeguarding national security interests?

Additionally, I urge the Department to conduct a comprehensive review to determine whether veterans who served at classified or data-masked locations have portions of their medical records similarly classified or otherwise inaccessible to the VA. If such restrictions exist, I request that the Department develop a secure and efficient process—coordinated with the VA—to ensure that relevant health information can be shared for the purposes of care and benefits adjudication, while still protecting the sensitive nature of the veteran's service. No veteran should be denied care because their records are locked behind classification barriers.

I request a written response and plan of action from your offices on an expedited timeline, so that this matter can inform the drafting of the Fiscal Year 2026 National Defense Authorization Act.

We owe our servicemembers and veterans more than silence or delay. I look forward to your attention and action on this important matter.

Sincerely,



Jacky Rosen
United States Senator