

Agent Orange in Laos Fact Sheet

Partnering to overcome the legacies of war

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Q What is the history of Agent Orange?

A Although the Vietnam War ended five decades ago, the remnants of munitions and chemicals deployed in that conflict continue to have deadly effects today. During the war, the United States deployed bombs and herbicides in Vietnam and along the Ho Chi Minh Trail, which connected northern and southwestern Vietnam via a network of military transport routes through Lao and Cambodian territory. While the military objective was to denude the landscape to make it easier to track insurgency during the war, the defoliation chemicals were toxic and have had long-term effects on human health and the environment.

A 1982 report by an U.S. Air Force historian revealed that the United States had also engaged in aerial defoliation and crop destruction chemical spraying in Lao territories during the Vietnam War.¹ While the full extent of spraying in Laos is unknown because many records are still classified, at least 600,000 gallons of herbicides were sprayed along the Lao portion of the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Approximately 165,000 acres of land were affected, primarily in Khammouane, Savannakhet, Salavan, Xekong, and Attapeu provinces.

Q Why does Agent Orange Matter?

A Most documentation on the impacts of exposure to the chemical herbicide known as Agent Orange have focused on Vietnam and US veterans, but people in Laos and Cambodia have also been exposed. Agent Orange was contaminated with dioxin—which is among the most toxic chemicals in the world—and was the most frequently used herbicide in the theater of the Vietnam War. Since 1991, scientists at the United States National Academy of Medicine have identified dioxin, a known carcinogen, as a risk factor in a long list of serious illnesses including many cancers as well as Parkinson’s, type II diabetes, ischemic heart disease and more.² The United States Veterans Administration currently compensates veterans

for 17 conditions associated with Agent Orange and compensates children of male veterans with spinal bifida. In addition, descendants of female veterans who served in Vietnam qualify for benefits if they have a birth defect without a known cause or family history.³ An estimated 2.8 to 4.1 million Vietnamese were believed to be directly exposed to Agent Orange, and the Vietnamese government recognizes 30 specific and related birth defects among the children and grandchildren of veterans.⁴

Q What is known about Agent Orange in Laos?

A To date, very little testing has been conducted in Laos to confirm the presence of dioxin from wartime use of herbicides. However, in 2005 Hatfield Consultants found notably elevated levels at the former Chavan airbase. These results suggest it is likely that other regions in Laos where Agent Orange was used will have elevated levels of dioxin, though further environmental and soil testing is necessary to confirm this.

In the first phase of their Laos Agent Orange Survey from 2015–2020, the War Legacies Project surveyed 126 villages across 5 districts in Salavan and Savannakhet provinces to explore whether communities in areas sprayed during the war have similar birth defects as affected communities in Vietnam. They found the rate of birth defects in sprayed villages in Laos were comparable to the rates in heavily sprayed villages in Vietnam. An average of 4 people per village had birth defects commonly associated with Agent Orange exposure, and approximately of those identified were under the age of 20. In Samoi district, the 14 villages in areas with multiple spray runs generally had higher than average numbers of people born with congenital disabilities. The survey covered only a portion of the 500,000 people living in areas which were sprayed during the war. Assuming similar rates of impact in other villages, approximately 5,000 to 7,500 people in Laos have birth defects associated with Agent Orange and are in need of services.⁶ The 15 districts in Laos that are

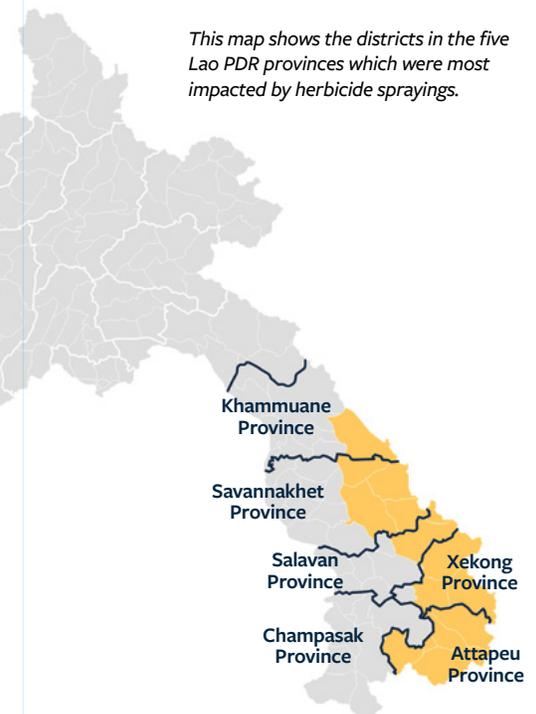
affected by Agent Orange remain far behind most other parts of Laos in terms of economic development. Children living in this area disproportionately suffer from malnutrition, lack of access to healthcare and education, child labor, and social and ethnic discrimination among other challenges.

Q What can be done to address Agent Orange in Laos?

A Support a thorough environmental test of areas with likely contamination to determine the actual need for remediation on the ground. These areas include villages close to multiple spraying runs and former US controlled bases where Agent Orange may have been stored. This will be an essential *(continued on back)*

Districts Sprayed by Agent Orange

This map shows the districts in the five Lao PDR provinces which were most impacted by herbicide sprayings.



Source: The Hatfield Foundation; Map data: © OSM

FOR MORE INFORMATION on activities, events, and membership, please visit stimson.org/project/war-legacies-working-group/ or contact warlegacies@stimson.org

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(continued from front)

starting point to identify next steps and coordination with the government of Laos and local communities.

Aid and assistance programs can explicitly seek to expand services to people with birth defects and disabilities in the areas of Laos sprayed with Agent Orange as well as general health support to address malnutrition, maternal and child health. This can take place simultaneously with efforts to improve testing as there is already initial data from previous surveys and would primarily be an expansion of existing healthcare assistance to support individuals with disabilities living in remote and underserved communities.

¹William Buckingham, Jr., The Air Force and Herbicides in Southeast Asia: 1961-1971, Office of Air Force History, 1982, <https://media.defense.gov/2010/Sep/28/2001329797/-1/-1/0/AFD-100928-054.pdf>.

²Birth Defects in Children of Women Vietnam Veterans” Veterans Affairs, U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 27 Mar. 2019, www.publichealth.va.gov/exposures/agentorange/birth-defects/children-women-vietnam-vets.asp.

³“Agent Orange Exposure and VA Disability Compensation.” Veterans Affairs, US Department of Veterans Affairs, 27 Mar. 2019, www.va.gov/disability/eligibility/hazardous-materials-exposure/agent-orange/#full-eligibility-requirements; “Birth Defects in Children of Women Vietnam Veterans” Veterans Affairs, U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 27 Mar. 2019, www.publichealth.va.gov/exposures/agentorange/birth-defects/children-women-vietnam-vets.asp.

⁴“Thông Tư Liên Tịch 20/2016/TTLT-BYT-BLĐTBXH Hướng Dẫn Giám Định Bệnh Với Người Hoạt Động Kháng Chiến.” LuậtVietnam, BỘ Y TẾ - BỘ LAO ĐỘNG - THƯƠNG BINH VÀ XÃ HỘI, 30 Oct. 2016, luatvietnam.vn/y-te/thong-tu-lien-tich-20-2016-ttl-t-byt-bl-dtbxh-bo-lao-dong-thuong-binh-va-xa-hoi-107374-di.html; “Interview with Dr. Linda Birnbaum about Dioxin.” AOR: Agent Orange Record, 2004, agentorangerecord.com/interview-with-dr-linda-birnbaum-about-dioxin/.

⁶War Legacies Project, 2021 Report on the Laos Agent Orange Survey: State of Health and Livelihood, June 2021, https://913e48b2-4740-4004-aafo-154fe39ec3a0.filesusr.com/ugd/6da981_223f6b8b061c4370b3f7f73c1eb1a0b8.pdf.

WAR LEGACIES WORKING GROUP OVERVIEW

The war the United States waged in Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos did not end for the people living there when the shooting stopped in 1975. Explosive bombs and mines still prevent people from safely using their land to create better lives for themselves. The dioxin residue left by Agent Orange continues to impact many tens of thousands of people who have been born with severe disabilities. Americans still struggle with the war’s consequences. These consequences limit human capacities, reduce the prospects for sustainable development, and adversely affect the safety and well-being of many families in these former war zones. These war legacies shadow the people of these countries with fear for their families and future generations, just as Agent Orange continues to affect American veterans and their families.

Addressing these consequences of war is not just the humanitarian thing to do, it also creates opportunities for mutually beneficial partnerships with our former adversaries. Such initiatives sustain peace, provide pathways to robust livelihoods, and improve diplomatic and economic ties.

Members of the War Legacies Working Group work to fulfill the mission statement above by holding regular meetings, public and private roundtables, and engaging with government agencies, non-government stakeholders, media, and educational institutions.

MEMBERS



Participating Individuals: Charles Bailey, Murray Hiebert



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