

Congressional Hispanic Caucus backs health bill to 'bring justice to Vieques' ^[1]

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By : KEVIN MEAD kevin@caribbeanbusinesspr.com ^[2] [Caribbean Business](#) ^[3] The Congressional Hispanic Caucus on Thursday endorsed legislation calling for the establishment of a state-of-art hospital and toxins research center on Vieques and set up a compensation fund to settle claims of residents against the federal government. The Vieques Recovery & Development Act of 2011 was filed by U.S. Rep. Steve Rothman (D-N.J.) in April and aims to address health issues left behind after more than 60 years of Navy bombing exercises on Vieques. The measure was co-sponsored by Puerto Rico Resident Commissioner Pedro Pierluisi. The caucus formally threw its weight behind the measure after a meeting in which Pierluisi argued its merits. "I am proud that the legislation has won the formal endorsement of the Congressional Hispanic Caucus and I congratulate Pierluisi for all the work he has done in getting support for this measure to advance this important cause," Rothman said. "The support of the Congressional Hispanic Caucus is key in the process we have started in the U.S. House of Representatives in favor of Vieques," Pierluisi said. "I thank my Hispanic colleagues for recognizing the need to address the health and wellbeing claims of my Vieques constituents." The members of the caucus, which groups Democratic Party lawmakers, backing the measure include the three of the four stateside Puerto Rican members of Congress: New York Rep. Nydia Velázquez, New Cork Rep. José Serrano and Illinois Rep. Luis Gutiérrez. Others backing the bill are Joe Baca, Charles González, Raúl Grijalva, Rubén Hinojosa, Ben Luján, Grace Napolitano, Silvestre Reyes Gregorio Sablán, Linda Sánchez and Albio Sires. The White House Task Force report on Puerto Rico released last month devotes one of its four sections to Vieques, which the panel says is facing another decade of cleanup. "The U.S. government must address the serious and disabling health care problems

affecting the people of Vieques and this bill is the first step,” Rothman said when he filed the bill in April. “These health issues were caused by more than 62 years of the U.S. bombing that island with military ordnance, which, our own government has acknowledged, created a federal Superfund site that contains dozens of extremely dangerous, toxic and harmful poisons.” The Navy abandoned its target range on Vieques in 2003 amid massive protests that sprang up in the wake of the 1999 killing of a civilian security guard during a bombing run gone awry. The military fired and dropped millions of pounds of bombs, rockets and artillery shells, including napalm, depleted uranium and Agent Orange, on Vieques starting in 1941. A cleanup began in 2005 to clear thousands of unexploded munitions from the former range, which is now a Fish and Wildlife Service refuge, and the island has placed new emphasis on tourism. After over a half a century of bombings, Viequenses – as locals are known – have a 25 percent higher infant mortality rate, 30 percent higher rate of cancer, a 381 percent higher rate of hypertension, a 95 percent higher rate of cirrhosis of the liver, and a 41 percent higher rate of diabetes than those on the main island, according to statistics provided by Rothman’s office. The Vieques Recovery & Development Act of 2011 calls for constructing a state-of-the-art hospital and toxins research center that would provide preventative care and treat illnesses prevalent on Vieques, such as cancer. The legislation would initiate studies and provide recommendations at the research center on the existence and prevalence of toxins that impact the people and environment of Vieques. The measure would also establish a federal interagency plan to ensure that Viequenses benefit from federal resources across government agencies. In addition, proposed legislation aims at settling all personal claims by Viequenses against the federal government by setting up a compensation fund. Some 7,000 past and current Vieques residents have filed a federal lawsuit seeking billions of dollars in compensation for illnesses they have linked to the bombing range. The impact on the health of Vieques residents from the bombing remains under investigation. The U.S. Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR) decided in 2009 to revise its report on the impact of decades of Navy bombing practice on the health of Vieques residents. ATSDR officials pledged to residents that the agency would review its 2003 research about the health consequences of six decades of Navy bombing practice and war games. The agency, a part of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, used its own studies to conclude in 2003 that there was essentially no health risk from the bombing range—a conclusion widely criticized by academics and residents on the 18-mile-long island of less than 10,000 people. The revision came after the ATSDR identified gaps in environmental data that could be important in determining health effects. “The gaps we found indicate that we cannot state categorically that no health hazards exist in Vieques. We have found reason to pose further questions,” former ATSDR Director Howard Frumkin said at the time. The agency said it would work with Puerto Rican health officials to conduct more in-depth health evaluations and will recommend monitoring to determine if Vieques residents were exposed to harmful chemicals. The U.S. agency re-evaluated its earlier finding after being asked by in April 2010 by Rothman, who said independent studies and reports had documented a health crisis on Vieques.

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