Agent Orange claims get another push

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Senate voted 95-0 Tuesday to expedite certain disability claims of veterans exposed to Agent Orange in Vietnam or to radiation from atomic explosions in World War II.

"It is time for their wait to end," declared Sen. George J. Mitchell, D-Maine. "It is time for this country to fulfill its commitment" to care for those disabled in military service.

At that, the Senate-passed bill is but a small step toward resolving scores of questions over the Agent Orange issue. So far, 20,000 disability claims have been filed by veterans who say they were exposed to the herbicide, and only 15 have been granted.

The bill potentially would relieve hundreds of those men and women from the burden of proving that particular disorders were service-connected.

It would direct the Veterans Administration to establish uniform procedures for handling all Agent Orange and radiation claims, based on the recommendations of a 15-member board comprised of laymen and scientists.

A similar bill was passed earlier this year by the House, and the two measures must now be reconciled.

The Senate bill would give veterans the benefit of the doubt in Agent Orange disability claims for:

- Soft tissue sarcoma, a rare form of cancer, if developed within 30 years after departure from Vietnam.
- Prophyria cutanea tarda, or PCT, a liver disease, if developed within one year of departure from Vietnam.
- Chloracne, also a skin disease, if developed within one year of departing Vietnam.