

No Records, No Nexus: Toxic Drinking Water at Diego Garcia and Other Overseas Military Installations

Prepared by Shawn C. Tovey, RCDD, U.S. Navy Veteran, on behalf of all veterans who drank the water.

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October 7, 2026. Bracketed numbers [n] point to the Source List (Section G).

Why I'm Writing

I'm writing from experience, not theory. I served at Diego Garcia from 1999 to 2000. Within a few years of leaving the island, I was diagnosed with Crohn's disease. It took two more decades to learn what may have caused it. By then the damage was done, and I had lived much of that time without the medical care that could have slowed the disease. Without water records, it is extremely hard for any veteran who served there to connect an illness to service. If it took me decades to understand, thousands of others who served there may still be suffering without knowing the cause. That is why I'm asking for action for all of us. I also contacted Dr. Rebecca Fry, Chair of Environmental Sciences and Engineering at UNC Chapel Hill and Director of the UNC Superfund Research Program. She responded by sharing published research relevant to this exposure, while noting how difficult it is to establish causation between exposure and disease. That difficulty is exactly why missing water records hurt veterans: without data, no one can make the connection.

A. Executive Summary and the Ask

Naval Support Facility (NSF) Diego Garcia is a remote atoll in the Indian Ocean. Every gallon of drinking water there came from a shallow freshwater lens under the island. The government's own records show that this water was put at risk for decades:

- **1991 jet-fuel leak.** A ruptured underground JP-5 pipeline contaminated groundwater near one of the island's major freshwater sources. Nobody knows how much fuel leaked. More than 134,000 gallons were recovered, and "substantial" fuel stayed in the aquifer [1][3].
- **Very high PFAS levels.** In 2017, out-of-service Air Operations wells averaged 8,066 parts per trillion (ppt) of combined PFOS/PFOA, and one reached 86,630 ppt. EPA's 2016 health advisory was 70 ppt [6]. Three Diego Garcia systems were among only 24 DoD water systems worldwide found above that advisory [5].
- **Unsafe tap water until 2018.** In 2017, every tap was posted "Not suitable for drinking." The Navy did not declare the tap water fit for drinking and cooking until February 28, 2018 [6][7]. The system still runs under a conditional permit, and its treatment still does not meet EPA's surface-water filtration rule [9].
- **Missing records.** Diego Garcia water-quality reports are posted publicly for 2020 to 2025, and one report covers 2017. We could not find any public finished-water test results for the 1970s through about 2016 [6][9][10]. PFAS testing of overseas Navy water did not start until a 2015 policy [6].

Bottom line: Diego Garcia is **not** a covered location under the PACT Act [13][14]. VA has **no** PFAS presumption of any kind [20]. Without a presumption, a veteran has to prove exposure with records that were never created, never published, or not kept. **No records means no nexus, and veterans pay the price.** This affects every veteran who served at an overseas installation with a poorly documented water system, not just one person.

The Ask

1. **Recognize the exposure (Congress).** Add NSF Diego Garcia, and other overseas installations with documented drinking-water contamination, to the PACT Act's covered locations, or enact a Camp-Lejeune-style water presumption.
2. **Designate a TERA now (VA).** VA can use its existing authority to designate this service a Toxic Exposure Risk Activity, triggering nexus exams.
3. **Pass and fix pending bills.** Cosponsor H.R. 3639 (VET PFAS Act) and clarify that it covers overseas installations; support S. 2220 (FORGOTTEN Veterans Act).
4. **Open the records and test going forward (DoD, via the NDAA).** Require release of historical overseas drinking-water records and routine, published, PFAS-inclusive testing for every overseas system.
5. **Concede exposure when records are missing,** so gaps in government records never defeat a veteran's claim.
6. **State role.** Ask the Texas Attorney General and state officials to press DoD and VA by formal letter and to support multistate action on service-member PFAS exposure.
7. **Fund the science.** Broaden VA's PFAS review beyond kidney cancer.

Specific asks with their supporting evidence are in Section D.

B. Fact Sheet: Diego Garcia Water Timeline

Every entry below comes from a U.S. government source (USGS, DoD, U.S. Navy). Diego Garcia had about 3,500 residents and used roughly 0.8 to 1.2 million gallons a day, all of it pumped from the ground [1].

When	What the record shows	Src
Early 1970s	The termiticide dieldrin was used on the island. In 2017 the Navy reported granular activated carbon (GAC) treatment as a precaution and no detections [6].	[6]
Early 1980s	The South Ramp was built with an underground fuel pipeline and many subsurface hydrants [1].	[1]
1985	USGS began keeping records of well withdrawals and chloride (salinity). These records cover water quantity and salinity, not finished-water safety testing [3].	[3]
May 1991	A rupture in an underground JP-5 jet-fuel pipeline at the South Ramp was discovered. It contaminated soil and groundwater near one of the island's major freshwater sources, and the amount leaked is unknown [1]. The leak was about 800 ft from production wells. Ten Air Operations (Air Ops) wells were shut from May 1991 to April 1992, about 15% of the island's capacity [3].	[1][3]
Apr 1992	A fuel-diversion program began, using six wells to recirculate about 150,000 gallons a day [3].	[3]
Feb 1993 to May 1994	Benzene levels rose steadily in groundwater and soil-vapor samples. More than 134,000 gallons of fuel were eventually recovered, and substantial fuel remained in the aquifer [1].	[1]
Aug 1997	More fuel contamination was confirmed. By the end of August, 10 of the 18 Air Ops wells were shut. Air Ops output fell from about 240,000 gallons a day before 1991 to about 60,000 by Sep 1997 [3].	[3]
1997 to 2016	Treatment consisted of "just an aeration, sedimentation, and chlorination," in the Navy's own words [8]. We found no public finished-water test results for these years.	[8][10]
Feb 2013 / Apr 2014	CNIC Instruction 5090.1 applied most U.S. national drinking-water regulations to overseas Navy systems (2013). An Installation Water Quality Board was created (2014) [6].	[6]
Sep 14, 2015	Navy policy first required PFAS (PFC) sampling of overseas drinking-water systems [6].	[6]
Jun 2016 to Aug 2017	DoD tested all 524 DoD-owned water systems worldwide and found 24 above the 70 ppt advisory. The Navy had six, including Diego Garcia's I Site, Cantonment and Sub Site systems [5].	[5]
Jul 2016	PFOS/PFOA was found in Air Ops raw water [6]. DoD reported results of 5,849 (Cantonment/Air Ops), 102 (I Site) and 74 to 78 (Sub Site), with an alternate supply "already being provided due to other contaminants" [4].	[4][6]
Dec 2016	A new water treatment plant was commissioned [8][9].	[8][9]
Feb 2017	High lead and copper were found in the main distribution system, and the Deep Draft Wharf service lines were secured because of lead [6].	[6]
2017	All taps were posted "Not suitable for drinking due to high Total Trihalomethanes." Drinking water was trucked in and bottled. Out-of-service Air Ops wells averaged 8,066 ppt PFOS/PFOA (range 96 to 86,630). Standby wells averaged 73.6 ppt and in-service wells 31.4 ppt [6].	[6]
May 2017 / Feb 2018	A sanitary survey found significant deficiencies, and only a Conditional Certificate to Operate was issued [6].	[6]

When	What the record shows	Src
Feb 28, 2018	The main system was declared “fit for human consumption,” meaning tap water could now be used for drinking and cooking [7].	[7]
Dec 2023 / May 2024	The treatment plant became the sole supply (2023). Another 3-year Conditional Certificate to Operate was issued after the 2023 survey (2024) [9].	[9]
2025	PFAS were not detected at the Cantonment and Air Ops points of entry. The plant still does not meet EPA Surface Water Treatment Rule filtration requirements, so a public notice goes out every quarter. A filtration upgrade is programmed for FY2029 (MILCON P-116) [9].	[9]
Sep 2025 policy	A DoD policy requires initial PFAS monitoring at overseas installations by Apr 26, 2027 and compliance by Apr 26, 2029 [9].	[9]

Units note: DoD’s 2017 AFFF report gives the 5,849, 102 and 74–78 values without a unit label. Its footnote compares them to the 70 parts-per-trillion advisory, so ppt is implied [4]. The 2017 Navy water report states its values in ppt [6]. **What the records do not tell us** is how much contaminated water service members actually drank in any given year. That uncertainty is the problem this packet asks Congress and VA to fix.

C. The Systemic Gap: No Records Means No Nexus

To get disability compensation, a veteran must connect an illness to service. Where Congress or VA has set a presumption (Agent Orange, the PACT Act burn-pit locations, Camp Lejeune), that connection is assumed based on where and when the veteran served. Everywhere else, the veteran has to document the exposure. At overseas installations like Diego Garcia, the system blocks that at every step:

Barrier	Evidence
Not a covered location	The PACT Act lists covered countries from Aug 2, 1990 (e.g., Bahrain, Iraq, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, UAE) and from Sep 11, 2001 (e.g., Afghanistan, Djibouti, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, Uzbekistan, Yemen). Diego Garcia is not among them [13][14][15].
No PFAS presumption	VA says: “Currently, there are no presumptions related to PFAS exposure in the military.” Claims are decided case by case, and VA does not offer PFAS blood testing [20]. In December 2025, VA limited its PFAS scientific assessment to kidney cancer and stated it “does not plan to create a PFAS registry” [21].
TERA depends on records	A veteran who took part in a Toxic Exposure Risk Activity gets a nexus exam and VA health care. Under 38 U.S.C. 1710(e)(4)(C), a TERA is an activity that requires an entry in an exposure tracking system, or one the VA Secretary designates [16]. VA guidance says name-only or routine ILER entries do not establish a TERA, and self-reported exposures must be validated [19].
ILER cannot show what was never measured	DoD’s Individual Longitudinal Exposure Record (ILER) labels self-reported exposures as self-reported and does not validate them. ILER does not determine eligibility. Veteran access is forecast for Fall 2026 [22]. If water was never tested, or the results were not kept, ILER has nothing to show.
Records were never required to last	Current DoD overseas drinking-water rules require keeping bacteriological records 5 years and chemical records 10 years (other monitoring records at least 3 years) [11]. Our inference: even if 1999–2000 records were made under similar rules, they could lawfully have been destroyed long ago. We could not find any public Diego Garcia water report before the one covering 2017 [10].
Oversight gaps were already known	GAO reported in 2017 (GAO-18-78) that DoD needed to improve internal reporting of drinking-water regulatory compliance [12].

The Camp Lejeune precedent. For contaminated water at Camp Lejeune, VA does not ask veterans to prove how much water they drank. Service of at least 30 days between Aug 1, 1953 and Dec 31, 1987 is enough, and eight diseases are presumed service-connected [23]. Congress and VA have already accepted that when the government contaminated the water and did not document individual exposure, **location and dates are enough**. Veterans who served at Diego Garcia and similar overseas bases deserve the same logic.

Who is affected. This is not one person’s problem. Every service member, DoD civilian and contractor who lived or worked at NSF Diego Garcia drank from the same system. The same problem likely exists at other overseas installations where water records are thin or never made public. DoD’s own worldwide testing found 24 systems above the 70 ppt advisory in 2016–2017, and 26 as of Oct 30, 2019 [5].

D. Specific Policy Asks, Tied to the Evidence

Ask	What we are asking for	Evidence
1. Presumptive exposure location (Congress)	Add NSF Diego Garcia (Cantonment, Air Ops, I Site and Sub Site systems) to the PACT Act's presumptive-exposure locations, or enact a Camp-Lejeune-style water presumption. The period should run at least through Feb 28, 2018, when tap water was first declared fit for drinking. The start date should be set from the evidence: dieldrin use in the early 1970s, fuel infrastructure in the early 1980s, the fuel leak discovered in 1991 [1][6][7]. Direct DoD to identify other overseas installations with similar documented exceedances so they can be added.	Sections B, C; [1][5][6][7][23]
2. TERA designation now (VA Secretary)	The Secretary can already decide that an activity counts as a TERA, "taking into account what is reasonably prudent to protect the health of veterans" [16]. Designate service at NSF Diego Garcia, and at other overseas installations with documented drinking-water exceedances, as a TERA. That triggers nexus exams under 38 U.S.C. 1168, which must consider total and combined exposures [17], and it requires no new law.	[4][5][6][16][17]
3. Formal presumption review (VA)	Use the 38 U.S.C. 1172–1173 process to formally evaluate overseas garrison drinking-water exposures: PFAS, fuel hydrocarbons including benzene, disinfection byproducts (TTHM) and lead [18].	[1][6][18]
4. Open the historical record (DoD, via NDAA or report language)	Require DoD to publish every available drinking-water record for NSF Diego Garcia and all overseas installations from 1970 to the present. That includes monitoring results, sanitary surveys, Certificates to Operate, consumer confidence reports, fuel-spill and remediation files, and USGS data. DoD should also publish an inventory of the records that are missing or destroyed.	[3][10][11][12]
5. Routine, public, PFAS-inclusive reporting going forward	Require an annual public water report, posted online, for every overseas DoD water system, including PFAS results using EPA analytical methods. Chemical monitoring data should be kept permanently and loaded into ILER by location and date. Today's 3-, 5- and 10-year retention rules [11] guarantee that this records gap will happen again.	[9][10][11][22]
6. Missing records shall not defeat a claim (Congress)	In law, provide that when DoD cannot produce drinking-water monitoring records for an installation and period, VA must concede exposure for any veteran whose service there is documented. The burden of missing government records should fall on the government.	Section C; [19][22]
7. Fund the science	Fund VA/DoD studies of overseas-garrison cohorts using the DoD Serum Repository, the same resource used in a 2024 study linking pre-diagnosis PFAS levels to inflammatory bowel disease [30]. Expand VA's PFAS assessment beyond kidney cancer to the conditions the C8 Science Panel linked to PFOA: ulcerative colitis, thyroid disease, high cholesterol, testicular cancer and pregnancy-induced hypertension [21][27]. Reconsider VA's decision not to create a PFAS registry, and offer PFAS blood testing consistent with National Academies guidance [20][21][34].	[21][27][30][34]
8. Make ILER complete	Require ILER to include historical installation water-system data (contaminant, concentration, dates, population served) so exposure is recorded by location, not only by individual report. Support S. 2220 (FORGOTTEN Veterans Act), which would expand ILER to document toxic exposures [26].	[22][26]
9. Fix and pass pending bills	H.R. 3639, VET PFAS Act (Rep. Lawler, R-NY; referred to HVAC Health Subcommittee June 6, 2025) would provide care and presumptions for veterans at a "covered military installation" with PFAS exposure [24]. Ask: cosponsor it, and amend it to state expressly that overseas installations are covered and that missing monitoring records do not exclude an installation. H.R. 4192, Military PFAS Transparency Act (Rep. McDonald Rivet, D-MI) requires PFAS remediation reporting [25]. Ask: extend it to overseas drinking-water systems.	[24][25]
10. State role (Texas Attorney General and state officials)	Press DoD and VA by formal letter to release historical overseas drinking-water records and to concede exposure when records are missing; join or support multistate efforts urging federal action on PFAS exposure among service members and veterans, including routine published PFAS testing at overseas installations; publicly support affected Texas veterans.	Sections B, C

Note on H.R. 3639 cosponsors: As of Oct 7, 2026, congress.gov lists Reps. Fitzpatrick (R-PA) and Kean (R-NJ) among the Republican cosponsors along with sponsor Rep. Lawler. Rep. Pfluger is not listed [24].

E. Research Summary, with Honest Caveats

Veterans are best served by an accurate account of the science, including where it is uncertain. That uncertainty is the reason presumptions exist: they settle questions that individual veterans cannot answer from incomplete records.

PFAS (PFOS/PFOA, from firefighting foam)

- **C8 Science Panel (2012)**, which studied a highly exposed U.S. community, found a “probable link” between PFOA and ulcerative colitis, thyroid disease, high cholesterol, kidney cancer, testicular cancer and pregnancy-induced hypertension. It found no probable link for Crohn’s disease and many other conditions [27]. The PFOA conditions in H.R. 3639 track this list [24].
- **Steenland et al. (2018)**: ulcerative colitis patients had about 38% higher blood PFOA than controls. **Caveat**: blood was drawn after diagnosis [28].
- **Fart et al. (2021)**: PFAS levels were higher in late-onset ulcerative colitis, and PFOA caused intestinal barrier defects in lab tissue [29].
- **Agrawal et al. (2024), military serum**: used stored DoD Serum Repository samples taken up to 10 years before diagnosis. A PFAS mixture was associated with Crohn’s (OR 2.13) and ulcerative colitis (OR 1.76), and the association held across the pre-diagnosis years. **Caveat**: small study (25 cases of each disease, 25 controls) and semiquantitative measurements [30].
- **Counter-evidence**: the Nurses’ Health Study found no association [31]. A March 2026 meta-analysis of 7 studies found ulcerative colitis risk rose 7% per ng/mL PFOA, but the result was not statistically significant (95% CI –4.7% to +20.0%), and overall confidence in the evidence was rated low [32].

Jet fuel (JP-5) and fuel hydrocarbons

- ATSDR (2017): human data on JP-5, JP-8 and Jet A are limited. Animal studies show immune effects for JP-8 and Jet A, but JP-5 immune effects have **not been adequately evaluated** [33]. That is a research gap, not reassurance.
- At Diego Garcia, rising benzene was documented in groundwater and soil vapor after the 1991 JP-5 leak [1]. How much reached finished drinking water in a given year is not in any public record we found.

Solvents, disinfection byproducts and lead

- Camp Lejeune’s presumptions rest on solvent-contaminated water [23]. In the public Diego Garcia records we reviewed, we did **not** find documented industrial-solvent (e.g., TCE/PCE) contamination of drinking water. We did find high total trihalomethanes (chlorination byproducts) that made every tap undrinkable in 2017, plus lead and copper exceedances [6]. Whether solvents were ever tested for historically is unknown.

Honest framing: The science shows real, repeated associations, especially PFOA with ulcerative colitis, thyroid disease and some cancers, alongside mixed and low-confidence results. It does not prove what caused any individual veteran’s illness. Congress built presumptions for exactly this situation: when the government contaminated the water and kept no usable record, it should not demand proof that only the government could have produced.

G. Source List

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