



PARLIAMENT OF AUSTRALIA

Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade  
Defence Sub Committee

Chair: Senator Michael Forshaw  
SubComm Chair: The Hon Arch Bevis

**MEDIA ALERT**

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## Assistance recommended for 2,000 forgotten F-111 “pick and patch” workers

The report of the Inquiry into RAAF F-111 Deseal-Reseal workers and their families tabled in Parliament today recommended that approximately 2 000 Defence personnel who worked in the F-111 fuel tanks be included in the F-111 ex-gratia scheme as recognition of their working conditions.

Chair of the Inquiry Hon Arch Bevis MP said: “The recommendations of this Inquiry, if adopted, will rectify the shortcomings of the Howard Government’s 2005 scheme which ‘was born of fuzzy logic, shrouded in misleading spin and then administered in confusion’.

“Those workers involved in running repairs of the fuel tank leaks undertook work known as ‘pick and patch’.

“Without explanation, the 2005 scheme provided assistance to workers who did pick and patch in the formal Deseal/Reseal programs but not to about 2 000 other Defence personnel in three other squadrons who undertook the same duties.

“The recent inquiry recommends that those 2 000 forgotten F-111 Defence personnel receive the appropriate ex-gratia payments and other assistance.

“The report also makes recommendations for assistance to be provided to the long-suffering families of those affected, improved communication with the wider F-111 fuel tank repair community and improvements in the handling of occupational medicine and OH&S issues within the wider Australian Defence Force.”

The Inquiry concluded that there was a lack of clear evidence to prove certain chemicals used in the F-111 Deseal/Reseal programs were the cause of widespread health problems in the F-111 fuel tank repair community.

However, the report’s eighteen recommendations are wide-ranging and cover ex-gratia payments, health matters and processes:

- The recommendations ensure access to the ex-gratia scheme is based on the work undertaken in the tanks, not the unit nor the year in which the work was undertaken. As a result, about 2,000 RAAF personnel will qualify for the scheme.
- Increased counselling support for families is recommended to help those affected move on with their lives.
- The Committee will seek regular reports on the progress of civil legal action taken by F-111 personnel in the hope that these can be concluded in a reasonable time.
- An urgent increase in the number of occupational medicine specialists. Amazingly, the Australian Defence Force has only one full-time person in this role.

- Further research into the health implications of working with aviation fuels is also recommended.

Mr Bevis added: “My hope is that the report’s release brings some closure to those affected by working in the F-111 fuel tanks, some of whom have waited many years for recognition.”

Downloadable copies of the report are available on the Committee’s inquiry website at: [http://www.aph.gov.au/house/committee/jfadt/deseal\\_reseal/index.htm](http://www.aph.gov.au/house/committee/jfadt/deseal_reseal/index.htm)

**For media inquiries**, contact the Sub-Committee Chairman, The Hon Arch Bevis MP on (02) 6277 4518 or (07) 3356 1555.

## **Report into RAAF F-111 Deseal-Reseal workers and their families**

### **Recommendation 1**

That the definition of eligible personnel for the purposes of Tier 3 of the ex-gratia scheme be extended to include personnel posted to one or more of the F-111 maintenance squadrons 1, 6 and 482 who carried out Sealant Rework (‘pick and patch’) work during the period 1973 to 2000 and personnel who served in 3AD or 501 WG and who undertook fuel tank entry and Sealant Rework (‘pick and patch’) work outside of the formal DSRS program.

### **Recommendation 2**

In absence of evidence to the contrary and where usual documentary evidence is not available or is inconclusive, a statutory declaration by the applicant confirming:

- They were posted to 1, 6 or 482 Squadron between 1973 and 2000, or 3AD or 501 WG and
- That they were required to undertake Sealant Rework (‘pick and patch’) or fuel tank entries, and
- Accompanied by a second corroborating statutory declaration from a commanding officer or superior officer or person who has already had a claim under the scheme approved

be accepted as evidence of qualifying service.

### **Recommendation 3**

That the definition of eligible personnel for the purposes of Tier 2 of the ex-gratia scheme be extended to include personnel posted to one or more of the F-111 maintenance squadrons 1, 6 and 482 who spent between 20 and 59 cumulative working days carrying out Sealant Rework (‘pick and patch’) during the period 1973 to 2000 and personnel who served in 3AD or 501 WG and who undertook fuel tank entry and Sealant Rework (‘pick and patch’) work outside of the formal DSRS program.

### **Recommendation 4**

In absence of evidence to the contrary and where usual documentary evidence is not available or is inconclusive, a statutory declaration by the applicant confirming:

- They were posted to the squadron between 1973 and 2000, and
- That they undertook Sealant Rework (‘pick and patch’) work for between 20 and 59 cumulative working days during the period 1973 to 2000 outside of the formal DSRS program, or 3AD or 501 WG and

- Accompanied by a second corroborating statutory declaration from a commanding officer or superior officer or person who has already had a claim under the scheme approved

be accepted as evidence of qualifying service.

#### **Recommendation 5**

That the definition of eligible personnel for the purposes of Tier 1 of the ex-gratia scheme be extended to include personnel posted to one or more of the F-111 maintenance squadrons 1, 6 and 482 who spent 60 or more cumulative working days carrying out Sealant Rework ('pick and patch') work during the period 1973 to 2000 and personnel who served in 3AD or 501 WG and who undertook fuel tank entry and Sealant Rework ('pick and patch') work outside of the formal DSRS program.

#### **Recommendation 6**

That where usual documentary evidence is not available or is inconclusive, a statutory declaration by the applicant confirming:

- They were posted to the squadron between 1973 and 2000, and
- That they undertook Sealant Rework 'pick and patch' work for 60 or more cumulative working days during the period 1973 to 2000 outside of the formal DSRS program, or 3AD or 501 WG and
- Accompanied by a second corroborating statutory declaration from a commanding officer or superior officer or person who has already had a claim under the scheme approved.

#### **Recommendation 7**

That a review be undertaken of those cases in which a statutory declaration has been rejected by DVA in determining an F-111 ex-gratia application. That the committee be provided with a copy of that review.

#### **Recommendation 8**

That the healthcare and compensation provisions made available under the F-111 ex-gratia scheme be in accordance with s7(2) of the SRCA or the VEA and this apply to the widened group in accordance with the recommendations in this report.

#### **Recommendation 9**

That the cut off date requiring applicants for the SHCS to submit claims prior to 20<sup>th</sup> September 2005 be removed. That all claims for SHCS received by DVA and rejected because of the September 2005 date be reviewed.

#### **Recommendation 10**

That the requirement excluding estates of those who died prior to 8<sup>th</sup> September 2001 from accessing the ex-gratia scheme be removed. Those estates of former personnel with qualifying service in accordance with the scheme and these recommendations be eligible for support under the ex-gratia scheme.

#### **Recommendation 11**

That the Minister for Veterans Affairs appoint a person with suitable qualifications and background knowledge of the F-111 workers claims to oversee the implementation of these recommendations and to provide expert assistance to DVA in processing claims. The person should be appointed for a minimum of two years and also provide periodic advice to the Minister on progress in handling claims.

**Recommendation 12**

That group counselling be made available to F-111 fuel tank repair workers and their families. That initially, participation in up to five group counselling sessions be made available to all who have access to funded individual counselling. That the Minister review whether further group counselling sessions should be made available, based on outcomes from these group counselling services.

**Recommendation 13**

That the Government give consideration to expanding respite care for partners of seriously ill former F-111 workers who are principal care providers.

**Recommendation 14**

That Defence provide a briefing on the progress of litigation to the Committee in March and September of each year.

**Recommendation 15**

The Committee recommends that Defence and DVA establish a dedicated website in relation to F-111 aircraft maintenance issues. Such a website should be comprehensive and include:

- The Board of Inquiry Report and recommendations
- The complete SHOAMP study reports
- Complete information on the ex-gratia payment including application forms
- A link to this report and recommendations

Contact details and role descriptions of all relevant personnel including the Defence Force Advocate, Ex-gratia processing team, DVA compensation processing team and other support mechanisms such as the F-111 DSRS Support Group, counselling support and the Commonwealth Ombudsman.

**Recommendation 16**

That a review of DVA staff training be undertaken to ensure a regular high standard of client focused delivery of services occurs. That policies for handling cases of seriously ill patients, especially those in vulnerable circumstances, be reviewed.

**Recommendation 17**

That the ADF expand its internal capability in occupational medicine as a matter of some urgency. That a review of current practices in handling OH&S matters within the ADF be conducted to amongst other things, respond to the structural and cultural issues identified in the BOI and by Professor Hopkins.

**Recommendation 18**

That the ADF fund further research into the mitochondrial changes identified in Professor Bowling's research. That as part of that research, further wider study be undertaken into the health implications of working with aviation turbine fuels and the results of these studies be reported back to the Committee at least annually.