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Review of VVA Critique of Ranch Hand Mortality Results
Science Panel, Agent Orange Working Group

At its March 15, 1984 meeting, the Science Panel of the Agent Orange Working Group (AOWG) reviewed a September 12, 1983 Vietnam Veterans of American (VVA) Critique of the Air Force Project Ranch Hand II Baseline Mortality Study Results (Baseline Report) released on June 30, 1983. The VVA Critique pointed out a number of instances where certain subgroups among the Ranch Handers had sustained higher mortality rates than comparisons and indicated that the observed differences were consistent with an adverse health effect due to heavier herbicide exposure among enlisted personnel. The Critique suggests that further analysis and interpretation of these differences may be advisable.

The many tables in the Baseline Report which show overall and cause-specific comparative mortality for various race, occupation and age-specific groups make it possible for the reader to identify subgroups with sizable differences in mortality experience. The Science Panel believes, however, that the number of deaths available for analysis at the time of the Baseline Report was not sufficient to determine whether or not any apparent excess mortality among Ranch Hand subgroups is due to chance.

Despite this fact, the Science Panel agrees that some of the differences cited in the Report and by the VVA may be of concern. The concerns for the health of Ranch Handers raised in the Critique are shared by other scientists, including the Air Force investigators themselves. The Air Force Investigators emphasize the preliminary nature of the Baseline Report and have stated that they intend to reanalyze the mortality results on an annual basis as more information becomes available.

Finally, the Science Panel recommends that a rather technical document with high public interest, such as the Baseline Report, should be presented in more readily understood language. Valid scientific interpretation of these data requires considerable familiarity with statistical and epidemiologic methods and the Baseline Report states that it was primarily intended for readers with a background in these disciplines. However, if the VVA Critique accurately reflects statements made to the press at the time of release of the Baseline Report, a discrepancy between the Report and statements made about it was already apparent. This may well illustrate why such a "translated" text is needed.