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Rotary speakers target Vietnam's lingering Agent Orange

By Phil Ferolito

YAKIMA, Wash. -- It's been 50 years since the U.S. military sprayed Agent Orange over Vietnam, but its effects are still felt today, said Charles Bailey, who is leading an effort to clean up the chemical's legacy.

Bailey, 66, and Son Michael Pham -- who left Vietnam as a refugee the day the war ended -- spoke to the Rotary Club of Yakima on Thursday at the Yakima Convention Center about the lingering impacts of the chemical in hopes of garnering cleanup support.

During the Vietnam War, U.S. planes sprayed roughly 12 million gallons of Agent Orange over the war-torn country as herbicidal chemical warfare to kill vegetation used for cover and wipe out the agricultural food supply.

It's time to try and undo the damage the chemical continues to cause, said Bailey. Bailey told the crowd how the chemical that causes birth defects, cancer and other illnesses is still prevalent in soils and waterways in Vietnam, where 28 Agent Orange "hot spots" have been identified.

"This is a humanitarian cause, we can do something about it," Bailey told a crowd of more than 100. Pham, a 57-year-old Rotary International member who lives in Seattle, said International Rotary has been supporting the cleanup effort.

"I would like to invite your club to partner with us," he said. "We're not looking for a lot -- I think mostly we're looking for engagement."

Pham is also the founder and director of Kids Without Borders, an international, nongovernmental organization based in Bellevue that helps disabled children in Vietnam.

In 2007, Bailey -- a former grant writer working to support humanitarian efforts in Africa and Asia -- helped establish the Ford Foundation's Agent Orange cleanup initiative in Vietnam. He became interested after visiting Vietnam in 1997.

"I looked around and saw all these scarred hillsides and said, 'What had been done?' " he recalled. Since that time, the United States has spent about \$40 million to help those living with disabilities caused by Agent Orange. Another \$36 million has come from foundations and other sources. Rotary International has already raised \$20,000 for piping clean water into a village at one of the hot spots, he said.

Fishing has been barred in certain waterways and concrete pads have been poured over soil in contaminated areas, such as the former Da Nang Air Base. He showed a national news report about the continued birth defects featuring a woman born without legs from her knees down. Her mother was exposed to the chemical during the Vietnam War.

"Agent Orange affected all it touched," Bailey said.

How to help

* Learn how you can support cleanup efforts in Vietnam at www.makeagentorangehistory.org

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