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At least three months

Air Force delays herbicide study

The Air Force has announced at least a three-month delay in a major study of the health of "Ranch Hand" personnel who sprayed Herbicide Orange in Vietnam.

The study is being conducted by USAFSAM's Epidemiology Division under the direction of the Office of the Air Force Surgeon General, Washington, D.C.

Operation Ranch Hand was a name attached to the Air Force spraying program in Vietnam between 1962 and 1971. "Ranch Hand" personnel would have been the most likely Vietnam veterans to have had significant exposure to the herbicide.

The purpose of the study is to determine if any causal relationship can be established between exposure to herbicide and changes in the long-term

health status of the individuals involved.

The initial phase of the six-year study was scheduled to begin early this month after the proposed scientific approach had been reviewed by several scientific groups. The start date has been pushed back to January 1980 because the peer review process is taking longer than expected.

So far, three scientific groups have reviewed the approach or "research protocol" -- the University of Texas Medical School at Houston, the Air Force Scientific Advisory Board and the Armed Forces Epidemiological Board. A fourth scientific group, the National Academy of Sciences, will review the protocol in the near future.

The first phase of the study

involves contacting all identifiable Ranch Hand personnel, according to Col. (Dr.) George Lathrop, Epidemiology Division chief. Researchers will be contacting the former aircrew members by telephone and giving them a detailed health survey.

A control group of individuals who were not exposed to the herbicide will be set up. These individuals will be carefully matched to the "Ranch Hand" personnel in terms of age, length of tour in Southeast Asia and other factors.

The long-range study will also involve comprehensive physical examinations of selected "Ranch Hand" veterans and control individuals and an extensive follow-up on the long-term health status of the group.