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HORSHAM WATER AND  
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## Compromise reached on defense bill, but PFAS cleanup mandate removed

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The final compromise National Defense Authorization Act calls for the creation of a U.S. space force, and creates paid family leave for all federal workers. But several provisions requiring the federal government to establish a drinking water standard for toxic PFAS chemicals and for the military to pay for cleanup of PFAS near hundreds of military installations were dropped.

After months of negotiations, Senate and House lawmakers have finally brokered a compromise on a defense policy bill for the 2020 fiscal year, but the bill lacks several provisions requiring the federal government to establish a drinking water standard for toxic PFAS chemicals and for the military to pay for cleanup of PFAS near hundreds of military installations.

Those provisions had been included in the Democratic-controlled House-approved version of the legislation.

"Once again, Senate Republicans have let the American public down by catering to special interests rather than the health and safety of the those they took an oath to represent," said U.S. Rep. Brendan Boyle, D-2, Philadelphia, said in a statement.

"The House did its job and passed meaningful PFAS protections in our version of the NDAA to protect our constituents and the environment. Now that Senate Republicans refused to negotiate in good faith, manufacturers of these dangerous chemicals are let off the hook, and people will continue to suffer as a result."

The NDAA sets spending and policy for the military for the 2020 fiscal year. A compromise was required because the House and Senate passed different versions of the bill earlier this year.

PFAS have been used for decades in firefighting foams at hundreds of military bases across the country. The man-made chemicals are of particular interest in southeast Pennsylvania, where major drinking water contamination has impacted communities near military bases in Warminster, Warrington and Horsham.

PFAS exposure has been linked to several health problems, including testicular and kidney cancer, high cholesterol and thyroid disease.

President Donald Trump had cited the PFAS provisions in a veto threat his administration made before the House approved its version of the NDAA in July with no Republican support, and no Republicans on the Senate-House conference would support keeping the off-base PFAS cleanup provisions in a compromise bill.

While the compromise bill dropped PFAS provisions for military funded cleanup outside installations, it does require the use of firefighting foams with the chemical to be phased out by 2024 and for the military to perform blood tests on any current and former service members or civilian workers who may have been exposed to it.

The House bill also contained language that would prohibit the White House from diverting military funding for the construction of a wall or barriers on the U.S.-Mexico border, as well as language restricting the president from unilaterally launching a military strike on Iran without prior authorization from Congress. Both those controversial provisions were struck in the compromise.

The deal does provide \$738 billion in total military spending plus another \$5 billion in emergency funding for disaster recovery at military installations in Florida and other states. It also creates a U.S. space force, which had also been pushed for by the president.

In return, Democrats were able to add a new provision allowing more than 2 million federal government workers to take up to 12 weeks of paid leave to care for a new baby or adopted child. Current federal law allows them to take 12 weeks of unpaid leave.

Paid leave was a priority for high-ranking Democrats, including Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer and House Speaker Nancy Pelosi.

"It's a real breakthrough for families," Schumer said, adding that Democrats hope the move will encourage more private employers to offer similar parental leave benefits.

"Not only does it mean that federal employees will get what they're entitled to, the federal government is a pacesetter," Schumer added. "If you work for a private company, this means the pressure on your employer will be much greater to give you parental leave as well when the blessed event of a child comes around, or god forbid your child is really sick and needs serious care."

Ivanka Trump, the president's daughter and adviser, said Friday that such a provision would "mark a HUGE step forward towards making paid leave a reality for all Americans."

The compromise phases out the so-called "widows tax" limiting the amount of survivor benefits Gold Star spouses can collect. Military families and their advocates have pushed for years to have it repealed. It also requires women recruits to be integrated into Marine Corps boot camps and provides some deportation protections for undocumented immigrants who served in the armed services.

The bill also calls for service members to receive a 3.1% pay raise and includes billions for military construction and family housing improvements, including the creation of a public database of complaints and a military tenants bill of rights.

Congress has never failed to approve the annual defense bill dating back nearly 60 years. But with a vote on impeachment articles fast approaching in the House, there was considerable pressure for lawmakers to reach an accord this week.

The full House is expected to vote in the compromise as early as Wednesday. The Republican-controlled Senate is expected to vote on it later this month.

*The Associated Press contributed to this story*