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Pentagon to resume forced anthrax vaccine program

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By Kristin Roberts

WASHINGTON (Reuters) – The Pentagon on Monday said it will force troops in Iraq, Afghanistan and South Korea to be vaccinated against anthrax, restarting a court-halted program after U.S. regulators declared the shots safe and effective.

But William Winkenwerder, assistant secretary of defense for health affairs, said the Pentagon has no plans to vaccinate troops serving elsewhere, including those in the United States — site of the only major anthrax attack against Americans, which killed five people in 2001.

"There are terrorists operating in and around Iraq and in that part of the world," Winkenwerder said. "That's a higher threat area."

The move to reopen the mandatory vaccination program follows a final order from the U.S. Food and Drug Administration in 2005 that found the anthrax vaccine safe and effective in preventing anthrax disease.

But attorneys whose lawsuit previously shut down the mandatory anthrax vaccination program said they plan to file a new suit to challenge its resumption.

"The forthcoming mandatory program is just as senseless as before and the FDA's new determination remains legally and scientifically flawed," said Mark Zaid, one of the attorneys.

Winkenwerder, who has not taken the anthrax vaccine, said the FDA's final order settles legal questions and the Pentagon is prepared for a

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court challenge.

Anthrax spores can be used in germ warfare to give victims the deadly bacterial disease. The Pentagon argues the shots are needed to protect troops against bioterrorism.

A federal district court in 2005 allowed the Pentagon to give some troops the vaccinations on a voluntary basis after ordering a halt to the mandatory shots the year before.

The court's action came after a lawsuit filed by six unnamed military personnel and civilian workers who objected to the vaccinations. Some troops had refused to get the mandatory shots due to worries about side effects, and some had been thrown out of the military.

Under the voluntary program, only 50 percent of troops offered the shot accepted it.

Winkenwerder said those numbers were too low and left U.S. forces unprepared for bioterrorist attacks. He said service members expect a shot to be mandatory if it is important.

More than 1.4 million service members have been vaccinated since 1998, according to the Defense Department.

Winkenwerder could not say how many troops would be vaccinated under the mandatory program, which should start in 30 to 60 days. Troop levels total 143,000 in Iraq, 21,000 in Afghanistan and 28,000 in South Korea.

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