

State-wide PFAS investigation program

Information for local residents and businesses

- The NSW Environment Protection Authority (EPA) is leading an investigation into sites across NSW where significant quantities of PFAS (per- and poly-fluoroalkyl substances) have been used.
- The EPA wants to better understand the extent of PFAS use and any resulting contamination in NSW. This will ensure the EPA is prepared if any health and environmental impacts become known.

What are PFAS?

PFAS (per- and poly-fluoroalkyl substances) is a group of manufactured chemicals that includes perfluorooctane sulfonate (PFOS), perfluorooctanoic acid (PFOA) and perfluorohexane sulfonate (PFHxS).

PFAS are very stable chemicals that bioaccumulate, do not easily break down and can persist in the environment.

Due to their fire retardant, waterproofing and stain resistant qualities, these chemicals have been widely used in some types of fire-fighting foams and industrial products worldwide.

PFAS can also be found in low concentrations in many consumer products like food packaging, non-stick cookware, fabric, furniture, and carpet stain protection applications. Products containing PFAS are being phased out around the globe.

Are PFAS a health risk?

Finding PFAS in the environment does not necessarily mean there is a human health risk. Expert advice released by the Australian Government in June 2019 states that PFAS have not been shown to cause disease in human and “probably has minimal impact on human health”¹.

However, the Australian Government’s PFAS Expert Health Panel recommends limiting exposure to PFAS as a precaution until further research into health effects is completed.

Typically, this approach means assessing and minimising human exposure pathways, such as limiting groundwater consumption or consumption of homegrown produce where threshold levels of PFAS are present.

How are people exposed to PFAS?

Due to their widespread use in everyday and specialty products, almost everyone is exposed to low levels of PFAS from food, water, and various consumer products. Specific contamination can lead to higher exposures through contaminated food, especially seafood, or affected drinking water.

Are these chemicals still in use?

While many essential uses of PFAS are still permitted, there are efforts both nationally and internationally to restrict non-essential uses and reduce use of the most hazardous PFAS compounds as a precautionary measure. Certain chemicals containing PFAS are still in use in industries such as metal plating. The National Industrial Chemicals Notification and Assessment Scheme (NICNAS) is monitoring their use in Australia.

¹ The 2019 enHealth Guidance Statements and a factsheet providing more information on PFAS and human health effects by the Department of Health is available at: <https://www.health.gov.au/resources/publications/enhealth-guidance-revised-guidance-statements-on-per-and-polyfluoroalkyl-substances-pfas?language=en>

Why is the EPA investigating PFAS in NSW?

The EPA wants to better understand the extent of PFAS use and any resulting contamination in NSW. This will ensure the EPA is better prepared if any health and environmental impacts become known.

Where is the EPA investigating?

PFAS are widespread in the environment in low concentrations, due to their use in a wide range of products and their persistent nature.

As a result, the EPA is investigating sites where the greatest usage of PFAS containing products has taken place, including firefighting training facilities, airports and some industrial sites.

The EPA is assessing whether there are exposure pathways that may increase people's contact with the chemicals from these sites, such as bore water usage, surface water usage or fishing.

How is the investigation being undertaken?

The EPA will work with occupiers and owners of identified sites to collect samples of soils and/or waters for indicative analysis for PFAS, and to identify potential exposure pathways. The initial investigation program is expected to take some months to complete. If significant PFAS concentrations levels are detected at a specific location and exposure pathways are identified, a more detailed assessment will be undertaken, and then clean-up will occur. The outcome of the investigations will be made public when it is available.

What is the NSW Government's role?

The NSW Government is committed to working closely with all stakeholders, to ensure an appropriate, scientific and risk-based approach is adopted throughout the investigation.

The EPA is working with other agencies including Department of Primary Industries, NSW Health, and NSW Food Authority to ensure investigations are suitable and timely, closely monitoring results and keeping the community informed across NSW.

Is my pet safe?

There are no proven negative effects on animals from drinking water that may have been exposed to PFAS. If you would like to minimise your pet's exposure, you should use an alternative water supply, other than ground, surface or bore water for drinking.

You should also use an alternate water supply when washing your animals to reduce the risk of them swallowing water during the process.

Can I sell my produce to market?

There are no domestic limits for PFAS in food, nor any restrictions on sale or movement of primary produce. In Australia, the general community's exposure to PFAS is low and declining as most people source their food from a wide variety of types and locations, and any PFAS levels that may be present in one source are diluted across the market.

Where can I find more information?

More information on the NSW Government's response to PFAS can be found at

<https://www.epa.nsw.gov.au/your-environment/contaminated-land/pfas-investigation-program>

If you have questions or concerns, please call the 24/7 NSW EPA Environment Line on **131 555**.

NSW Environment Protection Authority

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