

Armidale Fire and Rescue: PFAS Investigations

Update for local residents

Key points

- Fire and Rescue NSW (FRNSW) is investigating potential per- and poly-fluoroalkyl substances (PFAS) contamination stemming from the historical use of fire-fighting foams at its Armidale site.
- Investigations found PFAS on the Armidale site. PFAS was also detected in soil, sediments, groundwater and surface water at some surrounding properties.
- Tailored precautionary dietary advice has been provided to residents of surrounding properties. This advice does not apply to the wider Armidale community.

What are PFAS?

PFAS are a group of manufactured chemicals that include perfluorooctane sulfonate (PFOS), perfluorooctanoic acid (PFOA) and perfluorohexane sulfonate (PFHxS).

Due to their fire retardant, waterproofing and stain resistant qualities, these chemicals were widely used in some types of fire-fighting foams and other 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, clothing and shampoo.

The most common and prevalent sources of PFAS in the environment is where fire-fighting foams were used for training purposes, particularly on Department of Defence bases and at fire-fighting training facilities.

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

Products containing PFAS are being phased out around the world.

Are PFAS a health risk?

The Australian Government's PFAS Expert Health Panel, in its report to the Federal Minister for Health, noted there is no current evidence to suggest an increase in overall health risk related to PFAS exposure. However, the Expert Panel also said health effects cannot be ruled out at this time.

Because the risks are not fully known, the NSW Government takes a precautionary approach to limiting people's exposure to PFAS. This includes occasionally providing precautionary advice to help limit people's exposure to PFAS. The EPA is leading the PFAS Investigation Program to understand the prevalence of this emerging contaminant in NSW. This program will help NSW be better prepared to respond if any health and environmental impacts become known.

The Expert Panel's report and a factsheet providing more information on PFAS and human health is available at www.health.gov.au/pfas.

Why is testing being undertaken at Armidale?

FRNSW is conducting PFAS investigations at locations across NSW where there has been significant historical use of PFAS-containing fire-fighting foams. These investigations are looking at the extent of the impact of PFAS, and the potential risks to the community.

PFAS foams were used at the Armidale site in fire-fighting training and operations prior to the foams being phased out.

What is known so far?

Investigations have found PFAS on the Armidale site. PFAS was also detected in soil, sediments, surface and groundwater in some surrounding properties.

The detection of PFAS is not unexpected given the past use of PFAS-containing fire-fighting foams at the site. PFAS has also been used in many domestic and industrial products and background levels may be present from these other sources.

Do residents need to do anything?

Finding PFAS in the environment does not mean there is a human health risk. It is important to assess if there are exposure pathways through which people might ingest PFAS, such as drinking contaminated ground water or consuming food products watered with contaminated ground water.

Following a water use survey undertaken by FRNSW, residents of surrounding properties have been provided with tailored precautionary dietary advice to minimise their exposure to PFAS. This advice is specific to those properties and does not apply to the wider Armidale community.

Regardless of PFAS detections, NSW Health recommends that people do not use groundwater for drinking, cooking and personal hygiene (including cleaning teeth and bathing) without testing and appropriate treatment.

What are the next steps?

FRNSW is working with a consultant to develop a remedial action plan which will be provided to the NSW Environment Protection Authority (EPA) for review. The EPA will continue to work collaboratively with FRNSW to ensure timely and robust investigations are undertaken. The EPA and FRNSW will keep the community informed of any developments.

What is the State Government's role?

The EPA is working closely with FRNSW, NSW Department of Primary Industries, NSW Health and NSW Food Authority to ensure timely and robust investigations are undertaken.

This collaboration ensures an appropriate, scientific and risk-based approach to protect the environment and community.

Where can I find more information?

More information, including detailed investigation reports, can be found on the FRNSW website at www.fire.nsw.gov.au/pfas.

More information on the NSW Government's response to PFAS can be found at www.epa.nsw.gov.au/pfas.

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