

RAAF Base Richmond: PFAS Investigations

Update for local residents

Key points

- The Department of Defence has undertaken detailed investigations into PFAS (per- and poly-fluoroalkyl substances) contamination stemming from the historical use of fire-fighting foams at RAAF Base Richmond.
- Investigations have found PFAS in soil, sediment, surface water, groundwater, and produce both on and offsite.
- These results have identified that in certain areas, there is the potential for people to be exposed to PFAS through the consumption of home grown produce which was grown in contaminated soils, or where contaminated groundwater or surface water is being used.
- Following a fish sampling program in the Hawkesbury River, it has been determined that the community does not need to take additional precautions to reduce their exposure to PFAS, and that additional precautionary advice is not required for fishers.

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 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.

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

Do residents need to do anything?

If you are a resident in the area, and have any questions about your exposure to PFAS, please contact the EPA.

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.

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 appropriate treatment.

Why is testing being undertaken at RAAF Base Richmond?

The Department of Defence is conducting PFAS investigations at locations across Australia 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 RAAF Base Richmond in fire-fighting training and operations prior to the foams being phased out of use in training operations.

What is known so far?

Investigations have found PFAS in soil, sediment, surface water, groundwater and produce both on and offsite.

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.

What about fishing in local waterways?

Following a fish sampling program conducted in the Hawkesbury River by the Department of Defence in November 2018, the NSW PFAS Taskforce determined that the community does not need to take additional precautions to reduce their exposure to PFAS, and that additional precautionary advice is not required for fishers.

However, the NSW Environment Protection Authority (EPA) is encouraging community members to note existing general advice issued by Food Standards Australia and New Zealand that people can safely consume 2-3 serves of seafood a week, from a variety of sources and species.

What are the next steps?

As the Department of Defence has completed the investigation at the RAAF Base Richmond, the NSW EPA expects Defence to move onto remediation and ongoing management of the issue. This includes the development of a PFAS Management Area Plan (PMAP) and Ongoing Monitoring Plan (OMP).

These plans are expected to be released later this year.

What is the NSW Government's role?

Although the NSW Government does not regulate Department of Defence sites, they have agreed to conduct investigations in a manner consistent with the EPA's requirements.

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

The NSW Government is closely monitoring the Department of Defence investigation to ensure it is timely and robust and will keep the community informed.

Where can I find more information?

More information, including detailed investigation reports, can be found on the Department of Defence website at

<http://www.defence.gov.au/environment/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**

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