

St Columba's Catholic College: PFAS investigations

Update for the school and local community

Key points

- NSW Rural Fire Service (RFS) and St Columba's Catholic College have investigated the presence of PFAS (per- and poly-fluoroalkyl substances) contamination stemming from the historical use of fire-fighting foams for fire training exercises on the grotto field (top oval) and old squash courts.
- Investigations have found PFAS in sediment and groundwater.
- Students, parents and teachers do not need to take any additional precautions to limit their exposure to PFAS.

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 was testing undertaken at St Columba's College?

RFS 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 risk to the local community.

PFAS foams were used on the grotto field (top oval) and old squash courts in fire-fighting training prior to the foams being phased out.

What were the findings?

Investigations have found PFAS in sediment and groundwater.

The detection of PFAS is not unexpected due to the historical 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 students, parents or teachers 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. Students, parents and teachers do not need to take any additional precautions to limit their exposure to PFAS.

It is unlikely that students, parents and teachers have had significant contact with PFAS because:

- The College is connected to reticulated water (town water) and does not use surface, ground or bore water
- The top oval has only been used by the College for a total of two hours per week for general sporting activities such as soccer and softball since 2014, and has not been used since school resumed in 2018.

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?

PFAS investigations at St Columba's College have now concluded.

As a precaution, RFS removed a 10 x 10 m section of shallow soil from one area of the grotto field. The excavated soil was sent to landfill, in accordance with NSW Environment Protection Authority's (EPA) waste classification guidelines, and replaced with excavated natural material. Seed was sown to return grass to the area.

Where can I find more information?

More information, including more detailed information about the investigation, can be found on the RFS website at www.rfs.nsw.gov.au/pfas.

More information on 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**.