

Australian governments knew about the dangers of airforce fire-fighting foam for decades

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6 September 2017

Thousands of Australian residents living near military airbases have potentially cancerous toxins in their blood. The compounds—PFOS (perfluorooctane sulfonate) and PFOA (perfluorooctanoic acid)—which are used in fire-fighting foam, have been found at dangerous levels in water supplies near Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) bases.

Residents known to have been affected by PFOS and PFOA live near bases in Townsville and Oakey in Queensland, Williamtown in New South Wales, Darwin and Katherine in the Northern Territory, and in Perth, Western Australia. A Defence Department report late last year revealed that drinking water at the Townsville RAAF Base contained PFOS at 307 times the acceptable safe limit and PFOA 12 times the limit.

Australian and international studies have raised concerns about the impact of these chemicals on human health for almost two decades. However, consecutive federal Liberal-National and Labor governments allowed their use and are now refusing to provide any meaningful financial assistance to residents impacted by the poisons.

Aqueous Film Forming Foam, which was first produced by the giant 3M Corporation and marketed as 3M light water in 1964, is used in aviation firefighting applications and training exercises.

In 2000, the company began phasing out production of foam containing PFOS and PFAS. The decision followed negotiations with the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) in the US and revelations that the compounds had entered the bloodstream of the general population. International bodies, such as the Persistent Organic Pollutants Review Committee, also said PFOS and PFOA are potentially dangerous to

human health and highly persistent in the natural environment.

In 2003, Australia's industrial chemicals regulator, the National Industrial Chemicals Notification and Assessment Scheme (NICNAS), warned against any unnecessary use of PFOA and PFOS foam. The following year, the Defence Department claimed it would phase out the material.

At Williamtown, near Newcastle, where PFOS and PFOA chemicals were detected in the soil and waterways in 2012, 400 residents have begun a class action lawsuit against the Defence Department. Residents living in a designated "red zone"—i.e., in close proximity to the contaminations—have been advised by health authorities not to drink bore water or eat home-grown vegetables or eggs from chickens, and there are fishing bans in nearby waterways.

Despite the gradual withdrawal of the material, governments have downplayed the health consequences of its use. Defence and health officials continue to insist there is "no scientific evidence" PFOA and PFOS have adverse effects on human health. These statements fly in the face of the evidence.

The C8 science panel of leading epidemiologists in the US surveyed over 69,000 exposed people in 2005–2006 and found probable links between PFOA in drinking water and ulcerative colitis, thyroid disease, testicular cancer, kidney cancer, pregnancy-induced hypertension and high cholesterol.

No exhaustive studies prove beyond doubt the health risks, but there is more than enough evidence available to warrant extreme caution and adopt measures to reduce exposure.

In Williamtown, children living in the "red zone"

have been found to have significant levels of PFOS in their blood. At least 24 people who have lived or spent significant time in the “red zone” on Cabbage Tree Road near the Williamtown airbase have been diagnosed with cancer. On two properties either side of a small drain, five people have developed cancer since 2009.

Some 450 people from Oakey, near Toowoomba, are also taking legal action. In 2010, an area surrounding the Army Aviation Centre was found to be contaminated. Local bore water and farmland have been rendered unusable.

A Senate inquiry was initiated in late 2015 by Greens Senator Lee Rhiannon, designed to serve as a safety-valve for the frustration and anger of victims.

Submissions to the inquiry called for the development of national standards and regulatory mechanisms, compensation for residents and workers and the acquisition of devalued properties. The inquiry's recommendations are non-binding.

During last year's national election campaign, the Turnbull government announced \$55 million in funds for “managing the environmental impacts and investigating the potential health effects of the chemicals.” This pittance will provide little assistance to those poisoned by the foam. The government offered “business hardship payments” for local fishermen but these are capped at just \$25,000 and only if the waterways used to earn a living remain shut.

By contrast, the Williamtown air base last year received \$360 million for capital works to host the new Joint Strike Fighter (JSF) war planes. The total allocated for the JSF program so far is \$12.4 billion.

Katherine and Darwin are the latest communities involved. Last month, major water restrictions were imposed in Katherine because of PFAS in the local water. The town of 10,000 is close to the Tindal RAAF base. This is the first time a town's water supply has been restricted as a result of PFAS contamination.

While the government offered free blood testing to some residents around Williamtown and Oakey, it has refused to do the same in Katherine, saying further investigations are needed.

In Darwin, recent research conducted by the University of Queensland in Rapid Creek and Ludmilla revealed that of the fish and crustacean specimens sampled, 91 percent contained PFOA and 100 percent

contained PFOS.

Although the seafood is deemed “safe for human consumption,” the study did not consider human exposure to any other possible sources of contamination, such as groundwater or local produce. When combined, this could place individuals at risk.

The primary concern of federal and state governments, Liberal-National and Labor alike, is not the health of residents but the impact of compensation and relocation costs on their budgets.

The Senate inquiry and an associated \$12.5 million health study are cynical attempts to keep the mounting anger over the contamination within the parliamentary framework. At the same time, the Turnbull government, backed by Labor, has introduced new laws that will create more toxic chemical disasters.

In the name of cutting “red tape,” the government tabled legislation last month that will slash industrial chemical regulation standards and allow companies to “self-assess” whether new chemicals threaten public health and the environment.

Last financial year, more than 10,000 new chemicals were examined by NICNAS. Under the proposed measure, NICNAS would assess only 0.75 per cent of new chemicals.



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