

Australian military covered up dangers of toxic fire-fighting foam

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Contamination, an investigative television report which aired on the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's "Four Corners" program last week, confirmed that the Australian Defence Department ignored explicit warnings issued three decades ago about the danger of fire-fighting foam used at its facilities.

While it was previously thought the defence department only learnt in 1991 of the risks posed by the foam leaking into water supplies, the program cited a 1987 consultant's report which called for the foam to be treated as "toxic waste." Defence deliberately withheld this knowledge from the public.

The fire-suppressant aqueous film forming foam, also known as light water, was manufactured by the giant 3M chemical company. It contains perfluorooctane sulfonate (PFOS) and perfluorooctanoic acid (PFOA). Both are part of a grouping of chemicals known as per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFASs). The foam began to be used for aviation fire-fighting in 1964.

Up to 18 air force bases around Australia have been potentially contaminated by the foam. The total number of sites currently under government investigation exceeds 70. This includes some local fire stations and civilian airports.

The foam was widely employed throughout Australia until 2003 when the National Industrial Chemicals Notification and Assessment Scheme called for the end to any "unnecessary" use of the product. The following year, the Defence Department claimed it would phase it out, but this was not completed until 2012.

Two years after receiving the 1987 consultant's warnings, the defence department established the Tindal air force base in Katherine, in the Northern Territory, where it used the toxic material. It failed to warn defence personnel and residents of the dangers

posed.

Tindal base fire-fighters told "Four Corners" that they trained with the toxic material for years and were told it was safe. Former flight sergeant Brian Wrigglesworth said fire-fighters had no idea of the risks and were often "saturated in" the product. He estimated that roughly two-hundred litres of foam would overflow into local waterways and groundwater each week.

PFAS has been identified by international bodies, such as the Persistent Organic Pollutants Review Committee, as potentially dangerous to human health and highly persistent in the natural environment. Large-scale epidemiological studies conducted by the C8 Science panel in the US have shown probable links to six diseases, including thyroid and testicular cancer.

Philippe Grandjean, an assistant professor of environmental health at the Harvard School of Public Health, told "Four Corners" that PFAS chemicals can suppress the body's immune system. "With immune dysfunction, the body does not pick up the abnormal cells that are spreading and developing into a cancer," he said. Grandjean cautioned that further action was needed to "protect humans against these exposures."

The contamination of water supplies in Katherine has placed its 6,000 residents at significant risk. Defence Department testing of bore water, which is relied upon by families for daily use including drinking and washing, has showed PFAS levels up to 80 times the safe limit.

Two months ago, the town was put on water restrictions. While the tropical community receives high rainfall, the restrictions have been imposed so town water supplies do not have to be topped up with the contaminated ground water.

The Bartlett family, who were featured on "Four

Corners,” own a mango farm in close proximity to the airbase. They are among more than 40 people who rely entirely on bottled water because their bore water is unsafe. Kirsty Bartlett was diagnosed with thyroid cancer at around the same time that her family were told their water was contaminated.

The Defence Department’s failure to act on previous warnings was “just disgusting,” Bartlett said. “It feels a bit like we’re collateral damage. I know that sounds a bit extreme, but it just really feels like our lives here really don’t matter.”

Defence Department representative Steve Grzeskowiak attempted to deflect political responsibility for the disaster, telling “Four Corners” that standards and practices in place before the early 2000s were “not as good as they should have been.” He claimed to have had no prior knowledge of the consultant’s report in 1987 and refused to explain why residents and fire-fighters had not been warned of the dangers.

Residents of Oakey, Queensland and Williamtown, New South Wales, who live in areas contaminated by PFAS fire-fighting chemicals, have mounted separate class action suits to litigate for compensation. A Senate inquiry launched in late 2015 called for compensation and land acquisition but none of its recommendations were binding.

Oakey resident Brad Hudson told “Four Corners” about the impact of the contamination on his family. Hudson was diagnosed with testicular cancer shortly before he was informed that water on his property was toxic.

“Four Corners” also cited a 2012 internal email from the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) in which the defence department acknowledged elevated levels of PFAS chemicals leaving the Williamtown air base. The department, however, instructed the EPA to keep the information “confidential.” It was another three years before residents surrounding Williamtown were alerted.

During this period, several people purchased properties in the area and set up their lives, only to find out later that their homes had been placed in the “red zone.” These homes lost their value and now the banks will not lend to residents living in the zone. Water in some parts of the Williamtown “red zone” is currently registering PFAS readings 18 times the safe drinking

level.

The federal government, which has offered free blood testing to the residents of contaminated areas around Williamtown and Oakey, has refused to do the same in Katherine until environmental investigations are completed, a process that will drag on well into 2018. Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull has defended this decision, reiterating government and defence department claims that there is “no consistent evidence that PFAS is harmful to human health.”

According to “Four Corners,” the clean-up has already cost the Defence Department \$100 million nationally with defence spokesman Steve Grzeskowiak admitting that it was possibly the “largest environmental investigation” in Australian history.

The Australian government is fighting the class action by residents and strenuously resisting demands for compensation for the poisoning of water supplies and the consequent health and social consequences, for which consecutive Liberal-National and Labor governments are directly responsible. Utterly indifferent to the plight of residents and their families, it continues to spend billions on the military and, in lock step with Washington’s “pivot to Asia,” is preparing for war against North Korea and China.

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