

Toxic contamination zone expanded around Australia's Williamtown air force base

Patrick Davies
27 December 2017

The official “management area” or “red zone” covering the dangerous chemical contamination around the major Williamtown air force base near the industrial city of Newcastle was suddenly expanded by 50 percent last month.

The New South Wales state Environment Protection Agency (EPA) said it reconsidered the zone's size after evidence continued to come forward showing high levels of per- and poly-fluoroalkyl substances (PFAS) in soil, water and human blood tests outside the previous boundaries.

It also revealed that if the Defence Department does not improve its remediation efforts, the red zone will exist until at least 2050. Residents within the zone have been told not to use ground, bore or surface water and not to consume home-grown foods.

The expansion includes new sections of Salt Ash, the Cabbage Tree Road area and Fullerton Cove. This is the third extension of the zone, which was first proclaimed in September 2015.

PFAS chemicals have been used in aviation fire-fighting foam at Australian air force bases and domestic airports since the 1960s. The substances are internationally recognised as potentially harmful to human health, with probable links to a number of diseases, including several types of cancer. The chemicals now pervade in the surface and ground water at as many as 70 sites around Australia.

The expanded Williamtown red zone encompasses 750 homes, drawing in another 250 households who were, until recently, reassured by health authorities and the EPA, that their properties were not affected and therefore no health precautions were necessary.

In announcing the boundary change, the EPA said a series of blood tests outside of, but near, the red zone had produced results up to three times the national

average of PFAS. But this was not the first sign that the contamination extended beyond the official zone.

As far back as June 2016, Fullerton Cove, which at the time fell a kilometre outside the red zone, had concentrations of more than 13 times the safe level in drainage surface water. Testing carried out earlier this year, funded not by Defence or the EPA but by IMF Bentham, the law firm representing a Williamtown class action group, showed that some of the highest blood concentrations of the chemical came from residents who lived just outside the zone.

The new zone boundaries snake their way around three existing and proposed sand mines, which are multi-million dollar operations. The Fullerton Cove Sand Quarry, Mackas Sand Quarry and proposed Cabbage Tree Road Sand Quarry fit snug up against the revised borders.

A two-year investigation into the contamination has seen little to no real response from the federal and state governments. Only people living within the red zone before the border shift were given blood tests as part of an inadequate \$55 million national package announced during the last federal election campaign in mid-2016.

In October, EPA chairman Barry Buffier reasserted that the responsibility for the contamination lay purely with the Defence Department and the EPA had no regulatory power over it. This means Defence is free to delay test results and withhold information as it sees fit.

Lindsay Clout, a member of the Fullerton Cove Residents action group, spoke to the WSWS. He recalled some of the consequences suffered by one resident inside the red zone who addressed a local community meeting. “He asked for the water to be tested in his swimming pool. It was tested and it took them [Defence] four months to get him the results.

“We know that we can turn them [tests] around

within days, but it took four months to give him the results. They showed that the pool was highly contaminated. In that four-month period he was still swimming in it. Now his wife has lost a breast with breast cancer, and he said last night, is likely to lose the second one.”

Clout, who lives within the expanded red zone, said he had warned residents to take precautions before the boundary change.

“Firstly it was clear to me that Defence wasn’t telling us the whole story ... I knew it [the contamination] was running off the base in the drains and I knew the drains were flowing outside the exclusion zone. Then we got high blood tests. Either Defence was not telling the truth or they just didn’t have a handle on it ... it’s one or the other, and it’s probably the other. Their level of incompetence is ... hard to understand.”

Clout continued: “We’ve got a family that lives over here, easily a kilometre outside of the zone. When the contamination first broke, they rang the NSW EPA and said, ‘we’re outside the exclusion zone but this contamination is in the area, so what should we do?’ They said, ‘everything is fine, eat your eggs, use your bore water no problems at all.’

“After a cancer cluster article hit the newspapers they got a little bit worried, so they rang them again. They got the same response. But just through conversations they’ve had with other people, we recommended that they really should have some blood tests. Now they had blood tests and their results were through the roof.

“It just seemed to me like they [Defence] were trying to hide from it. From a community perspective, I thought it was a really bad bit of form. There was no concern about the risks that the community was exposed to.”

Asked about the blood and water tests, Clout explained that residents living outside the red zone before it was expanded were paying for their own tests. “A colleague of mine has had six tests, and he’s just waiting for the results. He paid for them, \$600 a throw, \$600 for each sample.”

Another resident, **Robyn**, told the WSWS her home now falls within the red zone. “The property value has gone right down, and the quality of life. You’ve just got to be so conscious of what you’re doing. You can’t eat your chooks’ eggs. There’s nothing better than your own chooks’ eggs. My bore water the kids can’t

play with it. There’s just a lot of things you’ve got to consider.”

Asked why she thought the EPA changed the boundaries now after insisting for so long that there was no danger, Robyn commented: “I think they wanted to keep it small and shut it down quick. I don’t think they expected it to go this long ... I do think more than anything, that Defence put a lot of pressure on the EPA”

Robyn said that before the border change she asked Defence to provide her a letter reassuring her that her property was safe. “I got it, signed and in writing, and then three weeks later we had the knock on the door from the Health Department and the EPA.”

The indifference toward the victims of the contamination was on full display in September when the Labor Party joined the Liberal-National Coalition in voting against a Senate motion that called on the Turnbull government to investigate potential buy-outs for properties that have plummeted in market value.

Labor’s shadow treasurer labeled the motion a “headline-seeking stunt.” Proposed by the Greens and supported by One Nation and the Nick Xenophon Team, the resolution would have actually guaranteed nothing. Instead, any buy-out plan would have depended entirely on the outcome of an investigation by the government itself into property acquisitions. The government, which repeatedly downplays the risks of the chemicals, has already ignored the property acquisition recommendations from a previous Senate inquiry in 2015.

Nevertheless, the bipartisan line-up against the latest Senate motion highlights how sensitive these discussions are becoming when all significant budget considerations must be tailored toward preparations for war.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact